

# Early Years

## Playful Learning at Home

### PLUS

Supporting English Language Learners with Technology

Ten Ways a Teacher Copes, and Thrives, During a Pandemic

Alleviating the Impact of Trauma on Learning



# 2020 ANNUAL CONFERENCE IS GOING VIRTUAL!

Due to the ongoing impact of the coronavirus pandemic, TXAEOYC's Annual Conference in October 2020 will be our first all-virtual Conference! We appreciate your patience as our Conference planning team continues to work on the details.

Stay Tuned for announcements and updates on our website, social media, and e-blasts as additional information is confirmed.



[www.texasaeyc.org/conferences/2020\\_annual\\_conference](http://www.texasaeyc.org/conferences/2020_annual_conference)

# Early Years

The Journal of the Texas Association for the Education of Young Children

Volume 41  
Issue Two  
2020

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Early Years (Austin, Tex.) ISSN 2166-8116 is the official publication of the Texas Association for the Education of Young Children.

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Published by  
**Sail House Publishing**  
3510 Crowncrest • Austin, TX 78759

Publisher  
**Kimberly Scheberle**  
kscheberle@austin.rr.com  
512-346-0892

Translation Service  
**Verbatim Solutions**  
www.VerbatimSolutions.com

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# An Unprecedented Chapter in American History

**Vivien Geneser, David Campos and Deepti Kharod, *Early Years* Co-editors**

Happy summer and welcome to *Early Years*! In this issue we discuss the challenges of life during the pandemic, offer support and solidarity to the Black Lives Matter movement, and provide articles germane to this unprecedented chapter in American history. *May you live in interesting times* has never seemed more relevant.

We begin with Executive director, Kim Kofron, who expresses gratitude to the TXAEYC members that shared their struggles, including those who participated in the Zoom sessions; Circle Time for Challenging Times. She reminds us that there will be more opportunities to advocate for Early Childhood Education this fall as Texas legislators begin crafting and pre-filing bills for the 87th Legislative Session, which will officially begin in January 2021. Next, our president, Michael Gonzalez, reflects on his new leadership role and encourages us to get involved with TXAEYC. The director of the T.E.A.C.H. Early Childhood Program, Megan Burk, shares the annual report.

Our articles pertain to the challenges of life during the pandemic. A local medical professional, Anna Jessup, weighs in on the perils of COVID-19 in "Stay Safe, Stay Well." In "Playful Learning at Home," the early education specialist, Melissa Scarpate, assures us that children learn through play. Adding to our resources for online instruction, the authors Haemin Kim-Breunig, Miranda Leddy, Amanda Weast, and Peggy Lisenbee provide useful information in "Implementing ELL Apps: Supporting English Language Learners with Technology." Since the needs of special education students can present unique challenges, Theresa Garfield and Mariya Davis provide helpful guidelines for parents in "Overcoming Online Obstacles to Teaching Young Exceptional Learners."

As adults, we may be experiencing distress, so Josh Thompson and Melodie Bourassa offer recommendations for self-care in "Ten Ways a Teacher Copes, and Thrives, during a Pandemic." To address the needs of children, Tasha Vice, Erika M. Warnick, and Jennifer



Vivien Geneser



David Campos



Deepti Kharod

D. Morales illuminate the ways that children express trauma and offer suggestions for helping them in "Pandemic Related Trauma: Alleviating the Impact on Learning."

Please join us for our annual conference! Located in San Antonio, the TXAEYC conference will feature many exciting events and interesting sessions by Early Childhood

professionals. For more details, go to our website: [www.txaeyc.org](http://www.txaeyc.org). Convention planners are closely monitoring the COVID-19 situation, and you can sign up to receive email updates.

The editors of *Early Years* welcome your input. If you would like to become involved with *Early Years* as a reviewer or author, please contact us at [editor@txaeyc.org](mailto:editor@txaeyc.org).

**We stand in solidarity with those who pursue equity, justice, human dignity for all, and an end to racism**



# The Value of High-Quality Childcare

**Kim Kofron, Executive Director**

As I sit in my “new” office a.k.a. at my dining room table, and reflect on the past few months, the words that are coming are simply, Thank You! Since mid-March, when Texas started to shut down, including child care programs across the state, I have spoken to many of you via phone, email or, more likely, during one of our Circle Time for Challenging Times Zoom webinars. You have shared your struggles and challenges, and your creative solutions to complex problems. We have cried together and been inspired together. We have sat together in the vast void of so many unknowns and uncertain futures.

Some of you were able to keep your programs open during the stay at home orders while others of you closed your doors, some temporarily, others permanently. No matter your situation, no matter what decisions have

been made or are going to be made, I want to say Thank You! Thank you for sharing that space with us, thank you for allowing us to join you on this journey.

As your membership association, TXAEYC has always been committed to standing alongside you to celebrate, educate and advocate for you, the children you serve and families. But now, more than ever, your voice matter! We have seen an unprecedented number of stories across the country in the news regarding the importance of quality child care in order for parents to go back to work. We have seen political leaders from both sides of the aisle talk about how important child care is to bring back our economy. Counties and cities are developing creative ways to support high quality child care. Now more than ever we need your voice to continue the conversation.

In just a few months, Texas legislators will begin pre-filing bills for the 87th Legislative

Session. Even before the session starts in January, there will be much to discuss and decide. We know it will be a tight budget year, but we also know it is not the time to take our feet off the gas as we push for high-quality child care with an educated and appropriately compensated workforce.

I have heard it said that there is no going back to the way things were before. Part of me is saddened by that thought, but the other part of me is looking forward to taking this opportunity to improve our current early childhood systems, making them a better place for children, families and the early childhood workforce.

Together we will continue to make a difference!



## With Change Comes Opportunity

**Michael Gonzalez, President of TXAEYC**

When I received the request for my contribution to *Early Years*, I asked myself, “How do I begin this?” First, I hope that everyone is well and, for those centers that are still open, THANK YOU! It’s a tough decision to make, as it is not just about health and safety, but is also a financial decision. Our current program is in the process of reopening, and it has been tough to see our teachers in masks because they seem so nervous. However, we can all agree that Early Education is Essential!

Next, let me say, “Welcome to summer!” Some of you may not realize it, since the days and months are all just mixing together at this point, and also, you may ask, who is Michael?

My name is Michael Gonzalez and I am the president of the Texas Association for the Education of Young Children. When I was asked to run for president, honestly, I

said maybe. Not because I didn’t want to serve, I have supported TXAEYC in various roles for over 20 years, but because it is the last position. Furthermore, we’re a family with four children and two grandchildren, so my life is full. However, since I have benefited from my mentors, not just as board members, but also with day-to-day issues, I wanted to give back. If you were ever unsure about volunteering your time with TXAEYC...don’t hesitate! It is rewarding in so many ways.

What’s on the agenda for TXAEYC? If you haven’t taken part in our Circle Time for Challenging Times, we invite you to join us. During Circle Time, we provide updates on TXAEYC and share what is happening at the state and federal level. It’s also a platform to video chat with others and reflect on current

events. People really enjoy the time together, just to know that they are not alone. Advocating for Early Ed is still going strong and will continue in the next legislative session. Plans for our annual TXAEYC Fall conference are in progress, but we are working on hosting a virtual option, if needed.

Thank you again for all that you are doing at this time to advocate for Early Childhood and to educate children and families. It is a different time for all of us and life will never be the same as before. We have to remember, though, that we experience many events in our life that bring changes. Let’s move forward and not look just at the beginning of 2020 and label it a bad year, but to use this opportunity to change the ending and make it a great year!

Stay Healthy and Be Strong!



**T.E.A.C.H.** Early Childhood®

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## 2019 ANNUAL REPORT

### SCHOLARSHIP

- 201 Scholarship Recipients
- 142 CDA Assessment Fee
- 52 Associate
- 3 Bachelor
- 4 Alternative Teacher Certification

### EDUCATION

- 448 College Hours Earned
- 4 Associate Graduates
- 65 CDA Credentials Earned
- **Associate**
  - 17 Average Hours Earned
  - 3.65 Average GPA
- **Bachelor**
  - 17.5 Average Hours Earned
  - 3.0 Average GPA

### COMPENSATION

- Median wage for recipients \$10.49
- 6.2% Wage Increase CDA Assessment Fee
- 12% Wage Increase Associate Recipients
- 18% Wage Increase Bachelor Recipients

### COMMITMENT

- 103 Sponsoring Early Childhood Programs
- 90% Retention for CDA Assessment Fee
- 95% Retention for Associate Recipients
- 100% Retention for Bachelor Recipients

**35**  
**9500+**  
**78%**



Texas Association for the  
Education of Young Children

## SINCE 2011....

- 1800+** Scholarships Awarded
- 38** College Graduates
- 756** CDA Credentials Earned
- 49%** First Generation College Students
- 81%** Recipients of Color
- 36%** Single Mothers



Texas Association for the  
Education of Young Children



### WHAT IS T.E.A.C.H.?

The T.E.A.C.H. (Teacher Education and Compensation Helps) Early Childhood® Program (T.E.A.C.H.) is an evidence-based strategy that creates access to higher education for the early childhood educators. T.E.A.C.H. provides comprehensive scholarships to enable early childhood educators to take coursework leading to credentials and degrees at local community colleges and universities in Texas. By supporting higher education, the program is helping to establish a well-qualified, fairly compensated, and stable workforce for Texas children and families.

