



Approaches to Play and Learning Guidance

Introduction

Families, caregivers, and early educators all work together to help children grow and learn. This guidance is intended to be a resource for educators to support and enhance children's learning and development while using the Foundations, Indiana's Early Learning Development Framework. While this is not an exhaustive list, this guidance is meant to serve as a suggestion for practice from birth to age five including the transition into kindergarten. It can be used to support a child's development at different levels of learning and promotes fluid movement between developmental stages. The Foundations are not intended to be a curriculum, but what children should know and be able to do throughout developmental stages. Curricula is content that children should learn and methods to teach the content whereas lesson plans are intended to demonstrate how the content is conveyed to children. This guidance is a resource for educators to use while developing an intentional lesson plan.

Looking Ahead to Kindergarten

High quality early experiences help a child become ready for kindergarten and beyond. The Foundations show early educators the developmental progression that typically developing young children should experience as they grow toward kindergarten readiness. In 2014, Indiana's Early Learning Advisory Committee approved the following definition of kindergarten readiness: "In Indiana, we work together so that every child can develop to his or her fullest potential socially, emotionally, physically, cognitively, and academically. Through growth in all of these domains, the child will become a healthy, capable, competent, and powerful learner."

Family Engagement

Indiana's Early Learning Advisory Committee (2016) has approved the following definition for family engagement:

- Families actively supporting their children's learning and development, and sharing the responsibility with early care and education providers who are committed to engaging with families in meaningful, culturally respectful ways;
- Continuous across a child's life, beginning in infancy and extending through college and career preparation programs;
- Occurring across the various early care and learning settings where children play and grow."

Children develop in the context of their environments, which includes family, culture, and community. Family engagement is a strong predictor of children's development, wellness, educational attainment, and success later in school and life. Early educators can use the Family Engagement sections and the Powerful Practices throughout this guidance for strategies that they can encourage family members to use at home. Children and their families also face a number of complex challenges and situations. Communities are strengthened when there are strong partnerships between organizations. Educators and program administrators are encouraged to refer families to agencies that have the most in depth knowledge to meet their needs.

Special Populations

The Indiana Core Knowledge and Competencies encourage educators to see children as unique individuals within a family and community and to be sensitive to individual developmental needs. This guidance supports special populations including dual language (DLL), exceptional, and high ability learners; however, many of the recommended strategies are appropriate and beneficial to all children. It's encouraged that educators use a flexible approach when designing curriculum and keep the needs of all children in mind. The use of the Universal Design for Learning (UDL) provides a blueprint for creating instructional goals, methods, materials, and assessments that work for everyone (See Appendix B for additional information). Additionally, with family/parental consent, we encourage educators to engage and collaborate with other professionals in closely related sectors supporting the child and family to further inform and align services. This could include professionals from education, health, and social services (e.g. First Steps/Early intervention, public schools, therapists, and physicians).



Approaches to Play and Learning Foundation 1: Initiative and Exploration

Early learners develop foundational skills that support initiative, self-direction, interest, and curiosity as a learner.

APL1.1: Demonstrate initiative and self-direction

Initiative and exploration is the cornerstone of future learning. **Initiative and self-direction** are critical to developing independence and decision making skills. As educators, we need to acknowledge and encourage children to follow their interests in order to support this learning. It is important to take advantage of teachable moments that occur every day. Children need to be given time to explore and discover, rather than be seated and “talked at.” With adult support, their self-confidence will flourish, and they will be prepared to initiate exploration, attempt new experiences, and engage with objects and people.

Looking Ahead to Kindergarten

Children who enter kindergarten demonstrating initiative and self-direction are:

- More confident in a new environment
- Ready to take risks and embrace new learning
- Prepared to work independently
- More willing to learn, especially when faced with challenges or following a failure (SEL Competency 7A)

Family Engagement

Encourage families to:

- Be flexible with plans, provide time for children to explore their interests, and provide choices when possible.
- Embrace new learning opportunities and experiences (e.g. picking books on particular topics to learn more).
- Provide the opportunity for their child to do tasks themselves (e.g. putting on clothes, dusting furniture) and resist the urge to do it the “right way”.

