Kansas Kindergarten Guide

KANSAS STATE DEPARTMENT OF EDUCATION

Kansas leads the world in the success of each student.

October 31, 2025

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KANSAS KINDERGARTEN GUIDE

Introduction

Kansas leads the world in the success of each student.

The Kansas State Board of Education in October 2015 announced a new vision for education in Kansas – Kansas leads the world in the success of each student.

The vision took nearly a year to develop. During that time, Kansans Can became the branded theme for the vision. Kansans are demanding higher standards in academic skills, as well as employability and citizenship skills, and the need to move away from a "one-size-fits-all" system that relies exclusively on state assessments. This new vision for education calls for a more child-focused system that provides support and resources for individual success and will require everyone to work together to make it a reality. Kindergarten readiness is one of five measurable outcomes that will move Kansas toward this vision.

Why Kindergarten Readiness?

School readiness occurs within a broad context that includes the four components of community, educational environment, family and the individual child. These four components function as interdependent systems of support that have multidirectional influences. Early childhood experiences, from birth through age 8, are necessary for school success and have a direct influence on future success. Experiences include health and physical well-being, cognitive development, communication and social-emotional skills. An effective foundation for school readiness also involves policy, funding and systems for children that support their ability to thrive and succeed in learning environments through their lifespan.

This Kansas Kindergarten Guide is a resource to provide kindergarten teachers, principals and other school district administrators with common information about high-quality, full-day kindergarten. This guide may be used to provide support to implement developmentally appropriate and academically rigorous kindergarten programs statewide. Creation of this document was in response to the Kansans Can initiative. It is not designed to mandate to school districts how to implement full-day kindergarten, but to provide information on effective practices. Kindergarten teachers and administrators are encouraged to discuss the design of high-quality, developmentally appropriate and rigorous kindergarten classrooms. This guide is a living document that will be reviewed and improved as more districts around the state implement high-quality, full-day kindergarten.

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Transitions

> "Kindergarten is a context in which children make important conclusions about school as a place where they want to be and about themselves as learners vis-à-vis schools. If no other objectives are accomplished, it is essential that the transition to school occur in such a way that children and families have a positive view of the school and that children have a feeling of perceived competence as learners."
>
> – Dockett and Perry, 2001, p.2

Kindergarten is a special milestone in a child's and family's life which requires big adjustments. It can be filled with joy, anticipation and apprehension. Children come to kindergarten with a wide range of abilities and past experiences. Kindergarten is a place for children to learn, play and grow. It is not the job of the child to be ready for kindergarten, but it is the responsibility of the system to be prepared to welcome and respond to each child in an intentional and appropriate way.

This transition should not only be considered from the teacher and administrator perspective, but from the child and family perspective. A clear understanding of kindergarten readiness on the part of all involved parties also assists in a smooth transition. It is critical that a system approach is not only implemented but thoughtful of both the child and his/her family.

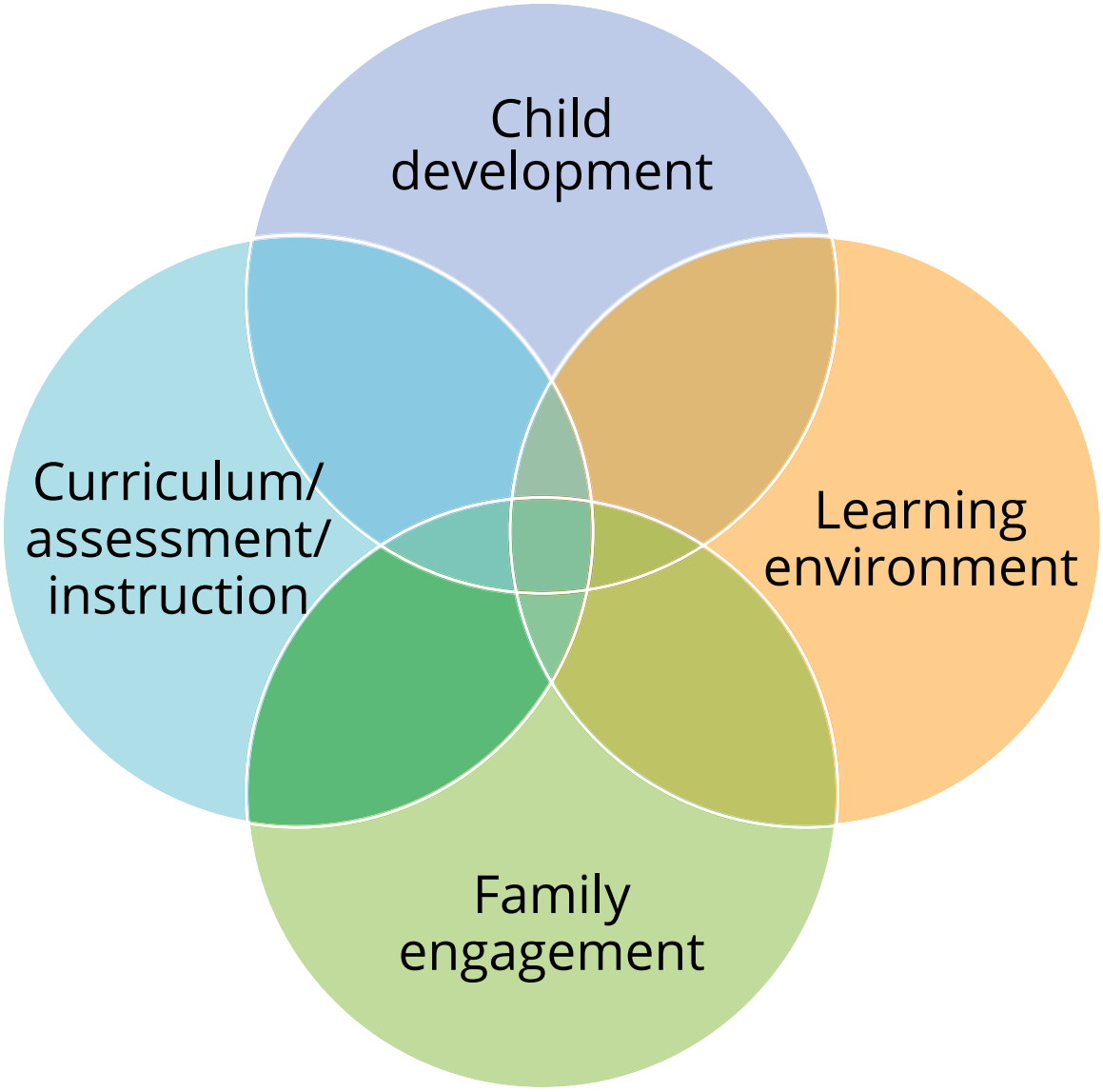
Early Learning Collaboration

The goal of collaboration is to increase communication and build connections between kindergarten teachers and early learning providers to promote smooth and successful transitions to kindergarten for children. A tool for collaboration could include *The Kansas Early Learning Standards*.

Collaboration components include:

- Building and strengthening relationships between early learning providers and kindergarten teachers.
- Developing and sharing common expectations for kindergarten readiness.
- Sharing emerging best practices.
- Analyzing and sharing data across programs to inform practice and improve future school success.

Guiding Principles for High-Quality Kindergarten



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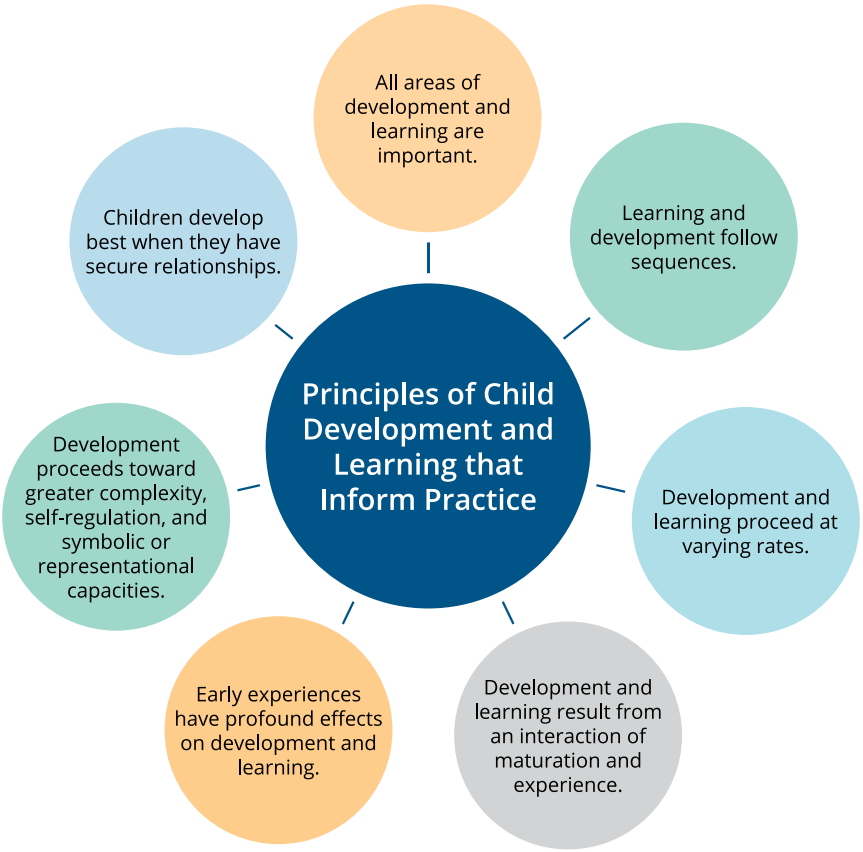
Child Development

