

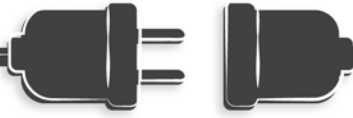


CONNECTED CLASSROOMS

Using Technology to Support Communication,
Inclusion, and Meaningful Relationships in
Early Learning

Brian Puerling

Foreword by Faith Rogow, PhD



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DEDICATION

To David



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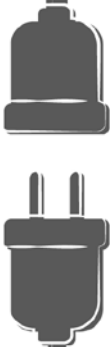
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FOREWORD

It's been more than fifteen years since a group of early childhood education professionals began crafting the joint NAEYC/Fred Rogers Center (2012) position statement on technology and interactive media. A research-based departure from the field's then-dominant "no screens" approach, the statement embraced the message that thoughtful, intentional use of media and digital technologies is a beneficial and important part of modern education.

I never quite understood the logic of educators who objected, often with a common mantra: "Kids spend too much time on screens at home. We need to balance that by not using screens here." Critics aren't wrong about the prevalence of screen-based technologies. But is our best response to concerns about this major aspect of children's lives and culture really to exclude tech tools from early education?

When technologies are ubiquitous, avoidance strategies determine only who will mediate children's screen experiences, not whether they will have them. Most researchers now agree that what children do with screens has a much greater impact than the amount of time they spend using screens. So, where will they learn what to do? For many children, schools and child-care settings will be their only opportunities to be with people who show them how to effectively use technologies to explore, connect, create, and support their well-being.

Those of us who expect children to use digital technologies must also demand more from the people who make those technologies. As Sonia Livingstone, Director of the Digital Futures for Children center and Professor of Social Psychology in the Department of Media and Communications at the London School of Economics and Political Science, and other scholars suggest, children have a right to participate in the digital commons that is increasingly central to civic, cultural, and community connection. As a necessary corollary, advocacy organizations such as the United Kingdom's 5Rights Foundation (2026) maintain that digital platforms must take into account children's needs by design, not as an afterthought and not by placing all the responsibility on individual consumers.

In our current digital-media ecosystem, people use screens for an ever-expanding range of activities, and families from different backgrounds use media in very different ways. In this context, "screen use" policies make more sense than bans or arbitrary screen-time rules. The American Academy of Pediatrics (AAP) acknowledged as much with the shift from screen-time recommendations to their "5 Cs" evaluation tool (AAP, 2026).

Yet, debates about screen time persist, in part because the disagreements have never been only about media effects or particular technologies. Deeply embedded in the conversations are divergent beliefs about the nature of childhood, the purpose of education, and core values regarding independence, authority, individualism, and community. Access to chatbots and

generative AI has exacerbated the divide, with some seeing new tools that enhance human capabilities and others fearing that AI makes us less capable and perhaps even less human. We all want children to thrive. We don't all share the same view of what that means.

Into this complex climate of possibility and worry, Brian Puerling gifts us this book. The subtitle reveals why it meets the moment so well. It's about "Using Technology to Support...Meaningful Relationships." Where others see an unbreachable wall between tech use and healthy social-emotional development, Puerling finds a mirage. The illusion frequently appears, for example, when schools invest in technology without consulting teachers or providing them the necessary time, training, and support needed to succeed.

Puerling's work, on the other hand, dispels the illusion and exemplifies what we mean by intentional use. He rejects rote screen-based instruction and reminds us that cute is not a learning outcome. His classroom-tested examples foster differentiated instruction, culturally responsive teaching, authentic personalized learning, and joyful learning opportunities. This book is everything you'd expect from a great teacher.

When Puerling discusses character building, for example, he avoids the deficit-based model that children born into today's digital culture are self-absorbed or lack empathy. Rather, he knows from experience that children have incredible capacity for curiosity, caring, and creativity. He sees every child as capable; therefore, he is able to integrate technology in ways that foster inclusion and prioritize children's inquiries and interests.

