

When Good 'Pins' Go Bad

Guiding Early Childhood Educators in the Effective Use of Pinterest

by Erin Hamel

You walk into one of your classrooms and observe a lesson that you saw on Pinterest just the night before. The teacher is excited to show the children how water can 'walk.' The teacher carefully puts two clear cups out on the table. She squeezes a drop of food coloring into each cup and then places a long strip of paper towel into each cup. The children stand excitedly around the table. The teacher places the other ends of the strips into a third empty cup. And then they wait. And wait. And wait. The children become bored. You wait to hear the teacher's explanation of what children are learning from the experiment, but it doesn't come. At least not until most of the children have wandered off. By the time any colored water begins 'walking,' the children are no longer interested and the teacher is using all of her energy to manage their behavior. How did a good 'pin' go bad?

What is Pinterest?

Pinterest is a popular free app available for smartphones and tablets, but it can also be accessed through the Internet on a laptop or personal computer. It is a tool for collecting and organizing things you love. It is a pinboard-style photo-sharing website that allows users to create and manage image collections such as events, interests, and hobbies. Users can browse other pinboards for images, 're-pin' images to their own pinboards, or 'like' photos.



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Pinterest's growing popularity has led to the creation of specialty hubs. *Teachers on Pinterest* was launched on August 13, 2013 as a collaborative effort between the company and elementary teachers, to create a supportive community for the profession. The site has lesson plans targeting preschool through sixth grade, environmental tips and strategies for the classroom, theme-based boards, and subject-driven boards. The need arose from a reported 500,000 education-related pins a day. *Teachers on Pinterest* serves the profession in shaping hundreds of thousands of children's lives each day. It allows teachers to access education-related pins in one place, making it easier to find what they're searching for. Having over half a million resources in one place is invaluable

Like other social media, Pinterest provides outsider viewers an idea of your tastes, methods, personality, preferences and goals. But just because you've pinned it doesn't mean you've done it or seen it used. And just because you've pinned it, doesn't mean it's good. Keep in mind that what you pin appears as your endorsement of the product, idea, or plan. Quality of the pin should be a top priority.

for early childhood educators and yet poses its own obstacles. This article will examine the use of Pinterest as an early childhood education resource. It will also provide a guide for using Pinterest effectively, including the pitfalls to avoid and how to organize your Pinterest boards in a way that is meaningful, educational, and functional.

Getting Started

Interested readers can visit www.pinterest.com to join the popular site.

- It is also possible to sign in through popular social media outlets, including Facebook and Twitter. Users without Facebook or Twitter accounts can join Pinterest by entering an email address.
- Once an account has been established, Pinterest will recommend boards for the user to follow.
- Users can explore the boards and search for others to follow.

In order to organize the information collected through Pinterest, the user can create new boards. By clicking Your Boards in the upper right-hand drop-down menu, the option to Create a Board becomes available. Type a description, category, and name for the board.

A recent feature allows the user to make a limited number of boards secret. Secret boards are boards that others will not be able to follow or see unless invited by the user.



Quality over Quantity

In an era where we as a society are purchasing more products than ever, Pinterest brings consumerism to another level. Now it's not only possible to collect material things; now people can collect the very *idea* of things. Pinterest allows teachers to store organizational, environmental, and lesson ideas that they wish they had enough time (and energy!) to implement. Admittedly, it is a great way to visually store information and ideas. Yet pinning too many ideas can become a long, stressful "To Do" list. Pinning manageable amounts of ideas will ensure that the user will recall the ideas and actually try them.

Early childhood educators need to be wary of users with an endless supply of behavioral management techniques, organizational methods, quick crafts, and easy activities. There may be value in these things, but quantity is not as important as quality. To use Pinterest effectively, it's important that the user implements ideas rather than gathering them to 'collect virtual dust.' Like other social media, Pinterest provides outsider viewers an idea of your tastes, methods, personality, preferences, and goals. Users should be reminded that the skill of collecting and organizing ideas is not just a theme in social media, but a responsibility as well. Just because you've pinned it doesn't mean you've done it or seen it used. And just because you've pinned it, doesn't mean it's good. As a curator, keep in mind that what you pin appears as your endorsement of the product, idea, or plan. Quality of the pin should be a top priority.

Investigate Pins Before Implementing Them

Several recipes on Pinterest claim the title "the best play dough recipe." Consider these with caution. Frequently a user pins an image without changing the caption that goes along with it. This means that many claims regarding pins are not up-to-date and haven't been tried or tested. A popular early childhood pin encourages teachers, parents, and other adults to open up glow sticks and empty the contents out for children to explore and blow bubbles with. Unless the pinner does his own research, he may not realize that some glow sticks contain glass and breaking one open means giving a child free access to small shards of glass. Try things for yourself before implementing with children. When possible, update the captions that accompany your pins to provide valuable and current feedback. Other users will appreciate your point of view, and you'll have your own review attached to the idea instead of someone else's.

Best Practice is Supported by Research

Early childhood is a crucial time for learning with long-lasting impacts; it's imperative that children are exposed to meaningful experiences during this time period. In short, time is valuable for both the early childhood educator and the children in her care. Ideas that float around on Pinterest are just that, ideas. And in general, not all of them are good. Pinterest isn't research based. Be sure that your staff is using both their common sense and professional judgment when using the popular site.

