

INTEREST CENTERS & ELG

WHY DO WE HAVE INTEREST CENTERS?

“An interest center is defined as: areas within the classroom where similar materials are grouped together to encourage specific activities or experiences for the children. These areas are well defined, distinct, and easy to see.” ECCO - Early Childhood Collaborative of Oklahoma

- Allows children to physically learn about their environment and the world in a meaningful way.
- Organizes learning materials in a safe and secure fashion so everyone knows where the supplies are kept – allowing children to make good choices and take responsibility.
- Allows teachers to spend more time focused on children’s learning rather than putting out fires and stopping fights.
- When there are plenty of learning materials and centers available it leads to fewer discipline problems – increasing self-esteem and independence.
- Children can learn how to make choices and take responsibility for equipment – (teachers explain how equipment is to be used and cared for).
- Children learn to play cooperatively and investigate language, social norms, physical materials, personal relationships, imagination, creativity, and adventures.
- Assists children in working on activities in a clear, meaningful, and stimulating manner – allowing for more learning and development in all areas at their own pace.

TIPS FOR SUCCESSFUL LEARNING CENTERS

- Ensure the room arrangement does not block the view of the teacher and allows for proper supervision.
- Use classroom book shelves, storage units, rugs, colored tape, tables, and chairs to create separate space for play. Look at your classroom as an assistant/second teacher.
- Ensure learning materials are accessible, available, and developmentally appropriate for all ages of children in care.
- Place similar interest centers together: art and science near water source, books and manipulative are quieter, dramatic play and blocks tend to be noisier, math and science may have similar themes.
- Arrange room to reduce distractions and interruptions/be aware of traffic flow.
- Be sure to have a place available for “works in progress”.
- Limit the number of children in each center – if appropriate.
- Alternate play equipment frequently – consider seasons, holidays, nature, community events, and guest speakers – avoid commercialism and stereotypical materials.
- Keep daily schedule flexible to allow for activities and changes that may evolve.
- Consider an “overflow” of one interest center idea into another learning environment.
- Create ideas to take outside for involved outdoor play – identify two interest centers to be taken outside.
- For 3, 4 & 5 Star programs, the seven required interest centers are: ART, BLOCKS, BOOKS & LANGUAGE, DRAMATIC PLAY, MANIPULATIVE PLAY, MATH, and SCIENCE/NATURE.
- Arrange classroom space carefully. Blocks and dramatic play are usually the largest interest areas and should be protected space; allow space for books so children can relax and be away from noise. Manipulative toys need little room – are often a solitary activity; math and science are separate, distinct areas from one another.

ART

“It is the process, not the product, that develops skills and confidence”.

Begin with basic and simple ideas and materials until children’s skills develop – then add more things.

Display children’s art work at their level and treat it with respect.

Allow the child’s creativity to flow with open-ended expressions and projects (shells, feathers, yarn, lace, tissue paper, felt, brushes, chalk, crayons, leaves, twigs, fossils, stones, fabric scraps, construction paper, etc.).

Demonstrate how to prepare and clean up: have smocks children can use, provide small amounts of supplies, have water nearby for clean-up, use protective floor covering, offer an easel with paper and supplies.

At the very least, leave out crayons and drawing paper – to allow children who feel like expressing themselves to do so without asking for permission.

The Art Center develops these skills:

- **Physical** –use senses to learn about the environment, develop fine motor skills, eye-hand coordination, and balance
- **Social** – self- expression of thoughts and feelings, channel anger/frustrations in an acceptable way, promote cooperation and differences, boosts confidence and pride
- **Language** – increase vocabulary via descriptive words about color, fabric, materials, texture, size, shape, etc.
- **Intellectual** – cause and effect, classifying, creativity, interest, imagination, organizing, and sorting

BLOCKS

200 blocks for 3yr olds, 300 blocks for 4yr olds, and
400 blocks for 5 year olds

Introduce children to hollow and unit blocks first. Then add accessories (dolls, figurines, little people, cars, trees, animals, signs, traffic signals, etc.) as skills develop, themes emerge, and play enhances.

Label containers and shelves with words and pictures for easy clean-up and organization.

There are many kinds of blocks and each type help children understand size, balance, and space. *Legos and Duplos are not considered blocks, but are excellent manipulatives.*

Establish rules about building and taking down the various projects.

