

**Early Childhood Education
Professional Training Handbook**



**MOUNTAIN
TRAILS**

Early Childhood Education Center

Clear Creek County, Colorado





Early Childhood Education Professional Training Handbook

3 Section I: Welcome and Introduction

- Welcome Message
- The Mountain Trails Difference
- How to Use This Handbook

5 Section II: The ECE Profession in Colorado

- Why ECE Matters
- Professional Pathways

7 Section III: Professional License/Ongoing Professional Growth & Support

- Initial Licensing in Colorado
- Background Checks
- Professional Development
- What is Colorado Shines and How to Use It?
- Substitute Teacher

12 Section IV: Home Childcare & Qualified Exempt Providers

- Home Childcare Providers: A Community Support Network
- Family, Friend, and Neighbor (FFN) Care
- Additional Training Resources

16 Section V: Resources and Support

- Community Resources
- State and National Resources

18 Section VI: Next Steps

- Pioneer Learning Network
- Mountain Trails Early Childhood Education update

20 Section VII: References

21 Contact



Section I: Welcome and Introduction

Welcome to the **Mountain Trails Early Childhood Professional Training Handbook**, your guide to a rewarding and impactful career working with young children. This handbook is designed to equip you with the essential knowledge, skills, and strategies needed to become an early childhood educator. We believe that a strong foundation in a child's early years is crucial for their future success, and we are excited to help you explore the many pathways available in this field. Funding for this work is provided by the Buell Foundation, Freeport-McMoran Foundation, and Clear Creek County.

Who is Mountain Trails Early Childhood Education Center?

At Mountain Trails Early Childhood Education Center (Mountain Trails), our mission is to provide exceptional early childhood education driven by a team of passionate and highly qualified educators. Located within the newly constructed Carlson Elementary School, Mountain Trails will serve as both a fully licensed early childhood education center and a community resource hub. We're not just operating a center—we're elevating early childhood education throughout Clear Creek County by supporting aspiring and current early childhood educators and providers, including home based care.

The Mountain Trails Difference

Mountain Trails is a dedicated resource for early childhood educators in Clear Creek County, designed to support you at every stage of your career. We understand the unique challenges and opportunities of working in this mountain community. Our mission is to provide hands-on support for professional growth, including guidance on navigating Colorado's certification process, access to continuing education, and community

resources. We are committed to fostering a strong network of skilled and passionate educators, ensuring that every child in our county has the best possible start in life.

We Provide:

- **Complete Certification Support:** Step-by-step guidance through state requirements.
- **Financial Assistance:** Access to scholarships, grants, and tuition support.
- **Hands-On Training:** Internships and practicum hours at our center.
- **Childcare During Training:** Support for your family while you learn.
- **Employment:** A pathway to become a licensed educator.
- **Ongoing Professional Development:** Continuous learning opportunities and career advancement.

How to Use This Handbook

This handbook is designed to be your comprehensive guide and a dynamic resource throughout your journey as an early childhood educator. It's more than just a document to be read once; think of it as a toolkit that you can return to again and again.

Here are some tips for how to use this guide:

1. **It's Your Personal Reference:** We encourage you to highlight key information, jot down notes in the margins, and use it as a log for your own professional development. The more you personalize it, the more valuable it will become.
2. **Navigate by Your Needs:** The handbook is organized into sections, so you can easily find the information you need most at any given time.
 - Just starting out? Begin with Section II: The ECE Profession in Colorado to understand the basic requirements and career pathways.
 - Stuck on a licensing form or need professional advice? Turn to Section V: Resources and Support for specific guidance and contact information
3. **Connect with Mountain Trails:** Remember, this handbook is a starting point, not the end of the conversation. The most important tool at your disposal is the team at Mountain Trails. If you have questions, need personalized advice, or want to explore a specific topic further, use the contact information in the final section to reach out. We are here to support you every step of the way.



