

Creating Learning Environments at Home

By Susan A. Miller, Ed.D.

As a parent, you become immediately aware that you are your child's first teacher. Then it should not be surprising that your child's initial important learning environment is your home. Your home setting can be a comforting, warm cocoon where your child very naturally learns about love and trust while you snuggle together reading a book in bed. Or it can be a stimulating place in which he learns to satisfy his curiosity while sinking toys in the bathtub.

Even if you do not consciously invite your child to be a part of your daily routine at home, you will probably find him right next to you anyway. An activity that may not seem exciting to you may be fascinating to your child. For example, when I sat outside on the deck shucking corn for dinner, my toddler-aged grandchild eagerly joined me. He began to intensely pull down the green husks. He became most intrigued as he discovered the golden surprise inside each ear. And then just as quickly, he made a tickly beard with the cornsilk! His sensory-motor skill development and imagination became alive during this simple, shared project.

You serve as an influential role model for your child as she learns about her world. It is fun for her to imitate you and copy your daily activities while she gains new skills and practices some old ones. In this article, *Earlychildhood NEWS* shares ways to take familiar areas in your home and create similar miniature learning environments for your child. Some things are interesting to do together, or with a sibling, while other activities foster independent learning.

Home Office

While you pay your bills, order clothes online from a catalog store, or call your dentist to make an appointment, encourage your child to practice his communication skills, such as reading, writing, listening, and speaking.

Online. Create a pretend computer with a shoebox. Cover the back of the box with clear contact paper so your child can add "words" or "graphics" to the "screen" with a wipe off crayon. Together, you can write letters and numbers on paper taped to the "keyboard" lid. Fine motor and language skills are sharpened as your child types answers to his email.

Phone fun. Poke holes in the bottom of two paper cups or tin cans (tape any sharp edges). Knot and pull the string tightly through the holes for designer phones for two. Hold one cup to an ear to listen while the other person talks in the other cup. Or create a hand held cell phone with a toilet paper roll and magic markers. To help your child make meaningful connections, create a personal phonebook with real or simple phone numbers (1, 2) and pictures of favorite people and places to call.

Box of bills. To help her learn to identify some numbers and letters and to create a print rich environment for your child, save your colorful junk mail. Add some old envelopes, scrap paper, markers and stickers for stamps so she can sit and write out her bills right next to you.

The Gym

While you grab some precious moments to exercise on your bike or treadmill, you are teaching your child at an early age the importance of keeping physically fit on a regular basis. Create a tiny exercise area for him to move his large muscles, too.

Jazz it up. Roll a towel up tightly and hold it together with rubber bands the long way and on each end. Encourage your child to see how many creative ways he can use this long snake to build his muscles: jump over it, lift it over his head, shake it in the air. Record some jazzy music for him to coordinate his jumps with the rhythm.

Pillow pile up. Pile several pillows on the floor for him to "dive" into or "crawl" around. See how

many different ways she can think of to move around the pile. And this provides a great "cooling down" spot for you both to rest and snuggle after your workouts.

Soup-can lifts. If you use weights to tone up, try taping an appropriately weighted can over your child's sock (in case of a skin tape allergy). He can enjoy sitting and lifting his foot or leg while he or both of you count together. For silly fun, try taping on a little teddy bear or a maraca.

Dressing Room

Usually you feel rushed as you try to decide what you want to wear for the day. Provide stress-free opportunities for your child to become involved in decision-making, too, as she solves some dress-up problems of her own in a near-by corner.

Zip or rip. Offer your child a wonderful collection of old wallets, purses, and bags. Invite her to explore the cause and effect relationships of various closures while practicing her fine motor skills as her fingers zip zippers, snap snaps, rip open Velcro® fasteners, and button buttons.

Sock sort. Keep a handy basket of all those single socks you never know what to do with. Have your child play a classification game and sort by color, shape, size, texture, pattern, or owner.

Dress for the weather. Ask your child to dress his teddy bear in outgrown baby clothes. Besides gaining practice manipulating sleeves and pant legs over the proper body part, he can make meaningful decisions about weather concepts—a fuzzy hat keeps teddy warm on a snowy day.

Cooking Station

While you are working in the kitchen, safety (sharp knives, hot pots) is often an issue. Give your child his own safe working station—a metal tray on the table or a box of pans on the floor near the wall—so he can make inspired scientific and mathematical discoveries.

