



# Helping Hands

Offering a helping hand to School Readiness Providers  
A publication from Childcare Resource & Referral



## Family Engagement

Episcopal  
Children's Services

Volume 19, Issue 9

March 2025

Inside this issue:

## 50 Fun Family Spring Activities

Shake off the winter blues and try any of these fun, spring activities that will have you and the kiddos enjoying the fresh air. In this article, you will find simple and exciting activities for children to enjoy during spring. From gardening to making art & learning about nature, these activities are perfect for little ones to discover new things about the world around them.

- \*Blowing Bubbles
- \*Play Hopscotch
- \*Rock Painting
- \*DIY Rain Guage

To read the full article & see additional activities, please visit the website: <https://www.todayparent.com/family/activities/50-fun-free-spring-activities/>



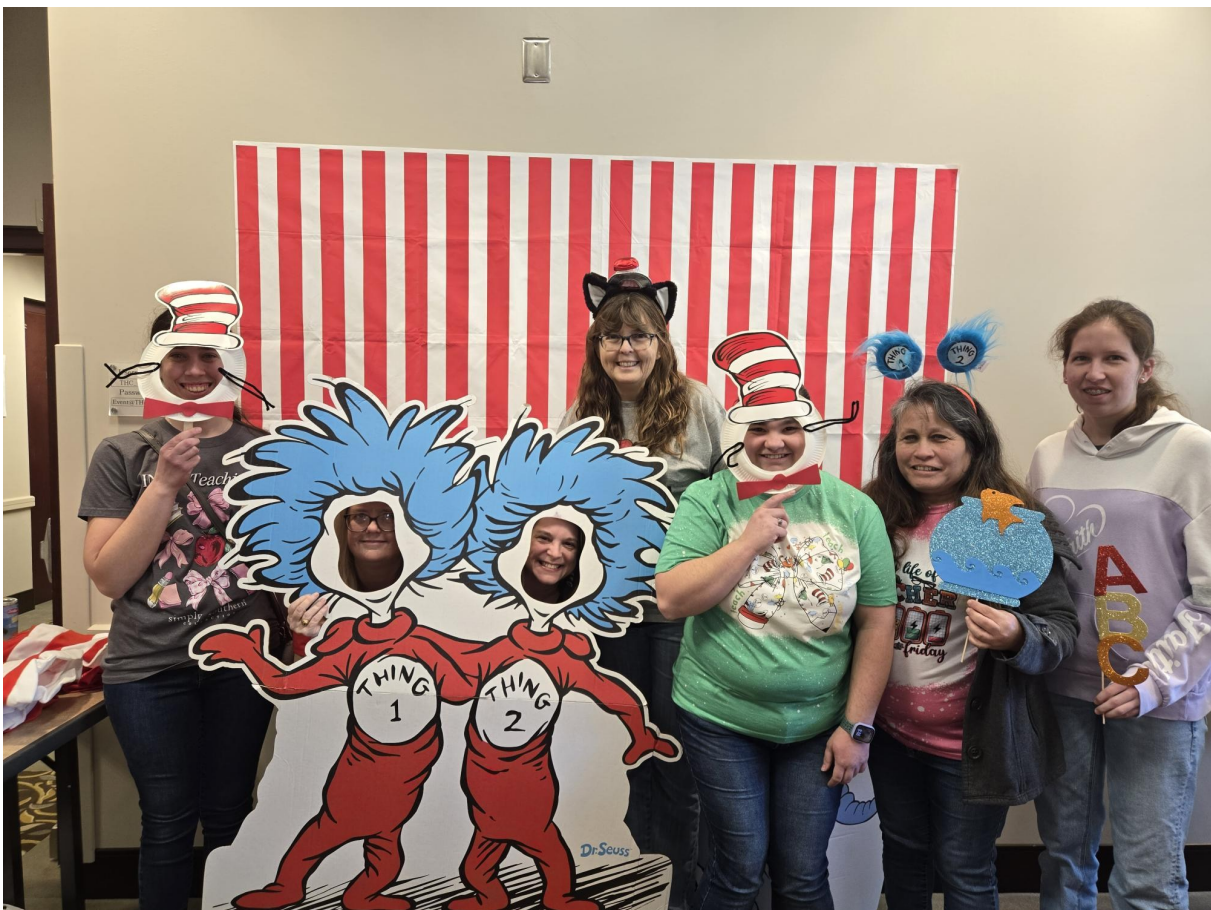
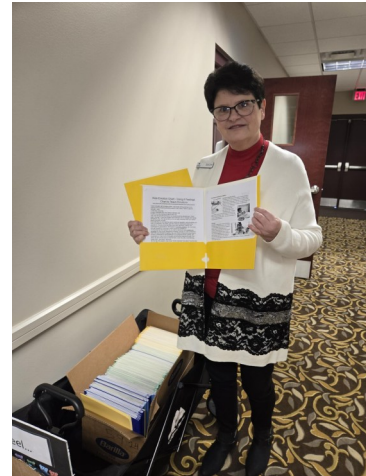
ELC Updates	2
Marco Polo Initiative	3
Sensory with Flower Petals	4
Planting a Salad	5
Counting Garden	6
Making Herb Pizza	7
Staying on Track	8
Read Aloud Together	9
Herbal Playdough at the Table	10
TEACH	11
Professional Development/VPK Corner	12



