

Explorers Preschool Curriculum

Getting Started

Welcome to *Explorers Preschool Curriculum*! We're glad you're here!

Explorers is designed for early childhood educators and preschool-aged children. It can be used in any setting, including private preschool programs, public school programs, and family child care homes.

Explorers is guided by the following principles:

1. Children are naturally curious and eager to understand their world.

The *Explorers* curriculum promotes authentic, enjoyable, first-hand experiences in a vibrant and encouraging environment.

2. Domains of child development are interrelated and are all important.

Physical, cognitive, communicative, social, and emotional development are all vital for success in school and life. *Explorers* supports the *Arkansas Child Development and Early Learning Standards (CDELS)* with engaging experiences that promote learning across all domains.

3. Children are trustworthy partners in learning.

Explorers is inquiry-driven, guided by children's interests, questions, and ideas. Children take on meaningful decision-making roles and responsibilities as a part of each investigation. The child's right to play is protected and supported as fundamental component of every day.

4. Each child, and each group of children, are unique.

Explorers offers choices and flexibility for children and adults. Individualization to include children with developmental differences and special needs is integral to the curriculum.

5. Learning happens best within the context of family, community, and the natural world.

Explorers strives to promote positive connection between preschool-aged children and their school, community, and environment. Diverse and meaningful opportunities for family engagement are given special importance.

Explorers may be different from other curricula you've used in several ways. Understanding these differences will help you use the curriculum successfully.

Explorers includes a collection of topics for investigation. These topics have been developed so far:

- Boats
- Bubbles
- Colors: Hue, Tint, Tone, and Shade
- Day and Night
- Farmers' Market
- Flowers
- Insects
- Making Music
- Ramps and Tunnels
- Songbirds and Squirrels

Topics of learning – known as investigations – do not have to occur in a predetermined order. Instead, educators are urged to observe, talk with, and think about children in their group. Which of the topics would be most interesting and engaging to this group of children? Decisions may also be guided by the resources that are accessible to the program. Programs may choose to participate in any of the investigations, in any order.

Within broad topics, individual groups are urged to “zoom in” and focus most intently on areas of special interest. For example, one group taking part in a *day and night* investigation might be most interested in city lights that shine though the dark. A second group might be more interested in nighttime creatures like crickets and moths. Although both groups have the same, broad focus, conversations and planned activities in the two rooms may differ greatly. Some activities in the topic packet may be skipped, and different high-value activities may be offered to support children's interests.

Educators are expected to “re-run” books and activities that especially interest children. That means that the same activity will be shared again over the course of several days or weeks. Through repeated opportunities to explore, children gain expertise, test new ideas, and work in increasingly complex ways. Repetition helps children build confidence and construct knowledge.

Investigations are not limited to one week. In fact, groups may focus on the same topic for two, three, or four weeks – or more! It is believed that deep, comprehensive investigation of any interesting topic is more beneficial to young thinkers and learners than a “sprinkling” of many different topics. Thus, children and adults are invited to continue their investigation as long as it sustains children's interest. An investigation concludes when educators observe that children's questions have been answered. Children seem satisfied and ready to move on to other topics of interest.

Explorers Preschool Curriculum

Learning Every Day

A resource packet is available to support each investigation topic. These packets support learning throughout the day in these eight ways:

1. Learning Center Extensions

Learning Center Extensions are play objects and other materials that support the topic. These can be added to the indoor play areas that children use every day. The items in this sections are examples. Educators may implement their own ideas, as well.

It is recommended that children have access to the learning center play areas for morning **and** afternoon playtimes. To allow children to become deeply engaged in their play, scheduled play times should last at least 30 minutes, and ideally 60 minutes or longer.

For more information about arranging and equipping indoor learning centers, see the section titled **Learning Everywhere**.

2. Books for Sharing with Groups

Many possible books are listed in each packet. It is not expected that programs will purchase the entire book list. Rather, the list may provide guidance and inspiration as educators select books from their storage area and/or their local children's library.

