

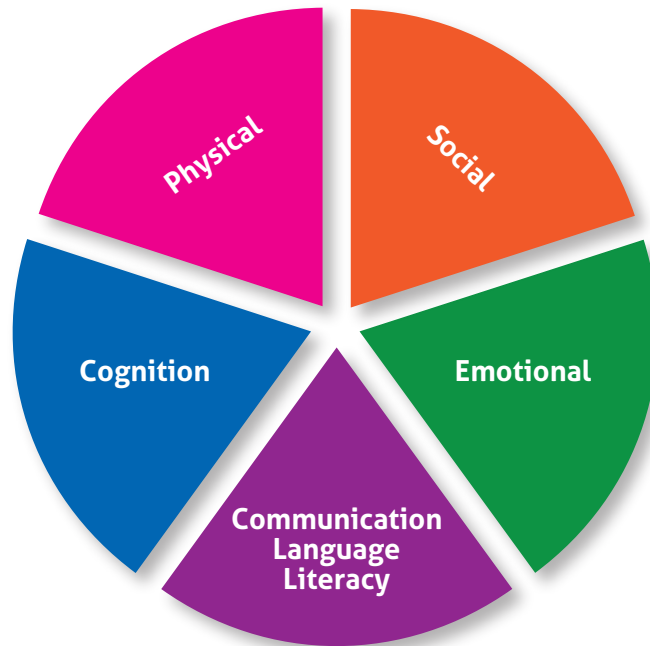


Early
Learning
Program

Learning In Centres



ELEMENTARY TEACHERS' FEDERATION OF ONTARIO



Introduction

It is learning centre time, and the educator explains the new activities and materials available that day. Jim asks who would like to use the props for the story Mouse Count, which the children know well. Rasheed and William ask for the props as they are excited by the model snake.

Next, Jim asks who would like to join him in a colour-mixing experiment. The children will add different food colouring to water in clear bottles. Jim says he wants them to observe what happens when different amounts of colours are added. This experiment will take place over three or four days with different groups of interested children. Eventually, the bottles will be displayed in the windows for children to observe the colours through the light. Jim writes the names of six children who are interested and says he will work first with one group of three, and then with the other group. He asks George if he would like to join the group as George seems to have difficulty making choices, and Jim wants to learn more about him.

In turn, Jim asks each child what he or she would like to do. Sam and Liam want to continue making their zoo in the sand box at the sand centre. Chung chooses the felt board again, he enjoys the Five Little Monkeys felt set. Matt chooses painting as he wants to paint his box sculpture. Melinda and Melissa want to go to the water centre where they have been enjoying filling up the plastic containers with cubes and watching them sink. Jim asks Tamilya and Niruba (who like to sit side-by-side and choose the same centres), Jiaxi, and Denny to point to the centres where they would like to go and then repeats their choices out loud – puzzles and bin toys.

As each child says a choice, Jim records it on his tally sheet of the centres. Along with working with two groups for a short time, he specifically plans to observe and take a language sample of the children using the props for Mouse Count. He plans to check in with Sam and Liam about their zoo and talk to them about it. For the rest of the time, he will circulate among the different centres.

What is a Learning Centre?

A learning centre is also known as an activity centre. Some centres are permanent, such as a reading corner, while others may be temporary and based on a particular interest, such as planting seeds.

Learning centres have specific purposes identified by the educator and program expectations. Materials chosen for each centre are based on children's developmental needs, interests, and potential for exploration and learning.

In planning for learning centres, educators need to think about the purpose and focus for each centre, keeping in mind what they know about child development overall, and their students in particular.

The expectations for centres are as follows:

- Each centre is well defined and organized for easy access of materials.
- Centres are not static, but evolve throughout the year to meet the changing needs and interests of the children.
- Educators consider the size of the space, the location, the type of furniture, and the materials that will best facilitate learning.
- Educators consider how to involve children in the set-up, changes, and maintenance of each centre.
- Materials placed in the centres are open-ended in nature and students with a wide range of abilities can access them effectively.

Why Learning Centres?

