

Supporting Learning in Interest Areas

You teach intentionally every day as children play and explore in interest areas and outdoors. The choices you offer children about where to play, which materials to use, how to use them, and whether to play alone or with others enable them to engage in child-initiated, or child-guided, learning. In these situations, children control the use of materials and create their play scenarios. They make discoveries as they explore and experiment, try their ideas, and observe the results. Here are two examples.

Example 1

Dallas experiments with objects at the sand table, pouring sand from one container to another. He fills a small container with sand twice, pouring it into a larger container. Then, he adds water to the sand, packs it down, turns it over, and says, “I made bread! Who wants some?”

Example 2

Setsuko calls Kate on the toy phone in the Dramatic Play area and says, “Dr. Kate, my baby is sick.”

Kate responds, “Come quickly so I can check her.”

Setsuko brings her baby over to Kate, who uses a stethoscope to listen to the baby’s heart. “She needs medicine,” announces Kate. She takes a pad and pen, writes, and hands a page of the pad to Setsuko. “Take this ‘scription to the drugstore right now.”

In both instances, the children are developing understandings about concepts through child-initiated play:

- Dallas is learning about measurement (math) and what happens to sand when water is added (science).
- Setsuko and Kate are learning about jobs (social studies), the use of different tools (technology), and human bodies (science).
- Both girls are recalling past experiences and applying literacy skills.

The teacher observes carefully and makes decisions about how to build on these explorations immediately or later. For example, she might decide to scaffold Dallas’s learning by engaging him in a conversation and using comparative words (e.g., *more, less, the same as*). She might find out what ideas Kate and Setsuko have about how a doctor examines a patient and the various tools doctors use. She could add props to extend their play, introducing the props to children, and then encouraging them to use them in their play.

Take an active role in observing as children play in different interest areas. Continually decide when your involvement will be helpful, how much support is needed, and what type of guidance to give. Ask probing questions that stretch children’s thinking: “How else might you...?” “In what ways is this similar to...?” For example, you might add notepads and writing tools to the Dramatic Play area so children can make menus and take orders in the restaurant they have created. On another occasion, you may decide to model a skill or behavior, for example, by showing a child how to use a balance scale to weigh rocks and compare them. When teachers talk with children about what they are doing and ask questions that challenge their thinking, they promote children’s learning.

Child-initiated learning in interest areas is not a matter of chance. It occurs when teachers think about children’s development and their content knowledge to prepare an interesting and rich environment that offers children choices. Child-initiated learning is supported by the arrangement of furniture and selection of materials, and by carefully planned daily routines and schedules. Effective teachers create extensive opportunities for children to make discoveries and initiate learning.