Early Childhood Building Blocks
Response to Intervention in the Inclusive Early Childhood Classroom
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INTRODUCTION
The entire staff of Child Care on the Square have been talking about and planning for the adoption of Response to Intervention (RTI) into their program for a while now. Assessment is an essential part of their RTI planning, and today Ms. Annie, one of the itinerant teachers that works with CCS, comes to observe in Ms. Robin’s preschool classroom.

Afterward Annie and Robin discuss the children’s participation in the morning’s experiences. Annie comments that most of the children seemed to understand the concepts explored today and had a success-filled morning of play and social interaction. However, as the two reflect on the documentation, it is clear that Zac (a child with an IEP), Eddie, and Sherree seemed to struggle a bit and lose interest while sorting the toy cars, planes, and trucks with Mr. Joe, the assistant teacher. Annie and Robin make a list of a few ideas that will give these three additional opportunities to sort and talk about transportation vehicles. Later, Annie will observe and document the children’s progress to determine if they are gaining success in the skill.
As their conversation continues, Robin asks Annie for ideas regarding one child who had a really hard time this morning. “How can I help Nyah learn sorting skills?” Annie had observed Nyah while she was trying to sort the toys. She was not able to sort the toys or answer the teacher’s direct questions. Nyah became frustrated and left the area. Annie provides Robin with several ideas that Robin can use to incorporate sorting activities into Nyah’s play, including experience with a few friends who already have mastered the new skill.

As they finish up their discussion, Annie and Robin also make a response timeline for their work with Zac, Sherree, Eddie, and Nyah, and set a follow-up meeting with the whole team, including parents, to look at the results of assessment.

**RATIONALE**

**Why RTI?**

As you can see in the opening scenario, Ms. Annie, Ms. Robin, and many of the children’s families are working together in the intervention process. Everyone wants Zac and his classmates to reach their full potential at Child Care on the Square and be prepared for his future learning in elementary school and beyond. Zac has an IEP, but other children, like Nyah, do not. Ms. Robin knows, however, that all her children have needs that influence how well they are learning.

The field of early education has always been grounded in the idea that children are unique individuals and that early childhood teachers must be responsive to the needs of each child, but in recent years research has shown just how diverse those needs can be. Not only do children look and act differently: they have different likes and dislikes, interests, learning styles, physical abilities and disabilities, attitudes, cognitive skills, cultural backgrounds, home languages, previous experiences, and social competencies, and all of these differences impact learning.

How can teachers hope to meet the needs of all their children? Ms. Robin, Ms. Annie, and the other staff at the center have found that some elements of response to intervention (RTI) work for them. They use a high-quality and strong core curriculum which is based on standards to plan the program for all the children. They have an ongoing assessment plan that allows them to continually monitor the children’s progress and obtain the information they need to inform their planning. And the collaborative team works together with parents to provide time, materials, staff, and space for different kinds of experiences, at different levels of intensity, to meet different needs. This assures that:

- The whole group can learn
- Small groups of children can get the extra help they need to learn
- Individuals can receive intense, specific interventions and learn, too

These strategies are the essence of RTI, but they are also the essence of a strong and effective early childhood program.
RTI is basically a system for bringing many people together to pool their knowledge and their skills to benefit all children and start them on the path for success in school. RTI is a framework that assists early childhood educators in organizing the supports needed to ensure that all children can be successful in classroom experiences. When adapted for use in early childhood, this detailed and data-based support builds a strong foundation for every child’s future learning.

Until recently, RTI has most often been used with school-aged children. While at Kent State University, Sarah Jackson and Sandra Hess Robins charted their comparison of RTI principles and early childhood recommended practices. As a result of their work and the work of others, it is becoming clear that many RTI components can be seamlessly applied to the education of younger children. For example, RTI for both age groups:

- Includes a framework of three tiers (some people use four) or levels of support for children and utilizes the most appropriate and effective classroom experiences that flow from a curriculum framework based on evidence from research
- Relies on universal and continuous screening and monitoring of children to accurately determine their needs and successes
- Relies on the efforts of a collaborative team of professionals and family members that plan for all the children

There are differences, though. Where RTI in older grades addresses problems as they arise or that may have already bloomed into issues that need ongoing intervention, in early childhood settings RTI often seems to be a more proactive, early-response system that detects budding problems and addresses them before they blossom into something more extensive.

