



CALECSE

California Early Childhood
Special Education Network

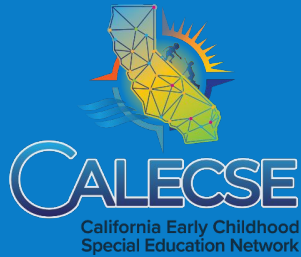


Funded by the California Department of Education (CDE),
Special Education Division

**Tiny But Mighty: Navigating Behavior and Development in the New
Transitional Kindergarten (TK) Age Group
September 15, 2025**

About the California Early Childhood Special Education (CalECSE) Network

Funded by the CDE



<https://www.calecse.org>

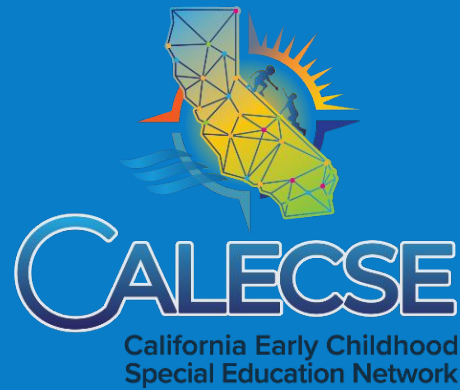


CalECSE is a technical assistance project funded under the CCDE that supports Local Educational Agencies (LEAs), Special Education Local Plan Areas (SELPAs), County Offices of Educations (COEs), and other Agency Partners in the areas of Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA) Part C to B Transitions, Preschool Assessment Practices, and Preschool Child Find by providing technical assistance, professional learning, and demonstration of tangible practices that have been proven successful.

CalECSE leverages collaboration amongst agencies, disseminates resources, highlights existing exemplar practices, and provides direct technical assistance to improve the capacity, knowledge, collaboration, and implementation of evidence-based practices across agencies throughout California.

The CalECSE Network is committed to improving outcomes for children and their families by eliminating and addressing barriers to successful transition for California's youngest children with disabilities.

The CalECSE Network Leadership Team



Co-Executive Director, Dr. Scott Turner, East San Gabriel Valley SELPA
Co-Executive Director, Melanie Hertig, Irvine USD
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What We Will Be Covering Today



- Transitional Kindergarten (TK) Basics
- Typical Development in TK
- Preschool Transitional Kindergarten Learning Foundations (PTKLFs)
- Developmentally Appropriate Practices (DAPs)
- Value of Play
- Developmentally Appropriate Behavioral Expectations and Supporting All Learners
- When Might Additional Support Be Appropriate and Where to Start
- When Might a Special Education Referral Be Considered

TK Basics



Age Eligibility for Preschool, TK, and K in 2025–2026



Preschool

Any child who is or turns three during the 2025–2026 school year or who is not four by September 1, 2025. Four year olds by parent choice under California Universal PreKindergarten (UPK).

Preschool Birthdates

Any child who turns three in the summer before or during the school year or who is not four by September 1, 2025.

Transitional Kindergarten

In 2025–2026, Local Education Agencies (LEAs) were required to make TK available to all children who had their fourth birthday by September 1, 2025.

TK Birthdates

September 2, 2020–September 1, 2021

Kindergarten

Must be age five by September 1, 2025

K Birthdates

September 2, 2019–September 1, 2020

Sources:

https://www.cde.ca.gov/ci/gs/em/kinderfaq.asp#:~:text=%20In%202022%E2%80%932023%2C%20children%20are%20eligible%20for,school%20year.%20*%20Inclusive%20of%20these%20dates.

<https://www.cde.ca.gov/ci/gs/em/kinderinfo.asp>

2025–2026 Full Implementation of TK

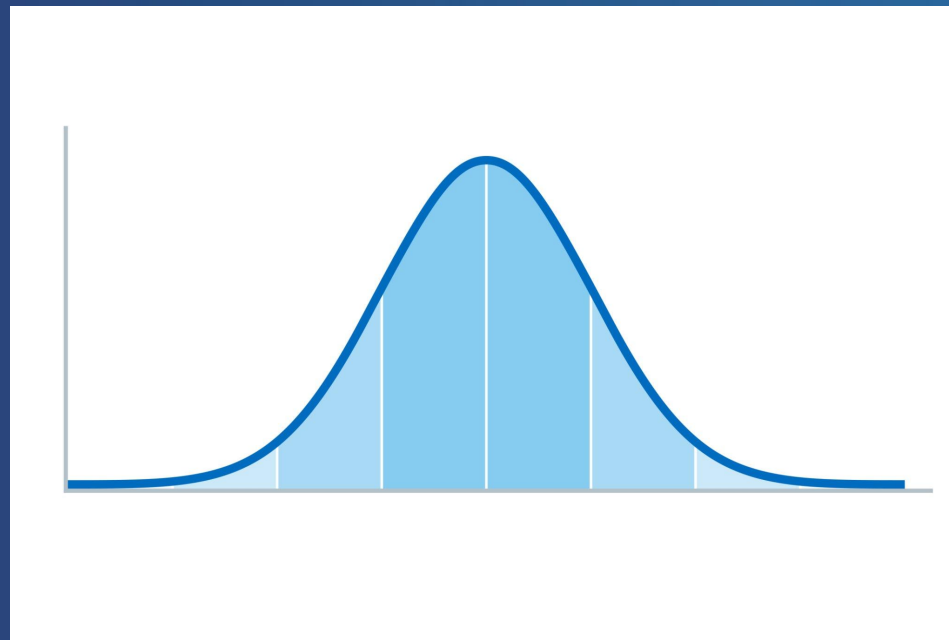
These are the youngest children we have ever seen on some elementary campuses.

