

# Early Childhood Indicators of Progress

Minnesota's Early  
Learning Standards:  
Birth to Kindergarten

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## Introduction

The early childhood years (from birth to the start of kindergarten) are an important time of rapid growth and learning. Children's brains are developing more quickly at this time than at any other. Young children are exploring what they can do with their bodies and creating relationships with loved ones. They are investigating how the world works and their place in that world. Because of this complex and rapid development in young children, a shared set of expectations of what young children can know and do is necessary to build successful early childhood education programs and supports. In Minnesota, this set of shared expectations is called the *Early Childhood Indicators of Progress: Minnesota's Early Learning Standards* (ECIPs). The areas of learning or domains covered by the ECIPs include physical and movement development; language, literacy and communications; cognitive; mathematics; scientific thinking; social systems; approaches to learning; the arts; and social and emotional development.

**“We must ensure that all students enter school physically healthy, with key language and literacy skills as well as the social and emotional capacity to approach learning - and life - with confidence, curiosity and enthusiasm.” (Council of Chief State School Officers 2010, 1)**

The first years of life are critical for later outcomes. Young children have an innate desire to learn. That desire can be supported or undermined by early experiences. High-quality early childhood education can promote intellectual, language, physical, social, and emotional development, creating school readiness and building a foundation for later academic and social competence. By defining the desired content and outcomes of young children's education, early learning standards can lead to greater opportunities for positive development and learning in these early years (NAEYC & NAECS/SDE 2002, 2).

### How children learn in the early years

Every moment for a young child is a learning moment. Every interaction and experience gives them information, increases their understanding, and provides them with foundational skills that they will use for the rest of their lives.

**“We now know that rich and engaging early learning experiences and nurturing, responsive relationships with parents and caregivers are as important to a young child's developing mind as nutritious meals and good health care are to their developing bodies.” (Council of Chief State School Officers 2010, 3)**

When nurtured and guided, children flourish. They thrive in supportive relationships and grow in confidence. Through hands-on interactions with objects and people, they begin to figure out how the world works.

## Play, Exploration and Active Learning

The most effective curricular approaches in early childhood are based on young children as active learners emphasizing play, exploration, and constructive learning more so than didactic, teacher-led, passive learning experiences. The ECIPs support play, exploration, and active learning for children from birth through kindergarten entry.

**“...a preponderance of research has shown that there is a false dichotomy between more rigorous academic learning and play...Students are more likely to learn important academic skills and content through play than by having teacher-directed instruction outside of a playful context, as with, for instance, the filling out of a worksheet.” (Lieberman and Cook 2016, 9)**

For infants and toddlers, play and exploration are rooted in strong attachments to family members as well as teachers and providers. The young, non-mobile infant observes and explores the adults who care for him, touching, listening, looking, and taking in all that is around him. He also explores his own body, figuring out what he can do with his hands, his arms, his torso, and his toes. As older infants begin to crawl and walk, they are able to interact more with the physical environment and explore their surroundings, still needing the base of support provided by familiar and trusted adults. Toddlers are even more active as they play and explore with a greater range of motion and physical capabilities. Their increasing communication skills and growing independence allow them to be more adventurous and always more able to explore with a solid base of adult support. Effective teachers and providers

structure the environment with safety in mind and offer intriguing objects appropriate for the age group. They interact with children as they play and explore, giving descriptions that increase vocabulary, engaging in longer conversations as children’s language usage increases, and encouraging curiosity and problem solving. Carefully planned experiences and toys increase the opportunity for children to learn.

Effective teachers and providers of infants and toddlers use the ECIPs to plan appropriate play experiences. They observe children at play and during routines, and refer back to the standards to identify what skills and knowledge the child is demonstrating and what he or she is ready to do next. Based on their observations and reflections related to the ECIPs, they offer more play experiences and observe again. The ongoing planning/observation/reflection cycle is at the heart of best practices.

