

Fortune Cookie Philosophy: Using Motivation Effectively With Young Children

by Tricia S. Kruse

Tricia Kruse has worked for over 10 years within Navy Child Development Programs and now carries out developmentally appropriate practices with her two young children. In addition, she is a field consultant for the High/Scope Educational Research Foundation and a freelance writer. As a published author she is intrinsically motivated to write about children and family issues.



I had just finished eating an enormous amount of moo-go-guy-pan and too many pieces of sushi to count when the waitress delivered my check and a fortune cookie. I was used to reading fortunes like, “You cannot prevent the bird of sorrow from flying over your head, but you can prevent it from building nests in your hair.” Surprisingly, the fortune I was holding in my hand actually told the truth. It read:

What we love to do
we find time to do.
Lucky# 2,9,32,33,34,46

And as I sat digesting my food and the meaning of the fortune, I realized, children live by this fortune every day.

Within the field of early childhood it is often said, “Children’s play is their work.” Adults have jobs that they may or may not love to do, but every day millions of children enter early childhood programs diligently engaging in their work, which is *exactly* what they love to do. A question then arises: How well do we support children in completing their “jobs”? One way to answer this question is by examining what motivates children and how we can use this information in our classrooms.

Motivation

Many researchers and psychologists study motivation, but they look at it in different ways. Some of the better-known motivational theories are based on behavioral, cognitive, or humanistic views. Some say that motivating children extrinsically is the way to get results; extrinsic motivation occurs when external factors are involved. These practices are evident in traditional preschool classrooms where children are motivated by stickers, verbal praise, prizes,

acclaim/rewards and other behavior management systems. However, studies have documented other methods for increasing children’s learning and more importantly, *their love of learning*, through intrinsic motivation. Intrinsic motivation can be defined as something that comes from *within*. Everyone is intrinsically motivated; we are just motivated by different things. For example, some people are motivated to exercise in their leisure hours while others choose to garden. The “reward” for participating in these activities comes from the activity itself and the satisfaction it brings the person.

Many researchers believe that tapping into children’s intrinsic motivation is the key to unleashing the potential for learning. The National Association for the Education of Young Children (NAEYC) suggests, “Children older than five show increasing abilities to learn through written exercises, oral presentations, and other adult-directed teaching strategies. However, the child’s active participation in self-directed play, with concrete, real-life experiences, continues to be a key to motivated, meaningful learning in kindergarten and the primary grades” (Bredenkamp, 1987, p. 4).

Intrinsic motivation in early childhood classrooms

There are many things teachers can do to tap into the intrinsic motivating factor. The key is to establish classroom practices that give children more time and opportunities through materials and adult-child interactions that motivate them to learn in an active way. Following these guidelines allows children the opportunity to dedicate their efforts doing the things they love, while, of course, learning!

Routines

The saying “time is of the essence” applies here. In order for children to be able to become fully engaged



PHOTOGRAPH BY BONNIE NEUGEBAUER

How well do we support children in completing their “jobs”?

during center time, they need a solid block of time to work. In order to reach their maximum potential, children need uninterrupted time. NAEYC recommends, “Children of all ages need uninterrupted periods of time to become involved, investigate, select, and persist at activities. In developmentally appropriate programs, adults: provide opportunities for child-initiated, child-directed practice of skills as a self-chosen activity” (Bredekamp, 1987, p. 7). The goal is for children to be able to develop complex levels of play and social problem-solving skills. Rather than limiting children’s time in each learning center, rotating them every few minutes, or directing them where they should play, let the children make choices. They should choose where to play, how long to stay there, and with whom they want to play. With these kinds of choices, children are enabled to develop self-regulation and increase social awareness. Remember, limiting children’s choices limits learning.

Every choice children make throughout the day shows us through *action* what they like to do. Therefore, adults who value the power of intrinsic motivation show children they are valued as individuals and decision makers by giving them every opportunity to practice these skills.

Physical environment

The learning environment plays an important part in supporting children’s intrinsically-motivated actions. Once children are able to make choices about where they want to play, the materials provided in each area should support their many interests. First, the classroom should be organized well and include opportunities for learning in the following areas:

- block building
- dramatic play
- art
- music
- science
- math
- manipulatives
- book reading

Once learning centers are established, each should be well-stocked with materials that appeal to children. This doesn’t mean there has to be expensive toys. In fact, the highest yield toys for complex play are simple, open-ended items. Open-ended materials invite children to use their own approach in determining how the materials will be used. Here are a few examples:

- blocks
- art materials
- sand and water
- books
- boxes

And don't forget the things found naturally in their environment like real pots and pans for the play center or rocks and shells in the block center.

In addition, labeling play areas is important. Children need to know where to find things and should be able to go to them as they work through their latest mental challenges. Moreover, the materials in each area should be able to travel with children as they interact in other areas. This will increase the levels of complex play. Labeling then assumes even greater importance because it helps children to take an active role in clean-up!

An appropriate environment allows children to efficiently engage in the activities they love and increases the likelihood that children will discover more areas of interest for future exploration!