### WHAT DOES T.E.A.C.H. DO?

- 80% of tuition and books
- 85% of the CDA Assessment Fee
- \$75 Travel Stipend per semester
- \$300 completion bonus at end of contract year (paid by T.E.A.C.H.)
- Sponsoring center offers 2% raise or \$300 bonus at completion of contract year for Associate/Bachelor Scholarship
- \$150 bonus for completion of CDA Credential (paid by T.E.A.C.H.)
- Individualized support through specialized counseling



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# Stay Safe, Stay Well: Reflections from a Medical Professional

By Anna Jessup



Each time I return home from the clinic, I have to enter through the garage, put all of my work clothes directly into the washing machine, and take a hot shower before any of

my children can touch me. When I first arrive and they see me through the front window, I hear my older daughter say, "Don't touch Mommy!" and it breaks my heart. Such is the

life of a mom who is also working as a medical professional on the front lines of a pandemic.

Yes, I'm worried. We're worried. As a health care professional, I'm concerned about the possibility of catching COVID-19, and my children are worried about me and my husband. They don't want to lose their Mommy or their Daddy. Although none of my immediate relatives have fallen ill, many of my colleagues have lost family members to the virus and we work in a clinic, a hot spot for the disease.

Furthermore, I am deeply concerned about the long-term effects of this pandemic. I believe that there will be a huge fallout on the mental health of my children and their peers (Steinberg, 2020). Sure, we try to make light of the situation by finding different ways to enjoy this extra family time. In fact, it was fun...at first. We visited an outdoor safari, made our annual trek to take pictures in a field of bluebonnets, went fishing, and enjoyed more than the usual visits to drive-through restaurants, especially for ice cream. My son's Scout troop even organized a backyard camping trip that we all shared on Zoom!

However, we cannot hide the fact that any semblance of normalcy has been upended. All of our routine activities, excursions, school attendance, and church events were abruptly cancelled on March 9, 2020, and we do not know when we will be able to return to normal, or begin creating a new normal. At home, we are constantly cleaning surfaces and washing our hands. Our children, ages 11, 9, 6, 4, and 18 months, are keenly aware of the solemnity of this unprecedented situation and help us keep our home sanitized. Their efforts, though appreciated, seem to diminish the innocence of their collective childhood.

As adults, we suffer from anticipatory grief,



**Camping!**



**Bluebonnets!**



**Fishing!**

from trepidation due to the uncertainty of our futures. We muddle through, doing our best to cope, and hoping for better times (Berinato, 2020). But what about our children? Quite suddenly, they had to adjust to a different life, with new expectations for cleanliness, socialization, and learning (Morrison, 2020). They lost their social outlets such as school, sports, church, and free play with neighborhood children. Even occasional outings such as a trip to the market or department store have ended. They can't give hugs, visit grandparents, or play on playgrounds.

Currently, I am still going to work. Luckily, I only have to report to the clinic two days per week because much of my job consists of conducting telehealth sessions. As we increase our face-to-face public contact, our adminis-

trators have assured us that we will maintain extensive preventative measures. The clinic will provide regular testing for COVID-19 and continue to implement comprehensive sanitation procedures.

Nobody seems to know how long this gloomy chapter will last. We don't know what our lives will be like on the other side of the global pandemic. All we can hope for is the strength to persevere and ingenuity to create a vibrant and productive new normal. We will do our best!

Until then, stay safe, stay well. Wear a mask! Wash your hands!

**ANNA JESSUP, DNP, APRN, FNP-C**, is working on the front lines as a Nurse Practitioner for Samaritan Health Ministries. Dr. Jessup con-

ducts research on social determinants of health, uninsured populations, and global health.

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## VISIT LONE STAR WORKSHOP!

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# Playful Learning at Home

By Melissa Scarpate



Photo courtesy of the author, Melissa Scarpate

As a result of the COVID-19 stay at home orders, millions of families are now homeschooling their children or overseeing their distance learning. Along with many other parents, I find myself second guessing the expectations for schoolwork...how much is enough? Should I add anything to what the teachers have already planned? How will I WORK AT HOME with

my teenager (age 17) and triplets (age 9) running around?

Many parents, who are considered essential workers, continue to report to work, and then

have the added responsibility of helping their children with school assignments when they return home. My heart goes out to those who are working in ICUs all night and then must come home to sleep AND teach their children. I'm sure they are doing whatever they can to survive and still show love to their families. These are very challenging times for everyone, but especially for parents of young children.

So, this is what I suggest...do the best you can with what you have to offer. Perhaps you only have time to make sure the kids completed their distance learning assignments on their own. Fine, do that. Want to switch gears, add playful learning opportunities, and teach the kids to bake? Fine, do that. Do what's best for you and your family at home. However, no matter what you decide to do, I suggest that you allow your children to be creative, imaginative and inventive. Make sure you ask them to turn off their devices and laptops (once their school work is done) and let them PLAY! Do you need to play with them? Of course! That's awesome for children and parents, but if that isn't in your "reserves" right now, then just make sure that your children have time to play.

Through the years, many parents and teachers have asked me, "How does play help children's development and academic success?" The answers can be found in research on playful learning in early childhood. Adopting a playful learning approach involves providing time for children to explore materials, plan activities, and narrate their own invented scenarios. Children learn through play and will acquire information from manipulating materials and navigating their environment. They are able to test their own ideas and hypotheses by building and creating with materials and toys. When children are allowed to engage in creative projects and to play with art supplies, toys, and loose parts, they are able to increase their cognitive capacity while also enhancing

their social and emotional skills.

Researchers report that when children explore, create, and play, they are forming important brain connections. However, when children experience a play deficit, these connections are not formed, and the child may show deficiencies in executive function and cognitive abilities (Blasco, Saxton & Gerrie, 2014). Results from early childhood research studies have found that playful learning has been linked with an increase of engagement and understanding of text and math, improved language development, and attainment of the 21st Century Skills (Fisher et al., 2011; Ghiso, 2013; Wohlwend, 2015; Zosh et al., 2016). While this research pertained to playful learning in classrooms, it is important to note that children still gain these skills when playful learning occurs at home.

Additionally, by playing with others, children have the opportunity to develop self-regulation skills. Self-regulation skills are essential for monitoring your cognition, emotions, and behaviors to gain a desired goal or outcome – super important for a successful life. Young children will develop regulation skills when they have to take turns, “use their patience”, and engage in self-calming activities. Blair, Ursache, Greenberg & Vernon-Feagans (2015) found that self-regulation skills are implicated in higher levels of math and reading ability from Pre-K to 2nd grade. In addition, children with higher levels of self-regulation are able to maintain their attention, follow directions, work in groups, plan, and manage their time (Raver & Blair, 2016).

Playful learning is not only beneficial for educating young children, it is fun! Knowledge and skills are easier to learn in a playful context. So, I would like to offer some simple tips to facilitate playful learning, but with this disclaimer: you may have to let go of needing a tidy home for creativity to flow from your kids! Creativity is often an iterative process with a lot of tweaking, modifying, reorganizing and mess making. If possible, designate an area of the house for creative play that doesn't need to be cleaned up right away.

### Tips for Playful Learning at Home:

1. Keep those delivery boxes! We are

shopping online more than usual, so keep the boxes and let the kids have them to build and create whatever they dream up.

2. Provide tape, glue, scrap paper, and other open-ended materials. Make them available and easy to reach, so they can create whenever they feel inspired.

3. Let them retrieve materials (clean and safe) from the recycling bin before it goes to the curb. Paper towel and toilet paper cardboard rolls are perfect for creative play.

4. Communicate with your kids about their work. Ask them to tell you about each creation. How does it work? Be a willing participant if they ask you to go see it or to try it out. You will be supporting their language skills, social skills, and self-confidence!

5. Provide your kids with open-ended items such as Legos, Magnatiles, Duplo blocks, and playdoh, so they can create and experiment with these materials. Obviously, recycled materials are much cheaper and work fine, too. Although the other items are nice to have, they are not essential for stimulating the flow of creativity.

6. Provide a variety of pens, pencils, markers, crayons, scissors so they can personalize and create with text and art!

To support creativity with my own kids, I limit their time on digital devices and tell them to go play. They are allowed to play outside in our fenced yard, play inside the house, play together, or play alone...just play. Additionally, making the materials readily available is a huge plus because it encourages autonomy. While I am busy working (at home), they can be busy creating and playing without my assistance.

What do your children glean from playful learning? They learn how the world works; they develop decision making skills when they plan activities; mathematical skills by experimenting with sizes, weights, and lengths, language skills by narrating their scenarios, and self-regulation skills by resolving the conflicts that inevitable arise.

