

## **Tips for Making Materials Accessible for Preschoolers**

Research verifies that children learn best through prolonged periods of play that give them opportunities to make choices, discover and explore. To support learning and development, schedules should include meaningful time periods when a variety of materials are accessible to children. A significant portion of this time should occur when most children are present so they benefit from experiences with these materials. Designing an appropriate schedule is important since the schedule determines not only the sequence of events for the day, but how much time children have to engage with other children and staff during educational free play opportunities.

Plan time for cleaning up and transitioning to other activities so play time is not impacted. Make sure the schedule includes ample time for play and is not overwhelmed with group times and/or long routines. If group times are optional, then children participating will be interested and engaged without disruption from other children who are not paying attention. This also allows uninterested children to engage in other types of meaningful play. If possible, handle routines such as using the restroom with individual or small groups of children. This allows children that are not using the restroom to continue with play activities instead of waiting in a large group.

### **Appropriate materials include**

- Fine motor materials such as art supplies, puzzles, manipulatives (stringing and lacing, zip boards, peg boards), interlocking toys (building toys that snap or fit together such as Lincoln logs or magnetic blocks).
- Blocks that stack and fall (wood, plastic, foam) and props to support block play (people, animals, vehicles).
- Gross motor materials to encourage active play such as balls, hoops, jump ropes, climbing equipment, etc.
- Varied art materials that allow children to be creative while developing fine motor skills such as drawing (paper with crayons, colored pencils, and markers), flexible and moldable materials (clay, playdough, pipe cleaners), paints (finger, water colors, tempera, dot markers), tools (scissors, brushes, glue, tape stencils, cookie cutters), materials for crafts and collages (cardboard tubes or boxes, craft sticks, foam sheets, felt or materials, feathers, cotton balls, google eyes, stickers, sequins, natural items like leaves and sticks, recyclable materials such as puzzle pieces and magazines)
- Dramatic play toys, clothing, and props to encourage children to practice social skills, explore work roles and diversity (basic housekeeping materials plus props for various roles such as animal hospital, restaurant, hairdresser or flower shop).
- Varied books that include diverse people, animals, fact and fiction.
- Musical instruments and a music player (CD player or electronic toys) that children can use to play various songs.
- Math materials to encourage number recognition and counting, materials with shapes, and materials that encourage measuring (rulers, tape measures, scales) or comparing quantities (abacus, balance scale, dominoes, puzzle with numbers).
- Nature/science items such as realistic animal books and toys, living things such as plants or a pet fish, natural items to explore (pine cones, rocks, shells, bird nest), and activities (magnets, magnifying glasses, binoculars).
- Sensory play opportunities (water and sand play) that allow children relaxing experiences while learning reasoning skills as they explore the materials with a variety of toys and activities (measuring cups, water wheels and funnels, sink and float, sifting and molding toys, etc.)
- Educational games such as homemade memory and board games that teach children concepts while they learn and play together.
- Diverse materials incorporated into interest areas throughout the room to help children learn about differences and similarities in people including varied ages, races, roles, abilities, and men/women in similar work roles (puppets, dolls, puzzles, play food and clothing, games, books, pictures).
- Soft areas for relaxing alone or with a friend so children can have a break from the pressures of being in group care.

## **Making materials accessible**

- Offer every child significant periods of free play with access to a variety of materials throughout the day.
- Include a variety of options so children have many choices.
- Organize materials on low shelves and in containers that are simple to open making everything easily accessible to children.
- Consider the abilities of *all* children in the group.

## **Creating an environment that supports play**

- Consider the abilities and number of children enrolled when selecting the types and amount of materials.
- Organize play spaces that have appropriate furnishings that support specific types of play.
- Allow enough space for children to play together to support developing social skills
- Separate noisy and quiet play areas to help children minimize disruption of quiet play and support opportunities for more vigorous activities.
- Allow children to move freely and take the lead in play. They are capable of making choices and may have a special interest in certain topics such as dinosaurs or insects.
- Determine a specific number of children that can play in more popular areas to minimize crowding. This allows children to still make many choices from other areas while waiting for a turn. Children have the opportunity to practice negotiating skills when taking turns in the area. It also gives children the opportunity to practice math skills as they learn to determine the number of children in the area.
- Add additional areas that included material from popular play spaces such as a second areas with dramatic play materials or block building. This supports children's choices, prevents crowding, and minimizes competition for frequently used materials.

## **Be intentional**

- Talk to children about what they are doing, ask questions that encourage longer answers (why, how, what if), engage in language activities such as singing songs or reading books related to play topics with a couple of children. Leave time for children to respond to questions and give them opportunities for taking the lead in conversations.
- Ask children questions about their interests and consider those topics when choosing materials for the classroom.
- Participate in play when invited by children (pretend to be a customer in a restaurant, help build a castle, assist children with using challenging art materials).
- Set up activities that encourage children to engage with each other so they can practice social and communication skills.
- Allow children time to practice skills needed for school readiness such as learning the fine motor control needed for writing, letter and number recognition, etc. This can be done through play and not just during structured group activities. When planning materials for the play areas in a classroom, incorporate materials and activities that encourage school-readiness skills into various play areas. For example, add paper and pencils into the block area so children can practice writing when creating blue prints or signs for block structures, include tickets in dramatic play so children can create by write ticket orders, and include a cash register with money to practice math skills while playing store.
- Rotate materials frequently to encourage changing interests and provide more challenge as they improve and develop skills.