For preschoolers, play and exploration are the most meaningful ways for children to acquire skills and knowledge as well as to practice skills and refine understanding of new concepts. Rather than view play as nonacademic, effective teachers and providers of preschoolers recognize that high quality play experiences present many learning opportunities that have long-lasting effects for children. Research has found greater academic achievement in the primary grades for children who engaged in child-initiated, productive play in the preschool years (Copple and Bredekamp 2009). Links have been made between play and the development of basic literacy skills, creative problem-solving, prosocial behavior, self-regulation, and executive function. Young children’s



**Children are such curious creatures. They explore, question and wonder, and by doing so, learn...For too many children, curiosity fades. Curiosity dimmed is a future denied. Our potential — emotional, social, and cognitive — is expressed through the quantity and quality of our experiences. And the less-curious child will make fewer new friends, join fewer social groups, read fewer books, and take fewer hikes. The less-curious child is harder to teach because he is harder to inspire, enthuse, and motivate. (Perry 2001, 1)**



engagement in high quality play supports their curiosity as they experiment and hypothesize. Play provides strong motivation for learning and multiple opportunities for practice and skill development.

Teachers and providers who work with preschoolers plan for play experiences with learning in mind. Using the indicators in the ECIPs to plan, they can scaffold learning by individualizing play activities and carefully choosing materials, offering ideas, and interacting with children.

## Purposes for Early Learning Standards

The ECIPs were developed and revised so that Minnesota's children are served by teachers and providers with a shared set of expectations. The ECIPs are based on the most recent research and demonstrate a continuum of learning that includes expectations for all children. They are a framework that fulfills multiple purposes:

1. **Provide a resource** for early childhood professionals as they work with young children and their families across the state.
2. **Support** quality improvement initiatives in early childhood care and education.
3. **Align** across the full educational spectrum from birth through secondary levels.

## The ECIPs as a Resource

The ECIPs offer research-based information about expectations for children's capabilities at different ages and across varying domains of development. They provide a progression of learning so that teachers and providers in Minnesota have a common framework and vocabulary by which they can plan curriculum that is developmentally appropriate for children of different ages, that is attentive to the individual needs of children, and that is culturally relevant for children's varying life experiences. The continuum of learning in the ECIPs and the alignment to kindergarten standards helps teachers talk with parents and families about generally accepted expectations, their child's progress, and individualized planning for next steps.

## The ECIPs as a Support to Quality Improvement Initiatives

As a framework for accountability, the ECIPs are designed to inform curricula design and assessment selection. While not an assessment tool, the ECIPs serve as the foundation for the authentic assessment processes.

## The Alignment of the ECIPs

The ECIPs align with the Minnesota K-12 Academic Standards and with the Common Core State Standards Initiative for Kindergarten through Twelfth Grade (CCSS) for English Language Arts. They reflect the child development knowledge that defines the foundational skills necessary to build toward the Minnesota K-12 Academic Standards and the CCSS expectations.







## Background of the ECIPs Revision

The preschool version of the ECIPs was initially developed in 2000, and revised in 2005; the infant and toddler version was developed in 2007. These were revised and expanded into a single continuum of expectations in the 2016 version of the ECIPs.

The revision process of the ECIPs used committees composed of professionals from school districts, Head Start and child care programs, including diverse content specialists, teachers, providers, coaches, faculty, trainers and administrators, convened to address specific domains. Proposed indicators were reviewed by additional content experts. Finally, the standards were reviewed for plain language to ensure the standards are as clear as possible.

The 2016 revision includes the following changes:

- The infant and toddler and preschool versions are combined into one set of standards for birth to kindergarten entrance.
- The display of the standards was revised.
- The age ranges were increased to make the ECIPs more helpful in planning.
- The primary audience was clarified to be teachers and providers in early childhood programs.

# Guiding Principles for ECIPs Development

The ECIPs revision is based on the following guiding principles. The ECIPs:

## □Recognize that young children are:

- Competent and capable of positive developmental outcomes and deserve high expectations.
- Individuals who develop at different rates and will vary in their progress within learning domains.
- Best understood and supported within the context of their family, culture and community.
- In a rapid period of brain development and need nurturing environments with appropriate interaction and encouragement to take full advantage of this growth period.
- Active learners who learn best in environments where they can construct their knowledge and practice their skills in a variety of ways, with teachers and providers who respect and respond to their needs.

**“For optimal development and learning of all children, individuals who work with children must respect, value, and support the culture, values, beliefs, and languages of each home and promote the meaningful, relevant, and active participation of families.” (Division for Early Childhood 2010, 1)**

## □Support equity and excellence for all children in the state of Minnesota.

High-quality early childhood education supports the optimal development of each and every child regardless of income, ability, race, culture, or special needs. The ECIPs promote equity and excellence so that every child has access to teachers and providers whose expectations are the same for each and every child. These expectations are the foundation on which teachers and providers build the supports for individual children while working toward generally accepted expectations for all. The ECIPs are written in a way so that teachers and providers can plan experiences that reflect the families’ cultures, interests and perspectives. This is necessary so that children are then better able to focus, interact, play and learn.