So, enjoy your time at home together and let them play!

*A previous version of this article was published May 17, 2020 on the Children In Context blog for Scarpate Consultancy (<https://scarpateconsultancy.com/2020/05/17/playful-learning-at-home/>).*

**MELISSA SCARPATE, PHD**, has over 20 years of experience as an early childhood professional. In addition to teaching, she has conducted research for the Center for Research on Play in Education, Learning and Development (PEDAL) at Cambridge University, the Pedagogy of Play project at Harvard University's Project Zero, and for the LEGO Foundation.

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# Aprendizaje lúdico en casa

Por Melissa Scarpate



Como resultado de las órdenes de quedarse en casa por la COVID-19, millones de familias ahora escolarizan a sus hijos en su casa o supervisan su aprendizaje a distancia. Junto con muchos otros padres, me encuentro pensando sobre las expectativas de la tarea escolar... ¿Cuántos deberes son suficientes? ¿Debo agregar algo a lo que los maestros ya planearon? ¿Cómo TRABAJARÉ EN CASA con mi hijo adolescente (17 años) y trillizos (9 años) que corren de aquí para allá?

Muchos padres, que son trabajadores esenciales, siguen presentándose a trabajar y además tienen la responsabilidad adicional de ayudar a sus hijos con las tareas escolares cuando regresan a su casa. Mi corazón está con aquellas personas que trabajan en UCI todas las noches y deben regresar a su casa a dormir y a enseñarles a sus hijos. Estoy segura de que están haciendo todo lo que pueden para sobrevivir y aun así demostrarles afecto a sus familias. Estos son momentos muy difíciles para todos, pero especialmente

para los padres de niños pequeños.

Por eso, esto es lo que sugiero... debes hacer el mejor esfuerzo que puedas con lo que tienes para ofrecer. Quizás solo tengas tiempo para asegurarte de que tus hijos completaron sus tareas de aprendizaje a distancia por sí solos. Está bien, hazlo. ¿Quieres cambiar de tema, darles oportunidades de aprender a través de juegos y enseñarles a hornear? Está bien, hazlo. Debes hacer lo mejor para ti y tu familia en casa. Sin embargo, no importa lo que decidas, sugiero que dejes que los niños

sean creativos, imaginativos e inventivos. ¡Asegúrate de pedirles que apaguen sus dispositivos y computadoras portátiles (una vez terminadas las tareas escolares) y déjalos que JUEGUEN! ¿Debes jugar con ellos? ¡Por supuesto! Es genial para los niños y para los padres, pero si eso no está en tu derecho de "reserva", entonces solo asegúrate de que tus hijos tengan tiempo para jugar.

Con los años, muchos padres y maestros me preguntaron: "¿Cómo los juegos ayudan al desarrollo y al progreso académico de los niños?". Las respuestas se pueden encontrar en las investigaciones sobre el aprendizaje lúdico en la infancia temprana. Adoptar un enfoque de aprendizaje lúdico conlleva darles a los niños tiempo para explorar materiales, planificar actividades y narrar sus propias situaciones hipotéticas inventadas. Los niños aprenden jugando y adquirirán información a partir de la manipulación de materiales y de la exploración de su entorno. Son capaces de probar sus propias ideas e hipótesis mediante la construcción y creación con materiales y juguetes. Cuando se los deja participar en proyectos creativos y jugar con utensilios artísticos, juguetes y partes sueltas, pueden aumentar su capacidad cognitiva al mismo tiempo que también mejorar sus habilidades sociales y emocionales.

Algunos investigadores informaron que cuando los niños exploran, crean y juegan, establecen conexiones cerebrales significativas. Sin embargo, cuando tienen un faltante de juego, estas conexiones no se forman y el niño podría demostrar deficiencias en las habilidades cognitivas y funcionales de ejecución (Blasco, Saxton & Gerrie, 2014). Los resultados de estudios de investigación de infancia temprana determinaron que el aprendizaje lúdico se ha relacionado con un aumento en la participación y comprensión de textos y matemáticas, un mayor desarrollo del

lenguaje y la obtención de las Habilidades del Siglo XXI (Fisher et al., 2011; Ghiso, 2013; Wohlwend, 2015; Zosh et al., 2016). Si bien esta investigación corresponde al aprendizaje lúdico en el aula, es importante destacar que los niños adquieren estas habilidades mediante el aprendizaje lúdico en casa.

Además, al jugar con otros niños, tienen la oportunidad de desarrollar habilidades de autocontrol. Las habilidades de autocontrol son fundamentales para supervisar el conocimiento, las emociones y los comportamiento para alcanzar un objetivo o resultado deseado, lo cual es muy importante para alcanzar el éxito en la vida. Los niños pequeños desarrollarán habilidades de control cuando deban turnarse, “practicar su paciencia” y participar en actividades para tranquilizarse. Blair, Ursache, Greenberg & Vernon-Feagans (2015) demostraron que las habilidades de autocontrol están implicadas en niveles superiores de matemáticas y capacidad de lectura desde preescolar hasta segundo grado. Además, los niños con niveles más altos de autocontrol pueden mantener su atención, seguir indicaciones, trabajar en grupo, planificar y administrar su tiempo (Raver & Blair, 2016).

¡El aprendizaje lúdico no solo es beneficioso para educar a los niños pequeños, sino que también es divertido! El conocimiento y las habilidades son más fáciles de aprender en un contexto de juego. Por eso, me gustaría ofrecer algunas sugerencias simples para facilitar el aprendizaje lúdico, pero con esta aclaración: ¡es posible que debas olvidarte de la necesidad de tener la casa ordenada para que fluya la creatividad de tus hijos! La creatividad suele ser un proceso repetitivo con muchos cambios, modificaciones, reorganización y lío. Si es posible, designa un área de la casa para el juego creativo que no se deba limpiar de inmediato.

### Sugerencias para el aprendizaje lúdico en casa:

1. ¡Conserva esas cajas de entrega a domicilio! Hoy en día, compramos por Internet más de lo habitual. Conserva las cajas y deja que los niños las usen para construir y crear lo que se les ocurra.

2. Dale cinta, pegamento, papel borrador y otros materiales sin limitaciones. Déjalos a disposición y fáciles de alcanzar, para que



puedan crear cuando estén inspirados.

3. Déjalos recuperar materiales (limpios y seguros) del cesto de basura antes de sacarlos a la calle. Las toallas de papel y los rollos de cartón de papel higiénico son perfectos para el juego creativo.

4. Habla con tus hijos sobre su trabajo. Pídeles que te cuenten sobre cada creación. ¿Cómo funciona? Debes estar dispuesto a participar si te piden que te acerques a verlo o a probarlo. ¡Estarás promoviendo sus habilidades del lenguaje, sus habilidades sociales y la confianza en sí mismos!

5. Dale a tus hijos artículos sin límites, como Lego, Magnatiles, bloques Duplo y Playdoh, para que puedan crear y experimentar con estos materiales. Por supuesto que los materiales reciclados son mucho más económicos y también funcionan. Si bien es lindo tener los otros juegos, no son fundamentales para estimular el flujo de creatividad.

6. ¡Dales diferentes lápices, lapiceras, marcadores, crayones, tijeras, para que puedan personalizar y crear con texto y arte!

Para promover la creatividad con mis propios hijos, limito el tiempo que usan dispositivos digitales y les digo que vayan a jugar. Pueden jugar afuera en nuestro patio cercado, jugar adentro en casa, jugar juntos o jugar solos... simplemente jugar. Además, tener a disposición los materiales listos es una

gran ventaja porque alienta la independencia. Mientras yo estoy ocupada trabajando (en casa), ellos pueden estar ocupados creando y jugando sin mi ayuda.

¿Qué adquieren tus hijos del aprendizaje lúdico? Aprenden cómo funciona el mundo; desarrollan habilidades para tomar decisiones cuando planifican actividades; habilidades matemáticas al experimentar con tamaños, pesos y longitudes; habilidades del lenguaje al narrar sus situaciones hipotéticas, y habilidades de autocontrol al resolver los problemas que inevitablemente surgen.

¡Disfruta tu tiempo en casa juntos y déjalos jugar!

*Se publicó una versión anterior de este trabajo el 17 de mayo de 2020 en el blog Children In Context de Scarpate Consultancy (<https://scarpateconsultancy.com/2020/05/17/playful-learning-at-home/>).*

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# Implementing ELL Apps: Supporting English Language Learners with Technology

By Haemin Kim-Breunig, Miranda Leddy, Amanda Weast, and Peggy Lisenbee



Due to the steady growth of the English Language Learner (ELL) population in Texas, classroom teachers are called to address the needs of an increasingly diverse student body. To effectively reach all of their students, they must differentiate instruction so, in order to foster academic skills, provide social support, and facilitate proficiency with technology, many teachers augment their practice with apps.

