

The Loop

QUALITY CARE SOUTH DAKOTA NEWSLETTER



April 2026 | Issue 32

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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 child care homes, 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 - March 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.



Quality Champions

Level 1 - Registered Family Child Care Home

- Karry Borgan

Level 1 - Licensed Child Care Center

- Montessori School of Aberdeen
- Little Tatanka
- Rockyford Daycare
- Apple Blossom Academy
- USD Vucurevich Children's Center
- Impact Kidz Daycare

Level 2 - Licensed Child Care Center

- Little Sprouts Daycare, Faulkton
- Faulkton Area Out of School Time
- First Lutheran Child Learning Center
- Story Time Preschool and Childcare Center

Level 1 - Licensed School-Age Program

- First Baptist Children's Center

Level 2 - Licensed School-Age Program

- Great After School Place - Camelot
- Great After School Place - United Methodist

🎉 Congratulations on achieving your new QCSD level! This accomplishment reflects your dedication, perseverance, and passion for early childhood and school-age care. Your work is creating meaningful, lasting impacts in your communities and that is truly worth celebrating. We are honored to support you along your quality journey and grateful to have you as part of the QCSD community.

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



May is Mental Health Awareness Month

May is Mental Health Awareness Month, with Mental Health Awareness Week recognized May 11–17. It's a valuable time to focus on well-being, not only for the children in your care, but for yourself as well.

Young children are still learning how to understand and express their emotions. Incorporating simple games and activities into your daily routine can help teach important skills like identifying feelings, building emotional awareness, and practicing healthy coping strategies. These small moments of support can make a big difference in helping children feel safe, understood, and confident.

At the same time, it's important to remember that your mental health matters, too. Caring for others is meaningful work, but it can also be demanding. Taking time to recharge, connect with others, and use available supports is essential to maintaining your own well-being.

We encourage you to explore this month's featured resources for activities and tools that support both children's mental health and your own. When educators feel supported and well, everyone benefits.

Young Children

[Supporting the Mental Health of Infants and Toddlers in Child Care: Forming Close and Secure Relationships](#)
[Supporting the Mental Health of Infants and Toddlers in Child Care: Experiencing, Managing, and Expressing Emotions](#)
[Children and Mental Health: Is This Just a Stage?](#)

School-age Children

[Educators](#)

[Prioritizing Staff Wellness for Child Care Programs Serving Infants and Toddlers](#)

[Eight Actions to Improve Mental Health in the Long Term](#)

[Ten Quick Actions to Boost Your Mental Health](#)



If you or someone you know is in need of mental health support, we encourage you to reach out to your healthcare provider or connect with [988 for Mental Health & Substance Misuse | South Dakota Behavioral Health](#) by calling, texting, or chatting 988. Support is available, and you don't have to navigate it alone.

Pathways Pathfinders: Lenae Tucker

Each month in Pathways Pathfinders, we highlight a Pathways member who is making a difference in the lives of children and families through their commitment to professional growth. This month, we are proud to feature Lenae Tucker of the Jones County Coyote Club, whose passion for supporting youth and dedication to professional development are helping shape a strong and inspiring afterschool program.

I have been a school-age care provider for two years. Before stepping into this role, I had worked in the school setting as a secretary, coach, and athletic director. I took a position outside of the school for a period of time, and that experience helped me realize how much I truly missed working with the youth in our community. When I learned that Jones County would once again be awarded the 21st CCLC grant to bring back an afterschool program, I knew I wanted to be a part of it. I was very grateful to be offered the site director position and for the opportunity to support and work with the youth of Jones County.

The Jones County Coyote Club afterschool program is wrapping up our 2nd year of our 21st Century Community Learning Centers (21st CCLC) grant. We serve youth in kindergarten through 8th grade by providing a safe, welcoming place for students to go after school. Our program offers a variety of fun, creative, and engaging learning opportunities designed to support both academic success and personal growth. Students participate in individual and group activities that help improve school performance, build technology skills, encourage positive character, promote healthy habits, and provide exposure to arts and culture. Our goal is to provide a well-rounded program where students feel supported, inspired, and excited to learn beyond the school day.