Section II: The ECE Profession in Colorado

Why ECE Matters

Early childhood education (ECE) is vital in Colorado for several reasons that impact children, families, and the state's economy. The state is a significant **child care desert**, meaning there are not enough licensed spots for the children who need them. This shortage hinders workforce participation for parents, particularly mothers, and costs Colorado billions of dollars in lost wages and productivity.

High-quality ECE programs are a powerful tool for preparing children for school by fostering cognitive and social-emotional skills. They are also crucial for closing achievement gaps for children from low-income families and those facing other barriers. To combat these issues, Colorado has a number of initiatives in place, including the **Universal Preschool (UPK)** program and efforts to build a strong ECE workforce. Organizations and training programs are essential to help recruit and retain the skilled and passionate educators needed to meet the demand and ensure every child has a strong start.

Professional Pathways

There are several rewarding professional pathways you can take in early childhood education (ECE). These roles offer different levels of responsibility, independence, and focus. Here's an overview of some common career paths:

- **Lead Teacher:** The primary educator in a classroom, responsible for creating and implementing daily curriculum, assessing children's progress, and communicating with parents.
- **Assistant Teacher:** Supports the lead teacher, helping with daily activities, supervising children, and managing classroom logistics. This is a great starting point for those new to the field.

- **Child Care Center Director:** Responsible for the overall administration of a child care facility, including managing staff, overseeing the budget, and ensuring compliance with licensing regulations.
- **Home Care Provider:** A licensed provider who operates a child care program out of their own home. This path offers a high degree of independence and requires a broad skill set in both education and business.
- **Family, Friend, and Neighbor (FFN):** In Colorado, FFN refers to the [qualified exempt from licensing](#) individuals who care for four or fewer children in a home setting.
- **Substitute Teacher:** A substitute teacher is a person who teaches an ece class when the regular teacher is absent or unavailable;

Beyond these core roles, ECE professionals can specialize in areas like:

- **Special Education:** Working with young children who have special needs.
- **Curriculum Development:** Designing educational materials and programs.
- **Family Support Specialist:** Aiding families in accessing resources and services.

High School Pathway to ECE Careers

A high school student cannot fully qualify as a licensed Early Childhood Teacher (ECT) in Colorado, as the requirements for that role are substantial. However, they can become a qualified assistant teacher by using a concurrent enrollment program at a community college like Red Rocks. This is also an excellent way to get a head start on the credits and experience needed to become a lead teacher after high school.

Assistant Teacher Pathway at Red Rocks Community College

The most direct route for a high school student is to complete a [college-level certificate program](#) while still in high school. Through Red Rocks Community College's [concurrent enrollment program](#), students can take classes and earn both high school and college credits at the same time.

To become a qualified assistant teacher, a student must:

- **Enroll in the program:** Work with their high school counselor to apply for concurrent enrollment courses. The high school will often cover the tuition.
- **Complete courses:** The core requirement is to complete the 6-credit **Early Childhood Assistant Teacher** certificate, which includes courses like "Introduction to Early Childhood Education" and "Guidance Strategies for Young Children."
- **Pass a background check:** A background check is mandatory for anyone working in a licensed child care facility.
- **Gain experience:** While taking classes, students should seek opportunities to complete an internship, volunteer, or work part-time in a licensed child care center.