Media literacy educators accustomed to helping children learn to ask questions about media they encounter and reflect on their own choices when they make media, will find many opportunities in Puerling's activities. His child-centered approach to tech use is a perfect complement to the inquiry aspect of media literacy.

As changes in technology continue to drive uncertainty, there is great value in Puerling's willingness to experiment and share the tweaks he makes when things don't go as planned. He is a "glass half-full" kind of educator—not dismissive of the challenges but convinced that solutions exist and committed to helping educators find them. Puerling's focus on helping children develop human relationships, ethical habits, and thoughtful openness to innovation and technology are fitting responses to the daunting prospect of preparing students for an uncertain future.

In an era when technology is often used to judge, track, and separate, Puerling shows how tech tools can help every child feel welcome, connected, visible, and valued. We could make a real difference for children if every educator used technology with that intention.

Faith Rogow, PhD
Ithaca, NY

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INTRODUCTION

Contextualizing Social-Emotional Development for the Digital Age

Early childhood educators know that core content areas—math, language (reading and writing), music, art, science, social studies, health, and physical education—are present in any high-quality program or setting. Within these, however, is another skill set that we refer to as social-emotional development. These important skills inform how children engage with and process learning and the environments they find themselves in.

In my work with teachers and parents, I have frequently listened to their concerns that technology is hindering children’s social-emotional development. They describe children on screens as disengaged, removed, isolated, and unsocial. Additionally, adults who shift attention back and forth between interacting with children and focusing on their smartphones—termed *technoference* by Komanchuk and colleagues—“talk to...children less, take longer to respond to child needs, may not respond at all, or may overreact” (Komanchuk et al., 2023; Radesky, 2025).

In his 2018 article in *The New York Times*, David Gelles addressed the public’s increasing concern around screen engagement among children and discussed the addictive nature of smartphones and tablets (Gelles, 2018). By 2025, 91 percent of U.S. adults owned smartphones (Pew Research Center,

2025), and these devices are readily available to children (Vasconcellos et al., 2025). Parents, teachers, administrators, and district leaders have recognized that these devices made their way into homes and schools at the same time for all of us.

Teachers need to apply thoughtful and intentional practices as they use digital devices to support learning. They need to carefully consider how to introduce the devices and materials and also address potential pitfalls. Parents should consider how devices will be present in their homes at a child's early age. They need to decide and plan for whether devices will be allowed at the dinner table or if they will be allowed in the presence of guests in the home. Parents need to stay firm that using a device before bed is not a good idea, as it does have negative effects on sleep patterns. To address these issues, in 2013, I wrote *Children in the Digital Age: A Guide for Families*. This short guide helps families develop a plan for the use of technology in the home. The guide also provides some suggestions to help establish a partnership between families and the school or educational setting around its technology program. As humans, we are hardwired to connect with each other, engage with our communities, and care for others. In its best forms, technology enhances all of those attributes that make us human. It is up to parents and teachers to identify moments and seize the most authentic and meaningful opportunities for children to use various technologies in their day-to-day lives. We need to guide children as they develop their own judgment and self-control around the use of devices, such as phones and tablets, to achieve balance.

As the age of innovation continues to move forward, there is a lot of talk about integrating essential twenty-first century skills in education. These skills provide the framework for this book. They are often referred to as the 4 Cs: collaboration, critical thinking, communication, and creativity (Isbell and Yoshizawa, 2016). When I worked at Catherine Cook School, we placed a high value on these 4 Cs. And we used another C: character. Through my experience in leadership, I am adding yet another C: culture. To merge these skills with the other essentials of early childhood, this book is focused on these six areas:

- Collaboration
- Critical Thinking and Identity Development
- Communication
- Character and Conflict Resolution
- Creativity
- Culture

It is widely recognized that these skills are essential for children learning and developing in the twenty-first century. This book's organization in this way underscores how significantly embedded social-emotional learning is in the day-to-day routines and activities of an early childhood classroom.

