


HOME & CLASSROOM

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Invitation to Play

IMAGE BY DAVID MARK FROM PIXABAY

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REFREEDOM
to
PLAY

by Jenny Edwards

O

One sunny spring day, I saw a group of children playing in the sand box and was quite astonished by what I saw. They were feverishly digging tunnels while others gathered items from the play yard. The items were transformed into small huts, overhead supports for tunnels, and bridges. They used bark, stones, sticks, leaves, and cardboard they found along the fence line. It looked like a mini tunnel maze dotted with various huts. The children naturally assigned roles within their group: "I will get more sticks!" "We need more rocks for the side of this hill! I will find some!" "Let's connect this tunnel with this one so he can get to that new hut." "I will help connect it!" "Should we make a kitchen for him?" "I will gather grass for him to eat!" I loved the play that I saw. I delighted in seeing how they naturally assigned tasks and worked together, and I was curious about this little world they were creating and for whom, so I asked. One child exuberantly answered, "We have made a playground for our pet hamster, Mr. Whiskers, and later he can come out and play! Will you let him?" The sand box did have quite the border around it, and these children collectively came up with an idea and worked together to make it happen, how could I say no? That afternoon, Mr. Whiskers had the time of his life exploring all the tunnels and huts while all the children cheered him on and gave a play-by-play report on his actions. "He is in the tunnel to the kitchen!" "Is he eating? Yes, he is eating!" "He is in the bark hut!" and so on.

The above story will always be a happy memory and I still smile as I think about this excellent example of play

that happened with my students about 17 years ago. These children were flourishing in their freedom to play.

You may ask: What is freedom to play? What does this look like with young children? First, freedom is the absence of constraint of choice or actions. The play yard fence served as a safe boundary, but within the play yard children had the freedom to move around, gather items, and create. They made decisions together and took on roles for a common goal: giving Mr. Whiskers his best day ever.

In a preschool classroom, freedom to play can happen similarly. When a child is given freedom to play, they have freedom to choose what, where, and with whom they play. Sometimes, classrooms call this "center time" or "choice time" and ideally it is a block of time of at least one hour. Yet, a classroom could have a center time, but still not provide a child with the freedom to play. I have seen classrooms where the teacher has set up activities at tables and in centers in the classroom, and then went ahead to assign children to certain activities with little rotation throughout the areas. Children were not given freedom to choose where or what or with whom to play and they did not have the freedom to move to another activity. I have also seen classrooms where children are able to choose between activities at the tables and centers and move from one to another, but most materials were not "open" for the use. So, in this classroom, children were given freedom to choose and move, but not the freedom to choose materials. Freedom to play includes the freedom to choose with whom they will play, what they will play with, and where they will play. How do you create a classroom where there is truly freedom to play?

TIPS FOR ALLOWING FREEDOM OF PLAY

1

Set up learning centers in your classroom with materials that enhance play and imagination. For example, a dramatic play center could include dishes, pots and pans, play food, dress up clothes, and baby dolls with accessories. I suggest having at least five learning centers such as blocks, dramatic play, art, music, fine motor, writing, library, science and sensory, or a cozy spot. Be sure to label the containers that house the play materials and label the shelves that the containers go on as this helps during clean up time.

2

Start small. You will need to start small especially if freedom to play is a new idea in your environment. For example, limit the number of dishes, pots and pans, and play food in the dramatic play area until the children are used to cleaning up properly. Then you can add more materials.

3

Start short. This is the same concept as above. Let each child explore the centers and freely play. You can start at 30 minutes at a time and gradually build your center time up to at least an hour. Remember to allow for the freedom to choose playmates, where they will play, and what they will play with. Starting with a short amount of time helps you keep expectations and enforce boundaries and encourages a child to build their attention span and ability to stay engaged or to choose another activity.

4

Have faith and before you know it, you get to settle into your role as a facilitator of play while the children take center stage. You never know, maybe they will create a vast city scape complete with a farmer's market devoted to vegetables for the class guinea pig to explore.

BOOK INVITATIONS IN THE CLASSROOM



"SNOWBALLS" BY LOIS EHLERT

BY LAUREN COHEN, THE WONDER ROOM



who still want to try out some new ideas

What is the idea in the book: An unnamed "we" has been collecting all kinds of objects to make a collection of snow creations. Finally, a big snow comes and together we make and decorate an entire family: a snow dad, a snow mom, children, a baby, and even a dog and cat. Eventually, the snow figures melt. The book concludes with a colorful two-page spread showing all the objects we saved to create the snow models.

How can we invite children to continue the exploration: When we set up an invitation, we expect that children will be intrigued to check it out during our long periods of free play. Sometimes, only one child is exploring, while other times so many children are gathered around the busy table that we need to add supplies. No matter the level of participation at a given time, we always keep extras on the counter, so newcomers feel welcome to join. For basic materials, we provide a large collection of white felt circles varying in diameter from about three to seven inches that we've made to use as snowballs. A low table provides a good space for children to explore the sizes of the circles and use whichever they like to form the people and animals. A larger table might make more sense if a lot of children are working at once and chatting, but a small coffee table in a corner can also be used if there are children

after a few days. Add lots of bits and bobs that can be used to decorate the designs. Over a period of days, we may put out a new collection of objects for children to explore. To hold the objects, we may wish to use small trays or low bowls with a selection of items in each. If we have a bigger crowd, we might prefer a larger, shallow bin so many children can access the supplies at once. Nothing is stuck down. We just build, create, and rearrange for as long as the students are interested. Because nothing is stuck down, we can easily share coveted items among students. Once we have used the item and saved a photo, someone else can try their own creation with the same piece.

Items may include:

Buttons, beads, marker caps, bottle caps, tiny hair bands, pieces of felt and ribbon, popsicle sticks, coffee stirrers, q-tips

Small pine cones, small twigs, acorn caps, small leaves, shells, cinnamon sticks, small evergreen stems with needles.

Why we love it: Arranging the felt circles

is an engaging activity that presents an opportunity to explore and compare size and dimensions. Some children may arrange them in ascending or descending order, while others may make one very tall or short creation. Some may even stack the circles on top of each other! They will enjoy watching their peers and talking about their choices. Projects with loose parts like this one allow children to try out many ideas in one endeavor, in a way that drawing and painting do not. With movable pieces to play with, children can change their minds and experiment with lots of ideas in a brief time. Some will spend time telling stories and interacting with the creations, while others will build and rebuild. Each child can enter the activity in a way that suits their skills and interests.



stays in our Book Look area so children can look at it alone or together whenever they wish. The book's vertical spreads make it fun for children to explore on their own, since they need to turn the book to see the images. Keeping the book accessible in the Book Look area lets children peruse the details at length, but when they are creating with the invitation, they are using the materials at hand and their own ideas - not using the illustrations as a guide or template.

