



CALECSE

California Early Childhood
Special Education Network



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

**Tiny But Mighty: Growing Inclusive Transitional Kindergarten Classrooms
Part 1: Developmentally Appropriate Practices and Play-Based Learning
August 18, 2026**



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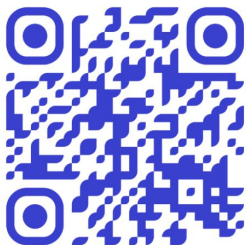


Funded by the CDE

Supporting Educators. Strengthening Partnerships. Improving Outcomes.

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California Early Childhood Special Education Network (CALECSE)

A CDE-funded technical assistance project supporting Local Education Agencies (LEAs), Special Education Local Plan Areas (SELPA), county offices of education (COEs), and agency partners through:

- Professional learning
- Technical assistance
- Evidence-based resources
- Cross-agency collaboration

Mission

Strengthen early childhood systems to improve outcomes for young children with disabilities and their families.



CALECSE

California Early Childhood
Special Education Network

Leadership Team



Scott Turner
Co-Executive
Director



Melanie Hertig
Co-Executive
Director



Carrie Rodrigues
Program Specialist,
Exemplar Leads



Sara Castille
Program Specialist,
Northern California



Laura Clarke
Program Specialist,
Southern California

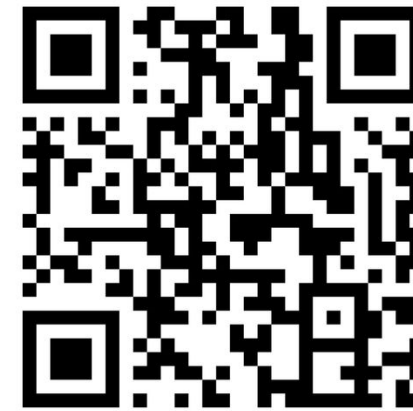


André Eng
Program Specialist,
Birth to Three



Tiny Steps to Golden Futures Symposium Registration is Open

Join us October 20–21, 2026, at the Hyatt Regency San Francisco Airport in Burlingame, California, for two days of exceptional professional learning, inspiration, and collaboration.



Learn more at the CalECSE website:
<https://www.calecse.org/symposium2026>

Today's Presenters

Sara Castille

CalECSE Program Specialist, Northern California

scastille@calecse.org

Laura Clarke

CalECSE Program Specialist, Southern California

lclarke@calecse.org

Carrie Rodrigues

CalECSE Program Specialist, Exemplar Leads

crodrigues@calecse.org



Today's Agenda



- Transitional Kindergarten (TK) Basics
- The Range of Typical Transitional Kindergartener Development
- Preschool/Transitional Kindergarten Learning Foundations (PTKLFs)
- What Are Developmentally Appropriate Practices (DAPs)?
- Play is the Foundation
- Questions

TK Basics



Age Eligibility for TK and K in 2026–2027



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, 2026. Four-year-olds are not required to enroll in TK and may remain in preschool under California’s Universal PreKindergarten (UPK) program by parent choice.

Kindergarten

Must be age five by September 1, 2026.

TK Birthdates

September 2, 2021–
September 1, 2022

K Birthdates

September 2, 2020–
September 1, 2021

Sources: CDE. 2026.

https://www.cde.ca.gov/ci/gs/em/kinderfaq.asp#:~:text=%20In%202022%E2%80%93%20children%20are%20eligible%20for,school%20year.%20*%20Inclusive%20of%20these%20dates.

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

California UPK. 2026. <https://cauniversalprek.org/families/#explore-prek-options>

California Education Code § 48000 (2025).