PROVIDING CONTEXT

Early childhood educators understand that every child is different and that developmentally appropriate approaches operate in ranges rather than as static moments in time. In other words, early childhood educators understand child development is uneven, and it's different for each child. This understanding indicates that teachers will plan learning experiences and activities over a range of goals and needs. Likewise, early childhood specialists understand that learning is recursive; it is not linear. An educator may assume that a child has achieved something one day but may realize that the child still needs support another day. Consider this example:

Hannah is a four-year-old in a full-day program who often comes to school well-regulated and has an established good-bye ritual with her parents at drop-off time. It is uncommon for her to not have a smile on her face when she says goodbye to her parents for the day. However, one day, Hannah arrives with a sulky expression as she walks through the door. When it is time for her mom to leave, she falls apart and is very upset. Both her mom and her teacher are surprised at the behavior. Her mom reluctantly leaves, as the teacher recommends, while Hannah is still upset. Her teacher, Ms. Williams, rapidly begins brainstorming ways to support Hannah in calming down and getting regulated.

Her first idea is to ask if Hannah would like to sit down and read a story together, which Hannah refuses. Ms. Williams then offers to play a game with her, and again, Hannah refuses. She considers taking a walk with Hannah, but this is not an option in the moment because no other staff are available to maintain the classroom ratio, so she has to find something in the classroom. She notices her digital camera on her desk. She says to Hannah, "Can you help with a special job this morning? In the past, I've seen you be a great helper with cleaning up our room and getting things organized. I'm wondering if you can help me out with a big job I have this morning. I'm hoping you can use this digital camera to take pictures of our friends and their families as they walk through the door. As we know, when it comes to taking pictures, you need to make sure they have a big smile on their face when you take the picture. Do you think you could help me with that?" Hannah stops crying, wipes away a few tears, and slowly takes the camera.

This morning event is likely familiar to early childhood teachers. As educators who are comfortable with integrating technology into social and academic development, they understand that technology in its best form is meant to support them in such moments and inspire thought and wonder. At best,

technology should enhance the child's experience. This book is intended to provide a variety of examples to help illustrate the multitude of ways in which technology can support social-emotional development in early childhood settings.

RATIONALE FOR THIS BOOK

As educational technology tools have quickly evolved into much smaller and more expansive devices than the desktop computer, they have begun taking a more prominent role in pre-K–12 classrooms. In turn, there has been criticism that technology in the lives of children, at home and in the classroom, can have negative effects on children's emotional development and well-being (Ramasubbu, 2015; Brown, Winsor, and Blake, 2012; Walters, 2015).

In a video interview, Massachusetts Institute of Technology professor Sherry Turkle and Common Sense Media Founder and CEO Jim Steyer discussed a 40 percent decline in measurements of empathy among college students over the past twenty years (Common Sense Media, 2014). Turkle discussed a social dynamic that may have contributed to this decline. She described how individuals have begun apologizing for various misdeeds over text. She went on to describe how this strategy, removed from face-to-face interaction, deprives the individual who is apologizing of the ability to feel an authentic sense of remorse and empathy because they're not with that person receiving the apology to observe their reaction and facial expressions. These are considerations that educators in our current digital world need to reflect on as relationships and curriculum are developed in early childhood settings and schools.

Teachers need to consider how technology plays a role in the lives of the children in their classroom. At home, it's often used as a digital pacifier, a device to hold children's attention while family members take care of household duties. Technologies are being developed that aim to help children track their emotional states to better support self-awareness and creativity, such as Mightier (<https://www.mightier.com>). This provides hope for more authentic uses of technology in the future, but teachers and parents must consider what they can do today with what they have. It's all about making sure educators maintain a focus on *how* the technology is being used.

Having worked with many teachers in the United States and abroad, I have often heard the concern that technology pulls children and families apart into isolation. This book offers readers authentic, meaningful, and developmentally appropriate approaches to using today's technology to bring children and families together to develop and maintain relationships and to provide children with opportunities to develop their own emotional intelligence. I suggest frameworks, strategies, and examples built around social-emotional development benchmarks described in *Developmentally Appropriate Practice in Early Childhood Programs: Serving Birth through Age 8*, 4th edition (NAEYC, 2022), as well as the *Developmental Milestones of Young Children* for

social-emotional development by Karen Petty (2010). The social-emotional skills listed below are common for preschool, kindergarten, and the primary years.

