



Helping Hands

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



Family Engagement

ECS4Kids

Volume 20, Issue 9

March 2026

Inside this issue:

10 Fun Spring Break Activities

Spring break is a great time for kids to unwind, explore new interests, and have fun. Spring break should be about having fun in a way that feels natural and enjoyable for them! These ideas give kids freedom while keeping them engaged and entertained. Here are 10 ways to keep them engaged without a strict schedule:

- *DIY Science Experiments
- *Cooking Without Rules
- *Random Acts of Kindness
- *Let Them Be the Boss

To read the full article & see additional activities, please [click here](#).

ELC Updates	2
Marco Polo Initiative	3
Commonalities in Infants and Toddlers	4
Creating a Class Garden	5
Straw Weaving	6
Challenging Behaviors	7
Kindness Counts	8
Boosting Seasonal Awareness	9
TEACH	10
Professional Development/VPK Corner	11



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:
Bri-anna.deosca@ecs4kids.org.
We will do our best to find the answer, post the comment, and address the concern.

ELC of North Florida Updates

The ELC of North Florida and ECS4kids hosted its annual Early Educators Conference on Saturday, February 21st at the Thrasher Home Conference Center in Orange Park. The keynote speaker was singer/speaker Shawn Brown from the Super Fun Show. His presentation was highly uplifting and full of wonderful motivation for our teachers. Many great break-out sessions were presented by ECS4kids staff. The theme was western and many attendees came dressed up in their western gear. A big thank you to all the ECS staff who came and helped put on this event. Our teacher of the year winners were honored and thanks to our vendors many door prizes were awarded.



Marco Polo Initiative

<https://calendly.com/marcopololearning/>



March 2026 Training Calendar



Sun	Mon	Tue	Wed	Thu	Fri	Sat
1	2	3	4	5 English ELC Part 1 Training 6-7:30pm EST	6	7
8	9	10 STAR Aligned Training 6-7pm EST	11	12 English ELC Part 2 Training 6-7pm EST	13	14
15	16	17	18	19	20	21
22	23	24 Spanish ELC Part 1 Training 6-7:30pm EST	25	26 CLASS Focused Training 6-7pm EST	27	28
29	30	31 Spanish ELC Part 2 Training 6-7pm EST	 Click here or scan the QR code to sign up for training			



March 2026 Training Descriptions

Click [here](#) to sign up for training

ELC English Part 1 Training

This training is intended for **ELC or RCMA Providers, Teachers, or Directors** to learn about how MarcoPolo For Educators enhances classroom quality through our alignment with **CLASS and STAR**.

This training is a **one and a half hour session** and with a recommended next step of **ELC Part 2 Training**.

ELC English Part 2 Training

This training is intended for **ELC or RCMA Providers, Teachers, or Directors** to learn about how MarcoPolo For Families enhances **family engagement**.

This training is a **one hour session** and it is recommended that you complete **ELC Part 1 training** beforehand.

ELC Spanish Part 1 Training - Entrenamiento de MarcoPolo para Educators Primera Parte

Este **entrenamiento** está destinado a maestros o directores de **ELC o RCMA** para aprender cómo **MarcoPolo For Educators** mejora la calidad en el aula mediante nuestra alineación con **CLASS y STAR**.

Este entrenamiento tiene una duración de **una hora y media**, y se recomienda como siguiente paso participar en el **Entrenamiento ELC Parte 2**.

ELC Spanish Part 2 Training - Entrenamiento de MarcoPolo para Educators Segunda Parte

Este **entrenamiento** está destinado a maestros o directores de **ELC o RCMA** para aprender cómo **MarcoPolo For Families** mejora la participación familiar.

Este entrenamiento tiene una duración de **una hora** y se recomienda haber completado previamente el **Entrenamiento ELC Parte 1**.

CLASS Focused Training

This training is intended for **Teachers or Admin** to learn about how MarcoPolo For Educators enhances classroom quality and strengthens family engagement.

This training is a **one hour session** and open to anyone who utilizes **CLASS** (The Classroom Assessment Scoring System).

STAR Aligned Training

This training is intended for **Teachers or Admin** to learn about how **MarcoPolo** enhances **language, literacy and early numeracy skills** while preparing students for **tech-based testing**.

This is a **one hour session** and open to anyone who utilizes the **STAR Early Literacy Assessment** and also includes information about **Early Numeracy**.

