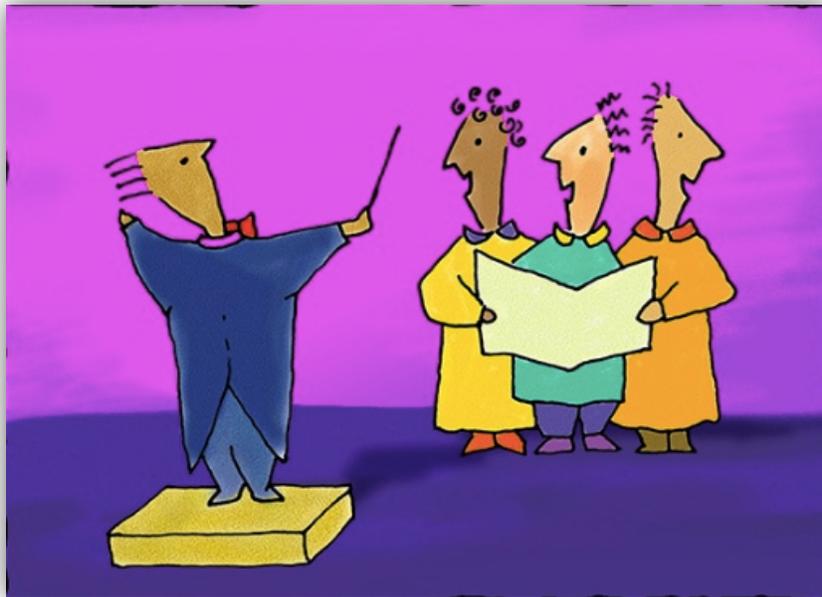


Strengthening Early Learning Systems Using the Coherent Path to Quality

Does everyone in your program share the *same vision of quality early learning*? Are you all singing from the same song sheet? As leaders for young children, we share the responsibility to ensure that each child has the best possible opportunity to learn and grow. The only way to achieve high quality for all children is to make quality user-friendly — *concrete and specific* — so that all adults who work with children can grasp what it means, why it matters, and how to implement it.



At Leading for Children, we believe it is imperative to have common language to establish a coherent and shared vision of high-quality early childhood programs for all the adults in a young child’s ecosystem so that it is user-friendly and therefore usable.

At Leading for Children, we define three dimensions of high-quality early learning programs. Each dimension applies to practices for children and for adults (educators, caregivers, parents, staff, and community members). To make the dimensions of quality usable, we offer simple rules within each dimension. Simple rules are the important ideas that guide our thinking about each dimension of quality. For example, consider the first dimension of quality: relationships and interactions. A simple rule for this dimension is that all relationships and interactions must be two-way or balanced — the relationship is “quality” if both people in it feel that they are

actively participating in it. For each of the three dimensions of quality (described below), we have articulated a few simple rules based on extensive research.



Dimension #1: Relationships and Interactions

Take a moment to think about how you feel when you are with someone you care about. Relaxed? Comfortable? Safe? What about people who make you feel uncertain? Edgy? Displaced? Defensive? In our work in early learning, relationships and interactions matter because they affect how we — children and adults — think, feel, and learn.

How adults relate to and interact with each other offers young children the most powerful model for how to be with others. When the relationships and interactions are healthy and strong among the adults in the child's life, the emotional climate supports a child's well-being. Most importantly, children develop and learn within the context of strong positive relationships and interactions with the adults who care for them. Here are some simple rules to guide our decisions about relationships and interactions are:

1. **Honest.** *Honesty means telling the truth — it is what someone does. The opposite is pretending. An honest relationship is “real” – it is authentic and genuine. Interactions are honest when they are sincere – they come from the heart.*
2. **Trusting.** *Trust is a feeling that develops in response to the **actions** and **words** of a person. When you trust someone, you know they will be there for you, they will support you and you can rely on them. Over time, a person's honesty allows you to trust them.*
3. **Open.** *Being open means you convey (with your body language, words and actions) to others that they are welcome to be with you, to interact with you. You are friendly and approachable.*
4. **Two-way.** *A two-way relationship is equitable — each person is respected and valued. It is balanced so that both people feel seen and heard. In a two-way relationship or interaction, there is mutuality and reciprocity.*

Relationships matter more than anything else. Human beings need to be nurtured. ~Asa Hilliard

Research shows when each person in a group participates in creating the vision and allows it to influence their decisions while planning for and working with young children, the individuals become a community whose common purpose is the high-quality learning of all children.¹

We invite you to think together as colleagues — program staff and families — about these simple rules. Together build a shared language and vision for how to work together to create strong healthy relationships and interactions among colleagues and with children and families.

Use the table below to help guide your conversation about Relationships & Interactions, the first dimension on the Coherent Path to Quality.

