Froebel Trust

A Froebelian approach

Supporting children with additional needs

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Contents

This is an interactive document

The top toolbar and contents buttons allow you to navigate through the different sections of the guide.

Froebelian principles

Friedrich Froebel (1782–1852) was the inventor of kindergarten and a pioneer of early childhood education and care. Froebel's work and writing changed the way we think about and value early childhood.

Froebel's ideas were considered revolutionary in the 1850s. The principles of his work continue to challenge and be relevant to modern mainstream early years educational practice.

Unity and connectedness

Everything in the universe is connected. The more one is aware of this unity, the deeper the understanding of oneself, others, nature and the wider world. Children are whole beings whose thoughts, feelings and actions are interrelated. Young children learn in a holistic way and learning should never be compartmentalised for everything links.

Autonomous learners

Each child is unique and what children can do rather than what they cannot, is the starting point for a child's learning. Children learn best by doing things for themselves and from becoming more aware of their own learning. Froebelian educators respect children for who they are and value them for their efforts. Helping children to reflect is a key feature of a Froebelian education.

The value of childhood in its own right

Childhood is not merely a preparation for the next stage in learning. Learning begins at birth and continues throughout life.

Relationships matter

The relationships of every child with themselves, their parents, carers, family and wider community are valued. Relationships are of central importance in a child's life.

Creativity and the power of symbols

Creativity is about children representing their own ideas in their own way, supported by a nurturing environment and people. As children begin to use and make symbols they express their inner thoughts and ideas and make meaning. Over time, literal reflections of everyday life, community and culture become more abstract and nuanced.

The central importance of play

Play is part of being human and helps children to relate their inner worlds of feelings, ideas and lived experiences taking them to new levels of thinking, feeling, imagining and creating and is a resource for the future. Children have ownership of their play. Froebelian education values the contribution of adults offering 'freedom with guidance' to enrich play as a learning context.

Engaging with nature

Experience and understanding of nature and our place in it, is an essential aspect of Froebelian practice. Through real life experiences, children learn about the interrelationship of all living things. This helps them to think about the bigger questions of the environment, sustainability and climate change.

Knowledgeable and nurturing educators

Early childhood educators who engage in their own learning and believe in principled and reflective practice are a key aspect of a Froebelian approach. Froebelian educators facilitate and guide, rather than instruct. They provide rich real life experiences and observe children carefully, supporting and extending their interests through 'freedom with guidance'.

Find out more about a Froebelian approach to early childhood education at froebel.org.uk

Introduction

Friedrich Froebel (1782-1852) developed an educational approach, based on a holistic view of children and their development, underpinned by core principles. Central to his approach is the belief that all children are unique and develop at their own pace.

Today, children enter early childhood settings at different developmental stages with a variety of life experiences. All children have needs, but some children will require specific adaptations and specialist support. Depending on where you are in the UK or globally this is sometimes described as having 'special educational needs' or 'additional support needs'. In this pamphlet, the term 'additional needs' is used.

None of these terms are ideal as sometimes they lead to deficit approaches, which view additional needs as problems to be fixed (Murphy 2022). Froebelian educators do not define children by their additional needs or diagnosis, should they have one. Instead, they view children as 'whole' individuals, each with their own unique needs, interests, likes and dislikes.

This pamphlet explores how educators can use Froebelian pedagogy to support children with additional needs, including building relationships with families and across the child's wider social network to develop an inclusive pedagogical approach that celebrates the uniqueness of each child. Real-life examples show how self-chosen play, nature, music and movement can be used to support development.

Connectedness

Working with families

Froebel considered each child an active member of their family and wider community. The Froebelian setting today is an inclusive community. Differences between children are celebrated and each child's unique contribution is valued. Integral to this are strong partnerships between educators and families.

Parents and carers are undoubtedly the most important people in their children's lives and know them best. However, relationships between families and educators are often conducted within a power imbalance where the educator is considered the expert.

Froebelian educators aim to build balanced partnerships with families where their knowledge, feelings and expertise are valued. Developing mutually respectful relationships is not always easy, particularly if families have had negative experiences with other professionals involved in their child's care.

Developing positive relationships with families begins before the child joins the early years setting. Their first contact with the setting is crucial. It is important that families have a first point of contact, usually the key person. Parents and carers need to feel that the educator sees their child as a unique individual rather than seeing only deficits and delays. Early conversations must put the feelings and views of the family at the centre.