Looking for Commonalities in Infant and Toddlers

Sherry Tindall, Education Specialist

References: <https://www.google.com/search?q=what+do+infants+and+toddlers+have+in+common>
<https://www.cdc.gov/ncbddd/actearly/milestones/index.html>

“Understanding child development is a protector factor. If we do not understand this, we might become frustrated. and when we become frustrated, we do not use our best thinking.” This statement says a lot, if we expect infants to be toddlers or toddlers to be preschoolers, we set ourselves, as well as the child, up for frustration and failure. However, to understand this we need to explore the usual milestones and look for commonalities. For example, infants and toddlers both experience rapid growth. Just think about how fast an infant goes from being born, lying on his back, to wobbling his first step at twelve months. Another commonality is verbal skills; one day it's cooing, babbling, and then it's simple sentences all in twenty-four months. Fine motor and gross motor skills are areas of growth for both infants and toddlers. These common areas build upon one another.

Considering that similarities exist. Let's look for areas on which we can capitalize. Fine and gross motor skills are areas in which we can find commonalities, such as the use of pincer grips, and large body muscles in catching and throwing. Both the infant and toddler will fine tune these areas and move from milestone to milestone. Recalling our beginning quote, it is our responsibility to understand these milestones of child development and provide activities that are age appropriate. This is the key to setting the child up for success. Below are two activities that are age appropriate.

Froot Loop play: For older infants- Place Froot Loops on the table and allow the baby to pick the pieces up with their forefingers using their hands and finally using a pincer grip as their hand-eye coordination improves. For toddlers- use the Froot Loops as a color sorting tool, reinforcing learning colors by sorting out all of one color. For example, put all the purple loops into a bowl. The toddler will use the pincer grip to achieve this.

Catching: For older infants, roll the ball and have the child roll it back to you. As the baby grows, have them toss the ball. For toddlers, have them catch the ball; start close and toss the ball. Using a short distance will set the toddler up for success.



Creating a Class Garden Katrina Willis, Education Specialists

Source: www.pbs.org from an article written by Nimali Fernando & Melanie Potock

Have you ever considered growing a class garden? There are so many benefits and scientific concepts you can discuss with your children when planting and tending to a garden. One study showed that children who participated in gardening projects scored higher in science achievement than those who did not.

First, decide as a class what seeds you will plant in your garden. Next, discuss where you will have your garden and how your class will take care of the garden, i.e. daily watering, fertilizer, pulling weeds, picking the harvest, etc. And now you are ready to plant the seeds! Supplement the experience of gardening with books about plants, trips to a garden, or a photo journal of the plants that you are growing. Add a little math while gardening by measuring how much the plants are growing from week to week or counting the flowers on each plant.

Once you harvest your produce, think of all the brain-building vitamins, minerals and phytonutrients your kids will be eating and how that will continue to boost brain development. Foods like spinach, garlic and beets (which are all easy to grow) have been shown to help with cognitive function and can give your kids an advantage in their growth and development. Even if kids may not love the foods they grow at first, teach them to keep tasting and trying and to train their taste buds to enjoy the bounty of their garden.

In today's world with an abundance of screen time, I think you would agree that our children could benefit from a little more physical activity and sunshine they will get while gardening. Activities like moving soil, carrying a heavy watering can, and digging in the dirt can promote gross motor skills and overall strength for a more healthy body. Plus, these activities, known as "heavy work," have been shown to help kids stay calm and focused.

Benefits of gardening:

Time in the garden allows for team building and promotes communication skills.

Planning a garden, planting the seeds and watching them grow gives kids a sense of purpose, responsibility and autonomy. Making sure that the plants get enough fertilizer, water and sun fosters mindfulness.

Improved mood, better learning experiences and decreased anxiety.

The self-esteem a child gets from eating a perfect cucumber that he grew himself is priceless.



CLASS Connections: Concept Development: Ask open-ended questions like: Why do the plants need sun? How does the plant "drink" water? Why are worms good for the plants? Language Modeling: Add in advanced language-- soil composition, fertilizer, photosynthesis, etc., and be sure to provide kid-friendly definitions.

Straw Weaving Sherry Tindall, Education Specialist

Reference: <https://happyhooligans.ca/straw-weaving/#:~:text=Straw%20Weaving!,of%20our%20weaving%20projects%20here>



School-age children will have a blast making friendship bracelets. Below are pictures with instructions. Enjoy!
All you need is a few drinking straws, tape, and yarn.



