

Child Care plus*

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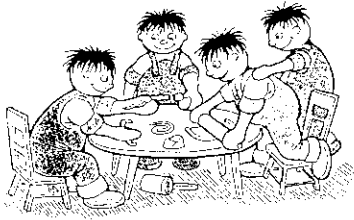
Supporting Inclusion in Early Childhood Settings

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+ It's All In The Doing

It is no surprise to most early childhood professionals that children learn from doing. Yet many traditional group activities still focus on achieving a final *product*. If we really believe that children learn from being immersed in play experiences that encourage them to keep playing, then curriculum activity planning should be focused more on *process*.

Recently, we watched a group of three-year-olds during an activity involving coloring, cutting, and pasting. At first, it looked like these highly competent children were engaged in a fun art project. However, a closer look revealed that this activity was actually a test of their ability to follow directions and make a snowman with wiggly eyes. Children received frequent feedback about what to do next and coaching on how to do it best. Among other things, we saw children who could not keep up, children who became frustrated with trying to follow the directions, and one charming young man who simply gave up. The creations of the children who finished looked remarkably similar.



Young children have many opportunities to practice following directions. What is needed are opportunities to practice doing, discovering, and learning. Imagine how a child with a developmental challenge would have participated in this art activity. Think about how hard it might be to keep up with the other children or how different the finished product may look. More importantly, think about the learning experience that has been missed.

Children learn best when they enjoy what they are doing and when the activity itself is exciting and engaging. They do not learn from being frustrated or from being told or shown exactly what to do. In any group of children it is important to engage each child in *active* learning. When children with disabilities are in the group, it becomes even more important.

Why are cute craft ideas so popular? One reason is that crafts can easily be taken home to show parents what children are doing, and children do take pride in having completed a cute picture or puppet. But "cookie cutter"

projects overlook one important thing. Young children learn best when the materials themselves allow them to make discoveries at their own pace. Raw materials like water, clay, sand, paper, and glue take the child on a journey of learning that is different every time. Each child playing at the water table may do quite different things and make unique discoveries all their own. Rather than being told what to do, each child has the opportunity to direct his or her own learning. These activities are called open-ended, because no one really knows what the finished product (if there is one) will look like. And no one really cares! The final product is not the learning goal of the activity. The beauty—and value—of the activity is the learning that happens in the process.

What do open-ended activities look like? Imagine a group of three-year-olds gathered a table with scraps of wood of different shapes, markers, glue, and paper. Each child begins by playing with the wood—feeling, stacking, and fitting it together. One child glues several pieces together; another writes on a flat scrap. One child sorts and stacks pieces. One by one, each finishes. Each child has learned something different from these fascinating materials.

The richness of this activity comes from children's active involvement in discovering, creating, and building. The direction each child took with the materials was his or her choice. If you offer paper, pre-cut snowflakes, and glue, children complete pictures of snowflakes that all look very similar. If you offer glue, paper, styrofoam pieces, white paper, and scissors, each child creates a unique representation of their current interests and past experiences. + SAM

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+ MAKING IT WORK

Amazing Water Play

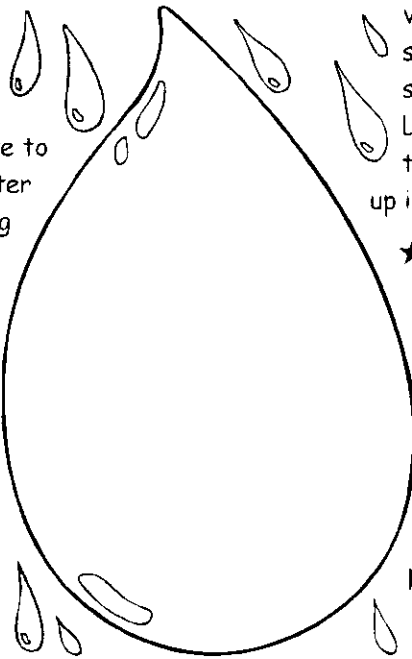
One of the best examples of open-ended learning is water play. This sensory material is like a magnet for children. It appeals to all ages and ability levels and children love to play with water over and over again. Water play has many possibilities for discovering new concepts but, just like any other learning activity, there are tricks that help ensure that the activity is productive and meaningful for each child. Here are ideas for turning water play into amazing play.

★ Be sure that each child can comfortably access the water. Experiment with using pans and tubs when it is difficult for some children to reach the water table. These containers can be grouped on a table or a wheelchair tray designed for two.

★ Vary the color of the water using a small amount of food coloring, beet juice, or commercially available tablets which turn the water different colors.

★ Vary the texture of the water. A small amount of vegetable oil can make the water more slippery feeling. Unflavored gelatin makes the water thicker.

