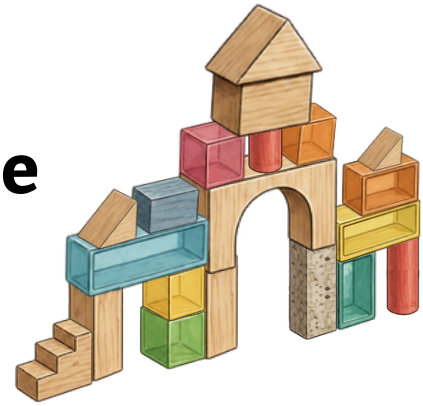
Welcome to the
2026 SAZAEYC Annual Conference
The Architecture of Belonging
Building Spaces Where Every Child Fits



Hello and welcome to the 2026 SAZAEYC Annual Conference!

If you're a returning conference participant, welcome back! We're so excited to have you with us again. If you're joining us for the first time, we can't wait to welcome you to a day of learning, growth, and collaboration with fellow early childhood educators and advocates. This document includes the conference schedule, keynote information, and descriptions of the sessions available throughout the day. We hope it helps you explore the opportunities ahead and identify the sessions that best align with your interests and learning goals. Please keep in mind that session spaces have limited capacity, so we encourage you to have a backup option or two in mind as you plan your day.

We're also planning opportunities to connect beyond the conference itself, including a networking event the evening before. Keep an eye out for more information from SAZAEYC as we get closer to the big day!

We hope this guide gives you a glimpse of what's to come and gets you excited for the conversations, connections, and new ideas ahead. We're looking forward to bringing our early childhood community together to explore how we can build spaces where every child feels welcomed, valued, and a true sense of belonging.

We'll see you in just a few weeks!

2026 sazaeyc

Annual Conference

Keynote

Keeping the R in AI

The Architecture of Belonging for Every Child

How Respect, Affirmation, and Inclusion Shape a Child's First Understanding of Self

Jimmy Hart is an award-winning educator, leadership speaker, publisher, and #1 Amazon bestselling author who helps leaders build cultures where people feel valued, connected, and that they truly belong. He is the creator of the R.A.I. Framework® - Respect, Affirmation, and Inclusion - a human-centered leadership model designed to strengthen relationships, improve organizational culture, and create environments where children and adults can thrive.

With more than three decades of experience in education and leadership, Jimmy has served as a teacher, coach, principal, and district leader in Arizona. He is the CEO of Hart Global Industries and gained national recognition when his DisruptHR Phoenix presentation ranked #1 globally in 2024.

Jimmy's work explores leadership, belonging, and the irreplaceable power of human connection in the age of artificial intelligence. He equips educators and leaders to intentionally build spaces where every child - and every adult who supports them - feels and knows they are respected, affirmed, included, and deeply valued.

2026 sazaeyc
Annual Conference

Session Descriptions

A2

“Saying YES” with Kyla Maciosek- Nature Created Play

Saying YES…yes to children’s ideas, yes to interesting materials, and yes to thoughtful risk, can dramatically increase engagement, creativity, and connection in early childhood classrooms. Participants will explore how the “yes, and…” approach helps educators move beyond automatic no’s while still maintaining safety, boundaries, and professional responsibility. Let go of “worst-case scenario” thinking and learn how to transform those concerns into collaborative problem-solving with children.

A3

“Listening to Children: Designing a Responsive Classroom inspired by the Reggio Approach” with Zoe Remund Aveling- Early Childhood Educator/Substitute at Desert Spring Children's Center

To truly feel a sense of belonging in the classroom, the lessons taught need to reflect the children within those spaces; emergent curriculum offers an approach to teaching that honors children's rights as protagonists in their learning journeys. This workshop offers an introduction to designing a Reggio inspired emergent curriculum through being responsive to children's needs and interests. Through this session, participants will be guided through the emergent curriculum cycle and get hands-on experience in designing responsive lesson plans and invitations for learning.

2026 sazaeyc
Annual Conference

Session Descriptions

A4

“Building Belonging for School-Age Children” with Jessica Flowers from Arizona Center for Afterschool Excellence and Linda Kubiak Executive Director YMCA

Building Belonging for School-Age Children equips childcare providers, site directors, and ECE educators who work with school-age youth (K–5th grade) with practical strategies for helping school-age youth feel a genuine sense of belonging in their programs. Grounded in Arizona's OST Quality Standards, this interactive session explores belonging through physical environment, relationships, and intentional programming, focusing on strategies providers can implement with the space, time, and resources they already have. Through hands-on activities like a gallery walk, room mapping, and a program-design challenge, participants will identify what's already working in their settings and leave with a concrete plan for one small shift to try next.

