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## **Are You Ready and Willing to Emulate God's Love with Intentionality for the 2021-2022 School Year?**

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I want to express my profound gratitude and sincere appreciation for all that Catholic School Teachers and Catechists that have kept our message of love and faith ever-present during the pandemic. I genuinely appreciate every one of you and the sacrifices you have made to put your students and families first during difficult times. Your actions and commitment have been a glorious example of God's love for his children.

As you prepare to plan for the coming school year, I would ask you to take a moment and embrace the success you had in developing new ways to reach your students and families while maintaining community. Planning for this coming school year is sure to require further changes and adaptations. As adult leaders of our faith for young impressionable children, we must first stop and check in with our children. We must listen to their feelings, frustrations, and fears and help them label the experiences and emotions they are sure to bring with them this school year. After all, God gave us these emotions, and we need to look at them as gifts, and how we handle them is the true testament of our ability to model our faith for families and children we serve.

Research has supported the impact of high-quality early childhood learning and the long-term gains for children and our society. As you plan, remember that high-quality early childhood programs include the opportunities for children to be involved, decision-making choices about what children want to explore, acknowledging and engaging families as a child's first teacher, and encouraging families to be meaningful partners in their child's education. We must not forget the educational leaders who must be committed to maintaining their knowledge and understanding of early childhood education research and principles. (The Value of Catholic Preschool, 2015)

Resiliency will also play a critical factor in your success this coming school year. The National Scientific Council on the Developing Child discusses the importance of resiliency in their paper Supportive Relationships and Active Skill-Building Strengthen the Foundations of Resilience WORKING PAPER131. Resiliency is defined as the ability to adapt, develop positive pro-social responses to stress, and adjust to the stress that they are experiencing. Research has proven that if children are helped to establish strategies and systems that allow for positive experiences that outnumber negative experiences, children will have better mental and physical health into adulthood. The ability to establish resiliency pivots around the child's and adults' ability to develop and honor meaningful relationships at home and school. You should strive to model the love that God has for each of his children in the decision-making and interactions you have throughout the year. (W. Thomas Boyce, 2015)

We can not forget the importance of purposeful, joyful play as the means to which children can harness new information and manipulate it until they have mastered the concept. Play is a child's work, and we must remain committed to ensuring play is central to our planning as we approach the new school year. How much of your day will you plan around purposeful, joyful play? Remember, the key is that the play is purposeful and meaningful and supports new concepts in appropriate hands-on ways. You may feel pressure from colleagues and others, but arm yourself with the research so that you can advocate for the children you have been blessed to lead and love. Help others see these young learners as our Fathers' children who need unique approaches to grow to their fullest God-given potential. (NAEYC, 2021)

Let each of us emulate God's love by first seeking to know and understand our children, identify and provide language for them to articulate their experiences, next provide them strategies to deal with big emotions that small children have had to experience during this time of change. By focusing on these strategies, we build community and trust. For those concerned about test scores, please pause. Children



will not dream, explore, and feel comfortable enough to make mistakes trying new things until they know we have unconditional love for them, just as God has for us. You are modeling God's acceptance and forgiveness by how you set the tone in your classroom at the beginning of the year and throughout the year. Academic success will come after the trust is built. Let us be a light for God's love as we make big emotions okay for small children.

If you commit to developing resiliency, emotional supports, and play, you are sure to create a lasting bond of love and community in your classroom. I wish you all the best this school year, and my hope for you is that you will remember that you are the model of God's love and acceptance as you build a culture that is appropriate for our youngest learners and reflects the message of God's love and acceptance.

### **Works Cited**

NAEYC. (2021). *DAP Position Statement*. Retrieved from National Association for the Education of Young Children: <https://www.naeyc.org/resources/position-statements/dap/assessing-development>

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