Drop in the chat:

1. What you are noticing?
2. What you are wondering?



Typical TK Development Ranges



Welcome to TK: Neurotypical Four-Year-Old Development

Language

- Says sentences with four or more words
- Says some words from a song, story or nursery rhyme
- Talks about at least one thing that happened during his day, like “I played soccer.”
- Answers simple questions like “What is a coat for?” or “What is a crayon for?”

Social-Emotional

- Pretends to be something else during play (teacher, superhero, dog)
- Asks to go play with children if none are around, like “Can I play with Alex?”
- Comforts others who are hurt or sad, like hugging a crying friend
- Avoids danger, like not jumping from tall heights at the playground
- Likes to be a “helper”
- Changes behavior based on where they are (place of worship, library, playground)



Source:

https://www.cdc.gov/ncbddd/actearly/pdf/FULL-LIST-CDC_LTSAE-Checklists2021_Eng_FNL2_508.pdf

Welcome to TK: Neurotypical Four-Year-Old Development

Cognitive

- Names a few colors
- Tells what comes next in a well-known story
- Draws a person with three or more body parts

Motor

- Catches a large ball most of the time
- Serves themselves food/pours water, with adult supervision
- Holds a crayon and pencil between fingers and thumb (not fist)

Adaptive

- Toilet trained
- Wash hands independently
- Puts on slip-on shoes independently (not able to tie laces yet)
- Zip backpack and lunch boxes
- Feeds self



Source:

https://www.cdc.gov/ncbddd/actearly/pdf/FULL-LIST-CDC_LTSAE-Checklists2021_Eng_FNL2_508.pdf

Typical Early Childhood Development

First: Know the Milestones

Center for Disease Control (CDC) Developmental
Milestones Tracker

Learn the Signs. Act Early. Checklist available at:

https://www.cdc.gov/ncbddd/actearly/pdf/FULL-LIST-CDC_LTSAE-Checklists2021_Eng_FNL2_508.pdf

Resources for Early Childhood Educators from the CDC
website, which can be accessed at:

<https://www.cdc.gov/ncbddd/actearly/ccp/early-care-and-education.html>

MILESTONES MATTER: LET'S TALK ABOUT THEM!

MILESTONES AT 4 MONTHS  ✓ Begins to babble ✓ Responds to affection	MILESTONES AT 6 MONTHS  ✓ Likes to play with others ✓ Responds to own name	MILESTONES AT 9 MONTHS  ✓ Has favorite toys ✓ Understands "no"
MILESTONES AT 1 YEAR  ✓ Tries to say words you say ✓ Waves "bye-bye"	MILESTONES AT 2 YEARS  ✓ Begins to run ✓ Begins to sort shapes, colors	MILESTONES AT 3 YEARS  ✓ Knows name and age ✓ Climbs and runs well

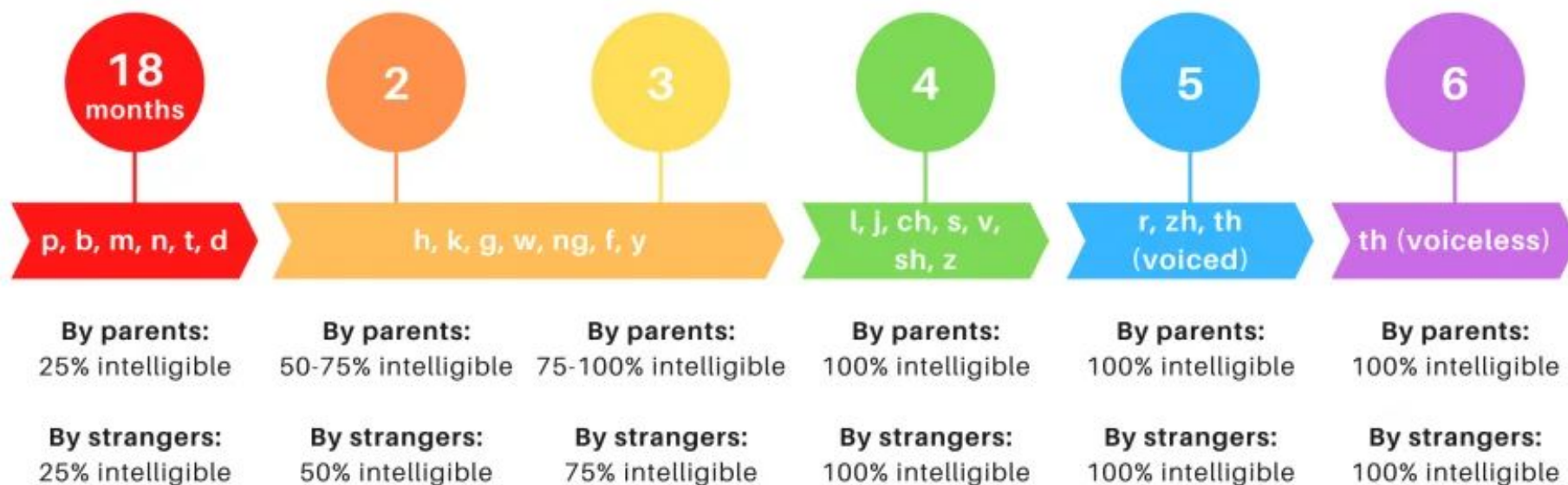
Get free milestone checklists for these ages and more at www.cdc.gov/Milestones or by calling 800-CDC-INFO (800-232-4636).

