



Helping Hands

Offering a helping hand to School Readiness Providers



Family Engagement

Episcopal Children's Services

Volume 21, Issue 1

July 2026

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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.

Thanks!

Brianna DeOsca,

Free & Budget-Friendly Family Activities in Jacksonville

Looking for affordable family fun in Jacksonville? Jacksonville's 22 miles of white-sandy beaches and low-cost family activities and lodging options make this "River City by the Sea" an ideal vacation destination for families. Experience Jacksonville without breaking the bank by partaking in these inexpensive and rewarding activities.

Tree Hill Nature Center
Jacksonville Jumbo Shrimp
Huguenot Memorial Park
Hands On Children's Museum

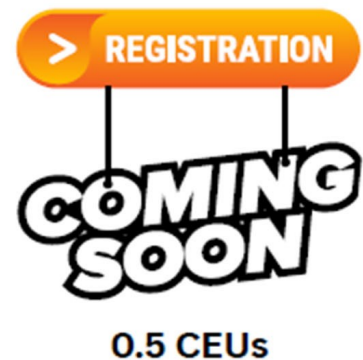
To read the full article & see additional activities, please visit the website:

<https://www.visitjacksonville.com/things-to-do/family/free-affordable/>



Summer Mini Conference

Save the date for our Summer Mini Conference! Providers- be on the look out for an email from ECS4Kids when registration is open and share with your teachers. Can't wait to see you there!



Summer Mini Conference

AUGUST 8, 2026

9:00 AM-3:30PM

8:30 AM CHECK-IN

11:45 AM-12:45 PM LUNCH ON YOUR OWN

CLOSING & RAFFLE AFTER LAST SESSION

KIDSFIRST LEARNING CENTER

2645 Blanding Blvd

Middleburg, FL 32068

Registration Link:

<https://ecs4kids.gosignmeup.com/Public/Course/Browse>

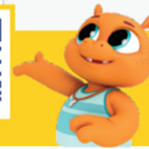
Marco Polo Trainings

REGISTER HERE: <https://calendly.com/marcopolearning/>



July 2026 Training Calendar

Sun	Mon	Tue	Wed	Thu	Fri	Sat
28	29	30	1	2	3	4
5	6	7 English ELC Part 1 Training 6:00pm-7:30pm EST	8	9	10	11
12	13	14 English ELC Part 2 Training 6:00pm-7:00pm EST	15	16 STAR Aligned Training 6:00pm-7:00pm EST	17	18
19	20	21 CLASS Focused Training 6:00pm-7:00pm EST	22 Spanish ELC Part 1 Training 6:00pm-7:30pm EST	23	24	25
26	27	28	29 Spanish ELC Part 2 Training 6:00pm-7:00pm EST	30	31	1
2	Notes		Click here or scan the QR code to sign up for training			



July 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**.

Outdoor Activities for Older Infants and Toddlers

Joan Whitson, Program Assessment Specialist

Resource: <https://headstart.gov/learning-environments/article/outdoor-experiences-infants-toddlers>

Outdoor activities are essential for infants and toddlers because they boost cognitive development, strengthen immune systems, and foster sensory exploration through natural sights, sounds, and textures. Daily outdoor time supports crucial physical milestones, such as walking and balancing, while reducing stress and promoting better sleep patterns.



Infant Activities (0–1 Year) Sensory Tummy Time: Lay a blanket on the grass and allow them to feel different textures like clover, leaves, or a cool, safe sensory mat. **Nature Sensory Walk:** Take a stroller walk focusing on sounds and sights—birds, trees, and wind. **Water Splashing:** Use a shallow, small bowl or pan with a few inches of water for hands/feet splashing. Add items like rubber toys and ice cubes for added sensory involvement.



Toddler Activities (1–3 Years) Sensory & Messy Play: Set up a sandbox or tuff tray filled with water, cups, and sponges. **Active Games:** Blow bubbles for them to chase, pop, and jump on. **Nature Treasure Hunt:** Give them a bucket to collect items like sticks, rocks, or leaves. **Outdoor Art:** Create large-scale art with washable sidewalk chalk. **Obstacle Course:** Create a simple course using cushions, low climbing structures and tunnels to crawl through.