Fig. 1: Sharing observations of play with families is a powerful way of celebrating the child's strengths

Open-ended questions about the child's likes and dislikes and how they communicate their feelings and needs can be helpful in supporting parents and carers to lead the conversation about their child.

It is also important to consider how the setting accommodates families. Quiet spaces where parents and carers can speak without being overheard ensures they feel comfortable talking about their child without judgement.

Often, parents and carers of children with additional needs receive feedback that is disproportionately negative. It is important to balance any discussion around concerns with positive feedback that focuses on the child's progress and strengths. Sharing observations of children's play can be very helpful. Encouraging families to share their own observations provides useful information about the child's life outside of the school or setting, as well as empowering parents and carers to view themselves as active agents in their child's education.

Working with multi-agency professionals

Often, when working with children with additional needs, educators become part of a multi-agency team. Sometimes other professionals may recommend interventions that do not fit with a Froebelian ethos. These may be tasks or activities that involve withdrawing the child from the main environment and their play.

Sharing concerns and reflecting together on the purpose of the intervention, including seeing it from the child's perspective, can help. Concerns have been raised that some interventions focus on teaching children to mimic developmentally 'typical' skills (Murphy 2022). This can lead to children masking their true needs and identities.

When Froebelian educators develop close bonds with children and their families, they build a good understanding of each child's strengths and areas for development. It may be unnecessary to remove a child from their main environment when educators adapt their own practice. If an intervention does require moving to a quieter space, it is often best carried out at a time that does not interrupt a child's play, such as at the beginning or end of the session.

In multi-agency meetings, where other professionals may have met a child just once or twice in a clinic, educators are advocates for the child and their family with an invaluable perspective on the child's development and needs. Communicating the Froebelian ethos of the setting to the other professionals involved supports collaboration. Inviting them to join a session can be very powerful. Detailed knowledge of the child puts educators in a strong position to work closely with other professionals to develop advice and support that aligns with Froebelian principles and will be of greatest benefit to the child.

Fig. 2: Meeting the needs of the child within their play requires sensitive observation and reflection

Routines and transitions

"Froebelian educators create long periods of open-ended, uninterrupted time so that both children and adults can become deeply involved in play and other learning activities. Time is not 'filled' but is freed from all unnecessary interruptions."

Tovey 2017, p.42

In a Froebelian setting, time for uninterrupted play is of central importance.

Loose, predictable routines are important as they provide a sense of safety and security, allowing children to become familiar with the rhythm of the day and predict what will happen next. However, they should be organised in a way that maximises time for play with transitions being kept to a minimum.

Transitions can be difficult for many children. If the child is pre-verbal or non-verbal, or has information processing difficulties, they may find it even more difficult to understand what is happening and what will come next. Often, supporting children to manage transitions simply involves reflecting on the appropriateness of routines and expectations, and making changes where necessary. Expectations need to be informed by an understanding of how children develop, with trust in children as autonomous learners. Froebelian educators do not have blanket expectations, such as that all children must sit still on the carpet. Expectations are dependent on the individual child and their developmental stage, needs and experiences.

For children who find transitions particularly distressing, supporting them requires reflection, creativity and often flexibility. The strategies used are dependent on the individual child and their needs, but the following ideas may provide a useful starting point:

- Keep transitions to a minimum and plan carefully for when they will happen.
- Ensure expectations match the child's developmental stage.
- Prepare children for transitions by giving verbal or visual warnings.
- Use a visual signifier that is appropriate to the child's developmental stage, such as an object of reference, photograph or symbol.
- Accompany transitions with meaningful songs, such as, 'This is the way we wash our hands' (to the tune of 'Here we go round the mulberry bush').
- Allow children to save or photograph whatever they have been working on if they have not finished and the session cannot be extended.
- Use augmented communication, such as signing, to assist verbal communication.

Meal and snack times

Meal and snack times should provide a sense of community and belonging. There may be adaptations required to ensure they are inclusive of children with additional needs. The educator who knows the child well is in the best position to identify what adjustments may be required. This could be as simple as a quieter table, or a specific plate or cutlery set designed to support eating as independently as possible. Some educators worry that it is unfair if one child receives different treatment, such as different food. Froebel urges us to give children what they need. It is often surprising how understanding children can be when it comes to adaptations for another child. Meal and snack times can be valuable for building relationships between educators and children.