These may be added to classroom book areas and can be shared informally with one or a few children at a time during play times. Some of the books on the list are also designated as **recommended read-alouds** with larger groups of children. Read-aloud books are appealing, with illustrations that are easy to see. Good books for reading aloud with groups usually do one or more of the following:

- Tell a relatable story with a clear conflict and resolution. Children can make predictions, respond to events, and recall the sequence of the story.
- Invite children to actively participate by playing with words or joining in rhyming or predictable text.
- Enhance children's real-life experiences, answering their questions in engaging ways.

Each read aloud book should be selected with confidence that it will be of special interest to this group of children. It is recommended that children are invited – but never forced – to take part in at least one group read-aloud time daily. A typical read-aloud time may last about 7-10 minutes for younger, less experienced groups and 10-15 minutes for older, more experienced children.

3. Topical Conversations

Conversations can occur in many different ways each day. An educator may talk with a few children while they wait between activities or enjoy a mealtime conversation with children gathered around the lunch table. Conversations can occur within the context of play or daily routines. Especially with older preschoolers, some conversations may also occur during whole group meeting times.

Topical conversations are relaxed and friendly. Children shouldn't feel like they are being put on the spot or quizzed. This is a time for adults to model listening skills and engage children in back-and-forth (serve and return) communication.

In addition to informal conversations throughout the day, *Explorers* encourages educators to routinely use two additional strategies each week:

Response Charts

The educator talks individually with each child, asking all of them the same question. She/he writes down exactly what the child says. All ideas and answers are welcome – even ones that seem incongruous or unlikely to be true.

This interview process takes place during play time or other informal times. Once all of the children have had a chance to respond, the chart is posted where children can easily see it. The educator reads all of the responses aloud during a group meeting. Written response charts are a valuable literacy experience and are recommended at least once a week.

Polls

Children and adults respond to a question by writing their name under one of two choices on a chart. Younger or less experienced groups may opt to place name cards on the chart instead. The polling process takes place with one, or a few, children at a time – perhaps as part of the morning arrival routine or as children finish breakfast.

During a group meeting, children and adults look together at the chart. This can be a time to compare quantities and share insights. Polls help connect literacy and math. It is recommended that children are invited to complete polls 1-3 times per week.

Ideas for topical response chart and polls can be found in each resource packet.

4. Playful Songs, Rhymes, and Games

These simple activities may be incorporated into group gathering times or used as transition activities. Many are “piggyback songs” – meaning that they offer new words to tunes that children may already know.

While it is valuable to offer a variety of songs, rhymes, and games throughout the year, not all of them have to be topical. Educators are also encouraged to develop a repertoire of class favorites, such as:

Apples and Bananas
Baby Shark
Down by the Bay
Good Morning song
Head, Shoulders, Knees and Toes
Hokey Pokey
If You’re Happy and You Know It
Itsy Bitsy Spider
Old MacDonald Had a Farm
The Wheels on the Bus
Who Took the Cookie from the Cookie Jar?

Singing, rhyming, and playing games with children helps set a playful tone and fosters positive relationships. It’s also a great way for children to hear, use, and experiment with language. Remember: A music playing device – like a smartboard or CD player – can’t take the place of an engaged adult!

5. Small Group Learning Experiences

Ideas for small group learning experiences make up the bulk of each resource packet. Small group interactions are proven to be far more meaningful and effective than whole group interactions. Children in small groups can see and hear better; have more frequent and higher value interactions with the adult; and are less likely to feel hurried or crowded.

Thus, these learning experiences are intended to be carried out with groups of 3 – 5 children at a time. Up to 7 children may participate at a time in simple, familiar experiences, but groups larger than 7 are not recommended.

This means that educators will complete each activity with several small groups. For some activities, some children may participate in the morning and some may participate in the afternoon. A few activities may even take place over the course of several days. Using lists or sign-up sheets can reassure children that everyone will have a turn.

Small Group Learning Experiences, cont.

There are two common strategies for scheduling small group learning experiences:

Small Groups as a Stand-Alone Event

Some educators prefer to offer small group learning experiences as part of a scheduled daily small group time. In a classroom with two adults, one group of children works with a teacher, another group of children works with a teaching partner, and one or two more groups of children work on self-guided activities that teachers have prepared for them. Typically, the second teacher's guided activity is less complex, allowing this educator to float to support children in self-guided activities as needed.

