

# ~ PROFESSIONAL DEVELOPMENT SOLUTIONS ~

*An e-newsletter supporting effective adult learning practices*

April 2014

MONTANA EARLY CHILDHOOD PROJECT

Issue #40

## PROFESSIONAL STANDARDS AND TRAINING

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*Standards, standards everywhere! In the field of early childhood education, standards are the buzz.*

~ Gaye Gronlund

### INTRODUCTION

Quality early childhood facilities have conscientiously worked to comply with licensing regulations for some time. Many programs are now turning increasing attention and effort toward complying with professional care and education standards embraced by the early childhood field at large. These evidence-based guidelines provide direction to optimize the growth and development of the children and families enrolled in early childhood settings.

These professional recommendations—most are voluntary—include teacher qualifications, program accreditation standards, quality rating and improvement system requirements, and other criteria that guide practice in a systematic way. They may include incentives for program growth and improvement as well.

Many early childhood instructors and professional development specialists see the relationship between what they are teaching in training sessions and professional standards, such as program accreditation, practitioners' knowledge base, early learning guidelines, and quality improvement systems. However, it takes constant commitment and determined effort to intentionally integrate standards and guidelines effectively within each training event or ongoing course.

You may be wondering how you can better help participants in training sessions understand and appreciate these connections. First, you need to know what standards and guidelines exist for a) early childhood

teachers, b) early childhood programs, and c) early childhood content or topic areas. Second, once you explore applicable standards, you are ready to consider modifications in your training practice. Modifications include 1) establishing significant connections between training content and professional standards of practice in most—if not all—professional development experiences you offer; and 2) planning and implementing active learning strategies to help participants apply these standards to their own practice.

Early childhood programs in Montana have access to multiple professional standard systems and structures, both related to teacher qualifications and program quality. Trainers should definitely be acquainted with the most common resources plus any others that apply specifically to training participants in the local area.

At a minimum, information from the following sections should be available—if not integral whenever appropriate—in relevant training sessions. For more information, click on the web links embedded in the headings or within each section below.

"[Early Learning Guidelines] should be embedded into the state's professional development system, including both preservice and inservice training." ~ Zero to Three

## EARLY CHILDHOOD TEACHERS

Trainers cannot ignore the growing number of evidence-based, cross-sector teacher education standards that serve to both professionalize the early childhood field and promote practitioners' lifelong learning. In fact, trainers should plan and implement training events that support and prepare participants to take the next steps along their career paths. This includes providing support and education that directly applies to participants' professional knowledge base.

The term "knowledge base" refers to the fundamental and evidence-based knowledge, skills, and practices essential for individuals who work with young children and their families. These essentials may also be referred to as core "knowledge," "competencies," "body of knowledge," etc.

Efforts to increase Montana teachers' early childhood knowledge base primarily focus on four programs: 1) identifying essential competencies, 2) implementing state certificate programs, 3) recognizing national credentialing, and 4) integrating post-secondary education.

### [~ Montana Early Care and Education Knowledge Base 2013](#)

The Montana Early Care and Education Knowledge Base is the foundation of Montana's career development system and was first published in 1997. The Knowledge Base underwent subsequent revisions in 2004, 2008, and again in 2013. Be sure you are using the most current version.

Montana's Knowledge Base is designed as 1) "a guide to professional early care and education practice" and includes 2) "what early childhood practitioners need to know, understand, and be able to do" to achieve best practice. Montana's Early Childhood Professional Development Approval System is based upon the Knowledge Base content areas.

The Knowledge Base can be used in a variety of ways to promote meaningful professional development.

- It may be helpful to supervisors of teachers, staff, and students as they plan in-service training and help practitioners set professional goals.

- Professional development sponsors, Professional Development Specialists, trainers, and other instructors may benefit from using the Knowledge Base to guide workshop and course development.
- Professional development sponsors and educational programs may use the Knowledge Base to critique the types of professional development they are currently offering, to determine gaps, and to design further educational opportunities.

