



THE NEW APPROACH TO EARLY CHILDHOOD EDUCATION

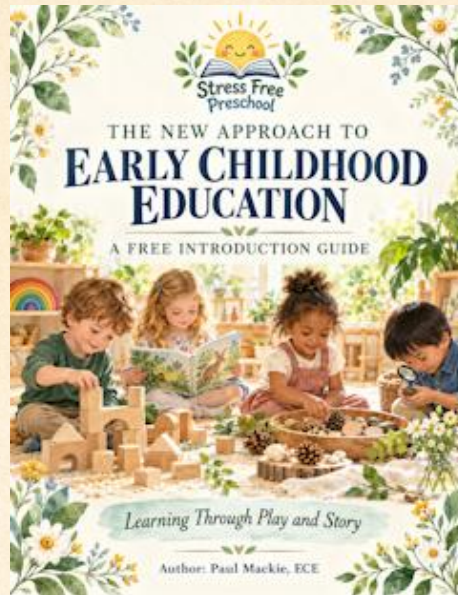
A FREE INTRODUCTION GUIDE



Learning Through Play and Story

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**The New Approach to Early Childhood Education
Learning Through Play and Story
An Introduction Guide**



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**The New Approach to Early Childhood Education:
www.thenewapproachtoece.com**



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Welcome to a New Approach to Early Childhood Education

A parent walks into a preschool and sees children playing, building something with blocks, pouring water, dressing dolls, moving Loose Parts, drawing, talking, pretending, and exploring.

There may be no worksheets on the tables or walls.
No identical crafts children have created to take home.
No teacher standing at the front giving a lesson.

**So the parent asks a reasonable question:
“What is my child learning? All I see is my child playing.”**

For many educators, that can be a difficult question to answer.

The New Approach to Early Childhood Education is designed to help educators answer that question, by helping you recognize, explain, and make the learning in play visible.



The Problem: A Child's Learning Is Not Always Easy to See

**The problem is not that learning is absent from play.
The problem is that learning is often difficult to recognize and explain.**

An educator may clearly observe what a child is doing:

- Building a tower.
- Filling and emptying containers.
- Arranging objects.
- Drawing marks.
- Talking during pretend play.
- Trying repeatedly to make something work.

But when a parent asks:

“What is my child learning?”

simply saying, “Children learn through play,” may not be enough.

The educator needs a way to connect what was observed with the possible learning behind the play.

This is where The New Approach to Early Childhood Education helps solve the problem of seeing learning in a child's play.



How The New Approach to ECE Makes Learning Visible

The New Approach to Early Childhood Education gives educators a simple way to watch a child's play and to recognizing and explaining possible learning.

1. Notice and record the child's play.

The **7 Senses** and **ODE** help the educator notice what the child does and says and record a short, factual observation.

2. Connecting observation to possible learning.

The **Possible Learning Reference Guides** help the educator see possible mathematics, literacy, science, problem-solving, communication, physical development, and life skills that may be supported by the play.

3. Build the picture over time.

The Child's Learning and Skills Diary brings meaningful observations and possible learning together, so the educator has something useful to present to and discuss with families.

4. Make documentation quicker and easier.

The Observation App helps capture an observation quickly and review the possible learning later. The app produces a PDF copy of the Child's Skills Diary.

The Six-Step Process provides the daily framework for using these ideas in a child-led, play-based environment.

**See the play. Record what happened.
Recognize possible learning. Share the Child's Skills Diary.**



The Child's Interest

The New Approach to Early Childhood Education begins with a simple idea: Learning begins with the child's interest.

Children show us what interests them through their everyday play and actions.

Watch what the child:

- Chooses.
- Repeats.
- Returns to.
- Builds or creates.
- Talks about.
- Spends time exploring.

These repeated interests give the educator clues about what is meaningful to the child.

Instead of deciding what every child must do or learn, the educator prepares materials, space, time, and opportunities that allow the child's interest to continue through indoor and outdoor play.

**Follow the interest. Prepare the possibilities.
Let the child lead the learning.**



What Is Child-Led Play?

Child-led play begins with interest and choice.

The educator prepares an inviting environment with materials children can see, reach, and explore.

The child decides:

- What interests them.
- Which materials to use.
- How to use them.
- What to create or explore.
- Whether to change the play's direction.

There is no required finished product and no single correct way to use the materials.

**The educator prepares the possibilities.
The child decides where the play goes.**



How Child-Led Play Develops

Child-led play often develops gradually.

A child may begin by simply exploring materials.

As the play continues, the child may:

- **Explore:** Handle materials and discover what they can do.
- **Experiment:** Try different ideas, make changes, solve problems, and try again.
- **Create:** Begin to develop their own ideas and creations.

The important learning is often not the finished product.

Learning is found in the choices, experimenting, problem-solving, communication, and decision-making that happen along the way.

The play develops. Learning develops with it.



What Can We Actually Observe?

