

Summary and Objectives

This lesson offers guidance on how to help direct care staff become familiar with the Early Learning Matters (ELM) Curriculum developed by Purdue University.¹ It describes five steps of a basic training plan for learning how to use ELM effectively. The lesson summarizes key information about ELM characteristics and resources to emphasize with staff, and describes how the curriculum's *User Guides* are central to understanding the content and methods of ELM.

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

- describe major characteristics of ELM to emphasize in helping direct care staff prepare to implement ELM;

The ELM curriculum offers a comprehensive, developmentally appropriate approach to meaningful learning for children from birth through five years. ELM was developed by Purdue University for the Department of Defense Child Development Program and civilian programs of early care and education. Features of ELM include:

- a whole child focus on skills that bolster school readiness and life success;
- developmentally sequenced activities that embed strategies for individualizing;
- evidence-informed, friendly-to-use resources for program staff and families; and
- training tools to support direct care staff with different professional backgrounds.

- describe how a classroom's daily schedule supports use of ELM;
- identify ways to help direct care staff effectively use the curriculum's activity plans, including the development of experiences tailored to the needs and interests of children; and
- support staff in engaging families in curriculum-based partnerships with their classroom.

This lesson is to be pursued **after** becoming familiar with the ELM Curriculum's *User Guide* that pertains to the ages of children in rooms you are supporting. This lesson builds on essential information offered in the *User Guides*. It is not a *User Guide* substitute. This lesson is also to be pursued after becoming familiar with the ELM Curriculum's Lessons 1 and 2 for direct care staff.

REVIEW

There are five sequential steps for introducing ELM to direct care staff. The steps are summarized in this lesson's box entitled, Preparing to Use ELM. This lesson describes highlights of essential information to emphasize with staff at each step.

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.

User Guides

The introduction to ELM begins with a careful reading of the ELM *User Guide* that pertains to the ages of children served by staff who are in training. There is a *User Guide* for rooms serving children birth through 36 months and a *User Guide* for children three to five years of age. The *Guides* are designed to provide a big picture as well as key specifics of ELM.

The *User Guides* explain that ELM is based on the latest research on child development and best practices in early education and care. A significant increase in research conducted on early development and learning in the last 20 years enabled the curriculum developers to ask two fundamental questions: What skills in the early years matter long term? What practices make a meaningful difference in early childhood programs? ELM is built on practical answers to these two questions.

The search for early skills that matter long term led to a curriculum focus on 14 foundation skills in five areas for infants and toddlers, and 27 foundation skills in eight areas for preschool-age children (see this lesson's box, entitled ELM Supports the Whole Child). The search also included consultations with nationally prominent content experts and stakeholders in military and civilian child care.

The areas of development emphasized in ELM are related to each other, of course. Motor development is strongly linked to cognitive and social-emotional growth, for example, and cognitive skills promoted in the infant and toddler years are a foundation for learning about mathematics and science in the preschool years.

Readers of the *User Guides* will find descriptions of each area promoted in ELM. The descriptions explain what foundation skills are addressed by ELM and why the foundation skills are important to promote. For example, readers of the *User Guide*

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

for rooms serving infants and toddlers will learn how “language is food for the brain.” The *User Guide* for preschool-age rooms explains how children’s abilities to pay attention, follow instructions, stay focused on a task, and control impulses (self-regulation skills) in the preschool years are linked to achievement at 21 and 25 years of age.

The *User Guides* also describe how ELM activities help children develop and strengthen foundation skills in each area. Active learning is central to all activities. Connections to the National Association for the Education of Young Children (NAEYC) accreditation standards and to related content available at the Virtual Laboratory School are described. There also are suggestions of additional ways to promote and learn about each area emphasized by ELM. ELM’s support of children’s learning goes beyond the activity plans.

It is important for users of ELM to understand how the curriculum reflects developmentally appropriate practices (DAP) developed by NAEYC. Each *User Guide* describes ELM's attention to DAP principles, such as meeting children where they are developmentally; providing challenging and achievable learning experiences; and making good use of the wealth of knowledge about how children learn and develop, including predictable sequences of growth.