Example:

Five children work with Teacher A. They're conducting an interesting science experiment.

Teacher B sits with five more children. They are playing a new matching game. Children in this group enjoy interacting with their teacher, but can continue to play independently if a child in another group needs her attention.

Five more children work at a nearby table. They use play dough with tools.

A final group of five children play on the large rug. They are using magnet tile blocks and other interlocking building toys.

Children who prefer not to participate their group's activity may look at books, work puzzles, or engage with other independent "table top toys" at another table.

The children will visit either the game table or the experiment table this morning, and they'll have a chance to try the other activity in the afternoon. These scheduled small group times make up only a small portion of their overall day; there's still ample time for self-directed free play throughout the room.

This strategy may be a good fit for groups with younger and/or less experienced children. It makes both teachers fully available to supervise and interact with children during free play center times.

Small Groups as Part of Free Play Center Times

Some educators prefer this second strategy, "making themselves a center" as children play. Children may freely choose to join the small group, or they may opt to continue playing elsewhere. Physical cues – such as just four chairs at the small group table or a sign-up list – help children understand turns.

Small Group Learning Experiences, cont.

Meanwhile, a second educator moves around the room to supervise and interact with children engaged in free play. Educators swap roles often; they take turns acting as small group facilitators on some days and play facilitators on other days. There are also times when small group activities are not in session. During these times, both educators act as play facilitators.

Example:

Teacher A works with children at a designated small group table. They're conducting a science experiment. Because there are five child-sized chairs at the table, children know that five people may participate at a time.

Children who would like a turn next have written their names on a waiting list. They know that their teacher will check in with them before the next group starts. The experiment will be offered several more times today, so they know that it's OK if they prefer to keep going with their play.

Teacher B is in the dramatic play center, following the children's lead in an imaginative game. Soon, he'll move to interact with children in the block building area. Children move freely around the room, following their own interests.

Because this strategy offers more flexibility for small groups that finish early or linger longer, it may be a good fit for older and/or more experienced preschoolers. Some classrooms use a combination of both strategies.

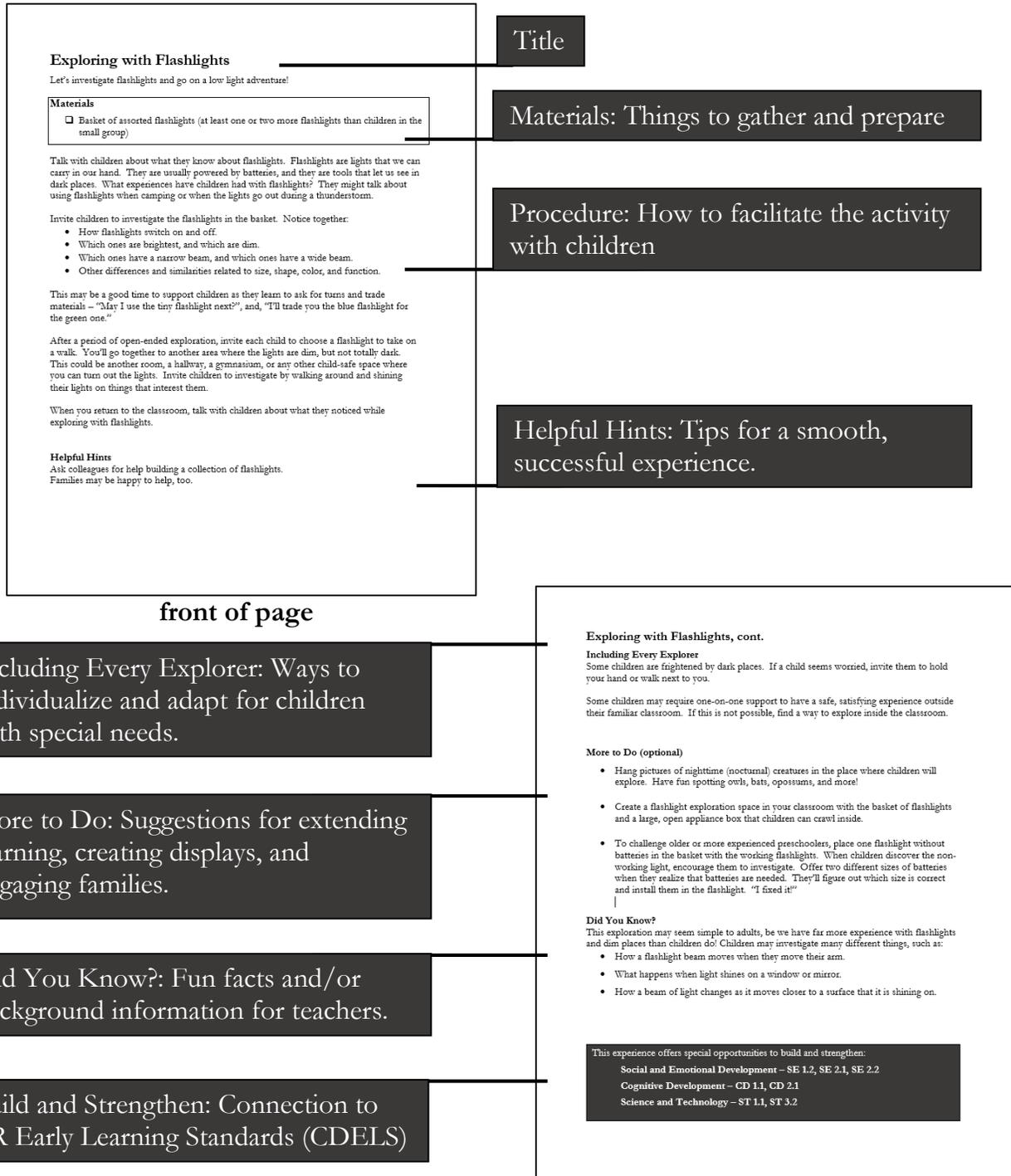
No matter which strategy is used, it is important to remember to “re-run” small group learning experiences. Offering an experience two or more times over the course of a few days or weeks invites children to gain expertise and deepen understanding.