Fig. 3: Educators may need to adapt mealtime practices to ensure all children are included

The central importance of play

"Play is the highest expression of human development in childhood for it alone is the free expression of what is in a child's soul."

Froebel 1912, p.50-51

Froebel recognised the need for a child's development to be viewed holistically – including emotional, physical and cognitive development, family and community relationships, and the spiritual aspects of the natural world. He believed that it was through play, particularly in nature, that children develop and construct an understanding of their world.

For Froebelian educators play is not simply recreation or a reward from 'real' work, nor is it merely preparation for the child's future. Instead, play is considered the primary vehicle through which learning happens and is important in its own right (Bruce 1991).

Fig. 4: All children should have the freedom to play and experience the joy of childhood

A key Froebelian principle is the value of childhood in its own right (Tovey 2020). Froebelian educators recognise that play is central to childhood and is the right of every child. Historically, there has been a tendency to view play that diverges from typical developmental expectations through a deficit lens (Murphy 2022). When play is viewed through a Froebelian lens, there is an inherent trust and respect for the child and the uniqueness of their development. Froebelian educators do not consider there to be a 'right' or 'wrong' way to play. Play that does not make sense to educators offers an opportunity to sensitively observe and learn from the child.

"Play is the right of every child. Not a privilege."

Souto-Manning 2017, p.785

The role of observation

"It is a privilege to observe and to listen to a child to find out how they are thinking and making sense of the world."

Louis 2022, p.111

Sensitive observation of play can often reveal that children can do more than previously assumed. Observation helps to build a more holistic picture of the child and forms the basis for adapting practice or the environment to ensure their needs are met.

Observation is a skill that is developed over time (Louis 2022). It requires curiosity about children's play and willingness to reflect on any preconceptions and understanding of what children can and can't do.

Tina Bruce uses the term 'free-flow' play to describe self-chosen play that is driven by the child's interests and ideas. She provides twelve characteristics that define free-flow play known as the 'twelve features of play'. The features can assist educators in observing and interpreting the play of all children, including children with additional needs.

(Bruce 1991)

Fig. 5: Observing children's self-chosen play helps us understand what interests and motivates them

Khalid's story

Every day Khalid arrives at nursery school holding two twigs of the same size. He moves the twigs between his fingers and watches in awe as they spin. Khalid enjoys spending time outside and will carry twigs to different areas of the nursery school garden, laying on his tummy, watching closely as he rotates them. He enjoys exploring moving them on different surfaces, such as on concrete, grass and gravel. Khalid has a diagnosis of autism and is non-verbal. His key worker, Tom, receives a medical report that describes Khalid's play as 'purposeless' and 'repetitive'. Tom is shocked by this perception of Khalid's play. His observations of Khalid reveal that he is exploring rotation, speed, light and shadow. He sees the value of Khalid's play, and therefore ensures Khalid is afforded ample space and time each day to continue his ongoing exploration.

"Observations help us to fit the curriculum around children's individual needs, rather than expecting children to fit into the curriculum."

Louis 2022, p.5

Froebel understood that children learn through their senses and therefore need concrete learning experiences, just like Khalid's, in which they gather, select and filter information. Froebel also recognised the child's need to express their inner life through exploration and play. Khalid makes his 'inner' schematic knowledge of rotation 'outer' through exploring the way the twigs behave when he manipulates them with his fingers.

Fig. 6: Children need opportunities to explore using all their senses

Schemas are patterns of repeated behaviour, which children often display in their play (Louis 2022). For example, a child may tip out containers of toys, transport objects from one place to another, or deliberately drop or throw things. Knowledge of schemas can be a useful aid for interpreting all children's play, but particularly play that might initially be hard to understand, such as in Khalid's story.

Fig. 7: Observing and understanding the schema the child is exploring helps educators to tune into their play

When educators observe and interpret play, a multitude of factors can have an impact. If, like Khalid, a child has an identified additional need or diagnosis, there is the risk of the educator unconsciously searching for play behaviours that fit with the traits or symptoms associated with the additional need. This is known as confirmation bias (Louis 2022). To prevent this, Louis urges educators to observe from 'a position of enquiry rather than judgement' (p.16). She suggests describing in factual terms what is happening as a way of increasing objectivity and avoiding making snap judgements or assumptions or viewing play in binary terms such as 'good' and 'bad' or 'right' and 'wrong'.

