

# Building Blocks for Teaching Preschoolers with Special Needs

Building Blocks is a set of **educational practices** designed to help teachers be more **effective** in including and teaching young children with disabilities and other special needs in early childhood classrooms and other early learning settings.

The building blocks framework can help all children **participate, learn and thrive**

## Building Blocks Framework

Specially designed instruction

Child-focused instructional strategies

Short teaching episodes with ongoing activities, routines and transitions, focusing on child's individual learning objective

8 types of modifications:

1. environmental support
2. materials adaption
3. activity simplification
4. child preferences
5. special equipment
6. adult support
7. peer support
8. invisible support

Embedded learning opportunities

Curriculum modifications & adaptations

Quality early childhood program

Safe, engaging, responsive, culturally and linguistically relevant, intentional teaching, ongoing child assessment, well-regarded curriculum



# Quality early childhood program

This foundation ensures that all children, including those with disabilities, benefit from research-based early childhood teaching strategies.

## Examples



### 1. Developmentally Appropriate Practices (DAP)



Instead of completing a worksheet, provide multiple ways to engage (e.g. using playdough to form letters, tracing sandpaper letters, or using magnetic letters on a board)

### 2. A Well-Structured and Predictable Environment



Display visual schedule with pictures to help children understand the daily routine. For a child with autism, this schedule might include removable Velcro pieces that they can move to indicate completed activities.

### 3. Positive Teacher-Child Interactions

When a child struggles to share a toy, the teacher kneels to their level and says, "I see you want the truck. Let's ask your friend if you can have a turn when they're done." This models positive social interaction.



### 4. Play-Based and Engaging Learning Opportunities

Instead of a traditional math lesson, children engage in a hands-on counting game where they sort objects by color and number while playing in a pretend grocery store.



### 5. Individualized Instruction to Meet Diverse Needs



During story time, a child with limited verbal skills is given a picture communication board to point to pictures related to the story.

### 6. Inclusive Classroom Practices



In an art activity, the teacher provides multiple tools—paintbrushes, sponges, and finger paints—so that children with different motor abilities can participate.



# Curriculum modifications & adaptations

Adapt your curriculum to meet the needs of all learners, including children with disabilities, for full participation.

## 8 types of modifications

### 1. ENVIRONMENTAL SUPPORT

Changing the classroom setup to help a child succeed.

Adding visual labels on classroom shelves with pictures of toys to help a child with limited verbal skills find materials independently.



### 2. MATERIALS ADAPTION

Changing materials to make them easier to use.

Providing a child with limited fine motor skills with a thick-handled crayon or a pencil grip to help with writing.



### 3. ACTIVITY SIMPLIFICATION

Breaking down or modifying an activity to make it more manageable.

Instead of asking a child to complete a multi-step art project, the teacher provides pre-cut shapes so the child only needs to glue them together.



### 4. CHILD PREFERENCES

Incorporating a child's interests to increase engagement.

If a child loves dinosaurs, the teacher uses dinosaur-shaped counters for a math lesson to encourage participation.



### 5. SPECIAL EQUIPMENT

Using adaptive tools to support participation.



Providing a child with low muscle tone with a special chair with lateral supports to help them sit upright during circle time.

### 6. ADULT SUPPORT

Offering guidance from teachers or aides.



A teacher provides hand-over-hand assistance to help a child learn how to use scissors safely.

### 7. PEER SUPPORT

Encouraging classmates to assist with learning.



During a matching game, a peer helps a child by verbally describing the pictures on the cards to reinforce learning.

### 8. INVISIBLE SUPPORT

Subtle modifications that naturally encourage participation.






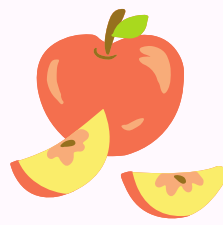











During reading, the teacher strategically places a child with poor literacy skills next to a peer who is able to read.



# Embedded learning opportunities

Intentional teaching moments that involves integrating learning goals into everyday naturally occurring interactions and routines to encourage children's participation