When children play, we can observe what they do and say.

We may notice a child:

- Stacking and balancing blocks.
- Sorting or comparing objects.
- Filling and emptying containers.
- Counting during play.
- Drawing or making marks.
- Asking questions.
- Trying again when something does not work.

These actions are easy to observe.

What is not always obvious is the possible learning behind those actions.

A child may be developing mathematics, literacy, science, problem-solving, communication, or self-regulation, but we cannot simply assume that from one play moment.



The 7 Senses: Knowing Where to Look

When observing play, it can be difficult to know what to notice.

The 7 Senses Observation Method gives the educator simple places to look:

Sight.

Hearing.

Touch.

Smell.

Taste.

Balance (Vestibular).

Body awareness (Proprioception).

You do not need to observe all 7 senses.

They simply help you notice what the child is doing during play.

**The 7 Senses help you notice the play.
They do not tell you what the child has learned.**



ODE Helps Record What Happened

Once something meaningful happens during play, the educator needs a simple way to record it.

ODE means:

Observe: Notice what the child does and says.

Document: Write a short, factual note about what happened.

Expand: Consider whether the child's interest could be supported with more time, space, or materials.

At this stage, the educator is not deciding what the child has learned.

The goal is simply to capture what happened while the play is still fresh.

**Observe the play. Record what happened.
Consider possible learning later.**



Possible Learning Reference Guides: Bridging the Gap

The educator has now observed and recorded what the child actually did and said.

The next question is:

“What might the child be learning through this play?”

The Possible Learning Reference Guides help connect the observation with possible areas of learning, such as:

- Literacy and language.
- Mathematics.
- Science.
- Problem-solving.
- Communication.
- Physical development.
- Life skills.

The educator selects only the possibilities that are supported by what was observed.

The Possible Learning Reference Guides help make possible learning visible without claiming that one observation proves a skill has been learned.



Now You Can Answer the Parent

The parent asks:
“What is my child learning?”

Instead of simply saying:
“They were playing with blocks.”

The educator can now explain:

“Today your child built and rebuilt a tower several times. They compared different blocks, changed their approach when the tower fell, and kept trying.”

Using the Possible Learning Reference Guides, the educator may recognize possible learning in areas such as:

- Spatial thinking.
- Comparison.
- Problem-solving.
- Cause and effect.
- Persistence.

Now the educator can talk about the learning behind the play, not just describe the activity.



Build the Picture Over Time

**One observation may suggest possible learning.
Several meaningful observations can begin to show a pattern.**

The Child's Learning and Skills Diary brings together selected observations, possible learning, interests, and developing skills over time. This gives the educator something more useful to discuss with families than a single activity from one day.

The Skills Diary can help show:

- Interests the child returns to.
- Skills that appear repeatedly.
- Possible learning across different play experiences.
- Changes and development over time.

The Child's Skills Diary helps turn everyday play observations into a clearer picture of the child's learning and development.

The Child's Skills Diary is a useful tool to show a child's development and to show parents what their child is learning.



Make Observation and Documentation Easier

Observing children is important.

Spending too much time completing paperwork is not.

The Preschool Teacher Observation App is designed to make the process quicker and easier.

The educator can:

- Record a short factual observation.
- Save it and return to it later.
- Review possible learning and life skills.
- Note ideas for expanding the child's interests.
- Add meaningful observations to the Child's Learning and Skills Diary.
- Create a PDF that can be saved, printed, or shared.
- Capture the moment now. Review it later.

**Less time completing paperwork.
More time observing and supporting children.**



The Six-Step Process

The Six-Step Process brings the ideas in *The New Approach to Early Childhood Education* together into a simple daily preschool framework.

1. Meet and Greet

Welcome each child personally and create a warm, safe beginning to the day.

2. Story and Circle Time

Share stories, songs, rhymes, pictures, or conversations that introduce ideas children may choose to explore.

3. Set Up the Environment

Prepare a calm, inviting space with accessible, open-ended materials.

4. Observe, Document, Expand (ODE)

Notice what children choose, say, repeat, and explore. Record meaningful moments and consider possible ways to support the play.

5. Child's Learning and Skills Diary

Bring selected observations together over time to help recognize interests, developing abilities, and possible learning.

6. Expand on the Child's Interests

Respond with small, thoughtful changes that give the child another possibility to explore.

**Follow the child's interests. Prepare the environment.
Observe the play. Let the child lead the learning.**



Step 1: Meet and Greet

The first step begins before the play begins.

How a child enters the preschool environment can affect how safe, connected, and ready to explore they feel.

Meet and Greet creates a warm, personal beginning to the day and gives the educator an opportunity to notice how the child arrives, responds, and connects.

A greeting may look simple, but it can support:

- Connection.
- Choice.
- Emotional security.
- Communication.
- A sense of belonging.

The New Approach shows you how to make this simple part of the day meaningful without making it complicated.
You are welcome. You belong here.