Lois Ehlert was the author-illustrator of many picture books, including Caldecott Honor-winning Color Zoo, Leaf Man, Pie in the Sky, In My World, Growing Vegetable Soup, Planting a Rainbow, and the best-selling Waiting for Wings.

Publisher: Clarion Books; Illustrated edition (September 1, 2001)

How can we share what we notice: We can share photos or videos with families digitally, along with a note about the process or a snippet of the stories the students told about their designs. We may see children practicing skills they have been working on, like symmetry, counting, sharing, or expressing thoughts and ideas. Photos can be taken and printed out to create an album or poster to hold memories of the activity and to share with students and their families.

How to be "extra": Upload the digital images and print them small enough so they can be mod podged onto small wooden blocks. These can be used with other blocks to create winter neighborhood scenes with masking tape roads, milk carton homes and apartment buildings, people and pets from our dollhouse collection and parks and rivers made with colorful felt or fabric.

How we use the actual book: We read the book during our circle time. During snack time, we may read it again or just browse the images while we talk about things we have built with real snow. After we read it, the book



The Pedagogy of Play

by Abbe Kovacik

Have you ever wondered why play is so important in the classroom? Well, the researchers at Harvard Graduate School of Education have written a book just for you! Titled "A Pedagogy of Play: Supporting Playful Learning in Classrooms and Schools," this book is a must-read for anyone interested in early childhood development. The authors hope children around the world, like those featured in the book, will lead their own learning, explore the unknown, and find joy in school. The book is dedicated "to the teachers and school leaders worldwide who gave so much to care for and educate their students during the Covid-19 pandemic," and it is remarkably joyful to read.

It all started with Harvard's Project Zero in 2015 when Pedagogy of Play (PoP) researchers began investigating playful learning in school settings around the world. The initiative, funded by LEGO Foundation, seeks to address three key questions: Why do educators need a pedagogy (method/practice) of play? What does playful learning look and feel like

in classrooms and schools? How do educators set up the conditions where play learning thrives? All good questions.

The answers to these questions are, of course, found in the book which can be downloaded for free as a PDF or bought at the Lulu website. A comprehensive toolkit that brings together a variety of tools and resources that teachers can use for designing and implementation strategies for play is also available.

The **Playful Learning Planner** one of the included tools encourages teachers to consider how they can structure the play experience to encourage exploring the unknown where "playful learners feel surprised, fascinated and inspired!" Another tool, the **License to Hack Cards**, gives learners permission to change any part of a learning experience to create increased ownership of learning. There is even a guide for **Creating a Culture of Risk-Taking**. This is one of my favorite tasks for children and adult learners alike. Embracing risk

taking normalizes making mistakes and experimentation. Imagine a classroom where making mistakes is the norm!

The ideas in the book came from educators and researchers across the world with participating schools in Denmark, South Africa, the United States, and Colombia. Throughout the book are examples of classroom practices called **Picture of Practice**. At the end of the book's introduction is one such example called Debating the Nature of Facts. The setting is a classroom of 10- and 11-year-olds from Johannesburg, South Africa. Teacher, Firdous Ismail Karolia is leading a lesson on gaining confidence in finding informational texts. During the lesson students became interested in the nature of facts- the basis of informational texts. One student, Abdullah, supports his definition of a fact with the example of Spiderman. According to Abdullah, it is a fact that Spiderman can spin webs from his wrists. He argues, "even though Spiderman is not real, it is still a fact that he fights crimes." Mbali disagrees. She supports that this is not a fact because Spiderman is fictional, and fiction does not give

"correct information." A spirited debate ensues. Later in the day the students consult a dictionary to look up the word "fact." This generates more questions. If a fact is "something that actually exists," is fear a fact? If the definition of a fact is "thing known to be true," what about religious beliefs that are true for some but not for others? The lesson continues as the students create informational texts about a fictional species of their own design! My heart races with excitement as I consider the brilliant minds of these young learners engaged in sophisticated debate where fact and fiction co-exist.

This must-read book is both inspiring and instructive. It will expand your mind and fill your heart with joy.

Free download linked on our website

INTENTIONALITY

a special project

by Jenny Edwards

The smell of oil mixed with gasoline is still one of my favorite smells. That is the smell of my father when he would come home from work and give me a great big bear hug, with his bristly face against mine as he lifted me off the ground. My father, who was an auto mechanic, hence the mixed scents of oil and gasoline, taught me the value of having and using the correct tool. Just like auto mechanics, most professions have specific tools they use to accomplish their work.

Our tools include our knowledge of child development, the art of reflection, and applying intentionality in our planned activities and room arrangement. "An intentional teacher acts with purpose and knowledge to ensure that young children acquire the knowledge and skills they need to succeed in school and life. Intentional teaching is planful, thoughtful, and purposeful" (*The Intentional Teacher, NAEYC*). The importance of room arrangement is often overlooked, but when research and intentionality are applied, how a room is set up becomes an integral part of educating children.

This article features a special project and partnership with Hudson Valley Community College's (HVCC) Education and Social Sciences Department. Guided by the Early Childhood Environmental Rating Scale, Brightside Up and the Education faculty began a project to revitalize the preschool teaching laboratory. The first step was reflecting on the general arrangement of the room and the placement of the interest centers. The latest research advises that loud interest centers such as dramatic play and blocks are set apart with physical space and furnishings from the quieter centers, like the library center, the cozy spot, and the writing center. Children who need a break from all the activity of a preschool classroom can retreat to the more quiet and less active centers. This helps children with their cognitive focus and emotional control. The arranging we had to do was to add a "buffer center" between the library and block centers. Typical buffer centers are art, science, sand and water tables, math, and fine motor which usually feature quiet materials, limit the number of children, and have a moderate level of activity.

Follow along in this 3-part series as we revitalize and investigate the intention built into the centers at the HVCC preschool teaching lab. In this issue, we will explore the sensory, library, and cozy areas and invite you to look at your own learning spaces as we explore purposeful room arrangement together.