There are other distinctive features of early childhood RTI. When responding to young children’s needs, educators must maintain a holistic viewpoint and take into account the social, emotional, and physical needs of the child, as well as the child’s cognitive needs. Similarly, interventions need to take place during play and in the routine places where the children normally live, learn, and play—at home, in the classroom, on playgrounds, and in other places and spaces in which they function normally.
Early Childhood Building Blocks: Response to Intervention in the Inclusive Early Childhood Classroom

RTI Tiers and REC’s Planning Options

**Tier I:** Plan for all. Introduce concepts and skills to all the children using the best curriculum and the best universally designed practices. Use universal screening results and continually monitor progress. See REC’s Planning for All Children.

**Tier II:** Plan for some. Use proven strategies to “kick it up a notch” by reinforcing or reteaching concepts in collaboration with other educators and families to plan extra support. See REC’s Planning for Some Children.

**Tier III:** Plan for a few individuals. Be a troubleshooter. Figure out what’s really going on with one or more children through more specific assessment. Then plan specific interventions. Monitor how the child is doing, but also how the teacher is doing at meeting the child’s need. See REC’s Planning for a Few Children.

FEATURES OF RTI IN EARLY CHILDHOOD

**Three RTI Tiers Of Responses Are Typical**

Most often RTI includes three tiers of support, but the tiers do not necessarily follow one another in order, nor are they a hierarchy of tiers. Children move into and out of tiers of support at different times and for different experiences according to their different needs. For example, a child with a need that is immediately evident should immediately receive appropriate intervention services as well as support in the classroom. However, children whose needs emerge more slowly may not require intervention at first, but will benefit from increased classroom and maybe even outside support as the needs arise. Also a child with an IEP may engage in experiences at all three tiers, and a child without an IEP may also work at all three tiers. The goal of the tiered system is to recognize and respond to a child’s needs as they ebb and flow. It is not a “one-size-fits-all from day 1 to day 180” philosophy.
Ongoing Assessment is Key

Teachers and others on the teaching team make a plan for all, for some, and for a few children (or an individual). But to know what to plan, teachers must know:

- What each child has already learned and to what point his or her development has progressed
- What each child still needs to learn and in which areas the child needs to develop skills
- How each child learns best
- When the concepts and skills have been mastered

To be aware of all this, teachers must have strong assessment strategies and tools at their fingertips and feel comfortable using those tools. When the teachers know their children well, they can work with others to match each child’s level of need with the appropriate level of help.

Teachers utilizing RTI in elementary school programs often use curriculum-independent assessment programs that have been proved over time to be reliable (e.g., DIBELS, AIMS web) to provide universal screening for their students. Early childhood professionals utilize a variety of different tools to support assessment and screening procedures, but we do not have resources that have been directly validated for the purpose of RTI decision making. So the question is, what should educators look for in assessment and screening tools to tell them what they need to know about their kids?

Judy Harris Helm, Ed.D., offers educators some specific questions to ask prior to choosing or designing best practice assessment tools and strategies in her best practice Building Blocks brief written for the Ohio Resource Center, Best Practices in Assessment in Early Childhood Education. In her Building Blocks article, Dr. Helm asserts that early childhood evaluation tools answer specific questions about each child. She lists reliability and validity as two of the most important characteristics of assessment tools. She also says that “one of the best ways to assess young children is to observe them while they are doing typical tasks during the regular school day (authentic performance).” However, she makes it clear that teachers need to “do more than just observe children and write notes.” There has to be “an organizational system for collecting, analyzing, and sharing information.”
A Quality Core Curriculum is Critical

Once they know the needs of their children, preschool teachers using RTI are able to develop tiers of support in their classrooms. As in elementary school-age programs, the first item to put in place is a good, solid core curriculum. If the core curriculum is not strong and does not meet the needs of the majority (80 percent-plus) of your class, it is difficult to develop interventions!

Ohio Offers Curriculum Support

Ohio provides a variety of supports for teachers who want to use a strong core curriculum in their classrooms. Here are a few examples:

- **Professional development.** The Early Childhood Quality Network (ecQ-net) offers professional development modules that focus on the preschool literacy core curriculum.

- **Podcasts, handouts, and rubrics.** The Center for Excellence in Early Childhood Research Teaching (CEECRT) at Kent State describes research and strategies that can guide a program in selecting a curriculum that has high standards.

