



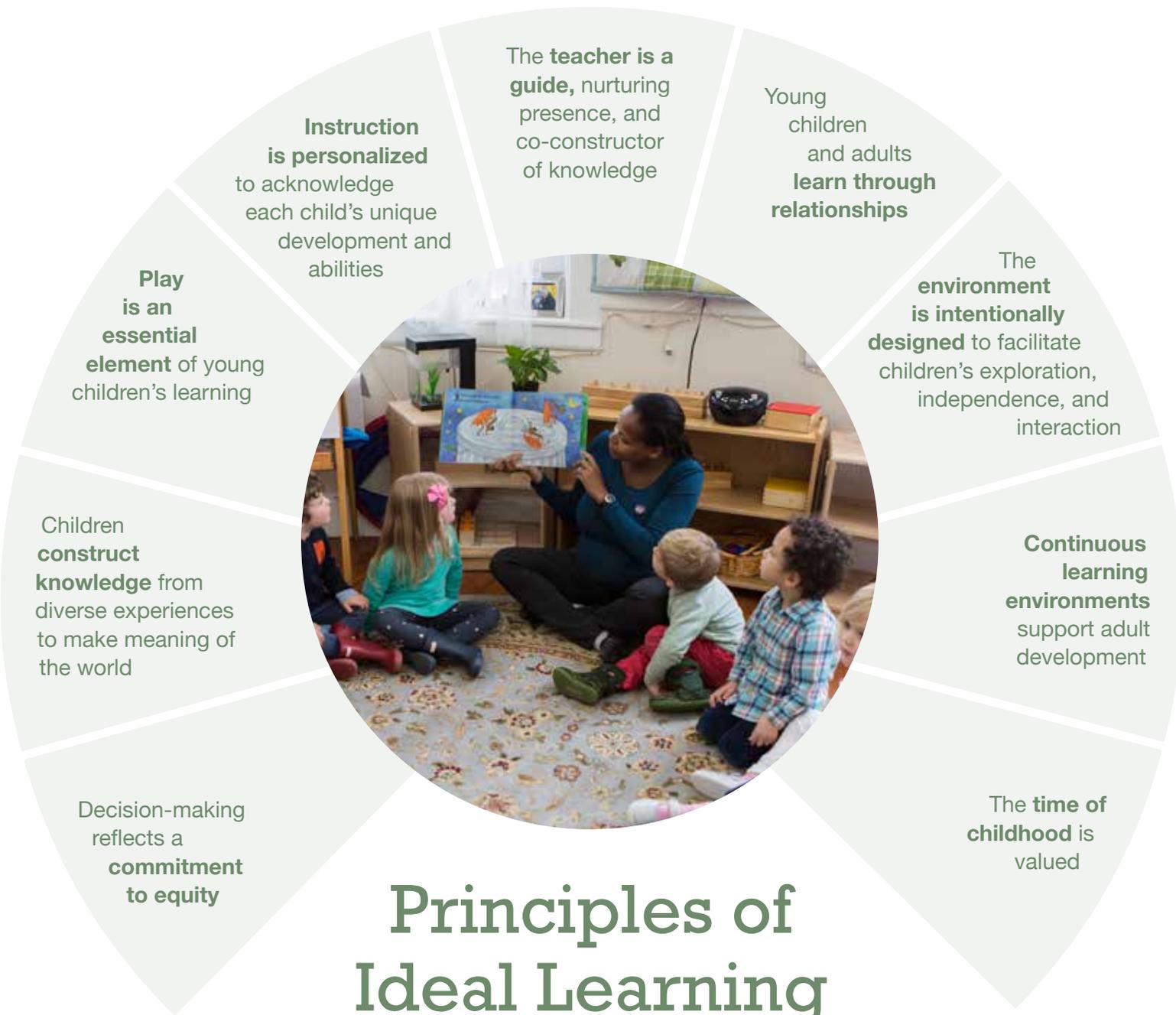
**Trust for
Learning**

Ideal learning made real for all.

