

Adopted by the NAEYC National
Governing Board February 2025

Early Childhood Program Standards

National Association for the Education of Young Children

By offering clear definitions of quality, NAEYC's Early Childhood Program Standards help families make informed decisions about their child's early education, and help programs ensure they are safe, well-prepared, and intentional about fostering the joy, development, and learning of every child.

A decorative graphic consisting of two concentric circles. The inner circle is a solid dark blue, and the outer ring is a lighter, medium blue. The text is centered within the inner circle.

A Position Statement Held on Behalf of
the Early Childhood Education Profession

Disponible en Español: [NAEYC.org/estandares](https://naeyc.org/estandares)

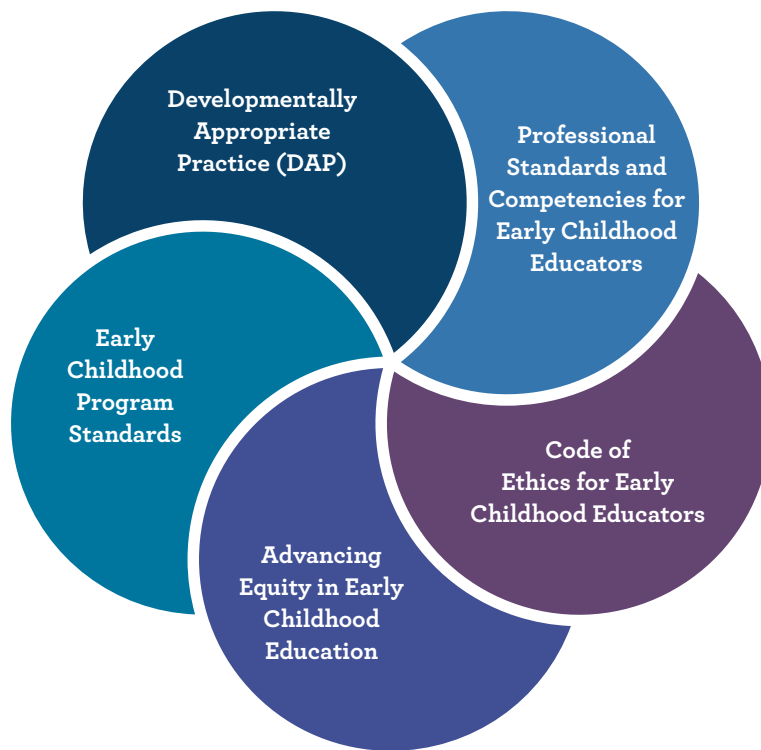
Relationship Between the Five Foundational Position Statements

NAEYC’s position statements are developed with and for early childhood educators. The “Early Childhood Program Standards” position statement works with other important NAEYC documents to help educators and systems leaders (1) define developmentally appropriate practice, (2) set professional standards and competencies for early childhood educators, (3) outline a professional code of ethics, and (4) work toward advancing equity. These five foundational position statements are grounded in [NAEYC’s core values and vision](#).

The revision processes have increased consistency across the position statements. For example, there are six areas of effective practice outlined in the “Developmentally Appropriate Practice” position statement. These are the same areas outlined in “Professional Standards and Competencies for Early Childhood Educators.” The “Early Childhood Program Standards” also

includes these six areas, plus three areas related to safety, the physical environment, and leadership and management (See Appendix A: History of the Standards and Crosswalk for more details). All statements help promote children’s right to equitable learning opportunities to achieve their full potential as engaged learners and valued members of society.

NAEYC’s Foundational Documents



Early Childhood Program Standards for Early Childhood Educators

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Purpose

Every child benefits from access to high-quality, equitable, joyful early learning opportunities. The purpose of NAEYC’s “Early Childhood Program Standards” position statement is to offer a framework for early learning programs, higher education institutions, and early childhood education systems at all levels to use.

The statement includes nine standards addressing key indicators of quality, and guidance for ongoing development and support of early childhood education programs.

These standards are the foundation for the NAEYC Early Childhood Program Quality Assessment and Accreditation system, but they are designed to benefit all programs and systems, no matter what accreditation status they have.

The standards and key indicators of quality, along with NAEYC’s accreditation items, provide guidance to ensure programs are equitable, safe, well-prepared, and intentional about fostering the joy, development, and learning of every child.

The Position

Early learning programs in homes, centers, and schools must include features that ensure that every child has access to joyful, equitable learning opportunities. This statement recognizes the ongoing inequities in access to quality care and early learning experiences and offers a clear definition

of quality to address these systemic gaps. The statement gives early childhood educators and administrators guidelines to follow and a way to evaluate their practices. The standards also empower families to make informed decisions about their child’s early education.

