



WHAT CAPACITY FIRST™ DOES

AND THE DEVELOPMENTAL SCIENCE THAT SUPPORTS ITS DESIGN

A research foundations brief from Educare Prep™

Purpose of this brief

Capacity First™ is a developmental reasoning and implementation framework designed to help early childhood educators move from an observed moment to a testable working hypothesis, a matched adult support, documented child-response evidence, and an informed next decision. This brief explains what the framework is designed to do and identifies established developmental-science principles that support each part of that design.

Research integrity note. *The sources cited here support the developmental principles that inform Capacity First™. They should not be interpreted as independent validation of Capacity First™ itself. Formal evaluation of the framework is a separate research question.*

The Core Idea

Capacity First™ asks a different question before adults jump from behavior to conclusion: **What was this moment asking the child to be able to do?**

The framework then organizes educator reasoning into a continuous learning cycle:

OBSERVE → **HYPOTHESIZE** → **SUPPORT** → **LEARN** → **ADAPT**

The intended outcome

Not more support for its own sake. The goal is more precise support, stronger participation, clearer shared knowledge about the child, and—when development allows—less adult assistance over time.

The child's response is evidence, not an afterthought.

How the Framework Connects to Developmental Science

1. OBSERVE — Turn the moment into usable evidence

What Capacity First™ does: Capacity First™ begins with objective observation: what happened, in what context, what came before, what the adult did, and what happened next. The purpose is to separate observable information from interpretation so patterns can be examined over time.

How developmental science supports the design: NAEYC identifies observation and documentation as ongoing, strategic, reflective, and purposeful processes. It also states that systems should be in place to collect, make sense of, and use observation information to guide planning and moment-to-moment interactions with children.

Key source: [NAEYC — Observing, Documenting, and Assessing Children's Development and Learning](#)

2. HYPOTHESIZE — Form a working explanation, not a fixed label

What Capacity First™ does: Capacity First™ uses patterns in observed evidence to form a working developmental hypothesis. A hypothesis is intentionally provisional: it identifies a capacity that may be difficult in a particular context and creates something educators can test rather than assume.

How developmental science supports the design: NAEYC guidance recognizes that behavior reflects children's experiences and needs and encourages educators to seek to understand what may be leading to behavior. Developmentally appropriate practice also requires attention to individual variation, context, current abilities, interests, language, and experience.

Key sources: [NAEYC — Creating a Caring, Equitable Community of Learners](#) | [NAEYC — Developmentally Appropriate Practice Position Statement](#)

3. SUPPORT — Match the adult move to the likely developmental demand

What Capacity First™ does: Once a working hypothesis is identified, Capacity First™ guides educators toward an intentional support that is connected to the likely developmental demand. Examples may include a transition warning, visual sequence, co-regulation, environmental adjustment, structured choice, or another Adult Move.

How developmental science supports the design: NAEYC describes developmentally appropriate teaching as intentional and responsive to each child's development, characteristics, needs, and context. Harvard's Center on the Developing Child describes adults as playing a critical role in scaffolding developing executive-function and self-regulation skills—first helping children manage challenging tasks and then stepping back as children become more able to manage independently.

Key sources: [NAEYC — Teaching to Enhance Each Child's Development and Learning](#) | [Harvard Center on the Developing Child — Enhancing and Practicing Executive Function Skills](#)

4. LEARN — Treat the child's response as evidence

What Capacity First™ does: Capacity First™ does not stop at “we tried a strategy.” Educators document what happened after the support: whether participation improved, the level of prompting required, what remained difficult, and whether the child was able to re-engage. That response becomes information for the next decision.

How developmental science supports the design: NAEYC emphasizes using ongoing observation and documentation to evaluate the effectiveness of experiences provided to children and to improve teaching and learning. This aligns with the Capacity First™ principle that a support becomes informative only when the child's response is observed and documented.

