

The Loop

QUALITY CARE SOUTH DAKOTA NEWSLETTER



February 2026 | Issue 30

• In This Month's Newsletter •

News to Support Your Program

- Congratulations - January Level Designations
- Using Classroom Assessments to Make Small Sustainable Changes
- Pathways Pathfinders: Samantha Intermill

SD ECE Resources

- Program and Teacher Discounts

Books of the Month

- Tummy Time Forest
- Chicka Chicka Peep Peep
- Dragon Girls: Selena the Sunflower Dragon

Mark Your Calendar

- Upcoming Statewide Conference Dates



Quality Care South Dakota is designed to support child care and school-age programs in meeting benchmarks of quality and identifying their strengths as well as areas for growth. The Quality Care Team is housed at the Child & Family Resource Network at South Dakota State University and works in collaboration with the South Dakota Early Childhood Enrichment System with support and direction from the South Dakota Department of Social Services.

Interested In Learning More?

Registered family day care homes and licensed child care centers and school-age programs can voluntarily participate in this opportunity. Please check out www.sdece.org/quality-care-south-dakota.

News to Support Your Program

Congratulations - January Level Designations

🎉 Shout-out to Our Quality Champions! 🎉

We are proud to recognize and celebrate the following outstanding programs that have recently achieved a new milestone in Quality Care South Dakota (QCSD). These teams exemplify dedication to continuous quality improvement for children and families.

Level 1 - Licensed Child Care Center

- EmBe South Childcare
- Faith Lutheran Daycare
- Vibrant Minds Learning Center
- Wilmot School Daycare

Level 2 - Licensed Child Care Center

- EmBe Downtown Childcare

Level 2 - Licensed School-Age Program

- EmBe Horizon OST

👏 Congratulations on achieving your new QCSD level! Your hard work, commitment, and passion for early childhood and school-age care are making a lasting difference. We're honored to support you on your quality journey and proud to have you as part of the QCSD community.

💙💛 Learn more QCSD at <https://sdece.org/quality-care-south-dakota/>



Using Classroom Assessments to Make Small Sustainable Changes

After an observation, programs typically receive a detailed report that shows scores and highlights the classroom's strengths and opportunities. It's important to take some time to carefully review the feedback. Just as we take a strengths-based approach with the children, we want to take the same approach with teachers and staff. Highlight their strengths and empower them to be a resource to others who need assistance in the areas where they excel. This is one of the greatest, untapped resources of your program.

James Clear, the author of [Atomic Habits](#), offers guidance in developing habits to gradually increase success over time. Below are a few suggestions to get started.

Focus on who you wish to become

- Be specific on whom you want to become
- Say: "I want to have warm, supportive interactions with the children," instead of "I want to score higher in Staff-child interactions."
- Observable actions:
 - I speak to children calmly and politely.
 - I make frequent positive contact: smiles, eye contact.
 - I get down on the children's level to talk or listen.

Track habits, not scores

- Say: "I want to develop systems, not goals," instead of consistently thinking about ECERS-3 scores.
- Track observable actions:
 - The number of times staff help children avoid conflict
 - The number of opportunities children have to work together on projects
 - The number of dramatic play props representing different cultures or races
 - The number of conversations about math while playing in a non-math area

The power of tiny changes over time

- The power of 1%: If you can improve by 1% every day for one year, you'll be thirty-seven times better.
- Say: "I want to make tiny observable changes," instead of "I want a 7 in 'Helping children expand vocabulary.'"

- Observable actions:
 - I will introduce a new word during the science activity.
 - I will respond to what a child says once and further expand on their idea during learning centers.
 - I will repeat English words in Spanish during lunch time when speaking to ESL students.

The focus should be on realistic goals. If a classroom scores a two, raising it to a three or four is impactful and more attainable than scoring a seven. Small, consistent changes lead to sustained improvements over time and yield better learning outcomes for children, something we all strive for.

Excerpted from [Using Classroom Assessments to Make Small Sustainable Changes](#) by Katie Gaul, McCormick Institute for Early Childhood. Used with attribution.

Pathways Pathfinders: Samantha Intermill

Welcome back to Pathways Pathfinders, our monthly feature highlighting the amazing educators who make Pathways - and early childhood and school-age care education - so impactful. Each month, we shine a light on a Pathways member and share their story, celebrating the dedication, leadership, and heart they bring to children, families, and their communities. This month, we are excited to feature Samantha Intermill, a dedicated family child care provider whose passion and commitment shine through her words.



