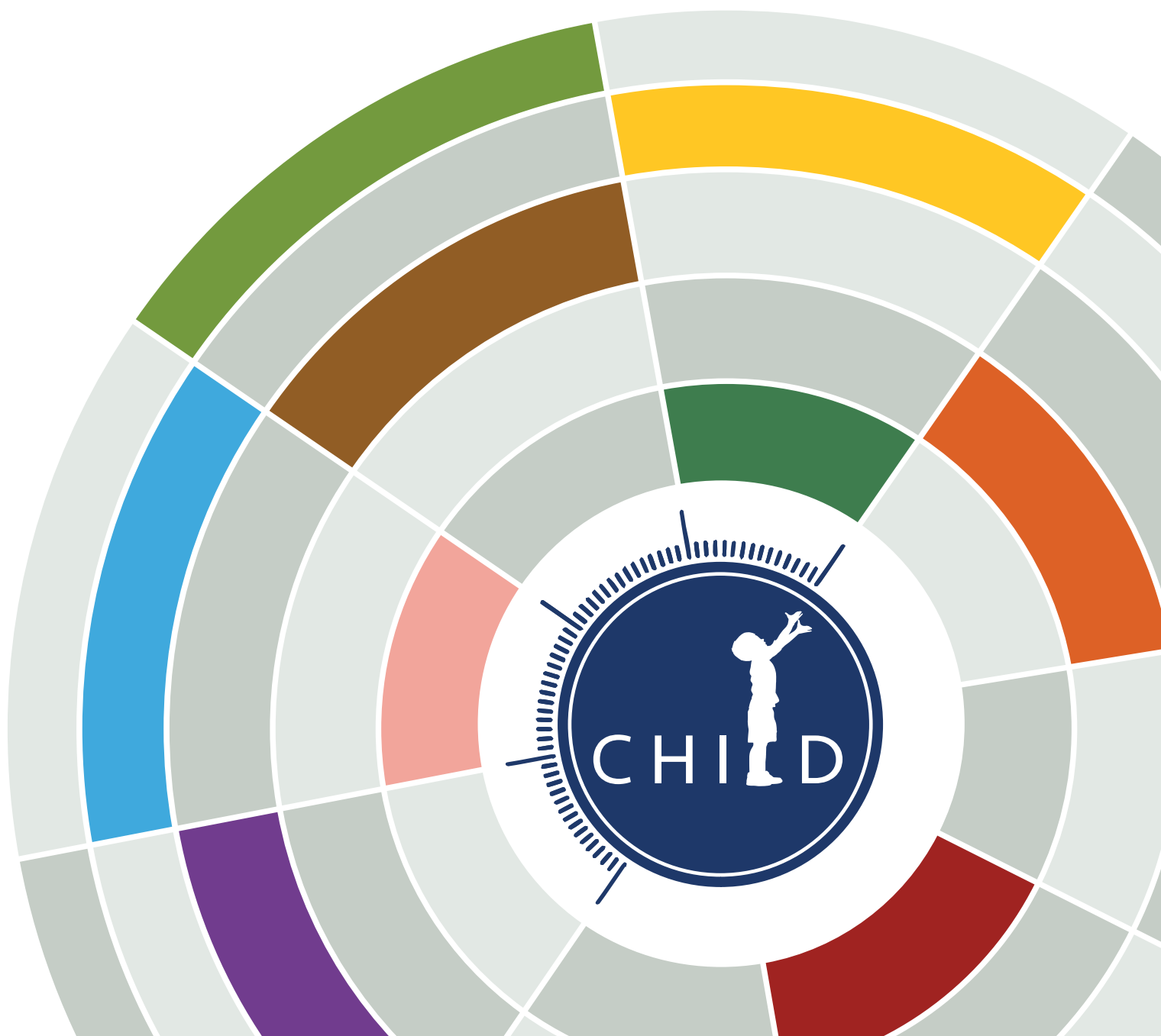




Practitioner's Guide

Climate of Healthy Interactions for Learning & Development

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Introduction to the Climate of Healthy Interactions for Learning & Development!