Observing play from a Froebelian perspective offers many benefits. It:

- Challenges preconceptions and biases.
- Recognises and celebrates the child's strengths.
- Gives educators a greater insight into the child's stage of development and their needs.
- Provides knowledge which enables educators to adapt the provision to ensure it meets the interests and needs of all children.
- Helps educators to get to know the child and encourages the development of close bonds.
- Allows educators to tune into the child's unique communicative strategies.
- Forms a starting point for discussions with parents and carers, supporting strong relationships and connecting with the child's wider world.

Music and movement for all children

As anyone who has spent time singing with young children will know, few other activities stimulate joy and connectedness so profoundly (Powell, Goouch & Werth 2015). Froebel observed the powerful role of singing and movement in the holistic development of babies and children, leading him to develop the *Mother Songs* (Froebel 1878, first published 1844) and ring games (Bruce 2012; Dyke 2019). Many of the songs that are sung with children today have their origins in these songs and rhymes (Tovey 2017).

Froebel's songs developed from his observations of the intense bond developed between mothers and babies as they sang together (Tovey 2017). Developments in neuroscience and attachment theory confirm the powerful role singing plays in developing secure relationships between babies and their caregivers.

Fig. 8: Singing is an intimate experience that supports the development of bonds between adults and children

Lina's story

Lina is non-verbal. Recently, she has struggled to separate from her dad when she arrives at nursery in the morning. Lina's key person, Olu, knows that Lina loves being sung to, so she sits Lina on her lap and begins singing 'Row, row, row your boat', rocking Lina forwards and backwards. She feels Lina relax into the rhythm of the rocking, and gradually, Lina stops crying. Olu continues to sing, "If you see a crocodile, don't forget to…". As she approaches the 'scream', Lina's face breaks into an anticipatory smile. Olu pauses, and Lina looks at her, indicating that she is ready.

Together they 'scream' whilst smiling and laughing. Afterwards, Lina pulls Olu's arms around her and begins to rock, motioning that she wants to sing the song all over again.

The intimacy and connectedness facilitated by singing is clear in the interaction between Lina and Olu. Whilst Lina is not yet communicating with words, Olu tunes into her communication and responds lovingly. There are numerous benefits to the development of Lina's communication skills. The song introduces Lina to repetition and anticipation; Lina's key person adapts it according to her cues and responses.

Benefits to physical development

Froebel observed the progression of children's physical development from gross-motor to fine-motor control. The *Mother Songs* and ring games begin with developing whole-body movements before gradually progressing to hand and finger movements.

For babies, Froebel recommended that the mother move the child's limbs to engage them in the movement. For children with reduced mobility, educators may move a child's limbs to the song e.g. supporting their arms in the winding motion whilst singing 'Wind the bobbin up', if this is something the child enjoys. Of course, this is dependent on the child's mobility and sensory preferences.

Fig. 9: Singing and movement games are whole body experiences

Sensory benefits

Singing and moving are experiences which can benefit children with sensory processing differences. For Lina, rhythmic rocking calms and relaxes her. Movement games involving jumping, clapping and rocking all activate the proprioceptive (knowing where your body is in space) and vestibular (balance) senses (Griffin 2021). Children who find the sensation of physical touch calming may enjoy songs and movement games which involve gentle touch or tickling, such as 'Round and round the garden', or songs which involve bouncing or pressure, such as a gentle squeezing. Songs which involve whole body movements, such as 'Head, shoulders, knees and toes', provide several benefits for children with a variety of additional needs. For the visually impaired child, action songs enable them to orient their body in space. Songs involving hand and finger play also support children to move from the 'literal' to 'abstract' as they develop an understanding of symbols, for example, that a finger stands for a person (Bruce 2023).

It is important to bear in mind that children's sensory preferences will vary, for example some children may enjoy loud singing, whilst other children may find it overwhelming. It is important to consider children's sensory preferences when planning for singing.