## Examples

Routine	 Student A	 Student B	 Student C
 <b>Snack time</b>	<b>Communication goal: Expanding vocabulary</b>  ELO: Teacher encourages the child to describe their snack using adjectives (e.g. "The apple is red and crunchy") and expands on their response ("Yes! It's a sweet and juicy apple").	<b>Fine motor goal: Self-feeding skills</b>  ELO: Teacher provides finger foods (e.g. small apple pieces) and encourages the child to practice pincer grasp by picking up pieces independently.	<b>Social skills goal: Making requests &amp; turn-taking</b>  ELO: Teacher facilitates peer interaction by prompting the child to ask a friend for an item politely ("Can you pass me the apple, please?") instead of grabbing.
 <b>Play time in the block area</b>	<b>Cognitive goal: Recognizing shapes &amp; colours</b>  ELO: Teacher naturally asks questions during play ("Can you find a red block? What shape is this one?") to reinforce shape and color recognition.	<b>Motor planning goal: Building coordination &amp; balance</b>  ELO: The child is encouraged to stack blocks to build a tower and problem-solve how to keep it from falling, supporting their fine motor and spatial awareness development.	<b>Social goal: Cooperative play &amp; sharing</b>  ELO: Teacher supports peer collaboration by encouraging two children to work together to build a bridge, modeling phrases like "Let's work together!" and reinforcing turn-taking.
 <b>Story time</b>	<b>Listening &amp; comprehension goal: Answering questions</b>  ELO: Teacher pauses and asks open-ended questions (e.g., "What do you think will happen next?") to encourage prediction and engagement.	<b>Speech &amp; language goal: Labeling objects</b>  ELO: Teacher encourages the child to point to and name familiar objects in the book (e.g. "Where's the dog?") and provides praise when they respond correctly.	<b>Attention &amp; engagement goal: Interactive participation</b>  ELO: To keep the children engaged, teacher assigns them a role (e.g. making animal sounds when an animal appears in the story) to encourage active participation.

These ELOs create **meaningful learning moments** while keeping children engaged in **natural** classroom routines

## Useful resources

### Activity / IEP Matrix Tip Sheet



### Activity Matrix Template





# Child-focused instructional strategies

Targeted learning opportunities designed to align with a child's individual goals

There are times when a child requires more **direct instruction** than what modifications or Embedded Learning Opportunities (ELOs) can provide. This is where Child-Focused Instructional Strategies (CFIS) come in.

With CFIS, you can deliver **structured, systematic, and consistent instruction** to help a child develop specific skills or behaviors.

## Key Features of CFIS:

### Planned and Systematic

Unlike ELOs, which occur naturally in daily activities, CFIS involves structured, consistent instruction tailored to individual children.

### One-on-One or Small Group Instruction

Teachers provide direct, focused support for children who need extra help.

### Targeted Skill Development

CFIS is designed to teach specific skills in areas like communication, motor skills, social-emotional development, and early academics.

### Use of Evidence-Based Teaching Strategies

Techniques like modeling, prompting, reinforcement, and task analysis are used to support learning.

### Data Collection & Progress Monitoring

Teachers track children's progress and adjust instruction as needed.

## Examples



### Direct Instruction for Communication Skills

A teacher working with a nonverbal child uses picture exchange communication (PECS) to help them request toys during playtime.



### Task Analysis for Self-Help Skills

A teacher breaks down handwashing into small steps (turning on water, getting soap, scrubbing hands, rinsing, drying) and teaches each step one at a time with modeling and reinforcement.



### Explicit Instruction for Early Literacy & Math Skills

A teacher uses hand-over-hand guidance to help a child trace letters, then gradually reduces assistance as the child gains independence.



### Reinforcement Strategies for Behavior Support

A child working on staying seated during circle time earns a sticker reward for every five minutes they remain engaged.



## Useful resource



Instruction-at-a-Glance		
Date: _____		
Child's name: _____		Teacher's name: _____
Objective: _____		
1. Setting for instruction		
When? _____		
Where? _____		
How often? _____		
Materials needed? _____		
2. Instructional interaction		
Antecedent	Child behavior	Consequence
Instruction		Positive reinforcement
Prompt		Corrective feedback

Instruction-at-a-Glance	
(continued)	
3. Monitoring progress:	
Instructions: For the numbers 5-0 and ND ("No data") in the columns representing number of trials, circle or draw a line through each number, depending on response: ○ = correct, / = incorrect.	
Date _____	
Current step	
5	5 5 5 5 5 5 5 5 5 5 5 5 5 5
4	4 4 4 4 4 4 4 4 4 4 4 4 4 4
3	3 3 3 3 3 3 3 3 3 3 3 3 3 3
2	2 2 2 2 2 2 2 2 2 2 2 2 2 2
1	1 1 1 1 1 1 1 1 1 1 1 1 1 1
0	0 0 0 0 0 0 0 0 0 0 0 0 0 0
Criteria:	ND ND ND ND ND ND ND ND ND ND ND ND ND ND
4. Comments, questions, or issues to discuss with the team:	
_____	
_____	
_____	
_____	
_____	

Instruction-at-a-glance retrieved from:

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