ELM also reflects characteristics of a high-quality curriculum. There is a coherent scope and sequence of activities based on children's developmental pathways. Each activity plan offers clearly stated goals and learning experiences, and responsiveness to individual differences.

Users of ELM will be interested to learn that extensive pilot testing of draft activity plans was conducted in military and civilian early childhood classrooms. The piloting of preschool-age activities ran nearly a full year. All pilot work led to revisions of a vast majority of activity plans in response to staff feedback and experiences.²

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Each *Guide* offers a chart of the sequence of ELM's attention to foundation skills promoted by the curriculum.³ Each sequence follows a predictable pattern of skill development and learning that moves from simple to more complex skills across time. Each *Guide* also provides completed samples of forms for planning activities and recording children's progress.⁴

Daily Schedule and Activity Plans

In the ELM curriculum, the daily schedule offers a coordinated balance of staff-guided and child-initiated activities. This feature reflects an important principle of NAEYC's position statement on developmentally appropriate practices. Children

learn through guided play pursued on their own and with peers, and staff-guided activities offered in one-to-one, informal gathering, small group, and large group contexts.

At the heart of ELM are 1,375 activity plans, from birth to age five years, each focused on one or more specific foundation skills. The sequence of activity plans follows a predictable pattern of foundation skill development and learning across the curriculum's 50 weeks, as noted earlier. The plans are intended to be used flexibly to support differences in children's development while, at the same time, keeping a clear focus on the learning goal promoted by the activity.

The activity plans are organized in a series of blocks for infants and toddlers. One block offers two weeks of activity plans in the five areas promoted by ELM for children from birth to 36 months. Each plan has 2–3 activity options in each of the five areas that represent different levels of challenge. The arrangement is summarized in the next section of this lesson and in the *User Guide* for rooms serving children birth to 36 months.⁵

The activity plans are organized by day/week for children from three to five years of age. For each day, ELM offers four activity plans of approximately 15 minutes each. The activities are spread across a daily schedule that also includes child-initiated play and basic care activities such as rest and nutrition. The four activity plans represent a total of approximately 60 minutes per day of staff-guided activities, an amount that is consistent with national trends in early childhood programs for preschool-age children.

Lesson 1 for direct care staff includes a review of information on the daily schedule. Lesson 2 for direct care staff reviews ways to make the most of activity plans.

It is important for users of ELM to carefully consider the curriculum's recommendations for the daily schedule. Each *Guide* includes a section

on daily schedule considerations.⁶ One of the parameters for preschool-age children, for example, is that an ELM activity is offered by itself and not combined with another organized group activity. Classrooms adopting ELM may need to make adjustments in their existing daily schedule. Center-level decisions about staff schedules also may be needed so ELM’s learning activities are offered when lead staff are available in the classroom.

A productive use of staff training time for using ELM is to study the components and structure of activity plans. Encourage staff to look at several plans of their choice along with the guidelines in the section on How to Use Activity Plans found in each *User Guide*. The guidelines for how to use activity plans are organized by four major steps to take in getting ready to offer an activity. What follows is a summary of characteristics of activity plans to emphasize with staff.

Each plan offers a model of high-quality use of the plan. Encourage staff to think of the model as the talk captions of a video without the images. The models are not designed to be used as scripts. They offer realistic examples of how staff can present and engage children in an activity. The examples include

child-friendly definitions of unfamiliar words and concepts.

Activity plans are to be used flexibly, as noted earlier, without drifting from the learning goal presented at the beginning of an activity description. Staff who participated in the ELM pilot phase often prepared note cards with key points they wanted to remember when implementing the activity plan.

Each activity plan for infants and toddlers offers 2–3 options that differ in level of activity challenge, as noted earlier. Key differences across options include: motor skills required or supported by the option; type of material used; whether and how peers are involved; and complexity of actions or tasks.

Each plan uses one or more teaching strategies that NAEYC identifies as developmentally appropriate. This provision is consistent with the NAEYC accreditation standard on teaching that emphasizes the benefits of using a range of teaching strategies to ensure each child is engaged in learning. Lesson 1 for direct care staff offers a summary of teaching strategies used in ELM activity plans.