## □Describe observable behaviors.

The ECIPs are written in language that supports consistent understanding and implementation by teachers and providers. Because the indicators are formatted across a continuum of age groups, the standards make it possible for children to demonstrate an outcome through a variety of culturally appropriate ways and with a variety of materials. This helps teachers and providers use authentic assessment practices based on ongoing observation and documentation. In addition, the language of the ECIP allows for flexibility as teachers and providers work closely with a child’s family to learn more about how the child is developing in his or her family, neighborhood, religious sect or ethnic group.

## □Demonstrate a continuum of learning from birth to kindergarten entrance.

Teachers and providers can refer to the continuum in the ECIPs as they observe what the child can do, have a general idea of what to expect next, and identify ways to support each child’s learning and development.

While young children’s development follows a predictable sequence, development is not uniform. Each child’s pattern and pace of development varies. There may be strengths in certain domains and opportunities in others. Sometimes children have an identified delay or disability that requires adaptations and accommodations. The continuum in the ECIPs helps teachers and providers address individual differences among children in their program.

□ **Demonstrate a continuum of learning from birth to kindergarten entrance.**

Learning is strongest when integrated across domains or broad areas of growth and development. Development in one domain influences development in other domains. For example, children with a strong self-concept and expanding oral language skills may engage in more successful social interactions with peers and adults. The ECIPs address this interrelatedness in the inclusion of some similar indicators across different domains. As teachers and providers observe children’s performance related to the ECIPs, they recognize children’s strengths, build upon them, and maximize connections across domains.

## What the ECIPs Are and What they Are Not

The ECIPs demonstrate a **continuum of increasingly complex learning** for children from birth to kindergarten entrance. They address the development and learning of ALL children, including typically developing children, dual language learners, children with disabilities, and children with high needs.

They are not an all-inclusive resource about children’s development. The standards reflect a selection of **important developmental expectations** that highlight the learning and skills children need in order to be prepared for kindergarten and to continue as life-long learners.

There are appropriate and inappropriate uses of the ECIPs. They are not intended to be used as a curriculum or an assessment tool. However, they should be used to **inform curricular decisions** and to correlate with authentic assessment procedures and content.

The ECIPs are not to be used to determine children’s eligibility for various programs or services or to deny children access to programs or services.



## Opportunities for Children when using the ECIPs

- Children and families will experience consistent expectations for the child’s development regardless of the early childhood program the child attends.
- All children will have access to challenging content and the supports they need to learn that content.
- Children will experience a coherent progression of learning expectations throughout early childhood, aligned to those in kindergarten and the primary grades.



# How to Read the New ECIPs

The organization of the domains is designed to be easy-to-understand and aid in planning by teachers for individuals and small groups of children. The ECIPs are now displayed as an age continuum within each domain and include the following elements:

- **DOMAINS** are major areas of development.
- **COMPONENTS** are specific areas of learning within each domain.
- **SUBCOMPONENTS** are consistent strands within a component across the full age-range continuum.
- **INDICATORS** are expectations for observable outcomes for the child at specific ages. For quick reference, indicators are now numbered within the domain and subcomponent.
- **INDICATOR NUMBERS** identify the location of an indicator within the domain, component and subcomponent.

The learning domains included in the ECIPs are:

1. Social and Emotional Development
2. Approaches to Learning
3. Language, Literacy and Communications
4. The Arts
5. Social Systems: Cognitive
6. Physical and Movement Development
7. Mathematics
8. Scientific Thinking

There are five age ranges identified, one for each year of a child's life from birth to kindergarten entry. The age ranges in the new ECIPs are:

- 0-1 year
- 1-2 years
- 2-3 years
- 3-4 years
- 4-5, K-readiness

*Note: In the Language, Literacy and Communications domain, the first two age ranges are slightly different than in the other domains. This is because of the large amount of research that highlighted these age ranges as important in language development.*

Remember, children's development is highly variable. Children will not always demonstrate indicators identified for their chronological age. They may show some behaviors identified for younger children or may demonstrate some skills and knowledge beyond their present age. The ECIPs are formatted in a continuum across different age ranges so that teachers and providers can identify where each child is performing and easily see what the next expectation is in the continuum. They can also see the indicator(s) in a previous age range, which can guide teachers to plan for missed or needed experiences and adapt curricula accordingly.



