

The ICRI Way in Emergent Curriculum

Our curriculum approach is a highly refined amalgam of the highest quality, research and evidence-based curriculums from around the world over the past 70 plus years. Given the length of time ICRI has been practicing various curricular approaches and developing best practices in all areas within the field, we are uniquely situated to provide insight and nuance that is rarely found in other programs.

For the last 20 years, ICRI has developed what has been seen by many as a curriculum that offers the highest quality model programs that truly reach the natural curiosity and creativity of every child in our care and that acts as a model program delivery approach in our field. This approach, based upon the latest research on the neuroscience of children's brain development and observation of highest quality early childhood programs around the world, has lead us to develop a series of standards, methodologies and curricular approaches. With the experience of two decades of continuous work and review with this approach behind us, along with new research and knowledge emerging every year, we have come to the highest level in developing a living, translatable curriculum that can serve infants, toddlers, preschoolers and their teachers and parents each day.

All ICRI program goals are based in Anti-Bias and Emergent curriculum, built using Developmentally Appropriate Practice, and expanded using the wide array of "Funds of Knowledge" from our families and teachers. At ICRI, we believe that learning is a life-long process that is best fostered through the natural course of play, exploration and self-discovery. It is through play that various aspects of the child's development come together and that the child organizes experiences and gives meaning to his or her world. Play involves opportunity to explore, create, invent, hypothesize, test and discover. The challenge at ICRI schools is to build upon the child's innate desire to learn. We provide an environment for growth in which children are encouraged to learn about the world through their senses, feelings and minds. ICRI teachers guide children's development through the environment they create, the information they provide, the questions they ask, the planning they do and the behavior they model.

Infant/Toddler - The core of ICRI's curriculum rests on the trail-blazing work and research of Dr. Emmi Pikler beginning in the 1940s at her institute in Hungary. Dr. Pikler was a pediatrician, who through careful observation and research, introduced new theories of infant/toddler education. Theories grounded in the understanding that children do best when they are given respect, free movement and uninterrupted play/exploration.

The work of Dr. Pikler was further developed and carried forward by one of her students Dr. Magda Gerber, who refined and popularized what she learned with Dr. Pikler bringing it to the United States through her studies at Stanford University and in her development of Resources for Infant Educarers (RIE). Gerber's philosophy is based on respect and trust, as well as, being conscious of the types of environments infants and toddlers are placed in, involvement of the child in all care activities, sensitive observation and consistency.

Preschool - In addition, our understanding has been enhanced by the work of Loris Malaguzzi and numerous successors in research on children's development through the Reggio Emilia, Italy programs combined with the innovative design concepts promulgated by Michele Zini, the architect of the Reggio Emilia space. Other influences have come through various methods related to the Project Approach as utilized in the British Infant School Programs, the High-Scope Framework developed by Dr. David Weikart, and through more modern thinking about how children learn. ICRI has also refined a number of individual approaches that have been used in a wide variety of curricula/frameworks to create a flexible, child-centered experience that leads to great gains in a child's self-confidence, abstract reasoning, curiosity building, and analytical skills that help each child reach their highest potential.

As will be further discussed below key parts of our curricular approach include documentation, approaches to full teacher engagement in our chosen curriculum, and the role of the child in the curriculum as continually improved and strengthened through observation and assessment.

In addition, we believe strongly that parents should be able to fully grasp and bring into their homes similar approaches to support their child's informal early learning experience.

At ICRI we believe that program leadership, administrators, teachers, parents and each child themselves should be given the greatest opportunity to become empowered lifelong learners, abstract reasoners, questioners and outside-the-box-thinkers. We strive to fully embrace the deeper concept of "lifelong learning." In order to succeed, this concept must be part of everything we do to nurture the creative, social and emotional intelligence of each child served. We are not trying to tell children what to think, but rather, seek on a daily basis to teach and learn together using approaches that provide children with the opportunity and resources to learn how to think for themselves. In a maturing child this blossoms into the ability to be flexible, innovative and resourceful problem solvers. No matter what the world may present to them, with these skills under their belts, our children will be able to meet the future and thrive and innovate.

