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**Making Breakthroughs  
with the CDA®**  
*Standards that Lead to Success*

## How Can You Show that You Have What It Takes to be Competent in the Early Learning Profession?

One of the best ways is by mastering the *CDA® Competency Standards*, according to [Tyneesha Parker](#), an educator at Future Leaders Academy in Philadelphia, Pennsylvania.



*“I loved the CDA classes because they gave me everything that I needed to be a better teacher,” Tyneesha says.*

“The CDA program taught me the importance of partnering with parents and getting down on the floor so you could be at a young child’s level. It taught me the value of physical movement and how it stimulates the brain,” she adds. “It encouraged me to sing more and showed me why scribbling stimulates children’s fine motor skills.” These best practices and more are part of the competency standards, which continue to make an impact on Tyneesha’s career.

“I still turn to the *CDA® Competency Standards* books when I’m doing my lesson plans,” Tyneesha says, “and I use what I learned in my CDA classes in my daily work at the center. Everything I am today I owe to the CDA, so I encourage everyone to earn it. When you get a CDA, you become even better at bringing children to the next level in their growth,” she points out. And that’s because the competency standards capture the core knowledge and skills that educators need to serve children, engage

families and advance the early childhood profession.

The competency standards set out six basic goals that all educators must reach to earn a CDA. These goals are to establish a safe, healthy learning environment; advance physical and intellectual competence; support social and emotional growth and provide positive guidance; establish positive and productive relationships with families; ensure a well-run, purposeful program responsive to participants’ needs; and maintain a commitment to professionalism, as over a million educators have learned while earning their credential. Many of the CDA holders have talked to the Council about how they’ve applied the competency standards in their classroom practice, and the breakthroughs they’ve made show what an impact the standards make.

For example, [Lakeisha McClendon’s](#) mastery of the competency standards launched her on a career as a Head Start teacher in Atlanta, Georgia, where she strives “to teach to the whole child and fill their distinct needs,” as she recalls.



*“The CDA gave me the practical skills I needed to work with children, taught me how to set up a classroom environment, keep children safe and be sensitive to different cultures,” Lakeisha says.*

And she’s good at getting through to young learners because she understands that every child is different.

### Goal 1: To establish and maintain a safe, healthy learning environment

| COMPETENCY GOAL | FUNCTIONAL AREAS        | DEFINITIONS   |
|-----------------|-------------------------|---|
| GOAL 1          | 1. Safe                 | Candidate provides a safe environment and teaches children safe practices to prevent and reduce injuries.   |
|                 | 2. Healthy              | Candidate provides an environment that promotes health and prevents illness, and teaches children about good nutrition and practices that promote wellness.   |
|                 | 3. Learning Environment | Candidate organizes and uses relationships, the physical space, materials, daily schedule, and routines to create a secure, interesting, and enjoyable environment that promotes engagement, play, exploration, and learning of all children, including children with disabilities. |

“I teach children in tune with who they are because kids don’t all get something at the same time,” Lakeisha says. Her study of the competency standards has made Lakeisha more effective by showing her new ways to promote children’s self-regulation, support acceptable behavior and gently step in when obstacles to learning arise. This knowledge has proved especially useful in serving Head Start children with special needs that pose steep challenges for them in the classroom. For example, one child on the autism spectrum had disruptive outbursts until Lakeisha taught him breathing techniques for calming down. Another child didn’t talk until he came to Lakeisha’s class where she gave him the personal attention that he needed to progress.

Learning how to work one on one with children is the best part of the CDA program, according to [Ava Wilson](#), who earned her CDA in Peck, Michigan, while she was a high school student. And



Ava is proud of the breakthrough she made with a preschooler named Tyler who was very shy.

