
WISCONSIN EARLY LEARNING AND DEVELOPMENT GUIDELINES

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About This Draft for Public Comment

This public review draft focuses on the proposed Wisconsin Early Learning and Development Guidelines (WI ELDGs) and is being shared to gather feedback and input. Additional introductory content describing the development and revision process, key updates from the Wisconsin Model Early Learning Standards (WMELS), acknowledgments, and related background information will be included in the final published version.

The WI ELDGs build on the strengths of the Wisconsin Model Early Learning Standards while updating the content, structure, and guidance to reflect current research, statewide input, and the needs of Wisconsin's early childhood system. Major updates include:

- A birth-to-kindergarten-entry developmental progression.
- Updated learning areas, strands, goals, and developmental expectations.
- Greater emphasis on children's observable behaviors and supportive strategies.
- Expanded attention to play, multilingual development, welcoming participation, and family well-being.
- Addition of Family and Community Partnerships as a Learning and Development Area.

To learn more about the development of the WI ELDGs, the statewide engagement process, project timeline, and opportunities to provide feedback during the public review period, please visit <https://dcf.wisconsin.gov/eldg>.

Purpose of the WI ELDGs

The Wisconsin Early Learning and Development Guidelines (WI ELDGs) provide a shared framework for understanding how young children grow, learn, and develop from birth to kindergarten entry. They are intended to support high-quality early learning experiences across all settings and communities where young children learn, grow, and experience the world around them. Further, they have been intentionally designed to support all children, recognizing their strengths, abilities, languages, backgrounds, experiences, and developmental pathways.

Reflecting a whole-child approach, the Guidelines are organized into six interconnected Learning and Development Areas:

- Social and Emotional Development
- Approaches to Learning
- Perceptual, Motor, and Physical Development
- Language, Communication, and Literacy
- Cognition and General Knowledge
- Family and Community Partnerships

The WI ELDGs are intended to be flexible and responsive to children's individual development. They are a resource for reflection, partnership, and responsive practice, not a compliance tool, and are designed to strengthen understanding, collaboration, and continuous learning in service of Wisconsin's children and families.

The WI ELDGs ARE: • A shared framework for understanding children’s learning and development from birth to kindergarten entry. • A resource for planning, reflection, and responsive practice. • A tool for supporting collaboration among families, professionals, programs, schools, and communities. • A guide for creating well-rounded, responsive, and developmentally appropriate learning experiences.	The WI ELDGs ARE NOT: • A curriculum. • An assessment tool. • A checklist for evaluating children. • A mandate for when or how individual children must develop. • A tool for labeling, tracking, comparing, or excluding children. • A compliance tool for evaluating children, families, professionals, or programs.
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Who Uses the Wisconsin Early Learning and Development Guidelines?

Primary Users: Early Childhood Professionals

The Wisconsin Early Learning and Development Guidelines (WI ELDGs) are designed primarily for the early childhood professionals who work directly with young children and families across Wisconsin’s mixed-delivery early childhood system, including:

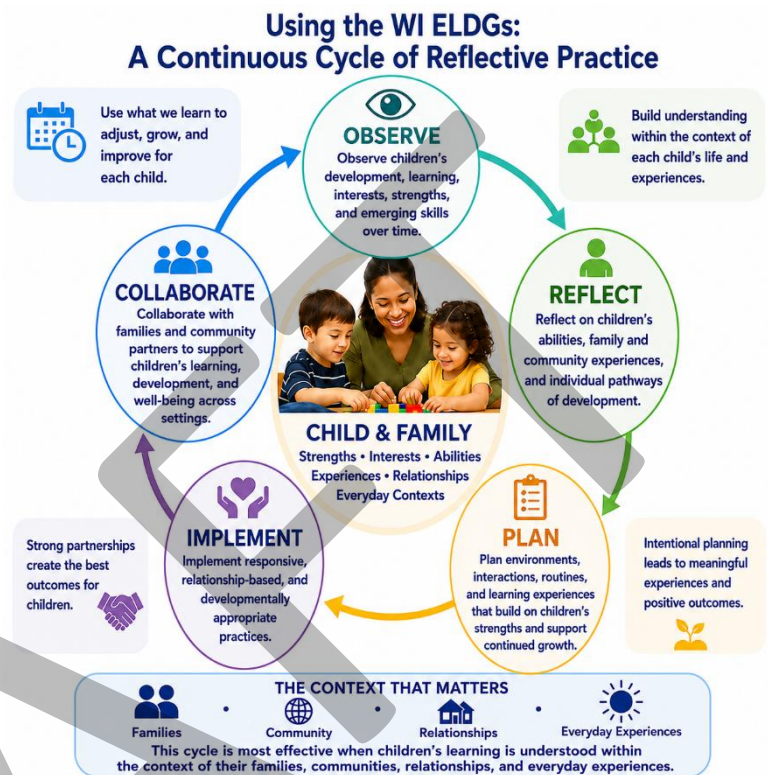
- Child care providers
- Family child care providers
- Head Start and Early Head Start staff
- 4K and preschool educators
- Home visitors
- Family support professionals
- Early interventionists
- Early childhood special educators
- Other professionals who support children’s learning, development, and well-being

