

All the Ways We Are Together: Creating a Caring, Collaborative Classroom Community in the Age of COVID-19

Introduction

The 2020–2021 school year promises to be unlike any other.

Like the one just past, it may well involve a reinterpretation of what it means to “go to school.” Even more challenging is the fact that this school year may *begin* with disruption.

Last year, by the time schools were suddenly shuttered in March, teachers, children, and families had already benefitted from time spent together. They had already had months to build, grow with, and forge bonds within their classroom communities. And while there was a great deal of uncertainty around how best to deliver instruction, teachers, children, and families had the advantage of already knowing each other well.

For many of you, the coming year will probably be quite different from that experience.

But, also unlike last year, we can be more prepared. While we cannot know exactly what this year will bring, we can expect that it may well include a mix of in-person and distance learning. Even if you are able to begin the year welcoming children into your school buildings, you will still probably need to have contingency plans for what to do if you suddenly close down again.

We know we need to work together to reimagine what the first six weeks of preschool will look like. Although there is still a great deal of uncertainty about the coming school year, there are also many knowns and constants. It is here where we will begin—with what we know for sure.

Social–Emotional Development: The Foundation for All Learning

One thing we know for sure is that social–emotional development is the foundation for all learning. This truth is likely to be more keenly felt than ever before, and teachers will need to prepare for addressing a variety of social–emotional needs that have intensified during several months of stay-at-home orders. Families will, understandably, harbor many concerns about sending their children to school this year, and you yourself will probably experience a variety of emotions related to returning to work.

It's not just adults who've been experiencing the effects of the current situation. Children and youths, too, have endured many disruptions to their lives and experienced losses. And while children are indeed resilient beings, changes in schedules, routines, and expectations mean that the structure that is so very important in a young child's life has been severely altered in the last few months.

Here are other truths to keep in mind as you plan for ways to support children's social-emotional development at this time:

1. School/child care is still a **stabilizing social force**.
2. Teachers are still a **necessary and powerful influence in children's lives**.
3. Families still look to teachers for **information, guidance, support, and resources**.
4. **Play is still the work of childhood**, and perhaps more than ever in their lives, children will need many opportunities to safely work out their thoughts, ideas, emotions, and developmental needs through unstructured, imaginative play.

Furthermore, **families still have hopes and dreams for their children**, and success at school will still play a major role in helping them achieve those hopes and dreams.

Voices From Around Teaching Strategies

While reasoning, measuring, analyzing, and other quantitative skills are important when learning about and working with technology, if such work involves other people (and it nearly always does), then social and emotional skills are actually the most critical part.

— Jonathan Cox, Vice President of Technical Operations

What Will Preschool Children Need This Year?

If the demands of preparing for this particular school year seem overwhelming, you can focus your thinking around answering this question: *What will the children in my class need this year?*

Here we find yet another persistent truth: regardless of how your class meets this year, **preschool-age children still need and deserve the same things that they always have:** routines, structure, positive relationships with you and their peers, and robust, engaging, and developmentally appropriate learning experiences. They also need a smooth, well-planned, well-supported transition from home to school.

Traditionally, preschool teachers have met these needs by

- establishing a warm, welcoming classroom climate;
- getting to know each child well;
- building partnerships with families;
- creating a strong sense of classroom community; and
- providing both small-group instruction and occasional large-group community-building experiences as well as individual attention to each child's strengths, needs, and interests.

While delivery models for teaching and learning may change depending on whether or not you are able to meet children in person, *these goals remain the same.*

Voices From Around Teaching Strategies

Things may be different this year, but you are going to make such a positive impact on the lives of the children in your class! You are about to do great things building your classroom's community!

— Tim Reed, Director, Product Marketing

Rethinking *The First Six Weeks of Preschool*

Regardless of whether or not you meet in person during the first six weeks of school, you can still structure your initial attention to children's needs using the six focus questions found in *The First Six Weeks: Building Your Classroom Community Teaching Guide* from *The Creative Curriculum® for Preschool*.