Design and Structure

This statement outlines the NAEYC Early Childhood Program Standards, broad guidelines designed to support effective early learning programs. These standards will be updated regularly to reflect new research and changes in the field. They are based on research, feedback from the field, and practical experience. These standards build upon the six guidelines for effective practice from “Developmentally Appropriate Practice,” with three additional standards specific to program operations. A full review of supporting research and links to supporting NAEYC resources are available on NAEYC’s website for those seeking deeper insight.

This revision of the standards was guided by three principles:

Focused: These standards focus on the core elements of program quality. They are comprehensive but are not meant to represent an exhaustive list of what constitutes quality practice in early learning programs. Licensing and accreditation bodies may expand these indicators to address specific needs or contexts.

Aligned: The standards are closely connected with NAEYC’s Quality Assessment and Accreditation System. This ensures that accreditation processes reflect the same holistic approach to quality outlined in the standards.

Simplified: Using as much plain language as possible, each standard provides a brief description of the features that programs must include to ensure joyful, equitable learning for each and every child, including the historically marginalized. Each standard includes two to four key indicators that highlight specific elements of quality. The indicators are supported by a complementary research review along with detailed guidance through NAEYC’s Early Childhood Program Quality Assessment and Accreditation system.

Together, these standards offer a clear, research-informed foundation for early childhood programs to deliver equitable, high-quality experiences for all children. A glossary of terms used can be found in Appendix B.

NAEYC EARLY CHILDHOOD PROGRAM STANDARDS

PROGRAM STANDARD 1

Relationships: Creating a Caring and Equitable Community of Learners

Young children experience their world through relationships. These relationships affect nearly all aspects of their development. From birth, children experience rapid brain development that is shaped by their interactions with their environment and their caregivers. Culture also matters for learning and development. Adults need to be responsive to children's and families' cultures as they build relationships and identify and address their own biases. Warm, sensitive, and responsive interactions help children develop a positive sense of self and encourage them to respect and cooperate with others. Positive relationships also help children develop self-regulation skills and benefit from learning environments and experiences. Children who see themselves as highly valued are more likely to feel secure, get along with others, feel part of a community, and experience greater leaps in learning.

A PROGRAM THAT MEETS THIS STANDARD:

- › Supports positive relationships with each child and family in ways that promote individual children's self-worth
- › Takes action to foster children's sense of belonging as part of a caring community of learners
- › Centers children's and families' cultural values, integrating their home languages/dialects/communication needs
- › Identifies and addresses potential biases that exist within the staff and program structures

PROGRAM STANDARD 2

Families and Community: Engaging in Reciprocal Partnerships with Families and Fostering Community Connections

Families and communities are children's first and most important teachers. They play a central role in children's learning and development. Early childhood programs must recognize this connection and build relationships with families based upon mutual trust and respect. This includes engaging families as leaders in ways that respect their cultures and home languages, ensuring they have a voice in decisions about their child's learning, and embracing them as co-educators. Programs should create welcoming environments where families feel encouraged to fully participate and collaborate to support children's educational growth. In addition, programs must support family well-being by helping families to access the resources needed to promote children's healthy development and learning.

A PROGRAM THAT MEETS THIS STANDARD:

- › Develops reciprocal relationships with each child's family responsive to culture, language, and individual needs
- › Continuously engages children's families as vital members of the learning community
- › Works to be a positive member of the larger community around it
- › Draws upon community resources (including both funds of knowledge and financial resources) to support program goals

PROGRAM STANDARD 3

Curriculum: Planning and Implementing an Engaging Curriculum to meet Meaningful Goals

A curriculum is a plan that includes learning goals, intentional teaching strategies, activities, and material to help children learn and thrive. It guides educators on what and how to teach covering all areas of children’s development, like cognitive, social, physical, and emotional growth. A high-quality curriculum provides an appropriate scope, and, in some content areas, a research-based sequence of skill and knowledge development aligned with children’s developmental progressions. It is developmentally appropriate and promotes an integrated approach to learning. A high-quality curriculum is flexible and respects children’s cultural and linguistic backgrounds, including those learning multiple languages or with disabilities. The curriculum also offers an organized foundation for teachers with flexible guidance for daily, weekly, and monthly schedules. It supports rich learning experiences both within and outside of the classroom, through play, cooperative activities, and direct instruction. It incorporates various formats like learning/interest centers (e.g., dramatic play, blocks, classroom library), small- and large-group activities, and individual activities. Educators use it to create learning experiences that are age-appropriate, culturally and linguistically relevant, and aligned with children’s interests and developmental stages.