2025–2026: First Year of Full Implementation



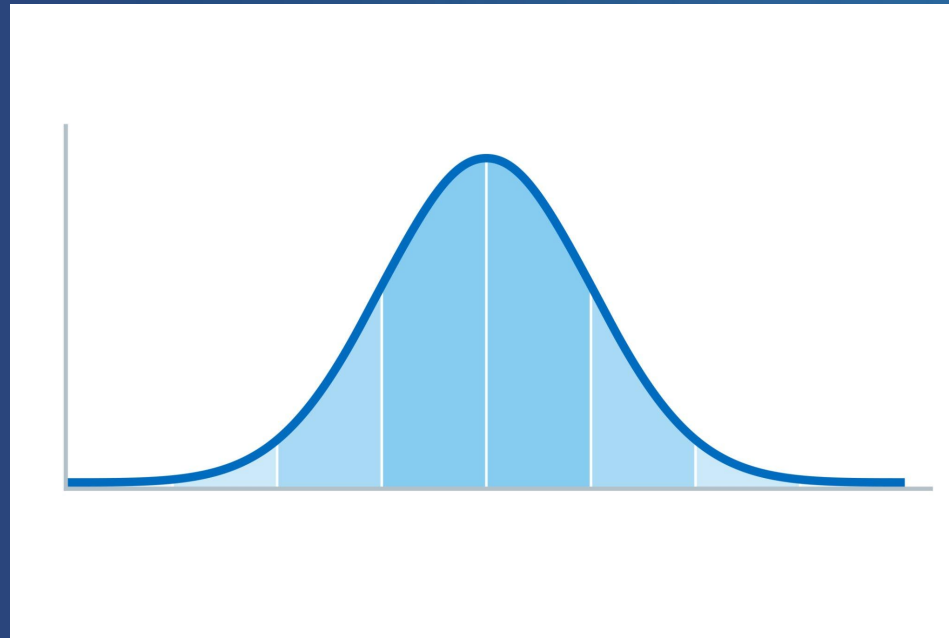
These were some of the youngest children we have ever seen on some elementary campuses.

Drop in the chat:

1. What did you notice?
2. What are you wondering about?



The Range of Typical Transitional Kindergarten Development



Welcome to TK: Neurotypical Four-Year-Old Development

Language

- Speaks in 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 their day, such as “I played soccer.”
- Answers simple questions such as “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, such as “Can I play with Alex?”
- Comforts others who are hurt or sad, such as hugging a crying friend
- Avoids danger, such as 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: CDC. 2026.

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 backpacks and lunch boxes
- Feeds self



Source: CDC. 2026.

https://www.cdc.gov/ncbddd/actearly/pdf/FULL-LIST-CDC_LTSAE-Checklists2021

[Eng_FNL2_508.pdf](#)

Know Typical Early Childhood Development First: Understand 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/act-early/early-childhood-educators/education.html?CDC_AAref_Val=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



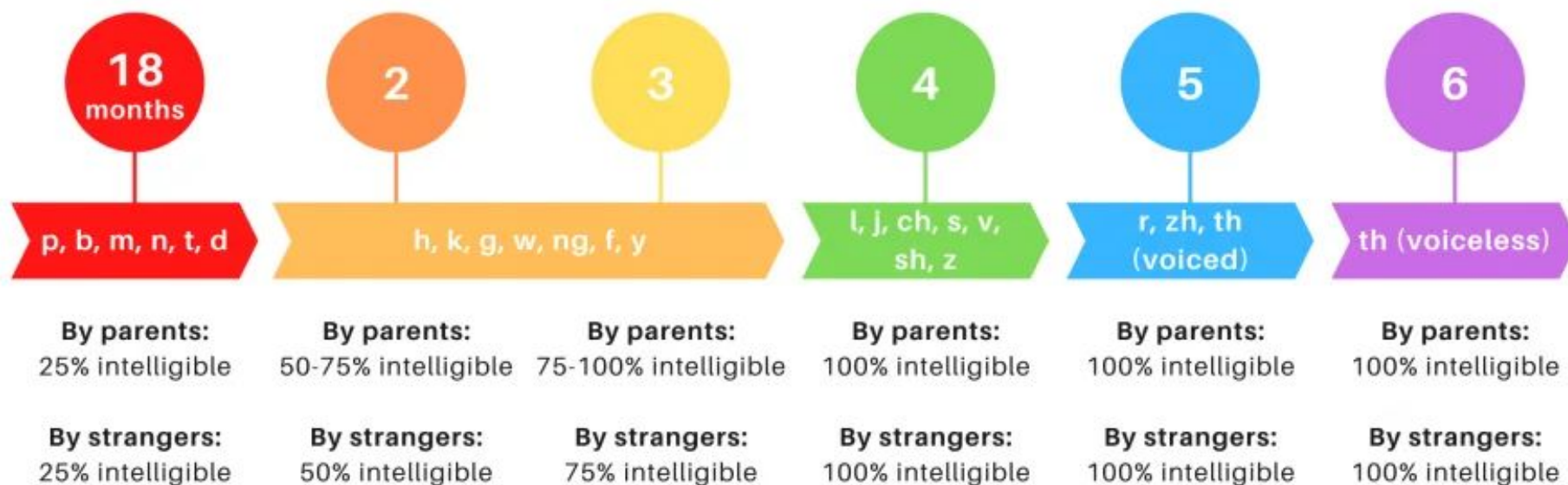
Get free milestone checklists for these ages and more at www.cdc.gov/Milestones or by calling 800-CDC-INFO (800-232-4636).