If you have a question, comment, or concern you would like addressed in an upcoming issue of *Helping Hands*, please send an e-mail to:  
[Brianna.deosca@ecs4kids.org](mailto:Brianna.deosca@ecs4kids.org). We will do our best to find the answer, post the comment, and address the concern. Thank You!

## ELC of North Florida Updates

The ELC of North Florida and ECS4Kids held the annual Early Educators Conference on Saturday, January 25<sup>th</sup> at the Thrasher Horne Conference Center. The day was filled with a variety of break out sessions and a wonderful keynote by Pamela Phelps. Her theme *Let the Sunshine In* was a positive message about the importance of the work we do as early educators in the lives of our youngest citizens. A big thank you to Marco Polo for providing lunch this year. And a big thank you also to all the presenters and ECS4Kids staff that came out and worked the event.





## Marco Polo Initiative

These sites have enhanced their classrooms by using MarcoPolo's FREE resources! Want to join them and get the chance to earn a FREE tablet? Click here for more information: <https://calendly.com/marcopolearning/>

(Note: This resource is for providers contracted with ECS for SR and/or VPK services in Clay, Nassau, Baker, Bradford, Putnam and St. Johns Counties.)

Episcopal Children's Services would like to highlight the following providers for enhancing their classroom instruction by using MarcoPolo Learning!

- 1 Collage Day School, LLC
- 2 First Baptist Preschool
- 3 Creekside Christian Preschool
- 4 Abbate's Day Care Inc  
DBA Kidz Klubhouse
- 5 Bayside Preschool

**Teacher Tip:** Get your account connected, attend our teacher trainings, add your families so they have FREE access too, and earn a FREE tablet!

**MarcoPolo**  
For Educators



## Sensory with Flower Petals Katrina Willis, Education Specialist

Resources: Source: [www.growing-minds.org](http://www.growing-minds.org)

Infants learn about the world through their senses: touch, sight, sound, taste, and smell. Creating and offering safe, diverse and developmentally appropriate outdoor learning environments and indoor sensory bins can offer many developmental benefits to infants.

Flower Petal water table: Sensory play with real flower petals is so much fun! You can pick some wildflowers from outside, ask parents if they can bring some in, or go to a local florist and ask for rejects or flowers that can't be sold. Keep it simple with water, flower petals, and a spoon or long stem for stirring. If desired, add some food coloring and/or essential oil for extra sensory fun! Allow the infants to touch and explore the water and flower petals.



### **CLASS connections:**

**Facilitated Exploration:** Be involved by engaging with the infants in the water table. Model touching the flower petals and stirring the water with the stem or spoon. Give the infants time to explore at their own pace. Keep the activity infant focused by following their lead and interests with the flower petal water bin.

*Expand infants experience* by building on infants' interests to create learning opportunities. For example, "Olivia likes to splash in the water!" "Do you feel the soft flower petals floating in the water?"

**Early Language Support:** Use teacher talk to create a language rich environment. Help infants to learn to express themselves and communicate their needs by initiating and or imitating sounds or words and model turn-taking with infants. For example, "w,w,water" and "splash, splash, splash!" and "Jordan is using the stem to mix the flower petals."

## Planting a Salad with Toddlers Katrina Willis, Education Specialists

Source: [www.momsandcrafters.com](http://www.momsandcrafters.com)

Planting seeds with toddlers is an amazing hands-on activity that encourages connecting with nature, sensory exploration, and some adventure! It's a great way to encourage healthy eating, and to get your toddlers moving. To keep it simple, you can use Miracle-Gro-Gro-ables, which are small biodegradable seed pods containing seeds, plant food, and potting mix.

### Tips for planting:

Start with their favorite (fruits & veggies)—allow them to choose from the selection you provide.