INTENTIONALITY IN DIVERSITY

What We Changed:

The first area of classroom-wide intentionality was embedding diversity. Diversity is the fact of there being people of diverse groups included or represented within the classroom. Embedding diversity includes visual displays such as posters and photos of people, and materials such as play food, figurines, puppets, dress-up items, dolls, puzzles, multilanguage books, and signs. In this classroom, we added photos representing a variety of families as the border of our family board and we added diversity to all the center labels by using photos of children playing.

Opportunities for Learning:

When diversity is present in play materials and classroom displays, it becomes easier to have natural conversations about similarities and differences in the human population. This can happen while reading books to children about families, solving puzzles with non-traditional roles depicted, such as a woman firefighter, playing with the figurines in the block center, or "serving" foods from diverse cultures in the dramatic play center. Creating an environment of acceptance is achieved when you intentionally select materials and employ positive language concerning human diversity.

What's the Big Idea?

We focused on two reasons for embedding diversity throughout the classroom. First, so that the children see their likeness and feel represented. A child's sense of belonging is integral to their growth and development. The second reason is that children are exposed to diversities within the human population that they may not encounter in their local community, and in certain situations, certain demographics may be absent altogether.

The Rating Scale:

A high-quality classroom will show diversity in a positive way that does not stereotype members of any group. There should be at least two types of props in the dramatic play area that represent diversity such as dolls, foods, and dress up clothes. There should be at least ten examples representing diversity with one example in the display, another from books, and another in the play materials.

Expanding the Learning:

An All About Me unit of study is an excellent time to introduce the concept of diversity. An example activity might include having the teachers and children each create their very own skin-colored jar of paint, labeled with the creator's name and photo. This activity requires color mixing skills and a small amount of time, but the results are worthwhile. Display the jars prominently on the art shelves along with the skin-toned markers, crayons, and paper. Be sure to acknowledge how beautiful the paint jars are, how unique everyone is, and just how wonderful it is to have everyone together every day.

INTENTIONALITY IN CLASSROOM DISPLAYS

What We Changed:

An often-overlooked area where one can be intentional is the classroom displays. A current approach to classroom display is to simplify and unclutter the walls. When creating a display, consider the specific needs of children when placing items on the walls. For example, children who are sensory avoidant can easily feel overwhelmed in a classroom where the walls are bright and busy with numerous posters. As often is the case, when children with neurologically divergent needs are considered and the classroom environment is calm and less busy, the full population of the children benefit. When considering all of this, we took the bright and busy displays down and we chose to only display children's

individualized art, the classroom rules, and our family board. When done with intention, classroom display sets the tone of the overall, creating a restful and comforting space.

Opportunities for learning:

When given the freedom to choose materials, children learn the properties of each available material and how to use it. Art helps develop a child's hand-eye coordination and builds the dexterity of the small muscles in the child's hands. Creating art is an enjoyable way to increase a child's fine motor skills while a child is learning how to plan and design.

What's the Big Idea?

When children see their individualized artwork displayed in the classroom, they experience a sense of belonging. Individualized artwork is where children freely create with materials and methods of their own choosing. A child's individual art represents the child's unique ideas. When a display features the children's art and creations, it creates a classroom culture that sends the message that their work is important, their creativity is treasured, and they and their ideas belong. Display also records the progression of the child's skills and is a way to document a child's thoughts. If a child enjoys telling stories about their work, dictation can accompany displayed art.

The Rating Scale:

According to the Environmental Rating Scale, a high-quality classroom's display should exhibit the current area of study (one half of the display), the display should include children's individualized artwork (one-third), and 3-D artwork should be present. The display in the classroom should include photos of the children, while the remaining portion (approximately 20% of the display) should be both developmentally appropriate and educational for the children's age group. For example, a visual illustrating the steps for proper handwashing could be hung above the sink. If the display is the alphabet or numbers, picture cues must be present along with the print.

Expanding the Learning:

Include materials that highlight what the classroom is currently studying. For example, if the children are learning about leaves, set out glue, paper and leaves and let the children create with these materials. Ask what color the leaves are and review why the leaves change color and fall off the trees. You could also discuss the scent of the leaves or the sound they make when walked upon. Stay nearby to help the children expand beyond the simple act of gluing and provide more materials as the children request them. For example, through the above conversation, a child might mention that they saw an ant walking across a leaf and wants to cut out an ant to put on their picture. Together, discuss the materials needed to create an ant for the leaf. This may encourage other children in a similar direction: one might want to draw a picture playing in the leaves, and another may want to paint the leaves assorted colors. Children will produce incredible works.

INTENTIONALITY IN THE FINE MOTOR AND MATH CENTER

What We Changed:

With the reorganization of the fine motor and math materials according to the material's purpose, we made sure all categories of materials were included in the center. This classroom's fine motor center does not include art materials.

Opportunities for Learning:

In addition to building small muscles and hand-eye coordination, the fine motor center can build a child's vocabulary and cognitive skills. Interact with the children and begin intentional conversations about the materials they are using. For example, if a child is building a structure with the bristle blocks, ask, "What are you building?" or "Tell me about your design." This might lead to a conversation about a building a child passes every day on the way to school or what the child's house looks like.

If a child is creating an image with the pattern blocks, ask about the shapes and colors the child is choosing for their design. If a child has chosen a counting material with written numbers, guide the child as to what number it is and help match the corresponding items by helping the child count them.

What's the Big Idea?

A fine motor center's main objective is to work the small muscles of the hands in coordination with the eyes. Hand-eye coordination is integral for many future academic tasks. Additionally, most fine motor materials also build a child's problem-solving skills and design and planning skills. This area of the classroom also encourages small-group peer interaction or an opportunity for a child to play alone.

The Rating Scale:

A high-quality fine motor interest center must have at least ten different items from these four categories: interlocking building materials, manipulatives, puzzles, and art materials. These materials should have items that vary in difficulty to accommodate all the needs of the children in the classroom. The area should be set out of the classroom's traffic pattern and comfortable for the children to use. For example, a soft rug in front of a shelf or a small table in front of the shelf. The containers and the shelves should be labeled with a picture label. This ensures that the children know what containers the items go in and where on the shelf each container belongs. Additionally, a high-quality program will have at least ten different math items from these three categories: Measuring/comparing sizes and parts of wholes (fractions), familiarity of shapes, and counting and comparing quantities. When a number symbol is present in the math materials, dots or picture support must accompany the numbers.