★ Add sponges of different sizes and shapes along with



tongs. You can purchase a few really big sponges and cut them into fun shapes or buy a bag of odd-shaped sponges. Be sure that you have enough sponges so that each child can have several. Look for variety in color, size, and thickness. Then

visit the kitchen section of a discount or second-hand store (or a restaurant supply store) and stock up on a variety of tongs. Look for tongs with short handles and tongs that move easily. Often they are used to pick up ice cubes or in restaurant salad bars.

★ Add pieces of large-diameter clear vinyl tubing (available at the hardware store), a few small toys that will slide through the tubing, and one-cup measuring cups with spouts or small pitchers. Let children discover ways to pour the water and toys through the tubing.

★ When selecting accessories for water play, choose enough so that every child can have one with one or two more to spare. This facilitates cooperation and allows children to focus on playing not on securing and keeping their toys. Consider age, interests, and abilities of each child and choose accessories that appeal to each one. It is particularly important that the activity include something that each child *can* do and *wants* to do.

Each time you add a new interest, be available to observe, listen to the children, provide new vocabulary, and extend their interests in other similar activities. + SAM

+ NOTES FROM HOME

Everybody Really Can Do It

I want to tell child care providers about what happened to my son when his provider started using more open-ended play at her program. Kithetheesyo is 5 years old and looks forward to playing with the kids at day care. However, the provider noticed a sense of frustration when he participated in table activities. These activities were often craft projects, like making sack puppets or cutting out shapes to make things like animals. Kithetheesyo would jump right in ready to do a project with the other kids, but by the end of the activity he was always frustrated. Often most of the children would finish their project and move on, leaving him working alone just to get something done so he could join them. She felt that his self-esteem and sense of belonging in the group were starting to suffer.

Last month, our parent newsletter described her decision to restructure activities so they were more open-ended. She warned us there would be less artwork going home. I noticed the shift right away. Now Kithetheesyo takes my hand and shows me the toys he uses at the sand table or the huge finger-painted mural all the children worked on together. He shows me the photographs of children playing together during these activities. He names the children around him in the pictures and tells me his favorite part of each activity. The children are not taking home as many crafts, but I can tell that they seem to be interacting a lot and really engaging themselves. The provider thinks this has been a good change for all of the children, and we are both so happy with Kithetheesyo's renewed enthusiasm. (It may interest you to know that my son's name means "persistence" in our native language.) +

+ SPOTLIGHT: Spirit At Play Early Childhood Program

Parents want to know what their children do all day. When teachers use an approach which is process not product oriented, it can be challenging to find ways to keep parents informed. When you do not send home a craft project every afternoon, you have to look for other ways to let parents know about the amazing learning that has taken place. At Spirit at Play Early Childhood Program in Missoula, Montana, the staff are as creative as the children. They have found many ways to document children's learning.

Spirit at Play is a small child care center with 36 children and a teaching staff that includes Kelly (the director who also teaches), and four teachers (Judy, Sarah, Cathy Mae, and Alyson) These highly skilled women have different backgrounds, but they share a commitment to child-centered learning.

They work hard to educate and inform parents about the rich learning opportunities that take place each day. Here are some of the extraordinary ways that Spirit at Play documents changes in the children and helps parents find out about children's daily experiences.

How to Make Apple Cider by D

15 apples
You have to squeeze the apples in a apple machine and it makes apple cider.

TO MEASURE PROGRESS OVER TIME: Each fall, parents are given an index card and asked to have their child write his or her name. This card is then placed in the child's cubby as a label. In the spring, staff have the children write their name on another card and both cards are sent home to demonstrate changes in the children's writing skills and understanding of letters and words.

Each child has a journal, called "Bookworks," that they can use to draw or write in. Often, the staff suggests a particular idea or offers to assist the child in capturing an important thought or concept. These journals are

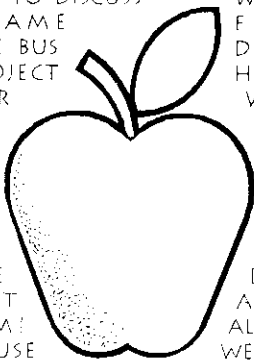
a collection of the children's work assembled throughout the year. Each fall, a new journal is begun.

TO DESCRIBE DAILY ACTIVITIES: Children's interactions and discussions during play are tape recorded, and the audiotapes are available for listening.

At the end of each day, a music stand is placed in the children's cubby room holding the program's "scrapbook," open to the current day's page (see illustration). This book contains one page for every single day. Teachers sit down with the children and write a story summarizing the day's events. Some days the children glue on treasures found on a walk; on other days, teachers record children's quotes. These pages are beautifully illustrated and prominently displayed so that parents cannot miss them. Parents often read the scrapbook page with their children at the end of the day and conversation begins . . .