2026 sazaeyc
Annual Conference

Session Descriptions

A5

“Using Universal Design for Learning to Encourage and Deepen Sense of Belonging” with Lenka Stogsdill and Tami Philips- Early Childhood Special Education Program Specialist, Arizona Department of Education

Universal Design for Learning is a framework that addresses the learning needs of diverse and exceptional children. Using this framework ensures that curriculum is accessible to all, and the barriers and challenges for children with exceptional learning needs are intentionally minimized. Please join us for this session to learn the three principles of Universal Design for Learning and how to utilize the framework to promote belonging for all children.

A6

“Exploring refugee, immigration, and incarceration issues through picturebooks, creative expression, and embodied practices” with Seneca Beth Miller- Mother and Doctoral Candidate, Nancy Grim-Tucson Virtual Unified Academy, 2nd Grade Teacher, Nanette Murray-Sam Hughes Elementary, ELD Resource Teacher, and Haley Motika-Vail School District 2nd Grade Teacher

In this interactive workshop we will explore refugee, immigration, and incarceration issues through picturebooks, creative expression, and embodied practices. We will share resources and practice ‘freedom dreaming’ for a more just future. Through deepening our understanding of these issues, we can increase our ability to create a sense of belonging for families and children whose lives for the children and families in our learning communities whose lives are impacted by these issues.

2026 sazaeyc

Annual Conference

Session Descriptions

A7

“Engaging with Children through Adult-Led Games in the Early Childhood Classroom” with Kristen Quenelle- Early Childhood Special Education Specialist/ADE

Children love to play games! Games like: Duck, Duck, Goose, Hide-n-Seek, Pop the Pig, Memory, etc., engage children while ALSO, developing their social-emotional and cognitive skills. Using components of the Pyramid Model, the Universal Design Model, and peer reviewed research, we will learn the “why” games are important, and “how” to incorporate games into the school day.

A8

“Early Childhood Play with Everyday Items” with Camille Verdugo and Christine Burnett- Early Childhood Program Specialist

Children develop critical cognitive, social-emotional, and communication skills through both independent and collaborative play. In this session, participants will explore how children engage in play-based experiences. We will examine how toys, everyday household materials, and open-ended "loose parts" create invitational environments that encourage participation, imaginative thinking, problem-solving, engineering, and creative construction while fostering meaningful peer interactions that promote a sense of belonging for all children.

2026 sazaeyc
Annual Conference

Session Descriptions

A9

“Growing Little Minds and Big Hearts” with Deb Heim Martinez- Clinical Assistant Professor/Arizona State University, Tanya Pinkerton- Clinical Associate Professor, ASU and Hannah Jennewein- Senior Lab Manager

Discover innovative ideas for enhancing preschool environments through social-emotional learning (SEL). In this interactive session, you'll dive into ASU’s Early Childhood Principled Innovation card decks to spark meaningful SEL activities, reflect on your own learning space, and leave with concrete, student-centered, actionable tools.

A10- Spanish Session

“Más allá del comportamiento: Entendiendo las experiencias sensoriales para promover la participación” with Itahi Arteaga- Founder of Cultivando Raíces

Las experiencias sensoriales son la base del aprendizaje. Esta sesión ayuda a educadores y proveedores de cuidado a mirar más allá del comportamiento para entender lo que el cuerpo de un niño está comunicando: la necesidad de movimiento, de calma o de conexión. Los participantes practicarán estrategias sensoriales y aprenderán a reconocer estas señales, incorporando experiencias sencillas en las rutinas diarias que ayuden a cada niño a sentirse listo para participar. Al finalizar la sesión, los participantes se llevarán 3 estrategias prácticas que podrán usar de inmediato para crear un entorno donde el sistema nervioso de los niños se sienta apoyado.

2026 sazaeyc
Annual Conference

Session Descriptions

B1

“Using banned children's books to teach anti-bias education to early childhood educators” with Joline Riddle- Tucson Jewish Community Center Early Childhood Education

Participants will have the opportunity to deep dive into the content of banned children’s books, identifying how we all have bias, and what we can do to work on them. Through the interactive work together, participants will experience materials and resources collected for easy access. The content will contain websites, articles, book recommendations, documentaries, art, poetry, and resources.

B2

“Self-regulation in Early Childhood” with Patsy Rethore-Larson- Early Childhood Program Specialist, AZ Dept of Education

Self-regulation is a crucial early childhood skill that supports long-term emotional, social, and academic success. Young children rely on supportive, responsive adults to help them manage strong emotions, particularly those who have experienced trauma. This session explores the brain science underlying self-regulation, highlights the essential role of co-regulation, and highlights effective classroom strategies for fostering positive social and emotional development in the early years.