### ~ **Montana's Certificate Programs**

Many of Montana's trainers are instructors for approved classes specifically designed to help practitioners develop competency in certain defined areas. These courses include:

- Infant/Toddler Caregiver Education Course (60 hours/4 college credits): A comprehensive course that introduces key components of high quality care and education for children from birth - age 3.
- Preschool Teacher Education Course (60 hours/4 college credits): A comprehensive course that introduces key components of high quality care and education for children from 3 - 5 years old.

Certificates for each course are awarded by Montana's Early Childhood Services Bureau. The courses together—plus a few additional requirements—provide the bulk of the training required to pursue the national Child Development Associate Credential.

If you are a course instructor, you may naturally include information about these certificate programs within other training events you facilitate. If you are not well acquainted with these and the other comprehensive professional development courses offered, you may miss opportunities to facilitate integrated training and help participants see their possibilities.

### ~ [Child Development Associate \(CDA\) Credential™](#)

The national Child Development Associate (CDA) Credential™ is the most widely recognized credential in early childhood education and is a key stepping stone on the path of career advancement. Over 300,000 educators have received their CDA to date across

the country. The CDA Credential™ is awarded by the Council for Professional Recognition.

The CDA Credential™ is based on a core set of competency standards, which guide early care professionals as they work toward becoming qualified teachers of young children. CDA recipients have knowledge of how to put the CDA Competency Standards into practice and understanding of why those standards help children move with success from one developmental stage to another.

### ~ Post-secondary Education

Information about post-secondary early childhood professional development should always be available for practitioners who are interested. Trainers should know enough about these programs to make knowledgeable referrals and ensure that training content complements content in advanced coursework.

Montana has a variety of higher education programs in early childhood and child development. Participants can achieve a 30-credit Certificate, Associate's degree, and Bachelor's degree in Early Childhood. Master and Ph.D.-level degrees in early childhood are not currently available from Montana institutions. For more information about programs in Montana, visit the Montana University System website <http://mus.edu/> and click on "Find a Program."

Post-secondary education programs themselves are committed to maintaining increasingly rigorous standards. In addition to regional accreditation, programs in Montana comply with [Montana's Professional Educator Preparation Program](#) (PEPP) Standards adopted by Montana's Office of Public Instruction. PEPP Standards align with the national accreditation standards as established by the National Council for Accreditation of Teacher Education (NCATE).

A number of Montana programs are accredited by NCATE. The 2010 [NAEYC Standards for Initial and Advanced Early Childhood Professional Preparation Programs](#) provide the basis for accreditation from the NAEYC Commission on Early Childhood Associate Degree Accreditation or NAEYC recognition of baccalaureate and graduate programs as part of NCATE accreditation of schools, colleges, and departments

of education. These standards are used across both NCATE and NAEYC accreditation systems and across associate, baccalaureate, and graduate degree levels.

Be careful! There are a multitude of online degree programs being marketed right now. Many programs are NOT at the very least even regionally accredited. Credits received may not count toward advancement on Montana's Career Path or be recognized by state institutions. To determine accreditation status, visit [www.ed.gov/admns/finaid/accred/](http://www.ed.gov/admns/finaid/accred/), or contact the Early Childhood Project for guidance.

Progression to higher levels along Montana's Early Care and Education Career Path involves practitioners' achieving the educational accomplishments required to earn certificates, credentials, and post-secondary degrees. Visit [www.mtecp.org/](http://www.mtecp.org/) for information about career development in Montana.

### EARLY CHILDHOOD PROGRAMS

Trainers need to be well acquainted with current state initiatives. In Montana, as well as in many other states, overall program development and improvement is eventually going to be supported by a well-defined "quality rating improvement system." These systems are based on training, accreditation, accountability, and incentives. Since it takes time to establish a viable system, trainers should start now to include information about Montana's system in training events.

