

Virginia's Alignment Project

Introduction

Without a doubt, the early years – from birth to kindergarten – comprise the most extraordinary period of development in a child's lifetime.

Learning begins in infancy when a child's development of knowledge, skills, and attitudes toward learning serves as the basis for healthy development and lifelong achievement. Infants and young children are by nature avid learners – enthusiastic, creative scientists who observe, explore, experiment, and practice skills until they are mastered, and then continue to the next challenge.

Although they learn much through independent exploration, infants and young children need competent adult guides to provide the critical elements of high quality learning environments at optimal times. Skillful adults – whether parents, grandparents, child care providers or teachers - provide the safety and security, both physical and emotional, that support young learners through adventures of discovery and mastery. Skillful adults provide more than affectionate relationships that support and foster confidence; they structure the environment to provide challenges, coach the learning process by providing feedback, and offer interpretation to confirm and to inspire. These skillful adults become learning partners who mentor young children as they explore the world in which they live.

It is vital that we support Virginia's young children as they prepare for school and life success. The Alignment Project documents serve as guides to assist adults in their important roles with young children.

Guiding Principles

The Alignment Project documents reflect a set of guiding principles that have served as a valuable compass in developing these resources:

1. Families are the first and most influential teachers of young children.
2. Every child develops at an individual rate, possesses unique characteristics, and exhibits an array of talents and interests regardless of family background, culture, special need, experience, or ability.
3. Optimal learning occurs when we recognize that all aspects of a child's development (i.e., social and emotional, approaches to learning, language and literacy, cognitive, and physical) are inextricably interrelated and nurtured through a combination of active exploration, play, social interaction, and thoughtfully planned activities that capitalize on children's natural tendency to seek ever higher levels of challenge to master.
4. Early learning experiences draw upon and enhance the connections between families, early childhood programs and services, schools, and the community.
5. Quality early learning experiences for children are guided by research-based knowledge and practice.
6. All children are capable and competent learners, and they learn best when they are included with their peers.



Developing the Alignment Project Documents

These frameworks were developed through a comprehensive and collaborative process involving many sources of information, expertise, and guidance.

The process began in February, 2006, through an intensive initiative known as the Alignment Project. Though spearheaded by the Virginia Department of Social Services, the Alignment Project team is comprised of dedicated professionals from many agencies and organizations, both public and private. Each of the team members brought insight and wisdom reflecting years of experience, expertise, and commitment.

Following the development of the original draft documents, critical reviews were conducted by numerous early childhood professionals who provided feedback and suggestions for improvement. In addition, six focus groups were held in six different regions across the Commonwealth to gather broad feedback on the Alignment work, as well as specific feedback concerning draft documents. The participating individuals represented various relevant constituent groups, selected to offer a full range of perspectives, thereby ensuring inclusion and integration of varied needs, programs, and cultures to the greatest extent possible. Working within a tight timeframe, the reviewers provided valuable edits and additions, contributing substantively to the final products.

Finally, the Alignment Project benefited in significant ways by reviewing and incorporating guidelines and competencies gleaned from early childhood initiatives from numerous states and local coalitions. Thanks to the graciousness and generosity of key representatives from each state and locality in granting permission for the team to learn from their respective processes and products, the Alignment Team feels assured that Virginia's frameworks reflect best practices across the nation.

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Focus Group Participants

More than one hundred parents, teachers, directors, child care resource and referral agency staff, and other interested partners attended the focus groups in Abingdon, Fairfax, Harrisonburg, Richmond, Roanoke, and South Hampton Roads.

An additional focus group comprised of early childhood educators Debra Daily, Renee Dino, Regina Ihsane, Claudia Knapp, and Rowena Seaman from Williamsburg-James City County offered important feedback concerning the content and format of the *Competencies for Early Childhood Professionals*.

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Competencies for Early Childhood Professionals

Welcome to Virginia's *Competencies for Early Childhood Professionals!*

This document is a comprehensive resource for those who work with and care about young children. We hope you will find this document valuable and that you will share it with others.

Purpose and Goals

In order to support optimal learning and achievement for young children, Virginia must have a highly skilled early childhood education professional workforce that embraces a spirit of life-long learning and continuous quality improvement. To articulate the skills and competencies desired in that workforce, Virginia's *Competencies for Early Childhood Professionals* outline standards for competent practice, identifying what early childhood professionals must know, be able to do, and care about to provide quality early care and education.

Because these competencies can be measured or demonstrated, Virginia's *Competencies for Early Childhood Professionals* can serve as a guide for improving teaching and learning. They are intended to support improvement of quality in early childhood programs by clearly articulating best practices for adults who are supporting the growth and development of children from birth to kindergarten. In essence, the professional development system itself is never a finished product and should continually evolve based on the most recent research and be refined to best meet the needs of the population it serves. To that end, early childhood practitioners need opportunities to learn and grow to become more effective in their profession.