Recommendation: Invite children to participate one or two small group learning experiences each day.



Small Group Learning Experiences, cont.

Each double-sided small group learning experiences idea sheet has specific components to assist you with planning and facilitation:



6. Active, Physical Play

These activities are designed to encourage healthy activity and build large motor skills. Most are intended to be used in the outdoor play area. Some are also suited for indoor gross motor spaces – such as gyms – or active group gatherings.

Educators are encouraged to invite children to join in activities such as these daily. Many children will want to participate, while others would rather continue with their own, free choice gross motor play. When two or more adults are present, one can lead the activity while others supervise children elsewhere in the play area.

While it is valuable to share games for active, physical play every day, not all of them have to be topical. In addition to the activities in the packets, educators are encouraged to develop a repertoire of class favorites, such as:

- Bear Hunt
- Follow the Leader
- Freeze Tag
- Obstacle Courses
- Parachute Games
- Red Light, Green Light
- Simplified Soccer
- Toss and Catch

Games like *Duck, Duck Goose* – where children spend more time waiting for a turn than actively participating – are not recommended for active, physical play. Focus on games where everyone can play and no one gets out.

7. Growing Every Day: Supporting Social and Emotional Development

These vignettes highlight strong, positive guidance practices. Educators are reminded that the most valuable learning occurs when adults model, coach, guide, and encourage children in the context of everyday interactions. Supplemental social-emotional curriculum or activities may be used, but guidance isn't just something that happens at a specific, scheduled time of day. It's an all day, every day endeavor!

8. Concluding Your Exploration

This final section of each resource packet invites educators to reflect about whether children are ready to wrap up and move on to another topic of investigation. It includes ideas for culminating events and documentation.

On the pages that follow, you'll find sample schedules from two different programs. These schedules highlight times when elements from the *Explorers* curriculum are incorporated throughout the day. Elements from the curriculum are in bold print.

Sample Schedule, 7.5-hour program day

8 – 8:30 am, Arrival and Free Play

Children add their names to a **poll** or add to a teacher's **response chart**.

8:30– 8:40 am, Breakfast Transition

Children who are ready and waiting join in a **song, rhyme, or game**.

8:40 – 9 am, Breakfast

Adults sit with children and engage in relaxed, informal **conversations**.

