



Helping Hands



Family Engagement

Episcopal Children's Services

Volume 20, Issue 8

February 2026

Inside this issue:

February Activities for Children
 February offers many free activities for kids, focusing on indoor fun like creating forts, baking, reading marathons, crafting and science experiments (like scratch-and-sniff art or [five senses](#)), plus outdoor options like winter nature walks, bird watching, [backyard campouts](#), all using simple household items for engaging, budget-friendly entertainment. Some examples of activities include:

- * Valentine's Day Slime
- * Polar Bear Paper Plate Craft
- * Random Acts of Kindness Jar

To read the full article and see additional activities please visit their website.

<https://kidsactivitiesblog.com/288399/february-activities-for-kids/>

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ATTENTION HH READERS...

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 We will do our best to find the answer, post the comment, and address the concern.



ELC of North FL Updates

The ELC of North. Florida and Episcopal Children's Services is pleased to announce the 2025 Teacher of the Year award winners!

Our winners are Patricia Hall (Preschool Teacher) from First Baptist Preschool in Palatka and Pat Jordan (Infant/Toddler Teacher) from O2Bkids Palencia location in St. Augustine. They each win a \$500 cash prize from our sponsors Kaplan Early Learning, and Clay Electric Co. They will be honored at our annual educators conference on Saturday, Feb. 21st at the Thrasher Home Conference Center.

On Tuesday, Feb. 27th they were surprised by a prize patrol. We thank these teachers for their wonderful dedication to our children. Both teachers have been devoted to the field of Early Learning for 30 years.



Pat Jordan Infant/Toddler teacher from O2BKids Palencia in St. Augustine.



Patricia Hall Preschool teacher from First Baptist Preschool in Palatka.



Early Educators CONFERENCE

Thrasher Horne Conference Center

Register [HERE](#) \$20 Includes Lunch and 4.5 IACET CEUs
Registration opens Friday, Jan. 23, and closes Monday, Feb. 16.

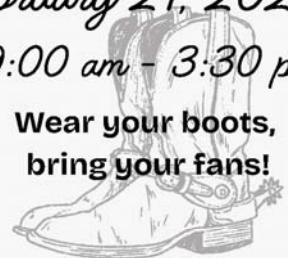


Saturday

February 21, 2026

9:00 am - 3:30 pm

Wear your boots,
bring your fans!



Keynote Speaker

Mr. Shawn Brown, a former Chicagoan, has developed an innovative curriculum enhancement program that utilizes catchy music for captivating and engaging audiences of children from Preschool to elementary grades - all while teaching them how to have "Super Fun"! His popular live show, "The Super Fun Show" has spread across the country gaining tremendous success as he visits schools and conferences nationwide.

Featured Sessions

Morning Keynote Sessions

1: "Laugh, Lift, and Let Go"

Motivational & Inspiring Hour with Music, Humor, and Storytelling

2: "Connection Before Correction: Classroom Organization that Works"

Behavior Management & Instructional Learning Formats

LUNCH

11:45 - 12:45

Provided by
Clara's Tidbit's



Afternoon Breakout Sessions

1. **Talk Like You Mean It** (Pre-K)
2. **Boots on the Ground, Hands to Yourself: How to Lay Down the Law with Classroom Ground Rules** (Toddler/Pre-K)
3. **Howdy, Howdy, Howdy!: The Value of Repetition on Infant Brain Development** (Infant)
4. **Fine Motor Development in a Screen Swiping World** (Toddler/Pre-K)
5. **Hold Your Horses: Letting Go Without Losing Control** (Toddler)
6. **Classroom Tech Doesn't Have to Be a Wild West: Welcome to the World of MarcoPolo** (Pre-K)



New Program: Tandem!

Staffing gaps impact more than schedules. Through its partnership with Tandem, ECS4Kids is sharing a staffing resource designed specifically for early childhood programs to help classrooms stay open and supported when absences arise. Create a free profile at www.join-tandem.com.



MarcoPolo Learning

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

- 1 Love 'n & Learning Childcare Center
- 2 Pinewood Christian Academy
- 3 First Baptist Preschool
- 4 Peniel Baptist Academy
- 5 Roots Academy

Teacher Tip: Get your account connected, attend teacher trainings, and add your families so they have FREE access too.

MarcoPolo
For Educators

The image shows two cartoon characters from MarcoPolo Learning. On the left is a small red character with large eyes and a white hat. On the right is a larger green character with large eyes, a blue shirt, and a yellow bow tie. They are set against a dark blue background with yellow stars and a light blue globe.