Expanding the Learning:

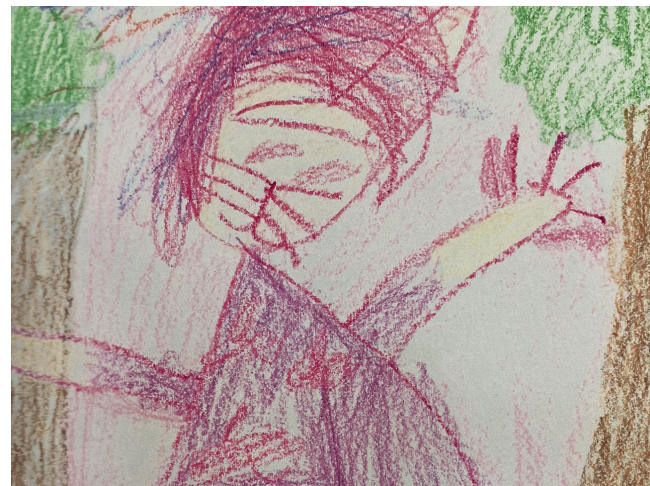
Consider beginning a fine motor center journal where you take a photo of each child's work and then ask the children to narrate what their work is, what materials they used and how

they made it. This activity celebrates the children and their work and creates the connection between what a child says and the printed word. This journal can remain in the center as a source of inspiration for other children.

Conclusion:

Our profession requires a specific set of tools. It takes knowledge of child development to design a thoughtful, high-quality classroom. Then one needs to be intentional about the placement and organization of each center and the materials within. Then the educator needs to practice the art of education through engaging with the children in purposefully ways that help build the cognitive, language, and social/emotional skills of each child. The last tool is daily reflection on how the day went and what the educator will do differently tomorrow. Brightside up was honored to help HVCC with this project. A true community partnership is one to be treasured and valued, and this partnership certainly is.

In the next issue, join us as we explore the block, dramatic play, and science centers.



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Principles of Staging Play

by Nora O'Hanlon

Open-ended invitations or provocations for play can lead children to make discoveries and explore ideas in ways that are uniquely their own. Being thoughtful in how you stage or display materials will provoke curiosity while prompting cognition and sustaining engagement. However, staging classroom activities presents the challenge of sparking interest in a variety of developing minds.

So, as we gather and consider our materials for each display, how can we be sure our collections create purpose while still providing a wide range of possibilities.

In her book *Really Seeing Children*, preschool teacher, and author Deb Curtis outlines seven principles of play that should be considered when curating materials for an open-ended invitation. Each principle is informed by a different style of play and makes suggestions for how children might seek to use materials.

PRINCIPLE 1 | EXPLORING

The most basic form of play is simply exploring the sensory aspects of the things in the environment. Include materials that offer a variety of visual and physical textures. Consider how items could be used to create sound effects or how a calming scent might contribute to the experience. For example, collect different sized sticks from a variety of trees and bushes. Look for pieces with interesting patterns of bark, or pieces with leaves still attached. Consider trimming some fresh wildflowers or pine branches to add a natural olfactory sensation.

PRINCIPLE 2 | TRANSFORMING

Children are mesmerized by objects that can be changed or reconfigured before their eyes! Consider how to add a transformative element to the supplies you've gathered. For example, wrap a few sticks in soft yarn or paint them with bright colors, then invite the children to pick at and remove the bark to reveal the smooth light brown wood within.

PRINCIPLE 3 | ORGANIZING

When presented with an assortment of materials, children find joy in identifying similarities and exploring differences. Consider how items can be sorted or used to create patterns or designs. Include various sizes and styles of bins and baskets for gathering, transporting, and dumping materials. For example, you might display some sticks in a tall spaghetti container and provide a similarly shaped pencil case to hold new collections.

PRINCIPLE 4 | BUILDING

It's well known that young children enjoy putting things together. Materials for construction can be used in relation to each other and allow children to create a representation of their ideas. Consider how to use non-traditional materials to build or create structures. For example, small sticks can be stacked like Lincoln Logs to build houses or place a row of sticks straight up in some dirt or sand to create fencing for paths.

Open-ended construction can be a great opportunity to repurpose mismatched or broken items as well. If pieces are free of any sharp edges or chipping paint, a single car tire or detached door frame could spark inspiration for new or continued play.

PRINCIPLE 5 | DRAMATIZING

It's amazing how children can turn any box of materials into inspiration for an adventure plot through the simple addition of a character. Include various figures or props that reflect diversity. Children may enjoy bringing in their favorite familiar characters to explore and expand on their play, but also consider how to craft new and unique characters with the provided materials. A simple stick wrapped with two pipe cleaners to create limbs could become the next best imaginary pal.

PRINCIPLE 6 | DRAWING

Drawing is one of the oldest forms of human expression, and children find wonder in the simple act of marking papers and using these marks to create meaning. Consider how materials can be used to explore the fundamentals of writing. For example, sticks and small fingers are perfect for drawing lines in the sand. Additionally, smooth, light-colored rocks can become a natural canvas for drawing with water or chalk.

PRINCIPLE 7 | READING

Reading is an easy way to gain new understanding, but before they can make sense of written words, children can still learn to gather information from photos, graphs, or diagrams. Include visual resources that will prompt children's cognitive connections to real life experiences. Provide examples of patterns or designs for children to recreate or visual instructions for how to arrange sticks into letters of the alphabet.

Imagination, cognition, and resilience are enhanced with new and unique materials used freely. The more possibilities, the more enjoyable. With time and support, children will use open ended play as a means for personal expression and growth.

We hope you find the Invitational Display Checklist useful as you gather and prepare your own open-ended displays in the future. Author Deb Curtis suggests including at least three or four principles in each of your collections. Please feel free to remove and copy this checklist for your own use.

INVITATIONAL DISPLAY CHECKLIST

PRINCIPLE 1 | EXPLORING

- Materials provide a variety of physical textures
- Materials include items of the same variety w/ slight differences
- Materials are visually pleasing
- Materials can be used in a safe way to create sounds
- Materials provide an olfactory experience

PRINCIPLE 2 | TRANSFORMING

- Materials can be adjusted and changed back
- Materials are naturally found in various forms

PRINCIPLE 3 | ORGANIZING

- Materials of the same variety are present in various colors, shapes, or sizes.
- Materials include bins or bags for collecting
- There are enough vessels for each child who is playing to have one

PRINCIPLE 4 | BUILDING

- Materials can be stacked or piled up
- Materials are plentiful enough for multiple children to build
- Materials come in interesting shapes and sizes

PRINCIPLE 5 | DRAMATIZING

- Materials include human-like figures
- Materials include animal-like figures
- Materials include items that could belong to potential characters
- Materials can be used to craft characters