Special Populations¹

Educators can:

- Provide support and ensure that children have the necessary materials to demonstrate initiative (e.g. communication devices, materials that support individual children’s level of development, etc).
- Encourage self-direction by providing accessible choices for children with varying abilities.
- For DLL, provide time for children to explore and interact with others while accepting the use of their native language.

¹ With familial consent, we encourage early educators to collaborate with other service providers.

Powerful Practices

Examples of ways adults can support young learners' initiative and self-direction development:

APL1.1: Demonstrate initiative and self-direction

Across all developmental stages, educators can:

- Ensure the environment is organized, inviting, and safe.
- Provide an environment with diverse materials that change with the interests of the children.
- Be flexible with plans by honoring and respecting children's contributions and teachable moments.
- Be flexible with materials and material placement (i.e. materials can travel throughout the environment - blocks are not confined to the "block area").
- Talk to children about what is happening in the environment and encourage conversation between children.
- Build positive relationships to develop trust in order for children to feel comfortable exploring.
- Provide balance between adult and self-directed/guided activities.
- Through intentional planning, provide choices that are safe and interesting for young children.
- Acknowledge children's choices and help them proceed when they make a decision.
- Focus on a child's efforts and not the outcome. Use specific, positive language (e.g. "You stacked three blocks by yourself! Way to go! You did it!").

Infant	Younger Toddler	Older Toddler	Younger Preschool	Older Preschool
<p>Create environments that support exploration and curiosity (i.e. limit the use of "baby containers" or equipment that restricts an infant's movement such as bouncy seats, swings, etc.)</p> <p>Engage infant in play and interaction with objects and peers (e.g. shaking a rattle in front of infant or building a tower together out of blocks)</p> <p>Communicate with and guide infant through social interactions (e.g. "You are holding the ball in your hand. What are you going to do with it? Oh! You threw the ball. Where did it go?")</p>	<p>Create environments that encourage children to interact with each other (i.e. collaborative play experiences across all interest areas)</p> <p>Organize the environment so that desired materials are readily accessible to children on low open shelves (e.g. placing blocks, people & cars/trucks out for construction play)</p>	<p>Recognize child's interest and ask questions about the desired activity (e.g. child brings object to educator. Educator asks, "What would you like to do with that?")</p> <p>Organize the environment so that desired materials are readily accessible to children on low open shelves (e.g. art materials are available at the easel for use)</p>	<p>Provide extended time for self-directed activities</p> <p>Support active and creative exploration of materials in the environment (i.e. children and materials move freely in and out of interest areas)</p> <p>Ask open-ended questions (i.e. "I wonder what...", "Tell me about...", "What do you notice?")</p>	<p>Encourage children to ask questions, to ask for additional materials or resources</p> <p>Offer opportunities for children to plan their activities (e.g. put a clipboard in the block area so children can plan their construction)</p> <p>Educators ask guiding questions to assist in a child's plan (e.g. "I see you're opening a store in the dramatic play area. What do you think you'll need?")</p>



Approaches to Play and Learning Foundation 1: Initiative and Exploration

Early learners develop foundational skills that support initiative, self-direction, interest, and curiosity as a learner.

APL1.2: Demonstrate interest and curiosity as a learner

Children are natural born scientists, wanting to know the how and why of our world. The development of *interest and curiosity as a learner* leads to the ability to:

- Ask questions to gain or deepen understanding
- Identify one's own strengths and preferences
- Approach learning and problem solving with a creative and critical lens

Looking Ahead to Kindergarten

Developing interest and curiosity as a learner is critical in kindergarten. Children will be challenged with many new concepts across content areas, and maintaining interest and curiosity will lead to their success. This also leads to a student's ability to demonstrate:

- Self-efficacy (SEL Competency 2C)
- An understanding of metacognition (SEL Competency 6A)
- A willingness to learn, especially when faced with challenges or following a failure (SEL Competency 7A)

Family Engagement

Encourage families to:

- Observe, ask questions, and support a child in their exploration at home (e.g. "I see that you're interested in dinosaurs. Do you want to learn more about that? Let's go to the library and find a book about it!").
- Demonstrate curiosity alongside their child (e.g. Child: "Why don't penguins need a coat? It's so cold!" Parent: "Let's look up how penguins stay warm!").