*“When he came to us,” Ava recalls, “he would cling to the teachers and wouldn’t play with the other children. So, we looked for ways to bring him out of his shell by pairing him in group activities with children who shared his interests in trucks, construction equipment and Mickey Mouse. By the end of the school year, Tyler had made friends.”*

Ava had advanced his social skills, among the goals of the competency standards and the CDA credential. So is advancing their cognitive skills, as Ava did with a child named Madison who was behind the other children when it came to writing numbers and simple words. “Madison came to class midway in the year,” Ava recalls, “and she hadn’t been to any kind of school before and had a big learning curve ahead of her.” So, Ava knew not to overwhelm the little girl with information. “I helped her catch up by taking it step by step, instead of asking her to pick up a lot at once,” Ava says. “Now, Madison is doing great.”

**Goal 2: To advance physical and intellectual competence**

| COMPETENCY GOAL | FUNCTIONAL AREAS        | DEFINITIONS   |
|-----------------|-------------------------|---|
| <b>GOAL II</b>  | <b>4. Physical</b>      | Candidate uses a variety of developmentally appropriate equipment, learning experiences and teaching strategies to promote the physical development (fine motor and gross motor) of all children.   |
|                 | <b>5. Cognitive</b>     | Candidate uses a variety of developmentally appropriate learning experiences and teaching strategies to promote curiosity, reasoning, and problem solving and to lay the foundation for all later learning. Candidate implements curriculum that promotes children’s learning of important mathematics, science, technology, social studies, and other content goals.     |
|                 | <b>6. Communication</b> | Candidate uses a variety of developmentally appropriate learning experiences and teaching strategies to promote children’s language and early literacy learning, and help them communicate their thoughts and feelings verbally and nonverbally. Candidate helps dual-language learners make progress in understanding and speaking both English and their home language. |
|                 | <b>7. Creative</b>      | Candidate uses a variety of developmentally appropriate learning experiences and teaching strategies for children to explore music, movement, and the visual arts, and to develop and express their individual creative abilities.  |

So are the children who [Carmen Davis](#) serves at Carmen’s Precious Moments, her family child care home in Nashville, Tennessee. The competency standards helped Carmen by giving her guidance on program management, record keeping and planning, as she points out.



CARMEN DAVIS

*“Earning a CDA prepared me to open my own child care business and give my best to children and families,” Carmen recalls.*

And Carmen’s command of the competency standards also equipped her to serve a young mom named Shirley who came to Carmen in tears because she was so worried about the care her young daughter was receiving at another day care.

“Shirley was distraught,” Carmen says, “because every time she went to pick her daughter up the child was either in a high chair or a baby bed.” The little girl was so inactive that Shirley thought there was a developmental delay. But that wasn’t the case, as Shirley saw after enrolling her child in Carmen’s program. “The child turned two last September and she’s thriving,” Carmen says. “She’s walking, talking, and doing music and movement, as Shirley sees every time she pops in for a visit. There

was nothing wrong with the child,” as Carmen concludes. “She just didn’t get the appropriate materials and stimulation she needed to begin moving around.”

Guiding children toward progress like this requires a firm grasp of how they develop and grow, according to [Isabel Blair](#), a family child care provider in Byron Center, Michigan.



ISABEL BLAIR

Isabel has embraced the competency standards by taking advantage of chances to advance her professional growth and pursue higher education. Despite gaining a master’s degree in early childhood education and teaching, she has continued to renew her CDA for 20 years. “The CDA has symbolic meaning for me since it started me on my career,” Isabel says.

*“Earning a CDA gives you a solid grasp of what it means to provide quality early care and learning,” Isabel points out.*

And it has helped her face the challenges of serving children with behavioral and physical issues.

“I had a little boy who screamed all the time and made himself throw up whenever he ate,” as Isabel recalls. “Then, it turned out that he was on the autism spectrum, and working with him was hard at first. But we found a routine that helped him calm down and now he’s doing very well.” So are two little boys who came from a home where there was domestic violence. “They were yelling all the time, feeling low self-esteem and hurting other kids, but I didn’t give

up on them,” Isabel says. “Instead, I tried to put myself in the boys’ shoes and realized how much they needed a place where people cared about them and made them feel safe.”