PRINCIPLE 6 | DRAWING

- Materials include standard writing/drawing tools (ex/ pencils or paint brushes)
- Materials include an appropriate surface for drawing
- Display includes a sufficient layer of base material for “drawing” with fingers or pointed tools
- Drawing surfaces can be easily erased or cleaned for immediate reuse

PRINCIPLE 7 | READING

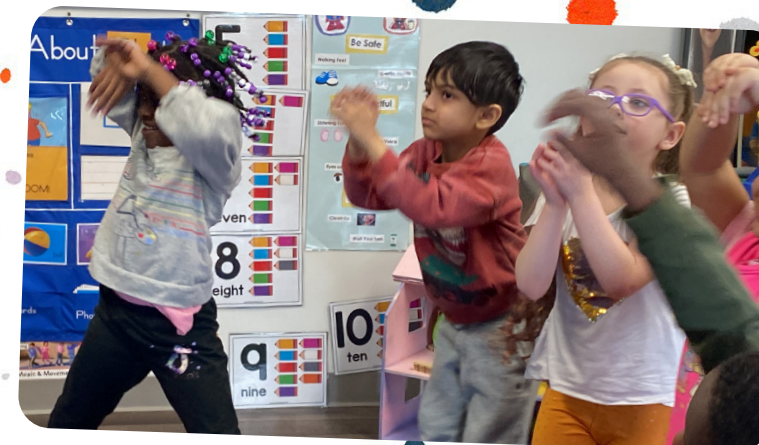
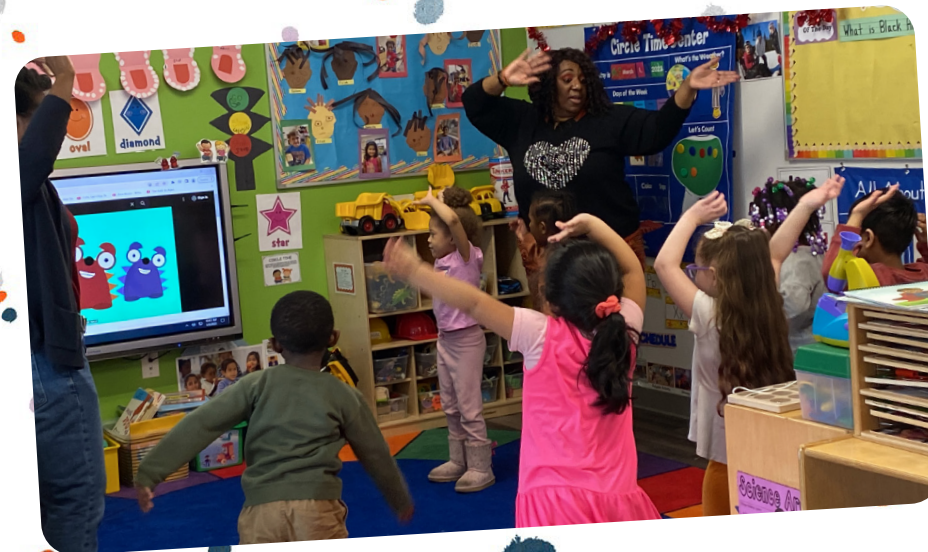
- Materials are labeled in one or more languages
- Display includes examples of how to use the materials
- Display includes graphs or diagrams that relate to the materials
- Display includes familiar visual cues

Music & Movement in the Classroom

Music and movement play an important role in the growth and development of children’s lives. They connect the brain to the body and promote cognitive, social, physical, and language skills when intentionally infused throughout the day. We had the opportunity to capture moments at the Schenectady Community Action Program and highlight the fun and free music and movement in their classroom routines.

Ms. Relf, a teacher at Yates, describes her experience with incorporating music and movement in her classroom. She shared, “I created a list based on the music the children enjoy. Sometimes I write educational songs related to the weekly themes, as well as songs that build on their social-emotional development, such as sharing, waiting, and taking turns. Some days, it’s a song about feelings. My heart is full when I see children engaging, laughing, and smiling as we sing and dance. A memory that has filled my cup this school year is seeing how music and movement have built self-regulation and cognitive skills for the children in the classroom. Music is one of the keys that engages children to learn, and it’s important for me to blend both music and movement throughout the day.”

by Philomina Adjei



Early Literacy Games & Activities

by Marion Delgiudice

We have heard the saying “Easy as ABC” but learning to read can be more challenging than that. We are programmed to use spoken language, but written language is a recent invention in our history. Before figuring out what those squiggles on a page mean, children need to develop and integrate complex language, auditory, visual, and thinking processing: the cornerstones of literacy. How can parents and caregivers support pre-literacy? Like all aspects of development, children learn and grow at their own pace. Activities should be appropriate for each child to avoid confusion and frustration that might impact later learning. Literacy practices in the past focused on memorizing letters and sounds. Practice has since shifted to seeing the world through the eyes of our youngest learners, helping us understand what a child is ready to learn, and how the “new” fits with the known. Since emotional and physical well-being underlie children’s ability to learn, activities should be fun, child-centered, and filled with specific and positive praise.

All learners benefit from immersion in a language rich environment. Talking and singing teaches an infant that vocalizations are communication. When infants “coo” and we respond positively, they are learning important speech sounds, or phonemes, which are specific to their primary language. When we converse with babies and toddlers, they learn that their sounds are valued, their voices are important, and their feelings are respected. Preschoolers are curious and their questions open the door for discussions. Activities such as “Echo Back”, “What and why”, and reading aloud encourage language development

and build strong relationships. Early exposure to stories and books is a powerful predictor of later reading success. Whether it is on our laps or gathered in a circle, reading to children is a joyful activity that begins in infancy and continues throughout childhood. Stories with beautiful language introduce the tone and rhythm of language, build strong bonds, and provide comfort. For babies and toddlers, nursery rhymes show that language can be playful. Books with predictable language, characters and plot allow young listeners to anticipate and make guesses. Concepts presented in stories educate and strengthen understanding. Children love to hear books over and over. Memorizing stories is an important part of early literacy. Celebrate when toddlers pretend to read or read with their “eyes shut.” Notice what happens when you skip your preschooler’s favorite part. These responses show what young children are learning about reading. Favorite books read from the rocking chair become the foundation of literacy and will be remembered far into the future. With some basic strategies like “Act It Out” and “Guess What?” parents and caregivers can make reading aloud a special activity.