Key source: [NAEYC — Observing, Documenting, and Assessing Children’s Development and Learning](#)

5. ADAPT — Refine, combine, replace, or fade support

What Capacity First™ does: Capacity First™ uses what was learned to determine what should happen next. A support may be kept, modified, combined with another support, replaced, or gradually faded as the child becomes more independent.

How developmental science supports the design: Harvard’s executive-function guidance describes scaffolding as helping children complete challenging tasks and then gradually stepping back as they are ready and able. NAEYC similarly describes teaching strategies as responsive and adaptable to changes in children’s development, interests, abilities, and context.

Key sources: [Harvard Center on the Developing Child — Enhancing and Practicing Executive Function Skills](#) | [NAEYC — Teaching to Enhance Each Child’s Development and Learning](#)

The Adult Is Part of the Developmental Environment

The adult response is not separate from development. Responsive relationships, language, pacing, expectations, co-regulation, and environmental supports are part of the context in which young children develop and practice emerging capacities.

Relationship-based foundation

The National Scientific Council on the Developing Child describes young children as developing within an “environment of relationships.” Harvard’s serve-and-return resources further describe responsive, back-and-forth interactions with caring adults as important for brain architecture, communication, social development, and later higher-order abilities.

Capacity First™ therefore treats the adult move as part of the developmental environment—not merely a behavior-management response.

[Harvard Center on the Developing Child — Young Children Develop in an Environment of Relationships](#) | [Harvard — Serve and Return](#)

From One Adult's Discovery to Shared Knowledge

Capacity First™ is also designed so that what one educator learns does not disappear with the moment. Documented observations, hypotheses, supports, and child-response patterns can create a clearer shared developmental picture across teachers, routines, specialists, and families.

This design is consistent with NAEYC guidance emphasizing systems for collecting and using observations and reciprocal partnerships in which educators and families share knowledge of the child to support future instructional decisions.

[NAEYC — Reciprocal Partnerships with Families and Community Connections](#) | [NAEYC — Observing, Documenting, and Assessing Children's Development and Learning](#)

What Capacity First™ Is — and Is Not

IT IS

a structured way to move from observation to a testable developmental hypothesis and matched support.

IT IS

a process for learning from the child's response and using that learning to guide the next adult decision.

IT IS

a way to preserve and share useful developmental knowledge across the adults supporting a child.

IT IS NOT

a diagnostic tool or a substitute for clinical, special-education, or other professional evaluation.

IT IS NOT

a claim that every challenging behavior reflects a developmental deficit.

IT IS NOT

a fixed strategy assigned to a child indefinitely; supports should be revisited as the child and context change.

From Developmental Science to Everyday Practice

Developmental science tells us that relationships matter, practice matters, context matters, and support should change as competence grows. Capacity First™ translates those principles into a repeatable educator reasoning process: observe the moment, identify a plausible developmental demand, test a matched support, learn from the child's response, and adapt what happens next.

OBSERVE THE MOMENT.
UNDERSTAND THE DEMAND.
SUPPORT THE CAPACITY.

References and Supporting Resources

1. Center on the Developing Child at Harvard University. (2014). Enhancing and Practicing Executive Function Skills with Children from Infancy to Adolescence. [Source](#)
2. Center on the Developing Child at Harvard University. Serve and Return: Back-and-Forth Exchanges. [Source](#)
3. National Scientific Council on the Developing Child. (2004). Young Children Develop in an Environment of Relationships: Working Paper No. 1. [Source](#)
4. National Association for the Education of Young Children. Developmentally Appropriate Practice Position Statement. [Source](#)
5. NAEYC. Creating a Caring, Equitable Community of Learners. [Source](#)
6. NAEYC. Engaging in Reciprocal Partnerships with Families and Fostering Community Connections. [Source](#)
7. NAEYC. Observing, Documenting, and Assessing Children's Development and Learning. [Source](#)
8. NAEYC. Teaching to Enhance Each Child's Development and Learning. [Source](#)