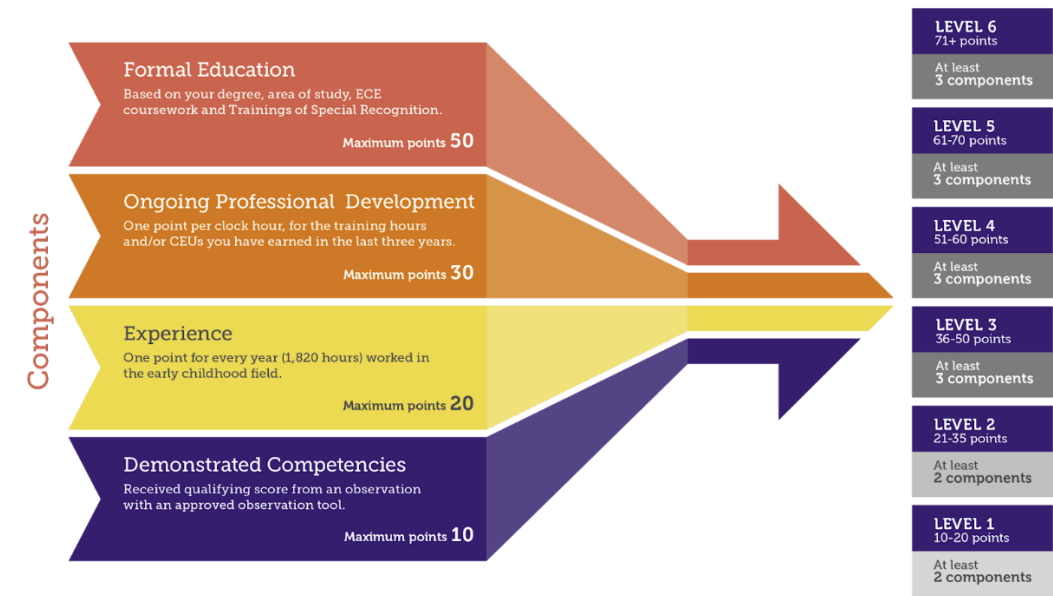
Section III: Professional License and Ongoing Professional Growth & Support

Be sure to reach out to **Mountain Trails** at any point in this process! We are prepared to support you step-by-step.

Initial Licensing in Colorado

Unlike other educator licensing which is managed by the Colorado Department of Education (CDE), the Colorado Department of Early Childhood (CDEC) manages the Early Childhood Teacher (ECT) licensing process. While CDEC manages the overall process, license candidates will work through their employer or a resource such as Mountain Trails to verify qualifications.

Introduction to the Early Childhood Professional Credential 3.0



Steps to getting your Initial Early Childhood License.

1. **Meet the Qualifications:** You must meet one of the state's [official pathways](#) for qualification, which typically involves a combination of college coursework and verified experience. The [CDEC website](#) provides detailed charts and information on these pathways.
2. **Use the [Colorado Shines PDIS](#):** You'll create an account on the **Professional Development Information System (PDIS)**, which is managed by CDEC. This is where you'll upload your official transcripts, document your work experience, and complete required training like CPR and First Aid. The PDIS serves as your personal portfolio.
3. **Employer Verification:** Your employer (a licensed child care center director or licensing specialist) will be the one to review and verify your documents. Once they confirm you meet the requirements, they will enter your qualifications into the state's system.
4. **Receive Your Certificate:** After your qualifications are verified, you'll be able to access a digital Early Childhood Teacher Certificate through your PDIS account, which serves as your official proof of qualification.

Background Checks

To ensure the safety and well-being of children in licensed care, the CDEC requires all license applicants “... to participate in a criminal background check, a child abuse and neglect records check as well, previous state(s) of residence, state criminal history check, state sex offender registry check, and state child abuse and neglect check” (CO Department of Early Childhood, Background Checks, 2025). More information can be found on the CDEC [website](#).

According to the CDEC Criminal Background Check FAQ-Who is required to complete a criminal background check? (CDEC, 2025)

- “Every applicant for an original child care license
- Every adult (18 or older) who resides at a licensed child care family child care home or a non-relative qualified exempt family home
- Every individual 16 or older whose activities involve the care or supervision of children or who has unsupervised access to children”

Professional Development

Professional growth and support are vital to ensuring high-quality care and a stable workforce. It improves the quality of care, enhances child outcomes, meets state licensing standards, and helps educators stay current with the latest research.

Required Training:

Before you begin working with children, you must complete specific CDEC requirements:

- **Pre-Service Training:** Must be completed before you start working.
- **Orientation Training:** Must be completed within 30 days of employment.