CIDER-DAY

ON OUR WAY TO CIDER MAKING WE READ "THE GIVING TREE" TO DISCUSS WHERE OUR APPLES CAME FROM. WE CAUGHT THE BUS DOWN TO M.U.D. PROJECT HOUSE TO MAKE CIDER WITH M'S MOM. K. WE TAKE THE STEMS OFF THE APPLES. WE WASH THEM WELL. AND DROP THEM INTO THE GRINDER AFTER A LOT OF HARD WORK WE DRANK DELICIOUS SWEET APPLE CIDER. MMMMMM! ALSO AT THE MUD HOUSE WE GOT A TOUR OF THE GARDEN AND PICKED CARROTS AND A LITTLE EGGPLANT. THEY HAD A WONDERFUL FISH POND WE LOOKED AT. PLAYING ON THE TIRE SWINGS WAS ALSO A BIG TREAT. FOR LUNCH WE ORDERED MANY PIZZAS AND EVERYONE WHO HELPED WITH THE CIDER PROJECT WAS WELL FED!! THANKS TO M. S'S MOM FOR ALL HER HELP TODAY! THE KINDERGARTNERS HAD THEIR FIRST DAY AT BITTERROOT GYMNASIICS . . . WE CANT WAIT TO HEAR ABOUT WHAT THEY LEARNED!



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TO RECOGNIZE EACH CHILD'S CONTRIBUTIONS: Staff members regularly record quotes from the children which are written during activities. These are posted on a bulletin board in the entry way so that parents can read what their child had to say. One day, the cards gave each child's "recipe" for making apple cider. These were recorded after several days of experimenting with apples and making apple cider with a cider press.

M's Recipe

Put sugar in cereal and mix it up to make juice. Mix it again. Turn it into cider.

The examples included here are simple and creative. What is most exciting is that they are only a few of the many ways that the staff at Spirit at Play document the learning of the children in their program. +

SAM

For more information, please write Kelly Ellis, Spirit at Play Early Childhood Program, 130 South 6th East, Missoula, Montana, 59802, or call 406-728-7001.

+ What do I do when . . . ?

Question: *I've reduced the number of craft activities we do and now the parents aren't happy. They're asking why their child hasn't had anything to take home for so long, and they are even requesting favorite crafts I did in the past with their older children! What do I do now?*

Answer: Your program is changing in response to your observations and knowledge about how young children learn. You are also hearing evidence that parents are noticing these changes and they have concerns. This is an important time to communicate with parents—listening to their thoughts and concerns as well as sharing yours.

Recognizing the common interest you and the parents have in the well-being of their child is a good place to start. When parent and provider ideas about best practice for children differ, open and respectful communication can lead to a better understanding of the issues and support negotiation of solutions. As you listen closely to parent concerns about the process/product debate, you will probably hear three key issues emerging. First, crafts provide parents with a way of knowing how their children spent the day in your program. Finding a concrete object in their child's cubby connects parents with their child's day and even fosters parent/child communication as they marvel at the child's creation. Second, parents may view crafts as evidence that their child is actively engaged and learning in your program. Third, crafts can be important keepsakes for parents—little memories of childhood to pull out year after year as their child grows up. As these or other perspectives emerge, you can begin brainstorming solutions that meet your professional standards as well as address parent concerns. For example, make sure that open-ended products like easel paintings, rock collections, and glue creations make it to the children's cubbies so parents feel some connection with how their child spent the day. Writing a

weekly newsletter that highlights specific play materials that are available can also help meet this need for connection. Share professional reading materials and invite parents in to learn more about process-based learning. This approach may be new to parents and they may need reassurance that activity-based learning is an accepted professional practice and that their children truly are learning. Finally, identify alternative (and probably more meaningful) "keepers" to send home, like photographs of the children at play, child-initiated drawings (dates on the back are helpful), and children's dictated stories. +

SHW

+ RESOURCE REVIEW

Young Investigators: The Project Approach in the Early Years by Judy Harris Helm and Lilian Katz is a readable and extremely valuable book on how projects emerge, develop, and culminate in groups from toddlers through first graders. Includes strategies for identifying a rich topic, organizing the classroom, setting up field visits, encouraging the children to represent learning in various ways, and involving parents. Includes a planning journal with step-by-step guidance for doing a first project with young children. Published by Teachers College Press.

CHILD CARE plus is designed to support inclusion of children with disabilities in early childhood settings by supporting child care providers, parents, and community service providers including social workers, therapists, physicians, teachers, and administrators.

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