

Centers in the Classroom Tip Sheet

Young children are actively involved in the learning process, and they love to explore the world around them. Having centers in the classroom allows children to do the things that come naturally to them; touch, feel, and experiment with the things around them. Playing in centers allows children to:

- Play alone or cooperatively;
- Make independent choices as to which activities to complete;
- Make choices, developing their confidence in their problem-solving abilities ;
- Ask playmates and teachers for assistance and develop social skills;
- Enhance creative abilities;
- Develop longer attention spans as they develop more advance play;
- Enhance their self-image as they feel more capable of impacting the world around them; and
- Experience integrated learning as they experience curriculum in meaningful ways.

Center time should be the longest uninterrupted block of time in a child's day. Time in centers should consist of 45-minute to one-hour blocks of time in the morning and again in the afternoon. During this time, children should be encouraged to freely explore and choose from a variety of activities located within the teacher-created "centers." During center time, children should be encouraged to choose their own centers, activities, and routines, to complete independently or cooperatively. A variety of different kinds of popular early childhood centers that experts recommend can be used to promote independent play. Appropriate traditional centers to use in your classroom include:

- An ABC and Writing Center;
- A Math / Literacy Center;
- A Science and Nature Center;
- An Art Center;
- A Construction and Block Center;
- A Socio-dramatic Play / Home Living Center;
- A Sand, Water, and Clay Center;
- A Reading / Library Center;

- A Music and Movement Center.

Some less traditional centers that are suggested by Rebecca Isbell in *The Complete Learning Center Book* are:

- Toy workshop
- Dance Studio
- Nighttime
- Recycling
- Sensory
- Space
- Camping

Once centers have been selected, it is important to clearly establish boundaries for those centers. The children in your program must understand where a center starts and ends, and which activities go with that center. It is important to consider a child's perspective when setting these boundaries. Look at the area from their perspective to see if it is clear from their height where these boundaries are. Low shelves, folding screens, bookcases, and dividers are all effective for separating areas. Low units allow teachers to easily monitor activity within the centers.

Examples of appropriate *teacher routines* for use during center time include:

- Making the same center materials available, every day, for at least a one week period of time. This helps children have many opportunities to repeat activities at will;
- Encouraging children to choose their own activities; and
- Encouraging children to decide for themselves how long they wish to play at each activity.

The teacher has several roles during center time:

- Observer – Record and evaluate the language use, the skills being used by the children, the type of play that is going on, and which children are working together for example. This information can be added to the child's portfolio for determining their development and growth. You can also use this information for planning future lessons.
- Resource – Help children as they need it. Listen and watch as children work and play. Teachers can move in and out of the play as needed. Be a model, facilitate, play a minor role, and encourage. It is important not to dominate the play.

- Evaluator of Center – Evaluate to see if centers are safe, learning areas. Are they providing opportunities for children to learn and grow? Do they have the necessary materials? Are children using the center? If not, why not?

Classroom rules are a very important part of classroom management within centers. Teaching appropriate rules to young children is important. Young children need to feel comfortable that their teachers won't allow them or others to get hurt. Appropriate classroom rules should:

- Encourage cooperation. They should be created for the greater good of the physical and psychological wellbeing of all of your children and NOT designed around the preferences of any one child or adult;
- reinforce good safety and hygiene practices;
- Be simple;
- Reinforce positive behavior; and
- Provide clear and consistent explanations as to why the rule is important for the child's well-being.

These are just a few ideas, suggestions and techniques that can make your classrooms more playful and purposeful. Becoming an effective manager of centers will allow you to become more effective in your classroom management as a whole.

An excellent resource book for helping early childhood teachers to develop, enhance, manage and energize their learning centers is *The Complete Learning Center Book* by Rebecca Isbell, Ph.D. This book is filled with ideas for transforming learning centers and includes learning centers plans with objectives, detailed illustrations, center activities, literacy connections, vocabulary related to the center, assessment tools and a CD-ROM that includes letters to send home, graphics and much more.