

# Play, PROJECTS and Preschool Standards

Nurturing Children's  
Sense of Wonder and  
Joy in Learning

**Gera Jacobs**

**Kathy Crowley**

*Foreword by Marilou Hyson*



## Dedication

*This book is dedicated to the young children of the world,  
with the fervent wish that they might all experience and retain a  
Sense of Wonder AND Joy in Learning.*

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# Contents

<b>Foreword</b>	<b>vii</b>
<i>Marilou Hyson</i>	
<b>Preface</b>	<b>ix</b>
<b>Acknowledgements</b>	<b>xi</b>
<b>About the Authors</b>	<b>xiii</b>
<b>1. Addressing Preschool Standards in Developmentally Appropriate Ways</b>	<b>1</b>
Defining the Standards	1
Meeting the Needs of All Children	3
Addressing Standards Through Engaging Experiences and Activities	3
Assessing Progress Toward Meeting the Standards	9
Summary	10
<b>2. Designing the Environment With the Child in Mind</b>	<b>13</b>
Creating a Welcoming Environment	13
Building Relationships	13
The Power of Choice	16
Arranging the Room for Exploration and Learning	18
Materials for Creating Engaging Interest Areas	18
Scheduling the Day for Play and Learning	21
Summary	22
<b>3. Developing Positive Approaches to Learning and Social-Emotional Development</b>	<b>25</b>
<i>Developing Curiosity and Eagerness; Initiative and Persistence; Problem Solving and Reflection; Invention and Imagination; Self-Concept and Self-Confidence; Regulating Emotions; Respect and Appreciation of Similarities and Differences; and Pro-Social Behaviours and Cooperation</i>	
Sample Early Learning Guidelines for Approaches to Learning	26
Sample Early Learning Guidelines for Social-Emotional Development	27
Developing Positive Approaches to Learning and Social-Emotional Development Through Projects	27
Designing the Environment	28
Addressing Standards Through Engaging Experiences and Activities	29

Supporting Children Who Are Bilingual Learners	37
Working With Children's Individual Needs	38
Summary	39
<b>4. Exploring the World Through Science</b>	<b>41</b>
<i>Science as Inquiry; Physical Science; Life Science; Earth and Space Science; Science and Technology; Science, Environment and Society</i>	
Sample Early Learning Guidelines for Science	42
Exploring the World and Science Through Projects	43
Designing the Environment	43
Addressing Standards Through Engaging Experiences and Activities	44
Supporting Children Who Are Bilingual Learners	54
Working With Children's Individual Needs	55
Summary	55
<b>5. Learning About Our Community Through Social Studies</b>	<b>57</b>
<i>Families/Cultures; Community/Civics; History/Time; Geography/Places, People and Environments; and Economics</i>	
Sample Early Learning Guidelines for Social Studies	58
Learning About Our Community and Social Studies Through Projects	58
Designing the Environment	59
Addressing Standards Through Engaging Experiences and Activities	60
Supporting Children Who Are Bilingual Learners	66
Working With Children's Individual Needs	66
Summary	67
<b>6. Engaging Children in Meaningful Literacy</b>	<b>69</b>
<i>Reading; Writing; Listening and Phonological Awareness; Speaking/Communicating and Oral Language Development; and Learning New Languages</i>	
Sample Early Learning Guidelines for Language and Literacy	70
Engaging Children in Meaningful Literacy Through Projects	70
Designing the Environment	71
Addressing Standards Through Engaging Experiences and Activities	73
Supporting Children Who Are Bilingual Learners	85
Working With Children's Individual Needs	86
Summary	87
<b>7. Making Mathematics Inviting</b>	<b>89</b>
<i>Number Sense and Operations; Shapes/Geometry; Measurement; Data Analysis and Probability; and Patterns/Algebra</i>	
Sample Early Learning Guidelines for Mathematics	90
Making Mathematics Meaningful Through Projects	91
Designing the Environment	92
Addressing Standards Through Engaging Experiences and Activities	92
Supporting Children Who Are Bilingual Learners	98
Working With Children's Individual Needs	99
Summary	99

