

# Achieving Quality: Helping Teachers to Use Interest Areas Effectively

by Diane Trister Dodge

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"Our new room arrangement worked so well that we haven't changed a thing since you were here last." This statement, made by a teacher whose classroom I had visited, serves to underscore the importance of appropriate learning environments. A well organized and rich physical environment is indeed critical in achieving a quality program, critical because it functions as the "textbook" of an early childhood curriculum.

Equally important, however, is knowing how to use the materials in each interest area to facilitate learning. To ensure that the environment provides children with new challenges and retains their interest and involvement, teachers must also develop a facility for changing and continually adding to the materials and arrangement of each interest area.

A step-by-step approach can be quite effective in helping teachers appreciate the learning potential in each area of the classroom. The approach involves a sequence of strategies that center directors can implement in their ongoing work with staff. These include:

## **1. Understanding How Each Interest Area Can Promote a Child's Development and Learning**

The traditional interest areas of a preschool classroom—blocks, house corner, table toys, art, sand and water, library, and outdoors—offer a wealth of learning opportunities for young children. Setting up each area as suggested in a previous article (see **Exchange**, June 1989, pp. 43-47) is the first step. To maximize learning, teachers need to recognize how the children's interactions and explorations with these materials can enhance growth. This step can be accomplished easily using readily available resources.

Early childhood curricula, which are appropriately based on child development theory, outline the developmental stages teachers can expect to see as children first approach materials and then gain skill in using them. These curriculum models also identify goals and objectives that can be achieved in each interest area. These goals are often organized by developmental areas—emotional, social, cognitive, and physical development. The lists of goals and

objectives can be duplicated and shared with teachers. Posting them in each interest area reminds staff what skills and concepts can be reinforced through play in that area.

## 2. Observing What Children Do

The next step is to help teachers learn to observe children. Observation is an essential skill in teaching young children. Teachers need to know what materials children typically select, how children use the materials, and how children relate to their peers. This information enables teachers to decide how well the environment is working, who needs assistance, when to intervene, what to say, and how to reinforce and extend learning. To make observations meaningful, teachers should have a clear idea of what to look for. Following are some suggestions you can offer your staff.

In observing **what materials children select**, teachers should consider:

- What types of toys and equipment do children like to play with?
- Do they play with a variety of materials?
- Do they tend to select materials popular with other children, or do they make independent choices?
- What types of materials hold their interest the longest?
- Do they tend to select materials that are traditionally for boys or girls?

In observing **how children use materials**, have teachers consider these questions:

- Do children do the same things with the materials each time they

play with them, or do they try out new ideas?

- Do they get frustrated or bored easily?
- Do they try out newly learned skills in their play?
- Do they invite other children to join in their play? Do they join other children when asked?
- Do the children prefer to have an adult play with them rather than play alone or with other children?
- Do they have special friends?

The younger the child, the more adults have to guess what children are thinking and learning. You can help focus teacher observations on **what learning experiences** are taking place by having them consider the following questions:

- Do the children use the materials to express their feelings, fears, and anxieties?
- Can they compare how materials are alike and different?
- Can they tell you what they are doing with materials?
- Can they describe the materials (e.g. size, color, shape, texture)?
- Do they initiate new projects and activities?
- Can they use the materials to solve problems?
- Can they predict what will happen before they try out their ideas?

Encourage teachers to keep brief notes on their observations and arrange a time to talk with them about what they have learned about individual children and the effectiveness of the learning environment.

## 3. Reinforcing Children's Play

Observations are of value only if teachers know how to use the knowledge they gain about individual children and how children use the learning environment. One way to help teachers learn this skill is to offer specific suggestions on what they can say to children to reinforce play activities. The process of reinforcement involves conveying to children that what they are doing has value, describing what was observed to the children, asking open-ended questions, and encouraging children to take the next step. Here are some suggestions you can give to teachers.

• **Describe what children are doing:** "I see you have used all the square blocks today." Or, "You mixed the blue and yellow paint together, and look what you made—green!" Or, "I see you're having trouble getting that wet sand to go through the funnel."

• **Ask children to describe what they are doing:** "You've been working in the block corner a long time today. Tell me about the building you've made." Or, "You really seem to like the shells we collected. Tell me all you learned about them."

• **Ask questions that invite children to examine their own work and look for new possibilities:** "Your car is a long way from the gas station. What will happen if it runs out of gas?" Or, "That playdough looks very sticky today. What could you add to it to make it work better?"

