



There is, and has been for quite some time, a call to ensure our children have key skills. Skills like creativity and critical thinking are now cornerstone outcomes of today's preK-12 schools. For young children this is a call to help them hold onto their natural capacities to work with others, play to solve problems, create, be curious, explore their environments, and more. Children are born to practice and use these skills; we have to ensure that our schools, homes, and communities help them to nurture these skills. The following provides an overview of what these key skills are¹ for our children, what these skills might look like, and what strategies you might see in your child's school that develop these key skills.

Collaboration

Collaboration is cooperative interaction between two or more individuals. In young children collaboration can be seen in their ability to play with others, interact with adults or children, learn with and from peers (sometimes leading, sometimes following), listen to others, willingly share their own views and knowledge, see value in others' skills as well as their own, complete tasks and solve problems with others, welcome the giving and receiving of feedback, and more. In classrooms look for opportunities for students to work in teams, solve real and complex problems together (with and without adults), establish expectations for teams, and make feedback from everyone a continuous part of learning, as well as opportunities for active listening, open ended questioning, observations and data collection, project work, and more.

Communication

Communication is the ability to produce meaning through exchanges that can be verbal, nonverbal, written, artistic, or digital in nature. In young children communication can be seen in their ability to talk with others, draw pictures, take pictures and tell about them, capture video and interact via video to learn, create, and contribute to discussions, write or engage in pre-writing work, share opinions, and more. In classrooms look for opportunities for students to practice talking with one another, use multiple means of representation (i.e., not just writing everything), practice give and take in group and 1:1 conversations, use video appropriately to learn with and from others, use technology to capture examples that deepen communication (i.e., capturing pictures and using text or voice to describe those pictures), share information in written, visual, or digital form with others and interact with information in multiple forms that is shared by others, and practice giving feedback and interacting digitally, engaging in experiences that promote the value of face to face communication, practicing communicating digitally with kindness, empathy, respect, and authenticity, and more.

Curiosity

The desire to know and understand. Or the driving force that leads to inquiry. In young children curiosity can be seen in their ability to respond positively to new experiences, to be okay with activities that lack explicit direction, to explore how things can be built or created, to enjoy figuring out how to solve problems, asking questions, wondering why, thinking about "what if," examining and investigating different topics, materials, objects, or idea, and more. In classrooms look for opportunities for students to self-direct their choices and topics of inquiry, chose books to read and materials to create with, multiple options for representing understanding and questions (video, recorded audio, pictures, writing, etc.), spontaneous learning opportunities and questions that lead to deep work that engages students in more learning than was planned or required, engagement with current events, solving real problems that impact their lives and neighborhoods, practices that promote intrinsic motivation, teachers readily creating with (not planning for) their students, and more.

¹ Definitions from all key skills were provided by EnGauge 21st Century Skills, Metiri Group and NCREL, 2003.



Critical Thinking

Critical thinking is the process of analyzing, comparing, inferring, interpreting, evaluating, and synthesizing to solve problems, deepen understanding, or contribute to a collective knowledge base. In young children critical thinking can be seen in their ability to consider probing questions, take the perspectives of others (“x feels because...”), putting together puzzles, mapping out stories or events or plans, being skeptical of information, combining information to build understanding, begin to tell the difference between fact and fiction, and more. In classrooms look for opportunities for students to question, collect data, plan, engage in “what if,” wondering, developing different ideas or conclusions (i.e., foundations of hypothesis), building, constructing, designing, questioning, developing criteria with others, reflecting on “why” for their likes and dislikes, project work, inquiry work, work that sustains attention beyond a single day or week of learning, and more.

Creative Innovation

Creativity is the act of creating something novel that is genuinely new, unique, original, and has value personally or to others. Innovation encompasses novelty, and the ability to introduce something new that has personal or more global purpose. Combined these two skills are visible in young children, and may be seen in their ability to create, problem solve and prototype (in developmentally appropriate ways), make up words with appropriate definitions, in trial and error attitudes and behaviors (think block building, building tips, try another choice for the base blocks), playful in the pursuit of figuring things out, the use of materials in new ways to create without direction, coding, and more. In classrooms look for opportunities that are student created or student directed, a teacher *facilitating* rather than directing what is happening, students identifying needs and easily accessing resources (materials, tools, etc.), students who are empowered to come up with their own solutions, students who are testing and retesting, students acquiring a deep understanding of topics of relevance, project work, inquiry work, work that sustains attention beyond a single day or week of learning, and more.

Confidence

Confidence is the feeling of self-assurance in one’s abilities, experiences, or qualities. In young children confidence is visible in their trust of their own skills, their belief that they can do something, their access to opportunities that let them “try and fail” safely on their own, having safe independence, developing trust from adults that they are making safe choices when given the opportunity to choose for themselves, and their capacity to ask for help without feeling ashamed. In classrooms look for opportunities that give student choice, age appropriate responsibility, and opportunities to feel “good at something.” Look for environments in which students have many opportunities to develop self-direction (making important choices and decisions as needed), set goals (both academic and non-academic in nature), give and receive feedback continuously, know what they are learning and why, reflect on effort, and more.

A quick note

The capacity of our kids to thrive often depends most greatly on the ability of adults to understand how learning happens. We ground our education work in learning science, that is, research on how people learn. The classroom opportunities above, are the best-practice examples based on learning science. The learning environment and experience of students in today’s classrooms should nurture these skills, not detract or compete with their development.