

Learning Center System

Preschool Resource Guide



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TABLE OF CONTENTS

	Page
Overview and purpose	3
Supporting Children's Learning	4
Daily Routine	8
The Classroom Environment	10
Learning Centers – Function	13
Learning Centers- Literacy Connections	14
The Planning Process for Children	15
Daily Planning	17
Learning Center Guidelines	20
Basic Essentials	23

Supporting Children's Learning

The **Learning Center System** gives children the opportunity each day to learn and development their individual skills and knowledge. Learning centers can meet all developmental areas based on child initiated activities. They are able to work with a wide variety of materials that are available based on their skills, development, and most of all their interest.

Learning Centers serves as true tools for learning by:

- Providing a wide range of experiences to accommodate a wide range of interests and development
- Meeting child's greatest need for movement, manipulation and expression
- Offering a rich environment with child-directed activities
- Integrating learning occurs continuously, providing reinforcement of skills and information
- Offering learning experiences that are active, concrete and relevant to the child
- Allowing adults to observe and work with children individually or in small groups

Learning Centers set the stage for adults who work and play with children by:

- Integrating age appropriate curriculum content that is meaningful and useful to the child
- Structuring, facilitating and guiding the learning process based on their developmental understanding and knowledge of children
- Designing curriculum practices that is based on children's culture, language and experiences
- Systematically planning and organizing learning experiences so that each child's creativity and sense of discovery is always maintained
- Creating environments that are welcoming, inviting and a good place for children and adults spend time learning and growing

Learning Centers have a major role in supporting development in young children. Their form and function is based on what we know and understand about developmentally appropriate practices.

The following definitions have emerged:

DEVELOPMENT: Understanding and recognition of children's **universal** developmental traits-physical, social, emotional, cognitive and creative; this also includes child/family cultural and linguistic development and experiences.

What we need to know in order to understand and work with children.

APPROPRIATE: Matching children's individual and "age" appropriateness learning with a curriculum design that is inclusive of appropriate content; meaningful to children and incorporates styles of children's learning and experiences.

How we plan for and establish an environment for learning.

PRACTICES: Providing an environment, materials and adults which support and enhance the developmental needs and abilities of all children, consistently promote active/interactive learning in a positive and supportive classroom. Within this environment, children and adults are supported and respected as both learners and teachers.

What guides our work with children on a daily basis.

Developmentally Appropriate Practices include:

- Matching early childhood practices to the ways children learn.
- Establishing a classroom environment that encourages creativity, exploration and facilitates active learning.
- Considering the age range from birth to 8 years as a continuum of development.
- Using on-going evaluation for decision making and curriculum development.
- Utilizes real and/or concrete materials for teaching and learning.
- Provides objects and materials children can manipulate.
- Provides experiences that are relevant to the life experiences of children.
- Provides prosocial environments where children gain competence and skill in positive interactions with others

We realized that children are more likely to internalize information when:

- It is familiar, meaningful and contains an organization of its own that is on the child's level of thinking.
- Children are actively involved with the learning experience.
- Learning / activities have variety and provide creative experiences.
- Learning experiences are presented to children based on their interests and intrigue them.

DAILY ROUTINE

There are two elements for successful environments for learning, first is the physical arrangement of the classroom and the second is the daily routine that children and adults use for their work and play. When considering learning centers as a daily component, you should also consider timeframes for the entire day.

Daily Routine Considerations for Young Children:

- Active and Passive Activities
- Developmental levels of children
- Attention Span-grows with children
- Time for children to work together in pairs, in groups and alone
- Consistent routines, children anticipate and understand flow of the day
- Flexibility in time blocks
- Transitions are considered part of an activity, not a separate block of time
- Individual adult/child time
- Consistent opportunities for physical/motor activities
- Supportive social interaction

When integrating learning centers, one of the major considerations should be the developmental ages of children. Center time needs to be scheduled so those children have sufficient time to plan, work and complete their tasks. Learning Centers are times for children to develop their capacity to think, communicate, problem solve, create and socialize. Their time is critical and evolves, as children are able to work in learning centers on a daily basis.

As children begin with a daily routine that includes learning centers at the beginning of the day, they have the capacity to stay focused and engaged for about 20 minutes. As they begin to gain a sense of routine and develop relationships in working with others, children are able to develop and maintain focus and work for up to 30-45 minutes. Extending learning center time should be based on keen observations of children as a group of learners and how their interactions with others and materials are sustained. Learning centers that are offered in the afternoon should have the same time considerations as the morning, extending the time as children gain more engagement time. Allowances for extended times can be accommodated by adding or reducing time to outdoor play.

