Summary and Objectives

This lesson provides an overview of the Early Learning Matters (ELM) Curriculum developed by Purdue University for programs serving children from birth to five years of age.[1] It describes why the curriculum was developed, key characteristics of ELM's approach to early learning, and how ELM supports classroom staff in providing high-quality, developmentally appropriate experiences for young children.

At the conclusion of this lesson, you will have a stronger understanding of:

- why the ELM Curriculum was developed;

- how ELM supports early learning; and

- how ELM helps classroom staff engage in developmentally appropriate practice.

This lesson is to be pursued **after** becoming familiar with the ELM Curriculum's *User Guide* that pertains to the ages of children in your room. There is a *User Guide* for children from birth to 36 months and a *User Guide* for children 3–5 years of age. This lesson builds on essential information in the *Guides*. It is not a *User Guide* substitute. This lesson is to be used with the active involvement of a trainer who is familiar with the ELM Curriculum.

REVIEW

The ELM Curriculum offers a comprehensive, developmentally appropriate approach to supporting the learning and development of children from birth through five years of age. ELM was developed by Purdue University for the Department of Defense Child Development Program and civilian programs of early care and education. The curriculum offers a whole child focus on skills that bolster school readiness and life success.

Why ELM Was Developed

More is known today than ever before about effective ways to promote early learning and development. Researchers have identified critically important aspects of young children's school readiness and well-being—especially self-regulation, literacy, and mathematics—that historically have received limited attention in early childhood programs.

Sometimes programs respond to new research on school readiness by using supplemental materials focused on a specific content area, such as math or literacy. This approach can pose major challenges.

Different resources need to be coordinated, often with little or no guidance and shared framework. Also, decisions need to be made about the type and amount of focus to give to various areas. There is risk of giving superficial or poorly organized attention to skills that are particularly beneficial to develop in the early years.

From birth, children are eager to learn. The responsibility for providing high-quality experiences for curious minds and rapidly developing bodies is a challenging and rewarding privilege.

The National Association for the Education of Young Children (NAEYC) notes that even well-qualified staff can find it difficult to create from scratch a comprehensive curriculum that optimally promotes all important aspects of development.[2] The rewards of helping a young child get off to a solid start in life are especially strong when staff have access to curriculum resources that enable them to excel.

ELM was developed to move forward the best early childhood research in ways that benefit

young children and their families. The curriculum offers in-depth guidance on how to promote early childhood skills that matter long term. ELM directly supports all developmental areas related to school readiness: cognitive, social, emotional, language, and physical.

ELM promotes the development of the whole child with planned and flexible learning experiences focused on specific skills. Research demonstrates the positive outcomes of a curriculum approach that integrates active, skill-focused learning experiences in both social and academic areas.[3]

ELM also promotes the professional development of staff who use the curriculum, and offers an extensive resource to help families support their child's learning and development.

How ELM Supports Early Learning

The ELM Curriculum fully embraces NAEYC's developmentally appropriate practice (DAP) position statement and accreditation criteria. This includes providing an **optimal balance of adult-guided and child-guided learning experiences**. The two types of experiences are not entirely separate. Staff-initiated activities are shaped by children's active engagement, and child-initiated experiences often include gentle, strategic staff support of children's interests, such as providing materials and meaningful ideas for children to explore.

ELM Curriculum activities frequently use **guided play**. In guided play, a child pursues his/her interests within a caregiver-supported situation that reflects a program's goals for learning. A caregiver provides materials of interest to a child and gently offers comments or actions that can broaden or deepen a child's explorations. Experts view guided play as a middle ground between direct instruction and open-ended free play. Research indicates that guided play is more effective than free play in supporting goals for a child's learning.[4]

ELM promotes a **comprehensive set of goals** that are geared to the needs of individual children

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ELM Supports the Whole Child

Birth–36 Months

Cognitive

Communication/Language

Physical/Health

Self-Regulation

Social-Emotional

3–5 Years

Creative Expression

Language/Literacy

Mathematics

Physical/Health

Science

Self-Regulation

Social-Emotional

Social Studies

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and to the **predictable sequences** in which children generally acquire key skills. The goals represent early childhood knowledge and abilities that provide a solid foundation for success in school and in life. ELM calls these **foundation skills**.