Provide an adequate number of blocks, especially if competition is present.

Introduce construction site ideas or actual locations to influence ideas.

The Block Center develops these skills:

- **Physical** – large muscle, small motor, eye-hand coordination, and sense of balance while carrying, stacking, and placing blocks in play area
- **Social** – enhances cooperation, sharing, confidence, acceptance, creativity, self-esteem, and respect for the work of others
- **Language** – promotes vocabulary/conversations about building, problem-solving, comparisons, quantities, relationships, gravity, stability, etc.
- **Intellectual** – understanding concepts of number, shape, size, length, weight, height, sequencing, measuring, patterns, ordering, adding and subtracting, etc.

BOOKS and LANGUAGE

Never Judge a Book by Its Cover

Make the book center cozy and inviting with a lamp, comfy sofa, and/or a nice rug in a quieter area of the room.

Consider adding books on tape, music, flannel boards, puppets, writing materials, or music to add a deeper understanding of language.

Foster a child's love of reading by showing how books relate to everyday lives (i.e. new baby in family, trip to the doctor, taking a dog for a walk) and ask open-ended questions (i.e. what did you see, tell me what you did, etc.).

Model the library by checking out books, organizing books, and caring for books – then plan a trip to the library or have a guest speaker in for a special reading time.

Highlight a book to go along with a topic, theme, holiday, season, life change, etc.

Books can be added to every interest center to spark children's interest and ideas and extend an activity.

The Books Center develops these skills:

- **Physical** – builds eye-hand coordination, eye movement, and fine-motor skills
- **Social** – communication of feelings/troubles, develops empathy/self-esteem, and encourages sharing and communicating effectively in one-on-one and small groups
- **Language** – vocabulary building, listening skill development, verbal expressions, story-telling, responding to simple directions, commands, and questions, arrange the events of a story in sequential order
- **Intellectual** – enhances understanding of language: written word/spoken word, identification of letters and words, and understanding of symbols, recall important details from a story, listen to identify rhythm, rhymes, alliteration and onomatopoeia, learn that authors and illustrators create stories, distinguish between real and make-believe,

DRAMATIC PLAY

Let's Pretend!

Children love to play make believe and investigate roles of parents, doctors, policeman, & teacher – add a full length mirror so they can see themselves.

Have 4 – 5 choices hanging up and add more dress-up items/props to enhance play, current themes, cultural ideas, individual choices/interests, and everyday events.

Organize & label items visually, include real/found materials, include props for beginning reading and writing skills – like phone books, cook/recipe books, or note pads.

Be sure the home area (if used) has plenty of house wares: food, dishes, silverware, cook-books, etc. Use real materials such as cereal and salt boxes, tablecloths, and flower vases.

Consider prop boxes to enhance vocational choices – fireman, doctor, teacher, scientist, carpenter, and mechanic. The sky's the limit!

Share/trade ideas with other centers and incorporate ideas globally.

The Dramatic Play Center develops these skills:

- **Physical** – fine motor skills, visual discrimination, and eye-hand coordination
- **Social** – a method to express emotions and feelings, develop an awareness of self, family, and community, and practice sharing, taking turns, and working cooperatively. Explore different celebrations and customs, practice self-help skills, and learn ways to help other people. Learn social skills appropriate to group behavior and discover socially acceptable and unacceptable behaviors.
- **Language** – increases oral and non-verbal communication understanding and skills, enhances vocabulary, and develops reading and writing skills
- **Intellectual** – enhance creativity and imagination, make choices and decision, develop problem solving and abstract thinking skills

MANIPULATIVE PLAY

Legos Anyone?

Easy to position in the classroom – only needs a table, chairs, and some storage space.

Often combines other interest center properties-- may be the most well-equipped area in room.

Use storage bins and labels to ease with set-up/clean-up.

Some ideas are: stringing beads, lace-up cards, dice, nesting containers, abacus, mosaics, puzzles, board games, etc. Encourage early writing skills by placing pencil and paper nearby.

When introducing new materials show children how to use them and put them away.

Be aware of choking hazards, read manufacturer's labels, and gather up all pieces for storage.

There are four types of manipulative equipment: Open-ended, self-correcting or closed, collectibles, and games with rules. To inspire creativity, avoid technological and media based products.

