

Classroom Quality

(Replaces Classroom Requirements section; see also **new** Program Administration and Staffing section)

Introduction

Each Strong Beginnings classroom selects an approved curriculum from the list within the [Curriculum](#) section of this manual. Strong Beginnings contractors should ensure that those classrooms for three- and four-year-old children typically providing a two-year sequence for the same students use the same curriculum. Since Connect4Learning was designed only for four-year-old children it is not approved for Strong Beginnings classrooms. Strong Beginnings classrooms may use any of the approved Strong Beginnings curricula if the GSRP classrooms children are likely to transition into have adopted Connect4Learning.

Regardless of which approvable curriculum is used, teaching teams implement a comprehensive, child-focused, constructivist curriculum model for all enrolled children, as is widely espoused for preschool and supported by the National Association for the Education of Young Children (NAEYC). Curriculum models are essential to implementing high-quality programs. They guide adults in:

- determining program content
 - skill progression
 - knowledge
 - overarching concepts
- planning for learning experiences
- training and supporting staff
- providing high quality environments
- creating and maintaining a consistent yet flexible daily routine
- engaging in responsive adult-child relationships
- supporting development across domains
- utilizing intentional teaching practices to support decisions about
 - individual learning objectives
 - methods to accomplish objectives
 - addressing specific child interests through use of emergent curriculum
 - structuring activities that are responsive to a variety of ability levels and populations, such as dual language learners and children with Individualized Education Plans
- engaging children and their families

Classroom staff also attend to Michigan's [Early Childhood Standards of Quality for Birth to Kindergarten](#), the Michigan Department of Lifelong Education, Advancement and Potential, Child Care Licensing Division [Licensing Rules for Child Care Centers](#), and program and intermediate school district (ISD) philosophies, guidance, and rules for Strong Beginnings. This section of the Strong Beginnings Implementation

Section 9: Classroom Quality

Strong Beginnings Implementation Manual

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Manual is intended to provide an overview of the state-level requirements for classrooms implementing the Strong Beginnings model. Support for how to implement any of these high-quality elements should be directed to the program administrator and assigned Early Childhood Specialist. Any teachers acting as the licensing designee should also carefully review the [Program Administration and Staffing](#) section of this manual for more information on program requirements.

Culture/Diversity/Implicit Bias/Anti-Bias/Equity

The National Association for the Education of Young Children's (NAEYC) document [Where we Stand on Responding to Linguistic and Cultural Diversity](#) recommendations emphasize that early childhood programs are responsible for creating a welcoming environment that respects diversity, supports children's ties to their families and community, and promotes both second language acquisition and preservation of children's home languages and cultural identities.

Activities related to religious holidays are often included in early childhood programs. While these activities and celebrations bring pleasure to many children, families and staff, they also pose a range of challenges in making all children and families, whether currently in your program or considering enrollment in the future, feel valued and respected. Whether and how to include holidays in your program requires thoughtful decision making. The NAEYC document [Anti Bias Education and Holidays: Making Thoughtful Decisions](#) provides important guidance on this topic.

Key Elements of High-Quality Early Childhood Learning Environments: Preschool

The [Key Elements](#) draw from national and state standards for early childhood and are based on research in child development that exemplifies proven practices in early education. Developed in 2020 and approved by the Michigan Department of Education in 2021, the Key Elements provide a condensed framework for implementing high-quality programs for children and should be adhered to by all Strong Beginnings classrooms. Additional Strong Beginnings-specific requirements are detailed below.

Key Element #1 High Quality Learning Environments

The environment is designed to promote high quality learning and interactions in all domains throughout the day.

A high-quality Strong Beginnings classroom embeds all of the requirements listed below.

- Classroom environment must reflect the Strong Beginnings approved curriculum being implemented by the program.
- All Licensing requirements are adhered to with fidelity.
- Learning materials and visuals reflect every child's family, local community, abilities, first language, and cultural identity.

- Children have access to varied, plentiful, and open-ended materials that are rotated over time. These items promote independence and include natural elements and real items vs. plastic/toy replicas.
- Interest areas do not have any artificial limits imposed by adults.
- Adult-made displays are relevant to children’s interest, topic of study, and essential to the implementation of the curriculum.
- The outdoor learning area allows adequate space to encourage various types of play and activities (e.g., stationary equipment, portable items, and materials to support content areas).