Spill and fill. For lots of fun with differently-sized measuring containers and spoons, put water or cornmeal in a dishpan. Have him observe which piles of cornmeal are the largest or which containers hold the most water. And to stretch his imagination, your child will also enjoy burying miniature figurines in the deep corn meal. These hands-on experiences help develop emergent mathematical understandings about volume and size.

Dry + Wet = Gush. Prompt your young scientist to add wet water to dry flour and salt in a bowl. Too much water? Gush! Not enough water? Crumbly stuff! Encourage him to slowly keep adding ingredients until he creates a wonderful ball of play dough to use with cookie cutters or bake. This discovery approach promotes an awareness of the characteristics of different properties.

Cook's choice. Cut colorful pictures of food out of magazines and advertisements. Use small pots, pans and a wooden spoon for your little chef to stir up a stew or birthday cake. Supply paper plates for him to dish out a special meal for daddy. You may wish to furnish a non-toxic glue stick so he can create some permanent food collages. Discuss his choice of foods: for example vegetables and healthy snacks.

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Tips & Toys for Valuable Play Experiences at Home

By Renee Farrington

Ever feel bombarded by information telling us we need to be a partner in our child's learning? We're constantly reminded that the earliest years are the most powerful learning years. Psychologists tell us that a typical 17-year-old develops 50 percent of intelligence before age four, 30 percent between the ages of four and eight and 20 percent between the ages of eight and 17. What's a parent to do? Do we need to teach kids more information at an earlier age? No! We can't "Create Child Geniuses in 10 Easy Steps." So how do we help our children learn? Remember the wonder of learning something on your

own? To a child the world is full of wonder and each moment is a new learning experience. And for a child, learning comes through play. In this article we hope to help you add more play to your day and to show how important play is to your child's learning.

What is Child's Play?

Learning through play lets us take advantage of our child's natural curiosity-- and at the same time we get a chance to bring out the child in ourselves. Kids are all ready and eager to learn. We just need to provide the opportunities. For young children, these learning opportunities take place during play. What is play?

- Play is to kids what brainstorming is to grown-ups.
- All creative adults play.
- Play is to create, to discover, to experiment.
- Play is to recreate the world and be able to change it.
- Play is to master our bodies.
- Play is to adventure into nature and science and find answers to questions.
- Play is mastering materials and tools and making connections.
- Play is essential to childhood and good toys are its tools.

Taking Advantage of Teachable Moments

While children are playing and throughout our daily routine, we have a chance to provide and take advantage of "teachable moments". Teachable moments are those opportunities to increase children's learning without planning. They don't require explanations of concepts or even academic vocabulary. But they do help build a foundation for more academic learning later on. Let's look at some teachable moments and teaching toys that pave the way for learning at school.

Math

To many adults, math is a complex subject. But it doesn't have to be. There are many fun and easy ways to introduce young children to math concepts simply by playing with items around the house. Here are a few ideas to get you started:

- Invite your child to help you measure items during cooking and household repair tasks. Try measuring and weighing members of the family including pets and make comparisons.
- Count backwards using the timer on the microwave.
- Help your child divide food into equal serving portions.
- Sort and count the dishes and the cutlery at the dinner table.
- Watch the gauges on the dashboard of the car and time the trip.
- Look for measuring, calculating, and weighing instruments at places you visit with your child.
- Sort the laundry into types and pairs.
- Use a sporting event to do math problems with scores and statistics.

Science

The cool thing about science is that it seems like such magic. It's not hard to achieve the WOW! factor so important for learning. It is through wonder and awe at the physical and natural world that kids get hooked on science.

- Did you know that if you hold a magnifying glass at arm's length, the objects you look at will be upside down?
- What kind of magic makes magnet rings float on a pencil?
- Watch the chemical reactions that take place when mixing ingredients together and adding heat or cold during cooking.
- Grow seeds in the ground and in jars to see their roots.
- Go on a nature collection walk and mount the collection in shadow boxes.
- Record the changes in the night sky.
- Use a magnet to explore what it will and won't pick up.
- Experiment with what sinks and what floats at bathtime.

Creativity

Pablo Picasso said that every child is an artist. The problem is how to remain an artist after growing up.