Learn the Signs. Act Early.

Developed in partnership by the University of Missouri and the US Department of Health and Human Services, Centers for Disease Control and Prevention.



Speech Sound Ages of Acquisition



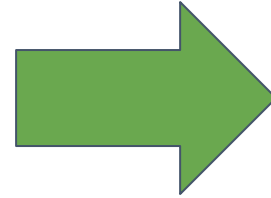
Source can be accessed at: https://pubs.asha.org/doi/10.1044/2018_AJSLP-17-0100
https://pubs.asha.org/doi/10.1044/2018_PERS-SIG1-2018-0014

Wide Developmental Range in One Classroom

Developmental Age Range in a TK Classroom: 3 years 11 months–4 years 10 months

- **Learner Backgrounds Vary:**

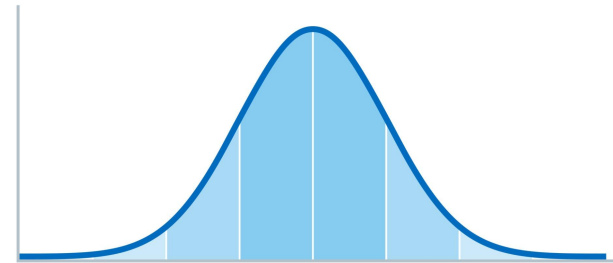
- Cultural and linguistic experiences
- Prior preschool or daycare exposure (or lack thereof)
- Home experiences and routines



Key Point: All of these differences can still fall within the range of **typical development**—instruction needs to be responsive to individual needs.

- **Implication**—Children in TK may look very different in:

- Social-emotional skills
- Language and communication
- Early literacy and math
- Self-help and motor skills



What TK Should Be and Should Not Be

TK Should Be:

- *Quick* interactive **playful** circle times
- Sensory **play** experiences
- Motor **play** experiences
- **Play** centers and stations
- Facilitative **play**/exploration
- Free choice/**play** exploration
- Hands-on **play** experiences

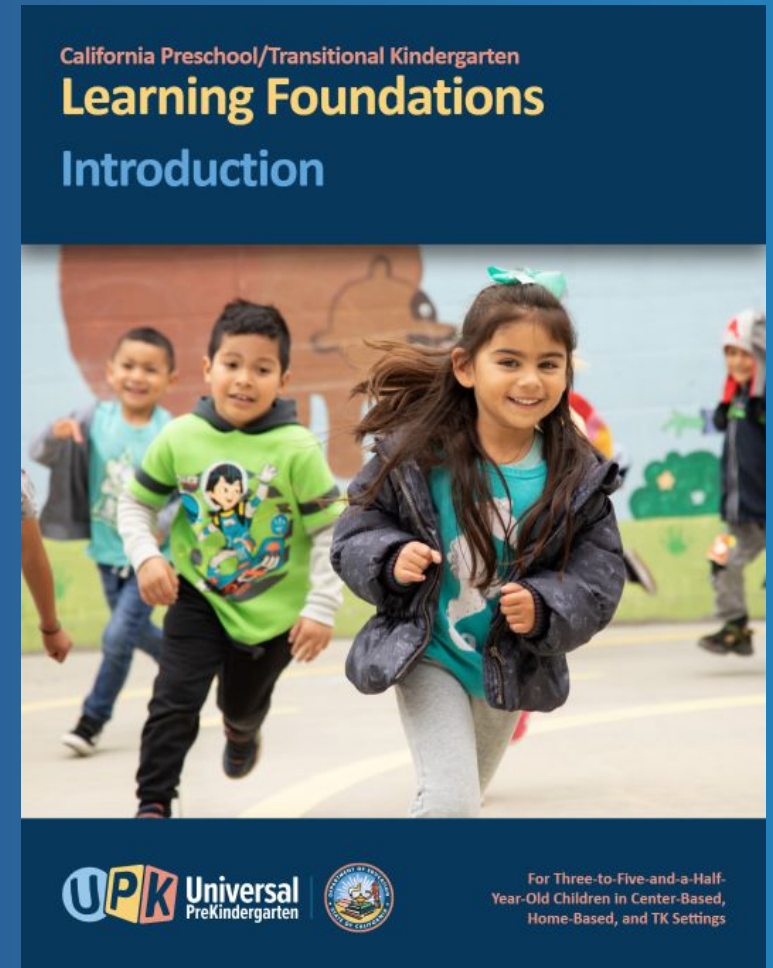
TK is meant to be about developing through **play**.