A sample schedule for beginning the school year for full day programs:

7:00 – 8:30	Arrival, Quiet Activities and/or Outdoor Play
8:30 – 9:00	Breakfast
9:00 – 9:15	Circle Time or Music and Movement
9:15 – 9:30	Group Time
9:30 – 10:15	Planning Time and Learning Centers (Includes work time and clean-up)
10:15 – 11:00	Outdoor Plays
11:00 – 11:15	Cleanup and bathrooms
11:15 – 11:30	Music and Movement
11:30 – 12:00	Lunch Time
12:00 – 12:30	Story Time
12:30 – 2:00	Rest Time and Quiet Activities
2:00 – 2:30	Wake-up and Bathroom
2:30 – 2:45	Afternoon Snack
2:45 – 3:30	Outdoor Play
3:30 – 3:45	Story time or Music and Movement
3:45 – 4:30	Planning and Center Time
4:30 – 5:00	Outdoor Play

THE CLASSROOM

The major indicator of success for learning centers is the arrangement of the classroom. Room arrangement is the first step and must be given great care and thought to physical spaces and their function. The focus of arranging the classroom

should be the children it should represent who they are developmentally, their interests and their work.

There are some basic requirements:

- Centers should be clearly defined in space and function
- Centers should have ample areas for children to move, play and work
- Room should be divided into active and passive areas
- Traffic patterns allow children to work without disturbing each other
- Materials and supplies are accessible and organized
- Room is arranged so that children are able to work in small groups, large groups and spaces for them to work alone

There are some “universal” learning centers that are basic to every classroom. A good rule of thumb in determining the number of areas can be based on the classroom enrollment. Children need to have choices of areas to choose from, but too many can make selection of learning centers overwhelming. Children also need stability and continuity of learning centers. Establishment of areas for a classroom of 18-20 children is based on nine learning centers- Dramatic Play, Blocks, Art, Water Play, Sand Play, Discovery, Reading and Writing and Toys.

Selection of the number of centers should be based on classroom space and the interest of the children. The number of children that work in each area will vary. The centers with the largest number of children are usually blocks and dramatic play, so larger spaces will be required.

Although each room is different in configuration, there are some basic elements each center should have:

DRAMATIC PLAY

- Space is large enough for several children to move around easily
- Located near the Block area for integrated play situations
- Child size furniture and storage areas
- Soft places for children to settle
- Props and materials are accessible and arranged based on children’s use
- Area is located in classroom where there is minimum traffic
- Place for books, magazines and print materials

BLOCKS

- Largest area of the classroom
- Carpeted space for children to build
- Child size cabinets for storage of blocks and props
- Away from quieter centers – reading and writing
- Is clearly defined by cabinets
- Located away from the main traffic of the room

ART

- Area should be close to a sink and water
- Tiled floor
- Tables and chairs for 3-4 children
- Space for storing art projects
- Materials organized and arranged for easy access
- Area for displaying children's work

WATER PLAY and SAND PLAY

- Tiled floor or outside
- Plastic tarp placed under water table
- Container with water play toys accessible
- Place for children to store and access smocks

DISCOVERY

- Table or cabinet for materials to display and explore
- Table and chairs for children to work
- Access to electrical outlet
- Located close to windows and in quieter area of classroom
- Space ample for classroom pets
- Display area for children's work
- Place for books, magazines and print materials

READING AND WRITING

- Located in quiet area of the classroom
- Soft places for children to settle, sit and read
- Table and chairs for writing
- Cabinets for materials
- Book case/shelving for books and magazines
- Electrical outlets to use to tapes
- Carpeted area for children to read and work on floor

TABLE TOYS

- Floor or table space for building and construction
- Cabinets for manipulative and toys that are easily accessible
- Carpeted space for working on the floor
- Containers for materials that are easy for children to put away

LEARNING CENTERS- FUNCTION

Learning centers can be complex in the way children work and learn. Planning for learning centers can be aided by understanding how they function for children. Learning Centers can be divided into three types –open-ended, teacher directed and self-guiding.

