



## Best Practices

No two children are alike. Each child comes to us with different interests, talents, needs, and abilities. Although the learning goals remain the same for all children, educators need to tailor instruction accordingly. This individualizing of instruction can be done by assessing children's strengths and challenges in order to plan for individualized instruction, demonstrating and guiding the learning, and clearly communicating rules, routines, and expectations.

### Assess and Plan

To successfully create learning opportunities for children, educators need to know the particular interests each child has—what “makes a child tick” as Professor Villegas-Reimers says in the overview video. It's also important for educators to assess each child's skill level and understanding by carefully observing and interacting one-on-one, in small groups, and with the whole class. This enables educators to tailor activities, interventions, and teaching strategies.

- **Be proactive.** Get to know each child. As educators watch, listen to, and engage with children throughout the day, they should note children's abilities and challenges.
- **Create fun and engaging learning opportunities** by using what you know about each child's special interests, expertise, and favorite things.
- **Encourage children's learning** by helping them succeed. Educators can then provide opportunities for each child to move to a higher skill level.

### Why is it important to assess the individual traits of each child?

- Each child has different learning levels and needs. The information that educators gather when observing and listening to children can be used to support, encourage, and engage children in learning.
  - If you notice that a child likes dinosaurs, use books about dinosaurs to teach letter sounds and concepts of print, use toy dinosaurs at the math table for counting, and provide dinosaur props in the Pretend and Play Center.
  - If a child or a group of children are having trouble with a concept or skill, such as sorting, use a small group setting to model the skill or explain the concept.

### How can educators assess each child's unique interests, needs, and abilities?

- Observe each child's interactions and ask questions. As you do, note individual children's successes or challenges.

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- At the Block Center, you might ask: *What shapes are you using to build your tower? How many blocks do you have left?*
- Review concepts or ideas children may not fully grasp. In the video, Min-Jen quickly reviews what the idea of a pattern is as she asks what color comes next.

### Why is it important for educators to recognize and respond to children's strengths?

- Notice and praise children's successes. This helps children gain a sense of mastery and self-worth. As Min-Jen explains in the video, *I catch the moment when they are really good at something.*
- Specific and positive feedback that focuses on the child's effort and perseverance helps give children confidence to engage in more difficult tasks. For example, *Wow! You are learning to zip your coat all by yourself! You have been working hard on that* is more effective than a general comment like *Good job!*

### Demonstrate and Scaffold

One of the best ways to guide young children's learning is to model a task from beginning to end. By hearing and watching the educator's process, children learn to think through a task and to understand what needs to happen first, next, and so on.

- **Demonstrate and explain.** As you model the activity, show how to do it by explaining and showing each step.
- **Provide time for children to practice.** Respond and coach children as they work. This "guided" practice will help reinforce what they are learning.
- **Scaffold the learning.** Provide supports, such as prompts, specific questions, or reminders that can help children follow instructions and learn.

### How can educators demonstrate and guide learning?

- Demonstrating and guiding learning supports each child's specific skills and understanding. This also helps scaffold the learning.
  - As you demonstrate an activity, describe what you are doing. For example, in the video, Min-Jen shows a visual example of the pattern and then breaks down the task into steps. You might also make a chart that gives step-by-step directions or show an example of a completed activity for children to reference as they work.

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- Have children do each step with your guidance and encouragement. This type of guided practice encourages children as they learn.
- Give children time to work independently, providing additional modeling or guided practice if needed. For example, in the video when the children plant grass seed, Karen is aware of their frustration levels and intervenes when they need help.

### How does individualized instruction influence the scaffolding educators use?

- Like the instruction, the scaffolds are specific to each child. For example, in the video, Cary knows that a particular child needs extra help in understanding a concept in the Block Center. She refers to the child's family in order to help him understand the number of blocks he is using and how they relate to each other in size. Cary then models the appropriate vocabulary and prompts the child to use the word "medium" by pausing and letting him fill in the word.

### Communicate Expectations

Establishing, communicating, and enforcing clear rules, routines, and expectations is important so that children can feel safe, secure, and competent. By better understanding what is expected of them, children can achieve the intended outcome and feel good about their performance. As you add new tasks, be sure that each child understands how it fits into the day.

- **Communicate expectations** in a way that children can understand. Use simple language, role-playing, and repetition to explain concepts, rules, or tasks.
- **Use a variety of communication methods** geared to children's different learning needs. For instance, charts or posters, calendars, photographs with captions, and "to do" lists are all ways that children may be able to understand and refer to the rules.
- **Individualize instruction by using a variety of reinforcements.** Some children may need to be reminded often, respond to signals such as visual cues or songs, or will need the rule to be rephrased in order to help them understand.
- **Periodically discuss and review routines and expectations.** This may be especially important to do after a holiday break or when a new child joins the group.
- **Redirect inappropriate behavior** calmly and kindly, yet firmly.

### What routines did the educators use? How might these help the children navigate through the day?

- Routines help children know what to expect and help them to regulate their behavior accordingly. In the video, Min-Jen uses different-colored name cards and emphasizes the word “walk” by saying it loudly and slowly, in order to help children move on to their next activity.

### How did educators communicate rules, routines, and how children are expected to behave?

- Cues help children transition from one activity or task to another. In the video, in addition to verbal cues, Liz uses auditory cues, such as music, along with visual reminders (turning the lights off).
- Non-verbal cues are also familiar methods. Educators can use a whispery voice, put their fingers to your lips, or raise a finger in the air to signal quiet. In the video, Liz has children mark the end of the activity by putting their hands on their heads.
- A fun “clean-up” song, used consistently, lets children know that an activity is coming to an end and that they are expected to help clean up the area.
- Children have different responses to the beginning and ending of the program day. “Hello” and “goodbye” routines help children make those important transitions more smoothly.

## Glossary

**guided practice:** practice of a process, behavior, or tasks that happen alongside an educator or coach

**individualized instruction:** instruction that is planned and implemented based on the individual interests, strengths, and needs of each child

**modeling:** explicitly demonstrating a process, behavior, or task

**scaffold:** a specialized instructional support that helps children learn; examples include prompts, hints, reminders, or models

**visual and auditory cues:** signals and other indicators to let children know that something is about to begin or end

View the self-paced video workshop at <http://resourcesforearlylearning.org/educators>.