Key Element #2 Consistent Daily Routine

A consistent daily routine is implemented to promote balanced participatory learning through all portions of the day.

Required parts of the Strong Beginnings classroom schedule are described below. Refer to sample daily routines in the resources for this section. Classrooms may have alternate terms for parts of the routine, as long as names are used daily and are easily understood by children. A visual daily routine should also be posted at children’s eye level, and referred to throughout the day. A consistent daily routine must include appropriate amounts of time each day for children to:

- Participate in a three-part sequence of child planning, choice and child recall. In child **planning**, children indicate their choice time plans to adults, in a variety of ways, and in ways that are consistent with individual developmental levels. Children will have a minimum of forty-five minutes of continuous **choice time** to carry out their plans and make many choices about where and how to use materials. Adults support children’s efforts by listening, encouraging children’s language, imitating children’s ideas and words, and commenting on specific attributes of children’s work. Children complete the sequence after **clean-up time**, by **recalling** and discussing their choice time activities.
- Engage in discrete **small group** activities which may be adult-initiated, but not adult-dominated.
- Engage in **large group** activities which may be adult-initiated, but not adult-dominated;
- Have **snack or meal time(s)** where staff and children eat together family style and share the same menu to the extent possible. (See *Meals/Snacks in Program Administration and Staffing* section of this manual);
- Experience planned transitions that are limited and actively engaging;
- Have **outside time** where adults provide equipment and materials to intentionally plan, support and extend children’s activities;
- Have an opportunity for **rest** in a school-day program that is scheduled for no longer than one hour and twenty minutes, accommodates for the needs of individual children, and includes alternate activities for children who do not sleep.

Key Element #3 Adult-Child Relationships

Responsive adult-child interactions promote secure relationships that support learning throughout the day.

The structure of the physical environment, daily routine and activities presented, and the adult(s) approach all have a direct influence on the adult-child relationship.

Required parts of high-quality adult-child relationships in a Strong Beginnings classroom are described below.

- Meet children’s basic needs by allowing children to use the toilet as needed. Their wet or soiled clothing is changed when uncomfortable or unhealthy for the child. Injuries are attended to promptly with empathy and compassion;
- Support children with sensitivity during transition times throughout the day (arrival, during daily routine, departure). Their feelings are acknowledged, and children are allowed to transition into and out of activities at their own pace;
- Provide a warm and caring environment by focusing on children throughout the day. Adults respond to children with calm and respectful tones and attend to them when they are upset;
- Acknowledge individual children’s accomplishments. Adults avoid using praise and rewards by acknowledging children’s individual efforts (e.g., repeating the children’s words and commenting on what they are doing, allowing the children to evaluate their own work and efforts);
- Use the following strategies that support children’s communication skills:
 - Allow the child to initiate conversations, speak first, converse in a give and take manner
 - Use open-ended questions,
 - Acknowledge and seek children’s ideas
 - Encourage children to talk about what they are doing
 - Use children’s words and comment specifically on their work
- Encourage children to interact with one another. Use the following strategies for partnering in children’s play:
 - Observe, listen, and follow cues
 - Assume roles suggested
 - Imitate and extend their play
 - Encourage children to do things for themselves like solving problems with materials and tasks

Social Emotional Learning

Social Emotional Learning (SEL) is crucial to helping children learn to manage their feelings and to interact successfully with others. Research shows young children who struggle with behavioral and emotional problems have a fifty percent chance of continuing to struggle into adulthood. There is additional evidence that high-quality early childhood education can minimize challenging child behaviors when it focuses

on child-initiated learning activities and is most effective when offered to children through a system based on positive relationships with children, families, and colleagues.

The following instructional strategies have been shown to be effective in promoting positive social interactions.

- Involve children in resolving conflicts with their peers. The following conflict resolution steps are taught to the children and implemented by the adult:
 - Approach conflict calmly
 - Acknowledge children’s feelings
 - Gather information from the children on what happened
 - Restate the problem to the children
 - Ask children for solutions and encourage children to choose a solution together
 - Support children in the implementation of their solution
- Reference a high-quality framework for teaching social emotional skills that target challenging behaviors, for example, the [National Center for Pyramid Model Innovations](#);
- Children must not be denied enrollment or excluded from Strong Beginnings programming based on challenging behavior, developmental delays or identified disabilities (e.g., toileting needs, speech, motor function, aggressive behaviors and cognitive delays).