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



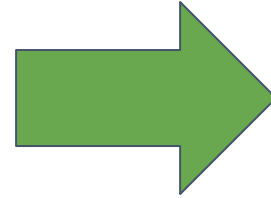
Source can be accessed at: https://pubs.asha.org/doi/10.1044/2018_AJSLP-17-0100
https://pubs.asha.org/doi/10.1044/2018_PERS-SIG1-2018-0014

Wide Developmental Range in One Classroom

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

- **Learner Backgrounds Vary:**

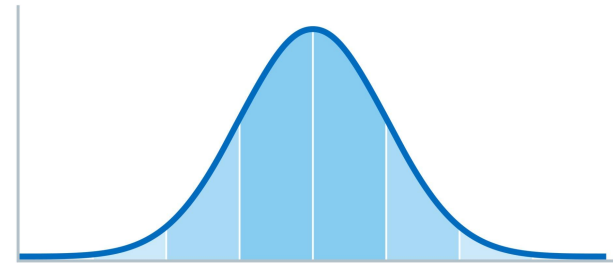
- Cultural and linguistic experiences
- Prior preschool or daycare exposure (or lack thereof)
- Home experiences and routines



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

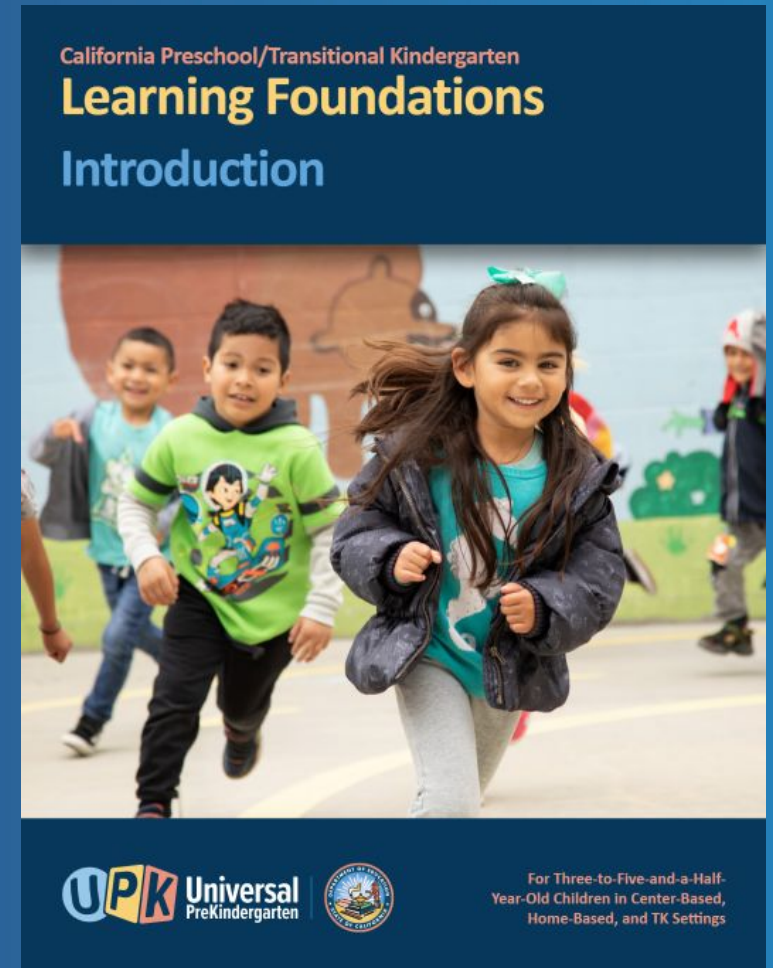
TK should not be:

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

TK is meant to be about developing through play.