<b>8. Fostering Creativity Through the Arts</b>	<b>101</b>
<i>Visual Arts; Music; Creative Movement; and Dramatic Play</i>	
Sample Early Learning Guidelines for Creative Arts	102
Fostering Creativity in the Arts Through Projects	103
Designing the Environment	104
Addressing Standards Through Engaging Experiences and Activities	105
Supporting Children Who Are Bilingual Learners	113
Working With Children's Individual Needs	113
Summary	114
<b>9. Promoting Physical Development and Healthy Lifestyles</b>	<b>117</b>
<i>Gross Motor; Fine Motor; and Health and Safety</i>	
Sample Early Learning Guidelines for Physical Development and Health	118
Promoting Physical Development and Healthy Lifestyles Through Projects	119
Designing the Environment	119
Addressing Standards Through Engaging Experiences and Activities	122
Supporting Children Who Are Bilingual Learners	127
Working With Children's Individual Needs	128
Summary	129
<b>10. Putting It All Together</b>	<b>131</b>
Addressing Standards in Developmentally Appropriate Ways	131
Addressing Standards and Benchmarks Through	
Projects, Studies and Themes	132
Supporting the Transition to Prep	136
Final Thoughts	137
<b>Resources</b>	<b>139</b>
Signs for Interest Areas	139
Assessing Children's Progress Toward Standards	144
Sample Group Observation Tool for Language and Literacy	145
Sample Individual Child Observation Tool for Language and Literacy	147
Children's Books and Music	148
Resources for Teaching Bilingual Learners	150
Assessment Materials	151
Helpful Websites	151
<b>References</b>	<b>153</b>
For Further Reading	155
<b>Index</b>	<b>157</b>

# 1

## Addressing Preschool Standards in Developmentally Appropriate Ways

The early years of life form the foundation for all later learning and development. Rich experiences with engaging materials and caring adults during the preschool years lay the foundation for children to develop a lifelong love of learning and a positive sense of self-worth. Research has confirmed that experiences children have during the first years of life help to form vital connections in the brain that establish the framework for future learning. As children play, investigate their world and participate in language-rich environments with supportive adults, they build these connections and grow in all areas of development.

Teachers, caregivers and parents often wonder how best to help their children, what kinds of skills they should be learning, and how they can assist their children in attaining these skills. Preschool content standards provide direction by outlining goals most children can achieve during these early years.

### Defining the Standards

Preschool content standards describe appropriate skills, knowledge and understanding children can attain with support by the time they have finished their preschool years. There are different terms used to describe standards, but generally accepted definitions are provided below.

Standards are general statements that represent the information and/or skills that children should know and be able to do. Each standard area contains benchmarks that are subcomponents of standards that describe more concretely what children should know and be able to do at specific developmental levels (Bodrova, Leong, Paynter & Semenov, 2000). For example, a standard for the Social/Emotional Area might be “Children demonstrate a positive self-concept and self-confidence in play and everyday tasks.” A more specific benchmark under that standard could be “Children adjust to new situations.”

In this book, the benchmarks that are provided describe children’s performance at the end of their preschool years.

Each state has created its own unique preschool standards and refers to them by various names, including the following:

- Early Learning Guidelines
- Early Learning Standards
- Indicators
- Desired Results
- Early Learning and Development Benchmarks
- Preschool Teaching and Learning Expectations

Target ages for the standards vary somewhat, but they are generally designed for children three to five years of age. Ideally, preschool teachers, family home- and centre-based child care providers, administrators, early childhood special educators, parents and all who work with preschool-aged children can use these standards.

Early learning guidelines in the areas of language and literacy, as well as mathematics, align with mandated standards for kindergarten. This alignment ensures a continuum of learning experiences from preschool to kindergarten and the primary grades. States have included other curricular areas as well to address the needs of the whole child. These early learning guidelines are available from the Department of Education in most states, as well as on the Internet, including the National Childcare Information Center Website at <http://www.nccic.org/pubs/goodstart/elgwebsites.html>.