> "All children are ready to learn more than they already know; it is the teachers who need to know how to create appropriate instruction for each child, whatever his or her starting point."
>
> – Dockett and Perry, 2001, p.2

According to the National Association for the Education of Young Children (NAEYC), child development is a complex phenomenon of interrelated domains. The principles that follow recognize these domains and importance when making decisions to meet the needs of young children.

Principles of Child Development that Inform Practice



Understanding Child Development

All kindergarten children are unique, yet follow similar patterns of development. As educators, either in the classroom or in the school community, it is essential that we understand these traits and characteristics of kindergarten children in order to plan environments and experiences that best meet the needs of the children. These characteristics, competencies and needs should be the foundation for all classroom experiences, the schedule, curriculum, educational activities and teaching practices (Berk, 2006). Kindergarten children are also in a phase of development where there is tremendous growth. This transformation between the ages of 5 to 7 is a critical and unique period of development.

Cognitive neuroscience research reveals that the brain develops rapidly during the first five to seven years of life. Because the brain is more malleable during these years than it will be later on, strong early learning experiences are critical in laying the foundation for the successful future for every child. Therefore, it is essential that teachers know and understand the sequences in which children gain specific concepts, skills and abilities. It is also essential for educators to understand the interconnectedness of children's social, emotional and cognitive development. Experiences shape a young child's brain, and it's never too late to support development, but earlier is better (Tomlinson, 2014). High-quality kindergarten programming hinges on fostering children's development and learning in all domains; including cognitive, social-emotional, physical and language.

Cognitive:

Kindergartners show more flexibility in thinking than younger children and greater advances in reasoning and problem-solving (National Association for the Education of Young Children, 2009). Kindergartners retain concepts best when presented in contexts meaningful to them. As a result, active, experience-based learning, while good for all ages, is key to this period of development.

Social and Emotional:

Forming and sustaining relationships with adults and other children is central to a young child's development. Studies show that children who fail to develop minimal social skills and suffer neglect or rejection from peers are at risk for later outcomes, such as school dropout, delinquency and mental health problems (McClelland, Acock, and Morrison, 2006).

Entering kindergartners vary in ability to self-regulate by intentionally controlling emotions, behaviors and thought (Tomlinson, 2014). It is important for teachers to minimize sources of frustration, overstimulation and stress in the environment that might be more than young children can handle. However, age and situation-appropriate frustrations and stress are opportunities for children to develop problem-solving skills.

Physical:

Kindergartners become increasingly more competent in physical skills, such as balance and eye-hand coordination. Many kindergartners initially struggle with fine motor tasks, such as writing, drawing, and precise cutting. Five- and 6-year-old students benefit from many opportunities to practice, including painting, working with clay, constructing with blocks, stringing beads, zipping, buttoning, using scissors and pouring juice at snack time. They are also becoming more competent in gross motor skills and can skip, hop and climb with ease by the end of their kindergarten year.

Language:

Language and vocabulary skills of kindergartners vary widely. Kindergartners can generally answer open-ended questions (e.g., "What would you fix for dinner if you were the cook?") with relatively complex sentences; can retell a story or relay details about an experience or event; and can participate appropriately in conversations. Vocabularies are growing at a fast pace and kindergartners still make frequent incorrect generalizations and grammatical errors when they speak (e.g., "Look at all of those deers.")

Child-Centered Learning

Understanding how children learn is also essential in creating responsive classrooms that encourage and support children. Children learn by talking, exploring, practicing, rehearsing, approximating and making meaning (Heroman and Copple, 2014). Children actively construct their understanding of the world through continuous interaction with their environment. Young children learn best when given ample opportunities to explore, practice, apply and extend on the concepts presented in the classroom. They are eager to discover ideas, to look for patterns and relationships and to form generalizations. Children learn through spontaneous activity, play, carefully prepared materials and guided experiences. A high-quality kindergarten classroom needs to provide a balance of teacher-directed activities, child-initiated play, and focused, experiential learning with daily time for playful, intentional learning centers.

Play and academics are not an "either or." For children birth to 8, play is an essential element in learning. High standards for math, language, literacy, social and emotional skills provide experiences for children to reach rigorous standards in ways that embed the love of learning. Before adults can expect different outcomes for children, there is a need to build the capacity of the adults that work with children. It is critical that kindergarten teachers have "effective instructional strategies that weave the knowledge base about child development with kindergarten standards and content knowledge in ways that are engaging, meaningful and relevant to children" (Heroman and Copple, 2014, p. 6).

Kindergarten is not only about increasing the hours in a child's school day, but it is the quality of the time that matters. The child must be the main focus of the kindergarten program. Each child brings unique experiences, expectations, emotions, attitudes and abilities to the classroom. It is essential that the individual characteristics of each child be accepted, understood and nurtured.

Kansas State Early Learning and Development Guidelines

Kansas has addressed child development by adopting *The Kansas Early Learning Standards*. These standards, written through the collaborative work of early learning professionals, communities, and cultural organizations, provide information for parents and educators regarding children from birth to 5. Being aware of characteristics of developmentally or chronologically younger children will help teachers identify supports. Also being able to successfully challenge older children, either due to chronological age or advanced development, will help these children experience success and a joy for learning.

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Learning Environment

> “Positive learning environments prepare children for the difficult task of learning. They open children up to the possibilities of what lies ahead. In that way, learning environments have profound implications for learners affectively and cognitively.”
>
> – Janet Mort, Joyful Literacy Interventions, 2014

The developmentally appropriate, rigorous classroom provides opportunities for experimentation, exploration, discovery, inquiry, challenge and interaction. A primary goal of the kindergarten year is to develop independent, confident learners who discover the excitement and challenge and provide a strong base for further learning throughout their lives. The kindergarten environment, including its physical, social, and organizational attributes, can play a critical role in a child’s learning.

Children feel more secure and learn more readily in programs that:

- Are well organized.
- Provide predictable routines.
- Have consistent expectations.
- Represent the children culturally.
- Demonstrate mutual respect.
- Foster positive relationships with teachers and peers.

Physical Space

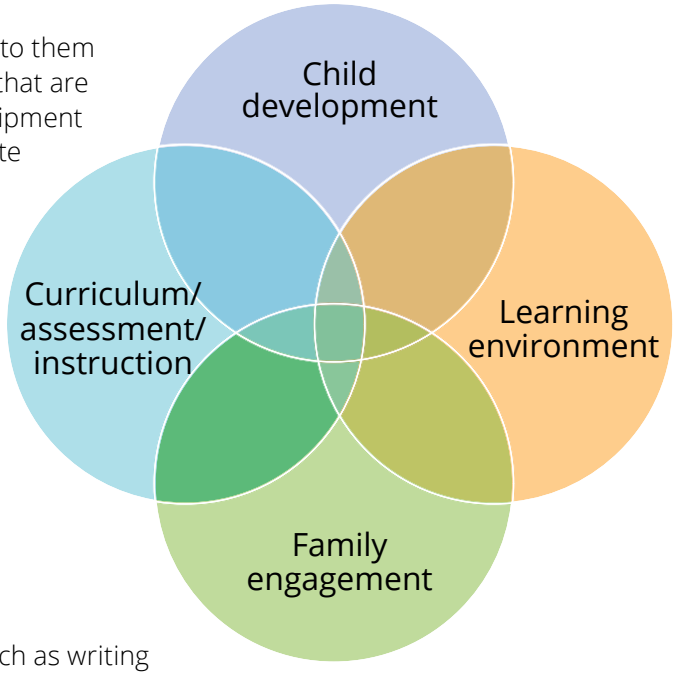
A rich, well-organized classroom environment is an essential part of the curriculum. The manner in which a room is arranged can promote choices and provide direction to children using both materials and space productively. The classroom should be intentionally designed so that purposeful and intentional play-based activities can be supported as a vehicle for a child's learning. Both the room arrangement and the materials within it send an important message to the learner that affects both engagement and behavior. Teachers need to continually evaluate and monitor the environment, ready to make changes and adjustments to meet the needs and interests of their children. As children grow and change, materials will change along with the needs of the children.

