

Ten Topics ECE Teachers Can and Should Study Today

(Which Might Have Seemed Improbable a Decade Ago)

by Leslie Coleman

The changing landscape of the American educational experience demands that child care professionals are highly trained in a variety of topics that extend beyond the basics of child development, positive guidance and early literacy. Children are impacted by advancements in technology, diversity in family structure and, unfortunately a gamut of traumatic events—and child care professionals need to be able to engage in developmentally appropriate ways to nurture and nourish this generation of young children.

With that in mind, here is a list of professional development topics that ECE teachers are studying today (that they might not have explored 10 years ago). Many of the topics are related

to the area of social/emotional development, which has been identified as essential to the development of the young learner as a whole.

Executive Functions.

The ability to “stop and think,” regulate emotional responses and focus attention are all strengthened as the brain (specifically the prefrontal cortex) develops. Early childhood educators who understand how executive functioning matures are better able to work with individual children in developmentally appropriate ways. Training in this area helps teachers establish realistic expectations for what children are capable of handling and helps them create learning environments that promote the continued development of these important skills.

Trauma-Informed Care.

Early childhood providers work with diverse groups of students from all walks of life. Statistics show that 26 percent of children living in America will experience some sort of trauma prior to age four. Recognizing the signs of trauma and understanding its impact are vital to ECE professionals. Training

courses should focus on ways to incorporate trauma-informed practices into the environment and interactions with children and families. In addition, educators should seek out information on how they can personally practice self-care as a way of preventing secondary trauma.

Mindfulness.

Adults have been practicing mindfulness for thousands of years. Recently, mindfulness in the classroom has gained quite a bit of momentum. Introducing mindfulness to children helps them develop awareness of the emotional responses occurring within their bodies. Mindfulness strategies can help children calm down during frustrating situations or break the habit of negative self-talk. ECE professionals should look for trainings that give them the opportunity to strengthen their own mindfulness skills, so they can act as powerful examples for the children in their care.

Growth Mindset.

ECE providers have spent years learning about and creating positive learning environments. They have



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explored elements of positive guidance, responsive caregiving and building strong relationships with children. The next step in this progression is to develop a clear understanding of what it means to have a growth mindset and how to incorporate growth mindset language and practices into the classroom. Introducing growth mindset to children helps them understand the value of sustained effort over a “perfect” outcome. It promotes the idea that with time and practice, children can achieve success.

Empathy Building.

Helping children recognize the feelings of others is such an important training topic. In the past, discussions of empathy may have been incorporated into trainings related to positive discipline; that practice should absolutely continue. However, teachers can enhance their ability to express empathy throughout the day in order to act as role models for young children, who absorb so much from watching their actions. Teachers should seek training opportunities that help them identify and practice the language of empathy, which is the foundation of trusting relationships with children.

Cultural Competence.

Cultural competence refers to the attitudes and skills one uses to work effectively with people from different cultures. Cultural competence applies to both organizations and individuals. Early childhood professionals can look for courses that help them strengthen their personal cultural competence and work with other team members to make culturally-responsive improvements to program practices. Additionally, teachers should explore ways to educate children about cultural competence and help them build the skills and attitudes they need to engage (and flourish) in a diverse community.

Family Diversity.

In the past, it was common for early childhood educators to take courses on ways to promote family involvement in program events and decision-making. While this remains an important topic, educators can deepen their understanding of families, their strengths and the challenges they face by exploring differences in family dynamics.

We no longer live in a world where each family consists of one mom and one dad. Children come to us from a wide variety of family make-ups and we can enhance our interactions with families when we value each and every family we serve. Teachers should look for training topics related to supporting single parents, families impacted by divorce/remarriage, multiracial families, families impacted by poverty and parents who are members of the LGBTQ+ community.

Dual-Language Learning.

In some areas, non-native English speakers may make up the majority of a classroom. It is important for all early childhood educators to be prepared to meet the challenges of guiding children toward English fluency while maintaining fluency in (and respect for) their home languages and cultures. Early childhood professionals should look for training opportunities that explore tools for helping young children develop language and literacy skills in the early learning environment.

Embedding Technology into the Early Learning Environment.

Today, opportunities to explore technology go far beyond simply having a computer set up in a corner of the classroom. Teachers need to understand how to guide children to use technology to create new pieces of

work (art, music, literature,) communicate with others, and solve problems. Technology is also becoming more popular as a tool for communicating with families. Today’s workforce must be tech-literate in order to take advantage of the learning opportunities technology provides.

Robotics.

In addition to learning effective ways to use technology, children are also learning about robotics at an early age. Simple robots can be used to introduce basic coding skills to young learners. However, teachers’ lack of comfort with robotics can hinder their desire and ability to integrate these rich exploration opportunities into their learning environment. Training is the best way for teachers to address these feelings of uncertainty and jumpstart their robotics curriculum.

Each of these training topics has evolved from professional development concepts from the past. They represent the next level of thinking and understanding about our field and the needs of children and families. Taking courses in these areas will require early learning professionals to reflect on their current practices, identify areas of opportunity, and work with supportive teammates to implement new strategies. It will take effort and practice. In some cases, learning from our mistakes will be necessary... but after all, is that not an important lesson we are aiming to teach children?

References

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