TK Should Not Be:

- Kindergarten Boot Camp
- Sitting and listening to learn
- Working quietly at a desk
- Worksheets and pencils
- Free play all day
- Lecture-style teaching

Preschool Transitional Kindergarten Learning Foundations (PTKLF)

(Think of these as the Standards)



The PTKLF

- Describe knowledge and skills that most children ages three to five and a half develop in a high-quality early education program
- Includes TK, the California State Preschool Program (CSPP), and other state-funded, federally-funded, and private preschool programs in California
- Access the full PTKLF at:
<https://cpin.us/content/california-preschooltransitional-kindergarten-learning-foundations>



Nine Domains of Learning Which Focus on the Whole Child

- Approaches to Learning
- Social and Emotional Development
- Language and Literacy Development (including Foundational Language Development and English Language Development [ELD])
- Mathematics
- Science
- Physical Development
- Health
- History and Social Science
- Visual and Performing Arts



How Should the PTKLF be used?

The PTKLF can be used by early childhood leaders and educators to:

- Set learning goals for children
- Plan learning environments and teaching strategies
- Select and implement curricula
- Design and use assessments
- Design professional development
- Enhance preschool to third grade alignment
- Inform program continuous quality improvement

Developmentally Appropriate Practices (DAPs)



What are Developmentally Appropriate Practices (DAPs)?



- What it is: Teaching and learning that match how young children (preschool to third grade) grow, learn and develop.
- Why it matters: Children learn best when instruction fits their age, individual strengths, and cultural/linguistic background.
- Core ideas:
 - Learning is hands-on, active, and play-based.
 - Expectations are realistic for the child's age and stage.
 - Instruction is responsive to each child's needs, interests, and family context.
 - Supports both academic skills and social–emotional growth.

Example of DAP for Teaching Early Literacy



- **Learning Goal:** Recognize and identify beginning sounds in words.
- **Non-DAP approach:** A worksheet where children circle pictures that start with the letter *B*.
- **DAP approach:** The teacher creates a “Sound Safari.” Children explore the classroom and outdoor space looking for items that start with the target sound (e.g., *ball, book, block, bell*). They collect or photograph items, then bring them back to a circle time discussion where the class sorts them on a chart under the correct beginning sound.

Why it's DAP:

- Learning is active and exploratory, not passive.
- Skills are connected to real-world objects children already use and recognize.
- Encourages oral language as children name, describe, and compare their findings.
- Meets the same learning goal while also fostering social interaction, motor skills, and problem-solving.

Example of DAP for Teaching Mathematics



- **Learning Goal:** Recognize and understand basic shapes.
- **Non-DAP approach:** A worksheet where children trace and color shapes at their desks.
- **DAP approach:** The teacher sets up a shape scavenger hunt in the classroom. Children move around with clipboards or picture cards, finding real objects that are circles, squares, and triangles (e.g., a clock, a book, a block). Afterward, the class gathers to sort photos or objects by shape and talk about what they found.

Why it's DAP:

- Learning is active, hands-on, and playful.
- Skills are connected to the child's real world.
- Supports language development through discussion and sharing.
- Meets the same learning goal while also building social, motor, and problem-solving skills.

Value of Play



What is Play?

1. Play is enjoyable.
2. It requires active engagement in which the child is absorbed.
3. Play is intrinsically motivated and self-driven by the child.
4. Play is flexible and changing.
5. Play is often imaginative and non-literal.

Source: California Department of Education. *The Powerful Role of Play in Early Education*. Sacramento: California Department of Education, 2020. <https://www.cde.ca.gov/sp/cd/re/documents/powerfulroleofplay.pdf>.

Read and Reflect



“A child’s drive to play is biological in nature—like sleeping or eating.” —Stuart Brown, M.D.

Play is Essential to Early Childhood



Decades of research provides significant evidence of the benefits of play for children's learning and development (Alfieri et al. 2011).

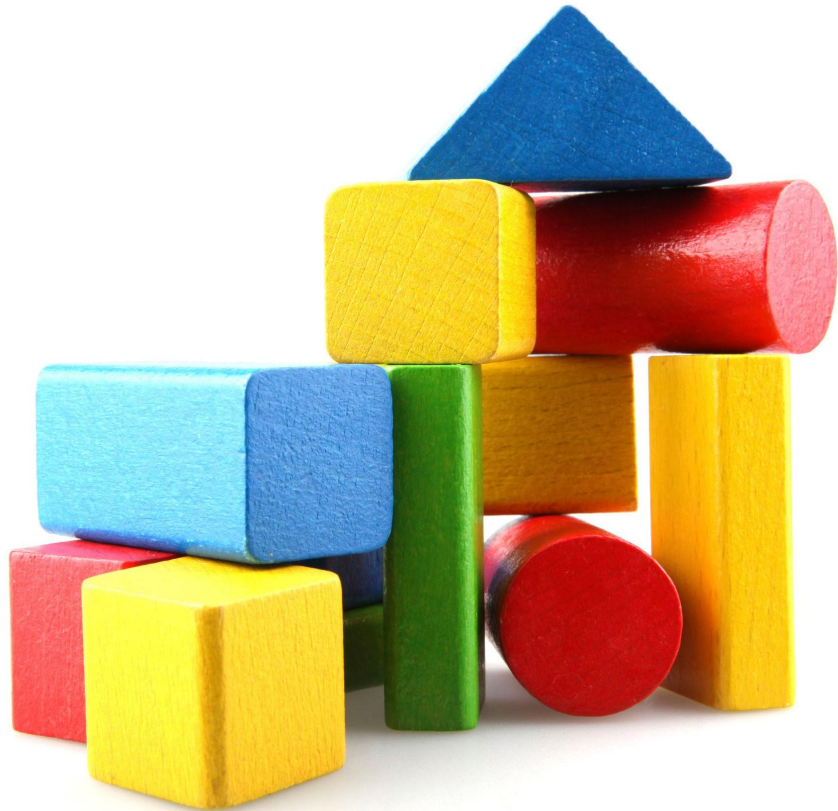
A short video from the Royal College of Speech and Language Therapists outlines the importance of play in child development can be accessed here:

https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=h_-1O_rBLPU

More information from the CDE on the value of play can be found in this document:

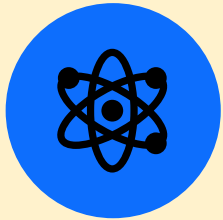
<https://www.cde.ca.gov/sp/cd/re/documents/powerfulroleofplay.pdf>

What Can Children Learn by Playing with Wooden Blocks?



Drop your answers
in the chat.

From Wooden Block Play, A Child Can Learn



Science	Math	Physical Skills	Language and Literacy	Social Skills
Balance Gravity Stability Cause and Effect Experimentation	Sequence Patterns Whole and Part Spatial Relationships Measurement Classification Counting Number Concepts	Muscle Strength Coordination Balance Core Strength Fine-motor development	Concept Development Receptive Language Expressive Language Emergent Writing (signs)	Competence Decision making Communication Compromise Planning Flexibility Persistence Relationship Repair



Building a TK Classroom's Schedule

- Children's Choice Learning Centers: half the time should be spent on child-directed **playful** learning activities (e.g., nature/science, blocks, sand, dress-up, art)
- Educator-directed **playful** learning activities: half the time should be spent in teacher directed playful activities (e.g., small group instruction, music/movement, read-alouds, community building)

Source: <https://cauniversalprek.org/>

Developmentally Appropriate Behavioral Expectations and Supporting All Learners



Is this Developmentally Appropriate for a Newly Four Year Old?



One Way of Receiving Learning Isn't Appropriate for Everyone

- My **eyes** help me listen when...
 - they are looking at the speaker
 - they are looking down at the ground
 - they are looking at visual/written supports
 - they are closed



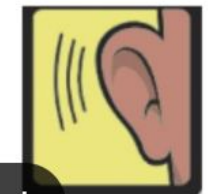
- My **hands** help me listen when they...
 - fidget
 - flap
 - stay in my lap
 - doodle
 - are in my pockets



- When I am listening, my **mouth** is...
 - humming quietly
 - echoing
 - quiet
 - chewing
 - asking questions



- My **ears** listen when...
 - it is quiet
 - music plays
 - there is white noise
 - I wear ear defenders



“Whole Body Listening” is out-of-date.

See this resource to author's updates to the book Whole Body Listening:

https://drive.google.com/file/d/1flqw-SQcreP_yZiBYhDFsuANyS1QKib0/view

Read and Reflect



“When a flower doesn’t bloom, you fix the environment in which it grows, not the flower.”

—Alexander Den Heijer

Top 10 Tips for Supporting TKers



1. **Routines**
2. **Visual supports**
3. **Use of transition signals** such as timers, a visual signal or song.
Ideas for classroom transitions are available at Headstart website here:
<https://headstart.gov/video/classroom-transitions>
4. **Catch Children “Being Good”: Use the 5:1 Rule**
Five positive praise statements for every one corrective statement
5. **Keep it moving:** Four-year-old attention spans are 8–12 minutes. Activities should not be longer than this.
6. **Teach self-regulation:** Model deep breaths, have a calming corner, provide sensory tools.
How to make a calm down corner can be found here:
<https://www.theottoolbox.com/calm-down-corner/>
7. **Provide choices:** Would you like to sit on the carpet or in a chair?
8. **Use “First.... Then....” prompting**
Access a printable “first...then” card here:
<https://spedsupport.tea.texas.gov/sites/default/files/2024-02/first-then.pdf>
9. **Reinforce desired behaviors teach replacement behaviors**
10. **Keep it playful and fun!**

Toileting: Schools Must Be Ready For All Children



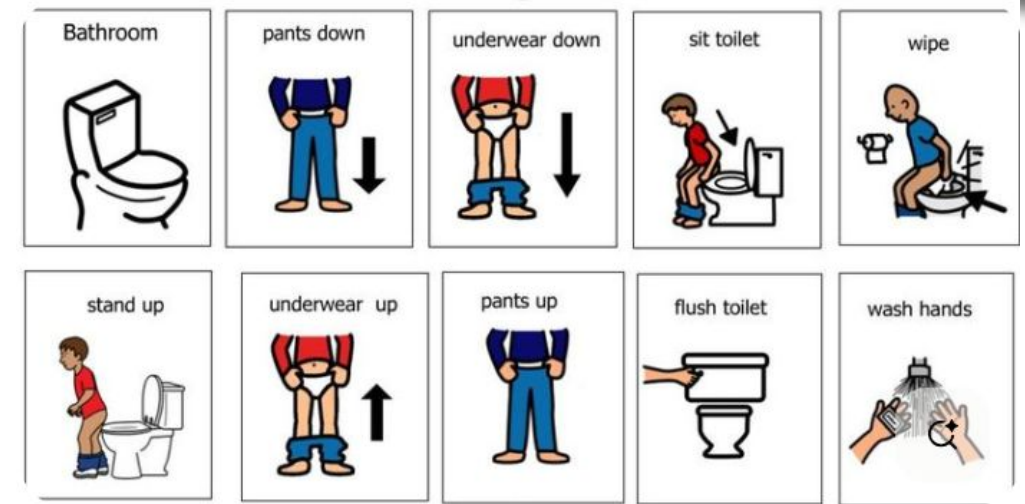
- Children may have a range of toileting skills
- LEA is obligated to support children who are not yet toilet trained and partner with families to support all children until they ultimately master this critical skill.

