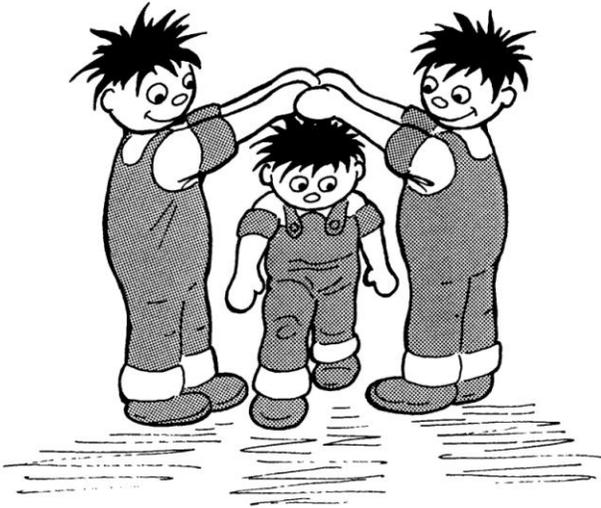


One Child at a Time



As an early childhood professional, you already know that young children are eager, active learners who come to your program ready to play. For some children, however, there may be obstacles in your environment that get in the way of playing. These obstacles may include physical barriers such as stairs, uneven surfaces, or narrow walkways. More often, children's full participation is limited by more subtle obstacles. Coat hooks may be placed too high. There may be too few toys and materials or toys and materials are hidden in cupboards or boxes. Some programs have poorly defined play spaces with too little room to maneuver. Others offer toys that are hard to grasp, give too little time to accomplish a task, or have paper towels that are too hard to pull out!

To truly individualize for young children, the early childhood setting should not only be barrier-free but child-centered. Child-centered environments enable children to meaningfully and play-

fully explore their surroundings. In many ways, an environment individualized for each child serves as an private invitation—a personal message that says, "This space is just for you."

You can extend this invitation, allow children to become fully engaged in play, and help them overcome obstacles related to play materials and room arrangement by looking at the environment from their perspective. Try to visualize how your program environment and your play materials look to each child currently enrolled. This approach works whether you have a single room or several, a large playground or small grassy yard, new toys or old favorites, established learning centers or shelves in a basement play room of your home.

While it is possible that many areas of your program already accommodate a particular child's needs, perhaps you are wondering what to do and where to go when you see the need for change. After all, simply recognizing a need is the first step in the process of improving your situation. Some solutions become obvious as you focus your attention on a specific issue. You are likely to get the best solutions from watching the child! If you know a child's abilities, interests, and preferences you can invite him into play by using that information.

When you find solutions, how do you implement them? You will need to make notes of your observations, identify strategies that might work, and formulate a plan. For example, "Summer has her own cubby, but the coat hook needs to be lowered so she can hang up her own coat." Some ideas for changes may pose particular challenges. Children can only participate when you look beyond limitations and allow them the same experiences as their peers.

There are no right or wrong answers and no ready formulas. Your task is to find individual solutions to help each child participate in typical routines and activities. Solutions may be as simple as placing toys on lower shelves or adapting a toy to make it appropriate for a child's developmental needs. Talk with the child's family, therapists, and other early childhood professionals for additional suggestions. Your goal is to create an environment in which the child has access to your play areas and play materials. Be flexible enough to try several different ideas, watching carefully to see which ones help the child play in each area. Let the child show you what works and what does not.

Try It Out

When you identify a barrier to a child's participation in a routine or activity area, you may need help to come up with a ready solution to address the special interests and needs of the child. You can get help with ideas by:

- ▶ problem-solving with the child's parents, early intervention or special education specialists, and therapists
- ▶ searching written and Internet resources for ideas or strategies
- ▶ brainstorming with colleagues and staff members

When you expand your resources and get input from others, you may come up with surprising and creative solutions, for example: plant hanger extensions to lower coat hooks, a multi-pocket shoe storage hanger on the back of the door for cubbies, symbols instead of name tags, name tags above as well as below the cubby or coat hook, enlarged letters. . . .

Individualizing for each child adds a singularly exciting and creative element to early childhood teaching. Seeing children's increased exploration and engagement is highly reinforcing and very rewarding!

A Child Care Provider's Question

QUESTION: *In my preschool, I used to teach kids as a group doing different crafts, finger plays, and projects. Now I've made changes in the schedule and environment to offer longer play time. The kids seem busy and productive, but I feel like I'm not really teaching anymore. What am I supposed to do while kids play?*

ANSWER: By extending child-directed play time and working to use your environment to invite children to play, you have taken an incredible step toward creating a more developmentally appropriate experience for every child in your program. Feeling uncomfortable with your new role is only natural as you take this risk and make a change.

It may help you to fully understand what it means to be a facilitator of play—a role that may clash with past expectations of what "good" teachers should be doing. As a facilitator of play, your role is to evaluate the effectiveness of the play environment, assess each child's engagement and learning, provide support, and make changes as needed. To facilitate children's play, you:

- observe how children interact with toys and each other
- document children's social, emotional, physical, and cognitive growth
- encourage children's play with attention and thoughtful comments to guide and expand their thinking
- supply additional props based on children's emerg-

ing ideas, interests, and needs

- introduce new concepts or vocabulary relevant to the play, either instantly or during a later opportunity
- play briefly to demonstrate a novel use of toys and materials
- assume a temporary role in small group play to redirect or help an uncertain child join a group
- ensure that the play environment is engaging and meeting the needs of each child
- keep notes about what is seen and frequently use the information to adapt materials, expand the play environment, and develop related activities

As you become familiar with implementing these practices, facilitating is likely to become just as rewarding as more direct teaching methods. In the process, you will be providing a well-designed environment that allows each child to be self-directed in individualized and meaningful play.