A PROGRAM THAT MEETS THIS STANDARD:

- › Uses a curriculum based on current research to support children’s development and learning
- › Uses a curriculum that includes developmentally appropriate goals, a scope and sequence aligned with research in appropriate content areas, and rich content to guide teachers in all areas of development and content (literacy, mathematics, science, social studies, and the arts)
- › Uses a curriculum that is culturally and linguistically responsive and reflective, builds on children’s strengths, respects their cultural backgrounds, and supports their identities and home languages

PROGRAM STANDARD 4

Teaching: Teaching to Enhance Each Child’s Development and Learning

Great teaching uses thoughtful strategies to encourage active, joyful learning. This helps children grow, build confidence, and develop independence and agency. These strategies build a rich, responsive learning environment that supports the many ways in which young children learn and grow. Effective educators support how children learn and develop in different ways by planning activities with clear goals that match the curriculum, while also adapting to each child’s interests, abilities, and needs. Educators should balance both child-led and teacher-scaffolded opportunities for play, exploration, and learning. This can be done by using open-ended, guiding questions, and fostering positive, encouraging interactions. Educators intentionally select materials, tools, and technology (if applicable) with discretion to ensure approaches support children’s specific learning and development needs.

Intentional teaching strategies include activities like interactive read-alouds, small- and large-group instruction, and hands-on experiential learning. Activities should incorporate various types of experiences that allow young learners to gather information and create meaning through images, drawing, speech, music, song, body movement, and text. Educators work with families to learn about each child’s background and culture and design activities that reflect that diversity and are aligned with learning goals.

Educators should work to create an anti-bias, inclusive environment where all children feel valued. This helps children build a positive sense of self, appreciate diversity, learn about differences, and work together with trusted adults against unfairness and injustice.

A PROGRAM THAT MEETS THIS STANDARD:

- › Uses teaching practices that are nurturing and inclusive
- › Equips educators to support each and every child’s development and learning through individualized and intentional practices
- › Uses teaching practices that are culturally affirming and linguistically responsive to the children being served
- › Supports learning through play and hands-on activities

PROGRAM STANDARD 5

Assessment: Observing, Documenting, and Assessing Children's Development and Learning

Educators use what they know about each child to plan lessons that match their strengths, interests, and needs. Regular and intentional assessment helps to identify children who may benefit from additional support, whether through more intensive instruction, intervention, or who may need additional developmental evaluation. To be culturally responsive, assessments should be child-centered, a part of children's everyday activities, and should take place in children's natural learning environments. This approach ensures the program meets its goals for children's learning and development, while also helping educators grow professionally and improve program quality. To reduce bias, assessments should consider children's cultures, languages, dialects, abilities, and prior experiences. In addition, multiple methods should be used by educators and administrators, including input from families, to get a complete picture of each child's strengths and areas for growth.

A PROGRAM THAT MEETS THIS STANDARD:

- › Uses an ongoing mix of formal and informal assessment to monitor children's development and learning to guide instruction
- › Uses assessment from classrooms to plan, identify resources, and improve professional development to ensure all children are making progress in their development and learning
- › Conducts assessments in partnership with families, ensuring open communication and collaboration

PROGRAM STANDARD 6

Health: Promoting Health and Well-Being in Early Childhood Programs

For children to learn and thrive, they need to be as healthy and well as possible. Their well-being depends upon the adults in their lives—who also need to be healthy and well—to make good choices for them and to teach them to make good choices for themselves. Although some degree of risk-taking is desirable for learning, a quality program ensures a safe environment that protects against practices and conditions that could harm children, staff, families, or communities. Child care licensing agencies are responsible for protecting the basic health and safety of all children. This standard goes beyond basic licensing requirements by focusing on fostering the physical and emotional well-being of both children and staff. It emphasizes creating a safe, supportive environment where everyone can grow, learn, and succeed while maintaining a high quality of life.

A PROGRAM THAT MEETS THIS STANDARD:

- › Promotes the nutrition and health of children and staff and protects them from illness
- › Promotes the physical safety of children and staff, protecting them from injury while also encouraging healthy risk-taking that supports learning, exploration and development
- › Nurtures infants', children's, and staff's emotional, mental, and behavioral well-being

PROGRAM STANDARD 7

Physical Environment: Designing Physical Environments that are Safe, Engaging, and Accessible

The program’s physical environment is designed and maintained to support high-quality activities and services while being safe and accessible for everyone. This includes well-maintained buildings, safe equipment, and clean water and air to promote children’s health and well-being. A well-organized, maintained, and equipped environment fosters learning, engagement, comfort, health, and safety for children, families, and staff. A sense of belonging is promoted by creating spaces that reflect the diversity of the learning community. Applying the principles of Universal Design or making necessary adaptations in the classroom environment ensures all spaces are accessible, safe, sensory-friendly, and encourage exploration, independence, and interaction for all children.

