



Using AI Thoughtfully in ECEC Leadership

WHY AI MATTERS FOR ECEC LEADERS

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Early Childhood Education and Care (ECEC) leaders balance staffing, family communication, program planning, and daily operations. Artificial intelligence (AI) offers another tool to consider when completing some of this work. The leadership question is not simply, “What can AI do?” It is, “Where could AI help without compromising privacy, professional judgment, or relationships?”

This article focuses on adults using AI for leadership and administrative tasks, not on introducing AI tools directly to young children. The goal is not to automate relationships. It is to explore whether a tool can help staff begin, organize, or revise work while keeping people responsible for the results.

Thoughtful implementation starts with a clear purpose, appropriate boundaries, and a manageable trial.

START WITH ONE LOW-RISK TASK

Before choosing a tool, identify the problem you want to solve. Is the task repetitive? Does it take too much time to begin? Would a draft or outline be useful, or does the task require a decision based on your knowledge of a child, family, or employee?

Possible starting points include:

- Brainstorming family-engagement ideas
- Outlining a staff-meeting agenda
- Generating discussion questions for professional learning
- Revising a general event reminder for clarity
- Creating a checklist from nonsensitive instructions

These are proposed trial activities, not automatic approvals for every tool or setting. Use fictional or nonsensitive information and follow the program’s expectations.

Consider a director preparing a staff meeting about family engagement. The director could ask an approved AI tool to generate discussion questions using a fictional program description. The director would then select, revise, or discard the suggestions based on the team’s needs.

That is different from uploading a family’s complaint and asking AI to decide how the program should respond. The latter involves sensitive information, context, and a relationship that requires direct human attention.

SET BOUNDARIES AND SUPPORT STAFF

Before staff use AI for program work, establish a few clear expectations. A practical starting policy can identify:

- Approved tools and uses
- Information that must not be entered into unapproved tools
- Guidance about who reviews materials before they are shared
- Ideas about when staff should stop and ask for guidance
- Information regarding who is responsible for reviewing vendor practices and policy changes

For routine drafting, use fictional examples whenever possible. Removing a name alone does not necessarily make information appropriate to share. Review whether the remaining details could identify a person.

Tool approval should include review of the vendor's contract, privacy protections, storage practices, and use of submitted content. Do not assume that a paid account or a product described as "private" automatically meets the program's needs. Treat this review as a program safeguard and consult applicable requirements before approving sensitive uses.

Introduce these expectations through practice rather than policy alone. Invite staff to try one approved task and discuss:

- What was useful?
- What needed correcting?
- Did the tool save time after review and revision?
- What would we do differently next time?

A successful trial is not necessarily one that produces a usable result. It may help the team identify a task that is better completed without AI.

REVIEW BEFORE YOU SHARE

Treat AI-generated material as a draft, not as verified information or professional advice. A polished response still needs review. For example, an educator might use AI to draft a newsletter about classroom routines. Before sharing it, the educator should confirm that the draft describes actual practices, communicates clearly, and welcomes the program's families. A well-written statement about a practice that the classroom does not follow is still inaccurate.

Use this review routine:

1. Accuracy: Are the facts, dates, procedures, and requirements correct?
2. Privacy: Does the material contain sensitive or identifying information?
3. Inclusion: Does it make assumptions about families, languages, abilities, or circumstances?

4. Fit: Does it reflect the program's practices and community?
5. Accountability: Who has reviewed and approved the final version?

Apply additional care when drafting or translating material in a language you do not read fluently. Establish a review process with someone qualified to assess meaning, especially for communications involving health, safety, consent, rights, or program requirements. Human review should connect the material to the people it is intended to support, not simply correct its spelling.

TAKE ONE NEXT STEP

Choose one low-risk task, identify the boundaries, and decide how the results will be reviewed. After the trial, determine whether to continue, revise the approach, or stop.

Questions for reflection:

- What task could AI help us begin without replacing relationships or professional judgment?
- What information must remain outside unapproved tools?
- How will we know whether the tool improved the work?

Thoughtful AI use begins with a clear purpose. It continues through leaders who remain responsible for the information they share and the decisions they make.

RESOURCES FOR FURTHER EXPLORATION

Federal Trade Commission. *Complying with COPPA: Frequently Asked Questions*. Information about children's online privacy requirements and their application to covered services.

<https://www.ftc.gov/business-guidance/resources/complying-coppa-frequently-asked-questions>

U.S. Department of Education. *Guidance on the Use of Federal Grant Funds to Improve Education Outcomes Using Artificial Intelligence (AI)*. Guidance on responsible educational implementation and applicable grant-funded uses. <https://www.ed.gov/media/document/oepd-ai-dear-colleague-letter-7222025-110427.pdf>

U.S. Equal Employment Opportunity Commission. *What Is the EEOC's Role in AI?* An overview of employment discrimination concerns involving AI. https://www.eeoc.gov/sites/default/files/2024-04/20240429_What%20is%20the%20EEOCs%20role%20in%20AI.pdf

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