Class Connections:

Quality of Feedback: In response to a child's answers, comments or actions provide hints and verbal and physical assistance. Expand and elaborate on what they are doing. Ask follow-up questions and provide individualized feedback recognizing their effort or accomplishment.

Language Modeling: Actively narrate your actions and the child's actions during each activity. "You are holding and squeezing the yellow duck." Encourage back and forth exchanges. Repeat responses and pause encouraging them to respond back to you or use nonverbal cues such as smiling and nodding to encourage extended communication.

Summer Outdoor Story Time Ideas, Joan Whitson Program Assessment Specialist

Resource: <https://www.literacious.com/2024/06/10/storytime-theme-outdoors/>



Outdoor story times can be some of the best created memories of the summer. Create engaging outdoor story times for preschoolers by combining nature-themed books with interactive, sensory activities like nature scavenger hunts, "animal sound safaris," or acting out stories. Use shady spots, oversized picture books, and props to maintain attention. Top themes include camping, bugs, gardening, and hiking.

Outdoor Story Time Themes & Activity Ideas

- **Nature Explorer Theme:** Read *The Hike* by Alison Farrell or *In the Tall, Tall Grass* by Denise Fleming. Follow with a scavenger hunt where children look for specific leaves, rocks, or flowers.
- **Camping/Adventure Theme:** Set up a tent with blankets. Read *Maisy Goes Camping* by Lucy Cousins and act out a "campfire" song using flashlights under fake paper logs. Make your own tents using popsicle sticks, paper, or fabric.
- **"We're Going on a Bear Hunt":** Act out the story with actions like walking through grass, swimming across a lake, and running back home, as mentioned in the story.
- **Animal Sound Safari:** Take a walk, listen for insects and birds, and mimic their sounds. Read *Hello, Hedgehog: A Peek-A-Boo Adventure* by Judi Abbot.
- **Art in the Park:** Read *Planting a Rainbow* by Lois Ehlert, then have children paint flowers found on the grounds.

Class Connections:

Concept Development: Increase analysis and reasoning skills by having the children compare and classify the different sounds they hear and items they find during their scavenger hunt. Ask effective how and why questions such as "How are these rocks similar?" "How are those sounds different?"

Quality of Feedback: Increase back and forth exchanges by asking follow-up questions during discussions and asking children to explain their thinking. Ask about their responses or actions. "What made you want to draw this flower?" "Why are you making your tent this way?"

Ways to Keep School Age Children Learning This Summer

Joan Whitson, Program Assessment Specialist

Resource: <https://www.bgca.org/news-stories/2024/June/5-ways-to-stop-the-summer-slide-and-help-kids-keep-learning/>

Summer break is a time for kids to relax and have fun, but it can also lead to learning loss known as the “summer slide.” Studies show that many school age children experience a decline in academic skills, in fact, some children lose an average of two months in reading achievement over the summer causing them to fall almost three grade levels behind their peers by the time they reach fifth grade.

Here are four ways parents and caregivers can support learning while schools are out for summer.

- **Make reading a priority.** Visit the local library weekly to participate in summer reading challenges and pick out new books. **Create a Book Club:** Organize a small, casual book club with friends or create a family book club to discuss stories. **Journaling:** Encourage children to write 3-5 times a week in a journal, covering topics like their day, movie reviews, or creative stories.
- **Embrace summer learning programs:** To beat the summer slide, check out local community centers, libraries and schools for interactive summer learning programs. They make learning fun and exciting as kids explore new subjects.
- **Embark on educational trips and activities:** Learning doesn't have to be confined to the classroom. Museums, science centers, historical landmarks, and zoos offer valuable opportunities for kids to ask questions, actively engage with exhibits, and discuss what they learned. Many places offer discounts for students and even free admission days. For example, in August the Jacksonville Zoo offers children free admission. Visit: <https://www.jacksonvillezoo.org/offers>
- **Use math and science in daily life. Cooking and Baking:** Have children calculate measurements, fractions, and times when preparing meals to apply math skills. **Garden Science:** Plant a small garden to learn about biology and ecosystems or use indoor pots for growing herbs. **Shopping Math:** Challenge children to compare prices per unit, calculate discounts, and manage a budget while shopping. **Road Trip Activities:** Calculate miles per gallon, predict arrival times, or play games identifying street signs to work on logic.