A kindergarten class is organized differently than a grade classroom, in that it is filled with learning centres. While classrooms for older grades are generally organized around desks, with learning centres to the side, the kindergarten class is organized around learning centres for the following reasons:

1. Learning centres are a means to provide a developmentally appropriate learning environment for young children. Through learning centres, children engage in open-ended activities, building on their prior knowledge as well as constructing new knowledge and skills. When learning centres are developed based on children's needs and interests, all children can experience success, build self-confidence, and develop a love of discovery and learning.
2. "Learning centres offer children a powerful opportunity to develop independence, risk-taking, perseverance, initiative, creativity, reasoning, and problem-solving – the 'learning to learn' skills."¹ These are the skills that children need to succeed in school and in life.
3. Learning centres afford children opportunities "to explore, experiment, manipulate, problem-solve, progress at their own rate of development, practice and apply skills and concepts, relate ideas from one material to another, respond creatively, develop communication skills, and acquire reading and writing behaviours in real-life situations."²
4. Thoughtful and well-planned learning centre experiences foster:
 - the development of oral language;
 - social skills;
 - literacy and mathematics learning;
 - sensory learning;
 - problem-solving;
 - inquiry;
 - higher-order thinking skills; and
 - the development of physical skills.
5. Learning centres support the development of the whole child across five domains. For example, as children build a castle at the big blocks, they develop:

- **social competence** as they work and interact co-operatively, while contributing their own independent thoughts and ideas;
- **language and cognitive skills** as they use language, vocabulary, and problem-solve;
- **emotionally** as they attend to the task within the group and as they use their differing abilities;
- **physically** as they practice both gross and fine motor skills, e.g., lifting and balancing blocks, drawing and writing; and
- **communication skills and general knowledge** as they use their literacy and numeracy skills, and use their knowledge about castles to build and represent their understanding.

During the kindergarten years, the development across these domains is strongly interrelated. (See chapter on Child Development)

Domains of Development

- Social Competence;
- Emotional Maturity;
- Communication, Language and Literacy;
- Cognition; and
- Physical Health and Well being.

Early Learning and Brain Development

“Play is how children make sense of the world and is an effective method of learning for young children. Ideas and skills become meaningful; tools for learning are practiced; and concepts are understood. Play engages children’s attention and offers a challenge that is within the child’s capacity to master.”³



Current research on early learning and brain development indicates the following information needs to be considered to ensure enriching and meaningful experiences for kindergarten children.⁴ (See chapters on *Play and Child Development*)

- **Learning is social and takes place within children's cultural context.**

Children learn by interacting with others and participating in activities that afford them the opportunity to talk, hear what others have to say, observe, and experiment.

- **During the early years, children are learning how to learn.**

During the kindergarten years, children are practicing the tools of learning, such as planning, monitoring, revising, reflecting, investigating, solving problems, and exchanging points-of-view with others.

- **Children build new understandings from existing ideas and concepts.**

Learning proceeds from the concrete to the abstract. When planning activities, educators need to provide hands-on concrete experiences and begin with what the children know as this motivates and engages them in learning.

- **Basic skills are meaningless if they are not part of a larger context.**

Activities must be meaningful for children and placed within a context. For example, children learn about reading and writing as they engage in such activities as 'reading' the book which the educator read aloud, and 'writing' a friend's name on a picture. Techniques such as flashcards, teaching a letter sound as part of a program, and worksheets teach skills in isolation. Children need to develop their knowledge of letters, sounds, and concepts about print and apply them as an integral part of the process of learning to read and write.

Consequently, when planning learning centres, educators need to ensure that they foster oral language development, social interaction, problem-solving, and hands-on concrete activities. As well, activities must be meaningful and developmentally appropriate to ensure engagement.



Adapting the Program

For English Language Learners, refer to Stages of Language Acquisition for ways to support children's oral language development.⁵

Making the Connections

Learning centres are where children can explore, revisit, create, and recreate based on past experiences and new knowledge. Experiences at these centres can be connected to various experiences to extend the learning.

It is important that the connections to learning centre experiences are natural and meaningful. While it can be tempting to tie all activities at every centre to a program theme or topic, the educator needs to make sure that the play afforded at the centre contributes to the learning in a way that is authentic and engaging. Moreover, flooding every centre with activities on the same theme or topic can be counter-productive as it can prompt the child to lose curiosity and interest. The themes chosen for exploration determine their fit with various learning centres.