Trainers need to also be familiar with standards for early childhood program quality and the basic prerequisites for program accreditation. Training participants should get a taste of these requirements and understand how they relate to the content of any training that is relevant.

### ~ [Best Beginnings STARS to Quality](#)

The Best Beginnings STARS to Quality Program is the voluntary quality rating improvement system in Montana. It aligns quality indicators with support and incentives for early childhood programs and early childhood professionals across the state. The overall aims of Montana's system are:

- 1) Workforce Development

- 2) Continuous Quality Improvement
- 3) Administrative infrastructure that includes specialized training, coaching, technical assistance, and resources

Check the Montana Early Childhood Services Bureau website or contact a local CCR&R office for details and updates about the STARS to Quality program.

The accreditation systems recognized in Montana's STARS to Quality program are briefly described below. Both are included as stepping stones to higher levels and greater incentives.

#### ~ [NAEYC Accreditation](#)

The National Association for the Education of Young Children (NAEYC) accreditation of programs for young children represents the mark of quality in early childhood education. NAEYC Accreditation began in 1985 with the goal of providing a system that would raise the level of quality in early childhood programs.

NAEYC Accredited programs invest in early childhood education because they believe in the benefits to children and families. Early childhood experiences—from birth to age 8—have an enormous impact on children's lifelong learning and positively contribute to their health and development. Quality early childhood education programs benefit children with greater readiness for and success in school.

Today, over 6,500 programs are NAEYC Accredited in the country. To date, 15 programs are NAEYC Accredited in Montana.

#### ~ [NAFCC Accreditation](#)

The National Association for Family Child Care (NAFCC) sponsors the only nationally recognized accreditation system designed specifically for family child care providers. This system was designed by hundreds of providers, parents, and early care and education experts in an effort to create a quality indicator for family child care programs.

NAFCC Accreditation is awarded to family child care providers who meet the eligibility requirements and the Quality Standards for NAFCC Accreditation. Ac-

creditation reflects a high level of quality through a process that examines all aspects of the family child care program, i.e. relationships, the environment, developmental learning activities, safety and health, and professional and business practices.

Once family child care providers become accredited, they agree to abide by—and be measured against—the standards set forth, with periodic integrity and compliance reviews.

There are over 2100 NAFCC Accredited providers throughout the United States and in other locations worldwide where military family child care professionals operate. To date, nine providers are NAFCC Accredited in Montana.

"Accreditation is a process many different industries use to identify exemplary practices in that particular field. Accreditation is both a status and a process. As a status, accreditation provides public notification that an institution or program meets standards of quality set forth by an accrediting agency.

As a process, accreditation reflects the fact that in achieving recognition by the accrediting agency, the institution or program is committed to self-study and external review by one's peers in seeking not only to meet standards but to continuously seek ways in which to enhance the quality of the services provided." (NAFCC)

### EARLY CHILDHOOD CURRICULUM

Trainers have access to multiple resources as they prepare to educate teachers and caregivers in supporting children's growth and development in specific early childhood curriculum content. Current standards provide a wealth of guidance for developmentally appropriate and age-appropriate practice.

Exploring the newly revised Montana Early Learning Standards is a trainer's first step to designing quality training for providers. The core early childhood domains addressed in the MELS are 1) emotional/social, 2) physical, 3) communication, and 4) cognition.

The Core Domains are further expanded into 12 Sub-domains that are described in more detail in 47 Standards. The Standards are statements reflecting young children's growth and development and are accompanied by detailed descriptions. Here is where trainers can find essential and valuable content for training that addresses providing quality care and education for young children.

#### ~ [Montana Early Learning Standards 2014](#)

The Montana Early Learning Standards (MELS) document is designed to guide the work of early childhood professionals in a variety of early childhood settings. Professionals who implement the MELS help ensure that children from birth to age five develop the skills and knowledge they need to achieve success in learning and reach their full potential in life.