Virginia's *Competencies for Early Childhood Professionals* may be used by adults working in various capacities with young children and by related organizations or agencies, including:

- **Providers, practitioners, and teachers** to assess their level of knowledge and skill in various content areas and to identify specific areas of need for future professional development (e.g., training/education);
- **Directors and program administrators** to specify training/education requirements for staff job descriptions, to develop staff training/education plans and policies, and to establish a salary scale based on staff educational achievement;
- **Trainers and training organizations** to plan and to organize training/education and to promote training/education opportunities;
- **Higher education faculty, staff, and administrators** to assess current program content to determine course development and to coordinate and design course content to facilitate transfer and articulation agreements;
- **Federal, state, and local agencies** to develop and implement policies that will enhance professionalism in the field; and for
- **Professional development efforts** to create the framework for a career development system that allows professionals to achieve recognition in the field, provides access to competency-based training/education, and promotes compensation commensurate with educational achievement.



Presentation of Content Areas and Levels

Virginia's *Competencies for Early Childhood Professionals* are presented in specific core areas of competency that correspond to traditional curricular areas in early childhood education. Further, the core competencies address best practices for a safe and optimal learning environment for young children, effective relationships and interactions with children and their families, and strong program management for early childhood administrators. Each area describes the knowledge and skills professionals need in order to support optimal growth and learning of children from birth to kindergarten.

The eight core areas of competency used to organize Virginia's *Competencies for Early Childhood Professionals* are:

- Health, Safety, and Nutritional Practices;
- Understanding Child Growth and Development;
- Appropriate Classroom Observation and Assessment;
- Partnering with Families and Communities;
- Learning Environment;
- Effective Interactions;
- Program Management; and
- Teacher Qualifications and Professional Development.

Importantly, all early childhood professionals working with children from birth to kindergarten, regardless of role or setting, need to master a core body of knowledge. However, professionals may apply the knowledge differently depending on their roles and settings. For example, infant-toddler professionals need to develop competency in supporting beginning language development, and preschool professionals need to develop competency in supporting specific language skills such as speaking in more complex sentences and following multi-step directions. Program directors, school administrators and supervisors need skills in supervision to ensure that staff demonstrate competency in supporting developmentally appropriate language acquisition. These variations require different applications of knowledge. For this reason, the content area of Program Management applies to directors and administrators as well as to family care providers who have responsibility for program management.

Within each content area, four competency levels are presented to establish a continuum from preliminary skills to an advanced level of academic preparation and varied experience. Professionals progress from one level to another through **various paths** including formal study, training, mentoring and coaching, and reflection on practice. Importantly, levels are defined for early childhood professionals serving varying roles. Advancement does not imply administrative promotion resulting in little or no direct interaction with children. Rather, as all professionals develop, they participate in continuous quality improvement by acquiring new skills, refining previously developed skills, promoting skill development among others, adding to the knowledge base of the field of early childhood education through research and reflective inquiry, and working with others to advocate policies and quality programs that nurture the development of all children. Early childhood professionals are encouraged to advance their knowledge and skill sets across content areas.



Competency Levels

Professionals at...

- **Level I:** implement practices according to program guidelines and policies.
- **Level II:** demonstrate the skills present at the previous level. In addition, they work independently and take initiative in designing environments to facilitate development.
- **Level III:** demonstrate the skills present at the previous levels. In addition, they design, assess, and modify the learning environment to meet children's changing needs. They also model excellent practices and encourage others to develop proficiency in skills.
- **Level IV:** demonstrate the skills present at the previous levels. In addition, they provide leadership for planning, implementing, assessing, and modifying the program to ensure continuous improvement. They conduct inquiry to advance the understanding of best practices for their communities.

The four levels are intended to be cumulative; a professional working at Level IV has knowledge and skills to meet the competencies at Levels I, II, and III. At all levels, adults who support the growth and learning of young children continue their participation in professional development activities and increase their knowledge and skills within each of the content areas.

Core Competency Content Areas

Each of the eight content areas includes a **rationale**, or an explanation for the inclusion of each competency area. Following this rationale is the related **knowledge** base outlining the key research-based indicators in which the competency area is grounded. Finally, a set of **practices based on knowledge** is included to provide specific approaches and strategies to foster children's healthy growth and development.



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An electronic version of this document is available at <http://www.dss.virginia.gov/family/cc/index.html>.

For more information on the *Competencies for Early Childhood Professionals*, contact the Office of Early Childhood Development, Virginia Department of Social Services, 7 North Eighth Street, Richmond, VA 23219.