ELM's learning activities incorporate **developmentally appropriate teaching strategies**. The strategies are listed in this lesson's box entitled, Developmentally Appropriate Teaching Practices in ELM Activity Plans. They reflect best practice recommendations of DAP experts.[5]

Developmentally appropriate practice is the basis of three key characteristics of ELM: intentional, meaningful, and plentiful. High-quality classrooms are **intentional** in supporting children's learning. Experiences that help children advance in their development and learning do not happen by chance. Learning activities are thoughtful and purposeful, and staff respond to unexpected events during

the day with a clear focus on goals for children's learning.[6] ELM offers a detailed overall plan that specifies learning goals and experiences designed to support goals. This is consistent with the NAEYC accreditation standard for a high-quality curriculum.[7]

In the ELM Curriculum, **meaningful** support for learning and development is responsive to children's understandings and abilities in the context of desired goals. This approach includes the use of **challenging and achievable** goals for children emphasized in DAP.

ELM is **plentiful** in the amount and quality of attention given to skills that bolster success. Areas that are most strongly associated with school readiness are the focus of frequent activities. Planned activities build on children's prior experiences and understandings, and provide children with **varied opportunities to practice** newly acquired knowledge and abilities.

ELM supports early learning by providing **parenting tips for families** that extend and reinforce classroom activities for a given period. The tips are offered in an easy-to-use *Readiness Starts Early* resource.

Developmentally Appropriate Teaching Practices in ELM Activity Plans[13]	
Strategies	**Examples from Activity Plans**
Acknowledge communications and actions	Invite preschool children to practice making thick and thin lines. Positively acknowledge children's attempts.[14]
Encourage curiosity, actions, persistence	Encourage toddlers, one at a time, to show what to do with a scarf.[15]
Ask questions to provide focus and exploration	Examples of questions to ask while children use yarn to make a basic shape of their choice: "What shape are you making?" "What is something that is the same shape?"[16]
Back-and-forth exchanges (serve and return)	The infant may serve a "coo" and you can return with an imitation of the "coo."[17]
Pause to invite looking, thinking, communicating	Pause on a page to encourage discussion of a specific emotion.[18]
Pace an activity in response to child's lead and reactions	Turn the pages as slowly or as quickly as the infant seems to prefer.[19]
Provide information by (1) naming objects, actions, and people;	Point to and say the name of items of clothing shown in the book. Describe where the item is worn on our body.[20]
and (2) giving specific feedback	"You held one star and pulled on the other star. The stars came apart."[21]
Demonstrate how an object, action, or game works	Demonstrate how to salute the flag by placing your right hand over your heart.[22]
Give assistance when child accepts offer of help	Offer assistance to a toddler who seems uncertain about how to put two links together.[23]
Request participation	Station yourself at the steps of a toddler climber. Kneel and invite a toddler to go up the steps with your help.[24]

How ELM Supports Classroom Staff

There are five sequential steps for becoming familiar with the ELM Curriculum. The steps are summarized in this lesson's box entitled, Preparing to Use ELM. The curriculum offers support to classroom staff in pursuing each step.

User Guides. Successful use of ELM begins with a careful reading of an *ELM Curriculum User Guide.* There are two *Guides*: one for rooms serving children birth through 36 months and one for rooms serving children 3–5 years of age. Each *Guide* contains a wealth of background information and descriptions of curriculum procedures, and is intended to be consulted regularly while implementing ELM.

Each *Guide* is organized into four major sections. A detailed Table of Contents lists the contents of each section.

The Introduction to the Curriculum section answers questions that users of ELM, family members, or other stakeholders may have about why and how the ELM Curriculum was developed. It describes how and why young children learn best through experiences that are intentional, meaningful, and plentiful. Studies and pertinent parts of the DAP position statement are briefly summarized in support of these key characteristics of ELM.

The Introduction also describes major influences on the development of ELM. These include professional standards, research evidence and expert guidance, pilot testing, and the realities of staff credentials and turnover in the early childhood field.

The section on Areas Promoted by ELM offers an in-depth look at developmental areas and content emphasized in the curriculum. This is a major resource for professional development. For each area, there is a research-based description of specific skills that are important to support in the early years; a summary of pertinent NAEYC accreditation standards; an overview of how ELM's activity plans

promote the development of skills in the area; and a description of additional classroom practices that promote the area and strategies that can strengthen your understanding of the area.