In addition to reading aloud, encouraging children to retell stories develops language, listening and thinking skills. Retelling is a skill that takes modeling and practice. First tries may mention a character or two and events strung together with “And then...”. The story elements included might be the ones the child enjoyed. This is an early attempt to order, or sequence, but concepts like “first, next, last” develop slowly. Over time and with experience listening to stories, children realize that books have a beginning, middle and end. One event leads or “causes” another. Characters have

important roles to play. Activities to build retelling and sequencing skills include “Puppet Play” and “Story Cards.”

Before learning that sounds represent “letters,” children need to understand the sounds around them. Parents and caregivers speaking, horns beeping, ducks quacking! How do children become aware of, discriminate between, identify, and understand the meaning of sounds? “Auditory processing” takes approximately thirteen years to fully develop, but we can help children grow their early listening skills through our daily interactions. Infants and babies become aware of sounds when we call to them from various parts of the room. Songs like “Old McDonald” can highlight different sounds. Identifying and labeling sounds in the environment strengthens listening skills. For preschoolers, recognizing rhymes is an important pre-literacy skill. This involves hearing the end of words and realizing when they sound the same like “bear / chair”. The focus is on the sounds not the spelling. Multisensory games and activities using rhymes, matching, and following directions engage young learners.

Like auditory processing, visual processing develops over time, and allows us to make sense of what we see. Infants, babies, toddlers and preschoolers process visual information differently. Some important pre-literacy skills are tracking, visual memory, visual discrimination and scanning. Tracking allows babies to follow us with their eyes, and preschoolers to follow a line of print. Visual memory is the ability to recall or form mental images. Babies use visual memory when they play peek-a-boo. Preschoolers depend on visual memory when they learn letters. Visual discrimination means noticing differences



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between objects, pictures, shapes and symbols. Infants can discriminate between faces. Preschoolers can discriminate between a cat and a lion. Visual scanning is the ability to look for information actively and efficiently in our environment. Babies scan when they are looking for a parent or caregiver. Preschoolers scan when searching for an object in a hidden picture. Catching bubbles, connecting dots, and playing “I Spy” develop visual processing skills.

Thinking uses all the language, auditory and visual processing skills discussed. Children form general cognitive maps or schema that become more specific with experience. Toddlers may label horses, cats, and squirrels as “dog” or “Buddy,” his/her own dog. This demonstrates recognition of key features like legs, fur, tails. However, they may not visually discriminate between animals yet. Sorting activities and games using objects or pictures refine and expand cognitive maps. “Same” and “different” may be new concepts, so parents and caregivers should model sorting for familiar concepts like colors.

Once children can sort objects and pictures for similarities and differences, plastic or wooden letters may be introduced for sorting. Our goal is to teach that letters are separate objects and have different physical features. Young children may hear “LMNOP” as one letter in the “Alphabet Song”. Early letter play should focus on distinctive physical features rather than sounds. Letter names may be used during games, but letters and sounds should not be paired yet. “A says /a/ like apple” or “A

is for apple” is confusing. From a child’s perspective, perhaps letters make noises, or apples and the letter A are both red. Instead, sort a few familiar letters for “same” and “different”. This reinforces the separateness of letters like other objects. More detailed visual discrimination is needed when learning letters, so new concepts like “straight”, “curvy”, “round”, and “tall” need to be introduced gradually. Also, letters have a specific orientation in space unlike other objects in the environment. A crayon remains a crayon no matter which direction it faces, but “b”, “d”, “p” and “q” are different because of their direction. Reversals, rotations, and confusing similar letters are common. They are part of the learning process and do not indicate a learning disability. In addition to sorting, other games like “Treasure Hunt”, and “Rainbow Writing” help teach letters. “Wiki Stix”, clay and shaving cream are great tools to make letters concrete.

Learning to read may be years in the future, but parents and caregivers can give infants, toddlers, and young children strong foundations by engaging in activities and games that develop the cornerstones of literacy: language, auditory and visual processing, and thinking. By looking through our children’s eyes, listening to their questions, and celebrating their individuality, we cultivate confidence and a willingness to learn.

Check out BRIGHT IDEAS on our website for a brand new set of tipcards that accompany this article.

MMM

mindful moment

with Kim Polstein, LMSW

AN INVITATION TO PLAY

Play adds joy to our lives, relieves stress, enhances imagination and creativity, and offers opportunities to improve social skills. Play can also strengthen your relationships with those special people in your lives.

In support of self-care, identify meaningful play. You may play games (board games, video games, etc.), or bring play into your exercise routine. Rather than running a mile, engage in a game of touch football with friends or a game of freeze tag with your children.

As a first step, explore how you play! Dr. Stuart Brown, a researcher at the National Institute for Play, has named 8 “personalities” for play that may help identify the kind of play that works best for you. Check out the descriptions below and let us know, are you a collector? A competitor? A joker? For example, I am “Kinesthete” and find joy in play through movement like dance and yoga. I also fit into the role of “Director” and am currently finding joy and playfulness in planning and organizing the events for my wedding! So which personality fits your style of play best?

The collector: You enjoy building collections of things that interest you. Whether these are physical objects, or experiences.

The competitor: You find joy and creativity in play that is competitive with specific rules. You aren’t just here to play, you’re here to win!

The creator or artist: You find joy in play that creates, making things is more your style. Whether is painting, wood working, pottery or knitting and gardening you enjoy turning nothing into something.

The director: You play by planning! You like to organize and make things happen. You’re the player friends call to create a themed party

The explorer: You play by exploring, whether physically or emotionally. You may literally enjoy going to new places, or you may explore by searching for new feelings, or deepening a familiar one through activity.

The joker: You enjoy clowning around and making others laugh. You find play through telling jokes, maybe playing pranks.

The kinesthete: You are a person who likes to move. You may even need to move in order to think. You might find this movement through sports, dancing, yoga or just simply jumping rope.

The storyteller: You may be a novelist or maybe you just enjoy keeping a private journal. Imagination is your game. You enjoy creating and telling stories, listening to stories and creating imagery in your head.

GO FISH! BY BONNIE SCHULTZ

*Fish is good for the brain, good for the heart.
With so many ways to make it, where do we start?
Baked, broiled, canned, sauteed, steamed...
citrus, spices, garlic, onion, or herbs taste supreme.
Glaze fish, flake it, mix it in salad,
every way you enjoy fish is absolutely valid.
Try fish flavored in many ways
to see what your tastebuds say.*



What are good ways to cook delicate versus firm fish? Lean “white fish” such as cod, flounder, pollock, and tilapia is delicate and best steamed, poached or baked in foil or a parchment paper packet. Firmer, full-flavored fish such as salmon, trout and catfish are often grilled, baked, broiled, or pan seared then cooked through.