It also helps to know how to build bonds with families, a competency standard that allowed [Danielle Evans](#) to make an impact in Sandusky, Michigan, where she’s served as a home visitor for Early Head Start since earning her CDA. She made an especially strong connection with Roberta, a foster mom whose 18-month-old son, Michael, was still crawling instead of walking, Danielle recalls.



DANIELLE EVANS

*“I assisted her in getting Michael a range of special services, and it turned out there was nothing wrong with the boy. He just didn’t have the nurturing he needed since his biological mom and dad had a history of drug abuse, domestic violence and child neglect.”*

Yet Michael’s biological parents were fighting to hold onto him, so he was being jostled back and forth between two homes until Roberta finally won the right to keep him for good. “She invited me to come with her when she officially adopted Michael in court, and he’s flourishing now at Head Start. It was wonderful to be a part of Michael and Roberta’s story,” Danielle says, “and I’m glad I got to play a role in helping them become the family they are now.”

The first step to achieving results like this is earning a CDA, according to [Nicole Bastfield](#) who runs Happy Sprouts Family Child Care out of her Baltimore, Maryland, home.



NICOLE BASTFIELD

*“A CDA helps you grasp new concepts, take new approaches to child care, and learn how to communicate better with children. That makes the CDA an industry standard, and I wanted to earn it to show parents that I’m a quality provider who can offer the best of care for their youngsters,” Nicole says.*

She also brings a keen sense of professional commitment to the first-time moms and dads she often serves. “As a first-time parent, you’re questioning everything you do,” Nicole says. “So, I offer myself after hours to give parents support and advice when they face a new issue with their child.”

The partnerships she forms with parents help the children take important steps, as Nicole is glad to see. “For example, one child was nonverbal,” she recalls, “and wouldn’t interact with any of the other children. But that changed after I worked closely with his parents for six months. While partnering with the parents, Nicole shared some tips from the competency standards on promoting language skills and communication, so the boy received the right support both at home and school. “That child is now flourishing,” Nicole says, “speaking in complete sentences and playing with the other children.”

Making big changes like this requires educators to address children’s social and behavioral skills, as [Cedric Bell](#) does at Acelero Learning in Las Vegas, Nevada.



CEDRIC BELL

*“My CDA training helped,” he says, “because it taught me why I was doing things a certain way instead of just winging it. I learned more about how to bridge language barriers with kids who don’t speak English, and how to reach children with behavioral issues.”*

What he achieves dispels any doubts the parents might have about leaving their children with a male teacher. “Sure, some parents are on the defensive, when meeting me on the first day of school,” he admits, “but soon have a change of heart when they see the changes in their children.”

For example, “one mom from Ethiopia brought her son to school and told me he didn’t speak English. He was bottled up and scared of his new surroundings,” Cedric recalls. So, he drew on what he’d learned from the competency standards about working with dual language learners. “I used things he understood, like colors and numbers, to help him feel more confident,” Cedric says. “I also teamed him with other children to improve his language skills, and it all worked. He went from being shy and not speaking a word to chattering up a storm. He’s a whole new child.”

### Goal 3: Support social and emotional development and to provide guidance

| COMPETENCY GOAL | FUNCTIONAL AREAS | DEFINITIONS  |
|-----------------|------------------|--|
| GOAL III        | 8. Self          | Candidate develops a warm, positive, supportive, and responsive relationship with each child and helps each child learn about and take pride in their individual and cultural identity.  |
|                 | 9. Social        | Candidate helps each child function effectively in the group, learn to express feelings, acquire social skills, and make friends, and promotes mutual respect among children and adults.   |
|                 | 10. Guidance     | Candidate provides a supportive environment and uses effective strategies to promote children’s self-regulation and support acceptable behaviors, and effectively intervenes for children with persistent challenging behaviors. |

CDA holders make breakthroughs like this since they take a positive approach that allows them to succeed. Study of the competency standards shows educators how to nurture children’s unique strengths while also helping them get along in a group, like [Samantha Meyer](#) does as an educator at Denali Child Development Center on an Air Force base in Alaska. For example, Samantha taught a five-year-old named John who was acting out in another classroom.



