

Centers and Center Activities

How to Ensure the Active Engagement of All Children

A huge issue for many teachers is how to keep children actively engaged within the various activity centers. Below are ideas for materials that can be placed within centers for various activities. Centers must be carefully constructed to ensure that there are enough materials in the play environment for the number of children who are allowed to play in the center, that materials and activities are arranged in a way to encourage social interaction between children, and that the arrangement of materials promote independence and active engagement.

Don't	Do
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Pile play items within one container or storage unit (e.g., dress-ups in a pile, all play food in one bin). 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Arrange items so that children can see them and access them easily.
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Provide only one of any material or item or set up activities so that children can't interact with each other. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Provide duplicates of high interest items to reduce challenges around who can play with the item and to promote parallel and social play. Consider the pairing of spaces (e.g., double easels) and setting up materials with the expectation that children will do the activity together (e.g., two doll houses that are side by side).
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Expect children to be able to initiate and sustain play without adult scaffolding. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Provide adult support to think of an idea about what do and to get started with materials.
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Arrange play spaces in a manner that will cause challenges between children (e.g., blocks in a small area). 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Be sure to allow enough area for children to move about freely without bumping in to each other or their constructions/projects.
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • End the opportunity to play and explore materials prematurely. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Children need a long block of time to engage in quality play (e.g., 1 hour). During this time, the adult should be explaining the rules of play, giving children suggestions of how to play or the possible roles of play (i.e., for dramatic play).
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Have materials that only target one developmental level within the design of your centers. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Provide materials that match the developmental levels of children who may have developmental delays. For example, art should accommodate the child who just wants to explore the materials and the child who is interested in the creation of a product.