

Learning Centres that Support Literacy Development

Book Centre

Books stimulate curiosity and reflective thought, and should be seen as a source of excitement and enjoyment. An enthusiastic teacher can encourage a life-long interest in books. A well-organized book centre surrounds the children with good literature that is pro-social, anti-biased, culturally sensitive and reflects the diverse nature of the children and their families.



Books allow us to explore our thoughts and feelings and respond to each other. Books also provide teachers with opportunities to encourage respect for the ideas of others and encourage the children to reflect on different points of view.

Books available for the children could include fiction, non-fiction, poetry, plays, magazines, newspapers from a variety of cultures, atlases, reference books, pamphlets, maps, guide books, picture books, predictable books, pattern books, big books, little books, smelly books, pop up books -- the list is endless!

Collect and read specific authors who have interested the children and emphasize the richness and depth of Canadian writers who reflect Canadian experiences. Look for a number of books with the same title and read and discuss the similarities and differences of each one (e.g. *The Three Little Pigs*).

A book centre will appeal to young children if it is clearly defined, provides privacy and has soft lighting. An attractive book area tells children that the teacher values books.

Place this centre adjacent to the science area so that the books are within easy reach for reference. The aquarium, terrarium and plants will also enhance the area. To lure the children to this space, try some of the following suggestions:

- Add interesting, eye-catching signage to the book centre.
- Make the floor more comfortable by including a small area rug with a soft under pad underneath or straw mats that can be rolled out.
- Hang mobiles and kites or drape gauze from the ceiling.
- Although natural light is best, don't forget clamp-on lights and small table lamps that the children can control.
- Incorporate different types of pillows in the area including enormous, embroidered, quilted or fluffy ones. Don't forget pillows that the children have decorated themselves.
- Provide bean bag chairs, rocking chairs, overstuffed chairs or couches with the legs cut off.
- A small crib-size mattress covered with attractive, cheerful material can also beckon children.

- Include a small table and some chairs. Cover the table with a colourful tablecloth (let the children make a tie-dyed one or create one with fabric crayons). Decorate with plants or fresh flowers.
- Create sheltered spaces using tents, parachute enclosures or empty closets.
- Display books attractively and remove the ones that need to be repaired.
- A bulletin board with book posters or covers from books often makes an attractive wall display. Add a list of the children's favourite books of the month and display their drawings of the stories you have discussed.
- Set up a flannel board with figures to act out stories.
- Provide story boxes that contain books and appropriate props. For example, *The Wonderful Pigs of Jillian Jiggs* by Phoebe Gilman (1988) could be accompanied by pig puppets, stuffed pig toy animals, pig writing paper, pig pencils, pig erasers and matching pig games on a tag board.
- Include props that reflect the children's favourite books (such as a Madeline doll, and Franklin the Turtle and Curious George stuffed animals).
- Provide puppets, a puppet theatre or a TV box for dramatic play.
- Add an overhead projector and cellophane characters for the children to act out their favourite stories.
- Have a video recorder available so that the children can tell their own stories, interview each other, record their comments and pantomime for the camera.
- Have a story apron available (an apron sewn with many pockets) filled with items such as finger puppets, popsicle-stick characters and props.

Writing Centre

Creating a pleasant area where children can use a variety of writing materials can be a tremendous motivator. It gives children an opportunity to record their thoughts by dictating them to a teacher or by using word cues available in the centre to "write" their own stories. Some interesting props might include:

- alphabets in languages other than English
- small chalk boards/brushes/chalk
- wooden and plastic letters for tracing
- variety of pens – ball point, calligraphy, etc.
- Chinese brushes
- markers -- all shapes, sizes and smells
- pencils – plain, fancy and coloured
- pencil sharpeners and boxes
- variety of papers
- envelopes of all sizes and colours
- stickers
- paper clips, paper fasteners
- templates and stencils for tracing
- rulers, erasers, scissors, tape



- clipboards
- alphabet and number stamps and stamp pads
- hole punch
- magnetic alphabet letters and board
- magic slates
- index cards
- receipt pads
- picture dictionaries
- photographs of interesting events, children and their families or dramatic images laminated on story board paper for children to record their thoughts
- a picture file with accompanying words
- an old typewriter or computer (there are so many wonderful programs to promote language acquisition)
- blank booklets in a variety of shapes for the children to record their own stories

By rotating materials, the area will continue to be exciting. If the teacher places items in see-through boxes or bins, then the children can be responsible for returning materials to their proper places.