Open-ended centers: BLOCKS, TABLE TOYS. SAND AND WATER PLAY, ART

- Promote a variety of outcomes and options
- Creations are based on child's experiences and creativity
- Initial activities/creations may not be appropriate to adult notions/ideas
- Activities foster prosocial skills and cooperative play
- Promote critical thinking and problem solving
- Offers a variety of materials that are functional and multi-dimensional in use

Teacher directed: DISCOVERY, COMPUTERS

- Utilize skills/techniques learned from an adult or previously structured activity introduced by the teacher
- Children may model behaviors/techniques from prior instruction
- Outcomes of learning are dependent on development of the child
- Activities may be done independently
- Promotes problem solving and critical thinking
- Promotes investigation, observation and discussion

Self-guiding: READING AND WRITING, GAMES

- Materials in center areas have apparent uses
- When children use materials, actions indicate correctness
- Individual or group interactions for activities
- Children's previous experiences with materials and/or skills are helpful
- Action oriented materials vary in skill and complexity

LEARNING CENTER SYSTEM- Literacy Connections

The ***Learning Center System*** provides not only a systematic way for child initiated learning, but also a way to use their daily communication of planning, creating and representing as functional literacy. Literacy development in children should be meaningful based on their development and skill level. When children use the ***Learning Center System***, they have a functional and meaningful way to communicate orally – talking and listening to others about their ideas, plans and representations of work. Oral communication is the first level of emergent literacy. When children begin to draw and scribble, they use these as a way to represent their plans and their actions, thus beginning the first steps to "writing and reading".

The ***Learning Center System*** support literacy development by:

- giving children environments that are rich in materials and activities that give children words, actions and meaning using oral language
- providing children many active and interactive experiences in order for them to build ideas about functions and uses of oral and written language
- understanding that children expect reading and writing to make sense and to be functional to them
- realizing that young children's knowledge and communication is grounded in their social, cultural and linguistic backgrounds

Readiness skills that emerge:

- sharing and cooperation with peers and adults
- confidence and acceptance
- fine and gross motor skills each day
- visual eye coordination
- auditory discrimination abilities
- visual discrimination abilities

THE PLANNING PROCESS

The Learning Center System gives children the tools they need to play and work for specific periods of the day. The routine of planning allows children the ability to build on their skills of thinking, problem solving and creating. It allows them to learn how to work and play with others. It provides children with the kinds of opportunities and experiences to function in a group and to work individually in areas of the classroom. Child planning needs to be consistent in where and how children plan. There is a developmental progression that children go through as they plan.

BEGINNING:

- Tells area where they would like to work/play.
- Usually have no advanced intentions of materials or plan for area.
- Center cards are used as a visual guide by child to locate center in classroom
- Adults talk with children about areas to work/play

Emergent:

- Knows area for plan and has some idea for plan and materials
- More descriptive in verbalizing plan and or materials, usually needs help with expanding idea
- Center cards represent more in depth understanding of functions each area has and wide use of materials to child.
- Children understand by "reading" others signs where children plan to work/play.
- Adults begin using dictation of children's plan; child begins to recognize function written plan has as a means of "reading with a purpose".

- **Planner:**

- Able to detail intentions for area and specific materials to use
- Represents through drawings and words plans and materials.
- Center Cards represent a systematic process for child to organize thoughts, plan use of environment, write and read plans of self and others
- Continue to advance literacy skills through drawings and writing of plans.

DAILY PLANNING**THE TOOLS:**

1. Planning Board
2. Center Cards
3. Name Cards
4. Paper, Markers and Crayons
5. Books

THE PLACE:

Same area in classroom used each day for children to use planning board. Area should allow children sit comfortably together for 10-15 minutes, depending on size of group.

The Process:***Beginners and Emergent***

1. Teacher shares with children learning center areas and special interest information - reminders, materials
2. Children sit as a group with either materials to draw with or books to read while teacher talks to each child individually.
3. Children talk to teacher one by one, selects center card and places next to name card.
4. When all children have planned, everyone goes to selected area.
5. Adults select areas to work with children based on center area needs and to be able to facilitate and observe children's work.
6. Children are responsible for areas of work, cleaning and placing materials and tools back properly.

Planners:

1. Children use plan form to write or draw plans that include intent for area and materials to be used. Teachers may also designate specific tasks that children need to complete while working in area. Centers should be consistent in time offered and duration.
2. After planning children go to areas of choice and begin work. Plan forms are kept in individual folders, teacher review these to assess child's work focus, detail of planning and writing skills.
3. Children may also use plan forms to document activities in center areas, reviewing actions taken, and illustrating work.
4. Children should be responsible for organizing the center environment, labeling materials and determining how class should work in keeping them organized.