Teaching Expectations Before Behavior Gets Big

Jhordan Speed-Johnson, Child Development Specialist

Source: Technical Assistance and Training System, also called TATS, Evidence-based Practices for Early Childhood Classrooms, Rock Your Classroom, Observation Guide Professional Development Tool, Section 5a.

Welcome to our monthly article series on evidence-based practices in preschool classrooms. Each article draws from the Evidence-based Practices for Early Childhood Classrooms Observation Guide, developed by TATS, the Technical Assistance and Training System, a Florida Department of Education initiative that supports educators working with young children with disabilities.

Each topic is organized around three tiers of support: **universal strategies** for all children, **targeted strategies** for children who need a little more, and **intensive interventions** for children with the highest needs.

This month we are starting with something that shapes everything else in a preschool classroom: having an actual system for teaching behavior expectations, not just responding when things go wrong. Most of us got into this work because we love children, and it can feel discouraging when behavior challenges keep interrupting the day. The good news is that a proactive approach, one where expectations are taught, practiced, and revisited regularly, makes a real difference. Not just for children who struggle, but for everyone.

When children know what is expected and have practiced what it looks like, the whole classroom breathes a little easier.

UNIVERSAL SUPPORTS: FOR EVERY CHILD IN THE ROOM

Three to five simple, positively worded rules posted with pictures where every child can see them is a strong starting point. But posting is not teaching. Review the rules daily, practice what they look like in real situations, and recognize children when they get it right. Weave calming strategies into the routine before anyone needs them, so they feel like a normal part of the day rather than a response to a crisis.

TARGETED SUPPORTS: FOR CHILDREN WHO NEED A LITTLE MORE

Some children need the expectations to come alive for them more personally. Photos of real situations, or even photos of that specific child following a rule, make the abstract concrete. Individual checklists for specific parts of the day, social scripts, and simple self-monitoring tools give children something to hold onto when the day gets challenging. Reinforcing expectations through songs and rhymes is also worth trying. It works, and the children love it.

INTENSIVE INTERVENTIONS: FOR CHILDREN WITH THE HIGHEST NEEDS

For children who need the most support, expectations need to reach them in multiple ways: visual, tactile, and through real photos tied to their specific routines and settings. Frequent, immediate, and individual feedback is essential. Every adult in the room needs to be responding consistently and using the same language. For these children, that consistency is not a nice touch. It is the intervention itself.

Behavior is a skill. When we teach it like one, children rise to meet us.

REFLECTION

Take a look at your classroom rules this week. Are they posted where every child can actually see them? Are they being reviewed daily, or only when something goes wrong? Pick one routine in your day and make a plan to practice the expected behavior during a calm moment before the challenge has a chance to show up.

FOR MORE INFORMATION

If you're interested in learning more about what tiered supports and interventions are and how to use them in your classroom, please visit <https://pese.ucf.edu> and explore the "Rock Your Classroom" resources.

Books to Read to Help Prepare for Kindergarten

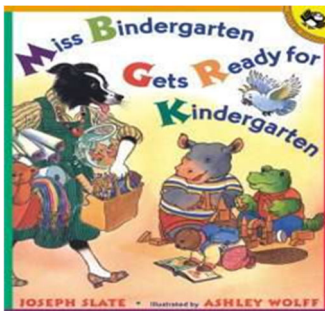
Joan Whitson, Program Assessment Specialist

Reading books about kindergarten is one of the best ways to help children make this important transition. Communicating openly about any worries and fears is important, and books are a great way to open the door for that communication.

Books For Teachers and Parents to Prepare Children for Kindergarten

The Night Before Kindergarten

By **Natasha Wing** It's almost the first day of school, and kids all over town are getting ready for it. What will kindergarten be like? Will the teacher be nice? Will they still get to play? Anticipation and excitement are in the air as they head off to school, where they discover just how much fun kindergarten really is!