Our method, curriculum, and activities are influenced by the children's own creativity and curiosity. Thus, there is a truly dynamic approach which fully engages each child in their own learning. Our teachers "scaffold" the natural curiosity and creativity of each child in the classroom by encouraging them to "go deeper" with thoughtful responses to each open-ended question. Parents are engaged in the curriculum and our approaches through the documentation in each classroom is geared to assure the parents understanding of the daily activities and why those activities were chosen. This documentation allows parents to further encourage their children's discovery and creativity at home. As parents are asked for their feedback at every occasion possible, they deeply understand that they are partners with ICRI in the growth and development of their children.

Centered through Emergent Curriculum, ICRI's approach includes observation, interaction, documentation and reflection in the classroom. Each day, teachers respectfully observe children, facilitate and fuel positive interactions, record and document the child's activities with purpose, and encourage the children to explore their world through meaningful interactions with their teachers and other children through outstanding environments that scaffold children's learning. Emergent curriculum is both spontaneous and planned, with careful consideration of the child's emerging interests. Our approach requires teachers to be hands on and balance whole-group, small-group, and individualized attention. We further continue to support and strengthen our evolving curriculum approach with the introduction of the latest neuroscience, psychology, and education research on how children grow and develop and how they are seen within the context of the group. Our new book, Unlocking the Curious Mind of the Child, (scheduled for publication in late 2018) documents and translates the latest neuroscience and curriculum research into daily activities, interactions, and provocations for parents and teachers.

One of the key parts of our curriculum are art-rich and print-rich environments. Neuroscience research makes it clear that there is little value gained by the child with product art, where children are being told what to draw, paint, or create. We may provide provocations for the child to consider certain artistic themes, but it is never for us to suggest what they put into their artistic or verbal expressions. The art of the child is all their own and stems from the empowerment that children feel when they are supported in being truly innovative in their paintings, sculptures, and other creations. We have also provided intensive work on Documentation-rich environments, as carried out at all levels of our programs, especially with children's art and writing projects. Teachers will ask a child to explain their project, record the child's explanations and then read it back to the child in case they want to add or change

anything. They then ask the child where they would like to display their project on the classroom wall, with the written documentation next to their it. We have observed that children begin to see a direct correlation between their spoken words and the written symbols that their teachers and parents understand. We observe many children wanting to read and write earlier as they begin to understand the connection that is depicted through documentation.

1. The Role of the Teacher

A. Catalyst - The teacher must see themselves and must be seen by children as a supporter, collaborator, and catalyst. The teacher must understand that their primary role is to connect with children in a wide variety of manners. As a catalyst the teacher observes the child at play and may enter into a dialogue with them about what they are doing. That dialogue supports the child's natural play and at the same time asks open-ended questions regarding how their "work" can be extended and expanded. The teacher as catalyst plays the role of providing a spark for new growth and learning. All of the skills that a teacher must have should be focused on the catalytic role that they play.

B. Scaffolder - Coming from the general concept of teacher as catalyst, the teacher, on a daily basis, works to construct, deconstruct or scaffold the work of the child. As the child is engaged in active experimentation, for example building a road and a village in the block and wheel toy area, the teacher can and should seek out ideal opportunities for scaffolding. This concept has more to do with the "process of building minds than buildings." It is a process of encouraging the children to grow their project or play in many different directions. The teacher does this by asking open-ended questions about the work/play of the children or by discussing ideas about how the children may be able to add to or expand their learning through this form of engagement. For example, the teacher asking questions about the road and village, begins to understand that this project is something that the children would like to carry on for a period of time and suggests that they may bring other concepts into the mix. A teacher may talk about art work being added to the project in the form of painting drawing on and adding other elements etc... It may also come out during a scaffolding dialogue that children would like to dress like knights and carry out a play in the built village. Thus, the scaffolding that teachers provide can expand, extend and deepen the work/play of each child.