Some children may prefer to sing alone with an adult or in a small group. Ensuring singing is inclusive also requires us to consider the different ways children request songs. Having a board with visuals for each song, or a basket with objects relating to each song supports children to choose songs non-verbally.

Froebel believed that songs sung with children should be meaningful, relating to their first-hand experiences and locating them in their wider community. Parents and carers can be involved by sharing songs sung at home and in the setting or school.

Fig. 10: Singing and moving as a group is a powerful way of fostering a sense of belonging and connecting with families

Fig. 11: A basket of objects relating to nursery rhymes supports children to communicate their song requests

Engaging with nature

The child needs to experience nature "in all its aspects – form, energy, substance, sound and colour"

Froebel in Lilley 1967, p.148

Central to Froebelian pedagogy is the importance of engaging in and with nature, as it offers numerous benefits to children's physical, emotional and spiritual health. Access to a rich natural environment is integral to the Froebelian setting. This does not necessarily require a large space or expensive resources. What is important is that all children are provided with opportunities to engage and connect with nature in all its forms. All children should have access to an outside space alongside plenty of time to become deeply immersed in nature in all weathers and seasons.

Stimulating the senses

When children play outside, they receive sensory feedback which is vital for brain development and the development of gross and fine motor skills, coordination and emotional regulation. For children who process sensory input differently (Griffin 2021) nature can be regulating and calming. Outdoor spaces with greenery allow children to seek the sensory input and physical and emotional challenge appropriate to their needs and stage of development.

Fig. 12: The natural environment stimulates all the senses (smell, hearing, touch, vision, proprioception and vestibular)

Accessible spaces

Accessibility is integral to ensuring outdoor spaces are inclusive of children with additional needs. As with all aspects of Froebelian practice, ensuring accessibility requires knowing children well. What works for one child will be different for the next, so continually reflecting as a team on the accessibility of spaces for every member of the community of children in the setting is essential.

Jade's story

Leanne, Jade's Key Person, visits her at home before she joins the setting. Jade's mum shares Jade's love for the outdoors. She also expresses her concern that Jade may not be able to access the nursery school garden as she is a wheelchair user. Leanne suggests that Jade and her mum spend some sessions together in the garden with Leanne. Jade enjoys being in the nursery school garden; she smiles and points whenever she sees a bird or squirrel. Leanne observes how Jade's mum tunes in to Jade's responses to the environment, taking her closer to a squirrel if she is expressing interest but moving her away if she shows fear. There is a wooded area at the back of the garden that Jade is particularly drawn to. Leanne works with the other educators to clear a path accessible by wheelchair so Jade can access it. Jade is soon attending nursery school without her mum. Over time, her confidence grows. Within the security of her relationship with Leanne, she challenges herself to go further into the wooded area to get closer to the birds and squirrels.

Fig. 13: Raised herb gardens enhance the sensory quality of an outdoor space and can provide accessibility for wheelchair users

Ensuring a space is physically accessible is vital, however, accessibility goes beyond this. It requires reflection on potential physical, sensory, and emotional barriers. Indeed, for Jade, the obvious barriers were physical but through listening to Jade's mum Leanne was also able to identify emotional barriers.

Inclusive, open-ended resources

Froebel's Occupations provide opportunities to develop close bonds with children. The Occupations are a series of materials and activities such as clay (Parker 2019), sewing (Imray, Thomson and Whinnett 2023), woodwork (Moorhouse 2021), paper-folding, parquetry and cooking (Denton and Parker 2024). They provide open-ended experiences that support the holistic development of all children, including children with additional needs.

Wooden blocks, crates, planks, wooden discs, sticks and stones are other examples of open-ended resources (Whinnett 2020). They can provide endless opportunities for inclusive play in schools and early years settings.

Fig. 14: Children can interact with open-ended resources in a way that is appropriate to their stage of development. Open-ended resources can be highly inclusive

Practice example

Clay is an open-ended malleable material which engages the senses (Parker 2019). Children who are developing their grip and fine motor skills can explore the sensation of manipulating and making marks in the clay using their fingers. Adding water alters the sensory experience.

When using clay, it is important to be mindful of children's sensory preferences. For example, they may not like the texture, or they may want to put it in their mouths. Move at the child's pace. Perhaps they wish to observe or touch the clay using tools to begin (adding baby oil to the hands stops clay sticking which some children find helpful). Mouthing objects is a sensory need. Educators may need to provide a teething toy for children who have been observed to do this.