Preschool standards can guide our work with children and outline what most children will be able to know and do by the end of their preschool years. However, they should not be used as a means of keeping children from entering preschool. As educators, our emphasis should be on helping children achieve success in preschool and kindergarten; preschool standards can help us to do that. They describe skills and understandings that children can develop in a supportive environment during their preschool years that will help them start primary school ready to succeed. Three-year-old children are just beginning to make progress toward reaching most of the benchmarks. With the guidance of caring adults, they will continue to make progress throughout their preschool years.

# 2

## Designing the Environment With the Child in Mind

**C**reating an engaging, exciting place for children to play, learn and grow is one of our major responsibilities. Maria Montessori has been credited with saying that the primary role of the teacher is to prepare the environment for children. What a wonderful job that is for us, to design a space that will motivate children to discover, explore and develop!

### *Creating a Welcoming Environment*

The environment we create communicates our beliefs about children, their importance and how they learn. The environment should be friendly and homelike, helping children and families feel at ease from the moment they arrive. To create this welcoming environment, add photographs of the children and their families and artwork created by the children. All this can be at children's eye level so they can view it easily. Green plants, pretty tablecloths, flowers and colourful fabrics at the window and throughout the room are just a few things that add to a warm, inviting setting. Comfortable furniture can be added, in which parents and children can relax, talk and read a book together (Curtis & Carter, 2003).

### *Building Relationships*

When children walk through the door into our programs, they need to feel that they are welcome, respected and valued. Building a strong, caring relationship with each child is the best way to instil this sense of worth and belonging. Greeting children individually at the beginning of the day and letting them know how glad we are that they are able to



## TRY THIS!

*Take a look at your room from a child's perspective. What catches your interest and invites you to play? Are there things you could change or add that would enhance the environment for the children? Are there things you could do to create soft, cosy spaces where children could curl up with a good book or simply relax? Be on the lookout for colourful, shiny, textured or natural objects and materials that children might find captivating or intriguing that you could add to your setting.*

spend time with us is a wonderful way to build the relationship. Developing this relationship requires that we take time, listen and have meaningful conversations with children throughout the day. According to Amy Baker and Lynn Manfredi/Petitt (2004),

Children's early relationships teach them who they are and what they can expect from the world; their healthy brain development thrives on loving attachments and a secure sense of belonging. The best caregivers are those who are able to invest themselves emotionally and take children into their hearts. (p. 56)

Children who have secure relationships are more willing to tackle new challenges and are able to get more out of learning experiences.

Get to know your children as individuals; treasure them. While children are playing, building structures in the Block Area or creating in the Art Area, ask them to tell you about what they are doing. Show interest and let them know their efforts have worth. This will boost children's self-confidence and interest in learning.

In her book *Teaching in the Key of Life*, Mimi Brodsky Chenfeld (1993) urged those who work with children to spend time with children, believe in them and teach from the heart:

Talk with your children. Share and compare observations, questions, experiences, and wishes, wondering. Laugh together. . . Our children need an environment sweetened with tender loving care, encouragement, inspiration, role models and time—time to play, pretend, explore, experiment and wonder; time to develop at their own pace and in their own special rhythms. When children learn in such safe, supportive settings under the gentle, constant guidance of loving adults, they prove over and over again that they are among the most creative members of this gifted and talented human family of ours. (p. 15)

Children will also feel more at ease, be willing to try and learn more if they feel that they are valued members of the group. Children need to know that it is safe to take chances, confident that their attempts at learning will be accepted and supported. This can occur in an environment where children know that we respect them and there is mutual respect between the children. Developing a sense of community among the children will increase their motivation and decrease behaviour concerns. This community spirit can grow by providing time for children to talk with each other, play with each other, sing with each other, and simply spend time with each other. Snacks and meals can be enjoyable times to talk and share together. End the day with a favourite big book, song and shared