A few points to keep in mind:

- **Positive relationships are your first priority.** Focus first on getting to know the children and their families and building a positive relationship with each of them.
- **Make families aware of your focus questions.** Doing so is especially important if you are engaged in distance learning at any time during the first six weeks of school. Sharing each focus question with families as you address it with children helps build a community of learners with similar experiences, shared vocabulary, and a store of knowledge about school, even if they aren't physically present.
- As you look through a *Teaching Guide* and think about the daily and weekly plans you would ordinarily prepare, repeatedly ask yourself: **Which of these experiences can work well at home? How can I tweak an experience to help it make sense at home?** For example, *Mighty Minutes®* games, songs, and chants often work well at home as adults try to get their children's attention, help children transition through various parts of their day, or reinforce important foundational skills. If you are using the resources in *The Creative Curriculum® Cloud*, you have access to a variety of learning experiences—such as *Guided Learning Plans*, family *Mighty Minutes®*, and family-facing *Guided Learning Experiences*—that you can easily share. These resources have been specially tailored to support learning at home. They are easy to implement with materials typically found at home.
- Remember that the **quality of at-home learning experiences is far more important than the quantity.** Remind families that it's fine—and often even preferable—to engage children in a single experience repeatedly, as repetition is an important tool for teaching and learning.

Regardless of whether children are learning at school, at home, or through a hybrid of the two, remember that you never need to extend a study or address the work included in a *Teaching Guide* for longer than the recommended time period (i.e., typically around four weeks).

- Always feel free to **pick-and-choose from among the activities** suggested, as you work to remain responsive to needs of children, their families, and the community you are creating together.
- Even if your program is meeting in person full-time, you may find that new demands on your classroom structure and schedule mean that you cannot get through all of learning experiences that you would normally plan. Consider **which activities will work best at home** and **prioritize in-person experiences for those that work best in the classroom**. Then you can support families to reinforce or extend the skills that children have learned with you. If your program subscribes to *The Creative Curriculum® Cloud*, you have access to study-related *Guided Learning Plans* and family-facing equivalents of all of the preschool-level *Mighty Minutes®* activities and *Intentional Teaching Experiences*. These resources offer ideas for developmentally appropriate activities that families can easily do with their children at home.

Focus Question 1: What names do we need to know at school?

One of the most exciting aspects of coming to preschool is meeting classmates, a process made much more difficult—though not impossible!—if your school is participating in distance learning.

- If you can host a group **video chat**, consider doing so with just two or three families at a time, especially in the beginning. Help the children learn the names of their classmates. Consider mapping out flexible grouping when planning your video chats so that the children get to **meet all of their classmates, a few at a time**.
- **Invite the children to introduce themselves** to the other children in their video chat group by sharing the name they liked to be called and something they enjoy doing or learning about. Any children who feel uncomfortable speaking up can have a family member do the talking for them, especially initially.
- **Keep a list of children's interests** and let children know if any classmates share those interests.
- Encourage the children to send you (either electronically or through the mail) a **self-portrait and a photo of themselves** doing something they enjoy. Incorporate the pictures in class discussions to help the children learn about one another. Use their photos and self-portraits to **create a class book** that you share with the children now and revisit throughout the year.
- Encourage the children to also send you **photos and drawings of their families**. An adult family member can assist in labeling the drawing or adding a note about the photo as the child names each person in it.

Focus Question 2: What should we do if we feel sad or scared at school?

Children of all ages (not to mention their parents!) feel both excitement and nervousness when a new school year begins. This year will probably bring exaggerated versions of the customary concerns along with new ones related to COVID-19:

- How can I stay healthy at school?
- What happens if I get sick at school?
- What will happen if school has to close suddenly?

It is important to let children know that it's okay to feel sad or scared at school and that there are adults who can help them. One way to help children work through their concerns is by reading books together that address those topics. In addition to the read-alouds that you yourself lead, you can recommend **children's books*** to families along with suggestions for how to use a book (e.g., multiple read-alouds, a picture walk, open-ended questions) to help children identify the problem in the story, empathize with the characters, and sort out their own feelings.

Remember to also talk with children about the many positive aspects of school... not just the scary ones!

- Regardless of whether or not children are in school, you can ask them to **think, talk, and draw about things that make them happy**.
- Ask them what they are looking forward to doing at school.