- Increasing ability for self-understanding and regulating own emotions
- Increasing willingness to play with familiar and unfamiliar peers
- Beginning to show fear and understand danger
- Increasing ability to understand others' emotions
- Establishing positive attitudes about learning
- Social experiences such as play supporting language development
- Increasing interest in the well-being of others (being interested in helping others, knowing it is to the other's benefit)
- Increasing attention on a child's own reasons for their successes and challenges
- Feelings of inquiry and curiosity that encourage exploration of their environment and the larger world around them
- Increasing coping strategies for difficult situations
- Beginning to look to teachers and other adults as models for language and interaction with others
- Increasing ability to recall and apply rules to guide play
- Developing a sense of belonging and being valued by teachers and other adults in their environment
- Engaging more in disagreements and collaborations with peers, advocating for perspective and point of view
- Increasingly demonstrates a connection to family
- Increasing interest in establishing and maintaining friendships while experiencing the up and down emotions associated with those friendships
- Brain development in the frontal lobes and cerebral cortex allows for increased sensitive and intentional language with others
- Increasing ability to manage and regulate negative feelings and emotions
- Increasing ability to engage in rules-based games
- Definition of friendships moves to shared feelings, emotions, negotiation of differences, and mutual trust rather than simply similar interests

- Increasing ability to self-reflect on the three images held for themselves: academic, social, and physical (i.e., a child can acknowledge they are a good reader but may need some work in being able to kick a ball)
- Increasing interest and awareness in identifying self-worth
- Cultural values become integrated in their ability to take initiative in various social situations
- Awareness and ability to experience and articulate more than one feeling or emotion at one time
- Beginning to integrate social and cultural norms and understand what is considered acceptable behavior

Please be sure to include these social-emotional skills and competencies as you read and plan. Consider using the Social-Emotional Skill Set Checklist (see Appendix B) to maintain an awareness of these skills when planning units and activities. In addition, the International Society for Technology Education (ISTE) provides a standards-based framework for approaching the integration of technology and digital media across grade levels (2016, 2024). While reading and engaging in any planning, please be sure to integrate both the social-emotional skills listed above with the ISTE standards listed in detail on <https://iste.org/standards/students> and summarized below:

- **Empowered Learner:** uses technology to set goals, customize the learning environment, and seek feedback
- **Digital Citizen:** engages in positive, safe, legal, and ethical behavior when using technology
- **Knowledge Constructor:** explores real-world issues, develops ideas and theories, and seeks solutions
- **Innovative Designer:** tolerates ambiguity, perseveres, and learns to work with open-ended problems
- **Computational Thinker:** breaks down problems, extracts key information, and develops models to understand systems or support problem-solving
- **Creative Communicator:** communicates ideas by creating or using visualizations, models, or simulations
- **Global Collaborator:** communicates with learners from a variety of backgrounds and cultures and contributes to project teams as they work toward a common goal

The ISTE standards address a wide age range of students. This book provides early childhood teachers with example strategies to apply these standards to young children in developmentally appropriate contexts and experiences. The

Social-Emotional Skill Set Checklist (Appendix B) paired with the ISTE student standards might be helpful in making sure that both domains are given attention in the planning process.

HOW TO USE THIS BOOK

Use the information in this book to consider new, alternative, and innovative ways to address the wide-ranging social-emotional needs of children in early childhood settings. Young children experience a vast range of situations and circumstances where a wider set of possible ideas and solutions is needed to support their social-emotional needs. Consider the TPACK+ model (Petko, Mishra, and Koehler, 2025), which integrates a teacher’s pedagogical, technological, and content knowledge. This dynamic integration supports and informs thoughtfully planned experiences rooted in social situations. This quality of integration also establishes a community of learners, both students and teachers, to develop higher levels of language, literacies, communication, and thinking (Petko, Mishra, and Koehler, 2025; Steckel, Shinas, and Van Vaerenewyck, 2015).