Prepare garden markers in advance by writing the names of the seeds on craft sticks, and draw simple pictures (of the fruit/veggie), using permanent markers, on each stick so the toddlers can “read” them.

Pull out some kids sized gardening gear—watering can, gardening gloves, garden rake, etc. Toddlers will have fun using their very own gardening tools.

Protect yourself and your toddlers--wear hats (and sunscreen as necessary). Try doing the activity in the early morning or late afternoon, avoid the harsh midday sun between 10-2. Bring drinking water.

Focus on the activity, not the outcome: Engage with and talk to the toddlers about the activity as they/you are doing the planting. Give the toddlers jobs to do—rake the leaves and stones out of the way, put in the markers, water the seeds, etc. Have fun!



### **CLASS Connections:**

#### **Facilitation of Learning and Development:**

*Active Facilitation:* guide the toddlers in the exploration of the materials and participate in the activity with them to support learning and development.

*Expansion of cognition:* Embed information that is relatable to their lives by talking about what the seeds will grow into, how long it will take, and how you will prepare and eat the fruits/veggies.

#### **Language Modeling:**

*Supporting language use:* have conversations using back and forth exchanges and ask open-ended questions, such as “What do you think the fruits/veggies will taste like?”

*Advanced Language:* Use words like dig, soil, bury, small, tiny, fill cover, grow, etc.



## Counting Garden Katrina Willis, Education Specialist

Source: [www.kidsactivitiesblog.com](http://www.kidsactivitiesblog.com)

This is a great small group activity for preschoolers to work on their listening skills while practicing counting as well as learning cause and effect: plant a seed, grow a flower.

Materials needed:

- Colored paper
- Popsicle/craft sticks
- "Garden" container (or two plastic cups)
- Glue and/or tape
- Rice/Sand/Lentils, etc.
- Big seeds or beans for "planting"

Using the colored paper to create ten flowers. Number each flower and attach it to the top of a popsicle/craft stick. Create a divided garden so that one side is filled with sand/rice/lentils to hold up the flowers and the other side is bare so you can hear the seeds drop. You could also use two plastic cups (one empty and one partially filled with rice). Involve your preschoolers in whichever parts of the crafting process are appropriate.

There are many ways to play with this garden. Preschoolers can practice basic math skills as well as listening and taking turns depending on how you play. The ideas are listed from most basic to most complicated. 1. Plant a seed, grow a flower, plant a seed, grow a flower-- repeat. Teacher counts each seed planted and child responds with the number as they plant their flower. Then child can plant the seeds and the teacher can grow the flowers. 2. Teacher drops a number of seeds in, one at a time. The child counts the number of seed sounds they hear and plants the corresponding number of flowers. 3. For number recognition pick one of the flowers e.g. #5 and plant five seeds and then grow the 1, 2, 3, 4 & 5 flowers. 4. Add two more seeds--now there are 7. Three flowers get picked for a bouquet (or eaten by a cow), and now there are 4. Students can partner up and work together. Be creative and come up with more ways for them to play in the garden.



### **CLASS Connections:**

**Concept Development:** Ask children how questions, such as "how many more would it take to make 5?" as they are planting the flowers. Build on children's previous knowledge about planting flowers and gardening. Relate this activity to the real world: ask children about planting a garden with family members at home or other times they have had experiences with flowers/gardening.

**Quality of Feedback:** If you see that a child is having difficulty completing his task, give him hints to help him better understand the concept. Use conversations to help students increase their understanding. Add new information when the opportunity comes up. Encourage and praise children's efforts by using their names, saying what they did and why they did it well.

## Making Herb Pizza Katrina Willis, Education Specialist

Source: [www.fantasticfunandlearning.com](http://www.fantasticfunandlearning.com)

This is a fun and engaging experience for multiple school ages to participate in as an after-school activity. They will experience the benefits of working together to complete a goal, while also learning about the planning and process of making a pizza. This could be a project that you do over several days, to allow for the planning and preparation of materials.

Prior to making the pizza, have the students brainstorm and make a list of all the ingredients that will be necessary, and determine student jobs for each participant. Talk to the children about the order/sequence of making the pizza—first, then, and final ingredients. Have a conversation about the specific herbs you will be using on your pizza and gain prior knowledge about growing the herbs.

You can make your own dough (<https://www.allrecipes.com/recipe/20171/quick-and-easy-pizza-crust/>) or buy ready-made if you prefer.

Talk to the children as they make the pizza. Ask them if they have ever made a pizza at home with family members, and what kind of pizza they made. Ask them if they grow herbs at home, and what else they do with their herbs.