Special Populations²

Educators can:

- Provide support and ensure that children have the necessary materials to demonstrate their interests and curiosity (e.g. communication devices, materials that support individual children's needs, etc.).
- Promote curiosity by providing accessible choices for children with varying abilities.
- For DLL, provide time for children to explore and interact with others while accepting the use of their native language.

² With familial consent, we encourage early educators to collaborate with other service providers.

Powerful Practices

Examples of ways adults can support young learners' development of interest and curiosity:

APL1.2: Demonstrate interest and curiosity as a learner

Across all developmental stages, educators can:

- Provide time and space for children to pursue their interests (e.g. when the child sees an ant crawling along the sidewalk, support them in exploring, asking questions, and wondering).
- Provide a predictable environment including some stability in materials and organization (e.g. construction area is consistently available, but materials in the interest area change over time).
- Build positive relationships to develop trust in order for children to feel comfortable exploring.
- Engage in meaningful conversations and actively listen and respond to children.
- Encourage children to move freely and explore the environment.
- Intentionally plan opportunities for new experiences while providing support for individual child needs.
- Model enthusiasm for new experiences using body language, facial expression, and tone of voice.
- Encourage communication to build relationships with children and foster their inquisitive nature.
- Make connections between children's interests and current and past experiences.
- Minimize transitions and interruptions.

Infant	Younger Toddler	Older Toddler	Younger Preschool	Older Preschool
<p>Create environments that support exploration and curiosity (i.e. limit the use of "baby containers" or equipment that restricts an infant's movement such as bouncy seats, swings, etc.)</p> <p>Model and describe how to engage with objects and materials</p> <p>Recognize and value repetition in actions as learning (e.g. fill and dump, dropping spoon)</p> <p>Encourage persistence and scaffold play (e.g. "You are trying to fit the square into the shape sorter. Turn, turn, turn. There you go! You got it!")</p>	<p>Expand on and value child initiated actions or vocalizations by modeling a variety of words and actions (e.g. child brings educator a rock. Educator says, "You brought me a rock. Look! I'm feeling it and it is hard and bumpy. Would you like to feel it?")</p> <p>Provide organized, consistent environment that includes a variety of materials (e.g. rotate materials or add new materials to spark interest)</p>	<p>Expand on and value child initiated actions or verbalizations by modeling a variety of words and actions (e.g. Child brings educator a rock and says "Rock!". Educator says, "Yes! You brought me a rock. Look! I'm feeling it and it is hard and bumpy. Would you like to feel it?")</p> <p>Understand the importance of and respond to child initiated questions and/or comments by asking open-ended questions and expand on their interests</p> <p>Provide organized, consistent environments that includes a variety of materials</p>	<p>Provide time for children to carry out their desired activity or exploration</p> <p>Ask open-ended questions (i.e. "I wonder what...", "Tell me about...", "What do you notice?")</p> <p>Demonstrate brainstorming with a child on a topic of interest (e.g "What do we know about squids?")</p> <p>Create environments that encourage exploration and investigation and model use of materials (e.g non-fiction books, magnifying glasses, natural materials)</p>	<p>Provide time for children to carry out their desired activity or exploration</p> <p>While communicating with children, use phrases like "I wonder...", "Why do you think...", "What would happen if..."</p> <p>Facilitate brainstorming with a child on a topic of interest (e.g "What do we know about squids? Where should we look to find out?")</p> <p>Create environments that encourage exploration and investigation and model use of materials and encourage collaboration (e.g non-fiction books, magnifying glasses, natural materials)</p>



Approaches to Play and Learning Foundation 2: Flexible Thinking

Early learners develop foundational skills that support flexible thinking and social interactions during play.

APL2.1: Demonstrate development of flexible thinking skills during play

Flexible thinking plays a critical role in learning across a number of domains, such as Mathematics and English Language Arts. It allows children to adapt from one learning context to the next with ease and shift their focus and attention to new tasks when asked.

