

Kohl Children's Museum Early Childhood Connections Executive Summary 2016-2017

Program Overview:

Developed in 2001, Early Childhood Connections (ECC) is a proven intervention program that provides training and resources to teachers and childcare providers and increases school involvement opportunities for parents, all for the benefit of children considered at risk of academic failure. ECC is focused on pre-kindergarten through third grade children in the Chicago metropolitan area's most underserved communities. Today, ECC is a recognized model of success that helps educators increase engagement and provide high-quality learning experiences for children. The program creates a seamless connection between learning in the classroom, childcare center, Museum, and home with activities and projects that nurture creativity, critical thinking, problem-solving skills, and executive function.

ECC introduces educators to the Project Approach—a child-centered teaching strategy in which children conduct an in-depth study of a particular topic of their choosing. While allowing educators to teach critical concepts and reach core curriculum goals, the Project Approach also allows students to be in control of the project and their own learning. Projects cover a wide range of topics – everything from owls and firetrucks to bees and doughnuts. In addition to picking the topics, children ask the questions: How do owls turn their heads so far around? Where do firefighters get the water to fight fires? Where do the holes from doughnuts go? Why do bees sting? All great questions – and ones the educators would probably not have thought to ask. That engagement of children is at the heart of the Project Approach.

ECC consists of several components that effectively integrate the project approach within the classroom or childcare curriculum, all provided at no cost to participants. Components include: a year-long professional development training program, Group Projects conceived and investigated by the children, funds to purchase materials that will help support projects, year-round technical support from Museum educators in English or Spanish, 18 Continuing Professional Development Units (or 17 Gateway hours for childcare providers), Focused Field Trips to Kohl Children's Museum (including workshop costs and bus fees), free Family Passes to use for additional Museum visits, and Family Activities (including year-end family celebrations at the Museum). Additionally, since this past spring, in conjunction with ECC family celebrations, the Museum has created 327 new family memberships for low-income families, free of charge. The goal of the memberships is to increase repeat Museum visits by families with children who can most benefit from the Museum's enriching activities, but who might otherwise be unable to afford a family membership.

2016-17 Overview:

Kohl Children's Museum and the ECC program are a Chicago Public Schools Preferred Professional Provider and an approved entity through Illinois Gateways to Opportunity, an online professional development system for childcare providers.

During the 2016-17 program year, Kohl Children's Museum worked with 128 teachers and childcare providers (33 teachers and 95 childcare providers). Approximately 2,800 children and 2,300 parents were served. Since its inception, Early Childhood Connections has served approximately 39,000 children, teachers, parents, and early childhood specialists from Chicago, Berwyn, Highwood, Round Lake, Highwood, North Chicago, Island Lake, Waukegan, Wheeling, and Zion Public Schools.

Evaluation Summary (Level One):

- Gains were found for every observational item for both the teachers and the childcare providers. A majority of the gains were highly statistically significant ($p < .001$), and the median gains for both the teachers (1.38) and childcare providers (.50) were the highest they have been in the past three years. In addition, the median posttest observation ratings for the teachers (4.86) and the childcare providers (4.83) approached the maximum rating of 5 on the 5-point scale.
- Similar to the observation ratings, gains were found for every attitudinal item for both the teachers and the childcare providers. A majority of the gains were highly statistically significant ($p < .001$), and the median gains for both the teachers (.65) and childcare providers (.42) were the highest they have been in the past three years. In addition, the median posttest attitude response for the teachers (5.00) and the childcare providers (4.78) approached or reached the maximum rating of 5 on the 5-point scale.
- Ratings on the posttest attitude survey indicated that both the teachers and childcare providers were very satisfied with their project experiences during 2016-17.

Key Findings (Level Two):

Key findings from observations conducted in five Chicagoland area (3) childcare centers and (2) public school classrooms serving at-risk children during the 2016-2017 school year may be summarized as follows:

- A wide range of child-focused topics were explored across the childcare centers and public school classrooms. Projects were closely aligned to core content areas (e.g., language arts, mathematics, social studies, science, social-emotional development, and physical development) in most settings. Seventy-five percent of the survey respondents reported that field site visits occurred. The teachers generally reported lack of support within their settings for project work. All centers/classrooms involved parents or other family members in project activities.
- All centers/classrooms generated evidence of project work and a majority of centers/classrooms had at least one type of evidence for important aspects of project work: preparation for a project for Phase I (e.g. a list of what children know about the project topic), recording the project for Phase II (e.g. data collection chart), and documenting children's explorations and research for Phase III (e.g. photos or functional writing examples).
- The majority of centers/classrooms (80%) provided resource materials for project work (e.g. word wall), as well as project-related books.
- The length of time in which project work was conducted varied across classrooms and observations with an average of 34 minutes per classroom. This is slightly under the period of 45 minutes recommended by Project Approach developers. A project-related item was used in nearly all groupings focused on project work.
- All teachers engaged in over 90% of the appropriate teaching practices during the observation. The active teaching strategies most consistently observed across settings at observations points included helping children connect the activity to their prior knowledge, asking questions, asked children to clarify, elaborate, or extend thoughts, and instructing children on how to do the activity.

