# A different kind of preschool: How ASU's Child Study Lab sets kids up for success

## Founded on developmental psychology research, the living lab teaches young children self-regulation, problem-solving

By Kimberlee D'Ardenne, ASU News
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The playground and classrooms on the ground floor of the Arizona State University Psychology Building might resemble the setting of any other preschool, but what happens inside those classrooms and on that playground is very different.

This is the site of the Department of Psychology's preschool, called the Child Study Lab, or CSL for short. At the CSL, children, some as young as 2, learn how to advocate for themselves and manage their emotions.

The lab is founded on decades of developmental psychology research, including findings on the importance of self-regulation and effective strategies for teaching young children.

"The Child Study Lab offers a developmentally appropriate schedule and curriculum for children aged 2 through 5," said Jody Southworth-Brown, director of the Child Study Lab. "Our students feel like they're just being kids, but they're really learning important life skills."

### Teaching preschoolers self-regulation

Arguably the most important life skill taught in the CSL is self-regulation, or the ability to regulate your emotions and to switch activities even if you do not want to. Self-regulation has repeatedly been shown to predict future success in school and the workforce, in social situations and mental and physical health.

Bryn Conway, a lead teacher at the CSL who teaches the parent-tot, 2-year-old class and early preschool class, explains that one of the first steps in teaching self-regulation is framing instructions and feedback in ways that kids can understand given their age.

“Very young kids do not understand opposites the way we do, and our goal is for them to understand what they should be doing,” Conway said.

A lot of times when negative feedback is given, it is simply a request to stop doing something, such as “no running.” But young children do not yet understand what else they are supposed to do in place of running. The CSL teachers are trained to use positive redirection. Instead of telling a child not to run, they say something like, “We use our walking feet because we want to stay safe.”

“This framing gives the children a chance to understand why we do things the way we do, and it makes the expectations clear,” Conway said.

CSL teachers also model problem-solving strategies to the kids, including how to handle sharing. Teachers give children a choice between letting another child have a turn now or in a few minutes, or they suggest an alternative activity.

Conway describes how these strategies quickly get kids to the point where they mediate taking turns and problem-solving on their own.

She has seen a 3-year old tell another child, “I am playing with this right now. I’ll give you a turn in two minutes,” and 10 seconds later, they gave the other child a turn. She has also observed a 3-year-old handle another child interfering with their play by redirecting them to another activity that interested them.

“They said, ‘I don’t like it when you put your car on my racetrack. You should build one right here,’ and then they gave that child the tools to do it.”

The CSL also teaches kids that emotions are normal, how to name them and options for how to feel better. The classroom facilities have observation rooms with one-way mirrors that allow parents to unobtrusively watch their children learning these skills.

Nicole Schmidt and Nathan Rees, who have two kids enrolled in the CSL, have seen their 4-year-old daughter use the emotion regulation skills she learned at the CSL while playing with her little brother, who is 22 months old, at their home. One of the conflict resolution strategies that the CSL teaches kids is to first tell their peers what they need in that moment, and then if that does not work, to move away before getting a teacher.

“When her little brother takes her toys, she will say, ‘You’re not playing the way I want. I feel frustrated,’” Schmidt said.

Schmidt and Rees have also seen her ask her brother for a turn with a toy, and when he says no, she tries trading with him before coming to find her parents.

“She tries to manage on her own before asking for help,” Rees said.

## Academics at the CSL

In addition to teaching emotional self-regulation, CSL prepares kids for school by teaching them their numbers, letters, shapes and colors with lots of hands-on and group activities. The preschool also has a gifted curriculum, which consists of changing topics.

“Outside of self-regulation and academics, we are always studying a topic in depth, such as our National Parks, chemistry or the circus. A few semesters ago, we studied archeology, and (we) are currently studying the ocean. You never know who will be an archeologist or a marine biologist,” Conway said.

> **Everyone wants the best for their kids, the best education. ... With the CSL, you can put your mind at ease that your kid is getting the best emotionally supportive education in a safe environment. This is the best choice you can have for your child. You found it.**
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> **Nathan Rees, Child Study Lab parent and ASU alum**

## By ASU for ASU and the community

At the CSL, there is one teacher for every four children, and all of those teachers are ASU students and alums.

There are four semester-long classes undergraduate students can take that have them working in different positions in the CSL.

The first two classes focus on teaching the preschoolers, and the undergraduates interact with the kids, eating meals and snacks beside them and sitting with them during circle time. The final two classes focus on research methods, with the undergraduates learning how to administer assessments to the children — for example, tracking their vocabulary and how they understand what others think.

### CSL enrollment is open

The youngest CSL students are aged 15 to 30 months and attend the parent-tot class, and the oldest students are in the pre-Kindergarten class. All students must be potty trained and in underwear. Information

Conway started as a student teacher in the CSL and loved it so much that she never left.

Lauren Bedsole, clinical assistant professor in the Mary Lou Fulton College for Teaching and Learning Innovation, first learned about the CSL when she was an undergraduate at ASU. She took a class and worked as a teacher's assistant in the CSL. Now, her two children attend the CSL.

about enrollment is available online, by emailing childstudylab@asu.edu or calling (480) 727-5097.

"I always said that when I grew up, that was where my kids were going to go," said Bedsole, who is studying for her doctorate in educational leadership and innovation with a focus on early childhood education.

Bedsole's children are ages 3 and 4 years, and they love the CSL. When she asks her 4-year-old son at pickup what the best part of his day was, he rattles off a long list that pretty much includes everything on the schedule that day.

Schmidt and Rees are themselves ASU alums, and Schmidt first became aware of the CSL when she noticed the playground while getting her MS in applied behavior analysis. The Rees family came to the CSL after they toured almost 20 daycares and preschools.

"Every one of those places felt like the kids were just surviving. The CSL has a curriculum that teaches an age-appropriate skill set, and the kids are thriving," Rees said.

"Everyone wants the best for their kids, the best education," he added. "With the CSL, you can put your mind at ease that your kid is getting the best emotionally supportive education in a safe environment. This is the best choice you can have for your child. You found it."

*This story originally appeared on ASU News.*

## Main image



The Child Study Lab is staffed by current and former ASU students, who help children learn how to understand and regulate their emotions and to problem-solve. Circle time during a class consisting of 2- and 3-year-olds is pictured. Photo by Laura Fields/ASU

## Text image(s)



The playground at the Child Study Lab. ASU photo