The third section of each *Guide* is a chart that shows the sequence of skills and learning goals across a year. ELM offers incremental support of skills that are the building blocks of success in life. The curriculum's activities follow well-documented pathways of skill acquisition in domains, such as motor development (birth through five years), and in content areas, such as social studies (3–5 years).

The fourth section—Effective Use of ELM—provides detailed information on the following: planning a daily schedule, how to use activity plans, individualizing children's learning experiences, connecting with families; and training resources.

Daily Schedule. Planning a room's daily schedule is a major step in preparing to use the ELM Curriculum. Each *User Guide* offers guidelines for staff to consider.

The guidelines for rooms serving infants and toddlers vary by age group because the configurations of activities are different across ages. The vast majority of activities (85%) for children birth–12 months are designed as one-to-one experiences (caregiver and infant). A similar percentage of activities (83%) for children 24–36 months are designed for informal gatherings. A

Preparing to Use ELM

1. Understand essential information in an *ELM Curriculum User Guide.*

2. Plan your room's daily schedule.

3. Become familiar with components and effective use of activity plans.

4. Understand options for tailoring children's learning experiences.

5. Consider ways ELM can help strengthen existing partnerships with families.

schedule that calls for large groups each day is not compatible with use of the ELM Curriculum. There are no provisions in the ELM Curriculum for all toddlers to participate in a group at the same time.[8]

In rooms serving children 3–5 years of age, four ELM large/group activities of about 15 minutes each are to be interspersed across the day. Each activity is to be offered by itself and not combined with another organized group activity. ELM's benchmarks for a daily schedule for preschool-age children include a coordinated balance of staff-guided and child-initiated activities each day, and each of the four small/large group activities are to be offered when all or most children are present.[9]

ELM provides a form for planning each week. There are samples of the *Planning Form* in the appendix of each *User Guide.*

Activity Plans. At the heart of ELM are 1,375 activity plans, from birth to age five years, that cover 50 weeks. Each plan focuses on one or more of the foundation skills promoted by ELM. For children from birth–36 months, ELM promotes 14 foundation skills in five areas. For children from 3–5 years of age, ELM promotes 27 foundation skills in eight areas.

The activity plans for children from birth to 36 months are organized by blocks that span a two-week period. There are 2–3 activity options, organized by level of challenge, in each plan. The activity plans for children from 3–5 years of age are organized by days within a one-week period. There are four activity plans per day designed for approximately 15 minutes each.

Each *User Guide* offers guidance on effective use of activity plans, including examples. Lesson 2 for direct care staff reviews how to use activity plans.

ELM's activity plans eliminate the daunting task of developing or finding activities that represent best practices in early childhood. Together the plans provide a coherent, sequenced approach to early learning.

A critically important task for direct care staff is to adapt planned activities to meet the needs of children in their room. Staff who engage in developmentally appropriate practice are continually tuned into children's understandings and abilities, and adjust the complexity and challenge of activities to accommodate children's skill level. No other person can make informed decisions about how to tailor experiences for children in their setting.

ELM offers tools to support classroom staff in adapting learning activities. For example, each activity plan includes **scaffolding tips** for providing children with extra support or enrichment related to the activity. Activity plans for infants and toddlers include additional suggestions for tailoring children's experiences in a section called **What to Look For**.

Assessing Child Progress. ELM also provides **tools for observing and assessing** children's progress with foundation skills. This is consistent with the fourth DAP guideline.[10] ELM observation guides (available for all ages) and assessment procedures (for preschool-age children) include suggestions for **individualized learning plans** that build on observation or assessment information. There also is an *ELM Snapshot of Child Progress* form for record keeping, and **examples of portfolio entries** based on an observation or assessment. The tools are described in each *User Guide* and are reviewed in Lesson 3 for direct care staff.

Parenting Tips. The *Readiness Starts Early* parenting tips resource is a tangible way to encourage families to support their child's learning through fun, engaging activities. It also may promote increased communication between families and staff about what and how children are learning. Establishing reciprocal relationships with families is the fifth DAP guideline.[11]

REFLECT

Preparing to use the ELM Curriculum is a good time to reflect on central ideas of NAEYC's DAP position statement.[12]

- What do you see as major advantages of the DAP guideline of providing an optimal balance of adult-guided and child-guided experiences?