Ideal Learning
in principle & practice

Contents

- 1 Principles of Ideal Learning
- 2 Principle 1: Decision-making reflects a commitment to equity
- 3 **Spotlight: Friends Center for Children**
- 4 Principle 2: Children construct knowledge from diverse experiences to make meaning of the world
- 5 **Spotlight: Bank Street**
- 6 Principle 3: Play is an essential element of young children's learning
- 7 **Spotlight: Waldorf**
- 8 Principle 4: Instruction is personalized to acknowledge each child's unique development and abilities
- 9 **Spotlight: Tools of the Mind**
- 10 **Spotlight: New Haven ChILD**
- 12 Principle 5: The teacher is a guide, nurturing presence, and co-creator of knowledge
- 13 **Spotlight: HighScope**
- 14 Principle 6: Young children and adults learn through relationships
- 15 **Spotlight: Reggio Emilia-Inspired**
- 16 Principle 7: The environment is intentionally designed to facilitate children's exploration, independence, and interaction
- 17 **Spotlight: Montessori**
- 18 Principle 8: Continuous learning environments support adult development
- 19 Principle 9: The time of childhood is valued



Drawing from well-known early childhood approaches including Montessori, Reggio Emilia, HighScope, Tools of the Mind, Bank Street College of Education, Friends Center for Children, and Waldorf, the Principles of Ideal Learning outline core concepts that form the foundation of high-quality early childhood education. These principles allow for multiple approaches, models, and traditions, and take into account the varied contexts within which early educators and care providers work. There are several essential beliefs that thread throughout including a commitment to play, equity, relationship-based interactions, an ecologically-focused and child-centered perspective, and a strength-based approach with children, adults, and families.

Together, the Principles of Ideal Learning enable educators and those who work with them to:

- build a shared vision of quality early childhood education;
- support effective educator training and professional development;
- serve as an anchor to reflect on and improve practice; and
- inform systems of oversight and policies that affect quality.

Decision-making reflects a commitment to equity

The Ideal Learning community believes that all children are entitled to an education that supports human flourishing, and that all children have within them limitless potential. Every child, regardless of race, gender, ethnicity, language, ability, sexual orientation, background, or family income, should have the early education they need to thrive.

In Ideal Learning programs, children's individual differences are celebrated as unique aspects of their identity, and resources are targeted based on individual children's needs and circumstances, including differentiated funding and supports.

Administrators and teachers recognize the deeply disparate opportunities and outcomes that have existed and persist for children from low-income families, those of color, English learners, and children with disabilities. Adults engage in ongoing learning and reflection on issues of race, power, equity, and bias, and take personal and group responsibility toward conscious countering of systemic racism. As a result, systems and policies are designed to counterbalance historic systems of oppression.

Furthermore, all children and families are valued as contributing members of the community. Teachers are knowledgeable about the communities in which they teach and decision-making is collaborative, including opportunities for child, teacher, parent, and leadership voice.

In an Ideal Learning program, you might observe:

- Home cultures evident in the classroom environment, curriculum, and celebrations.
- Teachers valuing differences and diversities in children's work.
- Teachers reflecting children's racial and ethnic backgrounds.
- Educators facilitating all children's participation and access to learning experiences.



TOOLS AND RESOURCES TO EXPLORE

[Do early educators' implicit biases regarding sex and race relate to behavior expectations and recommendations of preschool expulsions and suspensions?](#), Gilliam, W. S., Maupin, A. N., Reyes, C. R., Accavitti, M., & Shic, F., Research Study Brief. New Haven, CT: Yale Child Study Center (2016).

[The CRAF-E4 Family Engagement Model: Building practitioners' competence to work with diverse families.](#) Iruka, I. U., Curenton, S. M., & Eke, W. A. I., Boston, MA: Elsevier/Academic Press (2014).



Spotlight: Friends Center for Children

Friends Center for Children (Friends Center), located in New Haven, Connecticut, provides a child-centered, values-based learning community for children ages three months to five years. Its mission — educate children, empower families, inspire teachers, engage community, embrace diversity — defines and informs every aspect of their program.

“Our philosophy makes the child the center with a developmentally-appropriate, play-based, trauma-informed approach to learning,” says executive director, Allyx Schiavone. “All the adults surrounding the child enter into a partnership through which the child’s full self is supported, encouraged, and able to grow.”

Knowing that children develop faster and with more ease when the adults surrounding them enter into a partnership of support, Friends Center works closely with families, who are actively engaged to understand their children’s learning style and contribute their love and talent to best support their child. Parents partner with teachers to determine what works, what doesn’t, and how to advocate for what their children need at school and in life. Friends Center is deeply committed to enrolling a student body that reflects the racial, cultural, and socioeconomic diversity of New Haven, where the population is roughly evenly split between African American, Caucasian and Hispanic. With sliding-scale tuition, Friends Center serves families of all income levels, creating a vibrant community that encourages learning from different cultural perspectives.

