DEVELOPING LEADERSHIP SKILLS IN PRESCHOOL

SUMMER INCLUSION INSTITUTE

TUESDAY, JUNE 9, 2026

10:45 A.M.-12:15 P.M.

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ABOUT ME - EMILY DORSEY, PH.D.

- CURRENT DIRECTOR OF ILLINOIS EARLY LEARNING – WRITING ABOUT LEADERSHIP
- PREVIOUS ROLES
  - FACULTY MEMBER IN INCLUSIVE EARLY CHILDHOOD EDUCATION (UNL)
  - EDUCATIONAL CONSULTANT FOCUSED ON INCLUSION (NC)
  - PUBLIC ECSE TEACHER (IL AND NC)

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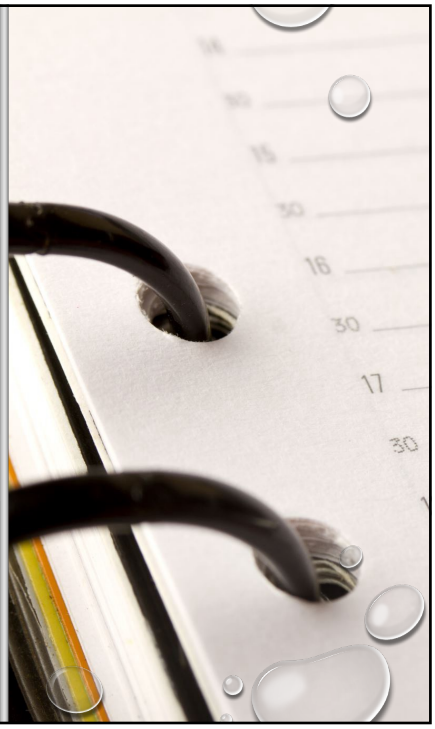
AGENDA

- What is leadership in the early childhood classroom?
- Why is leadership in young children important?
- Benefits of leadership skills
- Three strategies for promoting leadership
- Professional reflection
- Related resources



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WHAT IS LEADERSHIP IN THE EARLY CHILDHOOD CLASSROOM?

LET'S BRAINSTORM!

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LEADERSHIP IN THE EARLY CHILDHOOD CLASSROOM… IS PART OF THE SOCIAL STUDIES CURRICULUM

- Illinois early learning and development standards (IELDS) domain
  - Social Studies
    - Goal 14: Understand some concepts related to citizenship
    - Goal 15: Explore roles in the economic system and workforce
    - Goal 16: Develop an awareness of the self and his or her uniqueness and individuality
    - Goal 17: Explore geography, the child's environment, and where people live, work, and play

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LEADERSHIP IN THE EARLY CHILDHOOD CLASSROOM… CAN BE LEARNED THROUGH PLAY

- What games or play scenarios can you think of that naturally lead to leadership roles? Put your answers in the chat box.
- IEL tip sheets
  - Who's the Leader?
  - Work and Play Together

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LEADERSHIP IN THE EARLY CHILDHOOD CLASSROOM…IS FOR EVERYONE

- Children with and without disabilities
- Children from a variety of cultural, linguistic, and socioeconomic backgrounds

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LEADERSHIP IN THE EARLY CHILDHOOD CLASSROOM…IS RELATED TO AGENCY

- Demonstrations of agency can include:
  - Asking questions
  - Making suggestions
  - Challenging ideas
  - Refusing a task either verbally or nonverbally sharing ideas
- Early childhood educators who respond to and engage positively with these demonstrations can cultivate agency in young children

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WHAT ARE THE BENEFITS OF LEADERSHIP IN EARLY CHILDHOOD CLASSROOMS?

- LET'S BRAINSTORM!
- PUT YOUR IDEAS IN THE CHAT BOX

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BENEFITS OF LEADERSHIP SKILLS IN EARLY CHILDHOOD CLASSROOM – FOR CHILDREN

CHILDREN

- Gain communication skills
- Gain collaboration skills
- Build relationship and feel like part of the classroom community
- Develop ability to advocate for self and others
- Transfer and use leadership skills in other environments
- Build a foundation of leadership skills needed as an adult

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BENEFITS OF LEADERSHIP - FOR THE CLASSROOM COMMUNITY

THE CLASSROOM COMMUNITY EXPERIENCES:

- More collaboration
- Higher quality independent work
- Reduction in challenging behavior
- Efficient set up and clean up routines
- Increased teacher availability

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BENEFITS OF LEADERSHIP – FOR TEACHERS

TEACHERS HAVE THE OPPORTUNITY TO:

- "Reframe" and reshape perceptions and expectations
- Transform classroom environment from mostly teacher-directed to shared leadership

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THREE STRATEGIES TO PROMOTE LEADERSHIP DEVELOPMENT

PROVIDE INFORMATION ABOUT, MODEL, AND ACKNOWLEDGE CITIZENSHIP

FACILITATE PEER SUPPORTS

ENCOURAGE SHARED DECISION MAKING

These strategies align well to core considerations of Developmentally Appropriate Practice (DAP) – commonalty, individuality, and context

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PROVIDE INFORMATION ABOUT, MODEL, AND ACKNOWLEDGE CITIZENSHIP

- Put your thoughts in the chat box
  - Define "citizen"
  - What does "citizenship" look like in the early childhood classroom?

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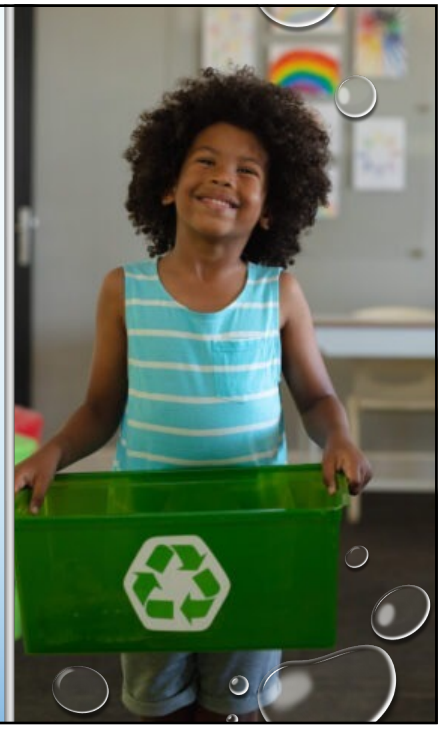
CITIZENSHIP - DEFINITION

- Caring for others, sharing ideas, and exploring respectfully
- Caring for community and environment; in an early education setting
- Illustrated by - helping clean up, assisting a peer with a difficult task, or sharing thoughts on a class project.



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HOW TO TEACH CITIZENSHIP

- Teach the term “citizen” at large group
- Use puppets to demonstrate good citizenship actions
- Model, and narrate own good citizen behavior
- Comment on good citizenship behavior – recognizing ALL students
- Invite children to share examples of citizenship they have seen in themselves or others

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FACILITATE PEER SUPPORTS

- Put your thoughts in the chat box
  - Define "peer supports"
  - What might peer supports look like in the early childhood classroom?

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PEER SUPPORTS - DEFINED

- Children help each other with daily routines and learning activities.
- Children with and without disabilities can be helpers.
- A child can be an expert based on their special interests, as well as their skills.

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WAYS TO FACILITATE PEER SUPPORTS

- Encourage children to seek out peers when they need assistance.
- Help children identify expertise in themselves or others.
- Build an "expert chart"
- Ensure all children are the “helper” but also benefit from the help of others

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SHARED DECISION MAKING

- Put your thoughts in the chat box
  - What might decision-making look like in the early childhood classroom?
  - What strategies can children use to reach a decision together?

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SHARED DECISION-MAKING: DEFINITION

- Children work in group and independently to indicate their preferences and make choices in the classroom.

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WAYS TO ENCOURAGE SHARED DECISION-MAKING

- Invite participation via large group discussion, small groups, individual conversation with teacher
- Allow creative participation – such as pictures of preferences
- Develop voting, polls, and compromises
  - IEL tip sheet: Children's Votes Count!
- Involve children in classroom decisions on classroom procedures and how to resolve conflicts

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ARE YOU READY FOR MORE LEADERSHIP IN YOUR CLASSROOM?

Reflect on these questions:

- Do I sense that children in my class have untapped leadership potential?
- Am I ready to let go of some control over learning activities and decisions?
- Do I understand the benefits of children developing as leaders?

Pro-tip – use the golden rule.

- Do you like working and learning more when you are seen as engaged and competent, or when you are given more direction with less autonomy?