While sharing ideas with educators is an important and necessary part of reflective practice, it's also important to be intentional and purposeful. Before investing time in a project, consider the benefits, challenges, purpose, and best practice.

Best practice involves using strategies supported by research-based evidence. Consider researching ideas and concepts found on Pinterest in academic journals and professional publications before devoting your time and children's energy to it. When selecting users and boards to follow, search for reputable, like-minded early childhood educators; their content will be more than just interesting, it will be useful.

Each Child is Unique

Relationships are the foundation of early childhood. As an early childhood educator, you live with and learn from each child in your care. When considering implementing an idea from Pinterest, identify what works best for children and the classroom. A simple solution for challenging behavior probably doesn't exist on Pinterest because each child is unique. A pin outlining strategies that worked for one child should be thoughtfully considered and adapted to meet the needs of the child it is intended to help. Collaborate with parents to individualize a plan for their child. Avoid a cookie-cutter approach of trying what other educators have done in their classrooms without making appropriate modifications. Classroom culture and characteristics of children should always be taken into account. For example, a teacher using Pinterest locates a template for a visual schedule used by a child with autism. The teacher should consult with the family and reflect on his knowledge of the child's skills before using or adapting the template for classroom use.

Child Interest + Adult Guidance = Success!

Remember the scenario at the start of the article? Why would a lesson that provides hands-on learning be so unsuccessful? Notice the implementation of the lesson: the children are passive

observers and aren't allowed to do any of the steps. Most importantly, the children's interests didn't lead the teacher to this lesson, and so they aren't invested or motivated to learn about what's happening. Sound familiar? An activity or idea that children would enjoy and have fun with may not be appropriate in the classroom at the moment.

Early childhood educators recognize the value of play more than anyone. Play should be authentic and natural. Children show adults their interests and understandings in an infinite number of ways. Early childhood educators help children build on those interests by bringing in new materials and presenting new ideas to help investigate those interests. Creating a pin for future use is a great way to store activities and ideas for when the interest emerges from children. Children benefit from connectedness in their learning, and introducing activities in an intentional order to support their learning and investigation is most effective.

Be Clear with Content

Be sure you can identify what you're teaching children. Introducing a project on how raisins react in seltzer water is fun to look at, but what science concepts are you introducing? How can you explain this phenomenon to young children? Children need the opportunity to learn why these things are occurring, not marvel at the 'magic.' Science is built on facts, so be sure to ask yourself what children will learn from the activity. Use local state standards for guidance on content.

Organizing your Pinterest boards in a meaningful way:

- **By topic:** By children's interests for future project work.
- **By domain:** Can be used to meet learning objectives in a natural way.

- **Organizationally:** Realistic ways to improve your classroom environment. Only bite off what you can chew.
- **Evidence-Based Practices:** Collect articles, resources, and research for easy referral.
- **Parent Share:** Select and save resources on timeless topics for parents (potty training, establishing a night-time routine, dealing with death and dying) for easy retrieval when the moment presents itself
- **"Done" Board:** Designate a board on your Pinterest account specific to things that you have already done. Seeing activities added to this board will be more meaningful than pinning things that you'll never do. It also helps organize the things you want to keep and those that are okay to delete.

Pitfalls to avoid:

- Pinning more than you'll ever use.
- Pinning as a way to collect ideas or present to others what you'd *like to do*. People care more about *what you're doing* than what you intend to do 'someday.'
- Pinning 'cute' crafts and activities that are product-focused and that have little value for children's learning. Remember it's about the process, not the product.
- Using without trying it out first; be sure you've done the activity before you present it to children.
- Never attach a child's name to a pin.

Conclusion

Pinterest offers teachers a platform for connecting with other educators, sharing ideas, reflecting on practice, and reviewing ideas and concepts. Pinterest

and *Teachers on Pinterest* provide the modern day educator with many benefits that members of the profession did not have in the past. Using the simple tips and strategies described here, you can embrace the advantages of technology while maintaining your quality of service and the intentionality of your teaching.

Author's Favorite Pinner's and Boards

The Learning Child: University of Nebraska-Lincoln Extension —

Covering topics in early childhood ranging from divorce to STEM, this source is definitely worth following. The extension office systematically organizes a range of information on a variety of topics for easy perusal.

Play At Home Mom — This group of moms shares the mission of connecting families through play. They embrace messy play with all its challenges for the benefits of early childhood. The users blog about their pins and share photographs of their own children engaged in play. A trusted site for original ideas they have tested themselves, this collection has over 32,000 followers.

Reggio Children Inspired — Focused on the process of learning, this pinner has created 14 boards of beautiful ideas for inviting children to represent their understandings with a variety of materials. It includes ways to use natural items and to make the classroom aesthetically appealing.

Kids' Nature Play — This board touts multiple ways to connect young children to nature in early childhood settings. Not only does pinner Jennifer Kable provide ways to explore the beauty of the natural world, she also has collected ways for early childhood educators to bring the natural environment indoors for children.

Resources

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