

Wisconsin Model Early Learning Standards: Frequently Asked Questions

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1. How were the Wisconsin Model Early Learning Standards developed?

Beginning in 2002, the federal government directed states to submit early learning standards currently available in the state as a requirement to receive the Child Care and Development Fund. Since Wisconsin did not have early learning standards at that time, a decision was made to begin drafting model standards through a collaborative approach. These voluntary standards serve as a framework for early learning experiences for children.

A steering committee made up of representatives from the State Departments of Workforce Development, Public Instruction, and Health and Family Services, along with the Wisconsin Head Start Collaboration Project, Cooperative Educational Services Agencies (CESA) and Wisconsin Early Childhood Collaborating Partners (WECCP) was established to guide the development of the Wisconsin Model Early Learning Standards. The Steering Committee met many times to discuss the ongoing process in the development of the Standards. A consultant was hired to complete the actual drafting of the Standards after a thorough review of current literature, best practices and research on child development.

A review of other state standards, and Wisconsin community standards was completed also. Input was requested from content experts through focus groups, workshops and other stakeholder events. Guiding Principles were included to inform the development and application of the Standards into practice.

Beginning in 2006, the Steering Committee began working with content experts to enhance the Standards to include children birth to 3 years old, and to create a developmental continuum with example behaviors of children and example strategies for adults. This version was completed during the fall of 2007. [Top of page](#)

2. What age group are the Wisconsin Model Early Learning Standards for?

These Standards reflect expectations for children beginning at birth to first grade. As birth to 3 enhancements and additionally, the developmental continuum, example behaviors of children and example strategies for adults were added to the Standards the language was changed from the original age group of three through the completion of kindergarten to the age group "birth to first grade". The language of birth to first grade continues to reflect the transition to mandatory school enrollment at age six. Typically, most children attain the developmental expectations within this time frame, though there is individual variability. [Top of page](#)

3. Why expand the Wisconsin Model Early Learning Standards to include children ages birth to 3?

The first printing of the Wisconsin Model Early Learning Standards was designed specifically for children between the ages of three through the completion of kindergarten. In response to requests from agencies and individuals working with children under age three that wanted to see the children they work with reflected in the standards, the steering committee decided to expand the standards to encompass all children, birth to first grade. [Top of page](#)

4. Are the Wisconsin Model Early Learning Standards appropriate for all children?

The Standards reflect expectations for a typically-developing child; adapting and individualizing learning experiences ensures optimal development for all children. The Standards recognize that children are individuals who develop at individual rates. While children generally develop in similar stages and sequences, greatly diverse patterns of behavior and learning emerge as a result of the interaction of several factors including: genetic predisposition and physical characteristics; socio-economic status; values, beliefs, cultural and political practices of their families and communities. Because brain development and social-emotional development are most active in the early years of a child's life, all of the child's experiences are of critical importance to the child and our society. As such, these standards

support the development of optimal learning experiences that can be adapted in response to the individual developmental patterns of children. [Top of page](#)

4a. How can the Wisconsin Model Early Learning Standards be used for children with disabilities?

The principles upon which these Standards are designed include the importance of individualized programming decisions for all children. While the vast majority of students with disabilities should be expected to work toward and achieve these standards, accommodations and modifications will need to be individually identified and implemented. For children with disabilities, these decisions are made as part of their individualized family service plan (IFSP) or individual education program (IEP) plans developed by Birth to 3 or the school district's IEP team. This team could include birth to 3 or school personnel as well as child care and Head Start personnel and the child's parent. Persons working with children with disabilities will need to pay special attention to the IFSP or IEP and how curriculum adaptations and special education services can be provided to meet each child's individually identified developmental needs. Some accommodations and/or modifications may be necessary as young children with disabilities master the skills and competencies related to the Standards. Adapting and individualizing learning experiences can help assure that each child is exposed to activities that can help him or her reach his/her optimal development. [Top of page](#)

4b. How can the Wisconsin Model Early Learning Standards be used in programs with children who speak English as a Second Language?