For Centers: [View licensing training requirements](#)

For Home Care: [Requirements for Family Child Care Homes](#)

To meet annual clock hour requirements (15 hours), all licensed providers must complete **12 clock hours** of training focused on eight core competencies, including health, safety, and professional development. Additionally, **three clock hours** must be focused on social-emotional development.

What is Colorado Shines and How to Use It

The Colorado Shines Professional Development Information System (PDIS) provides essential tools and training to help anyone caring for young children. Designed to assist professionals and family members alike, the program aims to enhance skills, support healthy child development, and help individuals advance their careers, whether they are working toward a child care license, improving their program's quality, or simply seeking to grow their knowledge.

The Colorado Shines [Professional Development Information System](#) (PDIS) offers a broad array of e-learning courses addressing all aspects of child development, health and safety, and quality instruction. PDIS is designed to support a variety of early childhood professionals at all levels of experience and education.

The Professional Development Information System (PDIS) is a free, online resource designed to help early childhood professionals in Colorado advance their careers. It offers a flexible, self-paced learning environment where you can access high-quality courses created by local experts. Using PDIS allows you to earn professional credentials, customize your learning to meet specific career goals, and maintain a permanent record of all your training and qualifications, making it an essential tool for professional growth and documentation.

Click [here](#) to access the PDIS Log In page. Then click on the Learning and Training Support [Link](#) to dive into resources and instructions about the training requirements, professional development resources.

Substitute Early Childhood Education Teacher

Why become a substitute teacher?

Want to make a real difference in the lives of children while gaining a flexible schedule and valuable career experience? Become a substitute teacher!

When teachers need time off for any reason, from professional development to family emergencies, it's the substitute teacher who steps up to ensure learning doesn't stop. It's a critical role that keeps our early childhood centers and programs running smoothly, and it's a job filled with rewards.

Serving as a substitute teacher offers a **flexible schedule** that you can control, making it an ideal way to **earn extra money** while working. Beyond the practical benefits, the role is **fun and rewarding**, providing the chance to **make a positive difference** in a child's life and **enhance valuable career skills** like leadership and communication. Make a difference in children's lives—become a substitute teacher!

If you are ready to learn how you can start your journey as a substitute teacher, contact Mountain Trails and make a lasting impact in your community.

How to become an early childhood education substitute

To become an early childhood education (ECE) substitute teacher in Colorado, you must meet the qualifications for either a child care center substitute or a public school district substitute, as these roles have different requirements.

For Child Care Centers (Birth to 5)

To substitute in a licensed child care center, you need to meet the qualifications set by the Colorado Department of Early Childhood (CDEC). The exact requirements depend on the specific role you will be filling, but generally, you need to:

- Be at least 18 years old.
- Pass a criminal background check and a child abuse and neglect records check through the CDEC.
- Complete specific preservice courses before you can work with children.
 - Preservice Training
 - ECE Centers [pre-service training courses](#)
 - Home Care [pre-service training courses](#).

This includes training in areas like:

- Child Abuse and Neglect Recognition and Reporting

- Standard Precautions (prevention of infectious diseases)
 - Prevention of Sudden Infant Death Syndrome (SIDS) and Safe Sleep Practices (if working with infants)
 - First Aid and CPR certification
 - Prevention of Shaken Baby Syndrome and Abusive Head Trauma (if **working with children under three**)
- Register in the Colorado Shines Professional Development Information System (PDIS), which tracks your training and professional development.

For Public School Districts (Pre-K)

If you want to substitute in a public school's preschool program, you must obtain a substitute authorization from the [Colorado Department of Education \(CDE\)](#). This is a separate process from the CDEC and allows you to work in public schools, BOCES, and charter schools.

