TATS & FIN Talk

VOLUME 1

A Focus on Early Childhood Learning

About Early Childhood Education

Research shows that children are more successful in school and beyond if they are given a strong foundation in the earliest years of their lives. Research on early learning programs in the 1960s and 1970s revealed that benefits for children lasted into adulthood (Meloy, 2019).

Recent scientific research describes early learning as the critical period from birth to about five years of age when the brain develops at a rapid rate and children are building a foundation for learning that will last for life. During the early childhood period the human brain undergoes rapid development; it's a period when a child builds cognitive skills–the foundation for reading, math, science, and academics–as well as character skills, social-emotional growth, gross-motor skills, and executive functioning, which includes everything from impulse control to problem solving (Dodge, 2017).

Early childhood education is a broad term used to describe an educational program that serves children in their preschool years, prior to entering kindergarten. Early childhood education may consist of any number of activities and experiences designed to aid in the cognitive and social development of preschoolers before they enter elementary school.

Diverse Opportunities

Florida's Division of Early Learning (DEL) reports that more than one million children under age five live in Florida and that nearly 600 babies are born each day. As many as 700,000 children in Florida attend some type of early learning program.

Options for early childhood programs in Florida are numerous and varied in focus. Most communities have pre-kindergarten programs; whether public or private (associated with religious facilities), they provide options for families. Several public programs, as well as district school systems, also provide classrooms and programs for young children.

Preschool education programs may be designed specifically for either three-, four-, or five-year olds, and they may be provided in childcare or nursery school settings, as well as more conventional preschool classrooms. These programs may be housed in center-based, home-based, or public-school settings; and they may be offered on a part-day or full-day basis, or even on a year-round schedule to include summers. Early childhood education programs also differ in terms of funding and sponsorship, and can be privately run, operated by a local school system, or operated through a federally funded program.

Preschool classrooms often serve children with a variety of learning characteristics, including students who meet eligibility criteria for special education under such programs as Developmental Delay, Speech Impaired, Language Impaired, or other identified disabilities. It is important to note that special education services are provided across various settings, as described under "Options for Early Childhood Education."

Options for Early Childhood Education

From birth to age 3, children are often enrolled in childcare settings in homes and other locations such as public and private preschools, including church and community programs. Young children who are identified as having special needs are often served by Florida's Early Steps program.

Early Learning CHILD CARE	Florida Head Start State Collaboration Office	early steps
Child Care in Home or Preschool	**Early Steps - Early Intervention**	**Early Head Start**

Young children and infants who exhibit delays, disabilities, and established conditions (for example, cerebral palsy, visual impairments, deafness, or medical conditions) are often provided with services in the Early Steps program as documented in an Individual Family Service Plan (IFSP). Service providers consult with and model strategies for family members in additional to working directly with the children. Before the children served with an IFSP reach their third birthday, a transition process occurs. This process includes collaboration with the family regarding services, review of progress and continued needs, and evaluation through the district school system. Children who continue to qualify for special education services then have an Individual Educational Plan (IEP) which is developed before their third birthday.

Children ages 3–Kindergarten are often served in public and private programs, including those that are federally, state, or district funded. Young children who are identified as eligible for special education services are served in a variety of settings and are often included in the programs listed below.

DIVISION OF Early Learning
LEARN EARLY. LEARN FOR LIFE.
[DEL Resources](#)

Head Start
[Head Start Migrant Programs](#)

FloridaVPK
[Voluntary Prekindergarten](#)

Florida Head Start State Collaboration Office
[Head Start](#)

Early Learning SCHOOL READINESS
[FL School Readiness](#)

FLORIDA DEPARTMENT OF CHILDREN AND FAMILIES
MYFLFAMILIES.COM
[Childcare, Private, and Community Programs](#)

Additional Resources

[Special Needs - Division of Early Learning](#) | [Head Start Center for Inclusion](#) | [VPK Specialized Instructional Services](#)

The Early Childhood Classroom

Children in preschool classrooms are usually busy and active. Pre-kindergarten teachers are tasked with challenges such as providing a safe and secure environment, establishing relationships, balancing teacher-directed and student-directed learning, and helping children become socially and emotionally ready to learn. Teachers need to be aware of the impact of aspects of development such as children's prior experiences, culture and family dynamics, and socio-economic factors, as well as possible developmental delays and disabilities. Children bring their experiences and developmental characteristics into the classroom with them. Good teachers are observant of that and design activities and supports around the kinds of things that they know their students are experiencing. Because children arrive in early childhood programs from diverse backgrounds, cultures, experiences, and levels of development, they also have diverse learning styles, strengths, and needs. Most children will thrive when given general and universal supports within the classroom setting; however, some children may exhibit difficulties and will need more intensive and individualized supports.

Child Development

To understand the varying needs of young children, it is important to be familiar with child development sequences and milestones. When considering developmental stages and domain skills, it is important to remember that children develop at varying rates. Each child develops at their own rate, and delays, learning difficulties, and needs for supports at any stage or level of development are not necessarily indications that a child has a disability. Most children learn by doing and will practice new skills through play. Children must have their basic needs met and feel safe and valued in order for learning and development to be maximized.

Child development is generally described in domains or categories which include the following:

▶ Social (adult and peer interactions and relationships, emotions, and self-regulation)

▶ Adaptive (self-care, group participation, responsibility)

▶ Communication (language; emergent literacy; listening; expressing wants, needs, and ideas)

▶ Motor (gross muscle movements, fine motor, perceptual motor)

▶ Cognitive (memory, problem-solving, conceptual information, emergent literacy, pre-academic skills)

Supporting All Children

All children, regardless of their learning differences, should have opportunities to experience activities and receive supports that assist when needed but at the same time maximize independent functioning across a wide range of settings.

Key principles for providing supports for all children are included in the components of Developmentally Appropriate Practices (DAP) and Universal Design for Learning (UDL). These strategies focus on providing minimum supports and moving toward more intensive and individualized supports as progress monitoring data indicates the need for additional assistance. Essential guidelines for supporting young children's learning and participation are listed below.

- ▸ Provide a welcoming, safe, and nurturing environment.
- ▸ Embed teaching and facilitating practice of skills throughout the routines of the day.
- ▸ Schedule, encourage, and facilitate play and hands-on experiences.
- ▸ Use individual interests, examples of real-life situations, along with actual objects and photos to help children understand lessons and routines.

In order for all children, regardless of their learning differences, to have access to information related to early learning standards, it is important to use the Florida Early Learning and Developmental Standards (FELDS). These standards describe what a child should know and be able to do as they progress developmentally from birth until age 5. There are eight domains of learning: Physical Development, Approaches to Learning, Social and Emotional Development, Language and Literacy, Mathematical Thinking, Scientific Inquiry, Social Studies, and Creative Expression. Information and resources in the developmental continuum of FELDS in combination with information about individual needs provides a framework for developing supports and strategies based on individual needs.

However, even with supports in place, there are various reasons that some children experience difficulties participating in and learning from the lessons and activities provided. These reasons include medical problems, lack of experiences, language or learning differences, along with developmental delays and disabilities. Children who have not had opportunities to attend preschool programs might not yet have experiences in school-related interactions and activities, while other children might have received early intervention or individualized supports in other programs. Some children who enter a specific early childhood setting might have already been evaluated and determined eligible for special education services.

For more information on early childhood programs, contact your TATS regional facilitator.

Technical Assistance and Training System (TATS)—http://www.tats.ucf.edu

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