The development of flexible thinking skills leads to the ability to:

- Use of effective problem solving skills
- Understand abstract concepts
- Take on new tasks and responsibilities
- Take others perspectives

Looking Ahead to Kindergarten

Flexible thinking is a key component of developing a growth mindset. The development of flexible thinking skills during play will support kindergarten students in:

- Applying conflict management skills (SEL Competency 4C)
- Analyzing, synthesizing, and evaluating the thinking process (SEL Competency 6C)
- Accepting constructive feedback (SEL Competency 7C)

Family Engagement

Encourage families to:

- Support children in using materials in ways other than designed (e.g. using pots and pans as drums).
- Model flexible language (e.g. bat is an animal and a tool used in a baseball game).
- Model flexible thinking in everyday opportunities (e.g using substitute ingredients in a recipe while cooking or making new rules for a game).

Special Populations³

Educators can:

- Provide a flexible learning environment where things are presented and learned in a variety of ways and for many purposes (i.e. differentiated instruction).
- For DLL, help children take others perspectives by labeling the emotions of others in their native language when possible.

³ With familial consent, we encourage early educators to collaborate with other service providers.

Powerful Practices

Examples of ways adults can support young learners' development of flexible thinking skills:

APL2.1: Demonstrate flexible thinking skills during play

Across all developmental stages, educators can:

- Give children the time to resolve difficulties and solve problems independently (e.g. educator pauses and observes before assisting a child with a puzzle by asking questions like, "This has a side that looks like a straight line. Where do you think that fits?").
- Encourage flexible use of open-ended materials in child directed activities.
- Discuss how children's actions affect other children.
- Model flexible thinking skills (e.g. play a sorting game and change the rule mid way through - first sort by color then by shape).

Infant	Younger Toddler	Older Toddler	Younger Preschool	Older Preschool
<p>Provide environments that allow for safe exploration of objects</p> <p>Model verbal and nonverbal communication (e.g. waving, shaking head yes or no)</p> <p>Model play by stacking blocks, shaking a rattle, or putting together a puzzle and watch as infant attempts to mimic or imitate your play</p>	<p>Provide open ended materials and encourage children to explore those materials how they choose; model a variety of uses (e.g. block represents phone)</p> <p>Model a variety of approaches to problem solving, depending on the child's individual needs</p>	<p>Encourage the use of open ended materials (e.g. chairs represent a train)</p> <p>Model a variety of approaches to problem solving depending on the child's individual needs</p> <p>Follow the child's lead in how and what they choose to play with (e.g. including taking materials from one center to another, pretending with common objects, etc.)</p>	<p>Support the use of open ended materials to promote problem solving (e.g. child cannot see out of the window, uses sturdy materials to create a platform to stand on in order to solve the problem)</p> <p>Provide children with multiple options to solve a problem using visual and verbal cues</p> <p>Help the child to develop coping skills when in a group setting (e.g. negotiate to develop a plan, compromise, and follow through on plan)</p>	<p>Encourage the use of open ended materials to promote problem solving (e.g. cardboard box represents computer)</p> <p>Encourage children to attempt a variety of approaches to solve a problem</p> <p>Help children to develop coping skills when in a group setting (e.g. negotiate to develop a plan, compromise, and follow through on plan)</p> <p>Encourage children to use available materials across learning centers (e.g. bringing dramatic play items to the building center)</p>



Approaches to Play and Learning Foundation 3: Attentiveness and Persistence

Early learners develop foundational skills that support initiative, self-direction, interest, and curiosity as a learner.

APL3.1: Demonstrate development of sustained attention and persistence

The development of *sustained attention and persistence* allows children to recognize the importance of completing a task and to develop internal self-regulation to follow through despite distractions and frustrations.

Children are encouraged to explore and discover together and on their own. This promotes experimentation, risk taking and collaborative learning in the environment. Children then use this curiosity to begin to build attention and critical thinking skills.

Looking Ahead to Kindergarten

As children make the transition to K-12 education, development of executive function skills become a key factor to success. In order to meet expectations, children need to be able to focus on and complete tasks with minimal assistance and begin to problem solve issues that occur. Kindergarten students will also be able to demonstrate a willingness to learn, especially when faced with challenges or following a failure (SEL Competency 7A).

Family Engagement

Encourage families to:

- Play interactive games with their child (i.e. finding games where children can develop coping skills for experiencing wins and losses).
- Read to their child (e.g. continuing a book that the family wasn't able to finish in one sitting).
- Create age appropriate responsibilities for the child in the home (e.g. taking dishes to the sink, cleaning up toys, etc.).
- Promote a growth mindset by giving specific praises on the process and effort (e.g. "You put a lot of time and effort into that!").