Preschool/Transitional Kindergarten Learning Foundations (PTKLF)

(Think of these as the Standards)



The PTKLFs

- Describes knowledge and skills that most children ages three to five-and-a-half typically develop in a high-quality early education program
- Includes TK, the California State Preschool Program (CSPP), and other federally and publically funded, and private preschool programs in California
- Access the full PTKLFs 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.

Source: National Association for the Education of Young Children (NAEYC). 2020.

<https://www.naeyc.org/resources/position-statements/dap/contents>

Example of DAP for Teaching Mathematics



- **Learning Goal:** PTKLF Mathematics 4.1: Identifying Two-Dimensional 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.

Note that the PTKLF Examples Are Play-Based and Developmentally Appropriate

Example Goal: PTKLF Mathematics 4.1: Identifying Two-Dimensional Shapes

The PTKLFs provide examples of play-based ways to both assess for and provide play-based opportunities to learn these skills in early childhood.

Source: California Preschool/Transitional Kindergarten Learning Foundations. 2026.

<https://cpin.us/content/california-preschooltransitional-kindergarten-learning-foundations>

Foundation 4.1 Identifying Two-Dimensional Shapes

Early
3 to 4½ Years

Later
4 to 5½ Years

Early Examples (continued)

During lunchtime, a child points to a roti* and expresses in their home language, "This is a circle."

While playing shape bingo, a child indicates the correct shape.

A child shows the dream catcher they made to their Elder and says, "The outside is a circle, but in the middle I made a triangle."

*Roti (or chapati) is a type of round unleavened flatbread common throughout Southeast Asia.

Later Examples (continued)

A child with a language impairment draws a rocket by tracing around square and triangular blocks. The teacher notices the picture and says, "I see you drew a rocket." The child nods their head "yes" and points to the triangle at the top of the rocket. "I see you added a triangle at the top to make the rocket pointy." The child then raises their arms above their head to make a triangle shape with their body and pretends to be the rocket.

While playing Guess the Shape, a child describes a shape to a peer by explaining that it has four sides that are all the same. One peer guesses, "Square."

Play is the
Foundation



What is Play?

- Play is enjoyable.
- It requires active engagement in which the child is absorbed.
- Play is intrinsically motivated and often self-driven by the child.
- Play is flexible and changing.
- 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).

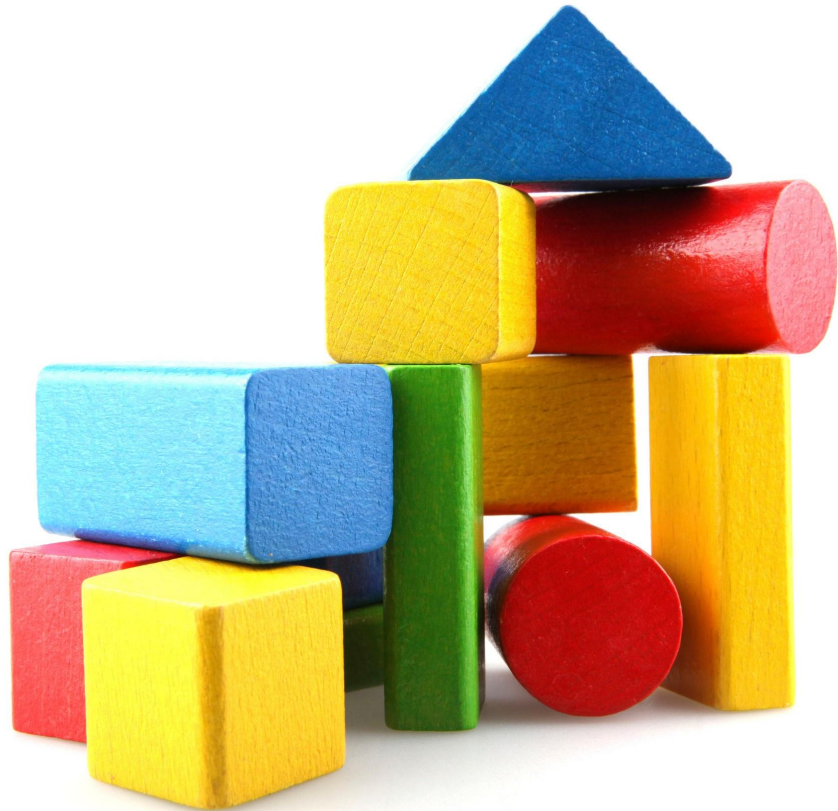
A short video from the Royal College of Speech and Language Therapists about the importance of play in child development can be accessed here:

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

Use the CDE publication **The Powerful Role of Play in Early Education** for additional guidance on integrating play into early learning environments:

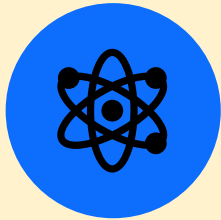
<https://www.cde.ca.gov/sp/cd/re/documents/powerfulroleofplay.pdf>

What Can Children Learn by Playing with Wooden Blocks?



Drop your answers
in the chat.

What Children Can Learn Through Wooden Block Play



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

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>.



Building a TK Classroom 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)

Universal PreKindergarten (UPK) Curriculum Evaluation and Implementation Toolkit



A new Toolkit is available that supports preschool and TK programs in selecting and implementing curriculum aligned with the PTKLFs is available on the California UPK website:

https://cauniversalprek.org/wp-content/uploads/2026/05/CA_UPK_GPG_CurriculumProject_FullToolkit_ACCESSIBLE_Functional_4.pdf

The toolkit emphasizes curriculum that is:

- Play-based
- Developmentally informed
- Culturally and linguistically responsive
- Inclusive of children with disabilities
- Aligned with all PTKLF domains



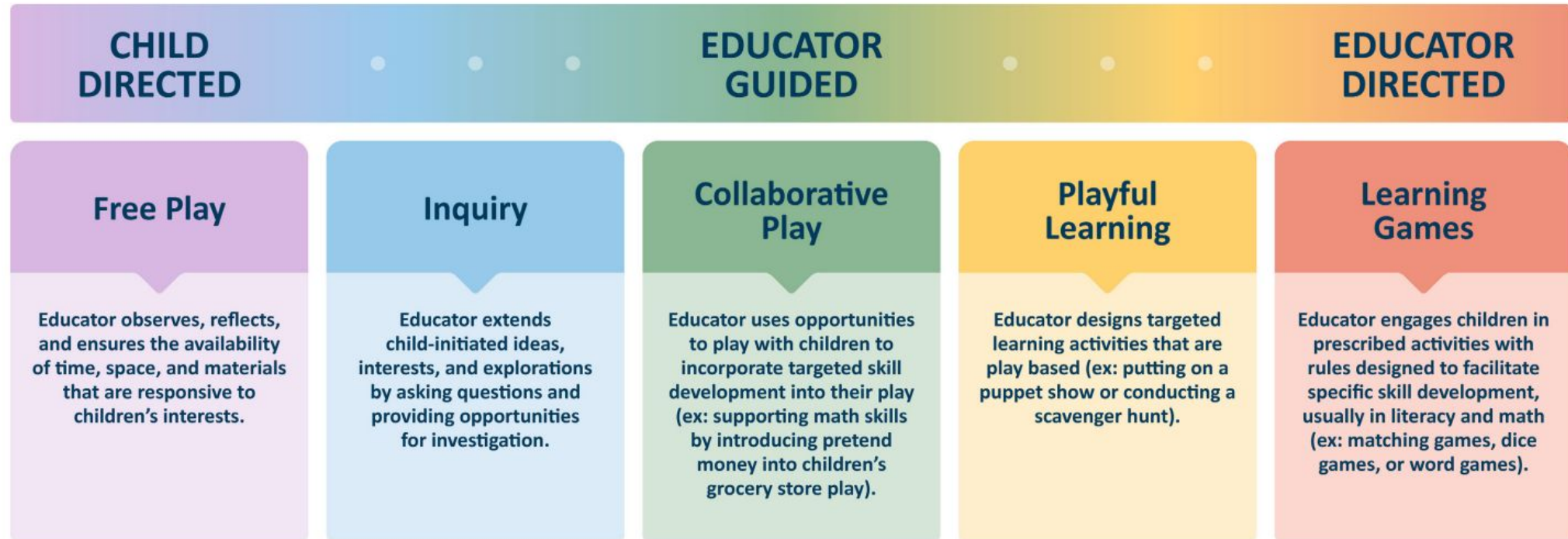
Released in 2026

Universal PreKindergarten (UPK) Curriculum Evaluation and Implementation Toolkit

With support from the Glen Price Group

Play Needs to Be the Foundation of Early Learning

P–3 Play-Based Learning Strategies



Our youngest learners thrive when at least 50 percent of instructional time relies on child-directed playful learning activities, such as those that occur in learning centers, with the remaining time spread across educator-guided or -directed playful learning activities, such as those available through whole-group or small-group contexts. The Learning Stems from Play graphic below details some of these playful learning contexts.