CDE has released a Developmentally Appropriate Toileting Practices Toolkit with helpful guidance for schools, which can be accessed her:

<https://cdn.caeducatorstogether.org/files/uploaded/resource/RpgBzzlpKWoti8MoeiCOhqtwfQc9KwHlg70KM0K5OF1XOYk3/Developmentally%20Appropriate%20Toileting%20Practices%20Toolkit-Final.pdf>

Toileting Tips

- ❑ Embed toileting times as a part of the classroom schedule every 45 to 60 minutes to start and then increase increments of time
- ❑ Have toileting visual schedules at every potty
- ❑ Throughout the classroom, have potty visuals that children can point to to request to use the bathroom
- ❑ Partner with families with toilet training and use positive reinforcement systems
- ❑ Typically district/school nurses can train teachers and classified staff on diapering and toilet training



Evidence-Based Practices (EBPs) Can Support All Students



What Are EBPs?

- 27 teaching and intervention strategies identified through extensive research as effective for improving outcomes people with Autism
- Examples: visual supports, social narratives, prompting, reinforcement, visual schedules

How They Help Students with Autism

- Support communication, social interaction, and emotional regulation
- Provide structure and predictability to reduce anxiety and challenging behaviors
- Improve learning outcomes and independence



And they can and will help **all students** and just good teaching strategies, particularly for TK.

Source for this information can be accessed at: <https://afirm.fpg.unc.edu/afirm-modules/afirm/>

EBPs Align with Multi-Tiered Systems of Support (MTSS) and Universal Design for Learning (UDL)



A chart on how EBPs align with MTSS can be found at the California Autism Professional Training and Information Network (CAPTAIN) website:

<https://www.captain.ca.gov/documents/mtssebbs4autismalignment202502.pdf>

A chart on how EBPs align with UDL can be found at the CAPTAIN website:

<https://www.captain.ca.gov/documents/captain-udl3.pdf>

EBPs:

- Promote clarity and consistency (helpful for all learners).
- Build inclusive practices that support diverse needs.
- Foster engagement, collaboration, and positive behavior across the class.

Source for this information can be accessed at:

<https://afirm.fpg.unc.edu/afirm-modules/afirm/>

No-Cost Training on EBPs



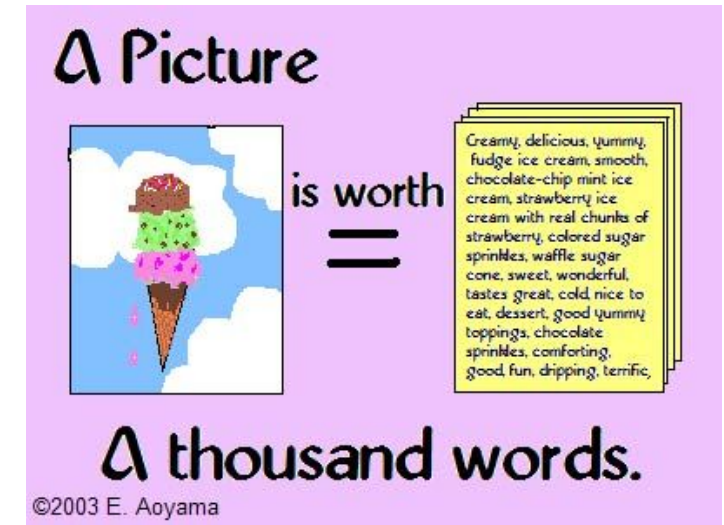
Learn more about Evidence-Based Practices through free module-based trainings at the Autism Focused Intervention Resources & Modules website: <https://afirm.fpg.unc.edu/afirm-modules/afirm/>. School staff can find evidence-based practices and approaches for the classroom for the classroom.

List of modules include:

- Antecedent-Based Interventions (ABI)
- Augmentative & Alternative Communication (AAC)
- Ayres Sensory Integration® (ASI®)
- Behavioral Momentum Intervention (BMI)
- Cognitive Behavioral/Instructional Strategies (CBIS)
- Differential Reinforcement (DR)
- Direct Instruction (DI)
- Discrete Trial Training (DTT)
- Exercise & Movement (EXM)
- Extinction (EXT)
- Functional Behavioral Assessment (FBA)
- Functional Communication Training (FCT)
- Modeling (MD)
- Music-Mediated Intervention (MMI)
- Naturalistic Interventions (NI)
- Parent-Implemented Intervention (PII)
- Peer-Based Instruction & Intervention (PBII)
- Prompting (PP)
- Reinforcement (R)
- Response Interruption & Redirection (RIR)
- Self-Management (SM)
- Social Narratives (SN)
- Social Skills Training (SST)
- Task Analysis (TA)
- Technology-Aided Instruction & Intervention (TAII)
- Time Delay (TD)
- Video Modeling (VM)
- Visual Supports (VS)