Step 2: Story and Circle Time

Story and Circle Time can introduce ideas that later appear naturally in children's play.

A story, song, picture, object, or conversation may spark curiosity about:

- People and places.
- Animals and nature.
- Building and creating.
- Feelings and relationships.
- New words and ideas.

The important difference is that the educator does not decide what the child must do with those ideas.

The child may return to something from Circle Time during play, change it completely, or ignore it and follow another interest.

The New Approach shows educators how stories and simple shared experiences can become starting points for child-led play.

Introduce the possibility. Let the child decide where it goes.



Step 3: Set Up the Environment

The environment can become one of the educator's most powerful teaching tools.

Instead of preparing the same activity for every child, the educator creates spaces and materials that invite children to:

- Choose.
- Explore.
- Build.
- Create.
- Move.
- Pretend.
- Follow their own interests.

The goal is not to tell the child what to make or how to use the materials. It is to create an environment rich enough to encourage curiosity and give the child possibilities to explore.

The New Approach shows educators how to prepare simple child-led environments using the space and materials they already have.

Prepare the possibilities. Let the child decide where the play goes.



Step 4: Observe, Document, Expand (ODE)

This is where the educator begins to make the learning in play visible.

ODE gives the educator a simple way to:

- Notice what the child actually does and says.
- Record a short, factual observation.
- Consider possible ways the play or environment could be expanded.

The important part is to observe first and interpret later.

The educator does not need to decide immediately what the child has learned.

The New Approach to Early Childhood Education shows educators how to use ODE to capture meaningful play moments without turning observation into complicated paperwork.

**Observe the play. Record what happened.
Consider what may come next.**



Step 5: Child's Learning and Skills Diary

**One observation gives you a moment.
Several observations can begin to show a pattern.**

The Child's Learning and Skills Diary brings together selected observations over time to help the educator recognize:

- Interests the child returns to.
- Developing skills and abilities.
- Repeated actions and ideas.
- Possible learning across different play experiences.
- Changes in learning and development that appear over time.

This gives the educator a clearer picture of the child's development and something meaningful to discuss with families.

The diary is not a test or a checklist of what a child should know. The Child's Skills Diary builds a picture from what the child does during everyday play.

The New Approach shows educators how to use the diary simply, without creating more complicated paperwork.

Notice the play moments. Build the picture over time.



Step 6: Expand on the Child's Interests

Expansion begins with what the child has already shown you.

Through observation, the educator may notice an interest, idea, or type of play that the child keeps returning to.

Step 6 helps the educator respond to that interest by creating another possibility for the child to explore.

The goal is not to turn the child's interest into a lesson or decide what should happen next.

Instead, the educator supports the direction the child is already taking while allowing the child to remain in control of the play.

The New Approach shows educators how to recognize when, how, and whether to expand an interest without taking over the learning.

**Follow the interest. Offer possibilities.
Let the child decide what happens next.**



What Could the New Approach to ECE Look Like in Your Preschool?

When educators have a practical way to follow children's interests and recognize the learning within play, everyday preschool experiences can begin to look different.

Instead of wondering:

"What is this child learning?"

The educator can begin to see:

- What interests the child.
- What the child is exploring and developing.
- Where possible literacy, mathematics, science, and life skills appear naturally.
- How the child's learning develops over time.
- What might support the child's interest next.

And when families ask:

"What is my child learning?"

The educator has meaningful observations to share.

THE RESULT

- You can see, document, and explain the learning happening through a child's play.
- You have a clearer picture of the child's interests, developing skills, and possible learning, without turning play into formal lessons.

**See the play differently. Recognize the learning.
Explain the learning to families.**



Ready to Explore the New Approach to Early Childhood Education?

Discover practical resources for bringing child-led, play-based learning into everyday early childhood education.



Workshop



Books & Educator Resources



**Stories & Learning
Through Play**



**Observation &
Documentation**

Explore the full range of resources
www.thenewapproachtoece.com



Scan to explore more.



About the Author

Paul Mackie is an early childhood educator with over twenty years of hands-on experience working in preschool classrooms, childcare centers, and community-based early learning programs. Throughout his career, he has focused on observing how children naturally learn through play, movement, repetition, and curiosity when environments are thoughtfully prepared and adults step back from directing outcomes.

This book reflects Paul's practical experience designing child-led, play-based learning environments that follow children's interests rather than fixed lesson plans. His work emphasizes Loose Parts, open-ended materials, and carefully arranged spaces that invite exploration, problem-solving, self-regulation, and storytelling.

The approaches shared in this book grew directly from years of daily observation, reflection, and adjustment within real early childhood settings.

Paul is the creator of *Story Time Made Simple* and *The New Approach to Early Childhood Education*, resources designed to support educators, caregivers, and families in creating calm, meaningful learning environments for children aged two to eight. His work bridges early childhood education theory with practical, easy-to-apply environment design that honors children's curiosity and passions.

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