

# Learning Paths in Early Care and Education



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**A Route to Improved Outcomes**



## Introduction

Is there a link between classroom quality in early childhood learning environments and children’s cognitive and social development?

The answer is a resounding **yes**.

Research has proven that high-quality early learning experiences promote academic, social-emotional and executive functioning skills.

It makes good sense. Especially at this young age, with minds eager to absorb new information, interactions with teachers and peers drive learning and development.

And the implications are significant. Positive outcomes in early care and education lay the groundwork for students’ success throughout their academic journeys — and ultimately, for their professional careers, too.



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## Improving Classroom Quality in Early Childhood Learning Environments

The quality of a classroom rests on the shoulders of the educators. So, the first step in improving it is to **educate the educators!**

Among center-based and family-based early care and education programs, better teacher education and training is foundational to enhancing the quality of the classroom environment.



*Rigorous research testing the effects of interventions to enhance classroom quality has found that providing professional development to teachers, including ongoing training and coaching, can improve classroom quality and teachers' instructional practices as well as children's outcomes.*

*These benefits are particularly noticeable when professional development is focused on a specific curriculum or set of teacher practices.*

(Maier, M. F. et al, 2022, p.1)

Creating effective **learning paths** for educators will allow them to better deliver high-quality care to the future's most precious resource: our children.

Why are learning paths effective? Specifically, how can they improve onboarding, training and professional development opportunities for early care and education providers?

## Let's take a closer look.

## What Is a Learning Path?

Let's start with a definition:

*A **learning path** is a series of related online courses presented in a structure built around a specific topic.*

*Designed to help individuals gain or deepen knowledge, master a skill or advance in their career, learning paths typically include multiple courses adding up to ten or more hours of instruction.*

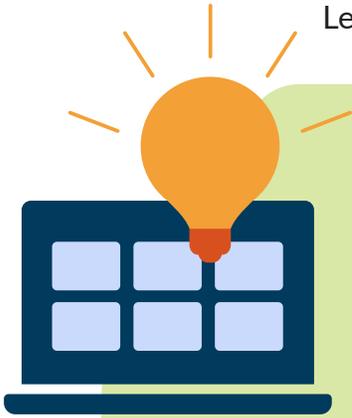
A learning path can be an extremely efficient and effective way to accommodate individualized learning needs while also meeting the objectives of organized curricula.

And herein lies an important distinction between the two: A curriculum advances at an instructor's (or organization's) pace, while a learning path allows the individual to learn at their own pace.

In the early care and education industry, learning paths provide staff opportunities to gain a deeper understanding of specific, relevant topics such as child development, behavioral challenges, family engagement and more.

Learning paths can also be used for professional development. They help educators advance in their careers by gaining new skills, preparing for certification exams and staying on top of best practices in their field.

In addition, early care and education centers can rely on learning paths to standardize and streamline the onboarding process for new employees.



## Why Do Learning Paths Work So Well?

While stand-alone courses are certainly appropriate for certain types of instruction (e.g., ethics training, updated health and safety guidelines or crisis management), learning paths offer myriad benefits for deeper learning.

Here are just a few:

- ✓ As its name suggests, a learning path is a “route,” guiding learners through a selection of courses from beginning to end. Progression through a learning path is linear, meaning each session or module builds and expands upon the previous lessons.
- ✓ Learning paths can be developed and customized based on a variety of factors such as experience level or classroom age groups. They can also be tailored to a specific purpose, from onboarding to ongoing training and career development.
- ✓ Rather than forcing too much information into a single course, learning paths break lessons into manageable sessions. Learners can progress through the sessions at their own pace based on their individual learning style and timeline. Allowing learners to move through the learning path at their own pace increases motivation, engagement and retention.

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## Examples of Applied Learning Paths

Kris, Jax, Tracy, Danielle and Alexis are all in different phases of their careers in early care and education. While they all work at the same center, each has a unique learning path “destination.”

### Kris: *Moving into a leadership role*



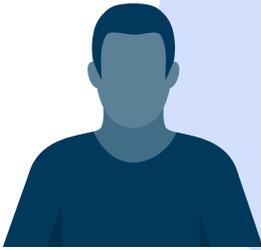
*Kris, an experienced early care and education professional, has been a lead teacher for the past three years. When the assistant director announced he was moving out of town, the center director was confident in offering the position to Kris.*

To prepare her for this new role, the director provided a learning path with courses on:

- ✓ Mentoring and coaching staff
- Onboarding new staff
- Talent management and promotion
- Staff communication
- Professionalism
- Work-life balance
- Assessing leadership styles
- Transitioning to leadership

Together, Kris and her director came up with a realistic timeline to progress through the path. Kris was thus able to continue to work full-time in the classroom before making the transition to assistant director.

## Jax: Entering the early care and education space as a new teacher



*Jax just accepted his first job in early care and education as a **full-time assistant teacher**. Ever since he was a young teenager, Jax spent a lot of time babysitting for his younger brother and sister as well as for other families in his neighborhood. Today, he is a big hit with young children who gravitate toward his upbeat personality – and with parents who know they can trust him to care for their children.*

While experienced with kids, Jax has no formalized early care and education training. Recognizing his potential – and appreciating his enthusiasm – the center director put together a learning path to help Jax succeed in his new role.