The Manipulative Play Center develops these skills:

- **Physical** – eye-hand coordination and pincher control, teach visual/tactile distinction, self-esteem, and fine-motor
- **Social** – promotes cooperation, instills the norms/rules of society
- **Language** – comparisons, social differences, cooperation and society norms/rules, quantities, and relationships, time, money
- **Intellectual** – problem solving, choices and decisions, patterns, shapes, counting, math, matching, one-to-one correspondences, predictions, exercise imagination and creativity,

You will need this later on in life...

Search out math materials that are fun and unusual – that can be applied to real life.

Utilize every day events to incorporate math concepts and skills (eating out, household bills, change in your pocket, time of day, cooking, measuring, matching, patterns, symmetry, construction sites, etc.).

Try using various methods to learn numbers: counting, math skills, sorting, comparing, contrasting, recognizing shapes, measuring, weighing, and time concepts, etc.

Document children's progress on charts, graphs, poster board, etc.

Introduce math skills/concepts one at a time – slowly as they appear ready to learn.

Set up activities for one or two children to use in a private space, away from larger group activities.

The Math Center develops these skills:

- **Physical** – fine motor control and eye-hand coordination
- **Social** – self-control, confidence, cooperation, problem solving
- **Language** – ability to ask difficult questions and solve problems, gain vocabulary such as units of time and measurement, more, less, greater than, less than, numbers, addition, subtraction, counting, volume, weight
- **Intellectual** – introduce sorting, matching, classifying, sequencing, patterning

SCIENCE/NATURE

What happens when we add this?

Science stimulates a child's natural curiosity and desire to learn.

Keep experiments direct, easy, and simple – allow children to examine and handle materials.

Ask open ended questions – Who? What? When? Where? How?

Document children’s progress for later review –use graph paper or a flip chart.

Organize and label individual children’s work – plants, leaf drawings, clay models, spider web, etc.

Be prepared about subject matter and have materials available such as a sand or water table with funnels or measuring cups, magnifying glass and shells or pinecones, ant farm, terrarium with plants and small insects or frogs, bird book and binoculars, insect nets and plastic containers, etc.

Incorporate ideas into other centers – it is okay to read a book about bugs in science area.

The Science Center develops these skills:

- **Physical** – eye-hand coordination, fine motor control, large muscle development (with activities such as nature walks and leaf collections)
- **Social** – pride in succeeding, grasping idea from beginning to end, nurturing plants and animals, thorough clean-up
- **Language** – enhance a descriptive vocabulary, asking questions, discuss and/or record what is seen, heard, touched, tasted or smelled as they are experienced, solve problems, etc.
- **Intellectual** – develop curiosity, thinking and reasoning skills, explore, discover, cause/effect concepts, make predictions and observations, learn about classification, comparison, measurement, cause and effect, change, etc.

MUSIC AND MOVEMENT

“Music gives a soul to the universe, wings to the mind, flight to the imagination, and life to everything.” Plato

Incorporate many different types of cultural influences and music to encourage a variety of music and movement.

Have 50 or more songs memorized to easily transition into a song during lag times or for periods of change.

Allow your imagination to run with all kinds of different sounds and materials – ask parents for surplus materials such as beautiful scarves, cloth and paper ribbons, hula hoops, parachutes, wooden sticks or spoons, rattles, rain sticks, handmade and purchased musical instruments.

Children will naturally bond over a favorite song with parts to play and dances to create.

Music and Movement develops these skills:

- **Physical** – develop gross motor skills, coordination, strength, endurance, flexibility, and locomotor skills as music naturally encourages children to move and dance, repeat simple/complicated rhythms with movement, voice, or musical instruments
- **Social** – helps build connections and reinforce shared joys, self-regulation, creativity and self-expression, self-soothing, express moods and meaning of music
- **Language** – refines listening skills, phonemic awareness, vocabulary, and sequencing, explore vocal sounds and learn the words to songs, play singing games
- **Intellectual** – enhances cause and effect relationships and problem solving skills, explore, recognize, and compare sounds, rhythm patterns, identify high/low, loud/soft, up/down, long/short, tones.
- **Language** – refines listening skills, phonemic awareness, vocabulary, and sequencing, explore vocal sounds and learn the words to songs, play singing games
- **Physical** – develop gross motor skills, coordination, strength, endurance, flexibility, and locomotor skills as music naturally encourages children to move and dance, repeat simple/complicated rhythms with movement, voice, or musical instruments