
Pre-K Teach & Play Practice Point

Overview of Where To Start Instruction

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Hi, everyone. I'm Dr. Kristie Pretti-Frontczak and this is the CliffNotes version of Where to Start Instruction. It's a [two-part Q&A video](#) for [ECE Solutionary members](#), and this is the CliffNotes version that's available to everyone.

So it starts off with the mentality of knowing that we actually have two jobs, one as a teacher, one as a boat captain, and I'll come back to those analogies, but you can be thinking about it in terms of your actions: a) Are you there to teach children a certain outcome, in particular self-regulation skills; or b) Are you there to help children return to the zone of optimal learning? We sometimes call it the green zone, and you're going to offer them a lifeline.

So let's unpack what all of this means and how the two jobs play out. So in essence, what we're trying to say is that all humans learn best when they're in the zone of optimal learning, in this [green zone](#), if their inner state is to hyper-aroused, we get into this mode of *fight or flight*. If we are hypo aroused, we are *freeze or faint*. And so either time when we're in the red or the blue, we're not really ready to learn.

But let's go through what happens if a child is ready to learn first, but how do we know? So we have this first step, which is we want to make sure that we have a strong [relationship](#) with the child. Without a strong [relationship](#), we won't be able to read their cues and know whether or not they're becoming hyper-aroused, whether they're hypo-aroused, or whether that's just their temperament and they're actually in the green zone.

The second thing is we want to make sure that we have the right [mindset](#). We want to make sure that we are looking at the child, seeing the child behind the behavior, being able to stay in the green zone ourselves, and being able to reframe anything that we might see that's in the red or the blue as stress behavior instead of misbehavior.

And then we want to make sure that we, again, know this child very well and can [recognize](#) and [reduce](#) the stressors that might be impacting them and their ability to stay in that green zone. Is the child in the green zone before we begin instruction and "Do we know [what](#) we want to teach?" This we'll come back as we think about a child who might be struggling a little bit.

And then, if we want to say, yeah, we know we are ready to teach, we want to know if we're teaching a common outcome. If the answer is yes, then we want to think about, is the child staying in the green zone once we begin instruction?

So the reason that I asked "Is it a common outcome?" is because when we talk about actually how we teach, we want to know are we teaching common outcomes or a different type? And I'll come back to that in just a second, but right now, we want to go, "Yes, this is something that all children are expected to learn, and when I start instruction, the child stays in that green zone." And so that helps me know that by going through all of those steps, the child is really ready for me to begin instruction.

And so what does instruction look like in the green zone? Well basically, you have to know what you're teaching. And so, we want to really be clear if we are teaching [the common outcome, or a targeted outcome, or an individualized outcome](#). Common outcome is what all children should be getting exposed to and are learning. If a child is struggling, they may or may not be outside the green zone. We actually need to shift our attention to teaching something different, which is a targeted outcome.

This is what I call the [messy middle](#). It might still be in the green zone, but they might not be able to do what is expected of all children. There might be an individualized outcome, but the child might still be in the green zone, but we have to start off with are we teaching a common outcome before we can discern whether the struggle is related to an arousal state, the struggle is related to the instruction being a mismatch, or the struggle being I need to change *what* I'm teaching before I think about changing *how* I'm teaching.

So the child's still really in the green zone, but it's back to my mindset and my perception. So my job here is to understand fully what I'm teaching all children so that I can understand and begin to discern when a child struggles.

My job here is also to broaden that window of tolerance. And so we want to widen or stretch that window, not close it shut. So we want to make sure that whatever we're doing instructionally is a match for the child and is keeping that window wide open or helping them learn how to make it even broader or wider.

We're also teaching children how to avoid sort of these danger points, creating self-awareness that they are becoming hyper-aroused or that they are becoming hypo-aroused. So how do we help them put the brakes on? How do we help them come back or stay in the green zone?

So even though I might be teaching common outcomes around literacy or math or social studies, I'm also teaching children how to stay in the green zone by putting the brakes on through self-awareness and then self-regulatory types of strategies.

Now sometimes I can be in the messy middle...I can still be in the green zone, but I might be struggling. So I alluded to this earlier that you got to know what your common outcome is so that if a child is struggling, but they're still in the green, huh? What's going on? So I sometimes call this the messy middle.