Source: California Universal PreKindergarten. 2026.

https://cauniversalprek.org/wp-content/uploads/2026/05/CA_UPK_GPG_CurriculumProject_FullToolkit_ACCESSIBLE_Functional_4.pdf

Reflect on Your TK's Current Schedule

50 percent of instructional time should
be **child-directed** playful activities.

Video: Early Childhood Education (ECE) Classroom



How is this program using a variety of play-based learning opportunities?

Video courtesy of: Placer County Office of Education Early Learning Program

<https://www.youtubeeducation.com/watch?v=7D5THfSPeF0>

Designing a Play-Based Transitional Kindergarten Classroom

An effective play-based classroom:

- Supports independence
- Encourages exploration
- Promotes collaboration
- Provides opportunities for choice
- Reflects children's interests
- Supports all learners

Ask yourself:

Can children independently access materials, make choices, and engage in meaningful play throughout the day?

Ten Low-Cost Items Every TK Classroom Needs

- Unit blocks
- Cardboard boxes
- Loose parts (pinecones, stones, shells, bottle caps)
- Magnifying glasses
- Scarves and fabric
- Clipboards and paper
- Play dough
- Toy animals
- Measuring cups and spoons
- Recycled materials for building

Developmentally Appropriate Learning Environments

The California UPK Curriculum Toolkit identifies six characteristics of developmentally appropriate learning environments.

Programs provide:

- Flexible schedules
- Well-designed indoor learning spaces
- A variety of learning contexts
- Accessible learning environments
- Print-rich environments
- Outdoor learning opportunities

These elements support children's engagement, independence, and participation in learning.



Source: Universal PreKindergarten. 2026.

https://cauniversalprek.org/wp-content/uploads/2026/05/CA_UPK_GPG_Curriculum_Project_FullToolkit_ACCESSIBLE_Functional_4.pdf

Essential Learning Centers



Provide centers that support multiple PTKLF domains.

Consider including:

- Blocks and construction
- Dramatic play
- Library and literacy
- Art and creativity
- Writing
- Science and discovery
- Sensory exploration
- Mathematics and manipulatives
- Fine motor
- Music and movement

Store materials where children can:

- See them
- Reach them
- Return them independently

Include:

- Picture labels
- Open containers
- Consistent locations
- Clearly defined expectations

Independence builds confidence and supports executive functioning.