2026 sazaeyc
Annual Conference

Session Descriptions

B3

"Addressing Incarceration Through Children's Literature Using Art" with Nancy Grim- 2nd Grade Teacher in TUSD

Nancy Grim has been teaching in Tucson, Arizona for the last 17 years. She has taught children from the age of 2 up to 6th grade. She has worked in charter schools, public schools, and combined classrooms. She is currently in her 6th year of teaching at the Tucson Virtual Unified Academy. She received both her bachelor and master degree from the University of Arizona. She currently holds a certification in Elementary Education K-8 and Principal PreK-12. She is endorsed in Early Childhood, Literacy, Gifted, and Structured English Immersion.

B4 - Bilingual Session

"Behind the Classroom: Building Belonging Through Sustainable Child Care Businesses" with Nora Glick and Tiffany Corona- Southwest Human Development

This interactive session examines how sustainable child care business practices support belonging, inclusion, and access. Participants will explore the connections between financial stability, leadership, operational systems, and family engagement through discussion, reflection activities, real-world examples, and interactive audience participation. Attendees will leave with practical strategies for creating programs where children, families, and educators can thrive.

2026 sazaeyc

Annual Conference

Session Descriptions

B5

“Best Practices: Empowering Preschool Providers in the IEP Process” with Priscilla Sachs and Tamara Rosario- ECSE Program Specialist, ADE

Preschool providers are important members of the IEP (Individualized Education Program) Team. In this session, we will review what an IEP is, who is part of the IEP Team, and how preschool providers can actively participate in the process. We will share guidance and best practices for meaningful involvement in IEP meetings and review key parts of an IEP that can be used to support children in preschool programs.

B6

“Intentional Teaching: What Is the Child Trying to Learn?” with Camille Lachar-Professional Learning Specialist/Enhancing Early Childhood and Melissa Weiss- FFN Provider

What is the child trying to learn? This question is at the heart of intentional teaching. Participants will discover how to use observation, assessment, and responsive interactions to uncover children's strengths, interests, and emerging skills, then use that information to intentionally plan experiences that extend learning and development.

2026 sazaeyc
Annual Conference

Session Descriptions

B7

"Engineering Experiences for Young Innovators" with Jasmin Lopez and Katherine Larned Ortega- SARSEF

Join SARSEF and learn how to develop engaging engineering activities, for the after-care setting, that inspire creativity and critical thinking. Participants will explore the engineering design process, discover methods for igniting student curiosity, and gain the tools they need for creating meaningful STEM experiences. This STEM workshop will equip school-age providers with practical strategies to add engineering to their programs and get students excited about solving problems.

B8

"Building a Foundation for Quality from Babies' Perspective" with Kerry Kriener-Althen- WestEd, Mirella Almaraz- Senior Research Associate; WestEd, and Bianca Reyes-Research Associate; WestEd

What does quality care mean to you? What does it look like to babies? How does the learning environment, the organization of care, the program's philosophy and practices promote meaningful relationships with infant/toddler care teachers and the children in their settings? Babies are curious, motivated learners who thrive through meaningful relationships with their care teachers. Through this active-learning session, participants will consider quality from the perspective of babies and how the structure of the program and setting can support and enhance babies' care and learning experiences.

2026 sazaeyc
Annual Conference

Session Descriptions

B9 - Bilingual Session
"Little Voices, Big Respect: Teaching Consent from the Start" with Debbie Curley- Family, Consumer and Health Sciences Agent/University of Arizona Cooperative Extension Pima County and Nataly Quiroz- Senior Program Coordinator for the Family Engagement Program
In this interactive session, UA Cooperative Extension will introduce a newly created two-workshop series for parents and their children aged 3-5 which offers fun activities to teach about bodily autonomy, private parts, alternative greetings, anatomical vocabulary, touch and safety networks. Participants will learn about valuable ways to support children and gain access to the lesson plans.

B10
"Family Math, PBS Social Workshop" with Gordon Brown- Early Childhood Educator and Development and Workshop Facilitator
Family Math is a research based, bilingual (English/Spanish), multi-platform program designed to foster math positivity, confidence, and foundational math skills in children ages 2–5. For early childhood educators, it offers an incredibly easy to use, no cost digital toolkit packed with ready-made activities, games, videos, and printable resources.

2026 sazaeyc

Annual Conference

Session Descriptions

C1

“Art of the Picturebook as an Avenue for Belonging” with Seemi Aziz- University of Arizona

This session will explore ways in which art of picture books can aid in understanding the concept of belonging.

C2

“N**o Screens Needed: Engaging Young Children Through Music and Movement” with Vikki Snipes- Early Childhood Specialist: ADE**

Discover how screen-free music and movement experiences can promote learning, creativity, and meaningful engagement in early childhood settings. This interactive session will explore developmentally appropriate activities for infants, toddlers, and preschoolers. Participants will leave with ready-to-use ideas that can be easily incorporated into daily routines to encourage active learning, joyful participation, and meaningful connections.