Adult Child Interactions:

Interactions in preschool classrooms emerge on a variety of levels. Working with young children on a daily basis is dynamic and can be different every day. This is because children are developing their social competence on a day by day basis. They gain their ability to work with others, communicate, share and help one another by engaging in daily activities. What this means for adults who work and support children's learning and development is that the context in which interactions occur consider the step by step process of building children's competence.

Learning centers play a central force in help children gaining not only essential skills and knowledge, but more so in how to get along with others and be part of a learning community. These experiences give children readiness skills for entry into school and can benefit them throughout their learning years.

Adults have often struggled with classroom management considerations when it comes to learning centers as part of their daily routine. Sharing control is what happens each day with children. It requires that adults accept that children do not come to preschool classrooms with pre-established social skills. They need to have the opportunity and the guidance and support of adults who can share the learning and the development of children – with the learner, the young child.

When adults and children have a balance in both working and playing together, there is a rhythm that is created.

It is based on:

- Respect of each other –adults to child, child to adult, child to child
- Adults “read” who children are in the context of daily experiences
- Children given freedom to think – to plan, solve, explore and represent their work and their ideas
- Belief in children’s capability and trust in their abilities
- Reciprocal relationships with adults and children teaching each other
- Interactions are based on knowledge and relationships

Some ways to support children is to provide encouragement throughout the day by:

- Participating in children’s play – your actions let children know that they are valued and accepted
- Talking and engaging in conversations that help children describe what they do, how they work and their feelings and emotions
- Words that recognize children’s work and ideas that are genuine and honest

LEARNING CENTER GUIDELINES

The Learning Center System has developed series of steps that help guide adults as they work with children in center areas. These are helpful especially in creating continuity in how children are supported.

DRAMATIC PLAY:

Focus: Encourage and enhance dramatic play that is child initiated

- Accept and respect child's choice of role play character regardless of sex or gender
- Become an active, participating member of the role play activity
- Continually provides opportunities for verbal communication by talking with children, listening and encouraging children to communicate and share with others.
- Assist children in ending role play activities as appropriate and encouraging and modeling cleaning up and putting materials away properly.

BLOCKS:

Focus: Supporting and encouraging creative construction, sharing with others and following through with creative ideas for building and play

- Talk to children first about what they plan to do
- Help children determine materials they plan to use and where they would like to work
- Consistently promote opportunities for communication – talking, listening with adults and among children
- Help, assist and encourage children to end block play
- appropriately and putting materials back properly

ART

FOCUS: Encourage and support children's creativity and representations by using a variety of materials and mediums

- Talk with children about what ideas they would like to create
- Have children determine materials and areas where they would like to work
- Provide children with supporting language by listening and asking open ended questions about work
- Support children as they work together
- Provide assistance as needed with materials and equipment
- Label child's work with name and date
- Help children with completing work or putting uncompleted work in storage space
- Assist children with clean up and putting materials away

DISCOVERY

Focus: Encourage and promote investigative skills of observing, experimenting, predicting and communicating about experiences and ideas

- Talk with children about materials and what they would like to work with
- Determine areas where children are able to work and materials they need
- Consistently promote opportunities for verbal communication through listening, active interactions and involvement
- When appropriate model and assist children in using materials or equipment
- Help children return materials and equipment to proper areas

READING AND WRITING

Focus: Promote and enrich literacy development through child initiated activities

- Talk with children about what they plan to do
- Assist children when necessary by continually providing support through active listening and participating as appropriate in discussions
- Read to children with enthusiasm and clarity
- Use proper manuscript printing and spelling when doing story dictations. Read back to children what has been said.
- Help, encourage children and assist children to return materials to the proper areas

SAND AND WATER PLAY

Focus; Supporting sensory experiences using water and sand

- If appropriate, help children with smocks
- Allow children to explore and play with sand and water
- Help children identify their experiences and feelings
- Play with children and role model appropriate actions and language
- Encourage children problem solving and sensory experiences by asking open ended questions

TABLE TOYS

Focus: Promote and understand spatial relationships and motor skills

- Talk with children about what materials they plan to use in the center
- Continually provide appropriate support, language and active participation
- Assist children when needed, with fitting things together, pulling them apart, rearranging and reshaping objects
- Encourage children to describe their actions of constructing, paying close attention to positions and shapes
- Help, assist and encourage children when it is time to complete working and returning materials to proper places