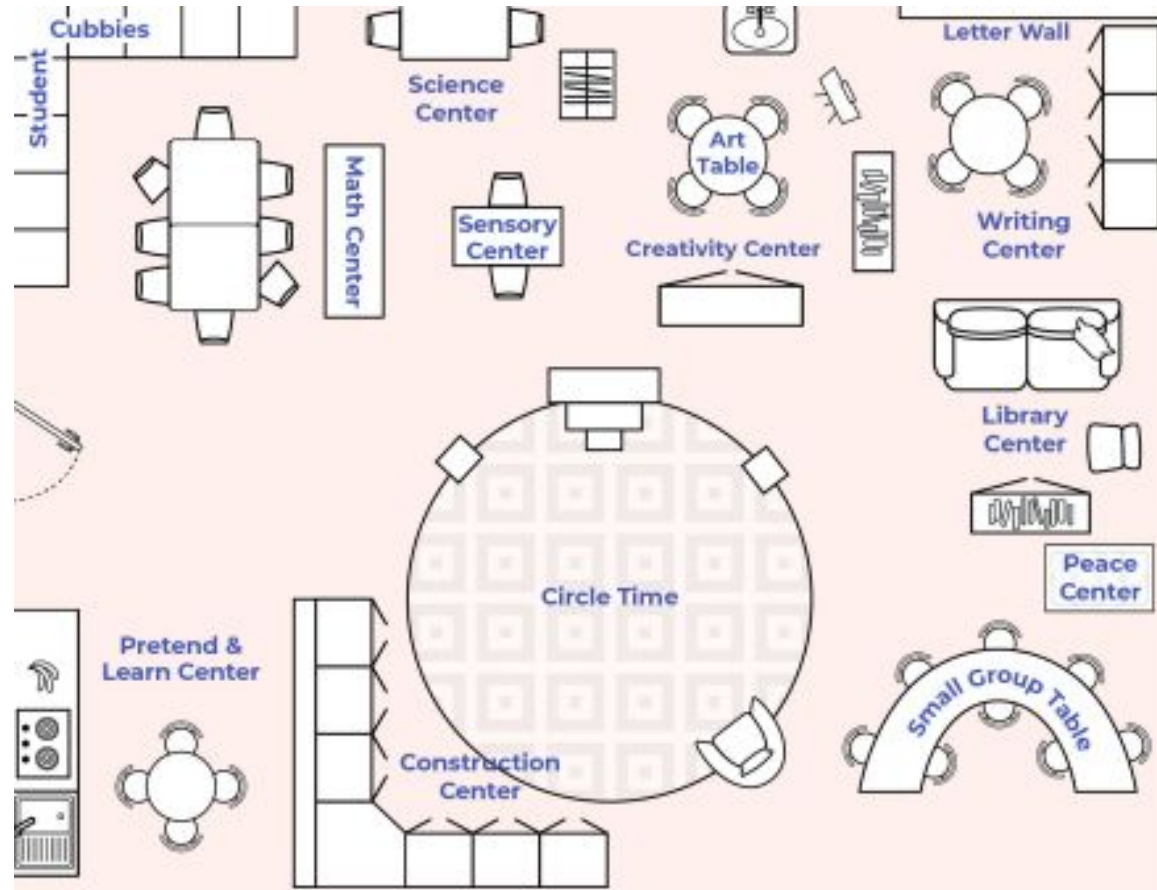
Source: Universal PreKindergarten. 2026.

https://cauniversalprek.org/wp-content/uploads/2026/05/CA_UPK_GPG_CurriculumProject_FullToolkit_ACCESSIBLE_Functional_4.pdf

Possible Layout of a TK Classroom

This image is sourced from a downloadable pdf, **Early Childhood Model Classroom**, available on the Texas Education Service Center Region 13 website. It offers detailed information about setting up each learning area:

<https://esc13.net/assets/uploads/docs/ecp-model-classroom-handout.pdf>



Classroom Arrangement

Organize the environment to support learning.

- Clearly define learning areas
- Use low shelves to separate spaces
- Store materials within children's reach
- Label shelves with pictures and words
- Minimize visual clutter
- Provide spaces for active and quiet play
- Create predictable traffic patterns



Source: Universal PreKindergarten. 2026.

https://cauniversalprek.org/wp-content/uploads/2026/05/CA_UPK_GPG_Curriculum_Project_FullToolkit_ACCESSIBLE_Functional_4.pdf

Choosing Materials That Promote Learning

Select materials that are:

- Open-ended
- Durable
- Inclusive
- Developmentally appropriate
- Representative of children's cultures and languages

Choose toys that encourage imagination rather than a single correct use.

Examples of Open-Ended Materials

- Unit blocks
- Loose parts
- Magnetic tiles
- Play scarves
- Play silks
- Cardboard tubes
- Wooden people and animals
- Natural materials
- Dramatic play props
- Art materials

These materials support creativity, language, collaboration, and problem solving.

Ideas for Indoor Spaces



- Block center
- Library
- Sensory Play
- Art
- Thematic Centers



Ideas for Indoor Spaces



- Group Meeting Area
- Dramatic Play Areas
- Calming Area
- Science Center



Possible Dramatic Play Themes

Home and Family

- Home Living
- Baby Nursery
- Laundry
- Birthday Party
- Kitchen
- Pet Care

Culture and Arts

- Theater
- Dance Studio
- Art Gallery
- Museum
- Photography Studio

Fantasy and Literature

- Castle
- Dragons
- Superheroes
- Pirates
- Fairies
- Wizards
- Puppet Theater

Science and STEM

- Science Lab
- Weather Station
- Space Station
- Dinosaur Dig
- Archaeology Site
- Nature Center
- Recycling Center
- Engineering Workshop