9 – 9:15 am, Good Morning Together Time

Children talk about this morning's **poll** or **chart** and discuss plans for the day.

9:15 – 9:25 am, Mid-Morning Transition

Children who are ready and waiting to go outside join in a **song, rhyme, or game**. The group continues to sing as they head to their outdoor play area.

9:25 – 10:05 am, Outdoor Play

Children are invited – but not required – to join in an **active physical play game**.

10:05 – 10:20 am, Transition Indoors

Adults engage in informal **conversations** with children.

10:20 – 11:10 am, Free Play and Small Group Activities

Adults engage in **conversations** with children at play. Children are also invited to join a **small group learning experience**.

11:10 – 11:30 am, Story Time & Lunch Prep

Children enjoy a **read-aloud** story and discussion.

11:30 am – 12 pm, Lunch Time

Adults sit with children and engage in relaxed, informal **conversations**.

12 – 1:15 pm, Nap/Rest and Quiet Activities

1:15 – 1:30 pm, Wake-up Transition

As children are ready, they gather on the rug for a **song, rhyme, or game**.

1:30 – 1:50 pm, Afternoon Snack
Adults engage in informal **conversations** with children.

1:50 – 2:00 pm, Transition Outdoors
Children who are ready and waiting to go outside join in a **song, rhyme, or game**. The group continues to sing as they head to their outdoor play area.

2:00 – 2:30 pm, Outdoor Play
Adults engage in **conversations** with children at play.

2:30 -2:40 pm, Transition Indoors
The group talks briefly about plans for the afternoon.

2:40 – 3:15 pm, Free Play and Small Group Activities
Adults engage in **conversations** with children at play. Children are also invited to join a **small group learning experience**.

3:15 – 3:30 pm, Afternoon Together Time
Children talk about their day and their plans for tomorrow.

3:30 pm, Dismissal



Sample Schedule, 11-hour program day

7 – 8:05 am, Arrival and Free Play

Children add their names to a **poll** or add to a teacher's **response chart**. Adults have **conversations** with children at play.

8:05 – 8:15 am, Breakfast Transition

Children who are ready and waiting join in a **song, rhyme, or game**.

8:15 – 8:35 am, Breakfast

Adults sit with children and engage in relaxed, informal **conversations**.

8:35 – 8:50 am, Good Morning Together Time

Children talk about this morning's **poll** or **chart** and discuss plans for the day.

8:50 – 9:00 am, Mid-Morning Transition

Children who are ready and waiting to go outside join in a **song, rhyme, or game**. The group continues to sing as they head to their outdoor play area.

9:00 – 9:45 am, Outdoor Play

Children are invited – but not required – to join in an **active physical play game**.

9:45 – 10 am, Transition Indoors

Adults engage in informal **conversations** with children.

10:00 – 11:15 am, Free Play in Learning Centers and Small Group Activities

Adults engage in **conversations** with children at play. Children are also invited to join a **small group learning experience**.

11:15 – 11:30 am, Story Time & Lunch Prep

Children enjoy a **read-aloud** story and discussion.

11:30 am – 12 pm, Lunch Time

Adults sit with children and engage in relaxed, informal **conversations**.

12 – 1:45 pm, Nap/Rest and Quiet Activities

1:45 – 2:00 pm, Wake-up Transition

As children are ready, they gather on the rug for a **song, rhyme, or game**.

2:00 – 2:20 pm, Afternoon Snack

Adults engage in informal **conversations** with children.

2:20 – 2:30 pm, Afternoon Together Time

Children talk about their favorite part of the day so far and their plans for the afternoon.

2:30 – 4 pm, Free Play in Learning Centers and Small Group Activities

Adults engage in **conversations** with children at play. Children are also invited to join a **small group learning experience**.

4:00 – 4:10 pm, Afternoon Transition

Children who are ready and waiting to go outside join in a **song, rhyme, or game**. The group continues to sing as they head to their outdoor play area.

4:10 – 4:45 pm, Outdoor Play

Adults engage in **conversations** with children at play.