Visual Supports

- Access a free training for teachers and paraeducators on using visual supports on the Afirm website:
<https://afirm-modules.fpg.unc.edu/Visual-Supports/content/#/>
- Open Access has a printable classroom core board here:
<https://drive.google.com/file/d/11i0JkGICKtiRYIRPooxNx49boXKdiaMF/view>



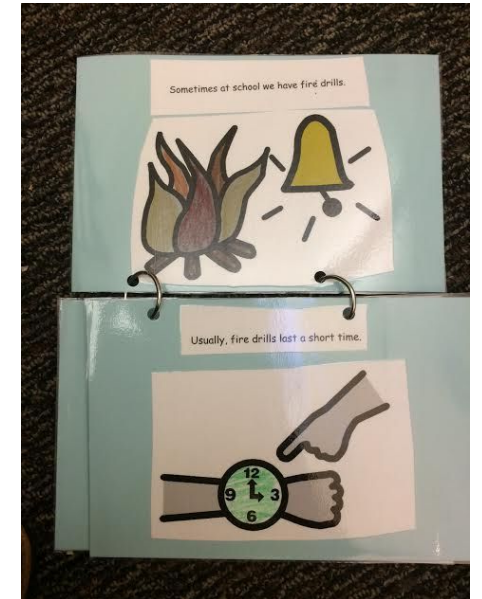
Why Are Visuals Effective With Young Students

Auditory Messages:

- Transient (in one ear and out the other)
- Difficult to process
- Difficult to attend (filtering ambient noise is hard)
- Difficult to remember
- Language Based

Visual Messages:

- Non-transient, fixed
- Allows child time to process message
- Provides a visual reminder of action



Many Ways Visuals Can Be Used in TK

Supporting Play: This website has free, printable visual supports ideal for a TK classroom: https://prekese.dadeschools.net/vis_act.html

Visual Schedules

Breaking Down Tasks Into Smaller Parts

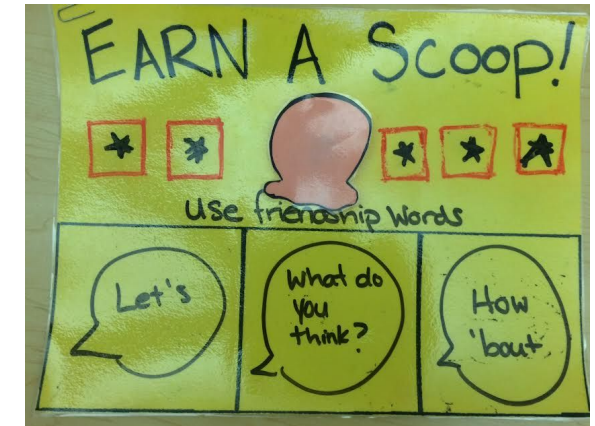
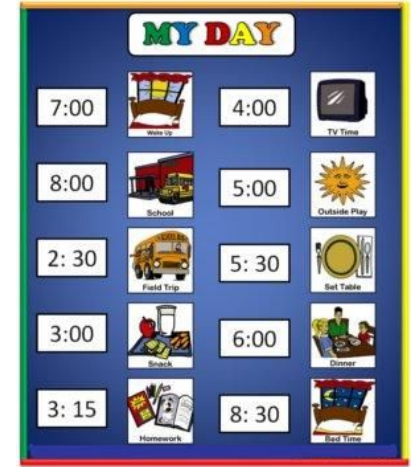
Social Narratives/Stories

Core Language Boards

Supporting Functional Communication (break cards to request breaks)

Timers for Transitions

Reinforcement systems



Sensory Supports

My student cannot sit still and/or seems to seek sensory input:

- Scheduled movement breaks (trampoline breaks, time to run, time to stim, walking up stairs)
- Heavy work: clean dry erase boards, carry a package to the office, push-in chairs, wear a backpack, water plants, return library books
- Fidgets, silly putty, squeeze balls
- Sensory seats
- Weighted vests/lap pads
- Bungee cords on seats



My student chews on clothing and other items:

- Water bottles with straws
- Chewelry/chew sticks

My student has a hard time with loud noise:

- Noise canceling headphones
- Study carrels
- Quieter setting

My student reacts strongly when accidentally touched:

- Avoid touch, hugs, pats on the back, unless initiated by student
- Assign a space on carpet, use special seating on the carpet, or assign a special place in line



When Might Additional Support Be Appropriate and Where to Start?



Considerations for Additional Support

Wide Range of Typical Development

Consider Students Age

Youngest of the group? Older end of the group?

There are no prerequisites for TK

Consider students prior school experience

Preschool? Daycare? Home?

Consider Length of Time

Is this day one? Week one?

Has the student been attending school regularly?

