

Leadership and Children

Why Leadership?

Leadership skills allow children to have control of their lives and the ability to make things happen. Leadership instills confidence, and helps children solve problems creatively, work in a team, and work collaboratively with others. Leadership gives children many opportunities to develop responsibility. While you may not find the word leadership in the early learning standards, many states have statements related to leadership in their standards in the social-emotional section. Key phrases that relate to leadership are “self-confidence”, “problem solving”, “pro-social,” and “makes independent decisions and choices”. For example, in Pennsylvania’s Pre-Kindergarten Early Learning Standards for social and emotional development skills for children include “Know and state independent thoughts and feelings” (25.1.1 Self Awareness) and “Participate in new experiences with confidence and independence” (25.1.3 Competence).

Are leaders born or made?

There is some debate whether some children are “born leaders” or they “learn to be” leaders. All children have the potential to develop leadership skills. Leadership development can be a lifelong process. As adults, we can teach the skills necessary for children to take on leadership roles now and in the future. Here are some ways that you can help children develop leadership skills:

Model leadership behavior to children. Children learn from seeing what others do. Tell the child what you are doing and why you are doing it.

Teach children how to see things from another’s point of view. Good communication is a key component to being an effective leader. Teach children how to listen carefully and how to respond to others in a calm and respectful way.

Help children build self-confidence. Give children opportunities to do a good job and offer praise when appropriate. You might say, “I am so proud of you that you volunteered to be the leader of the ‘toy clean up’ team in your classroom. It is a big job to make sure all your classmates are doing their part.”

Find ways to create problem solving situations. Children can learn how to solve their own problems. Allow children to start making small decisions such as which activity they want to participate in and then give them more opportunities to make decisions as they learn the concepts of responsibility and consequences of making a decision.

Give children the opportunity to take leadership roles in the classroom. Create leadership situations in the form of classroom jobs. Children can lead by becoming the classroom “greeter”, “paper/supply manager”, “line leader,” or “attendance taker”. Teachers should inform children of the responsibilities of each classroom job and guide them as they take on that leadership role. Children should have the opportunity to try various leadership jobs within the classroom.

Teach children how to work with others in a team situation. Group projects or sports activities are ways for children to work on a team.

Assist children to develop a plan or strategy to address a problem or situation. Children, as well as adults, shy away from leadership tasks because they feel overwhelmed. Show children how to break tasks into workable ways to get the job done.

Encourage children to pursue things that interest them. They may develop a passion for it and feel comfortable and later take on a leadership role.

Encourage parents to look for leadership opportunities for children.

Leadership opportunities can be in your child care program or another program at a school, church, community or club. Children can also take a leadership role in a family event.

Encourage communication and action.

Leadership involves speaking up or taking action. You can encourage children's leadership abilities by suggesting projects or identifying problems that may be important to them and helping them to come up with suggestions for actions and possible solutions.

- Example: During the holiday season, many organizations hold canned food or coat drives. Ask children in your care to think about what they would like to do to help. Have them choose another group to work with, such as the local elementary school, and decide how they would like to help.
- Example: Some children might become concerned about a little puppy or other animal in a story you are reading. They wonder what can be done to help animals. Ask them for ideas about what they would do for the puppy if they were in the story. The teacher can write down or have the children draw pictures of their ideas and have a discussion about caring for animals.

"Children are great imitators. So give them something great to imitate." – Anonymous

Teaching children how to be a leader at a young age will help children deal with peer pressure in the teenage years. Being a leader is not an exact science, but teaching children the skills needed to be leaders are important to help prepare the next generation to take the lead and become responsible adults.

Resources to use to help build skills related to leadership development.

Pennsylvania's Promise for Children – Pennsylvania's Promise for Children is a campaign to raise awareness about the importance of providing Pennsylvania's young children with access to quality early learning opportunities. This source gives ideas on how to include children and their families to take the lead in promoting community early learning events in their community. <http://paprom.convio.net>

National Association for the Education of Young Children – NAEYC's mission is to serve and act on behalf of the needs, rights and well-being of all young children with primary focus on the provision of educational and developmental services and resources. NAYEC has many online journal articles and position statements related to leadership and early learning and education. <http://www.naeyc.org>

Pennsylvania Early Learning Standards – The Pennsylvania Early Childhood Education Standards are research-based standards that identify key learning areas of development for children and are reflected in the Core Body of Knowledge competencies. The standards guide practitioners to intentionally integrate developmental knowledge with the attitudes, skills, and concepts children need to make progress in all learning areas. http://www.pakeys.org/pages/get.aspx?page=career_standards

Week of the Young Child – is an annual celebration sponsored by the National Association for the Education of Young Children (NAEYC). The purpose of the Week of the Young Child™ is to focus public attention on the needs of young children and their families and to recognize the early childhood programs and services that meet those needs. This source gives ideas about how to include children and their families to take the lead in community events related to the Week of the Young Child. <http://www.naeyc.org/woyc>

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