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SPARKING LEARNING in YOUNG CHILDREN

Classroom Best Practices

Chris Amirault

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Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data

Names: Amirault, Chris, author.
Title: Sparking learning in young children : classroom best practices / Chris Amirault.
Description: Huntington Beach, CA : Shell Educational Publishing, Inc, [2025] | Includes bibliographical references and index. | Summary: "Transform early childhood learning with expert guidance for inclusive and developmentally appropriate teaching in your classroom"-- Provided by publisher.
Identifiers: LCCN 2024005184 (print) | LCCN 2024005185 (ebook) | ISBN 9798765971956 (paperback) | ISBN 9798765971970 (epub) | ISBN 9798765971963 (ebook)
Subjects: LCSH: Early childhood education. | Early childhood education--Curricula. | Motivation in education. | Child development. | Classroom environment. | BISAC: EDUCATION / Schools / Levels / Early Childhood (incl. Preschool & Kindergarten) | EDUCATION / Professional Development
Classification: LCC LB1139.23 .A67 2025 (print) | LCC LB1139.23 (ebook) | DDC 372.21--dc23/eng/20240411
LC record available at https://lccn.loc.gov/2024005184
LC ebook record available at https://lccn.loc.gov/2024005185

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Shell Education

A division of Teacher Created Materials
5482 Argosy Avenue
Huntington Beach, CA 92649-1039
www.tcmpub.com/shell-education
ISBN 979-8-7659-7197-0

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Introduction

Sparking Learning in Young Children provides educators an overview of what they need to know to get started in a preschool or preK classroom. The following chapters introduce crucial topics in early childhood education (ECE). The insights here are drawn from recent research, best practices, and firsthand experience. And they're delivered with good humor and lively energy, so that you can spark learning not only in children, but also in yourself!

This book does not tell you which curriculum and assessments to use. And it is not a "how to teach" guide. Rather, it serves to set teachers up for success. Whether you're in your first year teaching young children or you're an experienced teacher, this book will guide, support, and encourage you so you can help all children in your classroom start their educational journeys with delight and confidence.

In this book, the terms *young children* and *preschoolers* both refer to children between the ages of three and five. (However, nearly everything here applies to working with all students under age five or six.) *Preschool* is the general term for programs for preschoolers, whether they take place in a district building or an early childhood education program. *PreK* refers to programs that serve three- and four-year-old children. Several states offer universal, publicly funded programs for four-year-old children. These programs are known by various names, including *transitional kindergarten* (*TK*), *voluntary preKindergarten* (*VPK*), and *preK*.

Overview

The first chapter focuses on **child development**, the critical foundation of the ECE field. The science of child development has grown significantly in the last several years. This knowledge helps us better understand the relationships between social expectations, culture and identity, brain and body development, and difficult experiences. Many of the basic insights you bring to your work will be affirmed. Others may be questioned or expanded. Exploring child development in depth is the foundation for everything else the book covers.

Chapter 2 is about **planning and reflection**. One key research insight is that children benefit from a very particular balance. They need set, expected routines and structure. But they also need free play, new materials and experiences, and emergent, responsive activities. That balancing act requires educators to learn how to work as a team to plan routine tasks, child experiences, and the flow of the day. To spark true learning, you need thoughtful, respectful planning and reflection in all you do. This mindset allows you to support children's development as individuals and as part of the classroom community. It also creates a more enjoyable, empowering professional experience for you!

Chapter 3 considers **room design and materials**. This chapter repeatedly asks the same two questions: Who is this object or material for? How is it used? Too often classrooms are designed for adults, with lots of commercial products and sensory noise. Overwhelming learning environments have little educational purpose—and they drain precious teacher funds! The chapter starts with the critical areas of safety and health. It then explores ways to find the sweet spot, with just enough engaging spaces and materials to spark learning throughout the day.

Chapter 4 focuses on creating powerful **curriculum, assessment, and instruction cycles**. Let's face it: sometimes curriculum can feel like an imposition, making instruction feel robotic. Assessment often seems like tedious paperwork. But our profession provides us with extraordinary opportunities. We are not required to follow a thick textbook, relentlessly covering all of the content. Instead, we get to focus on children and development. We determine what children know and can do, and we are part of the powerful moments that help them take their next steps. This chapter establishes simple and effective ways to approach these cycles. We can support everyone in the classroom, being accountable to both our program's administrative requirements and the ever-changing children we serve!

Chapter 5 dives into **family engagement**, tying the ideas from previous chapters into an overall approach for working with families. Parents and caregivers see and understand things about their children that they can share with you. This can help you create engaging environments for every child. At the same time, most ECE teachers are important members of their communities. They provide families with education and care for children. This chapter shares new research on family engagement and helps you build ongoing, meaningful relationships with families.

Throughout each chapter, you'll see text boxes that suggest additional resources to spark your learning. These are for you to use as you bring the topics in the book to life. You can explore a given topic in greater depth online, in print, or as part of a professional dialogue.

The Ten Key Principles for Preschool Classroom Design

As an early childhood school director for the last two decades, I've learned that there is one thing that all strong educators share: they create classrooms and schools driven by clearly stated, deeply held principles that they return to over and over in every aspect of their work. These principles aren't window dressing. Rather, they are living, breathing mindsets that are important when establishing relationships, norms, and communities. And they are especially critical in challenging times, providing guidance when the path forward is less than clear.

So, here in *Sparking Learning in Young Children*, we'll do just that, using the following ten principles. (Feel free to edit these or to add your own!)

1

Remember: Education Is Care, and Care Is Education

Our field has debated its name for decades, but one thing current research tells us over and over is that terrific early childhood education is grounded in an ethic of care. Outstanding care for children is the only way to provide them with the education that they deserve. The two go hand in hand!

2

Make Every Interaction Matter (Because Every Interaction Matters)

Early childhood education is based on strong, consistent, nurturing relationships. These relationships are between children and teachers, between teachers and families, and between children themselves. Relationships are built one interaction at a time, so we strive to make every interaction matter. And when something goes awry, we reflect on that interaction to rebuild the relationship. Infant mental health professionals call this "the cycle of rupture and repair."

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