To further support each child and family, Friends Center employs a comprehensive Emotional Wellbeing Program, which includes a licensed clinical social worker who supports all students, parents, and teachers as needed. The Center also assesses students within the first six months of enrollment and creates individualized plans to provide each child with the learning experience they need to thrive.



*What behaviors were celebrated in your family growing up?
What does the society you belong to value?*

Friends Center educators asked themselves these and many other thought-provoking questions as a part of a yearlong exploration of implicit bias and the way it can impact perspectives and interactions. Supported by Niyonu Spann from Beyond Diversity 101, Friends Center staff examined their backgrounds and experiences to understand the lenses through which they view others, especially the children in their care. The training also included ways, when necessary, that teachers can shift these lenses in order to increase emotional intelligence and strengthen their diverse community.

Children construct knowledge from diverse experiences to make meaning of the world



In Ideal Learning programs, children learn through observation, experimentation, and participation. Children engage directly with objects, ideas, and events to test theories and problem-solve.

Teachers facilitate children’s learning through the preparation of enriched learning environments—both indoor and outdoor—which provide opportunities for exploration and experimentation across multiple domains of development (e.g. cognitive, social, physical, etc). Activities are organized to encourage children to learn from and with each other, and to challenge the capacity of children’s emerging development levels. Teachers support children’s sense of agency by involving them in ongoing exploration, decision-making, and negotiating experiences.

Ideal Learning experiences reflect children’s interests and the context and community in which they live. Children’s questions and intentions are encouraged, which leads to new knowledge and understanding.

In an Ideal Learning program, you might observe:

- Teachers integrating exploration into everyday experiences (e.g. snack time, recess).
- Classroom art, music, and literature reflect the diversity of human experience.
- Children engaging in multiple sensory activities.
- Teachers referring to community events to set the context for an activity.
- Children hypothesizing about the outcome of a particular event.

TOOLS AND RESOURCES TO EXPLORE

The Construction of Reality in the Child (Vol. 82). Piaget, J., Routledge (2013).

Active Participatory Learning: The Way Children Construct Knowledge (pp. 14-53). Epstein, A.S., & Hohmann, M. The HighScope Preschool Curriculum. Ypsilanti, MI: HighScope Press (2012).



Spotlight: Bank Street

Bank Street, founded in 1916 by Lucy Sprague Mitchell, is centered on the belief that children learn best when they are engaged with their surroundings and are able to make meaning of the world around them. Informed by the work of educational theorist John Dewey, Bank Street's approach encourages children to explore, and their learning is guided by their natural curiosity.

Active, lifelong learning is a foundational premise of Bank Street's early childhood classrooms, including the Bank Street School for Children, the Bank Street Family Center, and Bank Street Head Start. Every individual learns how to be an active, intellectually curious member of their community through deliberate interaction with people, materials, ideas, and the environment. Teachers support this process by allowing for independent play, interactions with peers in the classroom and school, explorations of nearby neighborhoods, and developing the practice of age-appropriate advocacy around social justice issues.

Bank Street programs immerse even the youngest children in experiences that support their understanding of who they are as individuals and as members of a community. This involves using the community as an extension of the classroom, a fertile ground for diverse social interactions and an opportunity to experience how different people and environments coexist.



Children in pre-K at the Bank Street School for Children learn by doing, seeing, and experiencing. Working together in a group, students develop an understanding that the classroom is a community where everyone helps. Through hands-on projects and immersive activities, children are able to develop their social-emotional skills, a sense of autonomy, and their ability and responsibility for caring for themselves, others, and their classroom. Hands-on science activities allow students to predict, observe, and draw conclusions as they study plants, snails, and cooking. Literacy is experienced through listening, storytelling, library visits, and learning how to print words. Students also learn how to solve problems that are based on mathematical concepts, such as “How many crackers do we need for snack today?”

Play is an essential element of young children’s learning

Ideal Learning programs value play as a legitimate right of childhood that represents a crucial aspect of children’s physical, intellectual, and social development. For early learners, play is a primary way of exploring the world and building relationships. Therefore, it is given regular time in the schedule.