Relationships & Interactions: Simple Rules	Question 1: Why does this rule matter?	Question 2: Think about practices we do to bring this rule to life.	Question 3: When we apply each practice in Question #2, what are children learning?
Honest			
Trusting			
Open			
Two-way			

¹ Hord, Shirley M. “Professional Learning Communities: Educators Work Together Toward a Shared Purpose – Improved Student Learning.” *Journal of Staff Development* 30, no. 1 (2009): 40–43.
<http://www.earlychildhoodleadership.com.au/downloads/rsc/professional%20communities%20Hord2009.pdf>

Dimension #2: Emotional and physical environment

Think about how you feel when you enter a room — does it stress you out? Make you anxious? Relax you? Help you calm down? The emotional and physical environment matters because it affects how we feel, how we relate to others, and our ability to focus on tasks.

Everyone thrives when the emotional and physical environment has been prepared with intention. The emotional climate of a program helps children feel safe and, in turn, increases positive behavior. A healthy emotional climate reduces children's absenteeism and staff turnover. When families enter an early childhood program and feel welcomed, they are more comfortable and secure leaving the child so that they can go about the business of their day. When staff members come to work, the environment should motivate them to have a productive and satisfying day. Here are some simple rules to guide decisions about the emotional and physical environment:

1. **Safe.** *Safe means that people, adults, and children are emotionally, physically, and mentally protected from discomfort and danger. The environment is intentionally designed to ensure children are visible at all times so that they can work independently but at the same time be easily supervised by adults.*
2. **Calm.** *When an environment is calm it soothes your senses. Smells are pleasant and not overpowering. Visually it appeals to the eyes and invites you relax and take in the atmosphere. You hear sounds of laughter and conversations without it being overstimulating or intrusive. This calmness in the environment supports self-regulation as well as resiliency. It sends the message: "you're in a safe place to explore and follow your curiosity."*
3. **Organized.** *The physical environment presents an immediate message of either belonging or exclusion. It can provide opportunities for success and mastery or failure and boring repetition. It can provide an arrangement of space and materials so that children can be independent, or it can be set up where teachers are the "material brokers." It can provide spaces and activities for developing community, or be so noisy, crowded, and chaotic that this is impossible.*
4. **Respectful.** *The environment makes parents and guardians feel welcome, involved, and empowered. The physical environment presents an immediate message of either belonging or exclusion. They are places where learners feel at home. In surroundings where students are willing to open their minds and actually listen to what you have to say, you can empower them to achieve their highest potential.*

Judith Colbert asserts: *Your child care environment influences how you feel about yourself and your job, and how you as an early childhood professional relate to the children in your care. The*

children in your care experience the environment indirectly through interactions with you and directly through their own experience with the physical setting.²

When designed as the “third teacher” the environment is also less stressful for both adults and children, allowing teachers to spend more time in positive interactions with children.³

We invite you to think together with your staff about these simple rules and have a discussion to articulate the impact of the environment for adults and children.

Emotional & Physical Environment Simple Rules	Question 1: Why does this rule matter?	Question 2: Think about practices we do to bring this rule to life.	Question 3: When we apply each practice in Question #2, what are children learning?
Safe			
Calm			
Organized			
Respectful			

² Colbert, Judith. “Classroom Design and How It Influences Behavior.” *Earlychildhood NEWS*, 2007. http://www.earlychildhoodnews.com/earlychildhood/article_view.aspx?ArticleID=413.

³ Bullard, Julie. *Creating Environments for Learning: Birth to Age Eight*. Boston, MA: Pearson Education Inc., 2017.

Dimension #3: Learning experiences

Think about a time you learned something new. Your curiosity was sparked and you enjoyed yourself. How would you describe your experience? Did it feel like it was connected to something of interest to you? Did you get to independently explore and answer questions? Will you be able to use what you learned?

When learning experiences are meaningful, they have been intentionally developed with the learner in mind. We're better able to learn new skills and knowledge when it connects to something we know a little about. It connects to our cultural and social context as our interests and goals. High-quality learning experiences invite the learner to explore and construct by connecting the familiar with something new that the person can use purposefully. We invite you to think together with your staff about these simple rules and have a discussion to articulate learning experiences that are effective for children.

1. **Meaningful.** When learning experiences are meaningful, they connect to something familiar to the learner. It has meaning and value to the learner. The new learning offers a small stretch rather than a huge leap beyond the learner's capability.
2. **Exploratory.** Exploratory learning experiences spark the curiosity of the learner. While it is relevant to what is familiar, it's new enough to invite investigation and wonder. The learner begins to build questions and seek answers. What will happen if I? How does this work? Why does it work that way?
3. **Actionable.** When learning experiences are actionable, the learner can see how to use what she has learned and easily use new learning for a purpose.

Play is the highest form of research. ~Albert Einstein

Learning Experiences: Simple Rules	Question 1: Why does this rule matter?	Question 2: Think about practices we do to bring this rule to life.	Question 3: When we apply each practice in Question #2, what are children learning?
Meaningful			
Exploratory			
Actionable			

Think of the three dimensions of quality and all the simple rules as a “package” – you can’t just pick the ones you like. To be sure that children and the adults who care for and educate them thrive we must think about all three dimensions and all of the simple rules together.

To learn more about the Coherent Path to Quality or Leading for Children, please visit LeadingforChildren.org.