**Tips for Making Materials Accessible for School-agers**

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.

If programs provide after school care, the schedule should reflect at least one meaningful period when most of the children have access to materials because they have been in large group, structured activities for much of the school day. If programs offer before school care, consider the amount of time children are present.  If time allows, children should have access to different types of materials.

**Appropriate materials include**

- 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, sewing or knitting supplies, 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).
- Language materials that encourage literacy such as a variety of books and language games.
- Construction area with sets of blocks, construction sets, and supportive props such as tools, toy animals and people, road signs, play buildings and vehicles.
- Musical instruments, dance props (scarves, streamers, and microphones), and a music player (CD player or karaoke machine) that children can use to play various songs.
- Math and reasoning materials such as puzzles, math games, calculators, rulers, and unifix cubes.
- 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, science kits, magnifying glasses, telescope, and microscope).
- Materials showing diversity accessible throughout the room to help children learn about differences and similarities in people. Include various 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 few friends so children can have a break from the pressures of being in group care.
- A quiet area for children to complete homework or other activities that require concentration.
- Resources available to children and staff for finding answers about topics of interest or completing homework.  Resources may include computer programs, dictionaries, or encyclopedias.

**Making materials accessible**

- Offer *every* child significant periods of free play time with access to a variety of materials.
- Include a variety of options so children have many choices.
- Organize materials on low shelves, carts, or tables making everything easily accessible to children.
- Consider the abilities of *all* children in the group. School-age classrooms include children of various ages, abilities, and maturity levels.

**Creating an environment that supports play**

- Consider the abilities and number of children enrolled when selecting the types and amount of materials. Programs with 50 to 60 children will need more materials from each category than a program with 15 to 20 children.
- Organize play spaces so children have enough space and appropriate furnishings to support play.
- 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 when choosing activities. School-agers have developed their own interests and are capable of making choices when they engage in play.
- Identify popular interest centers and add additional areas with those types of materials so more children can choose that type of play.
- Offer group events such as snack, circle time, and homework as optional so children will have more time for engaging in educational play activities and socializing with staff and peers.
- Include tables or areas that can be used for different activities. This allows school-agers to find space away from the larger group to complete an art activity or play a game with a friend.
- Encourage peer interactions and problem-solving skills among all children.
- Consider the schedule for all groups of children when groups of children arrive at different times. Do all children have time for choosing materials?

**Be intentional**

- Talk to children about what they are doing and ask questions that encourage longer answers such as "why", "how", and "what if" questions.
- Engage in conversations and encourage children to use literacy skills during play and routines (write letters or books, read the snack menu to the group).
- 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 block city, play math games with children).
- Set up activities that encourage children to engage with each other so they can practice social and communication skills.
- Rotate materials frequently to encourage changing interests and provide challenges as children improve and develop new skills.