Examples

After a read-aloud or shared reading	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> – The story of the day is placed in the reading corner for children to revisit and enjoy. – The book with illustrations using torn paper is placed at the collage centre for children to use as a reference when experimenting with torn paper. – The book showing examples of tools is placed at the technology centre for reference. – The models of the gingerbread story characters are added to the sand for retelling. – Five yellow ducks and the book are added to the math centre for children to use when making up stories about five.
After a visit to a local bakery	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> – The educator engages children in various baking experiences. The baking pans, utensils, empty packages, playdough, and recipe are added to the dramatic play centre for children to revisit the experience and use associated language.
After going on a listening walk outdoors	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> – The educator and children record what they heard and discuss the different sounds. – The educator on her own, and with children, creates listening games for the science and technology centre where children identify the object by its sound, match and order sounds, and create sounds with different objects.
After a visitor comes to the classroom, e.g., a vet	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> – The educator adds props to the dramatic play (stethoscope, bandages, scale, empty medicine bottles, etc.) for children to role-play. – The educator observes and engages children in thinking about other props they might need.
After taking rubbings of objects outside in the playground	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> – Children create their own textured pictures and the rubbings are placed at the collage centre for children to add to their collages at other times.
After children had various experiences exploring shadows in the playground	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> – The educator adds the overhead projector to the science and technology centre along with various objects so children can explore making shadows. – The educator adds flashlights to the building materials for children to explore shadows with their structures.

The educator observes the children using The Three Bears props in the dramatic play centre	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> – In shared writing, the class creates a list of characters for the Three Bears story. Before going to learning centres, the educator invites the children to sign up for roles.
After observing the children build tall structures with the coloured blocks	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> – The educator adds thick pieces of card for children to create different levels, as well as to use for ramps. – The educator invites some of the children to record their structures.
As children make discoveries at the various centres	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> – The educator invites the children to sign their name on the sign-up sheet for sharing time. – The educator listens to children's explanations and questions for more information.
After taking photos of a child's building in process	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> – The educator asks the child to explain what is happening in the photos. Together, they create captions to be displayed.
After teaching the routine for painting and watching the children	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> – The educator plans a shared writing lesson to create the procedures for the routine with illustrations and print. – The procedures are reread and the educator asks the children to demonstrate parts of the procedure.
After children draw, write, or paint	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> – Each child has a place in the class 'art gallery' outside the room and can add a drawing/painting/collage to his/her spot for others to view. – The class often takes a gallery walk to view the new pieces.



Creating the Learning Environment

“We value space because of its power to organize, promote pleasant relationships between people of all ages, create a handsome environment, provide changes, promote choices and activity, and its potential for sparking all kinds of social, affective and cognitive learning. All of this contributes to a sense of well-being and security in children. We also think that the space has to be a sort of an aquarium that mirrors the ideas, values, attitudes, and cultures of the people who live within it.”⁶

The classroom environment has an impact on children as learners, and on their learning. The Reggio Emilia approach to early education considers the environment as ‘the third teacher’. In her book, *Authentic Childhood*, Susan Fraser states that the environment “informs and shapes the kind of learning that will happen in the room.”⁷ The choices we make about materials, tools, books, furniture set-up, and location of centres indicate our values as educators, and our intentions for learning and experiencing.

Some points to consider:

- Arrange materials, and learning centres, in an aesthetically pleasing way to engage children’s interest and to evoke curiosity.
- Think about lighting when deciding where to place centres. Should the science and technology centre be placed by a low window for outdoor observations? Or, should the visual arts centre capture the natural light from the window?
- Ensure that materials are in good working condition for safety reasons, and to prevent children from becoming frustrated.
- Include natural materials as much as possible – items that are naturally part of the child’s world. These items engage children in using their senses.

- Think about what is on the walls. How is the work of all children represented in the classroom? Is the work of all children valued and represented?

Creating the learning environment begins before the beginning of school.