Sequence of events:

- Clear and clean the space where you will make the pizza
- Roll out the dough (or make it first if you choose to)
- Spread tomato sauce over the dough
- Sprinkle cheese over the top
- Add other ingredients—various herbs, mushrooms, peppers, pepperoni, etc.
- Bake the pizza in the oven



### **CLASS Connections:**

**Regard for Student Perspectives:** Give children leadership roles/responsibilities (measuring ingredients, adding ingredients to the pizza, cleaning up, etc.). Encourage students to talk about the pizza they are creating, and how they think it will taste with the herbs on it.

**Concept Development:** Ask the children how and why questions about the process of making the pizza. Prior to the experience, encourage the children to brainstorm the ingredients needed in making a pizza. Build on children's previous knowledge about the process of growing the herbs and making a pizza. Relate this activity to the real world (ask the children if they have ever made a pizza with family members at home).

**Quality of feedback:** If you see that a child is having difficulty completing his task, give him hints to help him better understand the concept. Have conversations about growing herbs, baking, and family to increase children's understanding. Add new information when the opportunity comes up. Encourage and praise children's efforts by using their names, saying what they did and why they did it well.

# Staying on Track: Action Plan for Off-Task Behavior

Rebecca Huth, Inclusion Specialist

Resource: <https://www.jackson.k12.ms.us/cms/lib/MS01910533/Centricity/Domain/963/C10%20Off%20Task.pdf>

In order to understand why off-task behavior is happening, think of the function of the behavior. Understanding the function for this behavior is important to decide which intervention strategies to implement on an action plan. Let's look at strategies for off-task behavior for each function. This can be helpful with developing a behavior plan for school- and/or home-based strategies.

## **Sensory:**

- Divide tasks into parts and check off as completed.
- Reduce auditory and visual distractions when possible.
- Create a quiet area to reduce environmental distractions.
- Schedule change to promote success (preferred activity after non-preferred activity).
- Teach the child to take breaks and calming strategies.
- Have an adult take the child for a quick walk.
- Ask the child to carry heavy items (books, bin of blocks, moving chairs) to a specified location.

## **Escape:**

- Use a break card that allows the child to take breaks for certain amounts of time in a specified location.
- Use controlled choices for an alternative activity.
- Teach the student to ask for help.
- Provide a visual checklist.
- Accommodate task difficulty in relation to the child's ability.
- Send home uncomplete work.
- Use a visual timer.

## **Attention:**

- Utilize small group instruction to give the child more individual attention.
- Establish signals or visuals to request help.
- Give child extra responsibilities or privileges as on-task behavior increases.
- Assist/accommodate child to complete tasks.
- Visual behavior reminders/expectations.
- Frequent positive praise when on-task behavior is demonstrated.

## **Tangible:**

- Use preferred tangible item as "earned time".
- Token board that shows how many stars are needed to earn preferred tangible.
- Set time limits with tangible items.
- First/then visual (first complete task, then tangible item).



## Read Aloud Time Together Katrina Willis, Education Specialists

Source: <https://www.scholastic.com/parents/books-and-reading/book-lists-and-recommendations>

Getting your child ready for kindergarten can be overwhelming. One thing you can do to help is to have read aloud together time. This is an essential building block for learning to read and supporting readers of all ages.

When your schedule allows, read your favorite family books aloud together. Sharing your love of reading with your child early in their childhood and being a reading role model for them will set them up for success in school and beyond.

Shared joyful experiences that incorporate early literacy and language skills enable children to learn new words, expand their vocabulary, and better understand the world around them. It makes every day experiences joyful and educational.

Below is a list of recommended books related to growth and growing up.

You can find most of these books at the public library.

The Little Butterfly That Could by Ross Burach

See Me Grow by Scholastic

The Things God Made by Andy McGuire

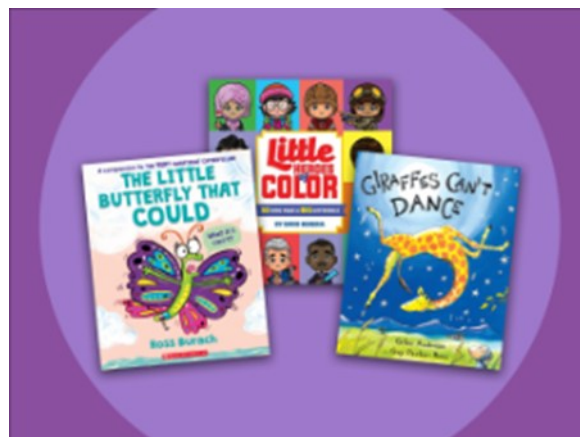
Bee an Expert!: Seasons by Scholastic

The Magic School Bus Inside A Beehive by Joanna Cole & Bruce Degen

Teeny Tiny Bunny by Rachel Matson

Lala's Words by Gracey Zhang

Read to Your Bunny by Rosemary Wells



## Herbal Playdough at the Table Katrina Willis, Education Specialists

Source: [fantasticfunandlearning.com](http://fantasticfunandlearning.com)