Kindergarten classrooms will differ from one another, but certain elements should be present in the physical environment of each kindergarten classroom. According to Heroman and Copple (2014), classrooms should include:

- A space for children to store their work and personal belongings.
- A comfortable place for group meetings that allows children to see one another during discussions.
- A variety of spaces for working that may include tables, centers and open-floor areas.
- Quiet places for working independently, with a friend or in a small group.
- Places for materials that allow for easy access and clean-up after use.
- Places to display children's work in a respectful, attractive manner.

The physical arrangement of the room should allow children to see and easily move through all areas with purpose. It is important to be mindful as to what the arrangement is saying to children. If a teacher sets his/her classroom up like a racetrack, the children will use it as such. However, if the teacher creates dynamic spaces that allow children to question, create and explore, then that is the type of learning that will take place.

Children should have a variety of activities available to them throughout the day, providing open-ended choices that are directly aligned to development and standards. Equipment and materials should be easily accessible, in a definite location, and clearly labeled so the children know where to get the materials and where to put them away. The materials should be open to a variety of possibilities so that all children can access an area of learning. When putting materials out, always question if there is more than one entry point to the task? Is there enough room for ideas to grow? Are there structures in place where children know how to access new materials as the idea blooms?



Meeting Area/Large Group Space

In this space, whole group lessons can occur, such as writing demonstrations, story time, interactive writing, gross motor activities, morning routines and music. Valuable skills and standards are taught in this space on a daily basis, such as speaking, listening, reading, writing, community building, responsibility, mathematical thinking, inquiry and problem-solving.

Block Area

Block play is a critical element in a high-quality learning environment. Research strongly suggests that working with blocks increases a child's spatial reasoning that leads to higher achievement in geography, science, technology, engineering and mathematics. Though it is important to have conventional materials, such as wooden blocks, it is also important to remember that less obvious materials open up more opportunities for pretend play (Tepylo, Moss and Stephenson, 2015).

Literacy Area

Literacy spaces in a high-quality kindergarten classroom should include a child library and writing area. In these spaces, children will work on reading and writing skills by practicing using their growing skills as they develop into readers and writers. Here children have the opportunity to become comfortable with various genres, read or write alone or with a friend, and create stories orally or through print. Though these spaces will be filled with both fiction and nonfiction opportunities, literacy activities will not live in these spaces alone. For example, the book "How a House is Built" (1990) by Gail Gibbons may be in the block area and a menu from a local restaurant in the dramatic play center. Thinking about reading and writing in terms of the whole child will allow the teacher to incorporate the concept of playing with words into every area of the room.

Dramatic Play Area

When children engage in the dramatic play center, they use imagination to bring to life places in their world, such as a home, store, post office, restaurant or a pet shop. The dramatic play area also is a powerful place for teachers to intentionally scaffold social skills for children. The power of taking turns, including others, patience and problem-solving are all skills that children will engage in while using this space. Children will be making connections in math while they are measuring, pouring, comparing, counting and possibly dealing with money. Children will deepen their understanding around reading and writing when they take an order, read from a recipe, write a grocery list or make a birthday invitation. The children will engage in imaginative play by exploring different roles from those of a family member or an interpretation of a community helper. They will increase vocabulary and orally rehearse a familiar story or create a new one that can be developed over time. It also becomes a place where children work through feelings and emotions that they are processing from personal experiences outside of school. To maximize the value of the dramatic play area, it needs to include a mix of child-initiated and teacher-guided experiences.

Math Area

Though the area is called the math center, it also is filled with opportunities for fine motor work, language development and social skills. In this space, children will engage in learning opportunities for reasoning, sorting, classifying, sequencing, comparing, counting, measuring, inquiring, joining and separating sets, recording, defining, estimating and solving meaningful problems at their own level of development and interest. By engaging with the children while in this area, the teacher is able to extend a child's thinking and guide the further development of the child's vocabulary. By incorporating games, puzzles and open-ended materials for engagement in this space, the children will be able to strengthen not only their ability to work with others in a small group setting, but also oral language, cognitive development and fine motor skills.

Art Area

Whether a child has had an early learning experience prior to entering kindergarten, or if this is his/her first structured environment, art tends to be an equalizer where all children can find a level of success. In the art area, children are able to explore a variety of materials and express his/her experiences and feelings while using their imagination to plan and create. While increasing vocabulary and developing fine motor skills, the child is able to deepen his/her understanding around technique, two-and three-dimensional studies, and learn to persist at the open-ended task that lies before them. Children will quickly learn mathematical concepts around shape while revisiting a project over and over through choice. Soon, child-made puppets will fill the dramatic play area, the block area will be filled with trees and people made of paper, and the walls will represent the budding artists in the classroom.

Science Area

Children are naturally inquisitive and full of wonder. Providing a space where they can ask questions, search for answers and observe the world they live in provides opportunities for children to make meaningful connections. Providing both living and nonliving items for children to observe, explore, compare and classify encourages children to not only ask deeper-level questions but empowers them to research the answers as well. Using the interests of the children and units of inquiry, the science area creates a space in the room for children to go and further develop their understandings. Here, children will investigate problems, compare findings with classmates, research theories, ask questions and make predictions. It also is another opportunity for a teacher to build in meaningful vocabulary to a child's day.

Quiet Area

Aside from the intentional areas of activity, a teacher should also think about where a child can go for a bit of privacy. This is a place where a child who needs a break or to be alone can go and still feel part of the classroom community. This space should have different opportunities for the child to self-select throughout the day to think, self-reflect, relax or problem-solve in private. Thinking about the sensory needs of the children also can help the teacher make choices about what should or should not be in this space. Depending on the needs of the children, this can change over time.

> "When the physical environment is planned with children's self-initiated learning in mind, children encounter places where they can freely explore what things are and how things work. The environment should be considered to be part of the kindergarten curriculum and given explicit attention to the needs of the children. In such an environment, children investigate, invent and experiment. To support children's self-initiated play and integrated learning, teachers create environments with a network of interest areas. Each area has a distinct focus and a predictable inventory of materials."
>
> – California Department of Education, 2010

Teacher-Child Interaction

A key factor in the quality of a learning environment in kindergarten is the quality of the adult-child interactions. The emotional support that teachers give to children provides a solid foundation for developing the motivation and cognitive skills critical to positive long-term academic outcomes:

> "Young children benefit from opportunities to develop ongoing, trusting relationships with adults outside the family and with other children. Notably, positive teacher-child relationships promote children's learning and achievement, as well as social competence and emotional development."
>
> – Crosnoe, Johnson and Elder, 2004). According to the NAEYC (2009, p. 13

It is the role of the teacher to be responsive to children's needs in a caring and respectful manner. Validating a child's feelings and interests, showing children daily that they are cared for, and scaffolding a child's ability to self-regulate will support a teacher in establishing positive relationships with children. Social activities are an ongoing part of a kindergartener's day. Through coaching and encouragement, the teacher can play a significant role in providing opportunities for a child to engage with others in social problem-solving. Children need time and a safe environment to work cooperatively with others. By demonstrating skills the teacher desires for children to emulate, a teacher can support the children in identifying emotions and expressing those emotions in an appropriate manner. While some children require coaching to work in a group situation, problem-solve or enter into a task with peers, other children may need more direct instruction. Knowing the learner allows teachers to select strategies more intentionally.

A child's ability to self-regulate happens gradually through strong adult-child interaction and opportunities for learning. True acceptance of all children is the first step in creating a safe learning environment where children can learn to manage their emotions and behaviors. Effective adult-child interactions are an essential ingredient for children's social and academic development. Changes in how adults interact with children do not happen overnight. Quality improvement efforts that focus explicitly on teacher-child interactions maximize impacts for children. Carefully designed and implemented professional development support can improve the quality of teacher-child interactions.