Hello! My name is Samantha Intermill, and I have been a registered in-home child care provider for the past 15 years. I studied Early Childhood Education at Lake Area Technical College in Watertown. From a very young age, I knew I wanted to pursue a career working with children. During high school, I worked at an in-home daycare in my hometown, where I discovered my passion for early childhood care and development.

When I opened my own daycare, my goal was to create a fun, safe, and nurturing environment where children feel comfortable and supported. I take pride in designing a program that reflects both my professional training and personal interests. I offer preschool programming two days a week, with arts and crafts activities on the remaining days to encourage creativity and learning through play.

I typically care for children ages 6 weeks to 5 years. I truly enjoy building meaningful relationships with families and their children. Each day brings something different, and it's incredibly rewarding to see children discover new things and develop new skills.

I am a Level 7 Pathways member, which I earned by earning my associate's degree in early childhood education from Lake Area Tech and completing a certain number of training requirements. Being part of Pathways has influenced my goals as an educator. I enjoy the challenge this role provides. After working in childcare for several years, I sometimes felt a bit stuck professionally, taking the same classes year after year with little excitement. I really enjoy the different incentives, like the Pathways Literacy Challenge - my kids and I had so much fun with that!

For other home child care providers considering Pathways, my advice is simple: getting started is so easy, and Nichole makes the whole process completely stress-free! It's such a welcoming experience, and it really inspires you to dive in and give it your best, no matter what level you are starting on. Being recognized through Pathways felt great. In this career, it's easy to feel overlooked, so I really appreciate that they take the time to recognize you for where you are and the effort you put in.

It's really the little moments that make this job so special - when a child says, "You're the best teacher," or "You're the best cooker," or when they come back after the weekend, and parents share how much they missed you and that they wanted to come to daycare on Saturday. I love seeing their pride in something they learned or accomplished during the day and watching their excitement to show it to mom and dad. Even when former students -some now in high school- tell me, "I remember when we did this in daycare," it makes me so happy to know their memories of daycare are positive ones (though it also makes me feel a little old! 😊)

Always remember your work matters! I remember when I had just started in daycare, feeling completely overwhelmed with all the new responsibilities that come with starting a business - learning the rules for the state, the food program, and everything in between. I even called my food program specialist one day in tears because it all felt like too much. She said something to me that I still carry with me today: "Sam, I know this all seems overwhelming right now, but remember - your home may be the only place a child receives a nutritious meal during the day."

I still think of this often on days that I feel overlooked or unappreciated. Daycare may be the only place where children hear "I love you," get a book read to them, learn about Jesus, or enjoy a hot meal. What we do goes far beyond "babysitting." We play a truly important role in every child's life that walks through our doors.

Never forget: the work you do matters more than you may ever realize.

Thank you for allowing us to celebrate you, Samantha, and the meaningful work you do each day in your child care program. Your passion for children, dedication to families, and commitment to professional growth come through and help strengthen the Pathways

community. If you are an early childhood or school-age care educator and would like to become a member of Pathways, please connect with [Nichole Lanning](#). You can find more information at <https://sdece.org/pathways/>

Stay tuned as we continue to spotlight more Pathways Pathfinders and celebrate the educators who make a difference across South Dakota.



Apply to be a member of Pathways

Congratulations to the 650+ educators participating on the Pathways to Professional Development Career Ladder. If you're an educator in a registered or licensed early childhood or school-age care program, we'd love to celebrate and get a welcome kit to you soon!

Visit our Pathways Facebook page and join us in celebrating the early childhood and school-age care educators who make up our Pathways community! 🎉



SD ECE Resources



Program and Teacher Discounts

Did you know that being a member of South Dakota ECE Resources not only comes with the benefit of thousands of resources at your fingertips, but also allows you access to special discounts?

These discounts are designed to support you professionally, helping stretch your budget while investing in the important work you do every day.

Participating businesses vary and include a wide range of companies you already know - from Ace Hardware and Office Depot to Lakeshore and Discount School Supplies, and many more. Whether you're looking for classroom materials, program supplies, technology tools, or everyday essentials, these discounts are another way your membership works for you.

Take a moment to explore the [full list of participating businesses](#) and start taking advantage of your member discounts today.

If you are an educator working in a registered or licensed program, please [register here](#) for a South Dakota ECE Resources membership at no cost to you.

Books of the Month

Each month, this section spotlights children's books that align with seasonal themes or offer meaningful value for child care providers. This curated selection is designed to introduce new and noteworthy titles that caregivers may not have come across before—providing fresh inspiration for story time.