Since our students must rely on technology for learning during the pandemic, it is important to provide options. By offering opportunities for them to utilize apps, they can strengthen their current proficiencies and develop new skills. Teachers must implement cross-cultural practices which foster learning for ELLs as well as strategies to evaluate their progress. To explore the efficacy of using apps, we evaluated 36 current apps that teachers can use to support their ELL students with

a specialized rubric.

Discovering the potential of an app as a tool for learning English is personally relevant to one of the authors because, in 2003, when my brother and I (Haemin) attended a middle school in southern Texas, we were the only Asian students on campus. Looking back on my experience as an ELL, I can say that my two greatest challenges during that difficult time were my limited English proficiency and low self-esteem. Until my speaking skills finally improved, my ability to relate to peers and teachers was minimal. Fortunately, my teachers were patient and supportive, and I eventually mastered English as a second language.

Today, however, the possibility for progress in second language acquisition is greatly enhanced by the availability of technology resources such as apps. Moreover, culturally relevant teaching practices facilitate the

bonds between teachers and learners as they integrate cultural norms in the classroom. Thus, effective 21st century teachers strive to integrate the tools of technology along with culturally sensitive practices to maximize the learning potential of their ELL students.

## Changing Demographics

Students who receive services in language programs in American public schools are known as ELLs. The definition of ELL refers to students who receive high-intensity language coaching, or bilingual education in school settings (Murphey, 2014). According to the Pew Research Center (2018), the rise of ELLs in US public schools rose from 8.1% in 2000 to 9.5% in 2015. Currently, there are over 5 million ELL students nationwide. The Pew Research Center (2018) reported that the majority of ELL students in the U.S. (77%) speak Spanish at home. In fact, Spanish is primarily spoken at home by over 3.7 million ELL students in 50 states, including Texas (National Center for Education Statistics, 2018c). After Spanish, the other prominent languages are Arabic, Chinese, and Vietnamese (National Center for Education Statistics, 2018c; Pew Research Center, 2018).

The National Center for Education Statistics (2018c) reported that there were more ELL students enrolled in urban school districts (14%) compared to suburban (9.1%) or rural (3.6%) school districts. Based on this finding, it can be inferred that ELL students in Texas are more concentrated in Dallas-Fort Worth, Houston, and Austin. The Pew Research Center (2018) stated that almost

two-thirds of ELLs are enrolled in kindergarten through grade five (Pew Research Center, 2018). As a result, there is an increased need for ELL teachers for younger children who are learning to read and speak English. The high number of ELLs means that there will be a corresponding need for adequate literacy instruction, both written and verbal, to ensure their academic success.

### Academic Performance

Although ELL students have been making steady improvement in their academic performance, they still continue to lag behind their peers (Murphey, 2014). From 2000 to 2013, Murphey (2014) revealed that non-ELL students consistently scored about 40% higher than ELL students in fourth-grade reading and eighth-grade math. With the growing number of ELL students in the United States, Sumaryono and Ortiz (2004) highlighted the role of teachers in facilitating ELL academic performance and English language learning. The ability to read another language without knowing the vocabulary is the most noticeable difference in reading performance between native English speakers and ELL students (Blachowicz, Fisher, & Ogle, 2006; Britsch, 2010). Billings and Mathison (2012) stated that technology is an effective method to make accommodations for language learning.

### Technology and Self Esteem

Technology tools can be used to improve literacy skills and enhance self-esteem (Blachowicz, Fisher, & Ogle, 2006; Britsch, 2010). The iPads are a common tool since they offer features that allow students and teachers to make accommodations to fit their needs such as: speech to text, font size, audio adaptations, cameras, microphones, images, and a touchscreen. Furthermore, the iPad provides an inconspicuous way for students to blend in with non-ELL students because they can practice literacy skills in social settings (Kagohara et al., 2013).

English language learners appreciate the ability to work discreetly by tackling unfamiliar content privately and individually before having to display their English fluency to the entire class. By working privately, they are protected from feelings of embarrassment (Walters, 2012). Of course, collaborative work and face-to-face discussion should still be part of the learning experience when us-

ing technology (Edward-Groves, 2011). Just be sure to consider the following key points:

- Adult modeling and guidance are effective when integrating technology into a classroom (Lee & Tu, 2016).
- Adults should provide scaffolding when a concept is unclear to an ELL student after interacting with others (Lee & Tu, 2016).
- Children have a high interest in using technology especially an iPad (Lee & Tu, 2016).

The value of technology in connection with self-esteem lies in the student's view of the personal power and agency it gives to them. When students feel the value of their learning is increased, they are able to experience dignity in ownership of their learning, communicating, and improving grades (Ok & Ratliffe, 2018; Walters, 2012). They report enjoyment in having the freedom to access the content at will, which increases the efficiency of their time.

### Literacy Instruction

Due to the fact that English Language Learners enter the classroom with different levels of English proficiency, each student's language development will progress at a different rate (Mathison & Billings, 2008; Prince, 2017). The use of technology allows a teacher to customize literacy activities to the instructional level for each student (Hur & Suh, 2012). When students use iPads, they are able to use technology inconspicuously which offers two-fold benefits: (1) practice in literacy skills, (2) possible increases in their self-esteem. Technology tools, such as apps used on iPads, allow students to not only practice literacy skills, but to become more familiar and independent using technology (Beauchamp & Kennewell, 2010).

Prince (2018) states that one-to-one interaction between a teacher and a student using an iPad is an instructional strategy which can enhance students' performance, including literacy. iPad devices alone cannot induce instructional practices or learning, but a teacher using a pedagogical approach which encompasses personal interactions will enhance students' language learning process. (Prince, 2018). When using a one-to-one approach that promotes teacher-student interaction, the other components such as cross-cultural approaches and using apps for literacy instruction will support the literacy development of ELL students. (LeClair, Doll, Osborn, & Jones, 2009).

### Cross-Cultural Approaches

Many states are implementing laws to mainstream ELL students and mandating ELL standards that promote unrealistic expectations for English language acquisition (Sumaryono & Ortiz, 2004). However, the research supports methods to embrace students' social and cultural background and promote a safe environment in which students feel supported when taking risks. Although mastering the English language is the foundation for academic success for ELL students, it is important to preserve their native language and culture (LeClair et al., 2009; Sumaryono & Ortiz, 2004).

How can you create a classroom climate and curriculum that embraces these components? Here are some suggestions,

- Use all of the students' native languages in your classroom to review vocabulary words in the curriculum.
- Provide the option to use their native language when engaging in writing activities (i.e. journaling or poetry) which will not be graded.
- Include culturally diverse authors and make sure cultures are authentically representative of the students (Boyd, Causey, & Galda, 2015; Lin & Bates, 2014).
- Pair students who share the same native language when grouping for cooperative learning activities to enhance learning for ELL students.
- Learn about the students' cultures, family history, and home life by creating authentic assignments in ELAR, social studies, art, or music.
- Invite students to share content from their own backgrounds when it relates to the curriculum.
- Include posters and photos of culturally diverse people involved in a variety of occupations, games, and celebrations on the walls of the classroom.
- Arrange desks and work areas to encourage interaction among members of different genders and cultures.
- Designate an area in the class or a cubby/locker where students can display their cultural identity through pictures or other artifacts.
- Include music from different cultures and countries in the classroom music library.
- Provide art supplies that represent a variety of skin colors and tones.
- Prepare dramatic play centers that in-



clude traditional and contemporary clothing and objects from different cultures

- Invite members of different cultures to come to the classroom to visit with students.

### Apps for Literacy Instruction

Tablets, such as an iPad, are easy for students to use, easy for teachers to individualize for student needs, and inconspicuous when students use tablets in a classroom to practice individual literacy skills. Freckle Education (previously Front Row Education, n.d.) completed their 2017 Technology in the Classroom Survey on 2,500 K-12 teachers and found that over 50% reported their school districts using a one-to-one student-to-device ratio. Considering the frequency and ease of using iPads in the classroom, application software (apps), are a practical way to supplement and enhance instruction for ELL. The authors created a list of dual language learner apps which address vocabulary, grammar and syntax, pronunciation, common phrases, and idioms (Appendix A).

The authors evaluated the list of 36 ELL apps using the Phonemic Awareness and Phonics Evaluation Rubric (PAPER) rubric (Lisenbee, 2018). PAPER (Appendix B) evaluates literacy apps by providing "... a framework focusing on app design, literacy skills, and pedagogy supporting 21st Century learners and teachers interested in integrating technology into their classrooms" (Lisenbee, 2018, para 2, p. 17). PAPER evaluates whether apps offer corrective and immediate feedback to allow for improvement of each students' skills, whether apps offer students autonomy when using technology, and if interruptions by advertisements cause issues for students. The PAPER rubric supports

teachers' needs to use quality apps as an instructional method to scaffold students' reading skills when students independently use technology.

The 36 ELL apps listed in Appendix A show four apps were evaluated as exemplary, eight were assessed as excellent, nine were identified as adequate, 14 were evaluated as needs improvement, and one app was assessed as not quality. The apps in Appendix A provide only a small subsection of available literacy apps but provide a beginning list for teachers to use along with the rubric in Appendix B so teachers are able to continue evaluating apps.