When children draw and color, they express feelings, make important decisions, and tell stories. Their drawings may not look like much to you, but to a child their drawings are works of art.

- Don't analyze a child's artistic endeavors. Let your child tell you about what she has done.
- Enjoy the process of art with your child. Find the artist in you while you nurture your child's natural creativity.
- Remember that a child's creativity may take an entirely different direction from yours!
- Point out how different artists express feelings and visions through their arts.
- Collect all sorts of stuff to create with-- one person's junk is the stuff of another's imagination.
- Have art materials ready around the house and for travel and waiting times.
- Encourage your children to make hand-made gifts and cards-- join in on the creation time.
- Make music together by pounding out rhythms on oatmeal boxes.
- Create a home gallery or fold-up album of artwork and photos of artistic achievements.

Social Studies

A child's understanding of the world around him begins with understanding himself. What better place than in the home to begin to understand ourselves and our role in the family, the community, and the world? Talk with your child about events in your daily life as well as those outside the family. Observe your child's role-playing and help him to understand himself and that great big world of grownups.

- Create a family tree, history timeline, and a time capsule or memory book.
- Study newspapers and magazines from the day or month you and your child were born. What looks different?
- Share collections of stamps, coins, old toys, or other antiques.
- Record family events, travel, and milestones on tape and film. Look at these as tomorrow's heritage and history.
- Imaginative role-playing is the way a child learns the social rules she and others will play in the "real world." So join in the pretend play with your child!
- Provide dress-up clothes, a great big box, and a few old household or office items. One day it's a dream house, another a doctor's office, another a supermarket. Watch imaginations and self-understanding soar!

Motor Skills

A child needs opportunities to balance, jump, run, push, pull, carry, and fiddle with lots of different physical things. In her book, *Smart Moves*, Carla Hannaford explains why "learning is not all in your head." The body is the means by which we gather information to give our brain. We learn through our senses. As a child develops, he needs opportunities to experience the world through all the senses and to move freely from discovery to discovery. It is our bodies that express what the brain has thought-- through speaking, writing, music making, computing, etc.

- Share with your child a favorite sports motion or other physical skill (how to skip backward, look like you're pulling off your thumb, wiggle your ears, etc.).
- Have a rousing game of charades. Guess what the motions represent.
- Let your child help with the proper use of tools in the kitchen, workshop, garage, and garden.
- Make your own obstacle course in your yard! You can make it as simple or complex as you want. For example, run to the fence and touch it. Next twirl to the swing set and go down on the slide. Skip to the picnic table and crawl under it. Do a cartwheel, then hop back to where you started. Take turns with your child making up the course.
- Put on fun music and dance with your child; show each other silly dance moves and make up a routine together.

Language

Recent studies have shown that language acquisition begins before birth and that babies have the amazing ability to distinguish different sounds and voices within a few hours of being born. Remember a newborn has over a hundred billion brain cells. As a baby is stimulated through a variety of interactions, trillions of synapses develop and the baby's intellect grows. You can enhance language development in your children simply by communicating with and reading to your children on a frequent and regular basis.

- Talk with your child about what you're doing and what the child is doing – make up silly songs about what you see and feel! Don't forget to tape record your words.

- Read signs, labels, and directions together.
- Go on a word scavenger hunt from billboards, shop windows, and signs.
- Play "Alphabet I Spy."
- Write shopping lists, greeting cards, fridge messages, wish lists, and thank you notes together with your child.
- Read together. Let your child read to you and let him see you reading.

What Makes a Good Toy

It's not what the toy does-- it's what the child does with the toy. The more detail in the toys, the less the child's imagination is nurtured. Plan a balanced menu of different toys for different discoveries. Some encourage activity, some creativity, and others help in specific learning areas. Keep to a minimum the trend toys, TV toys, and toys with limited flash-in-the-pan appeal.

- Choose toys that are open-ended and have a variety of ways they can be played with at different levels.
- Remember that just because a product is for a child does not mean that it should be disposable or of inferior design.
- Be sure a toy is safe and sturdy and does what a child wants it to. Look for toys that arouse a child's natural curiosity, that let the child experiment and find things out for himself without instruction. When buying toys, safety, quality, and variety come first! A baby needs a variety of toys to stimulate ALL the senses.

Renee Farrington recently retired from Discount School Supply, where she conceptualized, wrote, and developed products for young children.