SAMANTHA MEYER

*“When they moved him to my classroom,” she recalls, “I realized he was more advanced than the other kids and misbehaved because he was bored. Once I began to challenge John, his*

*behavior in class improved, and his mom told me he was also behaving better at home,” Samantha says.*

And one of the keys to working with children like John, as she’s learned, is having them mentor other children. “Helping his younger friends gave John the challenge he needed to stay engaged in class.” So did all the time Samantha put into finding out what made John tick.

And she also made progress with Billy Bob, a three-year-old who had misbehaved at another center. “His mom wanted to give him a fresh start, so she brought him to us,” Samantha recalls. She soon came to see that he got angry because he had trouble making himself understood when he spoke. So, Samantha helped his parents find the services Billy Bob needed. “By the time, Billy Bob left the center two years later,” Samantha recalls, “he was speaking clearly.”

It's important to determine the root cause of speech delays, as [Carime Ruvalcaba](#) did when she served two Guatemalan boys at her bilingual family child care home in Grand Island, Nebraska. Carime's program was in high demand after she earned her CDA, "a guarantee to parents that I will give their children good, quality child care," as Carime explains. And her experience with the two boys presented proof of her knowledge and skills "The boys were two- and three-years old, and neither of them talked," Carime recalls. "Instead, they were crying all the time, and it was clear that the parents needed my help. So, I accepted the two boys, and after a few weeks I realized they both were autistic and required early intervention. The parents didn't know what autism was, but they believed me. So, I helped them find an organization that would give the brothers the services that they needed. Now they're both learning to speak, and the older boy is doing fine in school."



CARIME RUVALCABA

Being responsive to families is part of the competency standards that Carime mastered while earning her CDA credential, as she explains. "I have the training to assist them with the issues they face."

Many educators also face issues when they come to the U.S. from another country, as [Marjorie Silvestrini](#) knows. "I had a college degree and was licensed to teach young children in Brazil," she says.



MARJORIE SILVESTRINI

"Still, as someone who spoke broken English and didn't know much about U.S. culture, I worried that families wouldn't accept me," Marjorie says. So, she eased back into the early learning field by working as a nanny before taking a job as an assistant teacher in a family child care home, where she learned about the CDA. When Marjorie saw what the CDA focusses on, she broke through her fears of failing as an educator in this country. "Some aspects of health and safety are different than they are in a developing country like Brazil," Marjorie says. But many child care practices are the same, as she was relieved to see. "So, the CDA has a special place in my heart for showing me that I already knew the right things to do with children."

This renewed sense of confidence led Marjorie to start a family child care home near Boston, where she cooks Brazilian food and teaches children a bit of her native Portuguese. Parents like the way Marjorie expands their children's cultural horizons and agree that she is teaching young learners the right way. Now she shares her success by guiding educators from Brazil who might be facing the challenges she's managed to overcome. Being a supportive colleague is one of the competency standards

Carime made a difference for that family, and she's made a positive impact on the lives of many other immigrant families.

*"When the families come here," she says, "they face many of the same challenges as I did when I moved from Mexico to this country: learning the language, filling out many forms, figuring out the best place to live, and finding out where to send their children to school. Sometimes, they don't know where to find help, so I give the families advice."*

#### Goal 4: To establish positive and productive relationships with families

| COMPETENCY GOAL | FUNCTIONAL AREAS | DEFINITIONS  |
|-----------------|------------------|--|
| GOAL IV         | 11. Families     | Candidate establishes a positive, responsive, and cooperative relationship with each child's family, engages in two-way communication with families, encourages their involvement in the program, and supports the child's relationship with their family. |