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Classroom Management

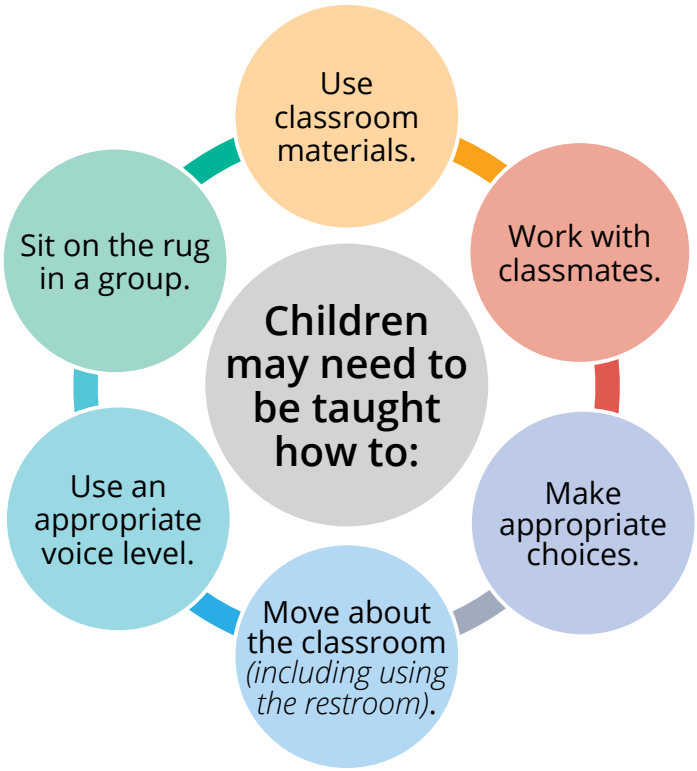
Establishing Classroom Rules and Procedures

> “Child achievement at the end of the year is directly related to the degree to which a teacher establishes good control of the classroom procedures in the very first week of the school year.”
>
> – Wong and Wong, 2009, p. 6

Establishing the routines, structures and expectations begins the very first day of school. The materials available in the classroom will influence your success in teaching these elements. It is up to the teacher to set the tone of the classroom. A teacher who is relaxed, happy and speaks softly is more likely to draw similar responses. The use of positive reinforcement is better than dwelling on misbehavior. For example: “I see you are being very careful to put the blocks back in their proper places. That will make it really easy for the next person to find the ones they are looking for.” Notice and comment on specific behaviors and respond with encouragement rather than praise.

It is important for children to understand the teacher's expectations. The child needs to know which behaviors are acceptable in the classroom and which behaviors are not.

In a high-quality classroom, there is shared control. Teachers consciously give children some control and decision-making opportunities (*e.g., self-selected projects during work time, daily classroom job, creative play*). Classroom agreements (*rules*) are clear, concise and consistent. Children have age-appropriate choices and nonnegotiables are known to all. Every classroom has nonnegotiables. Nonnegotiables will always include health and safety rules, but also will include school and teacher standards and expectations. In addition to introducing classroom procedures, it is important to establish building rules and procedures. Rules should be discussed, demonstrations given, and time provided for practice.



Developing Behavior Patterns

Establishing a pattern of working within a group as a positive member is the educational focus during the first months of kindergarten. Learning this pattern teaches the child a set of group work skills such as:

- Individual decision-making.
- Independent problem-solving.
- Responsible group membership behavior.

These skills are transferred to other large- or small-group or individual-learning situations, thus providing a foundation for future schooling. For this reason, it is particularly important to provide each child with time for developing these skills and practice. Listed below is a sample pattern routine that will fit many of the learning situations provided in a typical kindergarten day:

- Choose a job/activity/center and work at it appropriately.
- Work for a reasonable period of time.
- Clean up when your work is completed.
- Choose another job, and go to work.

Elements of the Day

High-quality kindergarten classrooms will have a healthy balance of child-initiated and teacher-led learning opportunities throughout the day. Offering choices to young learners provides deeper engagement in learning. However, a heavy emphasis on child-initiated activities is not a free-for-all. It is in the intentional planning on the part of the teacher for the materials, room arrangement, adult-child interactions and structure in how the children engage with peers. Teachers need to plan daily schedules to keep that "just right" balance of child-initiated and teacher-led activities for each group of children.

The daily schedule includes a mix of whole-group activities, small-group workshops and independent area/centers (Heroman and Copple, 2006).

Whole-group times are used to:

- Build community and common experiences.
- Do group problem-solving activities.
- Introduce and teach skills and concepts.
- Practice and review skills not yet mastered.
- Perform:
  - Sing
  - Dance
  - Act

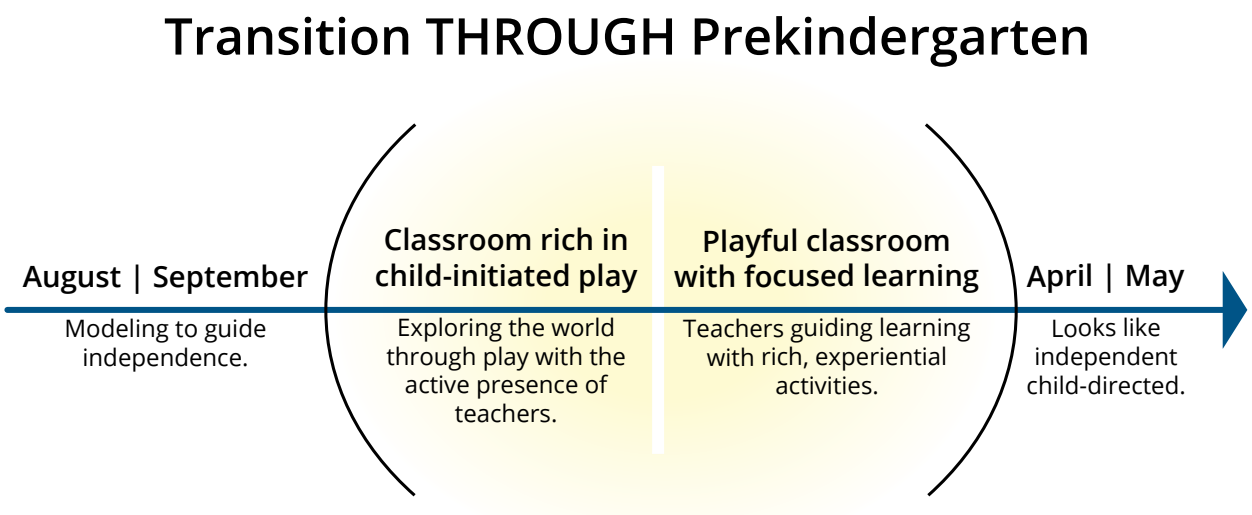
Teacher-led small-group times are used to:

- Reinforce skills.
- Provide corrective feedback during guided practice.
- Provide differentiated instruction.

Independent centers/areas are used to:

- Provide independent practice of familiar skills.
- Provide connecting and extending activities.
- Build independence and self-reliance skills.

As the year progresses, the kindergarten schedule should evolve along a continuum of looking like a preschool classroom to a first-grade room.



Miller and Almon (2009), "call for educators, their professional organizations, and policymakers to develop as fully as possible the two central methods in the continuum of approaches to kindergarten education" (p. 12).

A balanced daily schedule that includes play-based learning across the content areas is a key element of a high-quality kindergarten program. Not only does play allow children to be creative and use their imagination, play helps children develop decision-making skills, learn to work with others, and learn to negotiate in order to solve conflicts. Play is also important to healthy brain development and increases children's physical and emotional strength (Ginsburg, 2007). A balanced schedule allows children to fully engage in planned activity without interruption for extended periods of time. The schedule includes time for content-area specific experiences, but teachers should anticipate that literacy, math, science and social studies will be blended across segments of the day. Content learning does not happen in silos. The schedule is based on the premise that children spend most of their time in activity that is not sedentary. Hands-on experiences dominate a day that asks each child to explore, apply and extend concepts and ideas from each content area through investigations and projects.

Quieter and more active moments are balanced throughout the day. The earlier portion of the day is scheduled with activities that require more focus. The linked sample schedule[1] from the Kansas Department of Education (n.d.) is meant to be utilized flexibly with the needs of the children while incorporating purposeful play within the day.

