

What Is Professional Development in Early Childhood Education?

NAEYC defines **professional development** as **initial preparation** (preservice) and **learning experiences** (inservice) designed to improve the knowledge, skills/behaviors, and attitudes/values of the early childhood workforce. To meet NAEYC’s mission of “assuring the provision of high-quality early childhood programs for young children,” it is necessary to have a highly competent workforce for the early childhood field.

Professional development provides the path to achieving this goal.

Professional development is required for the early childhood workforce. This diverse workforce includes center- and school-based early childhood program administrators, teaching staff, and family child care providers, and others.

In addition to individuals who typically consider themselves to be early childhood **professionals**, the workforce also includes individuals who provide care for young children but do not necessarily consider themselves to be professionals. In order to provide high-quality early childhood programs for young children, everyone working with or on behalf of young children has an obligation to pursue ongoing professional development opportunities for themselves. Also, professional development providers have an obligation to ensure that all who provide care and education for young children are competent.

Professional development in child development and early childhood education also should be provided for **members of allied professions** working in early childhood programs (e.g., nurses, bus drivers, cooks)—related to their role(s) and responsibilities.

An effective process of professional development includes a number of criteria.

Professional development experiences are typically classified

The first is that professional development for the early childhood workforce uses an integrated **systems approach**—a “comprehensive system of preparation and ongoing development and support for all early childhood education professionals working with and on behalf of young children.”ⁱ Agencies and institutions overseeing a professional development system must ensure that early childhood educators know and understand the opportunities to prepare for a career in the field. **Professional preparation** includes general education as well as training specific to child development and the ages of children with whom they (will) work.

The professional development of all early childhood educators—at all levels of expertise—should be an **ongoing process**: All professionals need to continue to update their knowledge and skills—through a coherent and systematic program of learning experiences.

Professional development experiences must be **evidence based**; **structured** to promote linkages between research and practice; and **responsive** to each learner’s background, experiences, and the current context of his/her role. All professional

as **education** and **training**.

Education programs help learners to “...have a deep foundation of factual knowledge, understand facts and ideas in the context of a conceptual framework, and organize knowledge in ways that facilitate retrieval and application.”^{iv}

Education programs are broad based: They include learning experiences specific to a primary area of inquiry (e.g., child development, early childhood education) as well as subjects of general knowledge (e.g., mathematics, history, grammar). Education programs typically lead to an associate’s, baccalaureate, or graduate degree or other credit-based certification.

Training programs are specific to an area of inquiry and set of skills related to an area of inquiry (e.g., a workshop series on positive discipline for preschoolers). Completion of training participation can lead to continuing education units (CEUs), clock hours, credentialing, and certification.

development experiences should be based on specific **outcomes** that define what the professional should know and be able to do for young children and families as a result of their preparationⁱⁱ and continuing education and training. **Continuous assessment**, tied to these outcomes, *must* be a component of all education programs,ⁱⁱⁱ and *should* be a component of all training programs, as well.

Education and training programs can include face-to-face (FtF) instruction in a group setting, self-study, Web- or e-based learning, blended learning (e.g., a combination of FtF and Web-based seminars), observation by a coach or mentor with feedback to the learner, and other methodologies.

Core knowledge areas (CKAs), a component of professional development programs in early childhood education, are defined by NAEYC as the “professional preparation standards.” The standards are designed for the early childhood education profession as a whole, to be relevant across a range of roles and settings. In university- and college-based professional preparation programs these core NAEYC standards are used across degree levels, from associate to baccalaureate to graduate programs. They are used in higher education accreditation systems, in state policy development, and in program improvement planning. In addition, professional development for administrators and teaching and support staff in programs serving young children should address NAEYC’s [Early Childhood Program Standards](#).

Effective professional development experiences include a **variety of methodologies**; the methodology selected must match the goal of the learning experiences (e.g., information dissemination, skill learning, values clarification).

Professional development **activities** include community college and university courses; pre- and in-service training sessions—on-the-job or administered by an agency, organization, business, or institution of higher education; observation with feedback from a colleague; and mentoring, coaching, and other forms of job-related technical assistance.

Professional development programs include the development and ongoing application and monitoring of **individual professional development plans**. Each learner should work with a supervisor/advisor to develop a professional development plan to support an early childhood **career lattice** system. The professional development plan should include credit-bearing course work whenever possible.

Finally, **professional development providers** must have appropriate credentials, knowledge and experience in the subject matter being taught, and an understanding of the principles of adult learning. A system for verifying the qualifications of the providers must be in place.

Early Childhood Program Standards

Ensuring the quality of children's daily experiences in early childhood programs and promoting positive child outcomes is the heart of the NAEYC Early Childhood Program Standards. Collectively, the ten standards represent essential, interlocking elements of high-quality programs for all children from birth through kindergarten. And, "all children" means *all*; it includes children with developmental delays and disabilities; children whose families are culturally and linguistically diverse; and children from diverse socio-economic groups. It also recognizes that all children have individual learning styles, strengths, and needs.

Note, however, that the Early Childhood Program Standards are global statements that identify performance expectations for ten key components of quality. As a stand-alone framework, the standards are broad. The accreditation criteria are evidence-based statements that define discrete expectations for program practice. These criteria are used by NAEYC's Academy for Early Childhood Program Accreditation to recognize programs that have demonstrated the capacity to sustain quality over time. These criteria also provide guidance to all programs for quality improvement, regardless of whether a program intends to seek Accreditation.

ⁱ LeMoine, S. 2008. *Workforce Designs: A Policy Blueprint for State Early Childhood Professional Development Systems*. Washington, DC: National Association for the Education of Young Children (NAEYC), 5.

ⁱⁱ Hyson, M. ed. 2003. *Preparing Early Childhood Professionals*. Washington, DC: NAEYC, 7.

ⁱⁱⁱ Ibid.

^{iv} Adapted from National Research Council. 1999. *How people learn: Bridging research and practice*. Committee on Learning Research and Educational Practice. Donovan, M.S., J.D. Bransford, & J.W. Pellegrino, eds. Commission on Behavioral and Social Sciences and Education. Washington, DC: National Academy Press, 12.