

U is for **Universal Design for Learning (UDL)**

Supporting the Needs of Diverse Learners

Universal design began in the field of architecture with a focus on making buildings and surrounding environments accessible and usable for all people (e.g., adding Braille to elevators for individuals who have loss of vision or cut-out curbs to sidewalks for people who use a wheelchair or walker). The concept of universal design also applies to learning and is referred to as universal design for learning (UDL). UDL provides practitioners with a framework for intentionally and proactively addressing the needs of diverse learners, thus ensuring their access, participation, and progress across all learning opportunities. The needs of each child are considered relative to three principles of UDL based on the *what*, *how*, and *why* of learning. Research shows universal design for learning is helpful for all children, including those who are dual language learners and those who have disabilities.

UDL Strategies for Supporting Diverse Learners

To implement universal design for learning in early childhood settings, practitioners follow three strategies, based on guidelines developed by the Center for Applied Special Technology, that address the *what*, *how*, and *why* of learning.

Strategy 1:

Provide multiple means of representation (the *what* of learning).

Learning happens when information is available in ways that children can access, understand, and have experienced previously. Provide communication and learning opportunities in different formats and levels of complexity based on each child's language, cultural background, or disability. Think about what needs to happen in the early childhood setting so that every child will be able to communicate with adults and their peers.

In order to provide multiple means of representation, practitioners can:

- Support all children in an early childhood setting to learn words in the primary language of a child who is a dual language learner to facilitate communication. For example, pause during a shared book reading activity to say a key word from the book in English and in the primary language of a child who is a dual language learner.
- Provide opportunities for all children to share culturally relevant objects or pictures with their peers (e.g., a child could bring in a musical instrument or piece of clothing that represents their culture).
- Ensure all children in the early childhood setting learn frequently used signs or gestures to facilitate communication and interaction for a child with a hearing loss.
- Include visual examples or demonstrations with verbal instructions for all children and to benefit children who need additional visual supports (e.g., refer to a visual schedule as you describe the next activity in the early childhood setting).



Strategy 2:

Provide multiple means of action and expression (the *how* of learning).

All children need to be able to move independently; engage with objects, toys, and materials in their environment; and communicate with others. These means of action and expression are important for play, social interactions, and learning within an early childhood setting. Think about what needs to happen so that every child is able to participate and learn within their everyday routines and activities.

In order to provide multiple means of action and expression, practitioners can:

- Make changes to the environment to accommodate each child's physical needs (e.g., add a ramp in addition to stairs and adaptive swings on the playground).
- Arrange centers and furniture so that there is enough space for all children, including a child who uses a wheelchair, to access all areas of the early childhood setting.
- Display a visual daily schedule with pictures that facilitates all children's understanding and communication about everyday routines and activities, particularly for children who are dual language learners.
- Check in with children regularly during activities to make sure every child understands directions.

Strategy 3:

Provide multiple means of engagement (the *why* of learning).

Children are engaged in learning activities when objects, toys, or materials in the environment attract their attention. Facilitating children's motivation to engage in exploring and learning is an important part of the why of learning. As you think about universal design and the why of learning, consider learners with diverse needs, either a child whose primary language is not English or a child who might have a disability. Explore ideas about what changes are needed so that every child will be motivated to engage in learning activities.

In order to provide multiple means of engagement, practitioners can:

- Say relevant words and phrases in English for a child who is a dual language learner to facilitate the child's engagement with materials and others during play activities.
- Organize play with a "play script" so that all children have a role and interact during play.
- Use language to describe materials and activities that are available and interesting to the child and physically orient the child to the location of the materials within the activity and the early childhood setting.
- Establish a routine for increasing each child's ability to access and engage independently with the materials.

What We are Doing

The Anita Zucker Center and our collaborators are helping early childhood professionals support the needs of diverse learners through Universal Design for Learning.