The purpose of the MELS is to provide a structure that frames the amazing developmental process from birth to age five as the foundation for children's success in life and learning. The MELS incorporate current research, particularly in the areas of brain development and cultural/linguistic diversity, including significant and meaningful integration of the Montana Indian Education for All Act.

In addition, a crosswalk analysis of the MELS was conducted to highlight connections with other professional standards, including the Montana Common Core Kindergarten Standards for Language Arts and Math and the Next Generation Science Standards as well as the Head Start Framework. The MELS are meant to:

- Provide a common language and improve communication among the professionals who impact and provide services to young children and their families;
- Build upon early childhood professionals' understanding of the continuum of children's growth and development;
- Serve as a resource for ways to enhance children's early learning experiences;

- Describe the expectations for what young children should know and be able to do across different domains of learning;
- Support the transfer of child development knowledge to improve teaching and caregiving practices and encourage individualization;
- Provide information and context for the range of skills children develop from birth to age 5.

The MELS, however, do not provide a comprehensive or exhaustive list of every skill children might achieve in the first years of life.

#### ~ Other Specific Content Areas

You may already be aware of the [National Health and Safety Performance Standards: Guidelines for Early Care and Education Programs](#). These guidelines are reflected in Montana's licensing regulations. You should also be mindful that there are a growing number of professional guidelines for early childhood teachers in specific content areas.

Guidelines are available for the areas of communication and literacy, creative arts, mathematics, music, physical development/health, science, social studies, social/emotional, technology, and more. No training or instruction in a content area should be offered without meaningful incorporation of applicable standards and recommendations!

If you provide training for teachers in after school programs, you need to be well acquainted with [Montana's Common Core Standards](#). They were created through a state-led initiative and have been adopted by more than 40 states, including Montana. The Common Core State Standards replace current state standards in English Language Arts and Literacy in History/Social Studies, Science and Technical Subjects, and Mathematics.

Below are examples of professional recommendations for early childhood from just two of the many available: mathematics and science.

**MATHEMATICS:** [Early Childhood Mathematics: Promoting Good Beginnings](#) is a joint position

statement from NAEYC and the National Council for Teachers of Mathematics (NCTM). It covers key mathematical principles and concepts and makes recommendations for use in the classroom and beyond for children ages 3-6. The statement includes a chart focusing on children's typical knowledge and skills in different areas of mathematics and provides sample teaching strategies.

**SCIENCE:** The National Science Teachers Association (NSTA) affirms that learning science and engineering practices in the early years can foster children's curiosity and enjoyment in exploring the world around them and lay the foundation for a progression of science learning in K-12 settings and throughout their entire lives.

This [NSTA Position Statement on Early Childhood Science Education](#) focuses primarily on children from age 3 through preschool. NSTA recognizes, however, the importance of exploratory play and other forms of active engagement for younger children from birth to age 3 as they come to explore and understand the world around them. This document complements NSTA's position statement on elementary school science (NSTA 2002) that focuses on science learning from kindergarten until students enter middle or junior high.

## APPLICATION IN PROFESSIONAL DEVELOPMENT

Most teachers acknowledge that standards of quality are required to guide their practice, but they do not always know exactly what they are or where to find them. It is up to trainers and instructors to guide them in the right direction. This, by the way, is a huge responsibility and requires a solid knowledge of current, evidence-based, and professionally recognized resources and practice.

It is often appropriate and necessary to provide professional development experiences that specifically explain the purposes and uses of a particular set of standards. For example, Montana will soon offer training that directly addresses the 2014 version of the Montana Early Learning Standards (MELS). However, Montana's early learning standards are most

likely to be used and applied systematically across the state when there is both 1) direct training addressing the MELS and 2) indirect training embedding them in every early childhood educational experience offered.

Trainers must not only address standards and guidelines at the awareness level but also provide direct connections between the standards, the current training topic, program practice, and their application to designing curriculum. While most trainers have regularly tried to make these connections, it has now become imperative.