The DAP principle of offering challenging and achievable experiences for children is also

Organization of ELM Activity Plans

Birth to 36 Months	3 to 5 Years
Promote 14 foundation skills in 5 areas	Promote 27 foundation skills in 8 areas
Organized by blocks	Organized by days/weeks
25 blocks (1 block = 2 weeks) for 50 weeks of activities	50 weeks of activities
Each plan has 2–3 activity options in each area that vary in level of challenge	4 activity plans per day
Length of activity determined by child engagement	Each activity plan is designed for approximately 15 minutes
One-to-one and informal gathering configurations	Mostly small or large group configurations
Each activity plan provides a model of high-quality use, guidance on possible child responses (What To Look For), scaffolding tips, related interest area suggestion, and adaptations for family child care.	Each activity plan provides a model of high-quality use, scaffolding tips, related center activity suggestion, and adaptations for family child care.

represented in scaffolding tips offered in each activity plan. There are two types of tips: extra support for children who may need additional help with the activity and enrichment for children who may benefit from additional challenge. The scaffolding tips are one of the ways ELM facilitates staff responsiveness to differences across children in their interests and development. Additional supports are described in the next section on Adaptations.

Each activity plan also provides activity center (interest area) suggestions that extend the focus of the activity plan to children's play experiences. In addition, each activity plan suggests adaptations for Family Child Care settings. During the ELM pilot phase, some staff incorporated the Family Child Care suggestions into their classroom plan. Many of the Family Child Care suggestions seek to build on the multi-age character of family child care homes.

ELM offers a checklist for observing ELM activities. See the *User Guides* and Lesson 3 for trainers.⁷

Adaptations

A major point to emphasize with staff members is their critical role as experts in adapting learning experiences to the needs of children. No other person can make informed decisions about how to tailor experiences for children in their setting.

A major point to emphasize with staff members is their critical role as experts in adapting learning experiences.

The scaffolding tips described above are one of the ways ELM supports staff in adapting activities to meet children's needs. The activity plans for infants and toddlers include additional suggestions for tailoring children's learning experiences in a section called **What to Look For** found in each activity plan. The What to Look For section is designed to help staff anticipate the range of children's possible

reactions to an activity along with suggestions about how to respond to different child reactions. Often there is a brief explanation of how a child's possible reaction reflects an aspect of child development. In this manner, the What to Look For section can contribute to a staff member's professional development.

Decisions about some child-focused adaptations are made prior to implementing an activity. In a preschool-age classroom, for example, a staff member will know whether children would benefit from a review of purple and orange prior to playing a self-regulation game that requires knowledge of these colors. In a young toddler classroom, a staff member will know which small manipulative toy will be of greatest interest to a child for a guided object exploration experience. Across all rooms serving infants or toddlers, staff make decisions about which of the 2–3 activity options offered in each activity plan are best matched to particular children.

Some decisions about adaptations are made during implementation of an activity as a response to the nature of children's participation in the activity. This is where advance familiarity with scaffolding tips offered in each activity plan and the What to Look For section of infant/toddler activity plans is highly valuable.

Tailored learning experiences for children also occur as a result of focused observations and assessments of children's progress in developing foundation skills emphasized in ELM. Each *User Guide* includes a section on how to use ELM's observation resources.⁸ As part of introducing staff to ELM, draw attention to the *Guide for Observing and Individualizing* for each foundation skill.⁹ These resources offer suggestions for follow-up learning plans based on the outcome of observations.

ELM recommends conducting focused observations of each child every four weeks. In a room of eight infants, for example, two infants

would be systematically observed each week. In a room of 10 young toddlers, 2–3 children would be observed each week. In a room of 24 preschool-age children, six children would be observed or assessed each week.

For preschool-age children, ELM offers easy-to-use assessments of important literacy and mathematics skills.¹⁰ The assessments are scheduled at appropriate points in the curriculum. The assessments lead to skill attainment designations of Got It, Getting It, or Not Yet. Importantly, each assessment procedure offers numerous suggestions for follow-up learning plans based on assessment outcome.