Tape 3 drinking straws together, leaving a small gap between straws.
At the top (untaped end of the straw), tie the piece that you finished weaving with one of the new pieces of yarn and secure with a knot. Next, tie the other two pieces of yarn together. Then, knot all 4 tails together in one knot.



Gently push and shimmy your weaving off the straws. Lay your project flat and gently smooth it.

Challenging Behavior During Table Activities and Small Group

Jhordan Speed-Johnson, Child Development Specialist

Does this sound familiar? A child just won't come to a small group activity even after multiple requests, another just hasn't gotten the hang of what to do even after hand-over-hand guidance, and one throws crayons. Sitting for activities can be tough when kids feel bored, don't understand, or want attention. It's easy to feel frustrated when small group time turns into a power struggle. The ideas below are meant to help you feel more in control and make this time more meaningful for kids.

Behavior: *Child is confused or doesn't understand activity*

- Use a small visual schedule and go over each step before starting.
- Clearly explain what the child will be doing first, next, and last.
- Give one-step directions and guide the child through each part.
- Show how to do the activity with simple materials and fewer steps.



Behavior: *Child doesn't like activity*

- Keep the activity short and let the child choose materials when possible.
- Use a first-then cue like "First work, then music" to help motivate.
- Let the child pick a friend to sit with or work beside.
- Offer something they enjoy after the task, like a favorite toy or song.

Behavior: *Child wants adult attention*

- Let the child know when they will have one-on-one time with a teacher or friend.
- Acknowledge how they feel and gently remind them of when you'll check in.
- Talk less and encourage more independent work as they build confidence.
- Sit nearby to offer quiet support, then slowly step back as they stay engaged.

Teach: How to follow a simple schedule, ask for help, let you know when they're finished, and request attention.

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/>

Kindness Counts Katrina Willis, Education Specialists

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



The ability to understand other people's emotions is a key developmental skill that your child will need for kindergarten. Social-emotional books are a great way to help them get started. Scholastic Editors put together the following book list specifically to help young pre-kindergarteners learn the important skills of active listening, sharing acts of kindness, and imagining how others feel. You can find most of these books at the public library.

Peppa is Kind by Samantha Lizzio
How Do Dinosaurs Say I Love You? by Jane Yolen
How Do Dinosaurs Learn to Be Kind? by Jane Yolen
I Love You Little, I Love You Lots by Douglas Wood
I Need a Hug by Aaron Blabey
Rocket and Groot: Little Groot, Big Feelings by Kiara Valdez
The Caring Me I Want to Be! by Mary DiPalermo
I Love You, Stinky Face by Lisa McCourt
Character Counts! Be a Good Citizen by Sierra Harimann
Everybody! You, Me & Us by Elise Gravel
You Are Enough by Margaret O'Hair and Sofia Sanchez
I Love My New Toy! (An Elephant and Piggie book) by Mo Willems
Sometimes I Grumblesquinch by Rachel Vail
The Little Blue Bridge by Brenda Maier
A Friend for Dragon: An Acorn Book by Dav Pilkey

Source: www.parentingchaos.com



March's blooming flowers, baby animals, and gentle spring rain captivate curious minds. Hands-on activities like planting seeds or observing weather changes help preschoolers and toddlers connect with nature's big "wake-up" after winter. These themes also offer comfort during the transition from winter to spring, helping kids feel more grounded and connected to the world around them.



Plant a garden together: Have your child help you choose seeds to plant. Talk to your child about the names of the flowers as you plant the seeds together.

Here are a few common flower names you can teach your child:

- | | | |
|----------|-----------|----------|
| Daffodil | Peony | Jasmine |
| Tulip | Hibiscus | Lavendar |
| Rose | Sunflower | Poppy |

Visit a petting zoo or farm and talk about the animals you see. Look for any baby animals and talk about how they are different from the mama and daddy animals. Ask your child to tell you what they know about the animals, and then build on the knowledge they already have by adding more information.

Talk about the weather with your child when you are outside together. Discuss how the temperature changes with the change in season, and ask what season they think will come next, what type of clothes they will need. Discuss how the weather is different in other parts of the country and world at this time.

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

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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

Provider Portal SSO 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.

Progress Monitoring - 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.

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.

If you have any questions or concerns, please contact 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.