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WHAT BENEFITS MIGHT I EXPERIENCE FROM MAKING THIS CHANGE?

- Increased engagement and productivity from students
- More debating, collaborating, compromising, and helping among students
- Awareness of long-term leadership potential in students, that can be shared with families and future teachers

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RELATED RESOURCES - PRINT

- Learning, Practicing, and Exhibiting Leadership: Helping Children Develop as Classroom Leaders. By Emily A. Dorsey, Natalie Danner, Alisha L. Lewis, and Michaelene M. Ostrosky. In Young Children–Spring 2024
- *Leadership: Leading From Where You Are* (DEC Recommended Practices Monograph Series no. 9). Edited by R. Batz, S.B. Blanchard, D.L., Rooks-Ellis, & S. M. Stegenga (2023)
- Education for a Civil Society: Teaching Young Children to Gain Five Democratic Life Skills (second edition) by Dan Gartell (2023)

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ILLINOIS EARLY LEARNING RESOURCES

- Everyone Can Be a Leader –Tool kit
- Citizenship and Leadership –Resource list
- Who's the Leader? – Tip sheet

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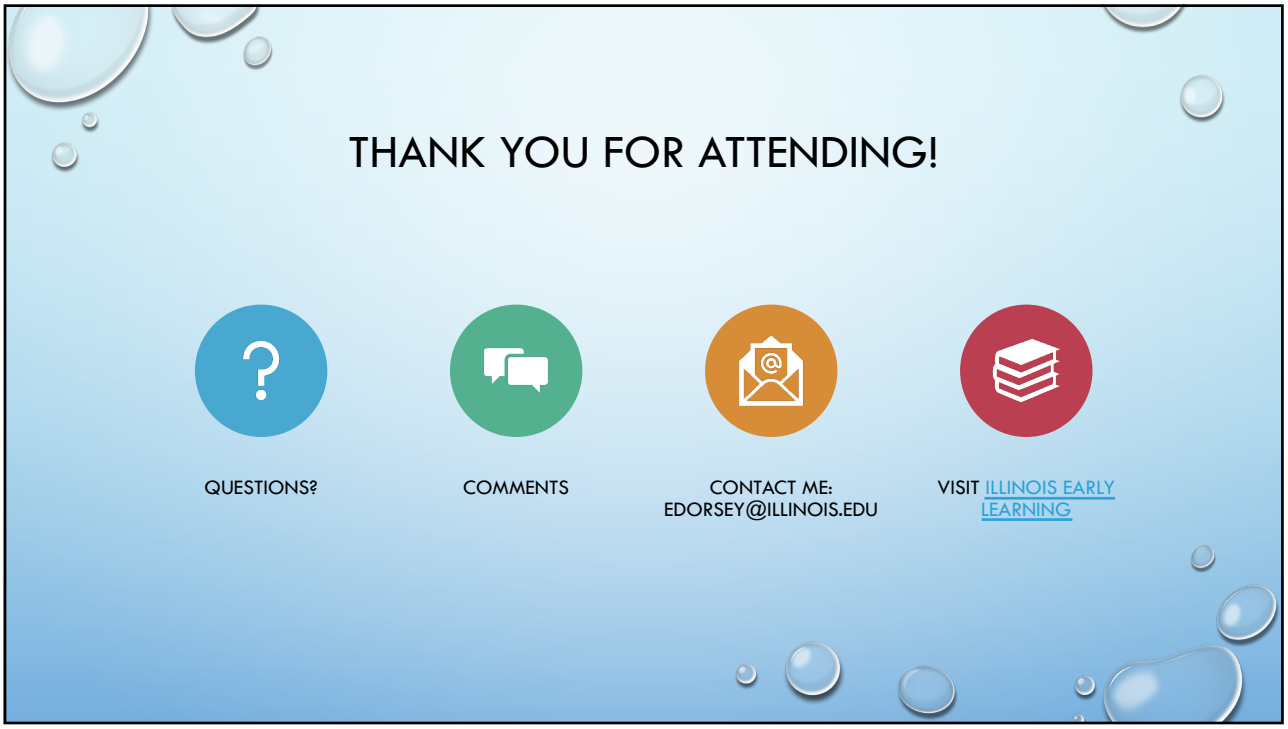
THANK YOU FOR ATTENDING!
QUESTIONS?
COMMENTS
CONTACT ME:
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