As you read this book and develop new ways to use technology to support your learners, be aware of why these ideas are of interest to you. It’s easy to fall into the trap of being enticed by the fun and flair of a new tool or resource (Boyle, 2015). As I wrote in my previous book *Teaching in the Digital Age in Preschool and Kindergarten: Enhancing Curriculum with Technology* (2017), if you find yourself saying, “Wouldn’t it be cute if...” while planning, that is a red flag!

Yes, fun and engagement are important in our planning, but they should not be the primary reasons we choose one tool or resource over another. Teachers often start their planning with the question, “What will I teach?” I challenge you to consider a different approach. Professors of early childhood education Tracy Galuski and Arlene Rider advocate for teachers to plan from the starting place of “What will the children learn?” (Galuski and Rider, 2017). With a focus on learning outcomes, teachers are more attuned to what the children will take away rather than what they, as the teachers, will provide. Many educators are required to provide written lesson plans that indicate what the child “will be able to do” after the lesson concludes. This phrase implies a variety of stages experienced by the child:

- Exposure
- Introduction
- Practice
- Reflection
- More practice
- More reflection
- Understanding and competency

When working with young children, we need to consider uneven development, prior experiences, individual student goals, differentiation, and access to resources. Keeping in mind this slight shift in thinking and planning for lessons with regard to social-emotional skills, consider about the following example:

Preschool teacher Mr. Tyler has twelve children in his group of four-year-olds. To help the children begin to identify themselves as musicians, he wants to introduce the application dJAY to the group. However, Mr. Tyler realizes that, given the various backgrounds and skill sets of the children, they will experience this introduction in different ways. He is using this experience as the first of many that will help his students begin to identify themselves as musicians or composers. In his planning, he developed three different learning objectives given the prior experiences of the children in his group. The children will understand that:

- technology can be used to listen to music.
- technology can be used to create.
- technology is a tool used by musicians to create their own music.

Consider the following chart that integrates his knowledge of the children in his group and where he feels they fit best in terms of the three objectives he has created.

TABLE I-1. LEARNING OUTCOME OBJECTIVES

Child's Name	Individual Experiences	Learning Outcome A: Technology can be used to listen to music.	Learning Outcome B: Technology can be used to create.	Learning Outcome C: Technology is a tool used by musicians to create their own music.
Abhinav	Never used a tablet before school		x	
William	Has a tablet at home and uses it often			x

Jack	Uses a tablet on long road trips		x	
Sloan	Parents have smartphones		x	
Sven	No experience with devices but likes music	x		
Freya	Enjoys tablet devices but prefers games over creative experiences		x	
Yana	No experiences with tablets but has expressed interest	x		
Pablo	Has his own tablet in his bedroom		x	
Audrey	Often watches movies in the car on long car rides		x	
Ryder	Has unlimited access to his family tablet			x
Olivia	Has used a tablet before school		x	
Benjamin	Parents have smartphones	x		

As Mr. Taylor plans this and subsequent lessons, he carefully considers children's experiences and attitudes towards technology.

GET THE MOST OUT OF YOUR READ

I know that when I read, I am always looking for opportunities to think, reflect, and identify areas of possible change in my own practice. To do this, I often underline, highlight, circle, and make notes in the margins, and if my notes are too large, I use sticky notes to capture my thinking. I encourage you to do the same with this book, as the ideas may generate a variety of ideas and questions to ponder on your own or with your respective teams. If notetaking in the book is not your style, perhaps using the Idea and Question Think Sheet (see Appendix D) will help preserve your thoughts for another time.