- In what ways do your current practices reflect DAP's 11th principle: that advances in children's development and learning occur when children are challenged to achieve at a level just beyond their current mastery?

- How do the Sequence of Skills and Learning Goals charts in the third section of each *User Guide* reflect DAP's second principle: that many aspects of children's learning and development follow well-documented sequences?

Areas of development are closely related to each other in early childhood. An activity focused on a cognitive skill, for example, may also actively support social-emotional and language skills. ELM Curriculum activity plans acknowledge this overlap with an "Also Promotes" list of other areas supported by an activity. At the same time, ELM gives each area focused attention that aligns with expert recommendations, including NAEYC accreditation standards. What are your thoughts about working with activity plans that have a primary focus on one area?

EXTEND

Areas Promoted

- The *User Guide* descriptions of each area promoted by ELM include a summary of the pertinent NAEYC program accreditation criteria. Select three areas of interest. For each area, review criteria summarized in the NAEYC Accreditation paragraph. Then link an accreditation criterion to a specific way ELM promotes the area, as described in the section How ELM Promotes _____. Examples:

  ○ For children from birth through 36 months of age, what NAEYC cognitive development standards are linked to ELM's emphasis on object exploration?

  ○ For children 3–5 years of age, what NAEYC social-emotional standards are related to ELM's attention to perspective-taking and personal responsibility?

- Select an area promoted by ELM that is less familiar to you than other areas. You may be relatively new to the early childhood field, or your professional preparation may have occurred before degree and credentialing programs gave serious attention to mathematics or phonological awareness or self-regulation. Are there any surprises for you regarding the area's components and/or longer-term outcomes? What is a new or enhanced understanding for you regarding the area?

- Take a child's view of the teaching strategies listed in this lesson's box entitled, Developmentally Appropriate Teaching Practices in ELM Activity Plans. Think about ways each strategy might support a child's learning. For example, how might **a pause** in a caregiver's talk or actions contribute to a child's experience in an activity? How does a caregiver's **acknowledgment** of a child's words or actions help a child learn? What teaching strategies potentially work well together?

Foundation Skills

- Review the foundation skills located in the *User Guide* for your room's age group. Reflect on the importance of the skills for children in your room. For example, think of an infant with emerging skills in calming down or a preschool-age child who finds it challenging to focus on an activity (both are aspects of self-regulation). What are your reactions to using a curriculum that gives research-informed support for the development of specific skills of children in your room?

- Look at the Sequence of Skills and Learning Goals chart found in each *User Guide*. How do learning goals move from simple to more complex over time? Examples:

  ○ In the chart for children birth to 12 months, what is the difference between Block 1 and Block 4 in the Cognitive learning goal for object inquiry skills?

  ○ In the chart for children 3–5 years of age, how does the attention to sounds in Language/Literacy (phonological awareness) advance from Week 1 through Week 3 and again through Week 6?

Daily Schedule

- Consider the benchmarks and other guidance on planning a daily schedule offered in the *User Guide* that pertains to your room's age group. Talk with a trainer in your center about the reason(s) for each of the guidelines or benchmarks for a daily schedule offered by ELM. What changes, if any, are needed in your existing schedule? What contributions are needed from your center's leadership/management to accommodate ELM guidance on a daily schedule?

- ELM provides a *Planning Form* for a week. What information on the ELM form do you anticipate will be particularly helpful to staff in your room?

Families

- What specific ways might your room use the *Readiness Starts Early* parenting tips to foster two-way communications with families?

- What questions do you anticipate receiving from family members about parenting tips offered in *Readiness Starts Early*? How might you use the question as an opportunity to describe the skills promoted by ELM and how your room supports children's learning?

- Uses of the *ELM Snapshot of Child Progress* form and portfolio entries in connections with families are addressed in Lesson 3 for direct care staff.

PRACTICE

You may encounter situations similar to those described below as you use ELM in your room. How might you address the situations?

Scenario #1: A family is touring your center with their four-month-old child as part of a look at several centers and family child care homes in the community. They stop in your room as part of their tour. One of the parents wants to know how much individualized attention a child receives in your room and how staff can spend much time with a child when there are seven others in the room needing attention.

Scenario #2: A parent of a four-year-old child in your room communicates concern about his child's readiness for kindergarten. He thinks one of the center times should be eliminated so more teaching can occur during the day, at least for children who are getting ready for kindergarten.