Fig.15: Clay is a rich sensory material which may be unfamiliar. Educators can support children to explore it at their own pace

The adult's role: knowledgeable, nurturing educators

Really knowing the child means educators can provide the appropriate balance of freedom and guidance. Firstly, it is important to identify what adaptations are necessary for the child to access the Occupation. For example, a child who is a wheelchair user may need to access the Occupation on a table. It is important to consider how these experiences can be brought to the child. Location is significant and should be dependent on the child's sensory needs and preferences. A quiet space that does not serve as a thoroughfare is often preferable. As with all elements of Froebelian practice, uninterrupted time, opportunities for repetition and an understanding of the value of the process, not only the product, are key.

Fig.16: In most instances the activity or resources can be brought to the child

Thinking about risk

Taking risks is an essential part of life and integral to healthy development. Educators cannot eradicate all risk, nor should strive to do so. It is by taking risks, e.g. by climbing a tree or using a hammer, that children develop autonomy to manage risk (Moorhouse 2018). When children play, they are constantly taking emotional, social and physical risks. However, it is often physical risk which is of most concern to educators.

Fig. 17a: Risks can be social or emotional as well as physical

Fig. 17b Holding an insect or animal for the first time may require the child to take an emotional risk

Fig. 18: Climbing independently supports children to assess risk and become aware of their own limits

Varied experiences, such as those described, provide opportunities for children to challenge themselves and learn to safely assess and manage risk whilst building autonomy and self-esteem. Generally, children seek physical challenge appropriate to their stage of development. However, some children with additional needs may have less risk awareness and may need extra guidance and support to explore risk safely.

Measures may involve increased adult support for children who lack awareness of danger, for example when climbing. The input will depend on the needs of the individual child but could involve measures such as reassessing the staff-child ratio (making this higher if necessary) or providing 1:1 support to engage in the Occupation. With this level of support the educator can sensitively judge the appropriate level of risk and provide the suitable balance of freedom and guidance.

"[T]he child whose training has always been connected with the gradual development of their capacities will attempt only a little more than they have already been able to do and will come safely through all these dangers. It is the child who does not know their strength and the demands made on it who is likely to venture beyond their experience and run into unexpected danger."

Froebel in Lilley 1967, p.126-7

Final thoughts

- Recognise the value of childhood and allow children to fully experience the stage they are at.
- Value and respect the play of all children, including children with additional needs.
- Working in a small group allows the educator to adapt activities to any child's needs and their developmental stage.
- Develop deep relationships with children and provide freedom with guidance.
- Be curious and take time to observe closely.
- Work as a team in your school or setting and make time to reflect together on any preconceptions or biases.
- Work closely with children's families and their community.
- Celebrate children's strengths and share these with parents and carers.
- Work in partnership with multi-agency professionals.
- Recognise that accessibility involves social and emotional as well as physical barriers.
- Support all children to take appropriate risks in their learning.

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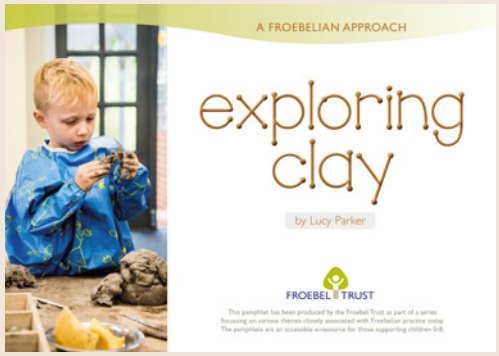

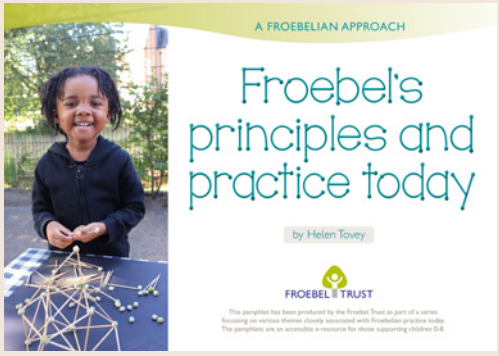

The Froebel Trust funds research into children's learning from birth to eight years and champions early childhood education.

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