In Ideal Learning classrooms, children engage in multiple forms of play—solitary, parallel, social, cooperative, onlooker, fantasy, physical, and constructive—that develop symbolic and imaginative thinking, peer relationships, language, physical development, and problem-solving skills. Children have access to a range of materials, and the freedom to create, engage, and imagine alone or with peers.

Teachers help children to develop mature play skills by providing background knowledge they can use in their pretend scenarios and by scaffolding peer interactions. Teachers empower children to develop initiative by providing time, space, and materials to support child-initiated play and appropriate risk-taking, engendering a sense of accomplishment.

Outdoor play is important whenever possible—allowing children space to run, jump, and explore. When this is not possible, educators incorporate large motor experiences in indoor spaces.

In an Ideal Learning program, you might observe:

- Children planning their play and describing what they intend to do before beginning.
- A variety of materials that children can re-purpose to fit their play ideas.
- Children’s play does not get interrupted by adults.
- Children participating in resolving social conflicts with teacher assistance as needed.



TOOLS AND RESOURCES TO EXPLORE

Science in Support of Play: The Case for Play-based Preschool Programs. Trawick-Smith, J. & Waite, P., Center for Early Childhood Education (2009).

Spotlight on Young Children: Exploring Play. A series of chapters about play in early childhood edited by H. Bohart, K. Charner, and D. Koralek, National Association for the Education of Young Children (2015).

Spotlight: Waldorf

Derived from the work of early 20th-century, world-renowned philosopher and researcher Rudolf Steiner, Waldorf education focuses on how to best support each child's growth towards their unique potential. In Waldorf schools, children learn through play, relationships, hands-on experience, story, and a range of artistic expressions.

In Waldorf early childhood classrooms, materials are open-ended and natural, activating imagination. Imaginative play is considered the most important "work" of the young child and the activity that best supports the child's physical, intellectual, emotional, and spiritual or inner growth. Children participate in guided, imaginative circle activities, including singing, poetry, movement, and playing out stories they have heard. The educational focus is on physical exploration, constructive and creative play, connection to nature, and oral language, story, and song. Direct engagement with nature provides a foundation for scientific thinking, and divisions between "play" and "work" are fluid, alternating between structured and child-initiated activity and real-world tasks modeled by the teachers.

Waldorf education values and fosters relationships. In early childhood and the elementary grades, students stay with the same teacher for more than a year (known as looping), allowing for the development of strong connections, trust, and continuity. This model builds community and provides an uninterrupted educational experience.

Waldorf schools believe in the importance of partnering with parents. Parents, teachers, and children form a collaborative relationship that supports students in their education and development toward being independent, fully engaged citizens of the world. Parents are welcome to volunteer in the school, teach classes in particular areas of interest (such as handwork), and bring activities from their home cultures.

Alice Birney School in Sacramento, CA is one of the oldest public Waldorf programs in the United States. Pre-k and kindergarten students spend their days immersed in carefully constructed environments that encourage creativity and nurture developmentally appropriate learning, and much time is spent outdoors. The children visit the school garden and use the produce in cooking, which also helps children develop a sense of the plant cycle and the entire process of food preparation. Parents have a very active presence in their children's education, volunteering for nature walks on weekdays and in the garden on weekends.



Instruction is personalized to acknowledge each child's unique development and abilities



In Ideal Learning programs, each child is known and appreciated for their unique abilities, interests, and potential. Teachers understand and tailor their practices to each child's developmental trajectory needs.

Based on their knowledge, teachers are able to create learning environments that are in keeping with children's interests and developmental profiles, while striving to stretch their capacities over time. Teachers are close observers of children and use observation to interpret and project future experiences and opportunities with children and parents.

In Ideal Learning environments, teachers view children from a strength-based perspective and their lesson plans build on what children can do. Activities are multi-level, allowing every child to learn at his/her own speed, pace, and level, and learning is scaffolded through interactions with both adults and peers.

Teachers and other professionals work together in Ideal Learning programs to make classrooms inclusionary, accommodating for the different needs of children. Children's home language is valued and supported while also facilitating English-language learning. In addition, daily routines and curriculum reflect an understanding of how trauma might play out in an individual child's behaviors.

In an Ideal Learning program, you might observe:

- Children engaging in different activities based on interest and developmental need.
- Teachers observing children's behaviors and documenting their learning.
- Children working individually or participating in small group learning experiences.
- Teachers and parents sharing information about the specific activities of children.