The WI ELDGs are intended to support all children, recognizing that children develop and show what they know and can do in different ways shaped by their abilities, backgrounds, languages, experiences, relationships, and environments. The WI ELDGs promote responsive, developmentally appropriate practices that help every child belong, take part, and learn.

Using the WI ELDGs in Practice

The WI ELDGs are designed to support an ongoing cycle of observing, reflecting, planning, trying ideas, collaborating with others, and learning. Professionals may use the WI ELDGs in many different settings to:

- **Observe** children's development, learning, interests, strengths, and emerging skills over time.
- **Reflect** on children's experiences, abilities, family and community contexts, and individual development pathways.
- **Plan** environments, interactions, routines, and learning experiences that build on children's strengths and support continued growth.
- **Implement** responsive, relationship-based, and developmentally appropriate practices.
- **Collaborate** with families and community partners to support children's learning, development, and well-being across settings.



Key terms used throughout these guidelines are defined in the Glossary at the end of this document.

Essential Partners: Families

Families are children's first and most important teachers. Children thrive when early childhood professionals support, value, and partner with families. The WI ELDGs support two-way family-professional partnerships by providing a shared understanding of children's learning and development across home, early learning programs, schools, health care, and community settings.

Families may use the WI ELDGs to:

- Learn about their child's development and learning.
- Reflect on their child's strengths, interests, abilities, and experiences.
- Partner with professionals to support their child's growth, learning, and well-being.
- Share insights about their child's language, family traditions, background, priorities, and goals.
- Engage in meaningful conversations about their child's development across settings.
- Identify resources and supports that strengthen family well-being and children's development.
- Prepare for and manage important transitions between programs, services, and school settings.

The Family and Community Partnerships Learning and Development Area expands on these ideas by describing practices that strengthen family well-being, build two-way family-professional partnerships, connect families with community resources, and support children and families through important transitions across early childhood.