The principles on which these Standards are designed include the recognition of cultural and linguistic diversity and its impact on child development. Persons working with children who speak other languages or with children from other cultures, will need to pay special attention to how they design culturally relevant environments and curriculum activities. Linguistically and culturally appropriate programming will ensure that each child's individual needs are addressed. See questions 34 and 35 for more information on Spanish and Hmong versions of the Standards. [Top of page](#)

5. Are the Wisconsin Model Early Learning Standards research-based?

Yes. Results of a comprehensive review of the current literature and research on child development and learning served as the foundation for the development of the Standards. Additional sources consulted include the National Association for the Education of Young Children (NAEYC), Head Start Child Outcomes, National Association for Family Child Care (NAFCC) and standards developed by Wisconsin communities. A review of Standards from other states was also completed. A listing of references and resources consulted is included in the back of the Wisconsin Model Early Learning Standards booklet in the Reference Section. Additional child development literature and research can be obtained through the [Wisconsin Child Care Information Center](#). [Top of page](#)

6. Why are the Wisconsin Model Early Learning Standards necessary?

The Standards provide a shared framework for understanding and communicating expectations for young children's development. They are a guide for parents, professionals, and policymakers, all of whom share responsibility for the well being of young children. Early learning standards promote beneficial connections between early childhood and K-12 educational experiences. [Top of page](#)

7. Why are the Wisconsin Model Early Learning Standards important?

Families, early care and education professionals, community institutions, and policymakers all share accountability for the optimal development of young children. These Standards provide a framework of developmentally appropriate expectations for young children that can guide their work in creating, evaluating, and improving the conditions necessary for children's optimal development. As a result, young children will have more opportunities for positive development and learning. [Top of page](#)

8. What is the intended use of the Wisconsin Model Early Learning Standards?

The Wisconsin Model Early Learning Standards are voluntary and applicable across all early learning environments, including child care, Early Head Start, Birth to 3, home visitor programs, Family Resource Centers, parent education classes, Head Start, and public and private early care and education programs. Broadly speaking, their intended purpose is: - to educate and provide guidance for families, educators/caregivers, administrators, and policymakers on developmental expectations for children in the early childhood period (in particular, from birth to first grade, before mandatory school enrollment); and - to inform the development of program standards across early learning environments. In tandem with the Guiding Principles, the Wisconsin Model Early Learning Standards establish a framework applicable across all early learning environments, with the following intended uses:

1. Educate families by informing them about the development of young children.
2. Guide the development of parent education activities and investments in parent education programs.
3. Improve quality across all early learning environments.
4. Guide professional development activities and investments.
5. Inform educators and caregivers in their approaches to curriculum development across all early learning environments.
6. Provide a unifying framework for resource investments and advocacy in early care and education.
7. Ease transitions for children and families across early learning environments and elementary school settings by establishing a shared framework aligned with the Wisconsin Model Academic Standards.
8. Serve as a basis for community partnerships and collaborations, unifying those who spend their days with children and those who advocate on behalf of these children. [Top of page](#)

9. Why does Wisconsin need its own Standards?

The Wisconsin Model Early Learning Standards reflect the shared values and commitments of the citizens of Wisconsin to prepare young children for success in school. They reflect attention to all the domains of a child's early learning and development and recognize that these domains are interrelated and interdependent. [Top of page](#)

10. Who should use the Wisconsin Model Early Learning Standards?

Parents, teachers, providers and programs can use the standards to enhance optimal learning experiences for young children, birth to first grade. The Standards can help guide the determination of developmentally appropriate curriculum, daily activities, and assessment. The Standards also provide a framework for ongoing assessment, planning and curriculum goals, and implementation of meaningful, experiential activities (refer to the Teaching Cycle included in the Standards booklet). [Top of page](#)

11. Do all early childhood education and care settings have to integrate the Wisconsin Model Early Learning Standards into their programs?

No. Implementation of the Standards is voluntary not mandatory. However, the Standards can be used as a tool to guide parents and programs as they plan activities that will provide a developmentally appropriate environment for children. These Standards can be used as guides for developing/adopting curriculum content, including instructional methods and materials, assessment practices, and for planning professional development opportunities.

Licensed and Certified Child Care Programs: Regulated programs are required to include certain components within the daily activities planned for children and in the program education policy. The Standards can provide a framework for providing these high-quality experiences for all children in these settings.

Head Start Programs: Head Start programs are legally required to meet the Head Start Performance Standards, including the Head Start Child Outcomes Framework. While the Wisconsin Model Early Learning Standards are voluntary, they align closely with Head Start requirements. Implementation of the Head Start Outcomes Framework is consistent with the Wisconsin Model Early Learning Standards.

Schools: The Wisconsin Model Early Learning Standards reflect expectations for a typically developing child beginning at first grade (mandatory school enrollment at age six). Wisconsin school districts may elect to use the Wisconsin Model Early Learning Standards along with the Wisconsin Model Academic Standards for four or five-year-old kindergarten programs. As the Wisconsin Model Early Learning Standards are designed to align with the Wisconsin Model Academic Standards they can be integrated into the school districts overall standards (see question 13 for more information).