TOOLS AND RESOURCES TO EXPLORE

Scaffolds for Learning: The Key to Guided Instruction. Chapter devoted to Lev Vygotsky's idea of the "zone of proximal development."

I Belong: Active Learning for Children with Special Needs (pp 17-33). Dowling, J.L. & Mitchell, T.C., Ypsilanti, MI: HighScope Press (2007).



Spotlight: Tools of the Mind

Tools of the Mind (Tools) is based on the work of Russian psychologist Lev Vygotsky, who emphasized the importance of playful learning and the role of teachers and peers in developing young children’s self-regulation and executive function skills. For Vygotsky, the goal of education is to develop “mental tools” that make learning new things possible—Tools of the Mind.

In a Tools classroom, activities are multi-level so that children of different ages and developmental levels can participate in a shared social context. Teaching is based on children’s current learning capacity rather than general age-level expectations. Teachers provide personalized guidance and individualized scaffolding based on assessment of each child’s Zone of Proximal Development (e.g., what a child can do independently and with varying levels of assistance) so that each child’s continuous development is supported.

Tools builds an inclusive classroom community, engaging children in co-construction with peers. Classroom practices, as well as core curriculum literacy, math, and science activities, embed executive function skills practice. This means, for example, that as children learn math concepts they are also developing self-regulation.

Tools currently serves over 300,000 children in 23 states, including dual-language learners and children with special needs. Tools is extending its reach with PowerTools, an iPad app designed to help young children learn to read and ensure that all children reach grade-level reading expectations by 3rd grade. PowerTools applies the same theory as the comprehensive Tools’ program: engaging children in playful learning, peer scaffolding, supporting intrinsic motivation, and providing teachers with meaningful data to personalize instruction.



At Christina Seix Academy in Trenton, New Jersey, the Tools program helps children meet academic goals and develop self-regulation, social, and emotional skills. Children with different abilities plan and engage in intentional make-believe play with peers. During the pre-K restaurant theme, children take turns playing the roles of server and customer in different restaurant centers. Teachers observe play and circulate to provide individual scaffolding. Scaffolding may include adding actions (“Next you can pour it into this pan to bake it in the oven!”) or the use of role speech (“Ask your customer if they want a small, medium, or large so you know what size to tell the cook!”). At the end of the make-believe play block, teachers lead the practice to target skills on the edge of emergence.

New Haven ChILD

New Haven Children's Ideal Learning District (NH ChILD) is a locally-led effort to provide all children with access to high-quality early learning experiences in New Haven, Connecticut. It is supported by multiple national partners including Trust for Learning, Bank Street Education Center, Montessori Leaders Collaborative, North American Reggio Emilia Alliance, Tools of the Mind, and Waldorf Early Childhood Association of North America.



The initiative—which brings together representatives from city government, the public school system, center-based child care providers, higher education, and nonprofit organizations—strives to create an equitable, high-quality continuum of care and education for all 14,800 children from birth to age 8 living in New Haven.

NH ChILD aspires to guide the city in this effort by focusing on two necessary and inextricably linked pathways as agents of change: Access and Quality. The first pathway aims to expand access to early childhood services particularly among families in greatest need; the second aims to bolster the quality of existing programs by enhancing professional learning opportunities among providers.

NH ChILD has developed a locally adapted version of the Principles of Ideal Learning as a foundation for its vision of high-quality services. The Principles serve as a self-reflection tool for practitioners and a guide for identifying professional development priorities. Leaders have developed a comprehensive plan to provide ongoing cycles of professional learning and coaching (in-service training), as well as innovative and cost-effective strategies for pre-service training and support, to build a skilled workforce.

NH ChILD also believes that these Principles can be a useful tool for policymakers by offering a framework to establish greater coherence across local, state, and federal mandates. NH ChILD aims to support greater alignment between the Principles of Ideal Learning and existing systems and structures that provide oversight to programs, such as the state’s new Quality Rating and Improvement System.

New Haven Children’s Ideal Learning District envisions a city where all children have access to high quality early learning experiences aligned with the Principles of Ideal Learning.

Given its size, diversity, and capacity, New Haven is well poised to serve as a national model for a place-based Ideal Learning pilot. Rooted in the Ideal Learning Principles, this community-wide effort exemplifies a united commitment to high-quality learning experiences for all children that will transform generations to come.

