

FACILITATING LEARNING THROUGH PLAY

It is critical that educators recognize that when they introduce play as a means of learning in school, their role changes from instructor to facilitator. As a facilitator, the teacher guides the learning which is different than controlling the learning. This is not a new idea. In fact, the teacher as facilitator is at the heart of the inquiry method promoted by Dewey over half a century ago. There are essentially three roles for the teacher as a facilitator scaffold-builder, pump-primer, and informed participant.

SCAFFOLD BUILDING

Scaffold building involves establishing an inviting physical environment and a comfortable social environment conducive to risk-taking. The physical environment is the first consideration. This involves placement of furniture and equipment, as well as the arrangement of learning areas. It also involves the display and storage of materials, and the general appearance of the classroom. Although the teacher has the ultimate responsibility for the room, especially in terms of safety, it is important for children to be involved in some of the decision-making as appropriate, such as designing a learning area, gathering the materials needed, and deciding on how many comfortably can be accommodated.

Given the amount of time children and teachers spend in the classroom, every effort should be made to ensure that the room is attractive and clean. This is everyone's responsibility and children need to learn early on that it is unacceptable to leave a mess for someone else to clean up. It is important to think through the routines that will be needed for learning areas and ensure that children are familiar with them. When problems arise, it is important to include children in the solutions. When play is in high gear, the room well may appear like the inside of a scrap box as children focus intently on what they are creating. At the end of the day, however, things need to be put in order.

Time set aside for clean-up at the end of a play period is well spent. Valuable life-skills are being acquired as children sort and categorize and put away tools and equipment properly, wash up any mess that has occurred, and carefully set aside a project that they are working on. Changing the physical environment is an on-going process as the teacher sees the need for new materials and challenges. The following anecdote, described by a grade one teacher, illustrates this point:

Learning involves making connections. As teachers observe, they may reflect on possible connections between the play, other classroom experiences, and curriculum opportunities.

Scaffolding also involves establishing a social environment conducive to building trust and risk-taking. The social environment encompasses the general atmosphere, as well as the quality of the interactions among the members of the group. From day one of school, educators work diligently to create a classroom community where each child is acknowledged and feels they have a place within the room. In this community, children's ideas are listened to and valued, and they have opportunities to make choices and decisions as individuals and as part of a group. Children hear respectful language modelled, see models of treating others with respect, and are treated with respect themselves. Children are invited to help others and are encouraged to seek help from their classmates, as well as from the adult in the room. These are the underpinnings of a classroom that allows children to function as they play.

Part of the environment also includes establishing the rules which are needed for managing a group of children. These rules enable children to function safely within the classroom and give them protocols for accessing and using materials and putting them away, and for maintaining a clean and organized room. When children understand the routines and follow a typical pattern every day, they feel more secure and less anxious about what to do and what happens next. They need to know the routines so that their time for self-directed learning can run smoothly.

In a classroom that values children's choices and provides opportunities to make decisions, children are involved in presenting solutions to problems as they arise. (What can you do when someone interferes with your project? What do you do when you need help? What might you do when someone hurts you in the classroom?)

Neuroscience research confirms what teachers have always understood, that is the emotional health of a child has the most profound affect on learning. Even in the most comfortable of environments, stress can overwhelm a child. It is play that provides a means of coping.

One teacher might have considered it an indulgence to allow this boy to play, and may have believed that it would result in a greater problem with this child. However, the boy's new teacher recognized that a power struggle would only serve to agitate the boy more. The new teacher knows that play is not an indulgence, but a benevolent way for children to cope. It is also an important part of healthy living.



Physical Environment	Reflect on the Following
Furniture and Equipment	<p>Don't clutter the room. Consider the following:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Is there furniture or equipment that is rarely used? Could this be stored somewhere until needed? • What could we do without? • What is missing? • How can the furniture be organized to promote talk and collaboration? • Is there enough shelving for storage? How well is the storage space organized? • Are there enough tables for work spaces in the different learning areas? Are tables of the appropriate height for the children? • Are there quiet spaces for those children who need to be alone at times? <p>Select furniture that is:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • flexible, (can be used for more than one purpose -rectangular tables are more flexible than round). • moveable . <p>Example: A storage shelf that is on casters can be used to define a special area such as the quiet corner, as well as moved to serve as the front for a puppet show.</p>
Materials	<p>Materials and toys are the textbooks of play. Have tried and true toys available that appeal to children of all ages and stages (Lego, blocks, puzzles ...) Absolutely essential for any primary classroom:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • blocks of various size, materials, and features. • containers for sand and water exploration. <p>Materials that are open-ended, multipurpose, and flexible:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • scraps and larger pieces of cloth, wood. • modelling clay, and playdough. • ribbons, wool, string, paper plain and patterned, of different sizes, shapes, and thicknesses. • found materials – stones, feathers.
Use of Time and Space	<p>Lack of time and space is a major obstacle to play-based learning. Children need time to engage, sustain, and develop complexity in their play. Don't let unrealistic expectations, imposed by administration or of your own making, rob the children of play.</p> <p>Make a commitment to play, and set aside a dedicated period of time daily for self-directed play – no less than one hour of continuous time.</p> <p>Encourage children to be creative in the use of space. Are there areas outside the classroom that could be used safely for play but still be supervised?</p>