Special Populations⁴

Educators can:

- Provide materials for the child's individual developmental level to promote learning.
- For DLL and exceptional learners, introduce, model, and reinforce vocabulary needed to communicate with peers and educators.
- Provide visual supports to aid in vocabulary and overall skill development.

⁴ With familial consent, we encourage early educators to collaborate with other service providers.

Powerful Practices

Examples of ways adults can support young learners' development of sustained attention and persistence:

APL3.1: Demonstrate development of sustained attention and persistence

Across all developmental stages, educators can:

- Provide an environment that is interesting and inspiring for children, adapting as their interests evolve.
- Be flexible in adapting the schedule to focus on children's interests and meaningful learning opportunities (i.e. avoid interrupting when children are actively engaged in play).
- Encourage children to persist by acknowledging their effort in a positive, calm, and supportive manner in close proximity and at the child's level.
- Be flexible in their expectations by recognizing individual children's attention span limits.

Infant	Younger Toddler	Older Toddler	Younger Preschool	Older Preschool
Engage in serve and return interactions in close proximity (e.g. educator responds positively to infant's coos verbally and nonverbally)	Provide books and read with children one-on-one or informally to a small group regularly, using vocal fluctuations throughout the story	Provide access to books and read with children (individually or in small groups) regularly, using vocal fluctuations throughout the story	Provide engaging books that are easily accessible to children	Provide engaging books that are easily accessible to children
Recognize and respond to infant's cues (e.g. when infant expresses discomfort)	Provide materials that are achievable but challenging (e.g. stacking cups, encouraging children to climb over a climber or tree stump)	Provide materials that are achievable but challenging (e.g. shape sorters and inset puzzles)	Use a variety of techniques while reading to children (e.g. using vocal fluctuations, asking open-ended questions, puppets, flannel boards, etc.)	Use a variety of techniques while reading to children (e.g. using vocal fluctuations, asking open-ended questions, puppets, flannel boards, etc.)
Provide a variety of interesting, engaging materials (e.g. shakers, books that can be mouthed and cleaned, and mirrors)	Follow a child's lead in play to extend their learning and attention (e.g. "You dumped out all the blocks. What should we do with them? Let's build together.")	Model repetition play (e.g. building a tower and knocking it over several times in a row)	Provide support based on child's needs to encourage completion of activity	Provide support based on child's needs to encourage completion of activity
Recognize and value repetition in actions as learning (e.g. fill and dump, dropping spoon)		Create invitations to play by placing materials out for children to explore, like placing puzzles at the table, and encourage persistence by scaffolding learning (e.g. "Try turning the dog so his head is at the top and see if it fits.")	Provide materials that are achievable but challenging (e.g. interlocking puzzles, magnet tiles)	Provide materials that are achievable but challenging (e.g. increasingly complex interlocking puzzles, matching games)
			Intentionally plan activities that require sustained attention (e.g. <i>Hokey Pokey</i> , <i>Going on a Bear Hunt</i>)	Intentionally plan activities that require sustained attention (e.g. <i>Simon Says</i> , <i>Going on a Bear Hunt</i>)



Approaches to Play and Learning Foundation 4: Social Interaction

Early learners develop foundational skills that support the engagement in imaginative and cooperative play with others.

APL4.1 Demonstrate development of social interactions during play

Social interactions are essential in developing a lifelong love of learning and positive relationships. Children establish who they are in the context of the others around them. The development of social interactions leads to:

- An established sense of self and confidence
- An understanding of what others expect of them
- Increased understanding of respectful communication with both peers and adults
- Increased language and cognitive skills (i.e. problem solving and conflict resolution with peers and adults)

Looking Ahead to Kindergarten

Development of social interactions in play supports success in kindergarten by preparing students to:

- Treat others fairly and respectfully (SEL Competency 5A)
- See multiple perspectives and be open minded (SEL Competency 5A)
- Effectively listen to others, take turns speaking, and add one's own ideas to small group discussions or tasks
- Ask questions to seek help, get information, or clarify something that is not understood

Family Engagement

Encourage families to:

- Talk about their and their child's day and interactions with friends (e.g. "I saw that you were playing with Matt today. Tell me more about the game you were playing!").
- Model positive social interactions with other adults.
- Plan play dates in unique settings (i.e. parks, museums, restaurants, etc.).