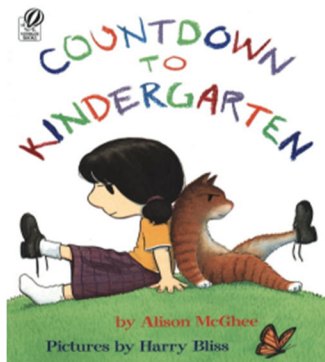
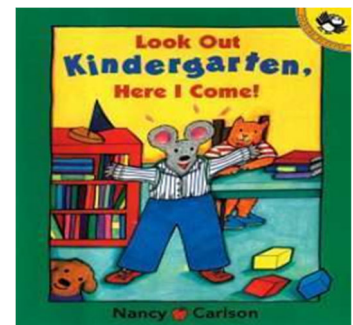


Miss Bindergarten Gets Ready for Kindergarten

By **Joseph Slate** It's the first day of kindergarten and Miss Bindergarten is hard at work getting the classroom ready for her twenty-six new students. Meanwhile, Adam Krupp wakes up, Brenda Heath brushes her teeth, and Christopher Beaker finds his sneaker. Miss Bindergarten puts the finishing touches on the room just in time, and the students arrive. Now the fun can begin!

Look Out Kindergarten Here I Come

By **Nancy Carlson** The first day of kindergarten is finally here, and Henry can't wait to paint pictures, sing songs, and practice counting. When he gets to school, though, he's not so sure he's ready for kindergarten. But before long Henry discovers that the only thing he's not ready for is how much fun he's going to have at school! This gently humorous, encouraging story will give children about entering kindergarten an extra boost of confidence.



Countdown to Kindergarten

By **Alison McGhee** It's just ten days before kindergarten, and this little girl has heard all there is to know from a first grader about what it's going to be like. You can't bring your cat, you can't bring a stuffed animal, and the number one rule? You can't ask anyone for help. Even so, what do you do when your shoes come untied, if you're the only one in the class who doesn't know how to tie them up again? Addressing pre-kindergarten anxiety, this book will bring a smile to the face of every child and parent having first-day jitters.

Improving Math Skills

Joan Whitson, Program Assessment Specialist



Parents can engage preschoolers in math by integrating counting, sorting, and shape recognition into daily routines like grocery shopping, cooking, and playtime. Using "math talk" to describe sizes, patterns, and quantities helps build foundational skills, such as encouraging children to sort laundry, count snacks, or identify shapes on street signs.

Daily Routine Math

- **Counting Opportunities:** Count steps while walking, toys while cleaning up, or utensils while setting the table.
- **Sorting and Organizing:** Encourage children to sort laundry by color, toys by type, or groceries by shape.
- **Measurement in Cooking:** Have children help measure ingredients for recipes, using terms like "full," "half," "more," and "less".
- **Shape Recognition:** Point out shapes in the environment, such as wheels being circles, doors being rectangles, and stop signs being octagons.

Math Conversation and Games

- **Math Talk:** Use descriptive language, such as comparing items ("Which is heavier?") or discussing spatial relationships ("Put the teddy bear *under* the chair").
- **Number Games:** Play games to identify numbers on houses or license plates while traveling.
- **Music and Movement:** Sing songs that involve counting down or patterns, such as "Five Little Monkeys."

Educational Resources

Books: Read storybooks that focus on numbers, shapes, and patterns.

Apps: Utilize educational apps that encourage collaborative play. Visit the NAEYC website for this article "Four Ways to Use Tablets to Foster Early Learning." <https://www.naeyc.org/resources/blog/tablets-math-learning>

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/>



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

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.



VPK Corner Sarah March, Contract Coordinator

VPK 26-27 Provider Applications and Contracts

26-27 VPK provider applications (VPK 10,11A,11B) and contracts are available. Providers need to have a certified VPK application in order for the 26-27 VPK contract to be initiated. If you have not done so already, please complete your 2026-2027 VPK provider application (VPK 10,11A,11B) to allow for sufficient time for review and certification.

If you have any questions, please contact Roushawn Saunders at Roushawn.saunders@ecs4kids.org . Or call 904-726-1500 ext. 2241



Warm Line 1-800-238-3463

Ext. 2281 (Clay, Nassau, Baker, Bradford)

Ext. 2227 (Putnam, St. Johns)

Do you have a concern about the health, development, disability, or 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.