Information from observations and assessments is recorded on a *ELM Snapshot of Child Progress* form. Specific procedures for using the form, observations, and assessments are described in the

User Guides. The Lesson 3 for direct care staff also addresses individualized experiences.

Families

Decades of research documents the lasting influence of families on their children's short- and long-term outcomes. In recognition of powerful family contributions, ELM offers parenting tips that extend and reinforce a week's classroom activities. The tips are provided in an easy-to-use *Readiness Starts Early* resource that can be distributed in printed form or digitally to smartphones. There is a companion resource for preschool-age rooms called *What Children Will Learn This Week* that can be posted as a summary of goals and activities promoted in the room.

ELM also offers examples of entries for children's portfolios that describe observations and assessments of a child's progress.

REFLECT

As part of your preparation for helping staff become familiar with ELM, identify one foundation skill in each area promoted by ELM and follow the skill's path from (1) the description of its importance in a *User Guide*, to (2) its emphasis in one or more activity plans, to (3) how the skill is observed or assessed, to (4) how the skill is further promoted in a follow-up learning plan suggested in an observation guide or assessment plan, and (5) communicated to a family through a portfolio entry.

Make lists of curriculum features you anticipate will be welcomed by staff and curriculum

characteristics that may be of concern to staff. You may wish to accentuate the positive features and spend more time introducing and discussing curriculum aspects that may be challenging for staff to consider.

Look closely at Lessons 1 and 2 for direct care staff, especially the Extend sections. What staff questions and reactions do you anticipate?

Develop a two-minute description of the most important feature or anticipated benefit of ELM that you can offer to staff or others in your own words.

EXTEND

Areas Promoted

- Lesson 1 for direct care staff suggests that staff link NAEYC accreditation criteria to the description of how ELM promotes a specific area, such as cognitive or social-emotional development (see Areas Promoted in the Extend section). Talk with staff about connections they make between NAEYC criteria and ELM's approach to an area.
- Talk with a staff member about an area promoted by ELM that may be less familiar to him/her. What information is new or surprising? What steps might the staff member take to effectively implement activities in this area?

Foundation Skills

- Review with staff the list of foundation skills in the pertinent *User Guide*. Help staff connect 3–4 foundation skills to several specific children in their care. In what ways is a foundation skill important to a child's current or future development? What are staff reactions to using a research-informed curriculum for helping children make good progress with a foundation skill?
- Lesson 1 for direct care staff encourages staff to look at the Sequence of Skills and Learning Goals found in each *User Guide*. How does the sequence move from simple to more complex skills? Examples: What are the differences in the level of challenge for object inquiry skills (Cognitive) from Block 1 through Block 4 for infants (birth–12 months)? How does the sequence of attention to sounds (Language/Literacy—Phonological Awareness) advance in challenge level from Weeks 1 through 4 for preschool-age children?

Daily Schedule

- Review with staff the daily schedule considerations described in the pertinent *User Guide*. Help staff compare their current daily schedule to the schedule parameters recommended in the *User Guide* for their age group. What changes might be needed and what steps can be taken to ensure a smooth transition to schedule changes?
- Encourage staff in preschool-age rooms to consider specific ways to use and adapt the transition suggestions offered in the *User Guide*.
- Encourage staff in rooms serving mobile infants or toddlers to look closely at the *User Guide's* page 63 suggestions of how to offer a one-to-one activity in the presence of other children also interested in the activity. Discuss ways the suggestions might be implemented in their settings.
- Talk with staff about the *Planning Form* sample in the appendix of the pertinent *User Guide*. For staff working with infants/toddlers, draw attention to features of the form that are described on pp. 59–60 of the *ELM Curriculum User Guide: Birth–36 Months*. For staff working with preschool-age children, draw attention to the form's emphasis on adaptations of activity plans and the list of Tailored Learning Supports.