*Remind families that many local public libraries and larger online libraries offer virtual lending, so that even if they are closed, families with internet access can still check out books.

Focus Question 3: What are our rules?

If you are able to meet as an in-person class, you will most likely have many new procedures and protocols that children will need to learn—proper handwashing, certainly, but also instructions for appropriate use of shared materials and shared spaces.

Remember that while procedures, protocols, and instructions are not the same as class rules, these important classroom guidelines are taking on extra significance this year. Help children see that proper handwashing, covering a cough or sneeze, and sometimes even mask-wearing and social distancing are actually part of what it means to treat each other with kindness.

If you and the children are using the **“big rule, little rule” strategy** (preschool *Intentional Teaching Experience* SE09, “Big Rule, Little Rule”), you can incorporate these procedures as “little rules” (e.g., we wash our hands after each game, we stand apart when we are waiting in line) that help maintain the “big rules” of taking care of each other and the classroom materials.

As always, both your class procedures and your rules should be grounded in the notion that you are **establishing the expectations for how you will build and maintain a caring, collaborative classroom community**.

- **Ask children to think about what they believe to be good rules** for being kind to each other, for taking care of their toys and other belongings, and for making sure that everyone has a chance to learn, grow, and play.
- If you are distance-learning during the first weeks of school, let children know that you can **revisit the rules** once you are all together and better able to understand how you all get along together.
- Consider establishing **specific "little rules" when conducting online video chats or class meetings** with more than one child and family at a time so that everyone knows how to speak up, join in, make a comment, or ask a question.

Focus Question 4: When do things happen at school?

Chances are that you will need to make some adjustments to your typical classroom schedule to account for more frequent handwashing, more thorough cleaning and disinfecting, and setting up and transitioning between activities so that children can maintain distance from each other.

Keep in mind, though, that the most important elements of structuring your day effectively remain the same, including the fact that **your daily schedule affects how children think about coming to school** and how well they function within the school day.

If school is open for in-person attendance, you will most likely **share your daily and weekly schedules with families**. If you are engaged in distance learning, consider doing so as well to give families insight into the structure of a typical day in preschool and the variety of experiences you offer.

- Children still need **large blocks of uninterrupted time for play**, both indoors and outdoors.
- They still need many opportunities to practice **low-risk decision-making**.
- They still need a **mix of both active and quiet pursuits** throughout the day.
- If your school is open but then needs to shut down for a while, remember that children will need to once again **learn about and become accustomed to the structure of the day**.
- If children are engaged in distance learning at any point during the year, let families know that for **some daily routines**—such as meal times, snack times, and sleep times—**maintaining consistency in timing is more important** than doing so for other experiences.

Focus Question 5: Who works at our school?

It will be even more important this year to have recent photographs of the **important people at school whom you want children to know**. Although "headshots" that provide the clearest images of people's faces are often best, consider also taking full-length photographs of anyone who wears special work clothing (such as custodians, crossing guards, and healthcare workers) to help children associate those individuals with their uniforms.

- Consider providing two versions of each person's photograph—both with and without wearing a mask.

You can display the photos during a video chat and talk about them, either introducing the people to children for the first time or providing reminders of who these people are, what their names are, and what their roles are at your school. It may also be helpful to provide printed or digital copies of the photos that the children and families can keep at home, regardless of whether or not children are able to see them during video chats.

Focus Question 6: How can we make and keep friends? How can we be part of a group?

Some of the greatest joys of school are its social aspects, such as making friends and getting to spend time with them each day. Every year, many children worry about whether or not they will make friends at school, but this year brings the added concern of making and keeping friends when distance—either real physical distance or enforced social distance—is disrupting traditional models of social interaction.

- **Continue to talk with the children about each other.** In fact, take advantage of every opportunity to help the children get to know one another. Each time you host a small-group video chat or send home a class newsletter, talk about what you have learned about individual children.
- Point out when you hear about things that two or more children have in common, such as **shared interests or favorite pastimes**.
- Invite the children to think about **ways that they are alike and different**. Lead them in playing variations of the activity *Mighty Minutes 02*, "Just Like Mine!" In this game, you select one child and point out something about him or her: "Juan's shirt has stripes." The other children who are also wearing shirts with stripes can respond by saying, "Just like mine!" You can also use what you learn about each child to play variations such as "I Do, Too!" (*Carla likes to play T-ball! Henry has a brother!*) or "Not me!" (*Suri likes to eat okra! AJ has a pet goldfish!*).