This can be one of the few times it is ok for your child to play with her food. You can make your own play dough or use store-bought. Include some scissors for snipping, some sprigs of aromatic fresh or dried herbs and a rolling pin or some cookie cutters if you have them. The herbs add such a wonderful scent and texture to play dough! Set the materials out in a divided dish as shown in the picture above for an extra special invitation for your child to play.

Tips to keep your child engaged in play: As your child plays with the materials ask if he/she can guess the herb by smelling it (them). Some common herbs to grow and have on hand are rosemary, lavender, and mint. Ask what foods you think the herbs would taste good with. For example, "how would it taste if we added mint to our pizza?" or "lavender to our baked chicken?" Also, involve your children as much as possible in the growing of your herbs at home. Encourage your child to water the herbs daily and ensure they are getting enough sunlight to grow. Talk about what the herbs need to grow.

Herbs can be a full sensory experience. From seed to sprout to harvest to table and everywhere in between, growing your own can make just about anyone feel like they have a green thumb. A few plants, plenty of sun and some water are all that you'll need to keep these fresh flavors in your kitchen all year round while providing fun and learning for the whole family!



## T.E.A.C.H

The T.E.A.C.H. (Teacher Education And Compensation Helps) Early Childhood® Scholarship Program funded by the Florida Office of Early Learning provides scholarships for early childhood teachers and facility/family home directors to work toward earning a degree in early childhood education (Associate, Bachelor's, or Master's), an Infant-Toddler

Certificate, Florida Staff Credential, Director Credential, National CDA Assessment, or credential renewals.

Your T.E.A.C.H. scholarship will cover the majority of the cost of tuition and books, a per semester student access stipend, a tiered bonus structure for degree-seeking scholars, and much more!

Contact our office today at 877-FL TEACH (877-358-3224) to see how T.E.A.C.H. can work for you.

<https://teach-fl.org/>

# T.E.A.C.H. Scholarships



DIVISION OF  
**Early Learning**

LEARN EARLY. LEARN FOR LIFE.





## Local Professional Development Opportunities (Training Calendar)

To register for one of our great training opportunities, please visit our website:

<https://www.ecs4kids.org/programs/regional-training-institute/>

Click on the registration link to see a list of available courses.

Click on a course and follow the directions for registration and payment.  
The website provides a list of trainings and descriptions offered each quarter.

For CDA information and questions, please contact  
Danesha Davis, Professional  
Development Coordinator  
904-726-1500 ext.2299  
904-536-2119 (cell)



## VPK Corner Sarah March, Contract Coordinator

### VPK Progress Monitoring

For most providers PM2 has ended. For others it is almost over.  
Some reminders for the end of PM2:

Please make sure you save a copy of the STAR TEST Activity report that shows the children's names and test dates. In addition, be sure you use the custom dates when running the report to ensure you are getting the correct report information. This report is a component of 5 year records.

Parent letters are also a part of the 5 year record retention and need to be available upon request. Please ensure you are saving a copy of the parent letter, as well as the documentation showing the parent received it within 7 days of the date the child was tested.

PM3 has already begun for some providers and many start in March and April.  
Here are some reminders for PM3:

Please ensure you check your PM dates for PM3. You can check the dates on our website at the link below. You will need your director email address and your provider ID. <https://www.ecs4kids.org/providers/vpk-providers/fast-progress-monitoring/>

In addition, it is imperative that you check your STAR Test Activity report to make sure all children are showing as tested during your PM window. You need to use the custom dates to run the report in order to obtain the most accurate information. Custom date is the PM window start date and PM window end dates.

If you have any questions or concerns, please contact [Roushawn.saunders@ecs4kids.org](mailto:Roushawn.saunders@ecs4kids.org)



Warm Line 1-800-238-3463

Ext. 2281 (CNBB)  
Ext. 2227 (PSJ)



Do you have a concern about the health, development, disability, and special needs of a child? If so, call the Warm Line. The purpose of the warm line is to provide advice to child care personnel concerning strategies, curriculum, and environmental adaptations that allow a child to derive maximum benefit from the child care experience.