1 All Day Kindergarten Expanding Learning Opportunities and Building Success for ALL Children (2004), KSDE. Retrieved from: https://www.ksde.gov/Portals/0/Early%20Childhood/Kindergarten/All%20Day%20Kindergarten%20Schedules.pdf

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Family Engagement

> “The evidence is consistent, positive and convincing: families have a major influence on their children’s achievement. When schools, families and community groups work together to support learning, children tend to do better in school, stay in school longer and like school more.”
>
> – Henderson and Mapp, 2002, p. 7.

Family engagement is a crucial component of high-quality early care and education. Engaging families in their children’s growth and learning can support the healthy social, emotional, cognitive and physical development of young children. These affirmative relationships also support positive lifelong outcomes for children.

Halgunseth, Peterson, Stark and Moodie (2009) highlight six key factors in their comprehensive definition of family engagement:

1. Early childhood education programs encourage and validate family participation in decision-making related to their children's education. Families act as advocates for their children by actively participating in decision-making opportunities.

2. Consistent, two-way communication is facilitated through multiple forms and is responsive to the linguistic preference of the family. Communication is both program and family initiated, timely and continuous, and is about both the child's educational experience as well as the larger program.

3. Families and early childhood programs collaborate and exchange knowledge. Family members share their unique knowledge and skills through volunteering and actively engaging in events and activities. Teachers seek out information about their children's lives, families and communities and integrate this information into their curriculum and instructional practices.

4. Early childhood programs and families place an emphasis on creating and sustaining learning activities at home and in the community to enhance each child's early childhood program.

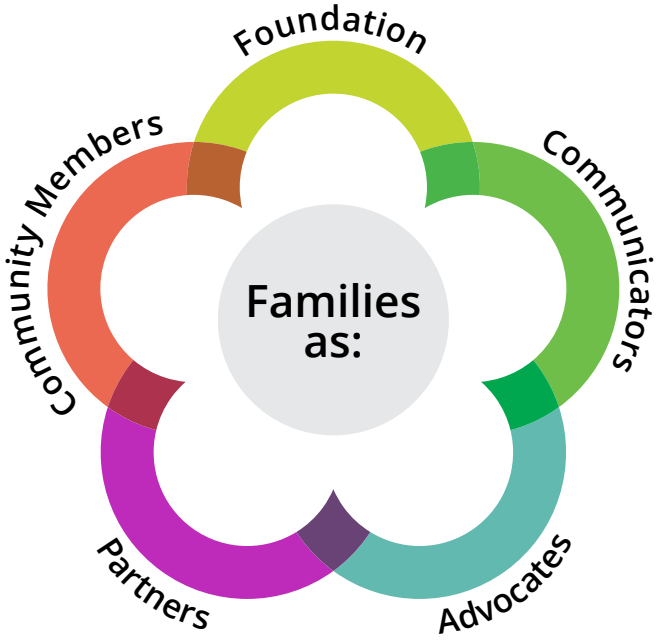
5. Families create a home environment that values learning and supports programs. Programs and families collaborate in establishing goals to enhance each child's early learning.

6. Early childhood programs create an ongoing and comprehensive system for promoting family engagement by ensuring that program leadership and teachers and educators are dedicated, trained and receive the supports they need to fully engage families. (p. 3-4)

Recently, the Kansas Family Engagement and Partnership Standards for Early Childhood were created to:

- Recognize the importance of family engagement as an essential component of early care and education.
- Provide common language for family engagement across the early childhood service systems and among early child care and education professionals.
- Offer family engagement practices and identify resources to support the implementation of those practices.

These standards include:



Families as:

- Foundation
- Communicators
- Advocates
- Partners
- Community Members

In 2008, the Kansas State Board of Education endorsed the PTA National Standards for Family-School Partnerships. The PTA Standards align with the Kansas Family Engagement and Partnership Standards for Early Childhood and provide a continuum of family engagement beginning at cradle and continuing through to career.

Sample Evidence-Based Practices for Family Engagement in Schools

1. Create a welcoming school climate.

2. Provide families information related to child development and creating supportive learning environments.

3. Establish effective school-to-home and home-to-school communication.

4. Strengthen families' knowledge and skills to support and extend their children's learning at home and in the community.

5. Engage families in school planning, leadership and meaningful volunteer opportunities.

6. Connect children and families to community resources that strengthen and support a child's learning and well-being.

KANSAS KINDERGARTEN GUIDE

Curriculum and Instruction

> “Teachers provide experiences, materials and interactions to enable children to engage in play that allows them to stretch their boundaries to the fullest in their imagination, language, interaction and self-regulation, as well as practice their newly acquired skills.”
>
> – National Association for the Education of Young Children, 2009, p. 18

The following section of the Kansas Kindergarten Guide is a compilation of resources to help teachers plan and implement the kindergarten curriculum. Defining the kindergarten curriculum is a difficult process. It incorporates so much more than a published curriculum kit or a set of reading materials.

Decisions are made at the local level to choose, implement, analyze and purchase instructional materials. However, the curriculum is more than just instructional materials. It is a dynamic and cyclical process of planning, implementing, observing and reflecting as indicated in the graphic. The standards for what kindergarten children should know and be able to do are the focus of the curriculum process. Without this focus, the content will not be appropriate or rigorous enough to meet the needs of the children. Teachers and administrators also need the knowledge and skills to implement the instructional practices as well as engage children in the learning process.

The following six elements will help teachers think about child development, observe how the children in their classroom are learning and growing, and make hundreds of decisions about the best ways to help children reach their full potential (Gronlund, 2013, p. 31)..

1. A rich, well-organized classroom environment.
2. Ample time for play and investigation with children making choices.
3. Teachers scaffolding and assisting children as they play.
4. A healthy balance of child-initiated and teacher-led activities.
5. Respectful, caring relationships with children and families.
6. Integration of curriculum and authentic, observational assessment.

In addition to the information provided in this section, the Kansas Curricular Standards for kindergarten for each content area can be found on the Kansas State Department of Education (KSDE) website.[1]

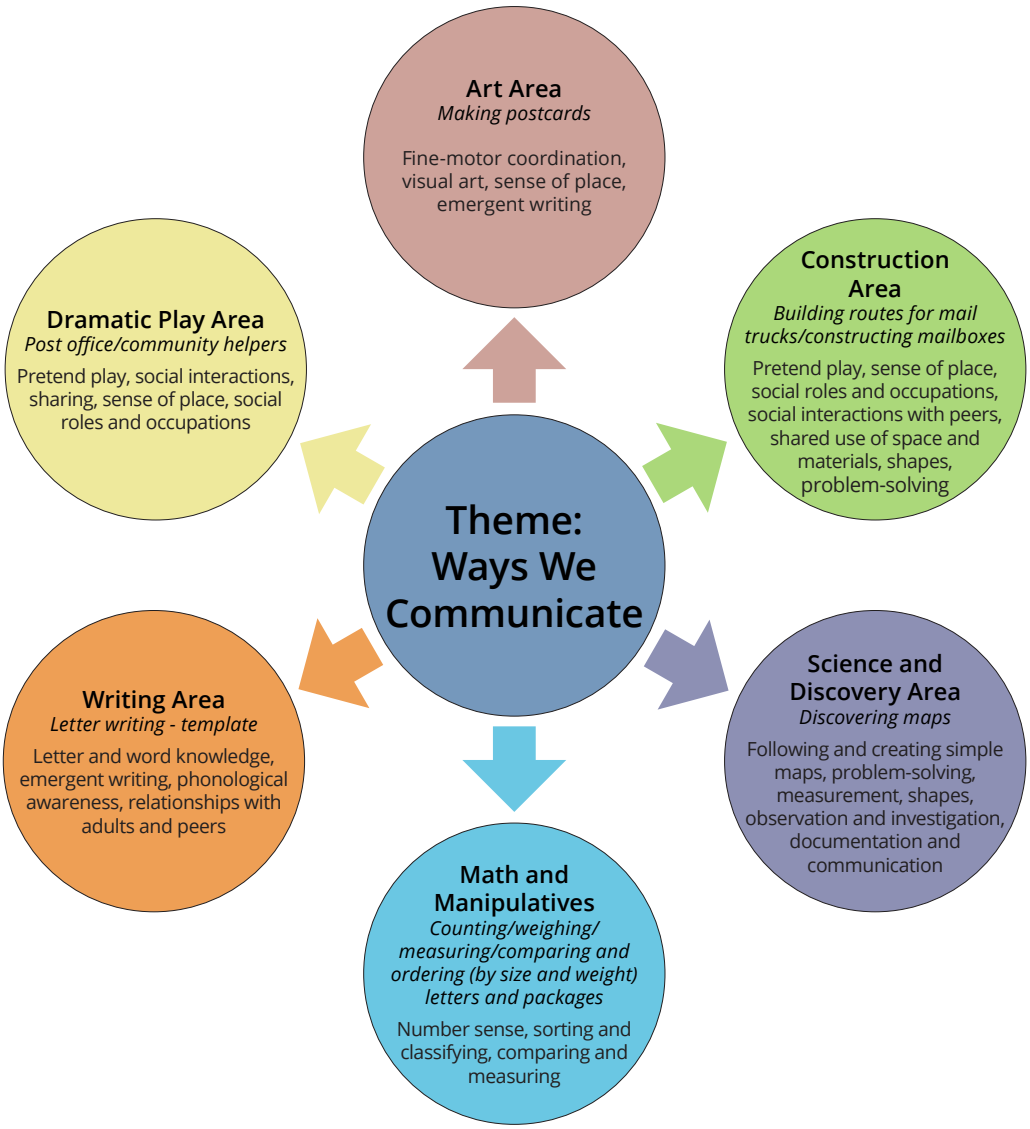
1 Kansas Curricular Standards: https://sites.google.com/ksde.org/kesa-2-0-four-fundamentals/standards-alignment