Before school starts:

- Make a list of the centres that can reasonably be supported in the classroom. Is there enough furniture? Are there enough materials? When moving into a new room, some educators prefer to first take everything out of the room so they can arrange it without being influenced or constrained by previous set-ups.
- Think about the location of the large group meeting area. How much space is needed to accommodate the number of children in the group? Should it be at the back of the room where there might be less distraction from people coming to the door? Should you face the door so that you can see people entering or exiting the room?
- Consider what furniture will be needed for the large group area - an easel for writing? Storage? Bookshelf? Display space for wall charts, etc.? Will this area also be used for construction materials and games?
- Consider the children entering the classroom. Have the children been in the room before? Do they attend childcare or the extended day program for part of the day? Are they new to school? If children have been to school before, or are in the childcare, there can be more centres open, with more materials, as they are already familiar with them and the associated routines.
- Consider the kinds of centres that would appeal to the children at the beginning of the year. Sometimes, centres such as the ABC/ word-study centre are not popular at the start of the year, and may be more effectively



introduced once children have settled in.

- Plan the storage needed for each centre. Where will the paper and writing resources be placed so they are easily accessible? Are there shelves by the water and the sand centre for easy organization and access? Where will completed paintings go? Where will pieces from the collage centre be placed to dry?
- Consider the placement of centres to promote flow and use. For example, would it be better to place the big blocks beside the dramatic play so there can be interplay? Should all the visual arts be close together - painting, collage, and modelling? Could the listening centre be part of the reading corner?
- Walk through the routines for each centre ahead of time to ensure the centre will function properly. Where will children get the material they need – is it easily accessible? Where will they work? Is there enough room? What will they need to tidy up? Is that stored handily? What will children need to know about the routine? How will it be communicated and reinforced? Will visuals help, or will the children need a demonstration and walk through? Consistency is important for young children therefore it is advantageous to have routines clearly mapped out ahead of time.

Adapting the Program

Become familiar with children entering the program to determine if there are children with special needs who will require special equipment or widened pathways.

For every centre, consider the following questions:

- Does the centre require an electrical outlet?
- Does the centre require proximity to a sink?
- Are materials placed near related materials? (i.e., construction hats and trucks logically extend block play.)
- Is there sufficient room for the activity to be used to the fullest extent? (If the space is too small, children will become frustrated.)
- Do the children have an appropriate number of materials to use? (Too many materials overwhelm, too few cause disagreements.)
- Are quiet areas separated from noisy ones?
- Are traffic patterns such that a child is able to move to and from the centre with a minimum amount of disruption to others?⁸

Once school starts:

Go for a walkabout with the children so they can see what is available in the room. Talk about the names for the centres. Circulate, getting to know the children, acknowledging and reinforcing behaviours and routines.

Remind children what is available at the centres each day. Some educators take photos of the actual centres and post them near the large group area so that English Language Learners and shy children can point to the centre where they would like to work.

Model the routines, showing children what they look like, question for understanding (Where will I put this? What do I put on before I paint?) and have a child model the routine. In this way, children see it, hear it, and walk through it. Re-teach where needed.

Children tend to feel more secure in an environment when there is a sense of order. For example, sorting is an important mathematical skill, and a skill needed in life. Different models of sorting and organizing may take place at each centre. At dramatic play, children may put clothes in the dresser and food in the fridge. At another

centre, they can return animal and transport models to their labeled containers.

Children are much more likely to visit a visually appealing and organized centre where they can locate materials they need. For example, when the sand materials are placed in labeled containers on a shelf, children can easily see what is available instead of wasting time rifling through a bin under the sand box. Labeling containers with pictures and words engages children in using literacy and mathematics skills.

When setting up the learning environment, educators also need to take into consideration their knowledge of child development, children's socio-cultural context, as well as the needs and interests of all children to ensure a developmentally appropriate environment.⁹



Adapting the Program

In planning for children with special needs, think about individual needs with regard to: **safety** (make sure areas are clear of barricades that might cause injury, and materials are of a size that won't be swallowed); **space** (provide a quiet space where children can go if they feel overwhelmed, enlarge pathways in the classroom for children with spatial needs); **access** (to outdoors for outdoor time, to centres with entryways); and **materials** (board books that make it easier to turn the pages, a name card with raised letters, visual cues to support routines).

