

What is Child-Centered Learning?

The history of child-centered education began in the twentieth century with ideas from John Dewey, Jean Piaget, Lev Vygotsky, and Maria Montessori. It is a reversal from traditional teacher-centered learning processes and instead places students at the center of the learning process.

Child-centered learning occurs when the learning environment takes a student’s curiosities and support them in growing and blossoming. The teacher designs learning that allows students to play, ask questions, explore and problem solve around their interests. In this way, their understanding gets stronger and extends their learning into greater complexity. Students are given more engaging opportunities to practice the same skills and learning objectives as in a “normal” classroom setting. The essential difference is that in a child-centered model, children often feel as though they are “just playing” when they are actually engaging in effective, beneficial skill development and learning.

Another way to understand this difference would be to compare adults’ interest in learning how to complete their taxes independently, versus learning how to create a budget for a small business they are passionate about starting. Both tasks require the same skills, but one is aligned with a deeply-desired outcome, and thus the participant will be far more engaged in the learning process.

When students’ learning follows their curiosity instead of being prescribed to them, they are more likely to take the lead, dig deeper, and join discussions. We see a drastic increase in their overall engagement and an individual understanding of their own learning approaches. This notable increase in excitement and joy for learning is the most common result of this approach.

What are the Benefits of a Child-Centered Curriculum Approach?

Child-Centered Education	Traditional, Teacher-Led Instruction
Helps children grow to their fullest potential by honoring and respecting the things they are curious about.	Places teachers as the sole decision makers on what is taught and how it will be practiced.
All areas of development and learning objectives are addressed in concert with one another. The importance of social-emotional, physical and creative development are considered <i>in conjunction with</i> cognitive development to create many different avenues for children to access learning material. This benefits a more diverse spectrum of learners.	Teaches new concepts as isolated skills and subject matter. Learners who do not excel with a specific style of learning (visual, oral, language, etc...) can lack understanding, fall behind or fail to comprehend information in the subject area being taught.

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<p>Strives to support children to become independent and confident learners with self-made goals. This supports their continued academic and social success as lifelong learners.</p> <p>Instances of undesirable behavior are looked at in a holistic manner, with teachers, children and parents working as a team to understand and address underlying causes. In this way, barriers to children's healthy development are treated at the cause, and lead to far higher rates of success. This is often referred to as a "whole-child" approach to learning, as in this resource created by the Hunt Institute.</p>	<p>Driven by compliance to the teachers' + school's rules, often externalizing the child's locus of control through the use of punishment and rigid expectations for behavior. In the United States, these expectations are often severely misaligned with scientific knowledge of child development and appropriate expectations for learning and behavior.</p> <p><i>Ex.: Kindergarten classes that require extended periods of sitting and focus, and worksheet-based activity.</i></p> <p>By approaching undesired behavior as cause for punishment, the root cause of children's needs remains unmet. As their undesirable behavior continues, so does their punishment, and they will most likely identify as a "problem student" or someone who isn't meant to succeed.</p> <p>This punitive, obedience-focused approach to education is often referred to as the "School-to-Prison Pipeline." as in this resource from the National Education Association.</p>
<p>The learning is active, often hands-on and integrated across subject matter. This approach is supported by the most recent research on brain development and how human beings learn.</p>	<p>Teaches isolated skills and content standards. Does not provide for individual needs for growth and development.</p>
<p>Teachers are facilitators and guides and offer learning opportunities that are a reflection of children's interests. This process is one of individualizing, and children are able to express themselves. At the center of this child-teacher relationship is the process of getting to know who students are and what motivates and challenges them. Children are supported for being unique and special people.</p>	<p>Views the child as someone whose impulses must be constrained so that they can complete adult-generated activities, such as worksheets.</p> <p>Research and education data have shown that worksheet-based lessons do not function to <i>teach</i> but rather confirm what children already know, and do not allow for individual children's expression. Read more in this article on developmentally-appropriate Kindergarten practices in Psychology Today.</p>

What is Outdoor Education?

Outdoor Education is a child-centered inspirational learning process that offers opportunities for whole child growth by designing learning opportunities that happen in nature based settings. Outdoor education supports play, exploration and managed risk taking. It develops confidence and self-esteem through learner-inspired, hands-on experiences in a natural setting. Children are immersed in opportunities to learn and think in ways that are exciting and deeply meaningful to their interests.

How Does Outdoor Education Benefit the Well-Being of Children?

- ☀️ **England's National Children's Bureau performed a comprehensive study** on the importance of natural play and outdoor learning. Their study reports, "the powerful combination of a diversity of play experiences and direct contact with nature has direct benefits for children's physical, mental, and emotional health. Free play opportunities in natural settings offer possibilities for restoration, and hence, well-being."
- ☀️ Studies compiled by the **Children and Nature Network (C&NN)** show that daily exposure to natural settings increases children's ability to focus, enhancing cognitive skills.
- ☀️ In this **study** from the University of Illinois' Landscape and Human Health Laboratory, researchers discovered that access to nature decreases the symptoms of ADHD in children.
- ☀️ Outdoor learning has been shown to **reduce stress and improve sleep**, according to research from the National Wildlife Federation.
- ☀️ For example, in a recent study of preschoolers, researchers found that nature-connected kids were better-behaved. They were less likely to suffer from emotional difficulties, and more likely to show kindness toward others (**Sobko et al 2018**).
- ☀️ Observational studies suggest that lifelong exposure to outdoor spaces may reduce a child's risk of developing certain behavior problems, like hyperactivity and attention deficits (**Vanaken and Danckaerts 2018**).

☀ One of the key studies, [Effects of outdoor education programs for children in California](#), focused on 255 school children over four primary schools. One group of children were given an outdoor education routine, with a control group for comparison. As in this excerpt from [the Stable Company](#), the study found:

- Children who attended outdoor school raised their test scores by 27%.
- Students who attended the program received significantly higher ratings than children who did not participate, for: self-esteem, conflict resolution, relationship with peers, problem solving, motivation to learn, behavior in class.

☀ Research shared in [this excerpt from an article by Pacific Oaks College](#) has shown that outdoor learning can have huge benefits on student mental health and academic performance. Outdoor learning has been shown to support students by..

- Developing reflective and inquisitive thinking and problem-solving approaches for “real-life.”
- Encouraging the healthy and *holistic* development of children in all realms; Social, emotional, physical, cognitive and creative.
- Developing their resilience, adaptability and persistence.
- Allowing children to become more capable in identifying hazards and risks.
- Developing a sense of environmental stewardship, and an understanding of how we humans can affect positive change in this area.
- Developing self-awareness, confidence, self-esteem and other positive mental health benefits.
- Affording ample opportunities to grow their collaborative-working and communication skills.
- Offering more engaging opportunities than a traditional classroom setting to practice their gross and fine-motor skill development.
- Developing an appreciation, respect and lifelong love of nature.