Integrating Content Areas in Kindergarten

Children learn best when teachers promote meaningful connections across subjects and content. In kindergarten, the core concepts of reading, writing, math, social-emotional skills, science, social studies and art should be integrated across all curriculum areas.

> "Teachers integrate ideas and content from multiple domains and disciplines through themes, projects, play opportunities and other learning experiences so that children are able to develop an understanding of concepts and make connections across content areas."
>
> – Copple and Bredekamp 2009, p. 161

Sample: Integrated Unit Lesson Planning



Graphic from: California Transitional Kindergarten Implementation Guide (2013), p. 35 .

Kansas Curricular Standards – Kindergarten

ENGLISH LANGUAGE ARTS

- Reading Foundational
- Reading Literature
- Reading Informational
- Writing
- Speaking and Listening

MATHEMATICS

- Mathematical practices
- Counting and cardinality
- Operations and algebraic thinking
- Number and operations in base ten
- Measurement and data
- Geometry

SCIENCE STANDARDS

- Forces and Interactions: Pushes and Pulls
- Interdependent Relationships in Ecosystems: Animals, Plants and their Environment
- Weather and Climate

HISTORY, GOVERNMENT AND SOCIAL STUDIES

- Choices have consequences

HEALTH AND PHYSICAL EDUCATION

- Motor skills and movement patterns
- Movement and Performance

ARTS

- Dance
- Media Arts
- Music
- Theatre
- Visual Arts

SOCIAL-EMOTIONAL STANDARDS

- Character development
- Responsible decision-making and problem-solving
- Personal development
- Social development

ENGLISH LANGUAGE ARTS

In kindergarten, children will learn the alphabet and the basic features of letters and words. They will break down spoken and written words into syllables and letters, and identify the sounds each letter makes. These important skills will enable them to learn new words and to read and understand simple books and stories. With prompting and support from an adult, children will also learn to write and share information in a variety of ways, including drawing, writing letters and words, listening to others and speaking aloud.

Activities in these areas will include:

- Naming and writing upper and lowercase letters.
- Matching letters to sounds and using other methods to figure out unfamiliar words when reading and writing.
- Learning and using new words.
- Identifying words that rhyme, when culturally appropriate.
- Reading common sight words.
- Asking and answering questions about a story the teacher reads aloud.
- Identifying characters, settings and major events in a story.
- Recognizing the person, place, thing or idea that an illustration shows.
- Participating in discussions by listening and taking turns speaking.
- Using a combination of drawing, speaking and writing to describe an event, give information about a topic or share an opinion.
- Taking part in shared reading, writing and research projects.
- Expressing thoughts, feelings and ideas clearly.

MATHEMATICS

In kindergarten, instructional time should focus on two critical areas:

1. Representing, relating and operating on whole numbers, initially with sets of objects.
2. Describing shapes and space.

More learning time in kindergarten should be devoted to numbers than to other topics.

Activities in these areas include:

- Know number names in the count sequence.
- Count to tell the number of objects.
- Compare numbers.
- Understand addition as putting together and adding to, understand subtraction as taking apart and taking from.
- Work with numbers 11-19 to gain foundations for place value.
- Describe and compare measurable attributes.
- Classify objects and count the number of objects in categories.
- Identify and describe shapes.
- Analyze, compare, create and compose shapes.

SCIENCE

(Source: Kansas Science Standards[2])

Kindergarten children use integrated three-dimensional learning (science and engineering practices, crosscutting concepts and disciplinary core ideas) to explore phenomena in four areas of science: physical, life, earth and space, and engineering design.

Children learn to formulate answers to questions such as:

What happens if you push or pull an object harder?

- Children apply an understanding of the effects of different strengths or different directions of pushes and pulls on the motion of an object to analyze a design solution.
- Engineering design integrated.

Where do animals live and why do they live there?

- Children develop understanding of what plants and animals (*including humans*) need to survive and the relationship between their needs and where they live.

What is the weather like today, and how is it different from yesterday?

- Children develop understanding of patterns and variations in local weather and the purpose of weather forecasting to prepare for and respond to severe weather.
- Children are expected to use the following science and engineering practices and crosscutting concepts (*grade-appropriate proficiency noted in standards*) to demonstrate understanding of the core ideas:

Science and Engineering Practices	Crosscutting Concepts
1. Asking questions. 2. Developing and using models. 3. Planning and carrying out investigations. 4. Analyzing and interpreting data. 5. Designing solutions. 6. Engaging in argument from evidence. 7. Obtaining, evaluating and communicating information.	1. Patterns. 2. Cause and effect. 3. System and system models. 4. Structure and function.

2 Kansas Science Standards. Retrieved from: https://sites.google.com/ksde.org/kesa-2-0-four-fundamentals/standards-alignment

HISTORY, GOVERNMENT AND SOCIAL STUDIES

In kindergarten, children study self-awareness and individual experience through:

- Their own story and the stories of others (*history*).
- A sense of location and place (*geography*).
- Knowledge of scarcity and resources (*economics*).
- An awareness of rights and rules (*civics/government*).

The goal is for children to understand the concept of who they are so they can have a frame of reference when studying various ideas. The content should be challenging and relevant with instruction that combines thinking skills and content so that children are able to apply their learning to their own lives.

Children are expected to develop an understanding of the five Social Studies Standards by discovering:

- Why and how we make choices?
- Why we have rules, and why they are important?
- Why and how people are similar and different?
- Why and how things stay the same or change?
- Why and how what we do impacts others?

HEALTH AND PHYSICAL EDUCATION IN THE CLASSROOM

Physical development includes growth and change of the body, such as increasing skill and coordination of both fine (small muscle, hand-eye) and gross (large muscle) motor skills, sensory development (vision, hearing, touch, taste, smell) and dental development.

The early years set the stage for developing lifelong behaviors, habits and values. Young children need varied opportunities for running, climbing, throwing (for large muscle development), drawing, cutting and writing (for small-muscle development). It is particularly important for activities to be unstructured and play-oriented.

The best opportunities are child-selected and intentionally planned to meet a child's interests and needs, not teacher-directed. Although adults may need to adjust activities for differences in abilities (either accelerate or delay), all children need a wide range of playful opportunities for optimal physical development.

Children are also learning self-help and adaptive skills during their early years. When children learn to take care of themselves, they are able to wash their hands, brush their teeth and do other self-care tasks.

Kindergarten children will build a foundation for knowledge acquisition, skill development and health-enhancing behaviors. Children recognize basic facts and concepts about their bodies and begin to acquire skills and practices that keep them safe and healthy. Developing fundamental movement patterns is the focus of the kindergarten physical education curriculum. While children at this level vary in maturity across all movement skills, they should demonstrate continuous improvement in movement under very simple conditions. They understand how to make good decisions about simple health issues, respect others, follow school safety rules and be responsible.

ARTS

The arts infuse a child's life on nearly all levels and areas of learning. Engagement in the fine arts (visual art, music, drama and dance) provides all children — not just those identified as "talented" — with a well-rounded education that includes the arts. By doing so, we are fulfilling the needs of our children, laying the foundations for their success and the success of our schools and, ultimately, the success of our state and nation.