What I love most about working with students is seeing their growth over time. It's so rewarding to watch them build confidence as they try new skills, explore their creativity, and discover what they enjoy. I especially enjoy seeing those moments when something "clicks" for them, whether it's learning something new, working through a challenge, or expressing themselves in a creative way. Being a part of the process is incredibly meaningful and one of the most fulfilling parts of this work.

I have achieved Level 6 of Pathways by completing the South Dakota School-Aged Care Credential, supported by The Right Turn. Throughout the credentialing process, I also had great support from my QCSD Quality Care Coach, who provided guidance and encouragement along the way. The coursework and coaching helped me continue building my skills and confidence so that I can provide the best possible experience for the students in our program.

Being a part of Pathways has encouraged me to continue growing as an educator and to always look for ways to improve the experience we provide for students. It has also motivated me to keep learning new strategies and ideas that help students succeed both academically and personally. It has strengthened my goal of providing a quality program where students feel supported, confident, and excited to learn. I would definitely encourage any educator to consider Pathways.

It is truly an honor to be recognized by Pathways, and I feel grateful for the experience. Coming into this role without the traditional educator background, it means a lot to know that the effort put into earning professional development to improve and provide quality opportunities for our students is valued. I am thankful for the continued support I have received, and I see this recognition as encouragement to keep learning, growing, and doing the best I can do in our program.

Thank you, Lenae, for letting us shine a spotlight on the important work you do each day. Through your dedication and passion, you are making a lasting impact in Jones County, helping youth thrive today and building a stronger community for tomorrow.

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/>

For information on the South Dakota School Age Credential, go to [South Dakota Early Childhood Enrichment -School Age Credential](#).

South Dakota School-Age Care Credential Program

Empowering Out-of-School Time Professionals Across South Dakota!

Are you passionate about supporting school-age children in afterschool and summer programs? Ready to grow your skills and advance your career? Check out the SD School-Age Care (SAC) Credential Program!

Start Your Journey Today!

Certificate	Credential
The certificate involves online training and support through the SD Early Childhood Enrichment (ECE) system and is a pathway to the SD SAC Credential. 38 clock hours of formal education 	This credential involves online training and support through the SD Early Childhood Enrichment system. 120 clock hours of formal education 480 hours of experience working with school-age children - A professional portfolio and documentation of demonstrated competencies - A formal observation by a regional SD SAC Credential advisor - A formal oral interview conducted by a regional ECE System representative

Whether you're just beginning or ready to take the next step, the SD School-Age Care Credential Program is your path to professional growth and recognition. Contact your regional SD ECE office today!

To learn more, contact your local ECE Office or visit www.sdece.org



Apply to be a member of Pathways

Congratulations to the 750+ educators participating on the South Dakota 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! 🎉

Current Pathways members, watch your inbox in the coming weeks for our next challenge announcement!



SD ECE Resources



Supporting Children Through Big Feelings and Challenging Behavior

Children experience a wide range of emotions and often feel them deeply, but they may not yet have the skills to express those feelings appropriately. In the classroom, this can show up as challenging behavior.

If your program is working to support children's behavior, maintain a calm environment, support staff, or communicate with families, you're not alone.

Behavior is communication. When children struggle to regulate, it is often a sign they need support, especially during times of stress or uncertainty. With consistent, caring responses, children can build the skills they need to manage emotions and feel secure.

To help children build these skills, explore this month's featured links for resources, printable tools, and visual supports, and practical tips you can implement in your program.

- [Behavior Guidance](#)
- [Classroom & Activities: Developmentally Appropriate Practices](#)
- [Managing Challenging Behavior: Developing Social Skills](#)
- [Managing Challenging Behavior: Promoting Healthy Social and Emotional Development](#)

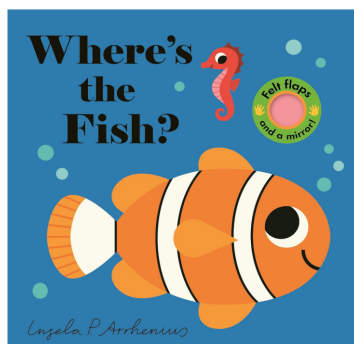
If you are an educator working in a registered or licensed program, please [register here](#) for a South Dakota ECE Resources membership at no cost to you.