The teacher is a guide, nurturing presence, and co-constructor of knowledge

In Ideal Learning programs, children are active participants in their own learning. The role of the teacher is to guide children to carry out this learning by facilitating activities and opportunities and without dictating specific outcomes. Teachers have deep knowledge of child development that informs their practice and is extended through the regular use of observation, documentation, and interpretation of children's behaviors and learning processes.

Teachers are thoughtful and intentional about the decisions they make in the classroom, allowing for shared control between themselves and the children. Teachers follow children's development, offering support and extension (as needed) and scaffolding learning based on children's individual trajectories.

Relationships are reflective of authentic and honest engagement with the children, families, and the community. Teachers hold a strength-based view of children and families and partner with and guide them into new areas of learning and growth.



In an Ideal Learning program, you might observe:

- Teachers modeling behavior and engaging in meaningful activity as an example for children.
- Children and teachers interacting in a positive manner.
- Teachers encouraging children to develop and investigate their own interests.
- Teachers providing guidance and direction, rather than didactic instruction.

TOOLS AND RESOURCES TO EXPLORE

Adult-Child Interaction: Establishing a Supportive Climate (pp 56-86). Epstein, A.S., & Hohmann, M., The HighScope Preschool Curriculum. Ypsilanti, MI: HighScope Press (2012).

Mind in society: The development of higher psychological processes. Vygotsky, L. S., Harvard university press (1980).

Spotlight: HighScope

HighScope’s active, participatory learning approach began with the groundbreaking longitudinal Perry Preschool Study in the 1960s, which has changed the trajectory of early education and policy. Its work over the past 50 years has evolved to best serve the needs of educators, policymakers, children, families, and communities through public outreach, research, curriculum development, child assessment, program evaluation, coaching, and training.

The HighScope Curriculum is based on the principle of active learning, a shared approach to education in which the teacher and children are partners in the learning experience. Children construct knowledge through direct, immediate experiences with objects, people, ideas, and events. HighScope teachers support learning by creating an environment that encourages children to explore, discover, experiment with engaging materials, and interact with adults and peers. Through active learning, children build academic, problem-solving, and social-emotional skills.

Teachers’ scaffolding of learning is guided by 58 key developmental indicators (KDIs), which are based on the latest child development research and align with national and state early learning standards. Grounded in ongoing observations of children, teachers develop strength-based, intentional lesson plans focused on children’s interests and the KDI content. HighScope’s trademark *plan-do-review* sequence builds on children’s abilities to make plans, follow through on plans, and recall plans later—a process that is essential to the development of executive function skills.



During planning time, Amari and Marcus write each other’s names and draw the block area symbol to show where they will go for work time. Karla, their teacher, asks them what their plan is and they say, “the block area.” Karla asks more questions, prompting the children to think further about their plans, such as how they will build their ship, what materials they will use, and who else might be involved. They all converse about how their plan will play out in work time. During work time, both children build their ship, pretending that they are pirates searching for treasure. Karla pretends along with them while asking open-ended questions to challenge their thinking about their actions and words. At recall time, Amari and Marcus reflect, describing how they built their ship and discovered treasure. Other children chime in about their participation.

Young children and adults learn through relationships



Ideal Learning programs emphasize the collaborative nature of learning and the importance of cultural and social context. Teachers, children, and families engender trust through the building of relationships and interact as partners.

Teachers foster a sense of community between and among the children and adults in the classroom, and develop a relationship with each individual child that allows them to feel recognized and acknowledged. Teachers help children get to know and interact with each other, and provide ongoing support to children in developing relationships with one another.

In Ideal Learning classrooms, children engage in small- and whole-group experiences. There is an explicit focus on communal spaces and activities, such as sharing meals and singing songs.

Teachers engage regularly with families to support children's learning and use knowledge of family and community life to organize experiences and environments. As part of their practice, teachers are aware of their own implicit biases and knowledgeable of the effects of adverse childhood experiences (ACEs), as well as how to respond in meaningful ways.

In an Ideal Learning program, you might observe:

- Children engaging in conversation, listening, and exchanging views on a topic or idea.
- Teachers modeling social skills and behavior that they want children to develop.
- Children and adults participating in a communal meal.
- Teachers, school staff, and families engaging in respectful conversations.

TOOLS AND RESOURCES TO EXPLORE

Your Image of the Child: Where Teaching Begins, Malaguzzi, L., Child Care Information Exchange (1994).

Young Children Develop in an Environment of Relationships, Working paper No. 1, National Scientific Council on the Developing Child (2004).