Key Element #4 Intentional Teaching

Adults use intentional teaching practices to support continued growth in all aspects of children’s development and learning.

Intentional Teaching is dependent upon adult expertise in fundamental child development and the developmental continuum together with authentic assessment and appropriate observations of each child to establish learning goals and continuously inform instruction.

Intentional teachers rely on all members of the teaching team to affect the on-going assessment cycle by observing and assessing, reflecting, and planning, and implementing instruction.

Intentional Teaching Practices:

- Encompass everything the teaching team does to facilitate children’s development, including organization of the indoor and outdoor learning environments, the nature of adult-child interactions, and strategies for transitions and grouping
- Promote active play through intentional, hands-on learning, using open ended, real materials, during all portions of the daily routine
- Offer real life learning experiences individualized for the strengths, interests and needs of each child, in consideration of their family, community, and culture

- Establish and support an inclusive environment, mindful of family, child, and staff unique and diverse situations and needs
- Use technology with intentionality, which may thoughtfully include being used as a tool during play
- Select books, music, and materials that reflect not only the culture of the children in the classroom but also the broader community while avoiding stereotypes

Utilize the following for further details on high-quality indicators of teaching practices:

Chosen curriculum and resources:

- [Early Childhood Standards of Quality for Birth to Kindergarten](#)
- [Essential Instructional Practices in Early Literacy for Prekindergarten](#)
- [Essential Instructional Practices in Early Literacy for Birth to Age 3](#)
- [Essential Instructional Practices in Early Mathematics: Prekindergarten to Grade 3](#)
- [Key Elements of High-Quality Early Childhood Learning Environments: Preschool](#)
- [WIDA Early Years Michigan Connections for Multilingual Learners](#)
- Program evaluation tool (Classroom Coach)

The following teaching strategies are not aligned with the *best* teaching practices and should not be utilized in a Strong Beginnings classroom:

- Use of workbooks, worksheets, flashcards, and/or other materials that do not engage children’s thinking in active learning
- Whole class extended, rote activity: calendar
- Letter of the week
- Homework

See your [Early Childhood Specialist](#) (ECS) for additional guidance and support.

Team Teaching Model

In team teaching, each staff person is fully engaged in planning curriculum, implementing curriculum both indoors and outdoors, child assessment, and supporting family engagement through home visits, conferences, professional learning, and family meetings. The work is collaboratively shared and a high-quality Strong Beginnings dedicates time for staff to plan on a daily basis:

- All teaching staff participate equally in planning activities; ensuring associate teachers do not play minor non-teaching roles (e.g., wipe tables, prepare meals, etc.); and
- All teaching staff conduct and participate in children’s activities (for all parts of the daily routine).
- All teaching staff recognize their responsibility for the health and safety, growth and development of all children.

- All teaching staff will be supported with and responsible for appropriate planning, instruction, assessment, and program implementation including needed accommodations to the daily routine, behavior challenges, and parent communication for children with IEPs when special education staff are not present.

In Strong Beginnings classroom where a third teaching staff member is hired with Child/Family Support or available classroom funding, their level of education and experience may make it difficult for them to participate equally in planning and conducting children’s experiences, especially before they have adequate time for professional learning around child development and the selected curriculum. Even in these cases, however, the third teaching staff should be part of planning and have meaningful responsibilities rather than just housekeeping tasks.

When a third teaching staff member is present, their role is to create a more developmentally appropriate classroom for all the children rather than to be utilized to perpetuate poor practice. They should not be seen as someone to restrain children who can’t sit for long periods of time during less than engaging group times, for example. Rather, group times must be made appropriate in both timing and content. Similarly, if some children need extra support for challenging behaviors, it is likely more appropriate for the Lead or Associate Teacher to provide that support while the third teaching staff member facilitates learning of children requiring less high-level assistance.

Key Element #5 Engaging families

The relationship with each family is valued and strengthened by seeking multiple ways to partner in their child’s development and learning.

Family engagement is critical to positive child outcomes. Strong Beginnings provides a variety of opportunities for families to become involved in the program and regularly seeks input from parents and involves them in decision making for the program. **Parents must not be required to volunteer in the classroom or participate in group meetings as a condition of enrollment**, although all efforts should be examined to engage all families based on their ability and comfort level.