Scenario #3: A friend has heard that your center is using a different early childhood curriculum. She asks, "What's it all about?"

Suggested Responses to Scenarios

Scenario #1: The *ELM Curriculum User Guide: Birth–36 Months* suggests some ways staff can manage individualized time with an infant or toddler while also supporting children who wish to join or watch the activity (see p. 63). Examples: Making available to all children a novel item used in the activity several days in advance of the one-to-one activity can reduce interest in the item. Providing another similar or identical item for other children to use during the one-to-one activity also may be an option.

As explained in the *User Guide* for rooms serving infants and toddlers, regularly interacting with individual children on a sustained basis can make one-to-one time with children a routine occurrence. A pattern of infrequent staff time on the floor with children heightens interest in one-to-one interactions.

It also might be helpful for the parent to learn how individual attention to children can occur during informal gatherings and the flexible nature of informal gatherings. See the description of informal gatherings on page 54 of the *ELM Curriculum User Guide: Birth–36 Months.*

Scenario #2: The parent's question is an opportunity to describe the benefits of a balanced mix of child-initiated and staff-initiated activities. Children learn through spontaneous pursuits of their own, and center time is often an extension of a topic explored in a staff-initiated session. For background information, see the *ELM Curriculum User Guide: 3–5 Years* sections on Developmentally Appropriate Practice (p. 9), Key Characteristics of ELM (especially the summary of research on benefits of different settings on pp. 4–5), and guidelines for Planning a Daily Schedule (pp. 91–92).

Scenario #3: Here is a chance to give a two-minute speech on ELM! Draw on information offered in a *User Guide*'s Introduction to the ELM Curriculum, including the role of research, professional standards, and expert guidance in shaping the content and methods of ELM.

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This lesson was written by Douglas R. Powell, with contributions from Kathy Broniarczyk and Chanele Robinson-Rucker. For information about the ELM Curriculum, contact: elmcurriculum@purdue.edu.

Endnotes

1   Development of the Early Learning Matters (ELM) Curriculum was supported by the U.S. Department of Defense Child Development Competitive Program of the U.S. Department of Agriculture's National Institute of Food and Agriculture (NIFA), grant number 2013-48762-21537 to Purdue University as part of the DoD-USDA Partnership for Military Families. The ELM Curriculum is based in the Department of Human Development and Family Studies, Purdue University, West Lafayette, Indiana 47907-2055. Douglas Powell, Principal Investigator. Shelley MacDermid Wadsworth, Co-Principal Investigator.

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7   National Association for the Education of Young Children. (2019). *NAEYC early learning program accreditation standards and assessment items*. Washington, DC: Author. Retrieved from https://www.naeyc.org/sites/default/files/globally-shared/downloads/PDFs/accreditation/early-learning/naeyc_elp_accreditation_standards_and_assessment_items_2019.pdf.

8   See pp. 60–61 of the *ELM Curriculum User Guide: Birth–36 Months*.

9   See pp. 91–92 of the *ELM Curriculum User Guide: 3–5 Years*.

10   National Association for the Education of Young Children. (2009).

11   National Association for the Education of Young Children. (2009).

12   National Association for the Education of Young Children. (2009).

13   See pp. 5–6 of *ELM Curriculum User Guide: Birth–36 Months* and p. 7 of *ELM Curriculum User Guide: 3–5 Years*.

14   ELM Curriculum, 3–5 Years, Week 35, Creative Expression, Day 2.

15   ELM Curriculum, 24–36 Months, Block 6, Social-Emotional, Option 1.

16   ELM Curriculum, 3–5 Years, Week 9, Mathematics, Day 1.

17   ELM Curriculum, Birth–12 Months, Block 23, Cognitive, Option 1.

18   ELM Curriculum, 3–5 Years, Week 10, Social-Emotional, Day 2.

19   ELM Curriculum, Birth–12 Months, Block 2, Communication/Language, Option 2.

20   ELM Curriculum, 12–24 Months, Block 9, Cognitive, Option 1.

21   ELM Curriculum, 12–24 Months, Block 2, Cognitive, Option 2.

22   ELM Curriculum, 3–5 Years, Week 28, Social Studies, Day 4.

23   ELM Curriculum, 24–36 Months, Block 14, Physical/Health, Option 2.

24   ELM Curriculum, 12–24 Months, Block 4, Physical/Health, Option 1.