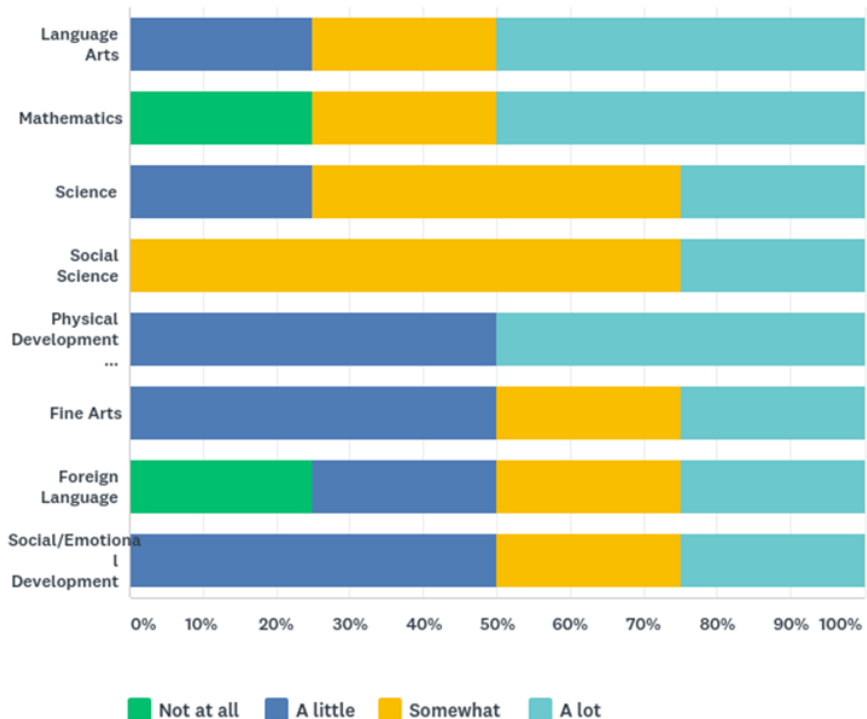
- Overall, children were rated as engaged in nearly 60% appropriate learning behaviors during observation. There was considerable variation across centers/classrooms in the extent of children’s active learning behaviors as children in centers were reported to display seven out of ten of the learning behaviors, whereas the children in public schools demonstrated all but one of the learning behaviors during observation. Across centers/classrooms, most children (80%) were actively engaged, asking project-related questions, and reflecting on what they had learned.

Educator Testimonial

“Giving students the opportunity to drive their learning was especially meaningful. Students were highly interested and motivated throughout the project. They problem-solved independently and with their partners, and the communication skills needed to work together were very advanced. My class is one with new immigrants, non-English speakers, students who are nonverbal, students on the spectrum, etc. They were all able to show their strengths at some point in the investigation. This was a confidence booster for everyone involved.”

Gaby Arabia
Rogers Elementary - Kindergarten
Project Topic: Swings

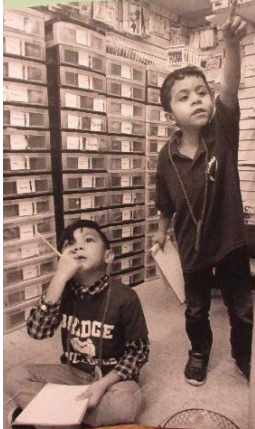
Curriculum Goal Alignment with Projects (teachers):



Project Examples:

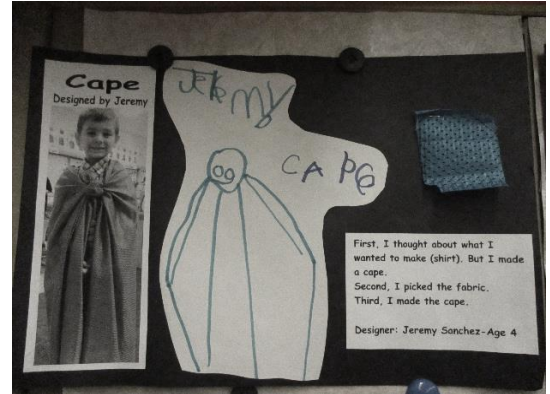
A. Clothing Design Project (teacher)

"We loved our Clothes project. We have tied the clothes project to our entire preschool curriculum. It is still going full force, even after our culminating event." *Melinda Chum, Norman Bridge Elementary, Preschool*



Evaluation:

Students discussed what they wanted to know about clothing and came up with a list of questions to ask the expert on their site visit to the fabric store. At the fabric store, students did observational drawings and explored different fabrics to make their own clothing item. For a culmination, students designed and sewed their own clothing. Parents were invited during report card pick up to see all of the students hard work.



B. Shoes (childcare)



"As a class, we decided to investigate the different types of shoes and what the parts of shoes are called. The children were able to see and examine a variety of shoes through the artifacts that we brought in. They had the opportunity to take a shoe apart to see what was inside and then watch a video about how different types of shoes are made. They measured, examined, touched, and discovered how many shoes are different and the same." *Mariza Barajas & Sandra Duran, Eyes on the Future, 3-5 years bilingual*

Evaluation:

During the study, children were able to explore and create shoes. They worked hard looking at the many varieties of shoes that are available. They used their previous knowledge and helped set up a shoe store in the dramatic play area. They posted prices and daily acted out their experiences at shoe stores. They also used clay to design their own shoes. During our study, children were able to use their math concepts in the project by measuring, sorting, and looking for numbers in their shoes. They had many opportunities to look at patterns on their soles and search for numbers in the sizes. Children also compared the size of a friend's shoe to theirs. Children picked up many new math skills in number recognition and patterning.



To conclude our project, children created invitations for parents and staff to a gallery of samples and pictures of the work they did during the shoe project. Some children helped set up the gallery in a different building of the school and gave their parents and staff a tour of the gallery. The children were able to talk to parents about the different "exhibits" and talk about the pictures and drawings they had created. They showed knowledge in the topic of shoes and use vocabulary that showed what they had learned.