When is the fish fully cooked? To estimate cooking time, measure the fish at the thickest part. Then use the 10-minute rule. Cook it on medium heat for 10 minutes per inch, turning it half-way through. A thin piece of fish will cook in 4-5 minutes. A thicker fish will take longer. Use the fork test. Place fork tines in the thickest part of the fish and gently twist. The fish will flake when done and look opaque, not translucent. If you have a meat thermometer, cook fish to 145°F.

Why is fish a healthy food? Fish and seafood is rich in protein and heart healthy fish oil (omega-3 and omega-6 fats). Fish provides iron and zinc which supports our immune systems. Particularly during pregnancy, fish is a good source of iodine and choline. Choline helps support the development of a baby’s spinal cord. The Dietary Guidelines recommend adults eat 8 – 12 ounces of seafood per week. Choose a variety of fish that are lower in mercury. See www.FDA.gov/fishadvice for lists of many fish that are both nutritious and lower in mercury, plus child serving sizes.

Try some Caribbean jerk flavor on baked fish. Smell blending aromas of Moqueca, Brazilian fish stew, simmering. Any way to you try it, spread the word about how you like to prepare fish and inspire others.

Caribbean Jerk Seasoned Fish

Prep time 5-10 minutes, cooking time 15-20 minutes, total time 20-30 minutes
Yields 4 adult servings (4oz), 16 toddler servings (1 oz), 10, 3-5 year old servings (1.5 oz) or 8, school-age servings (2 oz)
CACFP Food Program creditable as a meat equivalent

1 pound of fish
2 tablespoons olive or canola oil
1 tablespoon Caribbean jerk seasoning (or make your own blend below)
 ½ teaspoon allspice
 ½ teaspoon thyme
½ teaspoon ground ginger
¼ teaspoon paprika
 ¼ teaspoon onion powder
 ¼ teaspoon garlic powder
½ teaspoon salt
Optional 1/8 teaspoon cayenne pepper

Preheat the oven to 375°F. Pat the fish dry. Drizzle 2 tablespoons of oil on the fish, oiling both sides. Then place fish skin side down, if applicable in a baking pan. Sprinkle the jerk seasoning over the fish. Bake fish for 10-20 minutes, until it flakes with a fork and is opaque on the inside. Thinner pieces cook quickly, thicker pieces take longer. Enjoy!

Recipe adapted from <https://www.curiouscuisiniere.com/jerk-salmon/>

Brazilian Fish Stew, Moqueca (pronounced mo-KAY-cah)

Prep time 15 minutes, cooking time 20 minutes, total time 35 minutes

Yields 5 adult servings or 10, 3-5 year old servings

CACFP Food Program creditable as: 1 meat, 2 vegetables (tomato sauce and mixed vegetable)

1 pound firm, thicker fish
1 lime, for zest and juice
2 Tablespoons olive oil or canola oil
1 teaspoon salt
1 large onion, diced
2 bell peppers, diced
½ - 1 jalapeno, minced, or hot pepper to taste
1 cup carrot, diced (optional)
4 cloves garlic, minced (2 tablespoons prepared)
14.5 oz can of tomatoes or fresh, diced
1 cup fish broth, chicken broth or water
13.5 oz can of light coconut milk
2 teaspoons paprika (optional)
1 teaspoon ground cumin (optional)
1 Tablespoon tomato paste (optional)
½ cup cilantro, green onion or parsley, chopped



Cut fish into 1-inch chunks and place in a bowl. Add lime zest (grated green part of skin), lime juice and ½ teaspoon salt. Mix fish, lime, and salt together and set aside.

In a large pot, add olive oil and heat over medium high heat, adding onion and peppers and carrot. Sauté for 2-3 minutes, then turn down the heat to medium heat and sauté for 5 more minutes. Add garlic, tomatoes, and broth, cooking for 5 more minutes until carrots are tender. Stir in coconut milk, the remaining ½ teaspoon of salt, optional spices and tomato paste. Bring to a simmer. Add fish and lime juice, spooning broth over fish until cooked through about 4-10 minutes. Flaking with a fork to check that fish flesh is no longer translucent. Sprinkle with cilantro, green onion or parsley. Serve Moqueca stew, with rice and/or salad.

Recipe adapted from Sylvia Fontaine at <https://www.feastingathome.com/brazilian-fish-stew-aka-moqueca/>

PROMOTING FOCUS & SELF-CONTROL

by Emily Vantassel

Focus and self-control are skills that are built through life. It is also skill number one of seven from Mind in the Making. According to Ellen Galinsky, the author of Mind in the Making, children need this skill to achieve their goals. Paying attention, recalling expectations, thinking flexibly, and exercising self-control are demanding, especially in our fast-paced digital age. Focus and self-control begins developing in the early childhood years and continues through early adulthood. Think of the children in your life... when taking into consideration how long it takes to develop, where are they in developing this skill?

I have amazing news; you already have what it takes to support children in developing and practicing these skills. Children of all ages can begin learning the important life skill of self-control. Utilizing everyday moments mindfully, you can further promote this development. Here are some of my favorite ways to build this skill.

WITH INFANTS

Observe what helps each child regulate or keep focus. You might notice a child calms when facing outwards in a space with loud visual noise. Maybe they calm when you talk to them as you're up and away doing household/classroom tasks. I knew a child who would only calm if I talked to them about their feelings while I made a bottle. Do children in your life have regulation rituals? By following each child's cues, you're helping them to learn how to self-manage.

Acknowledge babies' successes. When a child self-soothes, notice their actions, and

verbally acknowledge them. A child's internal monologue is already developing (this is the voice inside their head that guides and supports) and your verbal acknowledgement reinforces this internal feedback system and eventually it becomes part of their 'tool kit.' Some might need guidance and they feel supported when we give it. For example, they might begin gnawing on your finger and you can guide them by offering a soft teething toy or cool washcloth to chew on rather than taking your finger away. 'You're wanting something to chew on. This chewy is a safe choice. Here you go, I see your face is now calm.'

TODDLERS

Supply two choices that are both acceptable to you. Do you want to walk like a penguin or hop like a bunny? Supplying choices, especially at transitions, helps children to feel in control and they move from complacent or aggravated to engaged in the moment. Additionally, by exposing children to new ways of doing things, they are learning different options. The next time it is time to transition, and the child doesn't want to, they might think back to their previous choices and decide to go about it in their own way. The child is still carrying out the goal, they're just using their executive functioning capabilities and self-control to do so.