• **Ask questions that encourage children to put together their information in order to arrive at an answer:** "Which of these bottle caps is the same as the one you put in the cup? How is it the same?" Or,

## Ideas for Extending and Enriching Children's Play

### Block Corner

- Wooden airplanes, helicopters, and Legos for building spaceships might be added to the block corner in response to the children's interest in transportation play.
- As the children are building, a teacher could say: "This airport looks like a busy place. Where do people park their cars when they come to get on a plane?"

### House Corner

- Prop boxes that stimulate dramatic play—doctor, grocery store, office—can be prepared and brought out in response to the children's interests.
- When the children are playing in the house corner, a teacher might say: "Here's a box with some things a doctor might use to care for patients." Or the teacher might ask: "Would you like a magazine to look at while you wait to see the doctor?"

### Table Toy Area

- Noting that the children have mastered the puzzles put out at the beginning of the year, a teacher would leave out some of the children's favorites and add new ones that are at the next level of difficulty.
- While the children are playing with manipulatives, the teacher can comment: "I see you have used all the red and yellow crystal climbers."

### Art Area

- The art area should include a rich variety of materials to stimulate creativity and experimentation—for example, white paint to mix with colors to create pastels, a different type of clay or modeling dough, and colored chalk to use with liquid starch.
- When the children are painting, a teacher might say: "You made a lot of new colors by mixing the paints. Would you like to tell me about your painting?"

### Library Corner

- Books displayed should be age-appropriate and reflect the backgrounds and interests of the children. As teachers pick up on new interests expressed by the children, new books can be added. Teachers select books that expand play. For example, if the children in the house corner have been playing doctor and hospital, books on these subjects can be added to the library corner.
- When the children are in the library corner, a teacher might say: "I have a new story tape I think you'll like. It's about one of your favorite books."

### Sand and Water Area

- Objects such as funnels, tubes, cups, shovels, and water wheels lead to discoveries in science and math as children explore the properties of sand and water.
- When the children are playing at the water table, a teacher may ask: "What could you use to get the water to go into that little opening in the bottle without spilling?"

### Outdoor Area

- The outdoor environment offers a rich resource for encouraging children's growth and development in all areas. Activities are planned for each day, and the children go outside at least once a day.
- Teachers plan special projects such as having the children plant and care for a garden. A teacher might say: "Look at how many of our seeds have started growing. It looks pretty dry. What do you think our garden needs?"

“What do you think will happen if we hang all the dress-up clothes on one hanger?”

• **Ask questions that help children look for many possible ideas or solutions to problems:** “What else can we do with the playdough?” Or, “What might happen if we all tried to climb to the top of the jungle gym?”

• **Ask questions that encourage children to explore their feelings and emotions:** “I can see you are happy with the mobile you made. Tell me what you like best about it.” Or, “How do you think Ira feels about sleeping overnight at a friend’s house?”

Because they do not require one correct answer, the open-ended questions and statements illustrated above are designed to reinforce children’s play and encourage their thinking. Once teachers learn this approach to reinforcing children’s play, they can easily apply it in their interactions with children in all areas of the room.

#### **4. Extending and Enriching Children’s Play**

Because learning is a dynamic process, teachers must become skillful in responding to children’s changing needs and interests. Periodically, teachers should enhance and alter the learning environment in order to provide new experiences, challenge the children’s abilities, and respond to their growing interests. This is accomplished by doing the following:

- adding new materials, equipment, and props to interest areas;
- asking questions, offering suggestions, and answering questions to expand children’s play experiences;

- bringing in outside resources, such as visitors and people with special talents, to generate new ideas that children can use in play; and

- taking children on field trips that expand their knowledge and areas of interest.

#### **Conclusion**

A well-organized and rich environment is a key strategy in working towards a quality program. The step-by-step approach presented here will help teachers learn to use their environment to facilitate learning and growth. When children can learn and grow at their own pace, the measures of program quality are usually evident: the physical environment is safe, orderly, and contains varied and stimulating toys and materials organized into appropriate activity areas; children have the freedom to select activities that interest them and to learn from their active interactions with people and materials; and teachers talk with children, are responsive and accepting, and ask questions that promote thinking and language development.

*This article is based on **The Creative Curriculum for Early Childhood** which is available from Teaching Strategies, Inc., PO Box 42243, Washington, DC 20015. Diane Trister Dodge is president of Teaching Strategies and author of the **Creative Curriculum**.*