Private/Parochial Programs: The Standards are applicable to a variety of early care and education settings. The Standards do not prescribe a particular educational philosophy. The Standards provide a framework that honors a variety of educational philosophies including private schools, faith-based settings, Montessori programs and other varied settings. These Standards reflect attention to the domains of a child's early learning and development and recognize that these domains are interrelated and interdependent. The Standards provide an expectation for experiences that can be integrated into a variety of curricular philosophies and approaches to communicate expectations for young children's development. [Top of page](#)

12. How are the Wisconsin Model Early Learning Standards aligned with the Wisconsin Model Academic Standards?

To support a smooth transition for children and families across early learning environments, kindergartens, and elementary school settings, the framework for the Wisconsin Model Early Learning Standards was developed to align with Wisconsin Model Academic Standards. The Wisconsin Model Early Learning Standards were developed to align with Wisconsin Model Academic Standards in their comprehensive focus on developmentally appropriate learning expectations. Therefore:

1. The Wisconsin Model Early Learning Standards refer to specific developmental areas while the Wisconsin Model Academic Standards refer to academic content.
2. Both sets of Standards offer specific developmental expectations; the Wisconsin Model Early Learning Standards specify developmental expectations and the Wisconsin Model Academic Standards specify content standards.
3. Both sets of Standards offer performance standards that tell how the child/student is meeting the expectation.
4. To address what happens in the classroom, the Wisconsin Model Early Learning Standards identify general program standards while the Wisconsin Model Academic Standards address curriculum. Children who meet the developmental expectations outlined in the Wisconsin Model Early Learning Standards will be prepared to master Wisconsin's Model Academic Standards. As such, the Wisconsin Model Early Learning Standards provide a foundation for the Wisconsin Model Academic Standards. [Top of page](#)

13. Why are the Wisconsin Model Early Learning Standards numbered in the Performance Standards section like they are?

The numbering system used in the Wisconsin Model Early Learning Standards reflects the numbering system used in the Wisconsin Model Academic Standards, where the first letter refers to the developmental expectation and the EL refers to Early Learning. [Top of page](#)

14. What is the difference between the Wisconsin Model Early Learning Standards and curriculum?

The Standards are statements that reflect widely held expectations for children beginning at birth to first grade. They also provide performance standards, by which children may demonstrate that they meet

expectations, and general program standard statements, by which teachers and caregivers can demonstrate that they provide the opportunities and experiences children need to meet developmental expectations. Curriculum reflects the practices that support children's early learning and development and is a component of program standards. [Top of page](#)

15. Can the Wisconsin Model Early Learning Standards also be used as a curriculum?

No. The Standards are neither a curriculum nor an assessment tool. By setting appropriate expectations for young children in the five domains of early learning and development, the Standards are intended as a guide for developing or selecting appropriate curriculum and assessment that support and promote children's learning and development. The Standards booklet includes a Resource Section that identifies examples of curriculum and assessment tools available. The Wisconsin Early Childhood Collaborating Partners web page also includes examples of early care and education curriculum and assessment tools at: <http://www.collaboratingpartners.com/learning-experiences/learning-experiences-curriculum/> [Top of page](#)

16. What specific curriculum should I be using in my program?

There is not a specific state-recommended curriculum or assessment for young children. The selection or development of appropriate curriculum and assessment should be a local decision. There are however, several published curriculum guides and assessment tools that are research-based and compatible with the Standards. Resources for the selection of early care and education curriculum and assessment tools are included in the Resource Section of the Standards booklet. [Top of page](#)

17. How can the Wisconsin Model Early Learning Standards and accompanying Developmental Continuum be used in the development of curriculum for early education classrooms?

A recent position paper from the National Institute for Early Education Research (NIERR) on preschool curriculum states, "At its simplest, curriculum is defined as what to teach and how to teach it." However, deciding what to teach – as well as how to teach it – is influenced by "concepts of what repertoire of knowledge and skills it is important for the young child to master, what role the child shall have in achieving mastery, and what organization of learning experiences is most likely to yield maximum cognitive power." (From the NIERR position paper, "Preschool Curriculum Decision-Making: Dimensions to Consider", Ellen Frede and Debra J. Ackerman.)