A PROGRAM THAT MEETS THIS STANDARD:

- › Provides access to appropriate and well-maintained indoor and outdoor spaces for both child-directed and teacher-guided activities
- › Ensures indoor and outdoor spaces are adequately sized and accessible to all children, including children with disabilities and those who need individual accommodation
- › Offers a physical environment that reflects the languages and cultural backgrounds of children and their families

PROGRAM STANDARD 8

Professionalism: Demonstrating Professionalism as Early Childhood Educators

As stated in “Professional Standards and Competencies for Early Childhood Educators,” children thrive when their educators have formal training and ongoing support. Educators who have specific preparation, knowledge, and skills in child development and early childhood education are more likely to build and maintain warm, positive, unbiased relationships with children, use rich language, and create high-quality, equitable learning environments. Opportunities for educators to receive supportive supervision and to participate in sequential, ongoing professional development helps educators to stay updated and improve their skills as the field of early childhood education evolves.

A PROGRAM THAT MEETS THIS STANDARD:

- › Employs a staff that has education and knowledge, skills, values, and dispositions to support the development, learning, and well-being of all young children
- › Ensures fair and equitable access to professional development opportunities that help educators deliver high-quality early learning experiences and environments

PROGRAM STANDARD 9

Leadership and Management: Supporting Staff, Children, and Families Through Effective Leadership and Management

As stated in “Professional Standards and Competencies for Early Childhood Educators,” great programs need strong leadership, effective management, and clear policies and systems to thrive. To build and maintain strong, continuous relationships between teaching staff and children, programs should strive to offer working conditions and compensation (wages and benefits) that attract and retain a diverse and qualified staff. Staff, across all levels, should reflect the community and children served, including race, ethnicity, and language. Programs should have policies in place that ensure adequate and safe group sizes and child-to-staff ratios that meet the profession’s guidelines to provide consistent quality care for children. The governance structures and leadership management maintain confidentiality for all matters concerning children and families.

A PROGRAM THAT MEETS THIS STANDARD:

- › Has policies, procedures, and systems that reflect high-quality HR practices, are aligned with the program’s vision and philosophy, and ensure developmentally appropriate experiences for young children
- › Maintains financial records that help leaders to make decisions and contribute to the program’s long-term success
- › Has policies that guide staff, educator, and volunteer orientation and continuous reflection, setting them up for success
- › Implements policies, procedures and systems that support confidentiality regarding information about enrolled children and their families

Appendix A: History of the Standards and Crosswalk

In the 2005 version of the “Early Childhood Program Standards,” there were 10 standards (shown in the leftmost column below). To align the standards with NAEYC’s four additional foundational position statements, with a particular emphasis on alignment to the guidelines embedded in the “Developmentally Appropriate Practice” (DAP) position statement, it was determined that six of the former 10 standards (shown in bold in the center column below) mapped directly to DAP guidelines. For example, the former Standard 2 “Curriculum” maps directly to the DAP guideline “Planning and Implementing an Engaging Curriculum to Meet Meaningful Goals.” The former Standard 7 (Families) and Standard 8 (Community Relationships) were combined to align with the DAP guideline, “Engaging in Reciprocal Partnerships with Families and Fostering Community Connections.” Historically, in the NAEYC accreditation system, standards 7 and 8 have been scored collectively for many years, so this merging of standards seemed quite appropriate. Former Standards 5 (Health), 9 (Physical Environment), and 10 (Leadership and Management) did not map directly to DAP guidelines, so the standards were renamed such that their new naming would align with the DAP guidelines. From there, it was decided to reorder the standards so that child-focused standards come first, followed by educator/program-focused standards. The crosswalk below demonstrates the evolution in naming and ordering the standards from the 2005 version of the position statement to this revised edition.