Children learn best when their needs for safety and emotional connection are met (Institute of Medicine and National Research Council, 2000). The **Climate of Healthy Interactions for Learning & Development (CHILD)** Tool is a comprehensive observational assessment of the mental health (or social and emotional) climate of early childhood care and education (ECCE) settings, as well as a framework that practitioners can use to support young children's holistic development, including social and emotional learning (SEL).



Who is a practitioner?

Everyone doing this important work is teaching children, and so for clarity and concision we refer to caregivers, childcare providers, preschool teachers, and anyone professionally involved in the care of young children as *teachers, practitioners, and/or* without distinction.

The Mental Health Climate

In meteorology, climate refers to the prevailing weather conditions in a given setting. New Hampshire, for instance, has a colder climate than Florida, while Costa Rica has a warmer climate than Greenland. Just as the weather can be felt when you step outside, there is a distinct impression or feeling that one has upon entering a classroom. The CHILD unpacks this feeling into discrete components that can be measured and acted upon, with the goal of improving the classroom climate.

First, this impression is based on the following elements:

- **Pedagogy** – actual method or practice of instruction
- **Affect** – any observable expression of emotion

In other words, our impressions of a classroom are based on how teachers teach, and how the emotions being expressed in the classroom make us feel – consciously or unconsciously.

Second, pedagogy and affect are manifested in all of the interactions occurring in classrooms every day, including interactions between staff and children, interactions that staff have with each other, and even interactions between children.

Third, all of these interactions involve multiple modes of communication (e.g., see Corrington, Hebl, & Tsang, 2018):

- **Verbal** – what we say, the words we use
- **Paraverbal** – how we say it, our tone of voice
- **Nonverbal** – how we act, facial expression and body language

The elements, interactions, and modes of communication work together to create the mental health climate. The mental health climate can be thought of as the social and emotional temperature of the learning setting; whether, for example, the classroom feels warm and welcoming or cold and uncaring.



What is the Mental Health Climate?

“The set of interactions between and among early care and education staff, children, and families that enable them all to realize their full potential, cope with daily demands and stresses, and work productively in an empowering environment conducive to development and learning” (Gilliam & Reyes, 2017). A mentally healthy climate is characterized by authentic warmth and friendship, a developmentally appropriate and child-centered pedagogy, the equitable treatment of children, and a focus on fostering children’s psychosocial well-being and holistic development, including SEL.

Throughout this guide, we use the terms *mental health climate* and *social-emotional climate* interchangeably, as the meanings are considered synonymous.

Teachers as Climate-Makers

Walk into an emotionally healthy classroom and right away you will feel the hum of engaged, confident learners. By contrast, a feeling of chaos or the presence of many challenging behaviors may indicate that something is amiss; for example, too many transitions, curriculum that is a poor fit with children’s interests and abilities, or teachers who are burned out.

A healthy climate is so essential to learning that the environment is often referred to as the ‘third teacher’ in a preschool classroom (Strong-Wilson & Ellis, 2007). In other words, children have a natural impulse to learn and master new skills when the learning climate is healthy and responsive to their needs. The teacher’s role is to tailor that environment to address both individual and group needs. Teachers do this through all three modes of communication, including facial expression, body language, and tone of voice; interactions with children as well as other adults; the materials and experiences they provide; their handling of schedules and routines; and so much more!



The CHILD Lens

SEL is a key driver of cognitive development and academic growth. As such, the CHILD focuses on children’s mental well-being and social and emotional skills. This focus may require two important shifts in our thinking about ECCE.

First, we shift the narrative around behavioral challenges. *Challenging behaviors are a product of challenging circumstances, not challenging kids!* These circumstances may originate in the classroom (e.g., chaotic clean-up routine, child is hungry well before snack time) or outside of the classroom (e.g., community struggling with poverty, parents in the midst of divorce), but they are not a fixed trait of the child and they are *not the child’s fault*. Indeed, these circumstances are usually not anyone’s fault! But with a focus on SEL and children’s mental well-being, adults have the power to promote positive behaviors among all young children.