Ministudy: What sounds do we hear at school?

If your program is meeting in person, you will want to reconsider which activities in the ministudy make the most sense at this time. Full implementation of some of the suggested experiences may be problematic, such as cooking projects, sharing headphones, using musical instruments (particularly instruments that require a child to blow air into them produce a sound), or interviewing a visitor. Even taking a walk around the school may be discouraged if your program needs to control the movement of people around the building and grounds.

If your program is engaged in distance learning, consider delaying the ministudy until the children are actually attending in person, since "sounds at school" (the topic of the mini-study) is an important aspect of the physical environment. You can still talk with children about the sounds they hear around their homes, where they come from, and how they are made. The point is to continue to nurture children's curiosity and their abilities to explore and discover, to make and test predictions, and to draw conclusions based on what they observe.

Revisiting Guidance From *The First Six Weeks Later in the Year*

If schools close and reopen, or if they open for in-person learning after the start of the school year, you may want to revisit relevant sections of *The First Six Weeks: Building Your Classroom Community Teaching Guide* to help children readjust to the school setting.

- **Revisit class rules** and ask the children if they think the rules are working well or need to be changed.
- Make a memory game out of your **photographs of school helpers** or a matching game out of the photos showing them with and without wearing masks. Help the children recall who works in the school and what their jobs are.
- **Tell the children about any changes you have made** since they were last in school, such as changes to the daily or weekly schedules, the physical environment, or the storage of materials.

Voices From Around Teaching Strategies

Thank you so much for the important work you do in shaping our future, especially as world events make what is already a difficult job even more so.

As Fred Rogers said, "You've made this day a special day, by just your being you."

—Luke Cieslewicz, Strategic Initiatives Product Manager

If Your First Six Weeks Are Held at a Distance

Connecting With Children

Young children respond differently to **video chats**, but if you have the capability, try to leverage this resource with the families you serve. These chats need not be very long, nor should they involve large groups, but they can give you an opportunity to help both children and adults get to know you and, if possible, the classroom's physical environment. Consider setting up appointments with one to three families at a time, giving them several options for days and times to meet.

Early in the year, these short video chats can help you get to know each other; later on, they can also be used for **small-group instruction**. Just as you would when planning in-person small-group instruction, you can prioritize your time with children by asking yourself what is most important for them to hear from you (and for you to observe for yourself) and what you can reasonably ask of families. For example, if you use an *Intentional Teaching Experience* that focuses on a certain skill during your video chat, you can then share the related *Guided Learning Experience* with families, so they can reinforce that learning at home.

Regardless of whether children can "see" you virtually—but particularly for those who cannot—consider establishing individual **"pen pal" relationships** in addition to your whole-group classroom newsletter. Send each child a written note from you and enclose a self-addressed stamped envelope. In each letter, share with the child a new detail or interesting fact about you, such as your favorite type of music, your favorite book or movie, your favorite food (or least favorite!), how you like to spend your free time, or the names of the people and pets in your family. Ask the child to write or draw something about himself or herself and mail it back to you, and then—with the child's permission—share this information with other members of the class to help them learn more about each other.

Connecting With Families

More than ever before, it's important to have a way to connect with each family. Schools will open for the 2020–2021 school year with a variety of instructional delivery models, and as the year progresses, you may be asked to switch models—perhaps more than once. Even if schools are open for in-person learning, you may also be asked to support many more families than usual who opt to homeschool their children, at least for a part of the school year. In any case, you will need to leverage resources—both modern and time-honored—to make sure that all children have access at home to the same kinds of developmentally appropriate learning experiences that they would typically enjoy in your classroom.