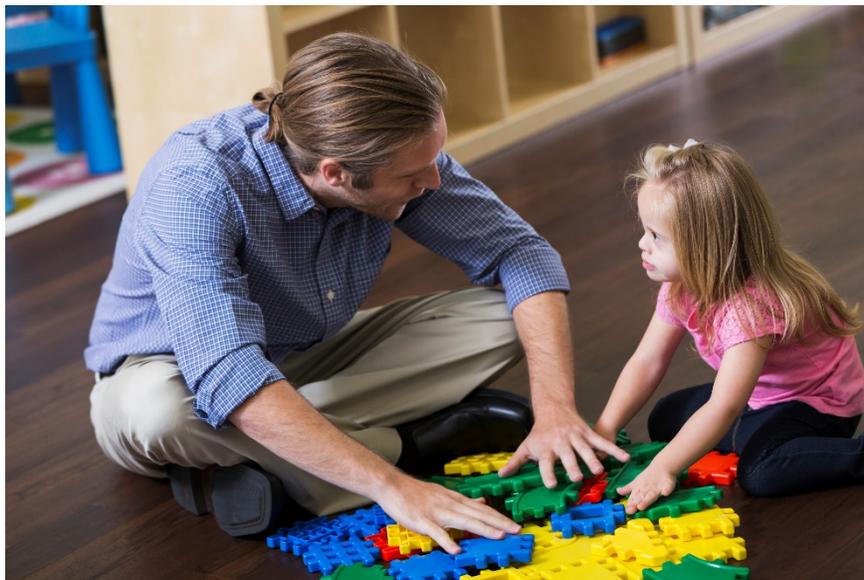
4:45 – 5:00 pm, Late Afternoon Transition

5:00 – 5:50 pm, Free Play in Learning Centers

Adults engage in **conversations** with children at play. A small snack may be offered.

5:50 – 6 pm, Prepare for Departure

The last children present play a game or select toys to play with at a table during the final minutes of the day.



Explorers Preschool Curriculum

Learning Everywhere

In the high quality early learning environment, your classroom is your learning lab! During play times, children are welcome to move freely around the room, following their own interests. Adult guidance may be provided to help children find uncrowded places to play and learn to manage materials safely.

On the pages that follow, you'll find suggestions for equipping, arranging, and interacting with children in the different learning areas within your classroom.

Book Area

- Provide a wide variety of books – including both fiction and factual books – organized on low, sturdy shelves.
- Near the books, offer a soft, comfortable place where children can read. Consider child-sized soft chairs, a covered crib mattress, and/or large pillows.
- Cozy touches like a mobile, a cool-touch lamp, and a soft rug can help make this space extra inviting.
- This area should be located far away from busy, noisy play areas like block building and dramatic play.
- Interact with children in the book area by sharing stories with one, two, or a few children. Consider sharing seek-and-find books or other interactive books that may be less suitable for whole group times, or invite children to “read” favorite stories to you.

Fine Motor Area

- Some teachers refer to this as the “table toys” area. It’s a place for puzzles and manipulatives like pegboards, lacing cards, and lacing beads.
- It’s also home to interlocking building toys like Lego, magnet tiles, Lincoln Logs, and K’nex.
- Older preschoolers will also enjoy playing simple board games and card games here.
- That’s a lot of little pieces, so you’ll want to be sure to label containers and shelves with pictures and words!
- Arrange the shelf of fine motor materials so that children can easily carry materials to a nearby table. Some educators also use a rug to define a floor-level play area for larger puzzles and building sets.
- Interact with children in the fine motor area by introducing new games, working side-by-side with materials, and inviting children to tell about their work.

Art Area

- This area offers materials that children can choose and use in their own, creative way.
- Over the first few weeks you share with children, gradually introduce a wide range of different materials: things to draw with, things for cutting and gluing, paints, and tools like hole punches and tape.
- Child-sized easels are a nice addition to the art area.
- Some teachers opt to create a separate, nearby table for clay, playdough, and other smooshy materials.
- It's a good idea to locate art table(s) on easy-to-clean floors near your handwashing sink.
- Interact with children in the art area by helping children manage materials and inviting them to tell about their work. Notice and talk about color choices, lines, and techniques.

