Creating a Caring, Equitable Community of Learners

Because early childhood education settings are often among children's first communities outside the home, the character of these communities is very influential in children's development. Through their interactions, children learn how to treat others and how they can expect to be treated. In developmentally appropriate practice, educators create and foster a community of learners. The role of the community is to provide a physical, emotional, and cognitive environment conducive to development and learning for each child. The foundation for the community is consistent, positive, caring relationships between educators and other adults and children, among children, among educators and colleagues, and between educators and families. Each member of the learning community is valued for what they bring to the community; all members are supported to consider and contribute to one another's well-being and learning.

At the beginning of the year, Nathaniel often arrived at school late and either crying or concealing outward signs of emotion. I had worked to establish a predictable morning routine to help children adjust to coming into school, but it was clear that Nathaniel struggled with big emotions. As Nathaniel's first teacher, I had an important job. I needed to create a secure relationship with him and find ways to be responsive to his individual strengths and challenges, his interests, and his approaches to learning and interacting with others. With his trust in me, Nathaniel could feel comfortable exploring the environment and curriculum of his new classroom community. (From "The Power of 'Good Morning,'" page 6)

This excerpt illustrates an educator aware of the power of positive adult–child relationships for children's development and their potential to impact children's social and emotional well-being. All children come into our educational spaces with the need to connect with others, to feel cared for, and to belong, and all educators have the power to build supportive, caring, and positive relationships with the children they serve. In "The Power of Good Morning," the author describes how she and Nathaniel developed a strong and caring connection over time. Nathaniel's smile, and the pride he showed in sharing with his mom the special tradition he and his teacher developed, speaks volumes about the effectiveness of the teacher's efforts.

Developing a caring, equitable community of learners involves intentionally building relationships among all members of the community—between teacher and child, between teacher and families, and among children. Providing children with multiple opportunities to play, interact with peers, and problem-solve with others through culturally and linguistically appropriate experiences is key to a welcoming, inclusive community. An important part of your role as a preschool teacher is to scaffold these experiences for children's varying levels of development and provide meaningful feedback to make their interactions more cooperative and effective. This includes modeling prosocial behaviors such as sharing and turn taking as well as using guidance strategies when conflict occurs. As you model the expressive language and other tools for children to problem-solve on their own, they gradually strengthen their self-regulation skills. These opportunities also lead to the development of children's agency and lay the groundwork for important lifelong social and emotional skills.

Within your learning community, recognize children's need for physical movement and organized spaces. Carefully choose the most appropriate learning format based on the children's characteristics and the learning goals. Formats include large and small group activities as well as play-based learning centers, in both indoor and outdoor spaces. Some of these experiences involve child-initiated play; others are most effective within

guided play. Ultimately, provide children with choices in learning materials and activities within an environment that supports flexibility, responsibility, and freedom of movement.

As you create these supportive spaces, consider your own implicit biases about children's and families' race and ethnicity, home language, ability, and other characteristics. Preschoolers are in the process of developing their identity. Including their language and culture within your learning environment will help them develop that identity. In addition, support children's expression of gender and avoid engaging in gender stereotypes. This requires reflective practices about your interactions with children and families and intentional actions to counter stereotypical thinking.

Recognize that 3- and 4-year-olds are still learning and refining their behavior regulation. When children behave in a manner that is not conducive to the learning and well-being of all, first reflect on what might be causing the behavior. Then, consider what changes you might need to make to your learning environment or instruction. For example, creating predictable routines, crafting classroom rules with children, and having developmentally appropriate transitions go a long way toward setting children up for success and preventing challenging behaviors because the children know what to expect. When needed, do not hesitate to call on additional resources for support. These might be family members, but they might also be colleagues who specialize in bilingual or special education or mental health experts who can provide you with strategies to ensure that the children receive appropriate support.

While each early learning setting looks different, reflecting the particular children, families, communities, and educators in it, all caring and equitable communities of preschool learners share important characteristics. Children "see themselves and each other—their social and cultural identities—reflected and respected" (Wright 2022, 112). This means building on children's cultural and linguistic wealth through environments and activities that connect to children's funds of knowledge, incorporate children's strengths, and foster joyful learning. Educators also respond to individual strengths and approaches to learning as they develop secure relationships with children and their families.

Part 1 features educators who develop caring and equitable learning communities where children are valued and recognized for their strengths. These educators promote social and emotional competence as they nurture relationships with families and children and

create environments for learning and development that reflect children's language and cultural experiences.

READ AND REFLECT

As you read the chapters in this section, consider and evaluate your own classroom practices using these reflection questions.

"The Power of 'Good Morning'" highlights the importance of fostering secure, trusting relationships with children throughout the school day. Such relationships support children to freely and safely explore, learn, and build resilience. **Consider:** How do you respond to children's need for secure and positive relationships? How do you nurture children's relationships with each other?

Differentiating support for children using a strengths-based approach is the most equitable way to meet children's needs. "Every Child Belongs: Welcoming a Child with a Disability" provides ideas and tips to help educators do just that. **Consider:** How do you show different levels of support for individual children? How do you involve families in the process?

"Will You Pass the Peas, Please?" outlines the benefits of sitting down with children and engaging in family-style mealtimes together. Children have opportunities to develop their social and emotional competence as well as their communication and coordination skills. **Consider:** How can you use mealtimes to support children in contributing to each other's well-being?

"Instead of Discipline, Use Guidance" illustrates processes educators use with children in conflict to help each child develop their own perspective taking, self-regulation skills, and agency. **Consider:** What opportunities do you give children to make choices in planning and carrying out their activities? How do you encourage children to work together to resolve problems or challenges?

In "Preventing Exclusionary Discipline Practices in Early Childhood," the authors highlight that children are often excluded from learning opportunities even without official suspensions or expulsions. They offer steps for addressing implicit biases and implementing positive behavioral interventions. **Consider:** How might your own personal biases contribute to your understanding of a situation involving a child? How might these biases be affecting your assessment of the child's behavior?