C. Questioner/Scientific Method - The teacher in an ICRI program observes children and asks open-ended questions that do not require a “right answer.” These kind of questions, that do not seek to place ideas into a child’s head, but rather find out what is already in there and allow for the child to be right, no matter the answer, creates a remarkable launching point for a child’s development in the following ways:

- 1) Firstly, for the development of that child’s language abilities, both receptive and expressive.
- 2) Secondly, it is a wonderful opportunity for social communication skill building – learning and practicing how to dialogue and converse with another person, whether peer or adult.
- 3) Thirdly, in building the confidence of that child - the child has no fear because they can’t be wrong.
- 4) And finally, and perhaps most importantly, for the child’s development of abstract reasoning skills. When a teacher shows respect to the child by asking them questions related to what they are engaged in at any given moment they are building on that child’s ability to reason based upon the what is happening in the world around them.

For example, when a child making a pile of blocks has reached the height at which the blocks begins to sway, the observant teacher may ask, “what do you think will happen next with your pile of blocks?” The child who is accustomed to being asked these types of questions may observe the pile and conclude “well, yesterday I built a pile about this big and it started to wobble and then I added one more block and it fell over.” The child is utilizing abstract reasoning skills based upon previous experience to form a hypothesis in what is a classical display of the Scientific Method. The Scientific Method should be front and center during the entirety of the child’s day within the program. Like any budding scientist, the child may form a hypothesis “if I add another block to the tower the tower will fall over.” The experiment is then carried out when the teacher says to the child “well, let’s see what happens.” Thus, the teacher is not providing their own theory but rather supporting the child’s own natural curiosity and competency by helping the child to test their scientific theory. What is important is not the result, rather, it is the child’s observation of the result and their understanding that the result may or may not fit within their original idea.

D. Challenger - The teacher also plays an important role, especially for some children, as a gentle challenger to the child’s daily process. For example, an ICRI teacher will, after going through our observation trainings, become a nimble and innovating presence within the classroom by assuring that she/he is able to:

- 1) Observe each child,

2) Determine what activity zones they are utilizing more than others and what areas they need more work or practice within and,

3) Gently challenge the child to use areas that they have shied away from up to that point.

They will also work to very gently to encourage and support children who may need some additional attention in order to become more engaged in group activities and in understanding their own inner and outer strengths.

E. Biggest Fan and Supporter - The teacher in the end must be the advocate for every child in their group and their room. An advocate under ICRI's standards assesses the needs of each child, develops an individualized support plan, and carries out aspects of that support plan based upon their own contact with each child each day. As teachers become experts in the ICRI Way they have little need to write down their plans, but must document the work of the child so the parent can see and reinforce the work of the child at the Center and at home. The teacher thus as the advocate and supporter, and as necessary, best friend, has many hats to wear during a typical day at the early childhood center.

2. Outcomes for Each Child – If every ICRI model early childhood program teacher and leader is hitting their marks, the child will become:

- A. Curious about the world around them,
- B. A Questioner who goes beyond “just the right answer,”
- C. A Scientist who begins to understand the Scientific Method and their ability to use it from their earliest days in the program. Even infants and toddlers, based upon the latest research and observation, who, when given choices, will carefully study those choices and will select certain items, observe them and “experiment” with them.
- D. An Explorer – if teachers and leadership have established activity zones in each classroom and the outdoor area that invites, engages, stimulates, challenges and satisfies infants, toddlers and preschoolers they are best able to begin a lifelong journey of exploring their environments and gain an understanding of them and their relationship to those environments. Research is now showing us that some of children’s earliest memories are how they mastered a toy, held and looked at a leaf, or became engaged with something remarkable outside of themselves.
- E. A Compassionate Friend – the child can become a compassionate friend and supporter of other children as the teacher’s model behavior within the classroom and the child sees the rewards of collaboration, cooperation, and engagement.

F. Open to the World - the program should be safe and stimulating enough to unlock the natural curiosity, playfulness, and self-expression of each child. In our work around the world at ICRI, we often note that when our staff ask program leaders which children they think are doing the best, almost invariably, teachers pick a very shy and withdrawn child who carefully follows all instructions. In our way of thinking, this actually may be the child who experiences the greatest challenges as they grow into adulthood. We are committed to assuring that every child should be allowed to take "full voice" within the program. They should never feel fearful of an adult, teacher or leader, and they should always feel that they have multiple opportunities for peace, growth, happiness and ownership within an ICRI program.