Spotlight: Reggio Emilia-Inspired

The Reggio Emilia approach originated in Reggio Emilia, Italy, where educators, parents, and children worked together after World War II to reconstruct their city through the creation of an exemplary system of municipal preschools and infant-toddler centers. The carefully designed, constantly evolving education project of Reggio Emilia envisions “education based on relationships,” embedding the social construction of knowledge between children and adults within engaging, welcoming, flexible environments connected to the community.

At the center of the approach is a strong image of the child—social from birth, rich with humanity, and full of intelligence, curiosity, and wonder. Children are encouraged to explore their environment and to construct, express, and negotiate their understandings through multiple paths and all their symbolic “languages,” such as movement, drawing, painting, building, sculpture, dramatic play, numeracy, and music.

Education is defined as research, and teaching and learning are emergent processes between adults and children, involving generous time to revisit and exchange in depth. Teachers collaborate regularly to interpret observations of children’s learning processes and experiences, enabling them to design responsive environments and experiences that enrich and challenge children’s understandings. Documentation makes learning visible and supports exchange and reflection with parents and children.

Reggio-inspired programs value the right of all children and adults to be recognized as unique individuals, have a voice, and co-construct the educational experience. Families are encouraged to participate in the school and their children’s learning. To foster deep relationships between children, educators, and families, programs typically offer multi-year classrooms through a looping organization.



Founded in 1894 as a settlement house for immigrant families, Chicago Commons provides underserved children with a Reggio-inspired early education. Here, teachers are taught to be keen observers of their students. The school acknowledges that “children come to us as whole, capable people. We aren’t the givers of knowledge but rather pull out of children what we can to enhance their learning.” Recognizing the many challenges facing their students’ families, Chicago Commons sees its work going beyond children to have a two-generation effect. The school surveys parents at the beginning of the year to understand their personal needs and goals. Parents, teachers, and the community all partner to foster children’s development.

The environment is intentionally designed to facilitate children's exploration, independence, and interaction

In Ideal Learning programs, the environment is not only attractive, it is also interesting. Classrooms are arranged to stimulate and encourage expressions of children's ideas, questions, and emotions.

All spaces are designed as part of an enriched environment to be interacted with and upon by the children. There are varied spaces for both community and individual reflection that are warm and inviting. Children have access to multiple spaces and a range of engaging and open-ended materials, which are intentionally chosen to support an emergent approach that reflects children's interests and questions.

The physical environment is secure and well-organized so as to enable exploration independent of adult direction. There are hands-on materials from various disciplines, including music, science, math, art, etc., and across interest areas, representing children's families and community.

Nature is also an integral part of an Ideal Learning environment. Children are able to go outdoors or nature is brought into the classroom.



In an Ideal Learning program, you might observe:

- Children deeply engaged and content in their work.
- Children interacting with the natural world, including plants, animals, and outdoor elements.
- Children engaging with a variety of hands-on materials (e.g. sensory, expressive, musical, working tools, recycled, natural, etc.).
- Children understand the organizational structure of the classroom and work with teachers to maintain it.

TOOLS AND RESOURCES TO EXPLORE

Children and Place: Reggio Emilia's Environment As Third Teacher (pp. 46(1), 40-47). Strong-Wilson, T., & Ellis, J., Theory into Practice (2007).

Developmental Environmental Rating Scale - a classroom observation tool that measures environmental and behavioral qualities for developmental education models.



Spotlight: Montessori

The Montessori method, developed by Dr. Maria Montessori a century ago through her work with underserved children in Rome, is based on the observation that children naturally and eagerly learn from their surroundings. Montessori emphasizes the critical role of the prepared classroom environment and the power of exploration. The adults' role is to be the dynamic link between the child and the environment, using observation to guide each child's learning.

Early learners ages 2.5 to 6 are grouped together in a classroom environment prepared explicitly for their common developmental needs. Children are seen as capable and are empowered to make choices. To that end, all aspects of the classroom—including furniture, materials, and cleaning and food preparation supplies—are thoughtfully designed for and accessible to children, which allows them to have agency in their classroom, fostering independence and building confidence. Classroom environments minimize unnecessary visual and aural stimulation and emphasize beauty and order to spark engagement.