Ohio Early Childhood Quality Education Documents

These standards and guidelines support quality early childhood practices:

- Early Learning Program Guidelines
- Ohio’s Infant & Toddler Guidelines
- IMPACT (Integrated Monitoring Process and Continuous Improvement Tool)
- Ohio’s Early Learning Content Standards
- Science Education Standards and Model Curriculum
- Social Studies Revised Standards and Model Curriculum
- Mathematics State Standards and Model Curriculum
- English Language Arts State Standards and Model Curriculum

Interventions for Young Children Need to Be Tried and True

Interventions planned for young children as part of an RTI approach need to be based on proven research and standard best practice. The following websites provide information and support for teams who are planning interventions:

- Center for Early Literacy Learning (CELL)
- Early Childhood Research & Practice
- Get Ready to Read!

- Technical Assistance Center on Social Emotional Intervention for Young Children. Especially see the resource “Creating Teaching Tools for Young Children with Challenging Behaviors.”

- Center on the Social and Emotional Foundations for Early Learning

- Supporting Early Literacy in Natural Environments: Tools for Traveling Teachers
WHO HAS MADE RTI WORK IN AN EARLY CHILDHOOD SETTING?

The effort to bring RTI strategies and priorities into early childhood classrooms is fairly new. Early childhood classroom that are leading the way in adapting RTI to effectively meet the needs of each and every child they serve include:

- **Center for Response to Intervention in Early Childhood** (the University of Kansas)
- **Recognition and Response**: Pathways to School Success for Young Children
- **The Literacy Partnership of Washington, D.C.**

These exemplary programs share their work in areas such as:

- Evidence-based curriculum
- A supportive environment
- Effective scheduling
- High levels of child engagement
- Differentiation and flexible grouping

You may want to review the above websites to find ideas for your program. Note that these programs have found that adoption of RTI into young children’s educational settings takes time, a shift of thinking, continual monitoring and ongoing feedback, and creative problem solving on the part of administrators, staff, and families. RTI requires continual reflection on instructional practice, too.

Ongoing Assessment is Key

You may be wondering how to get started on the road to RTI. You have already taken the first step by reading about RTI as it applies to early childhood. Teachers in today’s early childhood community are fortunate. There is a growing body of online resources that are freely available so that you can further your understanding of what it takes to utilize a tiered and assessment-based approach to inclusion. For example, in the National Center for Learning Disabilities’ Roadmap to Pre-K RTI, “Steps to Implementing a Program-wide Model of RTI in Early Childhood Settings” (p. 20) lists nine steps to implementing RTI and “Guiding Questions for Self Assessment of Readiness to Implement RTI in PreK” (p. 21) provides eighteen thoughtful questions.

Books About EC Quality Practices and RTI

If you are planning to utilize some form of RTI in your early childhood program, you may need to do some additional reading. Here are some popular book titles that Merrie Darrah, Ohio State Support Team Consultant for Region 4, recommends:

- **Alternative Approaches to Assessing Young Children** by Angela Losardo and Angela Notari-Syverson (Brookes Publishing, Baltimore, MD, 2001).
- **Informing Our Practice: Useful Research on Young Children’s Development** by Eva L. Essa and Melissa M. Burnham, eds. (NAEYC, Washington, D.C., 2009).
Another early step is to ask around and find people and places nearby that are also on the journey. Perhaps you can find someone to correspond with online or during a training event who knows something that you don’t know about the process. For example, the ORC is hosting a webcast to get a conversation started on RTI, UDL, and the needs of all children. If you don’t get a chance to participate in the live event, an archive of the webcast will be available on REC for your use.

The initial steps also should include the adoption of universal design in your classroom. UDL is a great way to support the use of RTI. Universal Design for Learning in Inclusive Early Childhood Classrooms, another Building Blocks best practice brief, can provide you with tons of information that will help tear down the barriers to learning that can exist in the everyday classroom. If you remove these stumbling blocks, you will open pathways for all children to learn in tier one of your RTI-based program.

Early on in the process, it is also important build a team to collaborate with you in this effort. The special education consultants in your area, itinerant teachers (traveling, speech teachers, early intervention, and maybe even art and music teachers), the parents of the children in your classroom, your administrator or director, and other teachers who teach in your building all have a stake in the progress your children make. Find some times to sit together and brainstorm, set goals, and plan.

Now take a look at your assessment system with your team. Ask yourselves questions (like those mentioned by Judy Helm) to determine if your system is adequate for your next adventures in inclusion. Look for additional tools that will fill the gaps. Then put your plan into action and find out what your children need.