Early education professionals can use the Wisconsin Model Early Learning Standards to help determine what to teach. Educators are encouraged to engage in conversations between key stakeholders including teachers, support staff, administrators and parents to decide the content or learning goals for their program. The content or "what" of the curriculum should be balanced with the "process" of how young children learn. This aspect of curriculum development (or the how of teaching) provides guidance to teachers in developing activities, interactions, and set up of the environment. Keeping this balance ensures that children maintain the intrinsic joy of learning.

The Developmental Continuum that accompanies the Wisconsin Model Early Learning Standards can help describe and clarify examples of skills and child behaviors being addressed in a particular standard. For the typical 3-5 year old classroom, examples in the upper range of the continuum would be most representative, while keeping in mind individual differences and variations in development. Individualizing and making modifications are expected for all children. Additional guidance in early childhood curriculum development can be found at the following websites: <http://www.naeyc.org> and <http://nieer.org/about/>. [Top of page](#)

18. How do the Early Learning Standards relate to the assessment of the development of young children?

By setting appropriate expectations for young children in the five domains of early learning and development, the Wisconsin Model Early Learning Standards set the stage for the development of appropriate curriculum and the use of assessment practices that support and promote children's learning and development. Assessment practices are a component of program standards. Appropriate assessment practices for young children take into account the following considerations: Young children learn in ways and at rates different from older children. Young children come to know things through doing as well as through listening and often represent their knowledge better by showing than by telling. Young children's development and learning is rapid, uneven and episodic, so that point-in-time assessments do not give a complete picture of their learning. Young children's achievements are the result of a complex mix of their ability to learn and their past learning opportunities. [Top of page](#)

19. How can the Wisconsin Model Early Learning Standards be incorporated into a natural learning environment?

The Standards embrace the opportunity to take advantage of the teachable moment. With a solid understanding of developmentally appropriate practice, learning takes place in daily, natural occurrences. [Top of page](#)

20. Should the Wisconsin Model Early Learning Standards be used as an assessment tool?

No. The Standards are neither a curriculum nor an assessment tool. By setting appropriate expectations for young children in the five domains of early learning and development, the Standards are intended as a guide for developing or selecting appropriate curriculum and assessment that support and promote children's learning and development. Resources for the determination and selection of early care and education assessment can be found in the back of the Standards booklet in the Resource Section. [Top of page](#)

21. How can the Wisconsin Model Early Learning Standards be used for program assessment?

The Standards were not designed to be a tool for program assessment. However, parents may find that quality programs are knowledgeable about the Standards and plan their curriculum in relation to the Standards. [Top of page](#)

22. Should the Wisconsin Model Early Learning Standards be used as a screening tool when making program entry or exit decisions about individual children?

No. The Standards identify a range of appropriate expectations for children birth to first grade but recognize the wide variability in development between children that is typical during the early childhood years. Decisions regarding individual children should take into account the multiple factors influencing the child's development and be based upon information collected through multiple tools and methodologies. [Top of page](#)

23. Is there a specific assessment tool that is recommended by the Wisconsin Model Early Learning Standards?

No. There is not a specific state recommended assessment tool. It is recommended that assessment practices reflect principles established by the National Association for the Education of Young Children (NAEYC) <http://www.naeyc.org/files/naeyc/file/positions/StandCurrAss.pdf> which suggest that assessment and curriculum are an integrated process, with teachers using the information they collect on an ongoing basis to guide their teaching.

This collected information should include evidence of progress towards identified learning and developmental goals, and be gathered in a variety of ways including, but not limited to, observational data, examples of children's work overtime, performance during authentic experiences, and input from parents on their child's progress. Some published curricula also have companion assessment kits. [Top of page](#)

24. Do the Wisconsin Model Early Learning Standards include specific benchmarks for each age group?

No. The Standards identify a range of appropriate expectations for children birth to first grade. The Standards include developmental expectations, performance standards, developmental continuums, example behaviors of children, and example strategies for adults. The Wisconsin Model Early Learning Standards recognize that a wide variability in development exists between children that is typical during the early childhood years. The decision to establish age level benchmarks is a district and community local decision. [Top of page](#)

25. What does “show evidence of” really mean within the Wisconsin Model Early Learning Standards?

Through observation of a child over time, a child has the opportunity to demonstrate their understanding and mastery of a specific performance standard. The child may provide evidence of growth and learning experience over multiple observations. [Top of page](#)

26. Will early care and education settings be assessed on their implementation of the Wisconsin Model Early Learning Standards?

No. Implementation of the Standards is voluntary not mandatory. Best practice recommends regular program assessment to ensure quality. There are published tools intended to assess program quality and effectiveness. Refer to the Resource Section in the back of the Standards booklet for information regarding the assessment or program quality and effectiveness. [Top of page](#)

27. How can child care programs be expected to provide opportunities for each of the Performance Standards listed with limited financial resources?