Voices From Around Teaching Strategies

We have always talked about being lifelong learners and creating a community of learners, and with so much uncertainty, you, the teacher, are likely being asked to learn the most. Be patient and kind with yourself. Remind yourself that you are giving this your very best. Remind yourself that there is a difference in excellence and perfection. Lastly, remind yourself of how challenging change, uncertainty, and learning can be and let it create a deeper empathy for or understanding of the children in your classroom and how overwhelming the first six weeks of school can be.

— Laura Bilbrey, Director of Customer Success

Helping Families Structure Learning

While you cannot (and should not!) expect that families will run at-home versions of your entire program, you can indeed supply them with resources and ideas for providing developmentally appropriate, rich, robust learning opportunities.

One of the best ways for families to support children's development and learning (and assessment of learning!) at home is to do so **within the context of their everyday activities**. Guide families in understanding the importance of their ordinary actions and interactions as well as the unique opportunities embedded in so many items generally found at home. Just as with studies from *The Creative Curriculum*[®], which are built around everyday objects that children can explore firsthand, anything at home that is both familiar and interesting to children holds opportunities for learning.

Sometimes families are already great at recognizing this fact (who hasn't noticed how much their children enjoy playing with cardboard boxes?) but at other times, they will need guidance from you to see that learning opportunities are indeed all around them.

- Remember that you do not need to send everything home at once. In fact, **it's better not to overwhelm families** with too many ideas at once.
- If your program subscribes to *The Creative Curriculum*[®] *Cloud*, you have access to an engaging assortment of developmentally appropriate resources designed specifically to empower families to support children's development and learning (such **Guided Learning Plans** that align with investigation questions from studies, **Guided Learning Experiences**, and family **Mighty Minutes**[®]) that you can send home digitally or by creating printed packets. We suggest that you consider sharing some of these resources with families even when children are attending school in person as a way to extend learning at home.
- Also offer families ideas for **documenting their children's development and learning** (e.g., through anecdotal observation notes, photographs, videos, and audio recordings) along with ways to share those items with you. Teachers using *MyTeachingStrategies*[®] can access a variety of family-facing digital tools in the Family area, including development and learning activities, *LearningGames*[®], and a two-way communication tool. If your program uses *GOLD*[®], you have an easy way for families to share documentation of their children's learning at home. Even when your school is operating normally, these are excellent resources for building strong partnerships with families.

Some Final Thoughts

An essential characteristic of *The Creative Curriculum*®—from the beginning of the first six weeks of school through the final investigation of the last study you implement as the school year draws to a close—is the importance of **making it your own**. You will always want to be able to respond to the strengths, needs, and interests of the children in your class. You also want to consider the strengths and needs of the children's families and both the history and current events of your community. While these statements have always been true, they seem especially so right now.

This year, while the decisions you make and the actions you take may sometimes differ from those you would typically apply to your preschool program, remember that **the most important thing about school**—regardless of where or when it is held or the curriculum used—**will always be the children's experience**.

So take a moment to think about where you *will* continue to find joy within this difficult job and this difficult time. Reminding children that you are still their teacher, that they are still very important to you, and that they and their classmates are still a part of a special community will indeed help you begin to build this community, regardless of whether or not you are able to assemble as a class. Be more explicit than ever in letting children know how much they mean to you, and you may eventually find that helping children and their families through this time—*together*—is among the most rewarding aspects of a career spent in early childhood education.

Lastly, remember that **each of us is made stronger when we work together**. Children have always benefitted from having a network of support. We realize now that we all need networks of support. Just as children and families rely on you, don't forget that you, too, need to rely on others. Make sure you are taking time for self-care and personal reflection. Forging connections with children and families—and even among your colleagues—this year will likely look different, but let's not let that challenge defeat us. Instead, let's join together to strengthen hearts, minds, and bodies. Let's learn from each other and grow with each other.

Voices From Around Teaching Strategies

Remember you are the expert in the room. Don't be dismayed if you don't know everything about a new curriculum or assessment tool. All that is asked of you is that you use these tools to create a warm, welcoming environment (in person or online) for the children in your classroom so that you can become an expert on EACH and EVERY one of them!

— Sharilyn Hilliard, Customer Success Manager

Here's wishing you, the children, and their families a wonderful year together, regardless of what your "together" looks like.