Seasonal

- Pumpkin Patch
- Apple Orchard
- Garden Planting
- Beach
- Snow Day
- Camping Trip
- Picnic

Animals and Nature

- Zoo
- Aquarium
- Farm
- Garden Center
- Camping
- Fishing
- Forest Rangers
- Wildlife Rescue
- Butterfly Garden

Transportation

- Train Station
- Bus Station
- Airport
- Harbor
- Car Wash
- Auto Repair
- Delivery Service
- Pet Theater

Community Helpers

- Doctor
- Hospital
- Dentist
- Veterinarian
- Fire Station
- Police Station
- Post Office
- Library
- School
- Classroom
- Construction Site
- Mechanic
- Hair Salon
- Bakery
- Restaurant
- Pizza Shop
- Grocery Store
- Flower Shop
- Farmer's Market
- Bank
- Airport
- Hotel
- Coffee Shop
- Ice Cream Shop
- Food Truck



Bringing Learning Outdoors

Outdoor environments provide opportunities to:

- Investigate nature
- Build gross motor skills
- Explore science concepts
- Develop social skills
- Engage in dramatic play
- Create large-scale art
- Solve problems collaboratively

Outdoor play is an extension of the classroom.



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>.

Outdoor Play Is Learning

Nature investigation

- magnifying glasses
- bug viewers
- clipboards

Water exploration

- funnels
- tubes
- measuring cups
- bubbly water
- food coloring in water

Building

- logs
- stumps
- loose boards

Art

- chalk
- paint brushes with water
- nature weaving

Music

- outdoor instruments
- pots and pans
- rhythm sticks



Ideas for Outdoor Spaces



- Nature play
- Loose parts
- Outdoor art
- Gardens
- Music
- Water exploration
- Climbing
- Dramatic play
- Gathering spaces



The Adult's Role During Play



Teachers intentionally:

- Observe children's interests and interactions
- Ask open-ended questions
- Introduce new vocabulary
- Extend children's thinking
- Encourage problem solving
- Scaffold learning without taking over
- Document observations
- Scaffold for students with disabilities with visuals, communication tools, or other individualized supports

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>.

Open-Ended Questions That Extend Play

Instead of...

"What color is that?"

Try...

- Tell me about what you made.
- What do you think will happen next?
- How could we solve that problem?
- I wonder what would happen if...
- Can you think of another way?
- What could you add?
- How did you decide to do that?

These questions promote language, reasoning, and creativity while allowing children to remain in charge of the play.

Let's Try It.

A group of children are building roads with blocks.

How might the adult supporting extend the play?



Wrapping Up Our Road Example



Adults can extend play by:

- Adding new materials
- Introducing books
- Asking a wondering question
- Modeling new vocabulary (supplementing with visuals or Augmentative Alternative Communication for students with disabilities)
- Adding writing materials for road signs
- Taking the play outdoors (e.g., "Let's drive outside!")
- Connecting play to children's experiences
- Inviting children to solve real problems

Example:

Children are building roads.

Teacher adds:

- maps
- measuring tapes
- traffic signs
- clipboards
- toy people

Now mathematics, literacy, and problem solving naturally emerge.

Questions



CALECSE
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Special Education Network

Communities of Practice: Join the Conversation

Discuss and Discover.
Share and Strengthen.
Connect and Inspire.

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



Join a regional, job-alike, or statewide Community of Practice (CoP) to share ideas, solve problems of practice, exchange successful strategies and tools, and strengthen early childhood special education across California.

If you are interested in joining a CoP, please complete this form by scanning the QR code below or filling out this google form

https://docs.google.com/forms/d/e/1FAIpQLSf2mTRqNCNqmfQp_1UzwO7hQvJqJUrlgGkoG0-qqUBXMYqAwA/viewform?usp=preview



Share Your Feedback for a Chance to Win CaIECSE 2027 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 **CaIECSE's 5th Annual Symposium** to be held at Paradise Point in San Diego, October 19–20, 2027.



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Special Education Network

Growing Knowledge. Building Capacity. Changing Lives.

Thank you—we appreciate you taking time to be here with us today. We hope you will join us again. You can find our full line-up of no-cost trainings at:

<https://www.calecse.org/news-resources/calecse-training-calendar>



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