Special Populations⁵

Educators can:

- Provide opportunities for peers of all abilities to interact and play together.
- Intentionally focus on and promote the strengths and uniqueness of individuals with varying abilities.
- Modeling use of communication supports (i.e. AAC or other communication devices).
- For DLL, consider having children pair with a friend who speaks their native language.

⁵ With familial consent, we encourage early educators to collaborate with other service providers.

Powerful Practices

Examples of ways adults can support young learners' development of social interactions during play:

APL4.1: Demonstrate development of social interactions during play

Across all developmental stages, educators can:

- Provide the appropriate amount of materials to support positive social interactions during play experiences (i.e. continually assess the environment available to ensure materials and space reflect the interests and skills of children).
- Ensure children are interacting with other children throughout the day, constantly observing, and providing support when needed.
- Foster the development of kindness and respect while accepting the child's peer preference.

Infant	Younger Toddler	Older Toddler	Younger Preschool	Older Preschool
<p>Create environments that supports onlooker play (e.g. place infant on the floor and in close proximity to peers throughout the day)</p> <p>Narrate activities of other infants in the environment (i.e. be a play by play announcer of infant's actions)</p> <p>Place toys within reach of infants to encourage their independent play skills</p>	<p>Create environments that supports solitary and parallel play (e.g. have duplicates of similar objects and space where children can play independently or side by side)</p> <p>Narrate activities of other children in the environment and begin to encourage interaction ("Oh, Juan is going through the tunnel. Sophia, would you like to follow him through the tunnel?")</p>	<p>Create environments that supports parallel play (e.g. have duplicates of similar objects and space where children can play alongside each other)</p> <p>Intentionally plan for small group activities for short periods of time (e.g. a small group of children using playdough with various instruments to manipulate it and explore)</p> <p>Facilitate activities while children play in small groups (e.g. "Oh! I see that you're trying to reach the rolling pin. Let's ask Cole if he can hand it to us.")</p>	<p>Create environments that supports associative play (e.g. two or more children are discussing their buildings but may not be working on the same project)</p> <p>Intentionally plan for small group activities (e.g. bringing a parachute outdoors for a group of children to use)</p> <p>Introduce complex cooperative play (e.g. asking questions to help the children plan or assign roles)</p>	<p>Create environments that supports cooperative play (e.g. children may plan and assign roles while playing restaurant)</p> <p>Provide materials that promote engagement in complex dramatic play based on the child's interest (e.g. providing multiple seats at a table, various types of food, and paper to write down food orders, etc.)</p> <p>Encourage and model compromising and negotiating with peers in shared decision making (e.g. "If we're going to open a restaurant, what do you think we need?" and then chart children's responses)</p>

Acknowledgements

The Indiana Department of Education is grateful to the following professionals for their input into the creation of this guidance:

Ann Aull, Child Care Answers

Katherine Ammerman, Fayette County School Corporation

Danielle Capstick, Early Learning Indiana

Lenore Friedly, Early Learning Indiana

Lauren George, Child Care Answers

Erin Kissling, Indiana Department of Education

Nicole Leach, Indiana Department of Education

Vicki Lehman, Child Care Answers

Olanda Lewis, Family and Social Services Administration, Office of Early Childhood and Out-of-School Learning

Rachelle Myers, Indiana Association for the Education of Young Children

Sarah Parks-Reese, Indiana Department of Education

Diane Pike, St. Mary's Child Center

Mary Podany, Carmel Clay Schools

Krystal Robinson, Indiana Department of Education

Melissa Romo, Indiana Department of Education

Dr. Sara Schmitt, Purdue University

Rose Tomishima, Indiana Department of Education

Jessica Tomasino, Indiana Department of Education

Candice Wise, Early Learning Indiana

Kristy Wright, Indiana Department of Education

Jessica Yoder, Indiana Department of Education

For additional resources, please see the Early Learning Foundations Guidance Online Tool at www.doe.in.gov/earlylearning.