The final step is not really a final step at all, but the first of many steps in a revolving system of best practices: assess, plan, teach (as you offer embedded experiences, explicit instruction, and specific interventions), reflect and assess again, plan to adjust and expand, teach even more, and continue the cycle. Ms. Robin and Ms. Annie from Child Care on the Square and other educators across the country travel this educational path every day, and it seems to be yielding positive results for everyone involved. The responses and interventions you make for your children will have a great impact on their lives.
These web-based tools and resources will help you do further research into the background, goals, features, and strategies of RTI so that you and your team can make the best choices for your program.

- **Recognition & Response**. R & R is one example of how RTI can be adapted to work in an early childhood setting.

- **RTI Action Network: RTI in Pre-Kindergarten**. This network focuses on the implementation of RTI in schools and across grade levels. The Pre-K pages focus on implementing RTI at the early childhood level. For example, the Fidelity of Implementation Program Level Rubric is meant to help you keep true to the vision and components of RTI. The rubric identifies the three tiers and outlines the key components of RTI. The rubric is an excellent tool for you and your planning team to use to evaluate your progress and level of fidelity.

- **Roadmap to Pre-K RTI: Applying Response to Intervention in Preschool Settings**. This whole document is worth reading and bookmarking. It explains in depth how RTI can be utilized effectively and appropriately in an early childhood setting.

- **Center for Response to Intervention in Early Childhood**. CRTIEC conducts research and provides resources for those applying RTI in preschool settings. The center also provide examples of interventions for Tiers II and III.

- **The Division of Early Childhood**. One of the seventeen divisions of the Council for Exceptional Children, DEC provides a wealth of information and resources for teachers, families, students, and others in the early childhood community. The website offers links to position statements, journals, and information on recommended practices. One of the especially interesting articles in the samples area of the Young Exceptional Children journal section is Recognition & Response: Response to Intervention for PreK by Virginia Buysse and Ellen Peisner-Feinberg.

- **National Center on Response to Intervention**. This website provides resources about RTI across grade levels. Many are pertinent for early childhood including some of the recorded webinars in the resource library.
OHIO EARLY LEARNING PROGRAM GUIDELINES

Section 2: Environments Matter

Outcome 1: The learning environment is organized to support and facilitate young children’s thinking abilities, learning processes, social competencies and general well-being.

Goal 2: A comprehensive early childhood curriculum is used to address child development objectives and Ohio’s Early Learning Content Standards.

Performance Indicator 2.4: Educators intentionally plan educational experiences and deliver instruction using a variety of teaching strategies to meet the diverse learning abilities of all children.

Outcome 2: Educators have the knowledge and skills necessary to support children’s learning and development.

Goal 1: Early childhood educators demonstrate the competencies necessary to provide high quality instruction.

Performance Indicator 2.1: Educators demonstrate their understanding of child development by:

• Planning experiences that reflect knowledge of the universal stages of development and developmental milestones;

• Adjusting experiences to meet the uniqueness of all children (i.e., stage of development, temperament, ways of engaging);

• Carefully crafting a daily schedule that addresses all developmental domains (i.e., time for gross motor play; opportunities for oral language and social interaction – peer to peer, adult to child and child to adult; and exploration, investigation and creative expression);

• Acknowledging the social and emotional feelings of children; and

• Incorporating knowledge of each child’s social and cultural influences and how they influence development and learning.

Goal 2: Educators demonstrate nurturing and supportive relationships with children to promote self assurance and competence.

Performance Indicator 2.2: Educators evaluate and adjust their actions to respond to differing abilities, temperaments, activity levels and developmental abilities.

Goal 3: Educators demonstrate reflective teaching practices.

Performance Indicator 3.1: Educators meet regularly to reflect on children’s experiences and to share curriculum ideas and teaching strategies.
ABOUT THE AUTHORS

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Merrie Darrah is the early learning coordinator with State Support Team for Region 4. Merrie has been in the field of early childhood education for more than 20 years. She has degrees in clinical/school psychology and educational administration. Merrie has broad experience working with individuals with disabilities from birth through age 21 including extensive work in the areas of early childhood assessment, curriculum and instruction, and response to intervention.

Sarah Jackson is the early learning/school readiness coordinator for the State Support Team of Region 8. She provides professional development and technical assistance to district and community-based early childhood programs. Sarah has conducted research and development in the areas of curriculum in inclusive settings, response to intervention, and quality continuous improvements models.

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FOR MORE INFORMATION

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Visit http://rec.ohiorc.org to see the REC website and other Early Childhood Building Blocks.

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