The key to implementation of the Standards is the quality. Teachers and caregivers must be well trained and qualified to provide quality education for young children. A rich environment that provides the opportunity for hands-on exploration, language development, and social interaction is optimal for learning. Implementing developmentally appropriate practices in all areas of development including: health and physical, social and emotional, language and communication, approaches to learning, and cognition and general knowledge are essential to providing quality education for young children. Expensive toys and packaged curriculum materials are not necessary if a rich environment is provided. [Top of page](#)

28. What is the concept of “Play” as included in the Wisconsin Model Early Learning Standards?

The major defining characteristics of play are positive affect (children’s enjoyment), active engagement (deep involvement without distraction), intrinsic/internal motivation, teacher’s active support, attention to the process rather than product and non-literality. Adults establish and guide the play environment. Adults ask exploratory questions that help extend the child’s play. Adults offer new and varied materials. Adults validate children’s feelings. [Top of page](#)

29. What Wisconsin Model Early Learning Standards training will be available to the early care and education workforce?

Training opportunities provide greater understanding of the developmental domains, developmental expectations, program standards, performance standards, developmental continuum, example behaviors of children and example strategies for adults. During training, connections will be made between the Standards, curriculum and ongoing assessment. Refer to the Wisconsin Early Childhood Collaborating Partners <http://www.collaboratingpartners.com/training.htm> website for training dates and locations. Community Outreach Specialists and Child Care Resource and Referral staff have facilitated full training opportunities across the state, and can work with local communities to create additional training opportunities. [Top of page](#)

30. Can specific activities be identified within the Wisconsin Model Early Learning Standards for each domain?

Yes. The new developmental continuum, example behaviors of children and example strategies for adults provide the basis for determination of appropriate activities. Observable “samples” of what children might do as they demonstrate accomplishments at each level of the developmental continuum are identified, but they are not a definitive list of how a child might demonstrate a specific accomplishment or an exhaustive inventory. Example behaviors for adults provide “samples” of what adults might do to assist the child to gain knowledge or learn skills at each level of the developmental continuum. Again, the adult examples are not a definitive list or an exhaustive inventory. [Top of page](#)

31. Can the Wisconsin Model Early Learning Standards be used by parents?

Yes. The Standards can be used by parents to plan activities and/or to select early childhood education and care settings that will enhance their child’s development. Since parents are their children’s earliest teachers, the Standards are expected to be a useful resource in supporting parents’ understanding of child development. Additional resources for parent activities are available through the National Association of Child Care Resource and Referrals www.naccrra.org/naccrra/. The Standards booklet also includes a Resource Section that provides information that will be especially useful to parents. [Top of page](#)

32. Is the Wisconsin Model Early Learning Standards revised to include parent resources?

Yes. The Standards booklet includes parent resources, and a wealth of parent resources are also available through the web. Parent-friendly resources and activities are available through Ready to Learn <http://www.pbs.org/readytolearn/parents/index.html>, through the National Association of Child Care Resource and Referrals www.naccrra.org/naccrra/, Zero to Three <https://www.zerotothree.org/resources?type=parenting-resources> and many other sources. The local Child Care Resource and Referral can help parents locate other resources and activities based on specific need <https://ccrfoxvalley.org/for-families/>
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33. How can the Wisconsin Model Early Learning Standards honor the cultural identity and background of children and families?

The guiding principles established to inform the development and implementation of the Standards specifically recognize the fact that children's development reflects the ethnic, cultural and linguistic diversity of their families and communities. The Standards were designed to support adaptation and individualization of learning experiences in order to provide every child with a responsive learning environment. Such an environment demonstrates respect for children's home languages and cultural/ethnic backgrounds. [Top of page](#)

34. Are the Wisconsin Model Early Learning Standards available in Spanish?

Yes, the original Standards were translated into Spanish. This Spanish version of the Standards is available on the Wisconsin Early Childhood Collaborating Partners website and printed copies can be ordered through <https://pubsales.dpi.wi.gov/product/wmels-spanish/>. [Top of page](#)

35. Will the Wisconsin Model Early Learning Standards be translated into Hmong?

The original Wisconsin Model Early Learning Standards have been translated into Hmong. The Hmong translated Standards are available on the Wisconsin Early Childhood Collaborating Partners website. The expanded version of the Standards has not yet been translated. When a translation is made the expanded version would be available on this Web site. [Top of page](#)

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