To adopt this focus, we must start by thinking more like young children. What does the classroom look like from the eye-level of a three-year-old – what is easily visible and what is harder to see? What relationships and materials are important to a four-year-old? What learning experiences feel ‘just right’ – neither too easy nor too hard? Even highly experienced and well-intentioned ECCE teachers tend to structure classroom environments using the lens of an adult (after all, we are adults!). But we may value certain experiences that don’t feel important to young children. We may structure routines in ways that feel clear and supportive as adults, but which are actually stressful to children. And we may miss opportunities to spark joy and deep learning.

One such opportunity is challenging behavior. When a child is “acting out”, we may feel the need to reduce, avoid, or extinguish their behavior. But this is an opportunity for that child to learn important skills such as emotion regulation and social problem-solving. This also presents an important moment for teachers to strengthen their relationship with the child by attuning to the message behind the behavior. When we think like a young child, we can begin to recognize that a thrown block doesn’t mean “I’m naughty and I like to throw blocks even though I know better!” Rather, it means, “I’m hungry” or “I’m having a hard time sharing and I need help” or “You hurt my feelings, but I don’t yet have the language skills to articulate what I’m going through.” By addressing a child’s emotional experience before we address the behavior, we can capitalize on opportunities for SEL and thus promote positive behavior.

Second, we shift our view of the content that is taught and learned. The CHILd does not dichotomize pre-academic vs. SEL skills. Rather, the CHILd recognizes that children learn in a social context, and that their learning is driven by strong relationships. Indeed, promotion of SEL in ECCE settings yields numerous learning dividends, many of which, such as increased self-regulation, are linked to improved academic outcomes in elementary school and beyond (Durlak et al., 2011; Taylor, Oberle, Durlak, & Weissberg, 2017). Every moment of the day in an ECCE classroom has enormous potential for teaching and learning!

Four key considerations help teachers capitalize on this potential and inform the lens of the CHILd Observational Tool.

1. **The Centrality of Relationships** - Relationships are fundamental to early learning. There is no tradeoff between the time spent truly getting to know children and successful learning outcomes. This means that **you** are the most powerful tool in your teaching toolkit. It also means that we must always remember how carefully children watch and listen to us. They are learning not only from our words, but also from our actions, our affect, and our attitudes - even when we think they aren't paying attention! This poses both challenges and opportunities for educators who work with young children, but with practice we can leverage relationships to promote young children's learning and development.
2. **The Power of Attunement** - The ability to observe another person's actions, interpret the meaning behind those actions, and respond compassionately, is known as *attunement*. Let's return to the example above, in which a child throws a block. The teacher is attuned to the child who throws the block, recognizing this as the child's way of signaling a need for help. Attunement is also essential for noticing and understanding the subtler cues that children sometimes give us when they are in need of support, such as a child who asks for help not by throwing a block but by retreating into a corner or quietly disengaging from a challenging activity. Because children (like adults) are unique individuals, strong relationships are an essential foundation of attunement.
3. **The Learning Process** - Sometimes we treat early childhood like a disease that must be cured, or a set of behaviors that must be quashed. The CHILd serves as a reminder that learning and development are ongoing processes to be honored, valued, and appreciated - learning is a process, not a destination! The CHILd also recognizes that, because learning is a process, teaching is an exercise in patience, flexibility, and mindfulness. To scaffold children's independence and mastery of new skills, we need to guide them gently - especially when they make mistakes.



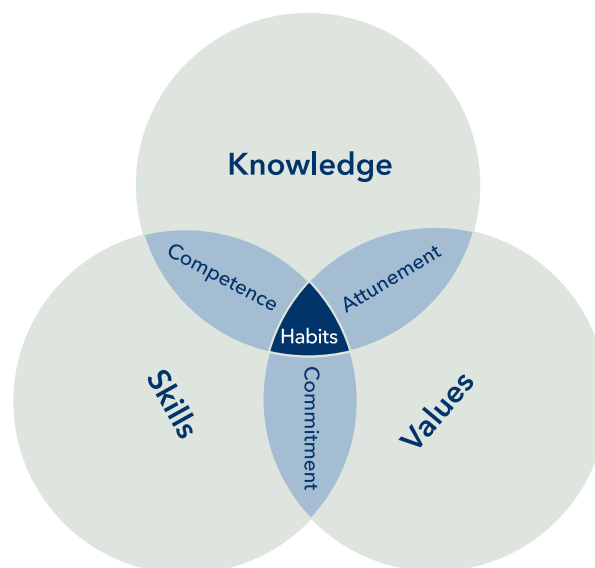
What is scaffolding?