And so when a child might be struggling to master or accomplish or demonstrate a common outcome, it may not be because they've left the green zone of optimal learning, but rather, they need more focused instruction around a targeted outcome. So they might be really struggling with self-regulation skills, even though it looks like they're struggling with counting. And so we can give more [embedded learning opportunities](#) where we [match](#) focused instruction with targeted outcomes to help the child, while they're in the green zone, learn the skill that would help them stay in the green zone, right, put those brakes on or to widen their window, or then concurrently, by learning how to self-regulate, I'll also increase my ability to demonstrate math skills or reading skills.

It might also be that instructionally I need to help reduce or recognize that there are different stressors being caused by the instructional environment, either the materials, directions, who's there, what we're doing, and so I've got to use evidence-based strategies that help reduce the stressors, help actually put the brakes on for children, or not cause the acceleration or deceleration in the first place, but that comes externally before we can expect it to be internally.

I might also use small groups and peers to help me employ those additional embedded learning opportunities as well as help the child really practice the skills that they'll need when they start reaching the top part of the green zone or the bottom part of the green zone. How do they stay in the green zone if I can't always be there to help them? Peers can be there. So we can also do some intentional small groups where, while we're in the green zone, we practice those things that cause us to leave the green zone.

We're also really thinking about the zone of proximal development. We're really thinking about, "How can I scaffold and support a child in this activity, in this experience, in this interaction?" So again, we're in the green zone, and it may not be beautiful, but it's still a place where the child's struggling. They're still ready to learn, but I might need to do more scaffolding and support.

Now, let's say that the child's completely, their lid is flipped, and now they've gone quote unquote overboard. Our job changes at this moment. So up until now, oftentimes, even through the messy middle, our job is to teach. And by teaching, we're teaching different outcomes within the same activity, we're teaching how to create a "wider window", and we're trying to help children learn skills to "put the brakes on".

But sometimes, even for a split second, maybe for a majority of the day, the child might have their lid flipped. This is where they've gone into the red or the blue zone. Their body is hyper-aroused, or hypo aroused. At this point, I become the "boat captain". So I'm no longer concerned about the tiered outcomes. I'm no longer even working on individualized IEP outcomes. So at some point, I could have decided that the child's in the green zone, but what they need to access, participate and make progress is an individualized outcome. Beautiful. They're still in the green zone. You're just continuing to tear and peel back from that common outcome to the right thing for that child, the exact zone of proximal development for that child.

But in this case, once their lid is flipped, you're actually in the blue or the red. Your job as a boat captain is to offer a [lifeline](#). And unless you know the child and unless you have that really strong relationship with them, you won't know which lifeline to offer.

Even then, sometimes we might offer a lifeline, and on some days, it's chucked right back at us or the child ignores it entirely. So it's our job to continue as the "boat captain" to think of different ways to approach the child who has fallen into the water, how to offer a lifeline. Almost always, in some way, humans want to be seen and to be heard, so validating the emotions, not saying that the behavior or the action was okay, but always validating those big emotions and helping them process through them.

We can always offer choices. People love to have a choice, especially a choice out of a sticky situation and something that'll make them feel okay about having flipped their lid. So we really want to know what are you interested in? What will soothe your system? Essentially, what will help you "save face" and feel comfortable coming back into the green?

Almost always going silent, which is not ignoring...this is just being quiet. This is just sort of saying, "Okay, I'm here with you," and giving all kinds of nonverbal indications that you are there to support them, but not doing a lot of talking. So the ghost silence shouldn't be interpreted as ignoring. You're still all in and connecting, you're there offering a lifeline, but you're not doing a lot of talking.

And that's right onto the last two examples, which are reduced directions and corrections. Even if you want to tell someone who's drowning to grab the lifeline, just say, "Grab the lifeline," and that's all you have to say. So even if you have to give a direction or correction, keep it really simple, slow it all down, including how fast you're talking, how quickly you're moving, how quickly you're throwing the lifeline. You're allowing the child to process, but to know that you are there.

And then hopefully, that effort, that offering the lifeline as the "boat captain", brings the child back into the green zone, even though it might be the very high part of the green or the very low part, and they're just "fix'n" to go right back into the red or blue, ah, you've got them in the green. Now, we return to being the teacher and we go, "Okay, do we need to repair our [relationship](#)? Are we still good? Have I learned something about the stressors that make your lid flip? Can I reduce and do something differently in the future? Am I clear about what I'm teaching and "Have I tiered it and peeled it back enough to create the exact right window of tolerance for you as well as the exact right outcome that is your zone of proximal development?"

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