Need professional development training to support your journey as an educator? Reach out to your [local South Dakota Early Childhood Enrichment office](#) for a list of trainings that support guidance and behavior management, as well as other professional development trainings supporting the [South Dakota Core Knowledge and Competencies for Early Childhood and School Age Educators](#).

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.

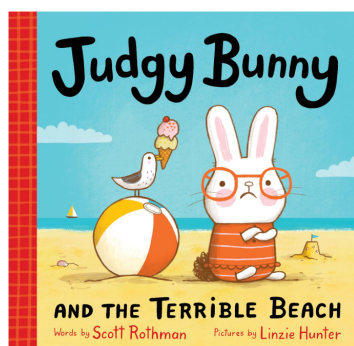
Sharing books and stories with the children in your care supports early literacy by building language skills, strengthening comprehension, and encouraging curiosity. Making reading part of your daily routine helps foster a lifelong love of learning.



An Interactive, sensory lift-the-flap book with felt flaps and a mirror for infants and toddlers.

Talented and prolific illustrator Ingela P. Arrhenius's artwork pops in this new addition to the best-selling felt flaps series, which has sold over two million copies! Five stylishly illustrated spreads depict a series of animals found in the ocean, including a crab, dolphin, lobster, and clownfish, all hidden beneath bright felt flaps. With a mirror on the final page, this is the perfect book to share with very little ones.

Reading age: 0-2 years



For this judgy bunny, nothing's worse than a day at the beach. The sun? Too bright. That view of the blue sky and gleaming sand? Awful. Sand castles? Ugh. Ice cream? Yucky.

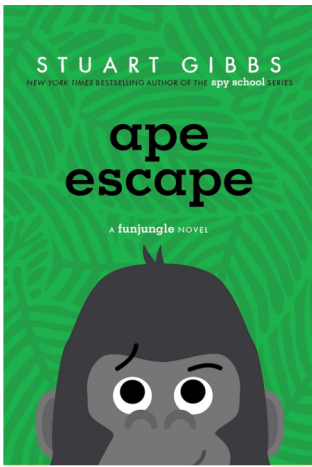
Yep. Everything is TERRIBLE. It has to be, right? There's no way she could EVER have a good time. Not with the inexplicably friendly bunny who's offered to fly kites with her, or the ice cream cone that possibly *isn't* a flavor she detests, or boogie boarding, which she actually... isn't bad at??! Okay. MAYBE it's fun. But she'll be the judge of that.

Reading age: 4-8 years

When a baby gorilla is stolen from an orphanage in Rwanda, Teddy, his parents, and an old family friend find themselves in a race against time to save it. Teddy has to piece together clues to figure out where the little ape is being taken while traveling through some of the most incredible—and dangerous—terrain in the world.

At the same time, he's long-distance consulting with Summer to help solve another mystery back at FunJungle. Between facing down lions on the Serengeti and chasing poachers through the bazaars of Zanzibar, will Teddy be able to find the baby gorilla before it's too late?

Reading age: 8-12 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

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

Sioux Falls, SD; October 8-10, 2026

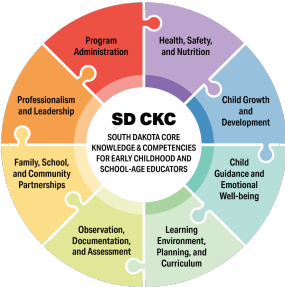
[South Dakota Early Childhood Education Conference](#)

Sioux Falls, SD; April TBD 2027



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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 QCSD Lead
- Amelia Gullickson, Early Childhood Quality Assistant
- 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

South Dakota State University
Quality Care South Dakota
South Dakota Quality Recognition and Information System | [Website](#)

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