Music and Movement Area

- This space invites children to sing, dance, and make music with instruments like maracas, xylophone and drums.
- Older children may enjoy a keyboard with headphones and/or a child-sized guitar.
- Props like scarves, microphones, tutus, and tap shoes add to the fun, and a music player is a nice addition.
- Children will need enough room to move; use a spacious rug to help define this play area. Locate it far away from quiet, focused areas.
- Interact with children in the music area by singing and dancing together, investigating instruments, and appreciating their performances.

Block Building Area

- This is an active and important area of your classroom! Stock it with lots of wooden unit blocks on low, open shelves.
- Provide props – such as loose parts and toy cars, people, and animals – to extend and enhance block play.
- To encourage builders, situate on a very large, flat rug along the perimeter of the classroom. Only blocks and block building happen here; builders need lots of room and should not have to compete for floor space.
- Interact with children in the block building area by encouraging them to explain their designs and problem-solving strategies. Together, think and talk about height, distance, balance, and other mathematical ideas.

Dramatic Play Area

- Furnishings like a child-sized couch, doll bed, and kitchen set make this play area feel just like home!
- Educators add vibrancy and sophistication with props like wristwatches, car keys, wallets, and interesting dress up clothes for boys and girls.
- This area is sometimes known as the “housekeeping” area because props like dolls and dishes are included here. But - the dramatic play area can be much more than that!
- In the course of their investigations, you and the children may also use real and homemade props to transform this space into a campsite, a florist shop, and more.
- Look for props that support literacy and math through meaningful play. Possibilities include - but are not limited to -cook books, coupons, menus, cash register, and play money.
- Give children lots of room to play here, at a small table and on the floor. Locate this busy, social play space far away from quiet, focused activities.
- Interact with children in the dramatic play area by following the children’s lead in play. Join in without taking control, encouraging children to interact with you and with one another.

Nature and Science Area

- This is a place for investigation. Fill it with fascinating collections of natural objects, such as seed pods, acorns, fossils and beautiful rocks.
- Add in tools for investigation, such as flashlights, mirrors, and magnifying glasses.
- Tops, kaleidoscopes, and kinetic toys can add a touch of whimsy.
- This can also be a good place for non-fiction books, photos, and games – such as animal matching games.
- Consider including non-toxic houseplants, an aquarium, and even a small pet if you feel confident that you’ll be able to care for them.
- Place materials on a low table and/or low, open shelves. Children can stand to work at the table, and/or carry materials from the shelves to a nearby seating area.
- Some educators opt to create a separate “experimentation station” – a small table where children can mix colors, melt ice, or take part in other messy investigations without damaging other materials.
- Interact with children in the nature and science area by mirroring children’s enthusiasm and inviting them to explain their thinking as they sort, compare, experiment, and investigate. Use informational books to help find answers to their questions.

Sand and Water Area(s)

- Scooping and pouring wet and dry materials can be both soothing and stimulating. Most educators offer two, separate spaces for water and sand play, but a few let children mix up the materials.
- You might have a special table made to hold sand or water, or you might use shallow tubs, such as under-bed storage tubs.
- Fuzzy bathmats help catch drips and provide a soft place to stand or sit.
- Store interesting tools – like funnels, scoops, measuring cups and strainers – near, but not in, the sand or water.
- Keep a hand broom and dustpan and some towels nearby; children can help with the inevitable drips and spills.
- You'll want to place these busy play areas on hard, easy-to-clean flooring near your classroom sink.

More Areas to Consider

The play areas listed above are common and popular, but you can also create unique play areas to suit the interests and needs of your group. Some classrooms include a light table writer's desk, puppet theater, dollhouse area, ramp building space, or even a woodworking area.

Some preschool educators create a special math learning area, but many prefer to incorporate math materials throughout the room: measuring tools in the block area, number stamps in the art area, a balance scale with the nature collections, dominoes and pattern sets in the table toy area, and so on.

Most educators find it extremely helpful to offer a soft, safe, quiet area where a single child can go to retreat, regroup, or relax.

The Power of Play

Play in this well-equipped, carefully arranged learning lab supports every domain of development. Children are challenged and encouraged as engineers, artists, investigators, and collaborators. As you explore topics of learning with children, gradually add topical materials to play areas. Materials from many small group learning experiences can be added to play areas once children are familiar with them. Look for more suggestions in each resource packet.