The CDE offers three types of substitute authorizations based on your education:

- 1-Year Authorization: Requires a high school diploma or its equivalent. You must also attest to having successful experience working with children.
- 3-Year Authorization: Requires a bachelor's degree or higher from a regionally accredited college or university.
- 5-Year Authorization: Requires a current or expired Colorado teaching license (or a teaching license from another state).

The application process for any of these authorizations typically involves:

- Submitting fingerprints to the Colorado Bureau of Investigation (CBI) for a background check.
- Creating an account and applying through the CDE's COOL (Colorado Online Licensing) system.

After receiving your authorization, you must then apply directly to individual school districts for substitute positions and complete their hiring process, which may include additional training.



Section IV: Home & Qualified Exempt Providers

Home Childcare Providers: A Community Support Network

Running a home childcare or small center can be challenging. **Mountain Trails** is your resource for professional growth, certification support, and curriculum enhancement.

What is Home Child Care?

Early childhood education (ECE) home care, is a licensed form of ECE that takes place in a provider's private home. Home care providers are licensed by the state and must meet specific requirements to ensure the health and safety of the children they care for. Home care providers are licensed by the state and must meet specific requirements to ensure the health and safety of the children they care for. (This is different from "Family, Friends, and Neighbor" (FFN) care, which is qualified exempt and not subject to the same regulations.)

Professional Certifications:

Training for licensed home care providers goes beyond child development to include the specific operational and safety needs of running a business in your home. This type of training is necessary for meeting licensing requirements and ensuring high-quality care.

Professional Certifications qualifications and requirements can be found on the Colorado Department of Early Childhood (CDEC) [website](#).

Background Checks: Once the Home Care provider has completed all the requirements and submitted the licensing package to the Division of Early Care and Learning, at the CO Department of Early Childhood, the provider will be given instructions for completing [background checks](#).

Required Training Beyond Initial Licensing:

To get and maintain a license, you'll need to complete specific training, much of it available through the Colorado Shines PDIS.

- **Pre-Licensing Training:** A comprehensive course covering child development, health, safety, and business practices.
- **Health and Safety:** You must be certified in **First Aid and CPR** and complete training on **Standard Precautions**.
- **Abuse Prevention:** You must complete training on the prevention of **Abusive Head Trauma** and the **recognition and reporting of child abuse and neglect**.
- **Medication Administration:** If you plan to administer medication, a separate, approved training is required.

Where to Find Training and Information in Colorado for Home Care providers

- [Mountain Trails](#) Mountain Trails provides Home Care providers with comprehensive support, offering training on provider licensing, business management, curriculum enhancement, effective family communication, and how to use the Colorado Shines rating system to grow their programs.
- The Colorado Shines [Professional Development Information System \(PDIS\)](#): This free online system, managed by the state, offers many courses on health, safety, and child development that are valuable for all caregivers. Specific courses that might be beneficial are listed [here](#).
- Training Requirements for Family Child Care Homes can be found [here](#)
- Colorado Department of Early Childhood ([CDEC](#))
- CDEC [BUSINESS GUIDE](#) For Family Child Care Homes
- Early Childhood Councils: Local early childhood councils and other non-profit organizations, often offer free or low-cost training workshops for providers. The [Triad Early Learning Council](#) services Clear Creek County. The [Expanding Early Care and Learning in Clear Creek](#) (EECL) is a non-profit organization in Clear Creek county that offers early learning support.

Family, Friend, and Neighbor (FFN) Care

In Colorado, **Family, Friend, and Neighbor (FFN)** refers to individuals who are exempt from licensing and care for four or fewer children in a home setting. FFNs are a vital part of the state's childcare landscape, especially in "child care deserts" like Clear Creek County. Mountain Trails is a valuable resource that will benefit FFNs.

While FFN care is **qualified exempt**, training on key topics is highly recommended to ensure a child's health and safety.