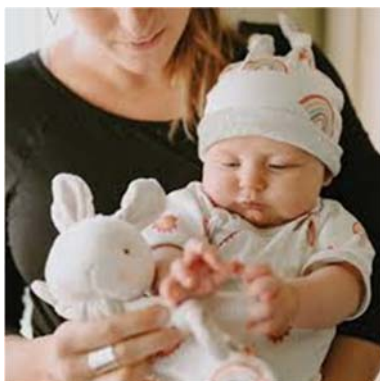
[CLICK HERE FOR MARCOPOLO TRAINING INFORMATION!](#)

Introduction to Texture Talk Katrina Willis, Education Specialist

Resources: www.unicef.org

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

Texture talk: Give the infants different fabrics to feel and use words to describe them such as “smooth” “rough” “bumpy” and “soft.” Use textured balls for the infants to touch and label the texture as they manipulate the balls. Read “touch and feel” books that have multiple textures and allow the infants to explore each texture as you add descriptive words to expand and support language. Set up water play by filling a shallow pan or bin with a small amount of water, add a few water toys including dumping/filling toys, and allow the infants to explore the water.



CLASS connections:

Facilitated Exploration: Be involved by engaging with the infants by getting down on the floor and sitting near them while looking at the books and supporting them closely at the water table. Model touching the textured materials and the textured pictures in the book, and manipulating the toys in the water. Give the infants time to explore at their own pace. Keep the activity infant focused by following their lead and interests. *Expand infants experience* by building on infants' interests to create learning opportunities. For example, “Olivia likes to splash in the water!” or “Do you feel the soft puppy (in the book)?”

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 “Luka is touching the bumpy fish, does it feel rough Luka?”

Valentine Sensory Bin Katrina Willis, Education Specialist

Resources: www.funwithmama.com



Toddlers love to explore. Sensory bins can be so effective for improving fine motor skills and sensory learning, and not to mention, full of seasonal fun.

Valentine Sensory Bin: First color the rice pink and red and place it into the bin. Then add different trinkets and small toys that are suited to Valentine's Day, such as small foam hearts, felt hearts, pom pom balls, heart shaped silicone liners, pink or red cups and spoons, etc. Be sure to monitor the toddlers closely so that they do not put anything in their mouth.

Create learning opportunities by labeling the colors, matching size or color, and encouraging the toddlers to touch and explore the items in the sensory bin. Talk to the toddlers about the items and what they are doing-- use words like red, pink, big, small, same, different, soft, filling, dumping, etc.

CLASS Connections:

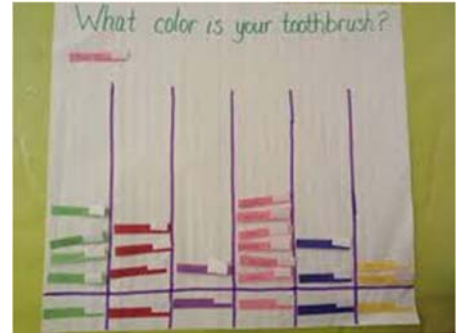
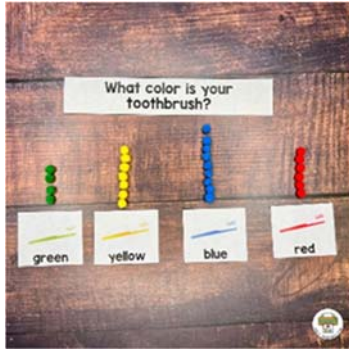
Facilitation of Learning and Development: Active Facilitation: guide the toddlers in the exploration of the materials and participate in the activity with them to support learning and development. Expansion of cognition: Embed information that is relatable to their lives, such as "This heart is red just like the car on your shirt!"

Quality of Feedback: Encouragement and affirmation: give specific feedback and recognition of their efforts or accomplishments, such as, "Wow, you are filling that cup up all the way to the top Andrew!"

Language Modeling: Supporting language use: have conversations using back and forth exchanges and open-ended questions. "How many hearts do you have in your cup?"

What Color is Your Toothbrush? Katrina Willis, Education Specialist

Source: www.prekprintablefun.com



A dental health theme is perfect for celebrating in February since it's National Dental Health Month. This toothbrush class survey activity will have your students thinking and talking about the healthy habit of brushing their teeth! Make a display chart like the pictures above that has four or five toothbrush colors.