Supporting Partners Across Wisconsin's Early Childhood System

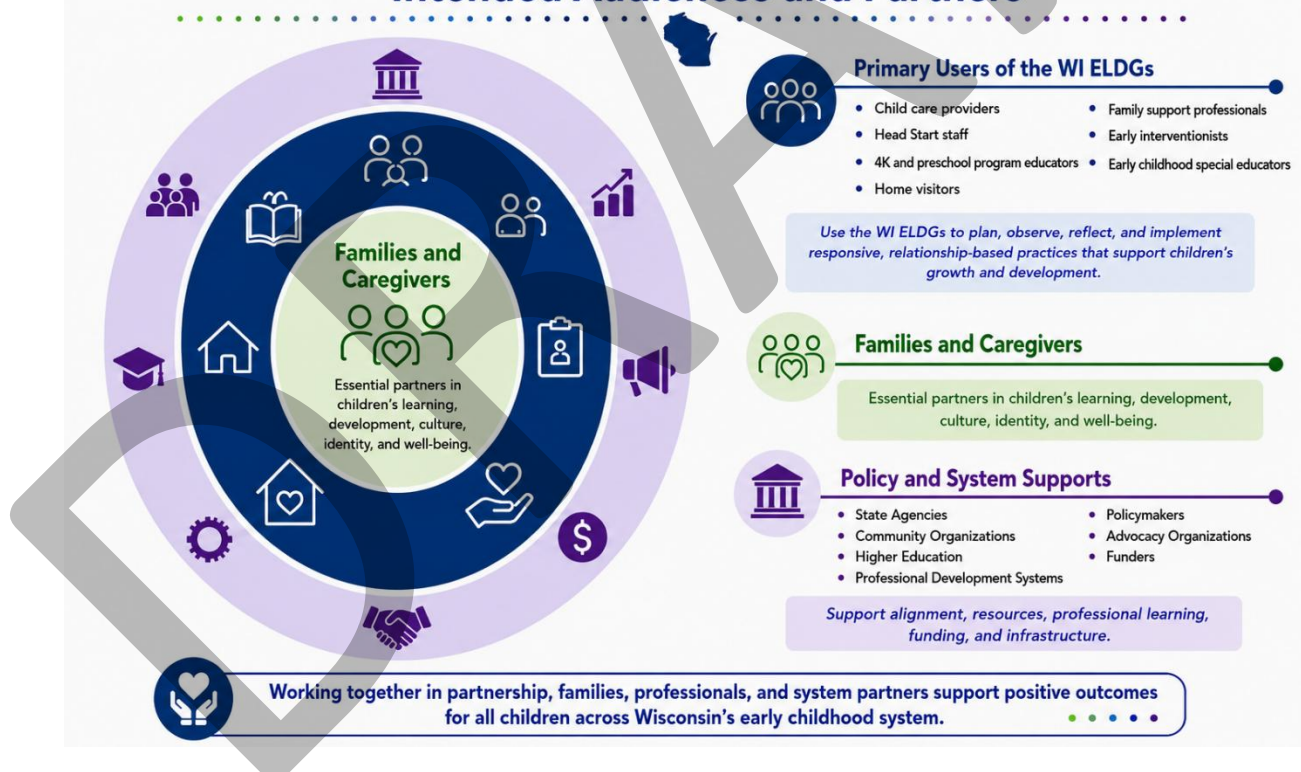
The WI ELDGs may also be used by others who support children's learning and development, including:

- Health, mental health, and community-based professionals
- Higher education faculty and students
- Professional development providers and coaches
- Program administrators and leaders
- Policymakers and system leaders
- Other cross-sector partners

These partners may use the WI ELDGs to support consistent approaches across programs and systems, collaboration, professional learning, program planning, and decision-making across Wisconsin's early childhood system.

Although different audiences use the WI ELDGs in different ways, they share a common purpose: supporting positive outcomes for children through responsive relationships, meaningful learning experiences, strong family partnerships, and coordinated community supports.

Wisconsin Early Learning and Development Guidelines (WI ELDGs): *Intended Audiences and Partners*



Structure and Organization of the Wisconsin Early Learning and Development Guidelines

The WI ELDGs are organized into six Learning and Development Areas that describe children’s development from birth to kindergarten. Children’s development is holistic and interconnected, with learning occurring across all areas through play, exploration, relationships, routines, and interactions with people and their environments. Each child develops along a unique pathway shaped by their relationships, languages, abilities, families, communities, and experiences. The six Learning and Development Areas below describe the primary focus of each area while recognizing that children’s learning and development are interconnected.

Interrelated Learning and Development Areas

Learning and Development Area	Primary Focus
Social and Emotional Development	• Building secure relationships • Developing a positive sense of identity and belonging • Understanding and expressing emotions • Developing social skills and self-regulation
Approaches to Learning	• Developing curiosity • Creativity • Persistence • Attention • Flexible thinking • Self-regulation • Problem-solving
Perceptual, Motor, and Physical Development	• Developing sensory processing • Movement • Coordination • Physical health • Safety • Nutrition • Motor skills
Language, Communication, and Literacy	• Understanding and expressing ideas through language and multiple communication modes • Developing communication across home language(s), English, and other communication systems • Building the foundations for reading and writing.
Cognition and General Knowledge	• Exploring • Remembering • Reasoning • Solving problems • Developing early mathematical, scientific, and social understanding • Building knowledge about themselves, their families, communities, and the world

Learning and Development Area	Primary Focus
Family and Community Partnerships	• Strengthening family well-being • Two-way family-professional partnerships and communication • Connections to community resources • Shared responsibility for supporting children’s learning, development, and successful transitions across settings

Organization of the WI ELDGs

The WI ELDGs are organized as developmental progressions from birth to kindergarten entry. The age ranges are used to show general patterns of development and are intended to support understanding of children’s learning over time rather than define rigid expectations. Children develop in different ways.