The 20-hour learning path covers the following topics:

- ✓

  - Understanding and adhering to basic health and safety protocols
  - Responding to emergency situations
  - Understanding child development milestones and appropriate expectations
  - Using effective classroom management strategies
- Identifying positive behavior management and strategies to address challenging behaviors
  - Establishing emotionally supportive relationships with children
  - Understanding developmentally appropriate practice
  - Communicating with families
  - Working in a team environment

Jax will take these courses during his first two weeks of employment to complement the knowledge he gains from shadowing other teachers. When he begins working in the classroom, he will be prepared!

## Tracy: Assistant teacher who is excited to advance in her career



Tracy has been working at the center for three years as an **assistant teacher**. Her director has encouraged her to take the next steps to become a lead teacher. Tracy is flattered – and excited to advance in her career.

To meet the education requirements of a lead teacher, Tracy needs to earn a Child Development Associate (CDA) credential. She is ready to start an online learning path to fulfill the credential's formal training component.

- ✓ The courses in the CDA learning path are arranged by subject area. They also help her build her Professional Portfolio while she's completing her training. This streamlines the process so she will be ready to submit her application to the Council for Professional Recognition as soon as she finishes her training.

Tracy is also a busy mom herself. The learning path allows her to work within her schedule to learn at her own pace and timeline. She can take online courses on her lunch breaks, early in the morning before starting work, or during evenings and weekends.

## Danielle: Sharing innovation through a learning path



*Danielle has been a lead teacher at the center for just over ten years. She is concerned about an increase in stress among preschoolers – and has witnessed its negative impact on learning and socializing.*

On weekends, Danielle teaches yoga and mindfulness to adults at a local studio. After completing one of her Saturday classes, Danielle had a thought: What if I could introduce modified versions of these practices into my classroom?

On Monday, she shares her thoughts with the center director, persuasively listing the benefits of teaching young children age-appropriate relaxation and mindfulness techniques.

The director loves the idea and wants to support Danielle and the other teachers at her center. She creates a learning path to help Danielle and her co-workers deepen their understanding of mindfulness for children and learn how to teach it in the early education classroom.

The learning path includes courses on:

- ✓

**Infant and toddler mental health**
  - Toxic stress in young children
  - Resilience after trauma
  - Movement and mindfulness activities for young children

The children embrace the mindfulness practices. In fact, they enjoy them so much that they “teach” their parents some of their new skills.

The parents tell Danielle about the difference they’ve seen in their child’s ability to control outbursts, interact with others and bring themselves back to a place of calmness after a frustrating or stressful situation.

The director clearly sees the positive impact of the mindfulness activities. She adds them to the center’s curricula and shares the program’s success in marketing materials.

## Alexis: Navigating behavioral challenges in her preschool class



*Alexis became a **lead teacher** 18 months ago. She is an excellent employee who truly enjoys her work. While she has a knack for developing great rapport with her classroom's four- and five-year-old children and their parents, Alexis often struggles with classroom management. This year, several of the children have had challenging behavioral issues, intensifying her struggle.*

She reaches out to her director for guidance. The director empathizes with her frustration and is eager to help.

But she knows it will take more than a meeting or two to help Alexis develop the classroom management skills she needs. So, she offers a learning path consisting of courses in:

- ✔ **Social-emotional development**
  - Behavior management
  - Natural and logical consequences
  - Early childhood conflict resolution
- Building and maintaining boundaries
  - Developmentally appropriate practices
  - Self-care

Alexis' case is one of many ways learning paths can guide early care and education professionals through specific challenges. Other learning paths could include areas such as leadership development or family engagement, to name just a few.

# How to Create and Implement Effective Learning Paths in Early Care and Education

Now let's think about your center's needs. What factors should you consider when designing and implementing learning paths for your employees?

Important considerations include:

## Goals

What should your learner understand and/or be able to do upon completion of the learning path?

## Content

What content will be included in the learning path?

## Starting point

What knowledge or skills will your learner already have when they begin the learning path?

## Assessment and feedback

How will you evaluate the learner's progress? How will you know if the learning path was effective, or how your learner felt about the experience?

## Format

How will the content be presented? Will it be in written form? Will it include audio and visual elements? Will there be games, homework or quizzes?

## Learning styles

How will you accommodate individuals' learning styles?

## Shelf life

How will you ensure the longevity of the learning path? Hint: Evergreen content (i.e., content that remains relevant over time) will stand the test of time better than trendy content, especially when using examples.

*These elements come together to inform the "what" and "how" of creating an effective learning path.*



The next step is to build it, maximizing the use of technology and other available resources. That can be a tall order—especially when formal education and compliance training requirements enter the equation.

That's why it makes sense to partner with a company with expertise in professional development and instructional design for early care and education.

## Learning Paths: Charting the Course to a Bright Future

A learning path provides an effective and efficient “route” for early care and education staff to acquire new skills, develop a deeper understanding of a specific subject matter, advance in their careers, and more.

Learning paths can be built and delivered to offer convenience and flexibility for learners to progress through them at their own pace and timeline.

### And there’s more.

By maximizing the use of continually evolving technology, learning paths provide greater accessibility and affordability to early care and education centers. The results:



Learning paths can be created for a variety of situations and needs. Taking a thoughtful and deliberate approach to using learning paths will exponentially increase their value and effectiveness, benefiting your center, your staff, and most importantly, the children in your care.



**Ready to implement learning paths in your center?**

**Let's work together.**

ProSolutions Training offers more than 200 individual online courses, multi-course packages, and certificates in early care and education and human services subject areas. We've developed a rich curriculum, with course content based on cutting-edge research and the firm's 27 years of experience in early care and education and human services.

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### **Reference**

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