Simple Data Collection

Consider a comparison to a like peer

Tier Two Supports: More EBPs

- Home-school communication
- Targeted small-group or individualized interventions for specific goals
- Positive behavior interventions using positive **reinforcement** systems: Access a free training for teachers and paraeducators on using reinforcement on the Afirm website: <https://afirm-modules.fpg.unc.edu/Reinforcement/content/#/>
- **Social narratives**: Access a free training for teachers and paraeducators on using social narratives on the Afirm website: <https://afirm-modules.fpg.unc.edu/Social-Narratives/content/#/>
- Teaching **functional communication skills** as replacement behaviors. Access a free training for teachers and paraeducators on using functional communication training on the Afirm website: <https://afirm-modules.fpg.unc.edu/Functional-Communication-Training/content/#/>



Helping Young Children Who Are Emotionally Dysregulated

- Use proactive strategies (breaks, warnings, sensory needs)
- Stay calm, use a calm voice
- Minimize language/use concrete language
- Minimize number of adults
- Offer choices
- Provide privacy
- Provide time and physical space for child to calm
- Avoid touch unless initiated by the child
- Provide a calming or distracting activity (reading a book, counting)
- When calm: Redirect to structured activity
- Debrief with child at a later time



Rightful Presence and Inclusion

“High-quality inclusion in early education supports children’s development, relationships with peers, and a sense of belonging, which is true for children with and without disabilities. Not only do children with disabilities benefit from being included in early education but children without disabilities also have positive developmental outcomes in inclusive environments.”

Source for this can be found at <https://www.cde.ca.gov/sp/cd/op/iee.asp>

“Rightful presence refers to the intentional effort to ensure children with disabilities are fully included, valued, and supported in the educational settings they would attend if they did not have a disability. It emphasizes belonging, equitable access to resources, and active participation in learning and social opportunities alongside peers without disabilities.”

Source for this can be found at <https://www.cde.ca.gov/sp/se/lr/om120424.asp>

For more information, visit the SWIFT National Center on Inclusion at <https://swiftschools.org/TowardRightfulPresence/>.

Special Education Referral

Familiarize yourself with your school's process

- Student Study Team (SST) Meeting
- Child Find
- Requesting Assessment as the Teacher

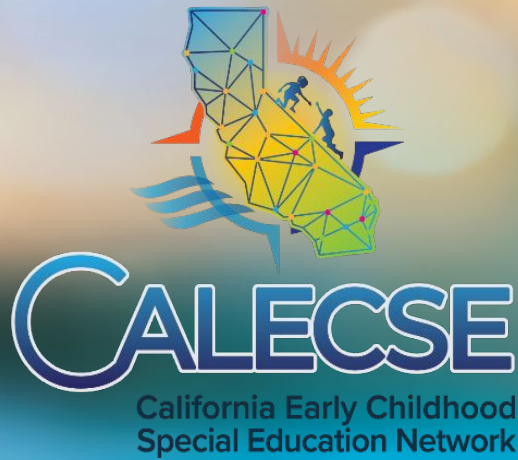
Familiarize yourself with assessment timelines

Be a part of the assessment process

Questions?



Share Your Feedback for a Chance to Win CalECSE 2026 Symposium Registration

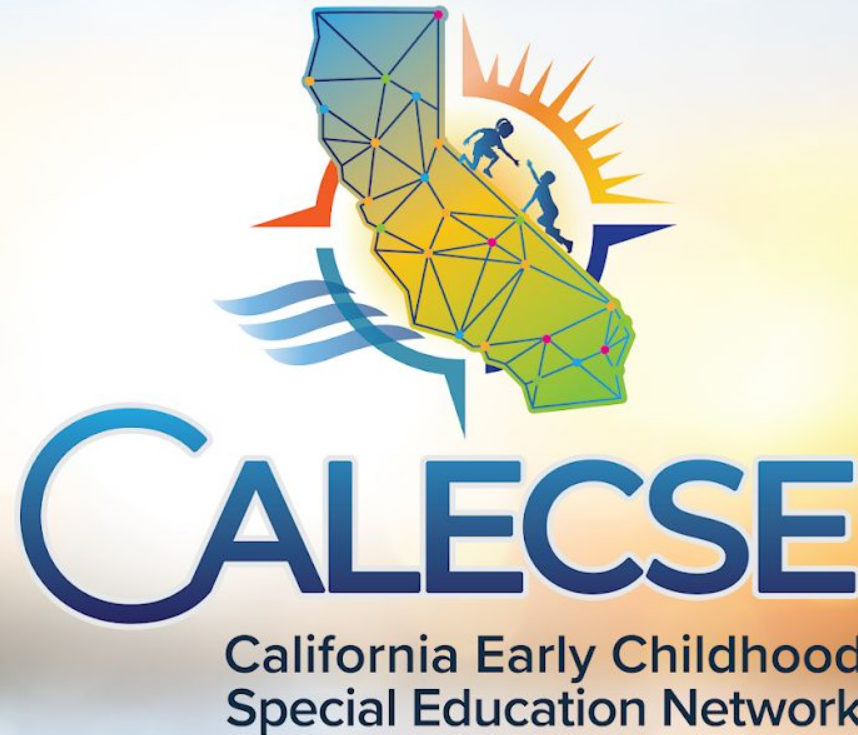


Please help us improve our practice and complete the zoom survey following this session.



After doing so, you will be entered into a raffle to win a free registration to **CalECSE's 4th Annual Symposium** to be held in Northern California October 20–21, 2026. Valued at over \$500.

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Find our full line-up of no-cost trainings at:
<https://www.calecse.org/news-resources/intentional-practices-meaningful-impact>



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**Interested in joining a local
Community of Practice (CoP) for
practitioners who support children ages
zero to five ?**

Find our full schedule of
regional CoPs at:
<https://www.calecse.org/news-resources/communities-of-practice>



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**Communities
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California Early Childhood
Special Education Network

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