### Conclusion

In order to effectively and efficiently increase the language skills of ELL students, teachers must embrace their culture and integrate the use of technology to supplement literacy instruction. As technology continues to advance, teachers will need to continually evaluate apps to find newly released, quality literacy apps (Lisenbee, 2018) and incorporate quality apps in their instruction to support students' independent practice of literacy skills (Hur & Suh, 2012). Providing a culturally sensitive and supportive classroom environment through the use of independent technology can help ELLs optimize their language learning experiences.

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## APPENDIX A

Rating (1-24) 24-22= exemplary; 21-20=excellent; 19-17=adequate; 16-12=needs improvement; 12-0=not quality

App Name	Operating System	Skill Practiced	Image	Price	Rating
Bob Books #2: Reading Magic HD	Apple; Android	Letters, sounds and spelling		\$2.99	23
English First High Flyers	Apple	Listening, reading, speaking and spelling skills		Free	22
Kidioms	Apple; Android	Idioms; figurative language, word relationship; literal and non-literal meanings of words and phrases		\$1.99	22
Learn English 6000 Words	Apple; Android	Phonetics, pronunciation, and vocabulary		Free	22
BrainPOP ELL	Apple; Android	Literacy program using videos, games, flashcards, and follow-up questions		\$59.99 for full access (First lesson free)	21
Rosetta Stone: Learn Languages	Apple; Android	Vocabulary and phrases		First 30 minutes free	21
Action Words	Apple; Android	Action words and vocabulary		\$0.99	21
TeachMe: Kindergarten & Teach Me	Apple	Sight words, addition, subtraction, spelling, and numbers for six different age appropriate subjects		\$1.99	20
Spell & Listen cards	Apple	Spelling, vocabulary, word recognition, and pronunciation		\$1.99	20
Magoosh English Video Lessons	Apple; Android	Grammar, verbs, nouns, pronouns, and clauses		Free	20
Easy English	Apple; Android	Free conversation		Free	20
PropositionBuilder	Apple	Prepositions, sentence meaning, and sentence structure		\$7.99	20
Babbel	Apple; Android	Language-learning, vocabulary, conversational skills		\$15.99/month, first lesson free	19
VoiceThread	Apple; Android	Conversation practice		Free	19
FluentU	Apple; Android	Language learning using music videos, movie trailers, news and inspiring talks		Free	19
Supiki English Conversation Speaking Practice	Apple	Conversation practice		Free	19
Drops	Apple; Android	Vocabulary		\$9.99/month	18

## APPENDIX A

Rating (1-24) 24-22= exemplary; 21-20=excellent; 19-17=adequate; 16-12=needs improvement; 12-0=not quality

App Name	Operating System	Skill Practiced	Image	Price	Rating
Speech With Milo: Sequencing	Apple	Developing sequencing and storytelling skills		\$2.99	18
iWriteWords Lite	Apple; Android	Alphabet, 3 letter words, writing, spelling		Free	18
SentenceBuilder™ for iPad	Apple	Grammar, sentence structure, and vocabulary		\$5.99	18
Phrasalstein	Android	Phrasal verbs and word meaning		Free	18
Rainbow Sentences	Apple	Grammar, sentence structure, language learning, and vocabulary		\$7.99	18
Learning English for Kids-Lingo Kids	Apple; Android	Vocabulary, verbs, and adjectives		Free	17
American Wordspeller ESL	Apple; Android	Finding words even if the spelling is wrong		\$2.99	17
Pogg—Spelling & Verbs Verbs	Apple; Android	Learning words, objects, and actions		\$0.99	17
Voxy	Apple; Android	Pronunciation		Free	17
Futaba	Apple	Practicing words in a classroom environment		\$0.99	16
Grammar Up	Apple; Android	Multiple choice quiz system with over 1800 questions across 20 grammar categories		\$4.99	16
Busuu	Apple; Android	Vocabulary and grammar		Free	15
Memrise: learn languages free	Apple; Android	English vocabulary		Free	15
Qlango: Learn Languages Easily	Apple; Android	Vocabulary		Free	15
Phonetics Focus	Apple	Pronunciation		\$2.99	14
Dictionary.com w/ English Learner's Dictionary	Apple; Android	Word usage, idioms, noun labeling, pronunciations, synonyms and antonyms		\$4.99	13
Speech Tutor	Apple	Pronunciation, consonants, and vowels		\$19.99	13
Speak English Like an American	Apple; Android	Practicing over 300 of today's most common English idioms and expressions		\$9.99	12
Duolingo	Apple; Android	Vocabulary, phrases, and grammar		Free	11

APPENDIX B

Phonemic Awareness & Phonics Evaluation Rubric (PAPER)

Literacy App Name: _____		Date: _____		Total Score: _____		
Scores: 24-22 = exemplary; 21-20 = excellent; 19-17 = adequate; 16-12 = needs improvement, ≤ 12 = not quality						
Identify Literacy Skill(s) Practiced In Each App:	App Design & Pedagogical Criterion		4 - Exemplary	3 - Excellent	2 - Adequate	1 - Needs Improvement
	Literacy Skills		Literacy skill(s) is effectively reinforced	Literacy skill(s) is generally reinforced	Literacy skill(s) is occasionally reinforced	Literacy skill(s) is not clearly taught
<b>PHONEMIC AWARENESS SKILLS:</b>		Engaging		Literacy skill(s) are practiced in a contrived, rote manner		Literacy skill(s) are practiced using drill & skill (i.e., flashcards)
Rhyming		Literacy skills are practiced in an authentic, engaging manner		Literacy skill(s) are practiced as part of a general, somewhat engaging manner		
Letter Recognition		Specific feedback is provided allowing students to respond again, if incorrect		General feedback is provided allowing students to respond again, if incorrect		Feedback is difficult to connect to literacy skill(s) practiced
Concept of Words		Complete autonomy to interact within content & adaptations are easily made for student needs		Some autonomy to interact within content & some adaptability is possible for student needs		No autonomy to interact within content & no adaptability possible for student needs
Phoneme Isolation		Students should be able to launch and navigate app independently		Students might need the teacher to review how to navigate app before becoming independent		Students might need constant teacher assistance to navigate app
Phoneme Identity		Students practice literacy skill(s) without any ads OR requests to upgrade (FREE)		Students practice literacy skill(s) with option for an upgrade offered after limited practice (FREE/\$ )		Students have little practice on literacy skill(s) due to the need to upgrade for any real practice (\$ )
Phoneme Categorization		<b>Remained Focused on Literacy (cost of app)</b>				
Phoneme Blending						
Phoneme Segmentation						
Phoneme Deletion						
<b>PHONICS SKILLS:</b>						
Consonants						
Vowels-Short						
Vowels-Long						
CVC Patterns						
Onset & Rime						
CVCe Patterns						
Consonant Digraphs-Beg						
Consonant Digraphs-End						
Consonant Blends-Beg						
Consonant Blends-End						
Vowel Digraphs-Long						
Vowel Diphthongs						
R & L Controlled Vowels						

# Ten Ways a Teacher Copes, and Thrives, During a Pandemic

By Josh Thompson with Melodie M. Bourassa



*How is it going with the teachers in your life? Follow along as one grandparent kept in touch with one remarkable kindergarten teacher during the first few months of the COVID-19 lockdown and school-at-home, in the spring of 2020.*

Just before the lockdown, early in March 2020, I visited my granddaughter's kindergarten. I sang a song with the children and chanted a rhyme as they passed around my university name badge: "Girls go to college, to get more knowledge. Boys go to Jupiter, they aren't stupider!" I read a book, *Frederick* by Leo Lionni, and then oohed and aahed at some of their work, art on the wall, cultural maps from places around the world. My granddaughter read to me, then held my hand while they walked in line to the play-

ground. Within two weeks, her kindergarten classroom would become a memory, and new learning environs would be built, from scratch, online.

By early April, I crafted this email greeting to her kindergarten teacher (using my grandfather nickname, "Billy"), along with similar inquiries and expressions of support toward a number of teacher friends. What unfolds is a telling tale of how amazing teachers are, and how one teacher organized a list, *Ten Ways a Teacher Copes, and Thrives, in a Pandemic*.

**Tue, Apr 7, 2020 at 2:49 PM**

From: Josh Thompson  
To: Melodie Bourassa  
Subject: A Grandpa's Hello  
Hi, Ms. Melodie,

Every blessing, greatest hope for a wonder-filled day in your life, your home, and your community of online scholars in the Leadership class of EFWMA. I am so very sorry about this situation, for all of us, for all our children, but especially for great kindergarten age kids like Mabel who need their friends and teachers at this most critical period in their development. What amazing people these children will become because of this season of transition and change in their learning environment. Thank you, thank you for being there for them all, each and every one. I am honored by your devotion and dedication. Let's have a party when this is through!

Please let me know if there is anything I can do to help, any way I can support you and your good work.