Strong Beginnings teaching teams conduct four formal parent contacts annually; these typically occur in two home visits and two parent-teacher conferences. Parent-teacher conferences can be completed virtually if the family prefers. Refer to the *Family Engagement* section of this manual for more information.

Strong Beginnings teaching teams should work collaboratively with the Family Liaison to ensure that maximum efforts to engage and support all families occur.

Additional Considerations for Children in Strong Beginnings

Although both three- and four-year-old children are often considered preschoolers, there are typically consistent and significant developmental differences between these two age groups. This is not surprising as a child turning four has had 25% more time to grow and learn than one just turning three. If it seems that some or all of the children in Strong Beginnings are too young to benefit from the classroom structure and routine that is currently in place, they should be altered to better meet the needs of all the children enrolled in the program. The following should be considered implementing Strong Beginnings classrooms:

- In the fall of Strong Beginnings, some children may still be using diapers/pullups or in the beginning stages of learning to use the toilet. All Strong Beginnings classrooms **must** have a policy for working cooperatively with families on learning to use the toilet, implement a plan for toilet learning in the classroom and have conveniently located diaper/pullup changing facilities for use with children who need them. Diapers/pullups and wipes should be provided free of charge to Strong Beginnings families unless a child requires a particular type or brand other than the one provided by the program. All MiLEAP Child Care Center Licensing Rules for diapering and toileting are to be followed. In addition, each Strong Beginnings classroom **must** contain a bathroom or have one immediately adjacent to its location.
- Three-year-old children have less developed language skills and smaller vocabularies than four-year-old children. Teachers need to spend more time modeling and expanding language with children as well communicating with parents who may not be receiving very much verbal information from their children about the program.
- Strong Beginnings may be the child's first school experience for parents as well as children. Both may experience anxiety around the new situation and the separation issues that result. They will benefit from ongoing support and relationship building during the transition to school. The Family Liaison can assist with this process.
- Three-year-old children are just learning self-help skills required for independent functioning. They will often need more assistance and support with dressing, toileting, eating, clean-up and other such things than older children generally do.
- Younger children have less experience with peers and are likely to have difficulty playing, sharing and negotiating with them. They will need continuing modeling and guidance in conflict resolution as well as in identifying and coping with their own emotions.
- Since three-year-old children have less control over their body movements, they need more space to move, spread out and sprawl on the floor to prevent them from intruding on the space of others.

- Whole group times for children with shorter attention spans should include plenty of interactive opportunities that involve all of the children simultaneously. Music, movement and physical activity should be frequently included in activities and transitions to minimize wait time.
- In equipping a room for three-year-old children, consider purchasing multiples of the same items to prevent conflicts. Manipulatives and art materials should generally have fewer pieces which are each larger/chunkier than for older preschoolers. Materials such as books should be sturdier and classroom furnishings and playground equipment smaller than for older children.
- For additional suggestions, see [Guidelines for School Districts Operating Pre-K Programs for Three Year Olds](#) developed by the Office of Early Learning at the New York State Department of Education. This document is available in the For Teachers--Resources Folder of the Strong Beginnings shared Program Partners Drive.

Class Structure

Program providers that serve both three-and four-year old children should thoughtfully consider the optimal way of providing them with a two-year program sequence. Children and families benefit most when they have the opportunity to build strong, ongoing relationships with consistent teaching staff who understand and have learned to support their areas of strength and challenge. The following research-based approaches are encouraged sequences.

Looping is the practice of moving a group of children and their teaching staff together from Strong Beginnings to GSRP. When the children have completed GSRP, teaching staff return to Strong Beginnings and begin the two-year loop again with a new group of children. While new children may be added to the class to fill vacancies that occur, most children, families and staff remain together as a consistent cohort for two years. This approach works particularly well when staff turnover is minimal, and teachers are experienced with either Strong Beginnings or GSRP before beginning to loop. Looping may be challenging for teachers who are new to a program and unfamiliar with supporting and engaging children at different developmental levels each year.

Program providers are also encouraged to consider the assignment of **primary caregivers** to each child. Relationships with children and families are strengthened when each member of the teaching staff has primary responsibility for half of the children enrolled in the classroom. As the child and primary teacher consistently connect, especially when assistance with self-care and emotional challenges are needed, their bonds deepen. Similarly, when parents routinely connect with or are contacted by one teacher, relationships with families are positively impacted. It may be used in traditional single aged classrooms as well as those utilizing looping.