Helpful Training Topics:

- **Child Development and Milestones:** Understand how children grow and learn at different ages.
- **Health and Safety:** Learn **First Aid, CPR, Safe Sleep Practices, and Infection Control.**
- **Social-Emotional Development:** Understand how to manage a child's emotions and behavior.
- **Recognizing and Reporting Child Abuse and Neglect:** Learn the signs of abuse and the proper procedures for reporting it.
- **Early Literacy and Learning:** Learn simple, low-cost activities like reading aloud and play-based learning.

Where to Find FFN Training

- For training guidance and support, start with **Mountain Trails** which offers
 - **Professional Development:** Workshops, training sessions, and continuing education opportunities
 - **Curriculum Resources:** Age-appropriate learning materials and activity guides
 - **Best Practices Sharing:** Expertise from our experienced team on safety, regulations, and enrichment
 - **Networking Opportunities:** Connect with other providers for collaboration and support
 - **Child Development Guidance:** Training on developmental milestones and individualized care approaches



Additional Training Resources

- The Colorado Shines [Professional Development Information System \(PDIS\)](#): This free online system, managed by the state, offers many courses on health, safety, and child development that are valuable for all caregivers. Specific courses that might be beneficial for FFNs are listed [here](#).
- Colorado Department of Early Childhood ([CDEC](#)): The CDEC has an FFN Advisory Council and a training and grant program dedicated to supporting family, friend, and neighbor caregivers. These initiatives focus on providing resources and training that are both culturally and linguistically appropriate for diverse communities. Type in Family, Friend and Neighbor in the search bar at CDEC for more information.
- Early Childhood Councils: Local early childhood councils and other non-profit organizations, often offer free or low-cost training workshops tailored to unlicensed providers. The [Triad Early Learning Council](#) services Clear Creek County. The [Expanding Early Care and Learning in Clear Creek](#) (EECL) is a non-profit organization in Clear Creek county that offers early learning supports.
- Public Libraries: Many libraries across the state have programs and resources designed to help FFN caregivers with early literacy and learning activities. In Clear Creek, connect with the [Clear Creek County Library District](#) for helpful resources.
- [FFN Text Channel](#): Get Resources, Support, and Connection



Section V: Resources & Support

Community Resources

Here are some organizations that provide valuable services and support for our early childhood community.

- **Mountain Trails Key Contacts:** Mitch Houston, Executive Director Clear Creek Schools Foundation, mitch.houston@ccsdre1.org ; Becky Dancer, Director of Learning Initiatives Clear Creek Schools Foundation, becky.dancer@ccsdre1.org
- **Expanding Early Care and Learning in Clear Creek (EECL):** A local non-profit offering early learning support.
- **Triad Early Learning Council:** A resource for professional development and training.
- **Red Rocks Community College:** Information on ECE programs and concurrent enrollment.
- Clear Creek Metropolitan Recreation District [CCMRD](#)

State and National Resources

These state and national organizations provide important resources for early childhood development and education.

- **Early Milestones:** Early Milestones Colorado is a nonprofit organization that advances success for young children by accelerating innovation, the use of best practices, and systemic change.
- **Triad Bright Futures:** Triad Bright Futures is a collaborative partnership dedicated to advancing quality, equitable early childhood experiences for families in Jefferson, Gilpin, and Clear Creek counties.

- [CDEC](#): The Colorado Department of Early Childhood (CDEC) is a state agency responsible for ensuring a high-quality, equitable, and comprehensive early childhood system for young children and their families, including the administration of Colorado's Universal Preschool program.
- [Colorado Early Learning and Development Guidelines](#): The Early Learning and Development Guidelines describe the path of a child's learning and development from birth to 8 years old.
- [National Early Childhood Organizations](#): A comprehensive site that catalogs national organizations, programs, and services that support early learning professionals in their efforts to provide high-quality early care and education.





Section VI: Next Steps

Coming Soon - Are you ready to make a real impact on early childhood development?

