

## Young Children Learn Through Play

*"Young children learn best through direct sensory encounters and not through a formal academic process. Learning should be the outcome of hands-on experience, especially play."*

National Association for the Education of Young Children (NAEYC)

When looking for an early childhood program, parents often say they want "something academic." As parents visit nursery schools and centers, it may appear to them that all the children do is play. They sometimes question whether children are learning.



The key is understanding how young children develop and learn. Children under the age of eight years acquire knowledge in ways that are significantly different from the ways older children learn. Therefore, programs for young children should look different from those for older children.



An appropriate early childhood program should include a variety of materials such as sand, water, clay, blocks, puzzles, games, pretend play props, art supplies, books and equipment for physical activity. The program should allow for long periods of time when the children choose the materials with which they want to play and experiment.

The early childhood classroom is prepared according to the needs of children. Teachers select materials based on their knowledge of how young children learn and their observations of each child's abilities and interests.

Children will have opportunities to learn about reading and writing, and math concepts as they play with materials and go about daily activities. A skilled teacher finds meaningful ways to help each child think. For example, the teacher may ask a child to put out a napkin for each person having a snack. By not telling the child how many the teacher has set up a problem for the child to solve. Because of the meaningful context (having a snack), the child will be motivated to think about the number of napkins and to solve the problem.

There are specific philosophies in which early childhood educators have been trained. This accounts for some differences in programs. Montessori schools and centers are based on the work of Maria Montessori. They use specialized learning materials developed through her observations of young children. Montessori classrooms reflect a high level of order and include many daily activities.

Other programs may define their philosophy as "constructivist" based on the research and observations of Jean Piaget. Materials in a constructivist classroom are designed for child experimentation and to be used in a variety of ways. Constructivist classrooms reflect a high level of interaction between children and include many pretend play activities.

### Indicators of an appropriate early childhood program:

...A wide variety of materials with which children can play and experiment

...Children making choices about activities

...Teachers with training in early childhood education;

...Each child's interests and abilities considered in the teacher's plans so that each child can experience success and joy in learning;

...A philosophy that reflects the way young children learn;

...Accreditation by the National Association for the Education of Young Children (NAEYC).