Ask the children what color their toothbrush is, track the results, and count up the totals. Once you have the total numbers for each color, discuss which color has the most, least, etc. Then have discussions on the children's connections to brushing their teeth, possible visits to the dentist, and losing their baby teeth.

CLASS Connections:

Regard for Student Perspectives: Allow children autonomy to choose their color toothbrush and place it on the chart (or if you are doing tally marks by the toothbrush color, allow each child to make their mark on the chart paper). Give children leadership roles/ responsibilities (coming up to the front of the class one at a time, passing out supplies, etc.).

Concept Development: Ask children why we need to brush our teeth. Build on children's previous knowledge about a visit to the dentist. Relate this activity to the real world: ask children to share about a time they went to the dentist. "What happened there?" "How did you feel?"

Quality of Feedback: If you see that a child is having difficulty completing their task, give them hints to help them better understand the concept. 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. Ask them to tell you more and be sure to pause and wait for their answer.

Celebrating the Chinese New Year Katrina Willis, Education Specialist

Source: www.hmhco.com

[The Lunar New Year, also known as](#) Chinese New Year or Spring Festival, is celebrated by billions of people of Asian culture each year and is the most significant holiday on the Chinese calendar. It is a 15-day festival with symbolic traditions and rituals that celebrate family, renewal, prosperity, and good fortune. This year it is celebrated February 17-March 3, 2026.

- 1. Wear Red Clothes-** Red is symbolic of wealth and good fortune in China, making the color synonymous with Lunar New Year. Encourage your students to wear red during these 15 days (or choose 1 day) for good fortune in the new year. Red is also seen as a weapon to scare away monsters.
- 2. Classroom Cleaning-** Cleaning is an important part of the Chinese New Year traditions. Families clean their homes leading up to the New Year as a way to “sweep away” bad luck from the past year and start fresh. (However, cleaning on the actual day is discouraged for fear that you will sweep or wash away your good luck!) Consider having the students do a bit of cleaning and organizing in your classroom/center.
- 3. Festival Collage-** Have the students make a wall display/large collage with pictures (like the ones above) that you can find online, and have the students write out the vocabulary words next to the picture they are related to, i/e. dragon, Chinese, festival, prosperity, lantern, lunar, etc. Hang it in a busy area of the center for all children and families to see.



CLASS Connections:

Concept Development: Ask children how and why questions about the Chinese New Year. Encourage the children to brainstorm ideas for celebrating the Chinese New Year. Relate this activity to the real world-ask students to think of ways they can clean up/organize their bedroom/home with their families. Build on children’s previous knowledge about holiday celebrations they have had with their family, how they celebrate holidays at their house to increase children’s understanding.

Quality of Feedback: Discuss with students why cleaning one’s home is an important Chinese New Year tradition. Extend on this by stating that cleaning might emphasize starting the year with a clean slate. When making the festival collage expand on the pictures the students have chosen and add more. Ask the students to name some other holidays that are celebrated in the world that are not celebrated by their family or community.

Challenging Behaviors at Centers and Free Play

Jhordan Speed-Johnson, Inclusion Specialist

Does this sound familiar? A child gets upset when a center is closed, one wanders around, and two argue over a toy.

Centers and free play can be tricky when kids don't know what to do or have a hard time sharing. These situations pop up often and can be stressful when you're trying to help everyone at once. With the right tools in your teacher toolbox, this part of the day can become more manageable.

Behavior: *Child wants a center that's closed*

- Use a center choice board and put a stop sign on closed centers.
- Offer a different choice using a first-then visual, like "First blocks, then water table."
- Teach the Turtle Technique with visuals to help the child stay calm.
- Let the child help set up or clean the center so they feel involved.

Behavior: *Child doesn't know how to play with center materials*

- Pair the child with a peer buddy to model how to play.
- Put out fewer toys and show simple ways to use them.
- Play beside the child and talk about what you're doing.
- Show a visual of how to play with the toys step-by-step.

Behavior: *Child wants a toy someone else has*

- Use a timer and "my turn" cards to help the child wait.
- Teach how to take turns and give praise when they try.
- Offer a different toy if they are upset or the wait is too hard.
- Give two other choices of toys they like.

Teach: How to take turns, accept limits, accept when a center is closed or a toy isn't available, name their feelings, choose something else to do, and express what they want or need.