As February brings chilly days and the heart of winter, it's the perfect time to snuggle up with books and share stories with the children in your care. Reading together supports language development, builds focus, and sparks imagination, making story time a cozy and meaningful part of your daily routine.

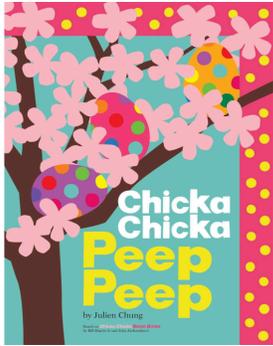


Make tummy time extra fun for little ones with this fold-out book with a mirror!

Unfold the pages to see a sprawling forest scene, complete with a cast of woodland critters. Then, turn to the end of the book where your baby will see their beautiful reflection in the mirror.

This dazzling board book series is designed with tummy time in mind. The fold-out format allows the book to be spread out in front of a baby, while the bold colors stimulate their developing eyesight.

Reading age: 1- 3 years

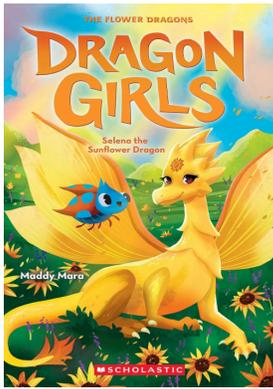


It's time for spring in this companion to the beloved and bestselling classic *Chicka Chicka Boom Boom*, and the letters peep something hidden up in the tree...

*A asked B
and B asked C,
"What's up there
in the pretty pink tree?"*

Everyone's favorite alphabet crew is ready to hop to the occasion and sniff out the surprise, with the help of some fuzzy new friends. Celebrate springtime in this colorful romp that will have everyone chanting—and hopping!—along.

Reading age: 4-8 years



Selena and her friends Charlotte and Layla are shocked to discover they are all Flower Dragons. They have been called to the Magic Forest because each girl has special talents this unusual place needs to survive. Selena is a Sunflower Dragon—she has traded her human form for powerful wings, glittering scales, and a roar that shakes the ground.

As a Dragon Girl, she must help break the evil spell that the Fury Queen has cast over the Magic Forest. The forest's animals are deep in a sleep they can't wake up from, unless the Flower Dragons can collect all the ingredients for a special perfume. Selena's hope glows as bright as the tallest sunflower and she's determined to lead her friends to success.

Reading age: 7-10 years

**Please note, all book descriptions and suggested reading ages are provided by Amazon. While suggested reading levels can provide guidance, they should be seen as flexible recommendations rather than strict rules. By using suggested reading levels as guidelines, you can choose books that not only match children's developmental stages but also ignite their curiosity and enthusiasm for reading. This personalized approach fosters a more meaningful and enjoyable learning experience.

→ Mark Your Calendar ←

Upcoming Statewide Conference Dates

[South Dakota Early Childhood Education Conference](#)

Rapid City, SD; April 9-10, 2026

[SD School-Age Care Alliance Out of School Time Leadership Retreat](#)

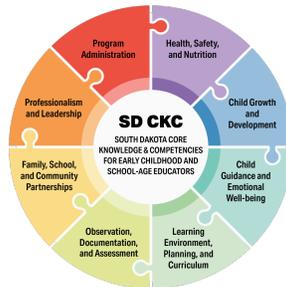
Keystone, SD; April 9-11, 2026

[SD School-Age Care Alliance \(SoDakSACA\) Conference](#)

Sioux Falls, SD; October 8-10, 2026



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The South Dakota Core Knowledge and Competencies (CKCs) guide self-reflection and professional growth by describing what early childhood and school-age care educators need to **know**, **understand**, and **be able to do** at all levels of professional practice in eight areas of knowledge.

Directors are using the SD CKCs to support important conversations about professional development and growing leaders in their child care and school-age programs. Click the button below to learn more, to view the document, and to order free copies of the SD CKCs for yourself or your team.

View SD Core Knowledge & Competencies

Quality Care South Dakota Team

- Rachel Busmann, Outreach Coordinator and QCSO Lead
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- Nichole Lanning, Early Childhood Quality Assistant
- Maria Picek, Lead Coach and Observer
- Cheyanne Kamps, Early Childhood and School Age Program Observer
- Deb Owens, Early Childhood and School Age Quality Coach
- Cassie Stoltenburg, Early Childhood and School Age Quality Coach
- Clover Herdman, Early Childhood and School Age Quality Coach
- Tessa Stoltenberg, Education Program Support Assistant

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