Activities and displays can be organized around different events or themes.

In the winter, for example, when celebrating the Chinese New Year, a teacher can cut out dragon shapes and animal year figures and label each one. The cut-outs can then be hung up in the Writing Centre so that children can have quick and easy access to the words they need. The Chinese characters that represent "Happy New Year" can also be posted for the children to replicate.

On a bulletin board in this area, you might also record a different thought each week, such as "What would happen if dinosaurs were alive today?" or "What does your bedroom look like?" With teacher support, children can record their responses and mount them on the board.

Creating bulletin boards at the children's level allows them to organize and decorate their space.

The children can also store their journals in this centre so that they can record important day care events. In this way, the journals become a memory book for the children and their families.

Encourage the children to make their own books such as shape books, accordion type books and flip books.

Create fancy folders for the children's published works and keep them in the book centre for sharing.

Dramatic Play Area



Language is at the core of this centre and a responsive teacher will be able to capitalize on many language opportunities here. The teacher should be prepared to create a sign when needed -- such as "Hospital Zone" or "Do Not Disturb" -- and be ready to add essential props. By including an interesting and innovative collection of props such as walkie talkies, dictaphone machines, telephones and tape recorders, children will have an opportunity to fantasize, discuss, problem solve, resolve conflicts, tell stories and act out stories.

Music Centre

Music is a powerful medium for language acquisition. To support children throughout the day, use songs, fingerplays, action songs, singing games, chants, adapt familiar songs to relate to topics being discussed and retell stories through song.

The centre itself should be stocked with a rich collection of music from a wide range of cultures and a variety of musical instruments. Encourage families to read and sing their family favourites, record them and share them with the group. Don't forget about taking the instruments into the outdoor environment.



Woodworking, Construction and Technology Area



This is a language-rich area where children can plan and test their inventions. Their projects will progress from simple to more complex creations as their skills increase.

Encourage group projects that require verbal planning. Children should be given opportunities to return woodworking tools and blocks to their designated areas by matching the objects with labelled shapes that have been cut out and taped to storage shelves. Create signs to explain the structures that children have built. "Do

Not Touch" is a frequently requested sign in these areas!

Creative Centre

Children in this age group enjoy choosing from a help yourself, creative shelf filled with dozens and dozens of materials. If the supplies are novel, as well as rich in variety and texture, then this area will have many possibilities for discussion. Children like to plan together and enjoy discussing their experiences with each other.



Outdoor Environment

No environment is richer for language development than outdoor space. This play space is a sensory-rich opportunity for exploration and discovery. Children need well-developed language skills to negotiate with their friends for a turn on the bicycle or to enlist the help of others to create a fort with rope, blankets and old tree branches.

Children will enjoy making observations of a favourite tree or of the birds that come to visit their feeder.

Planting and graphing a growing garden is great fun. The children might also enjoy making a book of photographs of their flowers and vegetables throughout the seasons. Recording these observations is a way of sharing this information with others.



Moving beyond the playground is critical to the child's growing sense of community. Visiting stores and finding resources within the neighbourhood are an important part of helping children become self-reliant and comfortable in their surroundings.

You could visit three different restaurants in your area and compare the different environments, types of menus, uniforms worn by the servers, types of tables and chairs, and variety of foods served. This is a wonderful opportunity for language development.

"Children refine and consolidate their learning when they communicate their discoveries and observations. They may communicate verbally, through art or drama, by demonstrating a discovery or by making a model.

By building in time for children to communicate their thoughts and feelings, you give them the message that they are important -- that their ideas are valued and respected" (Harcourt and Wortzman, 1992, p. 13).

Science and Math Activities

Collections and real objects provide the basis for discussions and problem solving and the development of mathematical terminology.

Encourage verbal exploration of specific areas of interest and include mathematical and scientific principles of exploration and cause and effect.

In this area, teachers can take dictation about the children's observations, do simple graphs and draw diagrams.

Food experiences allow the children to create recipes and follow directions in order to achieve an edible result.

"Children learn and enjoy mathematics and science best in a child-centered program where their interests, ideas and abilities are respected" (Harcourt and Wortzman, 1992, p. 5).



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