Interaction

Although routines and materials play key roles in every early childhood classroom, perhaps the biggest factor influencing children's play is the interaction they have with adults. The type of feedback children receive from adults can dramatically affect children's play and social interactions. In reference to praise, NAEYC's guidelines state:

Appropriate practice is when "children's natural curiosity and desire to make sense of their world are used to motivate them to become involved in learning activities."

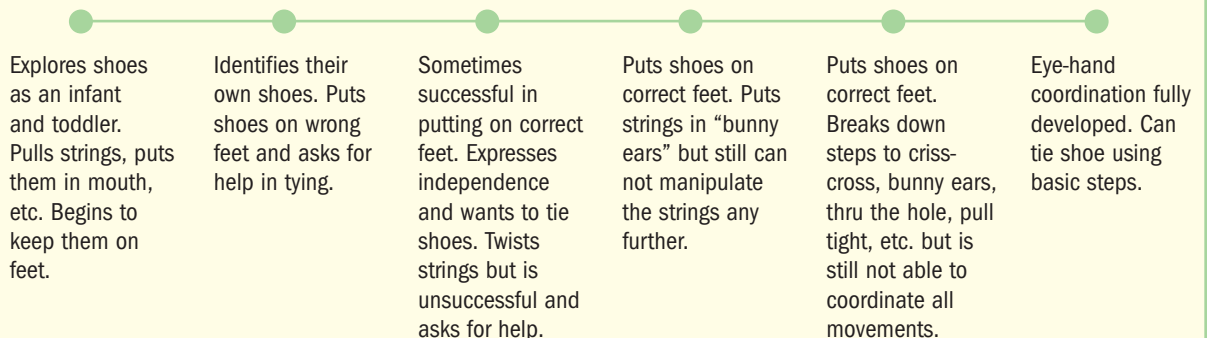
Inappropriate practice occurs when "Children are required to participate in all activities to obtain the teacher's approval, to obtain extrinsic rewards like stickers or privileges, or to avoid punishment" (Bredenkamp, 1987, p. 56).

Essentially, the two statements above refer to the distinction between using praise effectively or ineffectively. Ineffective praise builds on the *adult's* desire for a specific outcome. Many educators believe that motivating children through the use of behavior management techniques such as stickers, treats, and verbal praise produces results and provides children with positive attention. There is considerable evidence to suggest otherwise. According to Martin (1977), "Praise can actually lessen self-motivation and cause children to become dependent on rewards. Praise may be useful in motivating students to learn by rote, but it may actually discourage problem solving" (p. 51). On the other hand, effective praise enhances intrinsic motivation and does exactly what NAEYC recommends; it builds on the child's natural curiosity and desires. With effective praise we bring attention to the chil-

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Learning as a Continuum

Here is a simple illustration of how learning is a continual process. Learning can only take place when the whole child is able to complete each step that builds upon another. The ability to tie a shoe does not develop instantly. It has developed over a very long period of time (continuum) exploring shoes, observing others tie, and multiple attempts at tying until eye-hand coordination is developed enough for successful completion.



Learning as a continuum can be seen in every area of children's development. The principles of intrinsic motivation show us that in order for children to learn it is necessary to provide them with opportunities to repeatedly explore and build on previous knowledge of their surroundings. Only after multiple opportunities for exploration of the same materials can they progress along the learning continuum.

dren's accomplishments in a way that allows them to evaluate their own work rather than to depend on adult judgment.

The High/Scope Foundation has developed three specific interaction strategies that are forms of effective praise, or encouragement. These can easily be implemented in any classroom:

■ **Participate in children's play.**

This involves getting down on a child's physical level by kneeling, sitting — or even lying down. Interact as though you are another child accepting "assigned" roles to be the "baby" or the "bus driver." In essence, have fun interacting and allow yourself to give up control of the play situation to the children (Hohmann & Weikart, 2002, p. 210).

■ **Encourage children to describe their efforts, ideas, and products.**

Encouraging children to describe their work provides opportunities to expand their language development and allows for self-evaluation. A simple way to implement this strategy is by talking with children either as they work on a project or at the end of the play period (Hohmann & Weikart, 2002, p. 191). NAEYC'S position statement on developmentally appropriate care offers, "When teachers and adults

use various strategies to encourage children to reflect on their experiences by planning beforehand and 'revisiting' afterward, the knowledge and understanding gained from the experience is deepened" (NAEYC, 1996, p. 8).

■ **Acknowledge children's work and ideas by making specific comments.**

Ineffective praise does not encourage children's language development nor does it help the adult understand how the child is thinking. For example, ineffective praise is a generic statement that could be said to virtually any child's painting. For example, "I like that blue color!"

Effective praise, on the other hand, takes thought and is individually tailored to each child. For example, "Can you tell me how you made this color blue?" The comments are specific to each child's action or creation, whether it is a block structure or a way they moved their body to music. An easy way to change from ineffective to effective praise is to change from saying "I" to "you." Rather than saying "I like" or "I think" which offers the adult's opinion, try saying "You painted the whole paper!" or "You jumped on one foot!" This adjustment creates a specific comment that allows the children to respond with their own remarks and to evaluate

their own work, if they wish.