There are many ways to embed information about standards and professional practice in training. Most importantly, standards and guidelines—particularly the competencies in the Knowledge Base and the benchmarks in the MELS--can be used as the foundation for the selection of both training content and the choice of active learning experiences. Standards then drive the planning of the professional development session and form the basis for the anticipated learning outcomes required for Montana-approved training events.

The following list of suggestions can help you incorporate standards and guidelines in training activities, beginning with your very next training event.

- Arrange a resource table with several copies of the documents listed above available for browsing before and after as well as during breaks at your training sessions. Help participants in every training event become familiar with these documents and emphasize their importance and relationship to quality.
- Create annotated lists of pertinent resources for training participants to take home.
- Offer a short handout that introduces the standards directly from the original document, such as the Table of Contents from the Knowledge Base. Or the handout could be a page or two from the MELS more specific to your current topic, such as the Introduction to Core Domain Three: Communication or the continuum for Standard 3.6 (Print Development/Writing) - *Children develop interest and*

*skills in using symbols as a meaningful form of communication.*

- Embed a relevant page or two from one of the documents in your PowerPoint presentation or directly link to the Web pages of the document and show participants what you used to guide your session planning and what they could be using to guide their early childhood practice.
- Use the standards to create checklists or self-assessments on various topics or quality indicators. Help participants recognize their strengths, identify areas that need improvement, and set goals.

There are likely many more ways to incorporate professional standards and guidelines in existing training events. Whatever you do, make sure it helps participants begin to see the advantages of having standards, applying standards, and maintaining standards in their individual practice with young children. Become an advocate for professional development that leads to a certificate, credential, and/or accreditation. Help participants see the benefits of having standards, and celebrate access to methods based on research and the early childhood field's collective professional wisdom and values.

"Whether I am presenting on literacy, social emotional foundations, or sensory motor, I feel it is important to come back to the standards in every presentation or professional development to validate the important work we do and make sure we are continually aligning with the state standards in early childhood." ~ Arlene Wright, Wisconsin Model Early Learning Standards Coach

## CONCLUSION

For many years, licensed and regulated early childhood programs in Montana have been expected to comply with state and local regulations. Recently, programs are expected to apply additional local, state, and national standards to maintain and develop their businesses, achieve quality practice, and meet appropriate developmental outcomes for children.

It is a huge advantage that teachers no longer have to guess what is best practice or wonder how to build children's skills in a certain domain. Professional standards and guidelines often include specific strategies that support quality in programs and promote young children's growth and development. Teachers have guidance for how to provide educational as well as playful learning experiences for young children and build collaborative partnership with their families.

Embedding the principles defined in these resources across training sessions and other professional development experiences is critical in the current climate of growth, improvement, and quality. Trainers who rededicate themselves to helping teachers know and understand professional standards can have a positive effect on teachers' ability to apply them to their daily practice with young children. ~

## \*RESOURCES

\* *Make Early Learning Standards Come Alive: Connecting Your Practice and Curriculum to State Guidelines Paperback (2006, Redleaf Press)* by Gaye Gronlund. Practical help, support, and clear explanations of how to make early learning standards come alive in classrooms and programs.

**PROFESSIONAL DEVELOPMENT SOLUTIONS** was established by the Early Childhood Project at Montana State University in 2004 with monies from the federal Child Care and Development Fund administered through the Montana Department of Public Health and Human Services Early Childhood Services Bureau (ECSB). It is designed to support positive and effective training strategies for use in early childhood professional development.

**PROFESSIONAL DEVELOPMENT SOLUTIONS** is published four times a year. Individuals who have applied and been approved as a Montana Professional Development Specialist (PDS) receive the e-newsletter as a benefit. If you are not currently on the PDS Directory, please go to [www.mtecp.org](http://www.mtecp.org) and click on Professional Development Approval System for more information.

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