Daily opportunities for creative expression and aesthetic appreciation provide a way for meaningful integration of the fine arts into children's learning in all domains, including academic, social, cultural, and community development – generating a significant part of the creative, innovative, and intellectual capital of our state and nation. The fact that the arts provide important touchstones confirms their value to the development of every child.

The arts provide unique symbol systems and metaphors that offer a powerful and essential means of communication, allowing children to express curiosity, feelings and understandings, and to discover and appreciate varied aspects of life. Participation in each of the arts as creators, performers and audience members enables individuals to discover and develop their own creative capacity providing connections among history and culture. As children develop, they experience their world through the arts, learning to respond thoughtfully and sensitively to their environment. In addition, the arts enhance children with mental, physical and emotional well-being and a means for them to collaborate and connect with others in an enjoyable, inclusive environment.

All children want to explore, experiment and practice what they know and understand, and discover new relationships. Through music, movement, drama, dance and visual arts, children can share themselves and their creativity, expanding their skills and knowledge. Play through the creative arts provides children with the opportunities for creative, high-level learning supporting and enhancing preacademic and academic learning in domains, such as math, literacy, social studies and science.

SOCIAL-EMOTIONAL

Social-emotional well-being determines how children think, feel and act. Social skills are the foundation for optimal learning in all areas of growth and development. It is critical for young children to be nurtured by caring adults to develop socially and emotionally in healthy ways. Parents, teachers and all caregivers should help young children gain confidence and competence in living and learning with others and functioning independently and cooperatively by providing positive early experiences, especially positive interactions.

Children in kindergarten demonstrate a wide range of social-emotional competence. Social skills, self-regulation, friendship skills and social problem-solving should continue to be taught alongside academic skills in kindergarten classrooms since they are critical for school success.

The Kansas Social, Emotional, and Character Development Model Standards provide schools a framework for integrating Social-Emotional Learning (SEL) with character development so that children will learn, practice and model essential personal-life habits that contribute to academic, vocational and personal success. It is about learning to be caring and civil; making healthy decisions; problem-solving effectively; valuing excellence; being respectful and responsible good citizens; and being empathetic and ethical individuals.

HANDWRITING/FINE MOTOR SKILLS

The development of fine motor skills is an important part of every kindergarten child's growth and competency. A child's attention span usually lengthens during kindergarten, and this can lead to a greater enjoyment of and involvement in fine motor activities.

Children enter kindergarten learning to participate in tasks that require detail, patience, steadiness and small-muscle coordination, such as writing, drawing and cutting with precision. Children's upper body strength develops through play. Playground equipment, such as monkey bars and swings, will help children develop the strength and coordination they need for fine motor control. Children who are supported along the handwriting continuum will be able to write legibly by the end of kindergarten.

Kindergarten children are expected to demonstrate an understanding of the organization and basic features of manuscript writing.

- Print many upper and lowercase letters with proper proportion and some reversals.
- Print numbers 0-20 with proper proportion and some reversals.
- With prompting and support, print words and numbers with appropriate spacing.
- With prompting and support, use end punctuation for sentences (*period, exclamation mark and question mark*).
- With prompting and support, display and use correct pencil grip (*pointer and thumb finger grasp*).
- Print basic manuscript lines (*line, slant, curve, circle*).
- Form lines and letters following organization models (*left to right, top to bottom*).
- Begin capital letters and tall letters on top line and end on bottom line.
- Begin short letters on middle line and end on bottom line.
- Begin letters with tails on the middle line and have them reach below the baseline.

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Instructional Practices in Kindergarten

> "Teaching that meets learners where they are and that helps them to reach challenging and achievable goals does not happen by chance. In everything effective teachers do — from setting up the classroom to assessing children to planning the curriculum — they are intentional."
>
> – Phillips and Scrinzi, 2014, p. 1

Instructional practices will provide children with a balance between teacher-guided and child-initiated learning to create a developmentally appropriate experience for all kindergartners. Background in understanding children's development will assist teachers in planning curriculum and implementing strategies that are engaging and challenging for each child. It is critical that educators intentionally plan for and design experiences for children that deliver the content of the curriculum. Effective instructional strategies promote access to this content but also must take into consideration active engagement through meaningful discovery.

Purposeful play is an effective approach to build child interest and motivation, but play alone is not enough. Teachers must carefully plan and facilitate purposeful play throughout the day. They must make it a priority to balance their instructional practices to meet a child's needs. The ongoing measurement of developmental needs through observation and assessment will assist teachers in designing opportunities that build children's foundation for success. It is the educator's responsibility to:

Design a flexible environment where exploration is possible; divergent thinking is encouraged and children's interests are extended to achieve the kindergarten outcomes.

- Adjust the environment as children's interests expand and additional outcomes are targeted.
- Engage in genuine conversations to guide inquiry experiences that children initiate.
- Be prepared to initiate and plan conversations and experiences that will lead to achievement of the outcomes.
- Observe play to determine ranges of children's development.
- Support play that will meet individual needs, address interests and achieve outcomes.

Kindergarten teachers need a variety of effective instructional strategies. Choosing the best strategy at any given moment depends on the learning goal, the specific situation and the individual child (Heroman and Copple, 2014). It is important for teachers to be flexible in using different strategies. In order to achieve a high-quality instructional experience for all kindergartners, educators should be given opportunities for ongoing early childhood and professional development.

To help teachers be effective in their instruction, Copple and Bredekamp (2006) recommend the following teaching strategies:

- **Acknowledge:**

  Offer acknowledgement of what children do or say. Let children know that we have noticed by giving positive attention through comment, sitting nearby and observing.

- **Encourage:**

  Offer comments or nonverbal actions that promote children's persistence and efforts rather than giving evaluative praise.

- **Give specific feedback:**

  Offer specific rather than general comment on the child's performance.

- **Model:**

  Display for children a skill or desirable way of behaving.

- **Demonstrate:**

  Demonstrate the correct way to do something. This usually involves a procedure that needs to be done in a certain way.

- **Create or add challenge:**

  Generate a problem or add difficulty to a task so that it is just beyond what children have already mastered.

- **Ask questions:**

  Questions should provoke children's thinking.

- **Give a cue, hint or other assistance:**

  Help children to work "on the edge" of their current competence.

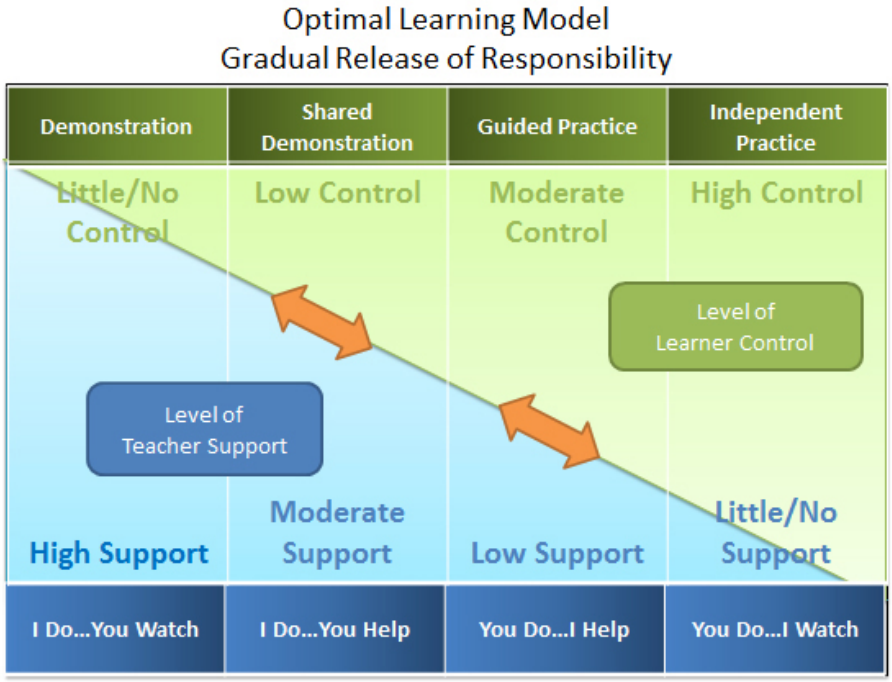
- **Provide information:**

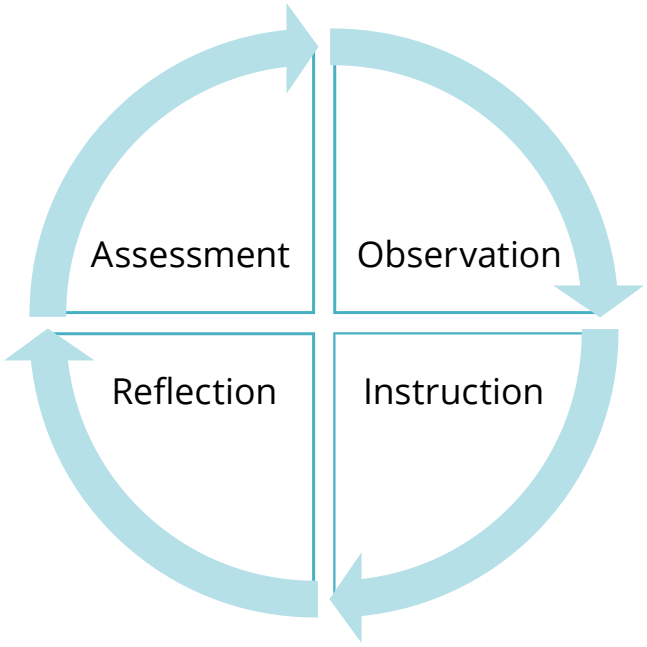
  Directly give children facts, verbal labels and other information.