Billy

**Tue, Apr 7, 2020 at 4:10 PM**

From: Melodie Bourassa  
To: Josh Thompson  
Subject: RE: A Grandpa's Hello  
Mr. Thompson,

What kind words. Thank you. The students are my daily inspiration, and bring hope and joy to me. I am so grateful for their presence, their smiles, their intellect, and their resilience to the harsh realities we are in the midst of. I am learning from them! We need each other, and a party? Sounds fun! We shall don our princess and warrior couture, and twirl and sing!

I hope and pray that your family stays strong and healthy, and that keen wisdom and wonder-filled spirit of Mabel's continues to shine. She is truly magical!

Take care,  
Ms. Melodie

April rolled on into May. Amidst many other communication emails with teachers, administrators, and my own undergrad students, I smiled when I remembered this teacher's kindness, quick reply, and thoughtful, child-centered interest in what's going on. In my follow up reply on May 1, I changed hats, asking instead of a grandparent's interest but rather a teacher educator's question of an experienced kindergarten teacher.

**Fri, May 1, 2020 at 1:43 PM**

From: Josh Thompson  
To: Melodie Bourassa  
Subject: Continuing a Conversation  
Ms. Melodie,

Back early April, you replied so graciously (and so quickly, too) when I asked, out of my doting grandpa voice, about you and your class going online. Your reply has sustained and encouraged me on in my work as a teacher educator: your attribution to the children as your daily inspiration, and a source of hope and joy; your gratitude for what connections you are sustaining with them; and your keen, trained observer eye to notice their resilience in these harsh realities. Wow, teachers amaze me – and great teachers retain their awe and wonder in the kids around them. Awesome.

While I love to continue our conversation based around your experience with my favorite kindergartener, I also wonder about how to best help other teachers keep hope alive, maintain the spark of connecting with children even afar, and the joy of learning alongside them. So, I come again to ask how it's going with you, and welcome to hear – a

quick reply here, a reflective response, or a telephone chat sometime. Let me know – how's it going with you?

Josh

**Mon, May 4, 2020 at 10:40 PM**

From: Melodie Bourassa  
To: Josh Thompson  
Subject: Continuing a Conversation

Thank you for your note and your inquiry about how to "best help other teachers" in pandemic times. I did not respond as quickly this time, mainly because I wasn't sure if I had anything worthy to share about how to keep hope alive, or to keep a spark lit. My hope and spark can be dim and bright, depending, and each of us are going to come at this individually. There is not a cookie cutter way to get through this. Nonetheless, you asked, and I have a reflective response for you. Take what you like and leave the rest!

This weekend was exceptionally full. I have been with my very insular family, had a few nightmares, tended to a broken washing machine, worked in the garden with my son, played in the pool with my granddaughter, walked with neighbors, did some reading, watched a few "how-to" YouTube videos and planned a drip-irrigation system, checked in with my parents in Houston, and ordered out for a Mediterranean family dinner on Sunday evening. Now, as I sit down to respond, I'm thinking, if I were to share advice to other teachers, the first thing I would say is **1) Take time away from the screen and get outside!** The past three days have inspired me – gardening, being with Lucy, and doing the

things I love to do. The second thing I would say is **2) Keep doing the things you love to do!** You can't teach what you don't know, or love...right? and you can't give what you don't have...obviously. As clichéd as those lines are, they are also true. To keep that spark, or joy for learning alive, you've got to be learning and living your life, pandemic, or not. While I know this pandemic is not going to go away in the next few weeks, or maybe even years, I do have to be prepared to meet it with openness, willingness, and with a spirit of radical hospitality. Why? Because it is here, whether I like it or not, and if I want to foster a life well lived, make a difference, be safe, have joy, then I need to be doing those things that make life worth living, and teaching those ideals and skills that get us through life creatively. If I am not doing it, I can't pass it on.

When people began talking about this pandemic being a time to reevaluate what is important for oneself, I was in a midst of frozen fear, and thought that kind of thinking was really self-centered. Surely, this is not about me? Now that the fear is more of a constant disquieting (something akin to the movie *Groundhog Day*?) and I'm once again embracing ambiguity like a firehose in my face, I am finding ways for this pandemic to work for me. I find myself getting creative with my space, my time, how I teach, what I teach, and asking the question of "what is most important to teach/pass on?" in this time. Whether generally speaking, or from a TEKS perspective (state mandates will always drive public school lessons), what is it this group of children need to know before this summer is upon us? From this, a little well of hope is beginning to bubble. I am still very concerned with what is happening globally, politically, environmentally, socially, and spiritually, and I will continue to be civically minded and active, but I have no control on the outcome of this. I can contribute to its unfolding, in any direction, so like a place-based curriculum, I am going to start here at home, with me, my family, in my neighborhood, at our school, in this community, and do what I can. Keeping it simple. The third recommendation I'd make is **3) Continue to reflect on what is most important and take action.**

On the homefront I could suggest **4) Make a small circle of people you can connect with, be with, and hug;** that share your beliefs of how to best safeguard oneself,

### Table 1: Ten Ways a Teacher Copes, and Thrives, in a Pandemic

- Take time away from the screen and get outside!
- Keep doing the things you love to do!
- Continue to reflect on what is most important and take action.
- Make a small circle of people you can connect with, be with, and hug; that share your beliefs of how to best safeguard oneself, and others, from this pandemic.
- Practice good self-care (sleep, eat healthfully, move frequently, and sing when you can!)
- Find alternative ways to do the things you enjoy doing.
- Be a prepared teacher.
- Keep learning and honing your craft.
- Be gentle with yourself.
- Keep a sense of humor

and others, from this pandemic. **5) Practice good self-care** (sleep, eat healthfully, move frequently, and sing when you can!) **6) Find alternative ways to do the things you enjoy doing.** My daughter attended a drive by wedding this weekend! - why not? Our school held an online pep rally and it was fun! **7) Be a prepared teacher.** I have been attending webinars to improve my online teaching, listening/watching others teach online, learning new programs, and being open to this way of teaching, and so far, it is working. I also helped organize an online women's retreat, and took what I had learned only 5 weeks ago, about Zoom/Google Classroom, and applied it there. It is a perspective. I can see this as "the end of the world," or like a new frontier! Not the last one, but certainly a virtual frontier. Another idea I would share is **8) Keep learning and honing your craft.** This is a unique opportunity for teachers, and students, to learn new ways of being together, learning how to listen more, and to communicate more effectively. And academically? the world is literally at our fingertips. Now, we only have to "right click" to find the meaning, and the etymology, of the words we are typing, as we type!

Here is another one, **9) Be gentle with yourself.** Allowing myself a full range of emotions without judgement, or regret, has been helpful. Be empathetic towards others. Have an attitude of gratitude. Easy Does It. We Are in This Together. United we are One. One Mask, One Life. The mini-day-spring-one-liners of hope and inspiration are slogans we can learn to live by in times like these. If they work for you, use them, paint them on rocks, put it on a t-shirt, get it tattooed on your forehead, and let them become your mantra. If One Day at a Time can be coined the golden slogan for millions of 12 steppers in a thousand languages, then any slogan that keeps you sane in a global pandemic is a slogan worth saying! Over and over, ad nauseum...

Maria Montessori believed that "by teaching children to recognize the interdependence of all living things, she would help them develop consciousness of their place on earth. With the idea that the Great Story, from which her Great Lessons are conceived, is not yet finished, Montessori portrayed humans as coming into a new era: the Ecozoic Era. Originated by Thomas Berry, the Ecozoic Era is the idea of a time when humans live

in unity with one another and tend to their cosmic task of earthly stewardship." I wonder if this is what is going on? What if all the environmental changes we are seeing this spring, due to the world's inhabitants slowing down, and "tuning in" will mark the beginning of this shift towards a collective stewardship? If we have a collective consciousness, and can experience collective grief globally, then maybe we can avoid the collective rage that some say is around the corner? The study of Deep Time intrigues me. There are two books I am reading now, *The Underland: A Deep Time Journey* by Robert Macfarlane (2019), and *The Overstory* by Richard Powers (2018). The world is always changing, and yes, it is different now, but it is always becoming different, after a crisis, or a storm; and regardless of me, or other humans, the one constant is nature. If we pay more attention to it, it will get us through what is coming. Now I have gone full circle...what was number one? Get outside? This is the first year I have smelled the delicate sweet scent of spring wafting in the wind...it brings out the poet in me.

Mr. Thompson, I am very humble in writing all this to you. I read your curriculum vitae over the weekend, and the "Why I Teach," article. You are very well educated, published and the students you work with are very fortunate, as well as your family. You inspire. Mabel's "joie de vivre" is generational! Her intelligence is a reflection of her parents, yours, your parents, and it is nurtured from the love, respect, and care she is given. Her curiosity and independence reflect how your family values self-expression, learning, and education. I know firsthand how inspiring having an artist as mother can be, or an entrepreneur as a father. Then, to have a professor, and a Montessorian, as a grandfather? Mabel will flourish in life!