Each Learning and Development Goal follows a consistent structure that includes developmental expectations, examples of children’s observable behaviors, and examples of supportive strategies. Together, these components help adults observe, reflect, plan, and implement responsive practices that support children’s learning and development through relationships, routines, play, and meaningful experiences. Some Learning and Development Areas include additional preschool strands that build on foundations established during infancy and toddlerhood. The figure on the next page illustrates how to read a Learning and Development Goal.

How to Read a Learning and Development Goal

The Wisconsin Early Learning and Development Guidelines use a consistent structure across all learning areas to show how children's learning and development progress over time and how adults can support that growth.

SAMPLE GOAL PAGE


LEARNING AND DEVELOPMENT AREA
 Social and Emotional Development


STRAND
 Relationships with Adults


GOAL
 Child learns to use adults as a resource to meet needs.

DEVELOPMENTAL EXPECTATIONS				
Birth to 9 months	8 to 18 months	16 to 36 months	3–4 years	4–5 years
Communicates needs to familiar adults.	Seeks help from familiar adults.	Asks familiar adults for help.	Uses adults for guidance, support, and learning.	Uses adults as a resource while showing increasing independence.


EXAMPLES OF CHILDREN'S OBSERVABLE BEHAVIORS

- Looks toward a familiar adult when help is needed.
- Uses gestures, signs, words, or actions to seek help.
- Asks adults for assistance during challenging situations.
- Seeks out a familiar adult during routines or transitions.


EXAMPLES OF SUPPORTIVE STRATEGIES

- Respond promptly and consistently to children's cues and requests for help.
- Model help-seeking during play, routines, and problem-solving.
- Name needs and strategies: "You can ask me for help."
- Offer encouragement, guidance, and appropriate support.
- Build trusting relationships and routines where asking for help is valued.



Each goal page includes six key components.

Use this guide to understand what each part means and how to use the information.

1

Learning Area

Broad area of children's learning and development (e.g., Social and Emotional Development).

2

Strand

Related concepts or skills within a learning and development area (e.g., Relationships with Adults).

3

Goal

Broad statement describing an important developmental outcome for children.

4

Developmental Expectations

Broad descriptions of how children's learning and development progress across age bands from birth through kindergarten entry.

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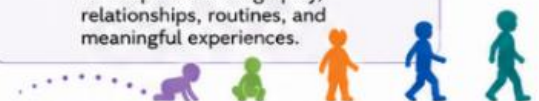
Examples of Children's Observable Behaviors

Examples of what children may say, do, show, or demonstrate as their learning and development progress.

6

Examples of Supportive Strategies

Examples of adult practices and environmental supports that promote learning and development through play, relationships, routines, and meaningful experiences.



Key Design Features of the Wisconsin Early Learning and Development Guidelines

The WI ELDGs include several key design features that reflect current research, best practices, and extensive input from Wisconsin partners. These features shape how the WI ELDGs are organized, interpreted, and used to support children's learning and development across settings, communities, and experiences.

Whole-Child Development and Integrated Learning

Children's learning and development are interconnected. Growth in one area supports and is supported by growth in others. For example, language and communication support relationships, thinking, and problem-solving; physical development enables exploration and participation in learning; and social and emotional development supports attention, persistence, self-regulation, and engagement.

The WI ELDGs are grounded in a whole-child approach that recognizes children develop through how social, emotional, physical, language, communication, thinking, and learning skills grow together. Although the Learning and Development Areas are organized separately to make the WI ELDGs easier to use, they should not be viewed as separate parts of development. Children learn through integrated experiences in which multiple areas develop together.

Everyday experiences, including play, responsive relationships, routines, conversations, exploration, and daily interactions, naturally support learning across multiple Learning and Development Areas at the same time. For this reason, adults should use the WI ELDGs to understand children's development as a connected, ongoing process rather than as a checklist of isolated skills.

Development Across a Birth-to-Five Continuum

The WI ELDGs are designed as a continuous birth-to-five framework that reflects the developmental progression of learning from infancy through kindergarten entry. Development builds over time, with early experiences and relationships providing the foundation for later learning.

Rather than presenting learning as a series of disconnected age-specific expectations, the WI ELDGs show how children's knowledge, skills, behaviors, and understandings become increasingly complex over time. This structure helps users understand how early skills support later learning while promoting greater alignment across programs, settings, and systems that serve young children and families.