Join us at Mountain Trails to become one of our first participants! We will be forming our **pioneer learning network** beginning in Fall 2025. Help us to create a strong foundation for training new early childhood educators, developing a strong substitute teacher pool and offering informal support to home-base providers and family, friend, and neighbor caregivers.

By being part of the group, you will gain access to immediate support and resources. Your participation and feedback will be vital in shaping this initiative for future participants.

Through our program, participants will receive a training guide and dedicated support to get started, along with valuable resources such as stipends, technology, and childcare while you are learning. In return, you will be asked to provide feedback that helps us continually improve the program.



Ready to get started?

Contact us today to learn more and become a key part of our launch!

Mountain Trails Key Contact: Becky Dancer, Director of Learning Initiatives, Clear Creek Schools Foundation, becky.dancer@ccsdre1.org

Next Steps for Mountain Trails Early Childhood Education

Mountain Trails is within reach, but a significant funding hurdle remains. With about half of the necessary funds secured, we face a \$2 million construction gap that must be closed before the center can welcome families. At the same time, we are preparing to grow educator networks that will expand the number of skilled early learning professionals in our community.

These next steps—closing the construction funding gap and building educator networks—are how we move from vision to reality. Together, we can create a place *where young children thrive and educators grow*.

Stay connected:



Scan the QR code to follow our progress and learn how you can support this work.

Learn More:

Visit MountainTrailsKids.com.



Section VII: References

Background checks. (August 22, 2025) Colorado Department of Early Childhood.
<https://cdec.colorado.gov/for-providers/background-checks>

Childcare innovations. (August, 10,2025) Red Rocks Community College.
<https://www.rrcc.edu/child-care-innovations>

Concurrent enrollment. (May 20, 2025). Red Rocks Community College.
<https://www.rrcc.edu/apply/concurrent-enrollment>

For Professionals. (August 18, 2025) Colorado Shines. <https://www.coloradoshines.com/>
High school relations. (May 20, 2025) Red Rocks Community College.
<https://www.rrcc.edu/high-school-relations>

Learn about credentials. (August 17, 2025). Colorado Shines PDIS.
<https://www.coloradoshinespdis.com/s/Learn-About-Credential-Offerings>

Learning and training support. (August 19, 2025). Colorado Shines PDIS.
<https://www.coloradoshinespdis.com/s/learning-training-support>

Legal Exemption from Child Care Licensing. (8/25/2025). Colorado Department of Early Childhood.
<https://cdec.colorado.gov/for-providers/legal-exemption-from-child-care-licensing>

Professional Pathways Program. (August 17, 2025). Mountain Trails Early Childhood Education..
<https://www.clearcreekkids.org/professional-pathways-program>

Qualifications. (August 18, 2025). Colorado Department of Early Childhood.
<https://cdec.colorado.gov/for-providers/qualifications>

Step Into Substitute Teaching. (8/25/2025). Colorado Department of Education.
<https://www.cde.state.co.us/educatortalent/stepintosubstituteteaching>

Support, resources and guides. (August 20, 2025). Colorado Department of Early Childhood.
<https://cdec.colorado.gov/for-providers/support-resources-and-guides>

Training. (August 21, 2025). Colorado Department of Early Childhood.
<https://cdec.colorado.gov/for-providers/training>



MOUNTAIN TRAILS

Early Childhood Education Center

Where curiosity climbs and
our youngest learners thrive



MountainTrailsKids.com

Physical Address:

420 Colorado Highway 103, Idaho Springs, CO 80452

Mountain Trails Key Contacts:

Mitch Houston

Executive Director, Clear Creek Schools Foundation

mitch.houston@ccsdre1.org

Becky Dancer

Director of Learning Initiatives, Clear Creek Schools Foundation

becky.dancer@ccsdre1.org

This handbook summarizes key information for early childhood professionals in Colorado. Regulations change regularly, and some requirements may not be covered here. For the most up-to-date information, please refer to the Colorado Department of Early Childhood (CDEC) and Colorado Shines websites.