Taken from *Adult-Child Interaction Participant Guide, Second Edition*, p. 36, 1996, High/Scope Education Research Foundation.

Learning to use praise effectively requires self-reflection and takes time to implement fully. Often it is a change that is made over a long period of time. Changing habits takes time; a new behavior must be reinforced over time until it becomes second nature.

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Activities

Developmentally appropriate activities can be planned to build on the individual motivation of each child. Observe children in their natural state of play to discover their interests and strengths. Essentially we are looking for the fortune cookie statement — *What is the child finding the time to do?* Once we know this, we are better able to plan future activities that scaffold (build on) learning based on all the areas that are available in an early childhood classroom. It is appropriate to plan activities in each area of development and not focus exclusively on cognitive development through activities like letter recognition and counting. There is a Yiddish saying that goes: “If we all leaned the same way the world would tip over.” So build on children’s individual interests by planning activities that encourage their continued growth in all areas of development.

A key to effective, appropriate curriculum planning is accepting that everyone’s learning takes place on a continuum (see box in adjacent page). Children need ongoing opportunities to explore and build on previous knowledge of their surroundings. If given the opportunity for active learning, children are intrinsically motivated to push their own learning further. Activities that result in either a “right or wrong,” like ditto sheets, actually discourage risk-taking behavior in children and therefore, decrease the opportunities for genuine learning.

Planning activities based on what you know about individual children is the key to keeping them excited and motivated to learn. A pre-planned activity from store-bought or prescribed curricula is often ill-suited to children who may be above or below that level. These activities create frustration, boredom, and loss of interest. Planning a lesson for children based on what a predetermined guide instructs is similar to ordering an outfit for a friend from a catalog, but not knowing the proper size or style she needs or wants. Resource books are a great tool for ideas and inspirations based on your actual observations of individual children.

Families

Families play an important role in motivating children. Here are some simple ideas to help parents understand the importance of motivating their children in healthy, effective ways which encourage learning:

Changing habits takes time; a new behavior must be reinforced over time until it becomes second nature.

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■ **Encourage children to describe their efforts, ideas, and products.** Encouraging children to describe their work provides opportunities to expand their language development and allows for self-evaluation. A simple way to implement this strategy is by talking with children either as they work on a project or at the end of the play period (Hohmann & Weikart, 2002, p. 191). NAEYC’S position statement on developmentally appropriate care offers, “When teachers and adults use various strategies to encourage children to reflect on their experiences by planning beforehand and ‘revisiting’ afterward, the knowledge and understanding gained from the experience is deepened” (NAEYC, 1996, p. 8).

■ **Acknowledge children’s work and ideas by making specific comments.** Ineffective praise does not encourage children’s language development nor does it help the adult understand how the child is thinking. For example, ineffective praise is a generic statement that could be said to virtually any child’s painting. For example, “I like that blue color!”

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- Encourage parents to accept their children as unique learners. Discourage them from comparing siblings' skills and talents. One child may be athletic, while another enjoys reading. Help them to build on each child's unique strengths and interests.
- Share information about effective praise. Send home weekly or monthly newsletters with parents that provide examples of effective praise or provide parent workshops.
- Invite parents to observe in the classroom in order to see how much their child is learning through active play and model effective praise.
- Send home activity ideas that use open-ended materials. Help parents to appreciate how the child interacts with the materials rather than what specific things they make or produce. Encourage creativity.

Conclusion

"We love to do what we find time to do" summarizes quite simply how influential motivation is to people of all ages. If we want to foster a love of learning in young children, we must observe and listen closely to them so that they can show us *what and how* they love to learn. A life-long love of learning started in early

childhood supports children's curiosity about the world and contributes to their continued development.

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For more information

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"We love to do what we find time to do" . . .

Which one do you use most?: As Kruse explored extrinsic and intrinsic motivation, did teachers find themselves falling into one category or the other, a little of both, or didn't they have a clue which one they used? Ask teachers to reflect on the role each type of motivation plays in their classrooms, citing examples of when they use each type of motivation effectively.

How long?: For what period of time daily are children in your program choosing what they want to play with, how long they want to play, and with whom they want to play? Ask teachers to analyze their classroom routines to explore this important idea and determine if they are providing enough uninterrupted play time.

Assess your physical environment: Count them up — do teachers have the right number of well equipped areas in each classroom? If not, make a plan to get them set up and stocked immediately.

Three strategies to try: Encourage teachers to increase the time they spend participating in children's play, encouraging children to describe their efforts, ideas, and projects, and acknowledging children's work ideas with specific comments. Observe to see if change is taking place.

Sharing the play: Start at the top and implement the great ideas listed in this article under the topic of families. Just do it — it will enhance teachers' abilities to support children's play and to share with families what children are learning when they play.

Using Beginnings Workshop
to Train Teachers
by Kay Albrecht