Thank you for asking how I am doing and for the opportunity to reflect on my current state of mind. Your request seemed genuine, so I thought I'd respond likewise. When I started writing this I did not have a clue as to what I would write, and like most creative endeavors, they take on a life of their own. Every time I sat down to write, something else would come to mind, and I found myself writing an awfully long response. (But that is OK - I can blame the pandemic and the unheeded notions of a solitary elementary teacher who has gone bonkers!) **(#10? Or is this #17? - Keep a sense of humor? lol) I**

think I have answered your questions. I will also leave you with a quote by Simone Weis, "Attention is the rarest and purest form of generosity." Thank you for your generosity of attention. If you'd like to join us one morning, online, and read, or have a discussion, or share something of interest with the students, just let me know what time/day would work for you. It would be fitting for Princess Mabel to have her Grandfather join in one of her last classes in online Kindergarten. We have classes from 9-12, Monday - Thursday and our last day is May 28th, so we have a few weeks left. Mabel's class this week starts at 10am (reading is at 9am).

Take care,  
Melodie

"We must not wish for the disappearance of our troubles but for the grace to transform them." - S. Weiss

**MELODIE M. BOURASSA, M.ED.**, is a Montessori teacher for the Leadership Prep Program at East Fort Worth Montessori Academy in Fort Worth, TX. Melodie's educational background in the fine arts, and love for science and literature provide her a broad base from which to approach her teaching and passing on the joy of learning.

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# Overcoming Online Obstacles to Teaching Young Exceptional Learners

By Theresa A. Garfield & Mariya T. Davis



Young exceptional learners need to have opportunities for success as do all learners. In particular, there is a need to provide specialized services to support them in and out of the classroom. By providing these added supports, we “level the playing field” so that there are equitable opportunities for achievement and progress. Special education guidelines govern the use of supports and services with exceptional young learners. Moving early learning classrooms to an online platform is problematic; moving it to an online platform while providing the essential special education services for young exceptional learners becomes especially challenging. However, it can be done.

Special education is a heavily regulated and legally mandated aspect of education. The Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA) Part B is the primary source of law that governs how to provide learners with disabilities ages 3-21 with an education that

meets their needs. IDEA requires schools to provide a Free and Appropriate Public Education (FAPE) for all identified exceptional learners. Recent litigation, such as *Andrew v Douglas County School District* (2017), further outlines how FAPE is interpreted. With the *Andrew* decision, schools must now offer more than minimum educational opportunities and expectations for exceptional learners. FAPE is now interpreted as mandating education that is both appropriate and meaningful (ED.gov, 2020).

Navigating the intricacies of special education is sometimes challenging for parents, educators, and school administrators. Previously, when any one of these stakeholders questioned the interpretation of the law and regulations, the result often played out through due process or the courts. With the introduction of mandatory shutdowns of schools and aspects of the judicial systems,

how do parents and districts find administrative relief? The Centers for Disease Control (CDC), as informed by the US Department of Education (2020), indicates that due process is still in effect, should there be disagreement regarding services or procedure. Further, FAPE must continue to be provided if the school remains “in session” online. If the school closes early (invokes an early summer break), they would not be required to provide services to young exceptional learners once that break occurs. However, the school must be aware that compensatory services may be warranted, if determined by the Individualized Education Program (IEP) team (CDC, 2020). One challenge facing parents, educators, and administrators is how does this mandate translate into online delivery?

## Specially Designed Instruction

In an ideal classroom context, the early childhood special education teacher receives a list of accommodations, goals, and modifications for each learner identified as needing special education services. The teacher collaborates with service providers and other staff to implement these goals into the learning environment. Young learners are frequently assessed using performance checklists, task analysis forms, and targeted data collection. Teachers assess and adjust instruction as needed and in response to the learner’s needs. Young exceptional learners do what they do best; they socialize and learn school-ready routines. At the core of these instructional practices is the concept that learning pathways should be individualized through specially designed instruction (TEA, 2018).

Early childhood special education teachers utilize SDI (20 U.S.C. 1401(29)(A)) to address the unique needs of young exceptional

learners as required by IDEA, which includes appropriate adaptations of the content, methodology, or delivery of instruction (34 CFR 300.39(b)(3)). It is specific to each learner, and is driven by their IEP. In a typical early childhood special education classroom setting, the teacher can create meaningful centers for learning and engagement, use songs and dramatic play for capturing attention, and develop units of study that reach across multiple disciplines. Online delivery of instruction can make these best early childhood practices less accessible for teachers, learners, and parents.

### SDI and Online Delivery

As schools have moved online, all teachers are faced with the demands of the new online delivery of instruction. However, early childhood special education teachers experience unparalleled challenges. What can teachers do? Consider the following 5 Cs strategies as a way to support young exceptional learners in this new learning environment.

### Designing Online Learning Environments

**Communicate** with parents or caregivers to find out their schedules and technology availability and ensure that parents understand the implications of the online learning mode on their child's IEP. It is critical to regularly communicate with parents via phone, video conference, or email to make sure they are supported.

**Create** learning activities that resemble the school day. Young exceptional learners thrive when provided with structure and routine; therefore, working with parents and caregivers to provide young learners with similar school learning experiences is of the essence. For example, learning activities can be structured to look like reading, math, or art classes, and a kitchen timer can be used to resemble a school bell.

**Connect** with students daily because young learners need to feel connected to their teacher, school, and friends (Richards & Valentine, 2020). This can be achieved with parental assistance and can be carried out digitally (e.g., email, video).

**Consider** how student IEP goals can be achieved in the new environment and how current accommodations and modifications can support their progress. It might be necessary to break learning targets into manageable tasks and revise or add new accommodations.

For example, online and mobile apps and programs may be utilized to assist young learners read aloud or text-to-speech can help struggling readers, and speech-to-text can help struggling writers.

**Choose** alternate ways to deliver special education services. As part of their IEP, young exceptional learners receive a range of special education services provided by a variety of professionals. Therefore, it is important to collaborate with related service providers on how to adapt the delivery mode. For example, PresenceLearning software offers live speech therapy, occupational therapy, and behavior and mental health services.

### Parental Engagement in Special Education

Parents play a crucial role in ensuring that their child receives a FAPE. Parental engagement in the educational process, and not just involvement in an annual meeting, is a federal

requirement. This *engagement versus involvement* is a paradigm shift for many schools. The *Every Student Succeeds Act* mandates parental engagement, and schools have been slow to embrace it (ED.gov, 2015). So, what is the difference and how can teachers facilitate parental engagement in the online era?

Parents of young learners may have been part of an Individual Family Service Plan (IFSP) process when their child was 0-3 years of age. This IFSP is geared towards the inclusion of the family to help their child achieve their goals. The outcomes for an IFSP are necessary and functional for the child's and family's life and reflects real-life contextualized settings. The outcomes are written in a simple, clear, and affirmative way using jargon-free language. (Lucas, Gillaspay, Peters, & Hurth, 2014). Essentially, parents who are largely responsible for their child's success are the drivers of the outcomes. Making the transition to an educational-based Individualized



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Education Program IEP at age 3 is difficult. Parents have been informed that the school is responsible for outcomes, and the parent takes a back seat to their child's learning.

### Parental Participation: Overcoming Obstacles

Parental participation, guaranteed by the IDEA, has long been a key factor of education for exceptional learners. Parents or other significant adults in the child's life, take on the important roles of a provider, a caregiver, and an advocate. The online mode of instructional delivery demands that parents play the increasingly challenging role of an educator who supports their child's learning in the home-based environment. What can teachers do in the online era of instruction to facilitate parental engagement and help parents adapt and modify the environment in order to promote their child's learning experiences?

First of all, assist parents. Providing the family with necessary current, comprehensive, unbiased, and accessible information that parents can understand and use to make informed choices is a professional responsibility of all teachers (Division for Early Childhood, 2014). For example, as parents search for easy-to-understand resources to support their children's learning at home, teachers can help parents locate reliable local and digital resources. It is equally important to provide parents with pertinent information. For example, teachers can help parents know and understand their rights, inform them about leadership and advocacy skill-building opportunities, and encourage those who are interested to participate. Another aspect of assisting parents includes helping them build supportive networks

with other parents, mentors, and community agencies. Google chat, Zoom meetings, and Facebook groups, are some of the options teachers may want to consider.

Next, create a welcoming environment. Professional responsibilities of a teacher include understanding family needs and facilitating parental participation in the IEP process. Whether physical or digital, the environment should be reflective of important virtues such as trust, honesty, respect, value, care, and commitment. This applies to all digital environments parents experience as a result of online schooling: online classrooms, conferences, and IEP meetings. Tips for creating welcoming environments include providing parents with a password to Google classrooms, and facilitating parent's engagement through apps (e.g., Remind) and other digital means preferred by the family (e.g., phone call, email, UberConference, Zoom IEP meetings).