- **Give directions:**

  Provide specific instructions for children's actions or behaviors.

The above stated instructional strategies alone are not effective without the gradual release of responsibility to the learner as shown in the Optimal Learning Model (below):





An ongoing cycle of observation, assessment, instruction and reflection is essential to address the learning needs of individual kindergarteners. In a typical kindergarten classroom, there is a significant range of development in all areas: social-emotional, physical, language and cognitive. No two kindergarteners are alike. It is essential that kindergarten teachers differentiate instruction to meet the needs of all children in their classroom. Teachers must provide children multiple paths to reach similar goals. Effective kindergarten teachers are skilled at aligning curriculum content and adjusting instructional strategies with each child's developmental levels and abilities (California Department of Education, 2013). Effective teachers use this cycle to create a pathway for success for all children.

Young children arrive in our kindergarten classrooms with a wide variety of competencies and challenges. They express their ideas and questions in many ways and demonstrate their particular approaches to tasks and problems in countless languages — with words, movements, gestures, artwork, symbols and stories. A variety of materials, tools and processes allow children and teachers to approach learning experiences from different points and in different ways while maintaining the expectation that all children will develop and express understandings, enhance new strategies and demonstrate skills as they develop.

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Assessment

Kindergarten Entry Snapshot

> "Developmentally appropriate assessments can be a means of maintaining and regaining joyful learning. Assessment can inform teaching so that developmentally and culturally appropriate practices are preserved and academic standards are met."
>
> – Gullo, as quoted in Hughes and Gullo, 2014, p. 145

The Kansas State Department of Education (KSDE) requires that kindergarten teachers and parents complete a kindergarten entry snapshot to record developmental readiness of children at the beginning of the kindergarten school year. Knowing more about a child's entering skills and strengths helps teachers and parents work together to support child growth in the kindergarten year. In addition, the results are used to provide feedback to early learning providers, target resources and influence state policies. The results are NOT utilized to determine eligibility for entry into kindergarten.

Developmentally Appropriate Assessments

Programs should incorporate a variety of developmentally appropriate formal (e.g., assessment tools, questionnaires, and standardized testing) and informal (e.g., natural observations, collecting data, child work samples) screening and assessment methods and tools to gather information on children' skills and knowledge. Both methods are effective and provide information useful for educators and families about a child's progress, according to Resources for Early Learning (Early Childhood Assessment, 2014).

Observations can be made with minimal or no intrusion into children's activities. Educators can observe all facets of development, including intellectual, linguistic, social-emotional and physical development, on a regular basis.

Portfolios are a record of data that is collected through the work children have produced over a period of time. The collection clearly shows the progress of a child's development. Portfolios can be an important tool in helping facilitate a partnership between teachers and parents.

Educator ratings are useful in assessing children's cognitive and language abilities, as well as their social-emotional development. These ratings can be linked to other methods of assessment, such as standardized testing or other assessment tools.

Parent ratings integrate parents into the assessment process. Parents who are encouraged to observe and listen to their child can help detect and target important milestones and behaviors in their child's development.

Standardized tests are tests created to fit a set of testing standards. These tests are administered and scored in a standard manner and are often used to assess the performance of children in a program.

The key to an effective assessment system is the accurate identification of children who experience delays in attaining critical early learning skills. When schools implement a multi-tiered system of supports, universal screening assessments for reading, math and social-emotional skills are used to identify and monitor the progress of children who may need targeted and intensive intervention. The use of accurate, valid and reliable assessments several times throughout the year, along with prevention strategies and interventions, can ensure children receive timely and successful support.

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Program Structures

> “Tomorrow, next week, next month, identify an outstanding kindergarten teacher and spend some time in her or his classroom. Study the art and science of excellent kindergarten teaching. Learn to articulate what is happening and why. Then become a kindergarten advocate.”
>
> – Graue, n.d.

As school districts recruit and employ full-day kindergarten teachers, it is important to carefully consider the training and prior teaching experience. Aside from the teacher having the proper credentials, administrators should consider the individual’s experiences in working with young children.

Holding the proper credentials alone does not ensure that the candidate has the knowledge and expertise to support the youngest learners. Having a deep understanding of how children grow and learn is essential in setting up a learning environment for kindergarten children. There must be a fine balance of being intentional with how children grow and learn as well as understanding the standards. A highly qualified teacher can take into account what a child should know and be able to do and infuse these milestones into lesson planning, environment, adult-child interactions and the curriculum extending his/her knowledge.

In order to provide intentional instruction, a teacher must be able to call upon sound judgment, content knowledge, developmental knowledge and knowledge of the individual child to instruct toward reaching outcomes (across all domains). Without specialized training, kindergarten teachers are less likely to be able to provide effective intentional instruction because of a lack of knowledge around developmental needs of children in kindergarten and the strategies to use to support strong child outcomes.

A kindergarten teacher, as an early learning instructor, is not only nurturing, but sees play as a required instructional strategy and uses ongoing observational assessment to make formative instructional decisions. He or she is able to set up structures that teach children to be independent problem-solvers who can self-regulate through play-based learning.

Some qualities that effective teachers display include:

- Passion for children and their learning.
- Ability to develop meaningful relationships with families and children.
- Ability to create a warm, responsive classroom environment.
- Understanding of content material and developmentally appropriate pedagogy.

Professional Development

Formal, informal, ongoing and job-embedded professional-development should be provided at the local and state level to help educators hone their craft. This type of professional development will ensure that Kansas kindergarten educators have a deep understanding of developmentally appropriate practice and the skills to apply that knowledge to their instructional practices.

State and Federal Programs

A number of state and federal programs provide additional support for children in kindergarten classrooms. These programs include a range of services, including providing services for English language learners, children with special needs and children who are considered highly capable. Information regarding some of these programs can be found in the links below:

Bilingual Education
https://www.ksde.gov/Agency/Division-of-Learning-Services/Special-Education-and-Title-Services/Title-Services/Title-III-State-ESOL

Child Care Aware: Kansas Resources
https://www.childcareaware.org/state/kansas/

Federal Title I Program, Part A
https://www.ksde.gov/Agency/Division-of-Learning-Services/Special-Education-and-Title-Services/Title-Services/Federal-Programs/Title-I-Part-A

Gifted Services in Kansas
https://www.ksde.gov/Agency/Division-of-Learning-Services/Special-Education-and-Title-Services/Special-Education/Gifted-Education-Services

Kansas Curricular Standards
https://sites.google.com/ksde.org/kesa-2-0-four-fundamentals/standards-alignment

Kansas Parents as Teachers
https://www.ksde.gov/Agency/Division-of-Learning-Services/Special-Education-and-Title-Services/Early-Childhood/Kansas-Parents-as-Teachers

Migrant Education
https://www.ksde.gov/Agency/Division-of-Learning-Services/Special-Education-and-Title-Services/Title-Services/Migrant

Special Education
https://www.ksde.gov/Agency/Division-of-Learning-Services/Special-Education-and-Title-Services

Teacher/Principal Evaluation
https://www.ksde.gov/Agency/Division-of-Learning-Services/Teacher-Licensure-and-Accreditation/Educator-Evaluations/KEEP-Districts

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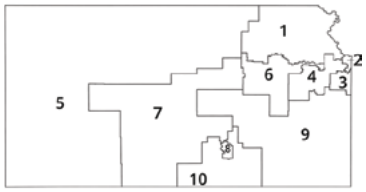

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