All strategies in this article are adapted from the Routine-Based Support Guide. For a comprehensive list of strategies for this routine, visit the NCPMI's Routine-Based Support Guide: <https://challengingbehavior.org/document/routine-based-support-guide/>



Interactive Learning of Sight Words Sherry Tindall, Education Specialist

Source: <https://www.thefidgetgame.com/blogs/blog/importance-of-sight-words-game#>

When is the time for sight words in a preschooler's life? It is the time span between PreK and Kindergarten. With that in mind, summer is going to get busy. Or at least we think it is, "Oh my goodness, Joey needs to learn 100 sight words by September." This might be exaggerated, but little folks in most school districts are expected to know some sight words. How can we foster this educational growth without stressing, frustrating, and setting our kiddos up for failure? You got it! It is through games. Make a game out of learning sight words.

Other ways to incorporate sight words:

- **Engagement:** help children focus on fun while learning.
- **Learning in stories:** use short books with short sentences. Books like Bob Books and The First Step Phonics books are great ways to utilize books to capitalize on learning sight words in context.
- **Fun Connection:** these are games that make learning easy. For example, transform a candy land board game into a sight word game, by adding sight words in the squares.
- **Keeping score:** use games that promote healthy competition.
- **Retention and Reinforcement:** play games often and provide reading opportunities for children to experience. This is vital to reading and learning certain words by sight. This transition to kindergarten should be a fun way to pass the summer.



Chinese New Year Activity for Families Katrina Willis, Education Specialist

Source: www.hmhco.com

The Lunar New Year, also known as Chinese New Year or Spring Festival, is celebrated by billions of people of Asian culture each year and is the most significant holiday on the Chinese calendar. It is a 15-day festival with symbolic traditions and rituals that celebrate family, renewal, prosperity, and good fortune. *This year it is celebrated February 17-March 3, 2026.*

1. House Cleaning- Cleaning is an important part of the Chinese New Year traditions. Families clean their homes leading up to the New Year as a way to “sweep away” bad luck from the past year and start fresh. Keep in mind that cleaning on the actual day is discouraged for fear that you will sweep or wash away your good luck! Discuss with your child why cleaning one’s home is an important Chinese New Year tradition. You can also mention that cleaning might emphasize starting the year with a clean slate. Then, consider having your child help you do some cleaning and organizing in your home, and include the whole family.

2. Play Dominoes- On (Chinese) New Year’s Eve, children stay up late playing games. The Chinese invented dominoes back in the 12th century, which makes dominoes a fitting game for the holiday. Have your child use dominoes to make patterns, solve basic math problems, or create chain reactions to teach the domino effect.

3. Eat Dumplings and Mandarin Oranges- Food and feasting are a major part of the traditions. In particular, the Chinese eat dumplings to symbolize moving away from the old and welcoming the new. Similarly, oranges are eaten because their golden color represents wealth. Make your own dumplings with your child (or buy them) and enjoy some mandarin oranges for dessert.



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



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

2026-2027 Provider Profiles

The 2026-2027 profiles are now available. Please update your profile for the upcoming 2026-2027 program year as soon as possible. An updated profile must be completed prior to the initiation of the 26-27 VPK Provider Applications.

Progress Monitoring 2 (PM2) Updates & Reminders

Progress Monitoring 2 (PM2) is currently underway for most providers. PM2 testing dates were emailed to providers on **October 24, 2025**. If you need a copy of your PM2 dates, please email **Roushawn Saunders** at **Roushawn.Saunders@ecs4kids.org**.

PM2 Testing Reminders

Prior to your PM2 end date, please review your **STAR Test Activity Report** using your custom PM2 dates to ensure all children are either tested or marked as *Non-Participating* (if applicable).

Once the PM2 window has closed, generate and **retain a copy of the STAR Test Activity Report** for your records to document testing completion.

Test Administrator Updates

If you have **new Test Administrators**, please email the following documents to **vpk@ecs4kids.org**: Educator Academy Test Administrator Course Certificate, Prohibited Activities Form, Security Form

If a Test Administrator is **no longer in that role**, please notify **vpk@ecs4kids.org** with the individual's name and the date they stopped serving as a Test Administrator.

Provider Portal Access Reminder

Please regularly review the **External Users** section of the Provider Portal to add or remove staff who require **School Admin access** in Renaissance.

All External Users must also be assigned the **VPK FAST Manager role** in the portal to access Renaissance.

Contract Department

8649 Baypine Rd Ste 300 Bldg 7

* Jacksonville, FL 32256

Toll Free: 1-800-238-3463 * Fax: 904-726-1522

contracts@ecs4kids.org * www.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.