2005 Early Childhood Program Standards	New Titles of Standards	New Ordering of Standards
1. Relationships	Relationships: Creating a Caring and Equitable Community of Learners	1. Relationships: Creating a Caring and Equitable Community of Learners
2. Curriculum	Curriculum: Planning and Implementing an Engaging Curriculum to Meet Meaningful Goals	2. Families and Community: Engaging in Reciprocal Partnerships with Families and Fostering Community Connections
3. Teaching	Teaching: Teaching to Enhance Each Child’s Development and Learning	3. Curriculum: Planning and Implementing an Engaging Curriculum to meet Meaningful Goals
4. Assessment of Child Progress	Assessment: Observing, Documenting, and Assessing Children’s Development and Learning	4. Teaching: Teaching to Enhance Each Child’s Development and Learning
5. Health	Health: Promoting Health and Well-Being in Early Childhood Programs	5. Assessment: Observing, Documenting, and Assessing Children’s Development and Learning
6. Teachers	Professionalism: Demonstrating Professionalism as Early Childhood Educators	6. Health: Promoting Health and Well-Being in Early Childhood Programs
7. Families	Families and Community: Engaging in Reciprocal Partnerships with Families and Fostering Community Connections	7. Physical Environment: Designing Physical Environments that are Safe, Engaging, and Accessible
8. Community Relationships		8. Professionalism: Demonstrating Professionalism as Early Childhood Educators
9. Physical Environment	Physical Environment: Designing Physical Environments that are Safe, Engaging, and Accessible	9. Leadership and Management: Supporting Staff, Children, and Families through Effective Leadership and Management
10. Leadership and Management	Leadership and Management: Supporting Staff, Children, and Families through Effective Leadership and Management	

Appendix B: Glossary of Terms

Administrator: An individual responsible for planning, implementing, and evaluating an early childhood education program, for infants and toddlers, preschoolers, kindergarteners, or children in primary grades. The administrator’s setting may vary, and may include a child care center, family child care home, or school. The administrator’s title may vary, depending on the program type or sponsorship of the program. Common titles include director, family child care owner or operator, site manager, administrator, program manager, early childhood coordinator, and principal.

Bias: Attitudes or stereotypes that favor one group over another. Explicit biases are conscious beliefs and stereotypes that affect one’s understanding, actions, and decisions; implicit biases also affect one’s understanding, actions, and decisions but in an unconscious manner. An anti-bias approach to education explicitly works to end all forms of bias and discrimination.

Equitable learning opportunities: Learning opportunities that not only help each child thrive by building on each one’s unique set of individual and family strengths—including cultural background, language(s), abilities and disabilities, and experiences—but also are designed to eliminate differences in outcomes that are a result of inequities in society.

Family: A child’s family includes a parent, parents or other adults who are bound together over time by ties of mutual consent, birth, kinship, and/or adoption or placement, and who, together, assume some key responsibilities for the raising and nurturing of children.

Funds of Knowledge: Essential cultural practices and bodies of knowledge embedded in the daily practices and routines of families.

Inclusive: Embodying the values, policies, and practices that support the right of every infant and young child and their family, regardless of ability, to participate in a broad range of activities and contexts as full members of families, communities, and society. The desired results of inclusive experiences for children with and without disabilities and their families include a sense of belonging and membership, positive social relationships and friendships, and development and learning to help them reach their full potential.

Scope: The breadth and depth of the content covered in an early childhood curriculum. It outlines what children are expected to learn, including key developmental domains such as cognitive, social-emotional, physical, and language development. The scope ensures that all necessary skills and concepts are included to support well-rounded growth and learning.

Self-regulation: The ability to manage emotions, behavior, and thoughts in ways that are appropriate to the environment and social expectations. It includes skills such as controlling impulses, focusing attention, following rules, managing frustration, and adapting to new situations.

Sequence: The order in which the content and skills are introduced, building upon prior knowledge in a developmentally appropriate way. A well-structured sequence ensures that children progress from simple to more complex skills, fostering a logical and meaningful learning experience.

Universal Design: A system that ensures that physical spaces are usable and practical for everyone, and ideally, individuals with and without disabilities can use these spaces without requiring special design or adaptations.

Acknowledgments

NAEYC appreciates the work of the Early Childhood Program Standards Advisory committee, who participated in the revision of this statement: Stacey French-Lee* (Chair), Jeffrey Leffler**, Jason Sims**, Amber Tankersley**, Reginald Williams* and the Children’s Equity Project. The committee was primarily supported by staff members Meghan Salas Atwell, Alissa Mwenelupembe, Lauren Hogan, and Susan Friedman.

NAEYC is grateful to our funders and supporters who make this work possible, including those who have donated through the Marilyn M. Smith Applied Research Fund.

Finally, NAEYC thanks the many NAEYC members, non-members, researchers, educators, faculty members, advocates, and others, including the Gates Foundation sponsored Pre-K Curriculum Technical Advisory Group, who provided input and feedback on this statement as it was developed.

*NAEYC Governing Board Members (current and former)

**Accreditation Council Members