Play as a Foundation for Learning

Play is the primary way young children learn about themselves, others, and the world around them. Through play, children explore ideas, build relationships, solve problems, express emotions, develop language, strengthen their bodies, and make sense of their experiences. Play supports all areas of learning and development and provides opportunities to practice emerging skills in meaningful and engaging ways.

Play takes many forms, including free exploration, imaginative and dramatic play, social and collaborative play, guided exploration, and games or structured play experiences. These forms of play often overlap and change as children grow and learn. Regardless of the form it takes, play supports curiosity, creativity, communication, self-regulation, confidence, and learning.

Adults have important roles in supporting children's play. They may observe, participate, extend children's thinking, introduce new materials or ideas, and create environments that encourage exploration while preserving children's active role in directing their learning.

The WI ELDGs treat play not as a separate area, but as a foundational context through which learning and development occur. Play is intentionally woven throughout the WI ELDGs in developmental expectations, examples of children's observable behaviors, and examples of supportive strategies.

Continuum of Play Experiences

The visual below illustrates several common forms of play along a continuum from child-directed to adult-supported experiences. These categories are flexible and do not need to happen in a set order, and many play experiences include features of more than one type. Children benefit from opportunities to engage in a variety of play experiences, with adults responding flexibly to children's interests, strengths, and learning needs.



Family and Community Partnerships: Families as Children’s First and Most Important Teachers

Children develop and learn through relationships. Families are children’s first and most influential teachers and remain central partners in children’s learning and development throughout early childhood. Family members provide caring relationships, experiences, values, backgrounds, languages, and everyday interactions that shape children’s understanding of themselves, others, and the world around them.

Children thrive when families are supported. Family well-being, including physical and mental health, social connections, economic stability, access to resources, and opportunities to build on family strengths, creates the conditions that help children feel safe, secure, connected, and ready to learn.

The WI ELDGs recognize that meaningful partnerships between families, professionals, and communities strengthen children’s learning, development, and well-being. Families bring unique knowledge about their children, while professionals bring knowledge about child development, learning, family support, and responsive practices. Together, families and professionals create a shared foundation for supporting children’s growth. Community organizations, health care providers, early intervention and special education providers, family support programs, libraries, Tribal community service providers, and other local partners also play important roles in strengthening families and expanding opportunities for children to learn and thrive.

Family and Community Partnerships is intentionally included as a Learning and Development Area because strong family-professional partnerships are more than a program practice; they are a critical component of children’s development and learning. Through responsive relationships with trusted adults across home, early care and education settings, schools, health systems, and community environments, children develop a sense of belonging, identity, security, confidence, and participation in learning. Strong partnerships also help families access supports, manage transitions, and help keep support consistent across the people and places that shape children’s lives.

Family perspectives, experiences, and partnerships are embedded across the WI ELDGs’ developmental expectations and supportive strategies. The Family and Community Partnerships area also provides a dedicated focus on the relationships, communication, collaboration, shared decision-making, and connections to community resources that strengthen family well-being and support children’s learning, development, and long-term success.

Multilingual Development: Building on Children’s Languages as Assets

Language is central to children’s learning, relationships, and sense of belonging. Many children in Wisconsin grow up using, hearing, or learning more than one language, including home languages, Tribal languages, heritage languages, American Sign Language, English, and other communication systems used within families and communities.

The WI ELDGs recognize multilingualism as an asset and a strength. Research shows that strong development in home and family languages supports communication, literacy, learning, cognitive development, sense of self, and connections to family and community.

Rather than treating multilingual development as a separate area of learning, the WI ELDGs intentionally include it throughout the Language, Communication, and Literacy Development area. Its three strands are Understanding and Responding Across Languages and Communication Modes, Communicating and Expressing Ideas Across Languages and Communication Modes, and Engaging in Multilingual Language and Literacy Experiences. These integrated strands highlight how children develop language and literacy across the languages and communication systems they use. This design supports multilingual development by recognizing it as a core component of language and literacy development for all children, while affirming that supporting children's languages strengthens learning, identity, relationships, and overall well-being.

Learning for All Children

Every child brings unique strengths, abilities, interests, experiences, and ways of learning. The WI ELDGs are designed to support all children, including children with disabilities, developmental delays, and special health care needs; multilingual learners; and children with a wide range of strengths and experiences.