Acknowledge their actions when they do show self-control. When a child clenches their fist in a power struggle over toys, they're utilizing extreme self-control! When they come to the table for mealtimes vs continuing to play, they're exhibiting self-control! Noticing those little moments that

are likely to happen throughout the day and acknowledging them, so they are more likely to make a similar choice in the future. 'I see you clenched your fist so you wouldn't take the toy. That was a safe choice.'

PRESCHOOL & SCHOOL AGE

Play games that require active listening and engagement. There are so many games out there! Many of which we played growing up and many more that the children imagine and create. I spy, puzzles, guessing games, musical chairs, hot potato, red light/green light, etc. When playing these games, children not only have to recall the rules but also pay attention to their surroundings and think ahead to their next moves. What a feat!

Read stories in unique ways that encourage active listening. If you've ever been in a meeting that could have been an email, then you know just how hard it can be to really listen and process what you're hearing. At times, it can feel nearly impossible to not doddle or multitask. Listening requires focus and powerful inhibitory control. Practicing this skill and promoting it from a young age helps children later in life. I would caution you to remember that practice builds confidence. It can be painful to read a story all while trying to limit movement and verbal feedback. What would it be like for the child if you were to read a story and follow their lead? When they shout out something about the picture on the page, what if you stopped reading the words and had a conversation about what we see and what we think will happen in the story? It can be exhausting for the adult but completely shifts the level of engagement on the child's end. My favorite way to make story time fun is

to add in movements and use different voices for each character. It keeps the children on their toes and actively engaged.

We are a model for children. Being well rested and taking breaks to regulate is just as important for adults as it is for children. If we're stressed, it is harder for us to help children in learning the skill of focus and self-control. Think back to my first suggestion; seeing what helps a child regulate and exposing them to it in moments of dysregulation. What do you find regulating? Is it lateral movement, washing your hands, taking a water break, singing a song, or maybe laughing with the child? Write down a few things that you find regulating and post them around your space as a visual cue throughout the day. We teach children by doing, so I encourage you to be mindful when you are focused. I know for me, every time I am focused, a child suddenly needs something, and I am quick to go to them. Am I modeling focus here? I recently tried saying 'first I will finish ___ then I will come to you' in non-urgent situations and I have seen the children pick up on it. I wonder, are there particular times of the day when you have a quick task to do that you often find yourself putting down? How could you model focus in this moment?



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PLAY BASED LEARNING: AN INTERVIEW WITH ANDREA FAMIANO

By Colleen Sterling

Play based learning is an integral part of a child's development, providing opportunities to explore and learn about the world around them. Children will develop social, emotional, and academic skills through the activities and materials that are available to them. I spoke with Andrea Famiano, a Head Start teacher, to talk more about what play looks like in her preschool (3-5 years old) classroom.

What does play based learning look like in your classroom?

The learning is child directed; they are free to move about the classroom to different center areas. They find the activities that are interesting to them. Sometimes we purposefully move materials from one area to another, for example we recently moved the construction hats and vests to the block area to use while building. Other times the children move the materials from one area to another to enhance their play. For example: they bring the babies from the house area over to the library and will read books to their babies. The classroom also has a variety of manipulatives for children to explore for children at a variety of developmental stages. There are easier puzzles for matching and one to one correspondence and 5-8-piece puzzles. There are also open-ended materials that do not have a specific way to use like art materials and blocks.

My role as a teacher is to encourage children's learning through interactions and to stretch their thinking to a higher level. Getting down on the floor and pretending with the children by following their lead, being silly or dressing up as a character while reading a story. I want to create a fun and engaging learning experience for the children. Asking open-ended questions will encourage problem solving and predictions as well as develop social and cognitive skills.

Why is play based learning important?

Through play children will strengthen social skills, develop positive peer relationships, solve problems, and regulate their emotions. Skills children are learning will overlap within

one activity. We hid plastic eggs around the room for each child to find. Each was filled with some plastic shredding (Easter Grass), and alphabet beads, numbers, or shapes. Each child brought their egg to the carpet, opened it up, and shared with their peers what was inside. The children were working on persistence skills and fine motor skills while opening the egg, using expressive language to share what is inside, cognitive and literacy skills to identify the letter, shape, or number, and practicing self-regulation while waiting for their turn.

Board Games are a favorite in your classroom. Can you give some examples of how you adjust rules based on the level of the children? Playing board games has always been a favorite among our children over the years. Game rules are always adjusted to meet the needs of our children to help minimize frustration levels and foster success in their play. I use a lot of cooperative board games. Games that encourage children to work together towards a final goal. We use Sneaky Snacky Squirrel Game and Snail Pace Race. While using the Snail Pace Race, I ask the children to predict who will win first. Sometimes we cheer for the snail that got across the finish line first and sometimes we cheer for the snail that crosses the finish line last. While playing the classic games of Candy Land, Chutes and Ladders children are working on cognitive skills, turn taking, and how to win or lose gracefully. Right now, we are teaching the children how to play Uno.

How is the classroom environment set up to invite children to play?

Our spaces within our classroom are set up that creates autonomy and is child directed. Materials are easily accessible. We use open bins on shelves that are labeled with contents as well as a label on the shelf, so the children know where things go when finished playing. We try to add open ended materials such as real sticks, plant foliage, plastic cups (igloos or caves). Really the sky's the limit of what we might place in any area that the children can incorporate into their play.

Spotlight LITTLE BEAR DAYCARE

Sonja Bailey, owner of Little Bear Daycare has been providing Group/Family child care in Hagaman for 30 years. This has given her the opportunity to guide and support families, children, and staff associated with her program in many positive ways. "I have spent my life learning and providing care for those around me." Sonja shared. "Even at an early age I knew I was meant for guiding children and operating a child care program has allowed me to do just that."

Sonja makes a positive impact on each child's life before they even begin their journey to Pre- K or Kindergarten. Recently, she even had a parent call her to let her know that their child was graduating high school as valedictorian of their class and conveyed part of that success to the early education they had received at Little Bear Daycare.

Recently, Sonja reached out to Brightside Up to share her idea and plans to revamp her literacy corner and we couldn't wait to help. She was looking to create a cozy reading nook with new books and materials which would provide a safe soothing area to relax and enjoy reading materials. With some creativity, collaboration, and imagination, her space was transformed into a space themed literacy nook filled with sensory items, new books, and a soft space to relax or read.

Visit our website to see the transformation video!



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