Disclaimer: Technology is rapidly evolving and reinventing itself and its abilities. For educators, it is hard to keep up, and that can be frustrating at times. I note some of these frustrations later in this book. It is important to understand that this book is intended to offer ideas, concepts, and frameworks you can use to support your planning for teaching and learning. This book is NOT intended to provide you with a shopping list for devices and apps to begin using. The intention is to help my colleagues, like you, by offering a new lens and a new set of questions to ask yourself when planning and acquiring new technology for your setting. This is a book for empowerment.

1

CHAPTER 1

Acknowledging the COVID Slump

I remember watching the news here in Chicago in 2020. Our mayor at the time warned, “Stay home! Stay inside! Protect yourselves and each other from COVID!” I remember when the pop-up COVID-19 testing sites began appearing. I remember the sold-out face masks. I also remember the sold-out paper towels and toilet paper. I recall the empty streets, the empty sidewalks, the empty restaurants, and of course, the social-distancing stickers on the floor of the grocery store to make sure people did not come within six feet of one another.

My daughter was in first grade when schools closed and transitioned to a fully remote, e-learning approach. This was a change that many families across the country experienced. Parents became supplemental teachers. This was happening as parents were in the midst of their own transition to working fully remote and businesses were closing their offices. At the time, I was employed as a school leader at the same school my daughter attended, so I had to quickly figure out how to be both her parent and her teacher, as well as being a teacher to my own students through live and recorded classes. There were so many changes happening rapidly and simultaneously.

For parents and caregivers:

- How to work from home
- How to be their child's supplemental teacher
- How to maintain groceries in the home
- How to earn an income if their job could not be performed remotely
- How to maintain relationships with friends and family with social distancing
- How to adhere to policies at their places of employment if they test positive for COVID-19
- How to provide support and care for family and friends who have tested positive for COVID-19

For school staff (principals, directors, teachers, and other staff):

- How to maintain relationships with their students
- How to restructure learning approaches to ensure learning still occurs under unfamiliar and evolving circumstances
- How to secure funding for staff salaries
- How to secure funding for COVID-related equipment and materials
- How to acquire, distribute, and (remotely) manage necessary devices, such as tablets, laptops, and headphones
- How to monitor learning over time
- How to assess and document learning in a virtual context
- How to be understanding to parents and families under difficult circumstances
- How to support teachers and staff under tremendous stress
- How to help students maintain relationships with each other when they're not able to be physically present with one another
- How to quickly learn new edtech platforms, such as Google, Zoom, Teams, Seesaw, and others, to shift to consistent virtual meetings and classes with colleagues and students

For students:

- How to learn technological skills regarding devices and new platforms to access classes and curriculum content

Thoughtful technology use that supports belonging and relationships

Technology is everywhere. When used intentionally, it can be a powerful tool for connection, collaboration, and inclusion in early childhood classrooms. *Connected Classrooms* shows educators how to use digital tools in developmentally appropriate ways that enhance—not replace—human relationships.

Written by a trusted expert in early childhood technology integration, this book shows how to utilize technology to support healthy social-emotional development. You'll discover how tools such as tablets, cameras, apps, and interactive books can help children develop skills in communication, problem-solving, creativity, and empathy—while helping them build meaningful relationships with peers.

Grounded in guidelines for developmentally appropriate and classroom-tested practices, this practical guide gives educators real-world strategies for integrating technology thoughtfully and purposefully.

Inside, you'll discover how to:

- use technology to strengthen collaboration and communication.
- support social-emotional learning through digital tools.
- promote inclusion for dual-language learners and children with disabilities.
- design developmentally appropriate tech-integrated activities.
- foster creativity, critical thinking, and peer connection.

Blending research with hands-on application, author Brian Puerling bridges the gap between why technology matters and how to use it effectively. Whether you're new to digital learning or refining your approach, this book provides practical guidance you can implement immediately.



Brian Puerling is a National Board Certified Teacher and an author, consultant, and presenter. He is a graduate of the Erikson Institute and is a former preschool teacher in the Chicago Public Schools. He has worked as an early childhood teacher coach, curriculum reviewer, and professional-development facilitator for the Chicago Public Schools, Rush

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