Learning environments that welcome children and respond to their needs support how children develop and learn in different ways and at different rates. Children benefit when adults build on each child's strengths, partner with families, and design environments, materials, routines, communication, and experiences so every child can participate meaningfully. This may include supports, accommodations, and opportunities that help children participate fully in everyday routines, play, learning experiences, and relationships.

Welcoming early learning environments are built on three key ideas:

- **Access** means every child can engage with the environment, materials, activities, communication, routines, and social opportunities. Spaces, materials, communication, and experiences are designed or adapted so children can explore, play, learn, move, communicate, and participate throughout their day. Access may include physical access, communication supports, adapted materials, sensory supports, translation or interpretation, assistive technology, augmentative and alternative communication (AAC), and other supports.
- **Participation** means children with and without disabilities learn, play, communicate, and build relationships together. Adults make thoughtful accommodations and adaptations so every child can participate meaningfully in everyday experiences.
- **Individualized supports** recognize that some children benefit from additional services, specialized instruction, assistive technology, AAC, environmental adaptations, or other supports that help them communicate, learn, and participate alongside their peers.

Throughout the WI ELDGs, welcoming practices are embedded across Learning and Development Areas, developmental expectations, examples of children's observable behaviors, and examples of supportive strategies. This integrated approach reflects a commitment to ensuring that every child experiences belonging, meaningful participation, and opportunities to learn, develop, and thrive.

KEY CONSIDERATIONS FOR DIGITAL MEDIA AND TECHNOLOGY USE IN EARLY CHILDHOOD

Digital media and technology are included in the WI ELDGs as a topic that appears across the guidelines rather than as a separate Learning and Development Area. Current research indicates that young children mainly learn through caring relationships, language-rich interactions, play, movement, hands-on exploration, and meaningful participation in everyday routines.

The WI ELDGs do not treat digital media and technology as required for early learning. Digital media and technology are not needed for healthy early learning and development. Children can learn, grow, and be ready for school without using digital media or technology in the early years. Limiting or delaying digital media and technology use is developmentally appropriate, especially for infants and toddlers.

If digital media and technology are used with preschool-age children, they should be used sparingly, intentionally, and with a clear purpose for how it helps the child. Families, caregivers, and professionals should consider the following:

1. Relationships and real-world experiences always come first. Digital media and technology should serve as tools. They should not be treated as foundational for learning, a replacement for relationships, or a default strategy for behavior management, transitions, or instruction.

2. Ask what technology may be replacing. Before using digital media or technology, consider whether it may replace conversation, sleep, movement, outdoor play, peer interaction, hands-on exploration, caregiving routines, or family practices, all of which are essential.

3. Use technology with children, not as a replacement for interaction with adults. Effective use means choosing evidence-based, high-quality tools for a clear purpose and using them with children through watching, playing, creating, and talking together before, during, and after use.

4. Connect digital experiences to real-world learning. Digital tools are most meaningful when they support children's communication, creativity, documentation, exploration, or connection and are related to hands-on experiences, play, books, nature, relationships, and daily routines.

5. Support access and communication. For some children, including children with disabilities, technology may be an important or even essential tool for communication, accessibility, or participation. Assistive technology, adaptive tools, and augmentative and alternative communication can help children express themselves, connect with others, and participate more fully in learning and daily routines.

6. Expect curiosity and imitation. Children may naturally notice, explore, and imitate technology use in their play. Professionals can support this curiosity in developmentally appropriate ways, such as offering pretend phones, keyboards, cameras, recycled materials such as cardboard boxes, drawing tools, or dramatic play props that encourage imagination, communication, and problem-solving.

7. Adults guide healthy habits. Children should never be expected to use digital media and technology independently or manage "balanced use" on their own. Families model and guide healthy digital habits, with support from professionals.

8. Partner with families. Intentional partnership means talking with families about their values, routines, access, concerns, and goals for technology use. Professionals and families can work together to create consistent expectations that protect children's sleep, movement, relationships, play, communication, and well-being.

Guiding Principles for the Wisconsin Early Learning and Development Guidelines

The WI ELDGs are grounded in eight interconnected Guiding Principles that reflect what research, practice, and lived experience tell us about how young children learn and develop. These principles provide a lens for understanding children's development, interpreting developmental progressions, planning responsive learning experiences, and building strong partnerships with families.

Guiding Principles for Learning and Development