#### Goal 5: To ensure a well-run, purposeful program that is responsive to participant needs

|        |                        |   |
|--------|------------------------|---|
| GOAL V | 12. Program Management | Candidate is a manager who uses observation, documentation, and planning to support children's development and learning and to ensure effective operation of the classroom or group. The candidate is a competent organizer, planner, record keeper, communicator, and a cooperative co-worker. |
|--------|------------------------|---|

#### Goal 6: To maintain a commitment to professionalism

|         |                     |   |
|---------|---------------------|---|
| GOAL VI | 13. Professionalism | Candidate makes decisions based on knowledge of research-based early childhood practices, promotes high-quality in child care services, and takes advantage of opportunities to improve knowledge and competence, both for personal and professional growth and for the benefit of children and families. |
|---------|---------------------|---|

that Marjorie has embraced, and she became a Professional Development Specialist after earning her CDA.

*"There was only one other Portuguese-speaking PD Specialist in Massachusetts," Marjorie explains. "She was my CDA instructor, and she urged me to apply to be a PD Specialist because we need more bilingual people to do CDA assessments in our state. And I'm glad she gave me that push because I want to serve other folks in the community from which I come."*

A commitment to help her community also inspired [Jada Vargas](#), a member of the Apache tribe in Arizona, to earn a CDA in high school.



JADA VARGAS

*"As a Native American, I feel I have a responsibility to address some of the issues my people face, whether it's poverty, struggles with parenting or failure to see the value of education," Jada says. "I also want to help*

*preserve Apache culture and language as a part of my classroom practice with young children.”*

And the CDA competency standards gave Jada the foundation to reach her goal. “I learned the importance of working with children one on one and getting down to their level so they can look you in the eyes. I realized that children like it when you call them by their names and talk about the things that especially interest them,” Jada says.

“For example, one little three-year-old boy loved sheep, so I often chatted about them with him,” Jada recalls, and it was just one of the conversations that showed Jada how every little member of the flock you face in a class is precious and unique. So, she realized that a teacher should explore a wide range of research-based practices in early care and learning. “There are different ways to teach children, and things don’t always go the way they tell you in a book because sometimes children can be crabby,” Jada says, and that’s when hugs help, especially for one little girl who had a sudden change in mood.

“She was super happy until she had a new sister,” Jada recalls. “The little girl now seemed to feel she wasn’t getting the attention she wanted at home and wanted one of the teachers to hold her all the time. So, we would hold her as much as we could until it was time for her to go home. When we had to let go, she would cry. So, we would tell her it would be okay tomorrow and try to get her mind on something besides being held.” And working with this child taught Jada the importance of being sensitive to children’s mood

swings and trying to figure out what they need. “For example, one little boy,” as she recalls, “suddenly became upset when we were doing an activity in class. He started crying, and the other CDA students and I weren’t sure what to do until one of the teachers realized the activity was too hard for him.” He couldn’t learn to do it, but Jada did learn something from listening to what the teacher said.

Now Jada is passing on the lessons she learned while earning her CDA and urging other high school students to also earn their CDA. People are listening because Jada made the news in 2023 when she became the millionth person to earn a CDA. The Council celebrated her achievement at its headquarters in Washington DC, because it was a milestone in boosting the ranks of early childhood teachers with the knowledge and skills to guide children in surmounting the roadblocks they might face, as we’ve shown in just a few snapshots of our CDAs.

Each one of their successes is a breakthrough in our mission to provide all children with the competent teachers they need. By spreading the *CDA® Competency Standards* nationwide, the Council is holding more educators to the high standards that all young children and their families deserve. And we’re making progress as the number of CDAs keeps on growing in states across the country. Every day, CDA holders help children take small steps that add up to a giant leap toward the Council’s end goal. We’re shooting for the moon as we envision a society where all children learn and thrive in environments led by competent, valued early childhood teachers.



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