Activity Plans

- Encourage staff to look closely at how a specific activity plan promotes the targeted foundation skill (provided at the beginning of an activity description). Examples: What specific experiences in the preschool-age Science activity for Week 8, Day 3 help children learn inquiry skills? How does the Self-Regulation activity in Block 2 for infants (birth–12 months) help

a very young child promote beginning skill in self-control?

- Help staff unpack the components of an activity plan. How does the plan's learning goal support the foundation skill targeted by the plan? If the plan promotes another area (see Also Promotes entry in an activity plan), in what specific ways does the activity address a related area? How might the suggested scaffolding tips be helpful to children? How does the suggested center activity (interest area) extend and reinforce the activity plan's learning goal? How might the Family Child Care adaptation be used?
- Lesson 1 for direct care staff invites staff to think about how specific teaching strategies can support a child's learning (see Areas Promoted in the Extend section). Teaching strategies are summarized in a box in Lesson 1 for direct care staff entitled, Developmentally Appropriate Teaching Practices in ELM Activity Plans. Talk with staff about ways each teaching strategy can contribute to learning. For example, how might a pause in a caregiver's talk or actions contribute to a child's learning experience in an activity?
- Encourage staff to consider how an activity plan in an area of their interest sets the stage for later and more advanced attention to the area. Examples: How does the Block 8 activity plan for infants (birth–12 months) focused on exploring textures (Cognitive) provide a foundation for later activities focused on looking at or touching different objects? In what ways do the Week 2 preschool-age Mathematics activity plans focused on creating small groups of items support later activities focused on counting?
- Invite staff to develop a note card summary of an activity plan they might use in implementing the activity. What reminders about the activity would be important to include on their card?

- An activity plan's model of high-quality implementation offers benchmarks of evidence-informed practices and content. Encourage experienced direct care staff to review several activity plans to identify content and teaching strategies that may be new or enhanced in comparison to their current practices.

Adaptations

- Look at and talk with staff about each of the following resources for helping staff tailor children's learning experiences. The intent of this suggestion is to support staff members' basic familiarity with the resources. Examples of information in each of the resources are offered in Lesson 2 for trainers.
 - Scaffolding tips in activity plans
 - Activity descriptions, including information in an opening segment that may describe intended participants and materials (such as a Be Prepared section) and adaptation suggestions included as part of a plan (such as follow-up prompts to use if children seem uncertain about a question)
 - What to Look For section in plans for infants and toddlers
- Engage staff who work with infants and toddlers in a discussion of how to select an appropriate option in activity plans. Draw attention to pp. 55–56 of the *ELM Curriculum User Guide: Birth–36 Months*, which describes four ways in which activity options may differ (motor skills, materials, peers, repetition). Invite staff to describe how one or more of the four factors was involved in 2–3 examples of caregiver selections of activity options. The *User Guide* offers five examples of selecting activity options for infants (pp. 56–57), and five examples of selecting activity options for toddlers (p. 57). The pertinent factors are listed at the end of each example.

Families

- Engage staff in planning ways to use the *Readiness Starts Early* parenting tips to foster two-way communications with families.
- Help staff anticipate questions they may hear from a family member about the purpose of an activity listed in the *What Children Will Learn this Week* or a suggestion in *Readiness Starts Early*. Encourage staff to think of “why” questions as opportunities to describe the importance of the curriculum’s foundation skills. Example: “We offer items with different textures to an infant because touching is a major way very young children learn about things in their environment. Feeling different textures is a starting point for learning how to compare things.”
- Invite staff to look at ELM’s examples of portfolio entries (see *User Guide* section on Connecting with Families).¹¹ Encourage staff to look at both the content and tone of the entries and to reflect on the meaning of the preschool assessment designations of Got It, Getting It, and Not Yet. Suggest that staff prepare a draft portfolio entry for your review and feedback.
- Facilitate a staff discussion of how to incorporate the *ELM Snapshot of Child Progress* form and corresponding portfolio information into conferences with individual families. How can child progress information be used as a springboard for two-way conversation about a child rather than a one-way communication of progress?

PRACTICE

Below are some situations you may encounter as you work with direct care staff to implement ELM. How might your understanding of ELM and developmentally appropriate practices help you address the situations?