Finally, collaborate to transform school-family partnerships. Teachers need to be mindful of the many demands placed on parents raising young exceptional children and carefully consider them when developing school-family partnerships. By being responsive to the family's needs and changing life circumstances, teachers can also identify and remove any barriers families might be facing. Steps toward building effective school-family partnerships include soliciting and using parental input in the development of IEPs, implementing practices that address the child's strengths and needs, and regarding the family's priorities and concerns. Treating parents as equal partners in decision making towards a common goal and practicing supportive communication are two important pillars that will provide a solid foundation for an effective collaborative school-family partnership.

### Concluding Thoughts

Although online learning and teaching presents challenges for young exceptional learners, parents, and teachers, there are some ways to ensure the fidelity of services. By engaging the families in a collaboration to succeed in the online instructional services, special education teachers can ensure the continued progress of the young exceptional learner.

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# Pandemic Related Stress: Alleviating the Impact of Trauma on Learning

Tasha A. Vice, Erika M. Warnick, and Jennifer D. Morales



The origin of the word “trauma” is Greek; its original meaning comes from the word wound. A modern take on the definition of trauma relates to one’s level of distress after a disturbing experience. Trauma can stem from loss or emotional shock after a physical injury, death, or other stressful events (Oxford Dictionary, 2020).

## Pandemic Related Trauma

In early 2020, when a virus that causes the coronavirus disease, COVID-19, began spreading, schools across the United States closed their doors. While the schools opted to shift to online instruction, community support structures were basically eliminated due to social distancing recommendations from the Center for Disease Control and Prevention (CDCP, 2020). As a result, fami-

lies found themselves with fewer protective factors while homebound and were separated from community resources that usually provide support such as child care, church, afterschool programs, and tutoring. Although some families have had the means to provide alternative activities, many children who were separated from these vital resources felt bereft over losing their daily relationships outside of the home. Virtually all of the families in quarantine have experienced a range of feelings pertaining to loss, isolation, and distress (Berinato, 2020).

As a result, many educators have expressed concern for the ways that children’s learning will be impacted by the pandemic. While the extent of the trauma cannot yet be measured, a look at related literature provides insight into how educators can identify the

symptoms of trauma and respond to the subsequent special learning needs for students. In light of these difficult circumstances, what recommendations can be made for providing appropriate emotional support and instruction for children who have experienced pandemic related trauma?

## Recognizing Symptoms of Trauma

The symptoms of emotional distress from trauma may vary. Also known as Adverse Childhood Experiences (ACE), the characteristic signs of trauma include, but are not limited to, indicators such as separation anxiety, language delay, developmental regression, impulsiveness, disassociation, extreme passivity or aggressiveness, and difficulty with peer relationships (Blumenfeld, S., Groves, B.M., Rice, K.F., & Weinreb, M., 2010; Harvard Center on the Developing Child, n.d.; Robles, et al, 2019; Shonkoff, et al, 2012). Statistics show that more than 60% of early learners already suffer from trauma and 25% of those learners are experiencing Post Traumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD) even at a young age (NCTSN, n.d.). Thus, a vast number of children who exhibit behavioral challenges are suffering from reduced executive function (EF) as a result of excessive stress (Bremner, 2006).

For early learners, trauma interferes with brain growth and development and reduces higher functioning tasks including self-regulation. According to the National Child Traumatic Stress Network (NCTSN), a child with a history of trauma will exhibit symptoms that can interfere with their behavior and academic progress in school. When children enter kindergarten after experiencing early childhood trauma, they often lack the necessary executive functions for learning.

Long term academic risk increases with students' trauma levels, ultimately resulting in increased drop-out rates, absenteeism, expulsion/suspension, and failure (NCTSN, n.d.).

### **Acknowledging the Impact of Trauma on Behavior**

Barr (2018) notes that children who have a history of difficult experiences will have a diminished ability to regulate emotions, decreased cognitive flexibility, and a reduced short-term memory. Barr suggests that educators must recognize that the student's resulting behavioral challenges are not "willful" or intentional and, instead of punishing the child, seek support for their emotional challenges.

A teacher's response to these behaviors can have a powerful and lasting impact on a child's "investment in the educational process" (Barr, 2018, p. 43). Harms (2018) states that children with early life stress continue to demonstrate difficulty with instrumental learning and cognitive flexibility as adolescents. Teachers who perceive one or more of these symptoms must document their observations and share the information with parents and the appropriate support staff in order to develop a plan of action for supporting the student (Robles, et al, 2019).

Traditional behavioral approaches, such as scolding, time-out, and other similar consequences are not effective methods for addressing the underlying causes of inappropriate behaviors. In fact, these punitive measures can actually decrease a student's investment in the learning process and negatively impact their educational success. Instead, teachers need specialized behavior management trainings in order to implement innovative methods for responding to student behavior. Researchers (Barr, 2018 & McGruder, 2019) recommend that teachers learn how to connect with children in distress and help them manage their difficult emotions with a trauma informed approach. Teachers can benefit from resilience training that provides them with applicable resources and practices (Lipscomb et al., 2019).

An effective system for working with children in trauma is Conscious Discipline, which is an evidence-based approach for interacting with children who have experienced trauma. The founder, Becky Bailey, developed the behavior management program for teachers and other professionals to address the emotional needs of children. As

a highly acclaimed approach, the methods espoused by the Conscious Discipline utilize brain-friendly, research-backed strategies for helping teachers implement trauma-informed practice (Bailey, 2015).

### **Addressing Trauma in the Classroom**

In the classroom, trauma not only interferes with a student's understanding of behavior and consequences, but it may also result in difficulty with language arts skills such as reading, writing, speaking, listening, and interpreting visual representations (Bücker, et al, 2012). Researchers (Mears, 2012; Ray, 2009) offer suggestions for teachers to address trauma in the instructional context. Ray (2009) advocates for structured academic approaches that include teacher-directed whole group discussions about community wide trauma, while Mears (2012) highlights the benefits of structured literacy assignments, including 'read alouds' or responses to music, film, or art. Similarly, McGruder (2019) suggests the implementation of trauma informed practices that teach methods for managing emotions.

Dutro (2013) investigates traumatic stories with the aim of identifying ways to situate children's lived experiences into their literacy classroom. Trauma literacies, or as Dutro describes them, "visceral literacies," are experiences whose intimate and unshareable content disrupt language processes. Dutro "calls for envisioning literacy classrooms that recognize and embrace the disorientation of living in the not quite known, entering a space we cannot quite fathom, but wherein lies potential for vital connection with ourselves and others" (p. 304).

The literacy classroom is a connected space where children can delve into questions surrounding their trauma through writing and talk. Despite trauma studies that indicate young children lack the language needed to face trauma, skilled educators can structure learning experiences with opportunities for testimony and critical witness responses that enable children to make sense of their lives through literacies (Dutro, 2013). When educators can accurately interpret a child's behavioral problems, they can support them appropriately.

### **Providing Community Support**

In the field of education, the adage from an African proverb, *It takes a village to raise*

*a child*, resounds. The importance of family involvement in a child's learning is well established; when students have strong social-emotional connections that are supported in positive family relationships they have increased achievement (Harvard Family Research Project, 2005; Henderson et al., 2007). However, when students lack strong family relationships, they may struggle to cope with personal or community traumas.

Researchers (e.g., Hlinka, 2013) suggest providing community outreach to reduce the effects of trauma. For community wide trauma, The National Child Traumatic Stress Network (NCTSN, n.d.) suggests taking a multisystem approach to build knowledge, improve communication, and set up partnerships with schools. Community partnerships can bring resources to schools, educate families, and improve student achievement (Reynolds et al., 2005).

Community programs that target at risk children can intervene by teaching family response, providing community interaction, and helping to meet the basic needs of students. With this combination of intervention, the programs are able to provide a sustainable response for students who have been impacted by trauma (Gross-Manos et al., 2020). Additionally, community-based learning collaboratives that support families can reduce barriers and increase early learners' access to mental health treatment (Hanson et al., 2018). Districts can also support a community wide movement by requiring training for administration, staff, and educators in all of the schools. When the community comes together, children can grow in a safe and healthy environment (McMahon et al., 2000).

### **Recommendations**

First, educators must recognize that children of trauma experience structural changes in the brain as a result of stress hormone production (Bremner, 2006). They may exhibit diminished interest in activities or the inability to regulate their behavior and emotional responses. Next, educators should respond promptly and with sensitivity. We all learn best in an emotionally safe environment, so provide a sense of safety (Medina, 2018). Finally, remember that educators are not trained counselors, and should not attempt therapeutic activities without oversight and a consultation from the appropriate profes-

sional. Although the nurturing that takes place within a classroom is certainly helpful and important, without the appropriate training, educators may not be able to mitigate a child's trauma in the classroom (Moss & Nichols, 2012).

### Final Thoughts

Trauma can negatively impact learning in the classroom, yet early intervention and community support can help mitigate the effects of trauma. Educators must make timely referrals, implement trauma-informed practices, and act as advocates for their students. It is important to acknowledge that the research on trauma is not generalizable to all early learners, or to children of trauma in all contexts. The emotional experiences that form traumatic stress responses are personal and individual even when community wide.

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