## How Different Groups Can Use the ECIPs

The primary audience of The Minnesota Early Childhood Indicators of Progress (ECIPs) is teachers and providers in early childhood care and education programs that serve children from birth to kindergarten entrance. The settings for these programs may include school districts, child care, community preschools and Head Start programs. Administrators, directors, principals, educational leaders, policy makers, community members, and other stakeholders will use the ECIPs when planning for or assessing the effectiveness of current policies and resources related to the optimal development of young children.

Communication with families should include discussion of the ECIPs so parents have the information they need to support their children's learning and development. Potential uses of the ECIPs by different groups are described more fully below.

### Families

Family engagement is an essential component of successful implementation of the early learning standards. Families of young children in Minnesota better understand their children's development and communicate more fully when teachers and providers share this framework with them. The standards create a common vocabulary for the families and the staff so that communication flows easily. As they work in partnership with teachers and providers, families see high quality early childhood practices in action.

## Teachers and Providers

The ECIPs should be used frequently as a tool to assist in meeting the individual needs of all children. Teachers and providers will use the ECIPs in three primary ways:

1. To guide planning for learning experiences and effective caregiving and teaching strategies.
2. To provide direction for authentic assessment of young children.
3. To support family engagement.

In addition, teachers and providers will be impacted by the ways that the ECIPs influence program standards and evaluation. Plans for staff training and development sessions, as well as higher education coursework in Minnesota will integrate the ECIPs into all areas of best practices for those working with young children.

### Curriculum Planning

When planning for curricular approaches for infants, toddlers, and preschoolers, teachers and providers can turn to the ECIPs to identify the concepts, knowledge, and skills appropriate for children at different ages. Teachers and providers use the broad developmental trajectories identified in the ECIPs to plan for individual children and determine the best ways to support each child's continued growth. In addition, by considering the diverse cultural backgrounds of the children and their families, teachers ensure that the curricular approaches are culturally inclusive as they plan activities and experiences.

The ECIPs support strong communication among all professionals within and across early childhood programs when everyone uses the common vocabulary.

### Authentic Assessment

The ECIPs provide direction for teachers and providers when using authentic assessment procedures to monitor young children's progress. Assessment tools aligned with the ECIPs should be selected to ensure standards, curricula, assessments and teaching strategies create a coherent experience for the children and enable teachers and providers to impact children's learning and growth. Teachers and providers can engage in criterion-referenced, observational assessment that is authentic, grounded in the everyday practice of observation, documentation, and collection of work samples.

### Staff Training and Development

Higher education coursework and ongoing staff training and development are important ways to further the professionalism of teachers and providers in early childhood education programs. The ECIPs will be integrated into these learning experiences for teachers and providers, offering a framework of child development expectations and developmentally appropriate practices. Higher education coursework and staff development sessions increase familiarity with the ECIPs as well as address the implications of the standards for curriculum and assessment.

## How the ECIPs Relate to Program Standards and Program Evaluation

Program standards and the ECIPs share the same goal: to improve outcomes for young children. The ECIPs are a framework that support high quality programming for young children, within any set of program standards. Programs may be accountable to the Head Start Program Performance Standards or to accreditation processes such as those established by the National Association for the Education of Young Children (NAEYC) and the National Association of Family Child Care (NAFCC). In fact, these program standards create the conditions for successful implementation of the ECIP by creating high quality learning environments for young children.





## Conclusion

The ECIPs are a solid foundation for the Minnesota early childhood care and education programs that offer services for young children and their families. The indicators in the ECIPs clarify expectations for all children's development while supporting teachers and providers in offering the highest quality services for young children and their families. Improved programs, teacher interactions and individualized planning result in better outcomes for young children.

The ECIPs are the basis for pedagogy, curriculum, child assessment, teacher preparation curricula, and evaluation in Minnesota. We hope that teachers and providers use the standards to communicate with parents and family members so that, together, they make a difference in the lives of children. In addition, community members and policymakers will use the standards to make neighborhoods and cities robust places for children and families to thrive. The goal of these united efforts to implement the Minnesota Early Indicators of Progress fully is to support each child to grow, develop and learn while reaching his or her full potential.