Scenario #1: Adrienne has worked in a preschool room for 12 years. She has kept files of all of the activities she has done for the past five years and likes to pull out her favorite activities to support different themes she does through the year. The children like the activities and the parents seem pleased. She says she tries hard to entertain the children and keep them out of trouble in her room. Adrienne asks you how ELM is different from what she has been doing for many years.

How would you help Adrienne understand important features of the ELM Curriculum and how it differs from what she is currently doing? What specific information and ELM resources would you use? How might you help Adrienne understand the

difference between engaging children in learning versus entertaining them?

Scenario #2: Stuart has served as a direct care staff member for eight months. He implements the social-emotional activity plans as part of a division of responsibilities in the classroom. He is unsure how the activities in ELM support children’s social-emotional skills. He asks you to help him understand this better so he can make sure he is doing what is needed.

How would you help Stuart develop a strong understanding of how to support children’s social-emotional development? What ELM resources would you tap to assist you in this task?

Scenario #3: Lee is new to your program (two months) but has experience in another early childhood program. She is developing a new schedule for the classroom in order to accommodate the four learning sessions. She brings you a copy of her new schedule which has all four learning

sessions in the morning so the afternoon is a relaxed time for children to have fun.

How would you help Lee create a more balanced daily schedule? What tools are available to you to assist Lee?

Suggested Responses to Scenarios

Scenario #1: Refer to the first section of the *User Guide* (Introduction to the ELM Curriculum). Pay close attention to information in the sections on key features of ELM and ELM's starting points. Reinforce the importance of foundation skills, the concept of plentiful learning experiences, and intentionality in promoting children's learning. Draw attention to how the curriculum supports active engagement.

Scenario #2: Each *User Guide* has a dedicated section on social-emotional development. Review this information with Stuart, especially the in-depth information offered in How ELM Promotes Social-

Emotional Development. Encourage Stuart to select one of the social-emotional activity plans and compare its contents to the descriptions in the *User Guide*. Stuart may benefit from knowing the long-term outcomes of attention to social-emotional development early in life, as described in the *User Guide*.

Scenario #3: Use the guidelines in the *User Guide* section on Planning a Daily Schedule to provide specific guidance to Lee. Emphasize the reasons for the recommended schedule provisions. Talk with Lee about how learning activities can also be "relaxed" and that children are learning all of the time.

This lesson was written by Douglas R. Powell, with contributions from Kathy Broniarczyk. For information about the ELM Curriculum contact: elmcriculum@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.
- 2 See p. 9 of the *ELM Curriculum User Guide: Birth–36 Months* and p. 10 of the *ELM Curriculum User Guide: 3–5 Years*.
- 3 See section entitled, Sequence of Skills and Learning Goals beginning on p. 38 in the *ELM Curriculum User Guide: Birth–36 Months* and on p. 77 in the *ELM Curriculum User Guide: 3–5 Years*. The chart for birth–36 months is organized by three age groups. See upper right of each chart page for age designation.
- 4 The completed samples of forms are in the appendix of each *User Guide*. The forms include a *Planning Form* for a week and an *ELM Snapshot of Child Progress*.
- 5 See pp. 53–54 of the *ELM Curriculum User Guide: Birth–36 Months*.
- 6 See pp. 60–61 in the *ELM Curriculum User Guide: Birth–36 Months* and pp. 91–94 of the *ELM Curriculum User Guide: 3–5 Years*.
- 7 Samples of the *ELM Activity Observation Checklist* are located in the appendix of each *User Guide*.
- 8 See pp. 67–71 of the *ELM Curriculum User Guide: Birth–36 Months* and pp. 100–106 of the *ELM Curriculum User Guide: 3–5 Years*.
- 9 There is a sample of a *Guide for Observing and Individualizing* in the appendix of each *User Guide*.
- 10 See pp. 101–102 of the *ELM Curriculum User Guide: 3–5 Years*.
- 11 See p. 72 in the *ELM Curriculum User Guide: Birth–36 Months* and pp. 107–108 of the *ELM Curriculum User Guide: 3–5 Years*.