2026 sazaeyc
Annual Conference

Session Descriptions

C3

“Growing Together: Child Care/Preschool Programs and Specialty Providers with Diona Williams- Early Childhood Education Professor at Tohono O'odham Community College & Educator/Owner of Out Back Learning LLC and Jacque Shelton-Raftery- Marriage and Family Therapist, Nurtured Connections, LLC

The purpose of this presentation is to explore how child care/preschool programs can collaborate thoughtfully and effectively with specialty providers. As education continues to evolve across public, charter, private, homeschool, and unschooling spaces, families are increasingly drawn to nature-based learning environments. With this growing interest comes an opportunity—and responsibility—for programs to reflect on how they can remain inclusive and responsive to the diverse needs of children and families. This session will highlight practical ways childcare/preschool programs can partner with specialty providers through consultation or on-site support, while staying true to their program philosophy.

2026 sazaeyc
Annual Conference

Session Descriptions

C4 - Bilingual Session

“Build the Room: The Leadership Blueprint for Belonging in Early Childhood” with Martha Mazor- Childcare Consultant

Belonging is not created by a poster on the wall or a one-time classroom activity — it is built through leadership, language, culture, relationships, and daily rhythms. In this session, Martha Mazor, founder of Whiz Kidz Preschools and The Empire Builder, will share a practical blueprint for designing early childhood environments where children feel safe and seen, families feel connected, and educators feel empowered to lead with purpose. Participants will walk away with actionable strategies to strengthen classroom culture, family partnerships and team alignment so belonging becomes part of the foundation — not an afterthought.

C5

“Lighting the Way with Simple Circuits” with Amanda McPherson- Director of the STEMAZing Project

Light up your classroom with hands-on STEM! In this workshop, teachers will learn the fundamentals of LED circuits, build simple projects, and leave with ideas and resources to use with their students.

2026 sazaeyc
Annual Conference

Session Descriptions

C6

“Step outside and rediscover the magic of learning in nature” with Noortje Nelissen- Professional Development Facilitator, Arizona Science Center and Brenna Chambers Follett- Director of Professional Learning at Arizona Science Center

This playful session explores the importance of outdoor play, the many benefits it brings to young learners, and how to nurture curiosity through inquiry-based experiences. Gather fresh ideas and inspiration for creating inviting outdoor spaces where children can explore, imagine, and fall in love with the natural world.

C7 - Spanish Session- CANCELLED

“Salud mental en niños de 0 a 5 años: Nuestro papel como educadoras, como soporte para los niños y sus familias” with Sonia Elizabeth Soto- Lead Bilingual Family Child Care Specialist / UWPC FFN Program

En esta sesión hablaremos de qué se entiende por salud mental en el grupo de 0 a 5. Además, veremos por qué hay debate entre los expertos, repasaremos los diferentes puntos de vista con evidencia y nos concentraremos en lo que se puede hacer en el aula.

2026 sazaeyc

Annual Conference

Session Descriptions

C8

“Nurturing Executive Function in Infants, Toddlers, and Preschool Children” with Darcy Heath- Research Manager Teaching Strategies and Tina Sykes- Senior Research Manager at Teaching Strategies

Executive function skills help young children focus, remember information, manage their emotions, and control their behavior. In this session, participants will learn how executive function develops from infancy through the preschool years and why it is important for learning and everyday interactions. Educators will leave with practical strategies they can use to support children's self-regulation, attention, and problem-solving skills in the classroom.

2026 sazaeyc
Annual Conference

Session Descriptions

C9 - Bilingual

Sentar las bases de la calidad desde la perspectiva de los bebés (Building a Foundation for Quality from Babies' Perspective) with Mirella Almaraz EdD, is an Early Childhood Research Manager at WestEd.

¿Qué significa para usted el cuidado infantil de alta calidad? ¿Cómo lo perciben los bebés? ¿De qué manera el entorno de aprendizaje, la organización del cuidado, la filosofía y las prácticas del programa fomentan relaciones significativas entre los educadores de cuidado infantil y niños pequeños y los propios niños en sus entornos? Los bebés son curiosos y tienen ganas de aprender, y se desarrollan plenamente gracias a las relaciones significativas que establecen con sus educadores. A través de esta sesión de aprendizaje activo, los participantes analizarán el concepto de calidad desde la perspectiva de los bebés y cómo la estructura del programa y el entorno pueden respaldar y mejorar las experiencias del aprendizaje y el cuidado de los bebés.

(What does quality care mean to you? What does it look like to babies? How does the learning environment, the organization of care, the program's philosophy and practices promote meaningful relationships with infant/toddler care teachers and the children in their settings? Babies are curious, motivated learners who thrive through meaningful relationships with their care teachers. Through this active-learning session, participants will consider quality from the perspective of babies and how the structure of the program and setting can support and enhance babies' care and learning experiences.