Over the course of 3 years in an early childhood Montessori classroom, children work with more than 300 hands-on materials tailored to isolate and scaffold concepts and support the development of key skills, such as independence, concentration, working memory, and confidence in addition to academic skills. These materials are designed to stimulate the senses and inspire hands-on exploration and experimentation. Furthermore, the mix of different-aged students lets younger children learn from older peers and helps older children reinforce their learning by teaching concepts they have already mastered while developing leadership skills.



In the Montessori classroom, the environment itself develops children's executive function, including inhibition, working memory, organization, and emotional control. At Breakthrough Montessori Public Charter School in Washington, DC, after Jamal hangs up his coat and greets his teacher, he is free to choose what he wants to work with. He remembers he had a lesson on the Brown Stairs the day before and carefully lays out a small rug to work with it again. The shelves are orderly, so he knows just where to find it, but discovers it's not there; another child is already working with it. He's disappointed and takes a moment to regroup, then puts away the rug and turns to work on table washing instead. There are a lot of steps involved in gathering the materials and cleaning the table, which makes it especially satisfying when he finishes.

Continuous learning environments support adult development

In Ideal Learning programs, teachers and administrators create, cultivate, and maintain an intentional educational philosophy that is shared by all and guides their practice. In addition, this philosophy is routinely revisited to account for new developments. Adults gather regularly to share experiences, ask questions, and reflect on children's learning. Throughout the program, there is an ongoing commitment to continuous improvement for all staff (e.g., teachers, assistants, administrators).

To enable this environment, program budgets plan for and utilize funds to support ongoing adult learning. Substantial and consistent time and space are set aside for regular professional reflection, peer learning, and planning. Programs also encourage and support associations with colleagues in other centers and professional organizations.

Teachers are actively engaged in their own learning process and set goals for improvement. Coaching and supervision are strength- and inquiry-based to build capacity, encourage curiosity, and increase self-awareness. In addition, teachers' knowledge and expertise of children is respected when setting goals.

In an Ideal Learning program, you might observe:

- Teachers sharing observations of children, analyzing documentation, and engaging in peer learning.
- Teachers actively seeking answers to their questions in professional literature.
- Teachers and staff engaging in dedicated planning time.
- Adults observing other teachers both within and beyond their setting to reflect on practice.



TOOLS AND RESOURCES TO EXPLORE

Working in Teams: Adult Collaboration to Promote Active Learning (pp 119-148). Epstein, A.S., & Hohmann, M. The HighScope Preschool Curriculum. Ypsilanti, MI: HighScope Press (2012).

Continuous professional development and ECEC quality: Findings from a European systematic literature review (pp. 53(1), 9-22). Peleman, B., Lazzari, A., Budginaitė, I., Siarova, H., Hauari, H., Peeters, J., & Cameron, C., European Journal of Education (2018).

Professional Development in Early Childhood Education (pp. 427-448). La Paro, K., & King, E., The Wiley Handbook of Early Childhood Care and Education (2019).

All Our Kin's Family Child Care Network offers educational mentorship, professional development, advocacy and leadership opportunities, and a network of relationships with other family child care providers in New Haven.

The time of childhood is valued

In Ideal Learning programs, learning takes place at an intentional, calm, and responsive pace. Teachers recognize that children are born knowing how to learn and use time flexibly, repetitively, strategically, and in relation to new experiences and relationships. As a result, children are given time to fully engage with materials and each other.

For teachers, continuity is a guiding principle for the organization of time. Adults are respectful of children's pace and allow them to engage in uninterrupted activity. Long-term projects that enable children to thoroughly explore topics of interest are often part of the curriculum. In addition, daily, weekly, and seasonal rhythms are incorporated into the classroom, which provide predictability and security for the children.



In an Ideal Learning program, you might observe:

- Children engaging in uninterrupted play.
- Teachers allowing children to set their own pace when engaging in an activity.
- Materials, music, or stories that reflect the seasons or time of year.
- Children observing beauty in the environment.

TOOLS AND RESOURCES TO EXPLORE

Becoming, a film from documentary filmmaker Paul Zehrer about Waldorf Education and the importance of early childhood.

We know that the first eight years of a child's life are a critical period for brain development, and our country is at a pivotal moment when it comes to equity for our earliest learners.

Trust for Learning is a funder collaborative measurably advancing equity in early learning, making sure that our most vulnerable children experience the highest quality traditions available — what we call Ideal Learning.

Equity in the earliest years will lay the foundation for generations of creative, brilliant young people when our country and world will need them most.



**Trust for
Learning**