When used in ECCE and other educational contexts, the term scaffolding refers to a type of systematic teaching in which the adult (or another child) provides enough individualized support that the learner can make small steps toward independent completion of a task or accomplishment of a goal. It is the type of support where teachers patiently meet children where they are, and help build additional learning on the foundation of children's current skills and knowledge (Bodrova & Leong, 1998; Vygotsky, 1978; Wood, Bruner, & Ross, 1976).

4. **A Curious Mindset** - Just as curiosity is essential to learning, it is essential to teaching. Researchers, coaches, consultants, administrators, and teachers alike are constantly seeking information and learning from it. This curiosity spans three levels: children, self, and practice.
- a. **Curiosity about Children** - Curiosity about who children are, what they like and dislike, what makes them feel excited, what makes them feel scared, what they are still learning, what they already know...Teachers can gather information and learn about individual children in many ways, such as observations of children, interactions with children, and conversations with parents or primary caregivers. As teachers learn more about the children in their class, their relationships and attunement become stronger. It is the job of those who teach and support teachers to fuel this curiosity, and to cultivate the skills needed to address it. Likewise, those who teach teachers may strengthen their own efficacy by cultivating curiosity about their own students (that is, curiosity about teachers).
 - b. **Curiosity about Self (A Reflective Mindset)** - How do our past experiences, present circumstances, biases, personal convictions, and mental and physical well-being impact our teaching and relationships with children and adults? Teaching involves careful reflection on our own thoughts and feelings, recognizing their impact on how we interact with others. Developing a reflective practice is as important for those who teach teachers (e.g., consultants, coaches, directors) as it is for those who teach children.
 - c. **Curiosity about Practice** - Understanding child development and best practices allows both teachers and those who support teachers to do their best work. Often, it is the teachers of teachers who have ready access to current research and updated practical information, and who can share this knowledge to support teachers' professional development and self-efficacy.

Social and Emotional Learning

In addition to understanding the lens of the CHILd, it's important keep in mind the integral elements to effective social and emotional skill-building:

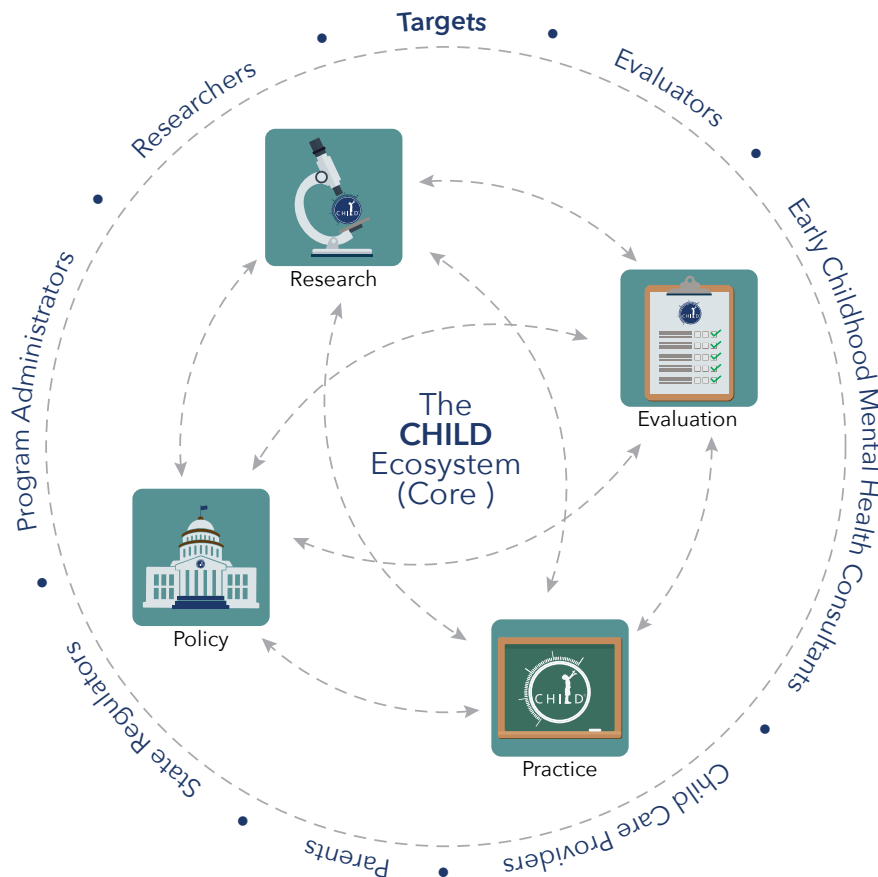


1. **Knowledge** - openness to learning new information, or seeing old information in a new light
2. **Skills** - openness to developing the skills necessary to foster children’s healthy development and learning
3. **Values** - feeling and valuing the importance of social and emotional health and well-being in early childhood development

Together, the CHILD lens and these three elements frame each component of the CHILD Toolkit.

The CHILD Ecosystem

The core functions of the complete CHILD Toolkit are to address needs in the following interrelated areas:



- **Research and Evaluation - The CHILD Observation Tool** is a measurement tool that assesses the quality of the mental health climate. As a measurement tool, the CHILD can be used for *research* (e.g., examining how the mental health climate is associated with child outcomes), or for program evaluation (e.g., assessing the effectiveness of early childhood mental health consultation services or SEL programs).

- **Practice** - The CHILD is also a *practitioner-oriented tool* designed to strengthen the work of ECCE providers and the systems that support them. The **Practitioner's Guide to the CHILD** offers implementable strategies that map onto the nine CHILD dimensions, and reflective exercises designed to strengthen teacher-child, teacher-teacher, and child-child interactions. The **Consultant's Guide to the CHILD** is designed to support the work of early childhood mental health consultants and other professionals providing support to teachers (e.g., instructional coaches). It may also be used by center directors as a way of providing feedback to their staff and promoting ongoing professional development. The **Equity Tool** is an accompaniment to the Consultant's Guide to the CHILD. It is designed to assist early childhood mental health consultants in the detection of potentially discriminatory behaviors and in the promotion of equity in the classroom using the lens of the CHILD.
- **Policy** - Ultimately, the CHILD aims to provide policymakers with evidence to inform social policies around early care and education programs and services. The **State Regulators Guide**, currently under development, provides state regulators with a rapid assessment of quality of the mental health climate.

The CHILD Dimensions

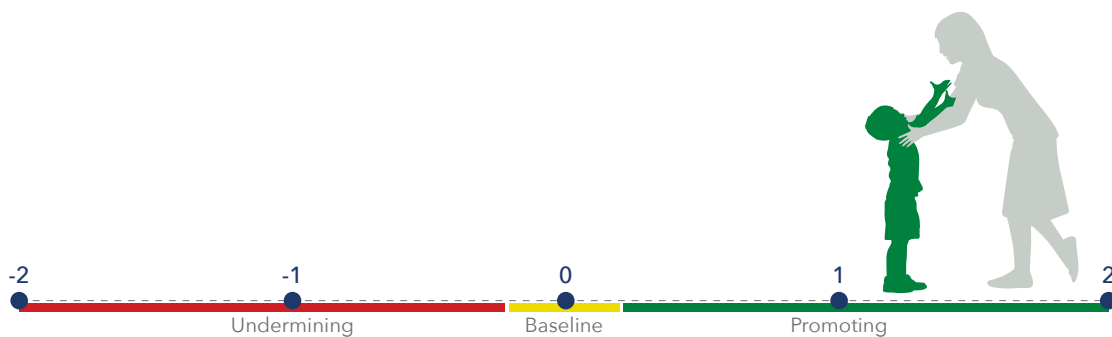
The CHILD is a research-based, evidence-informed tool designed to support the healthy development and learning of young children by providing a lens through which to assess and improve the mental health climate in ECCE settings. In particular, the CHILD partitions the mental health climate into nine dimensions:

1. **Transitions** - smooth, efficient, flexible, and productive transitions
2. **Directions & Rules** - behavior management characterized by setting, modeling, and enforcing clear, consistent, and developmentally appropriate rules of conduct and applying proactive and positive behavior strategies
3. **Social & Emotional Learning** - fostering emotional literacy, relationship skill-building, social problem-solving, and responsible decision-making
4. **Staff Awareness** - monitoring and attunement to both overt and subtle signals and signs for assistance
5. **Staff Affect** - emotional state of staff
6. **Staff Cooperation** - staff demonstration of teamwork, camaraderie, and genuine enjoyment of each other's presence
7. **Staff-Child Interactions** - staff interactions with children characterized by dignity, respect, genuine relationships, equity, and the celebration of diversity
8. **Individualized & Developmentally Appropriate Pedagogy** - promotion of holistic development through a child-centered and individualized approach
9. **Child Behaviors** - child behaviors exhibiting positive affect and self-regulation





These nine dimensions are further divided into 28 behavior-specific items, which encompass pedagogy, affect, interactions, and other (sometimes invisible) elements of the mental health climate. For example, under the *Directions & Rules* dimension is found the item “Staff encourages positive behavior”, while under *Social & Emotional Learning* we find the item “Staff capitalize on opportunities to talk about feelings”.



These 28 items describe behaviors that can *Promote* or *Undermine* the mental health climate. For instance, a classroom in which there is lots of authentic, individualized, positive reinforcement when children behave well is *Promoting* a mentally healthy climate by “encouraging positive behavior”.



You can say...

"Jamal, you're being very careful to put each block back on the shelf in the right place. That will make it so much easier for you and your friends to find the blocks you want tomorrow."

Conversely, a classroom with a greater focus on what children are doing wrong is *Undermining* the social and emotional climate. Some behaviors may fall into a sort of middle ground, such as giving a vague "Good job!" to a child who is putting away the blocks. The CHILD refers to this middle ground as *Baseline* - the minimum that needs to be done to foster a mentally healthy climate in ECCE settings, but which is not quite the gold standard best practice (which we call *Promoting*).

Together, the components of the CHILD Ecosystem apply this framework to research, policy, and practice, with the goal of improving the mental health climate in ECCE settings and thus supporting the learning and development of all children.





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Resources

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Wonderful websites

Center on the Developing Child at Harvard University
<https://developingchild.harvard.edu/>

Center on the Social and Emotional Foundations for Early Learning (CSEFEL)
<http://csefel.vanderbilt.edu/>

Collaborative for Academic, Social, and Emotional Learning (CASEL)
<https://casel.org/>

National Association for the Education of Young Children (NAEYC)
<https://www.naeyc.org/>

Teaching Tolerance
<https://www.tolerance.org/>

U.S. Department of Education
<https://www.ed.gov/early-learning/resources>

Zero to Three: Early Connections Last a Lifetime
<https://www.zerotothree.org/>

Peer-reviewed scholarly journals related to children

- Pediatrics
- Child Development
- Developmental Psychology
- Early Childhood Research Quarterly
- Early Childhood Research and Practice
- Journal of Applied Developmental Psychology
- Journal of Research in Childhood Education
- Journal of Educational Psychology
- Journal of Early Intervention
- Early Education and Development
- American Journal of Public Health

Publishers of books related to early childhood development and education

Childcare Exchange:

<https://www.childcareexchange.com/>

Gryphon House:

<https://www.gryphonhouse.com/>

Redleaf Press:

<https://www.redleafpress.org/>

Scholastic:

<https://www.scholastic.com>

Teachers College Press:

<https://www.tcpres.com/>



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