

Getting Started

with Explorers Curriculum
for Toddlers and Twos



Explorers Curriculum for Toddlers and Twos

Guiding Principles

Welcome to *Explorers Curriculum for Toddlers and Twos*! We're glad you're here!

Explorers Curriculum for Toddlers and Twos (ET2) is designed for early childhood educators and children ages 10-35 months. It can be used in any setting, including private and public early childhood centers and family child care homes.

Explorers is guided by the following principles.

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

The *ET2* curriculum promotes authentic, enjoyable, firsthand 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 children. *ET2* supports the *Arkansas Child Development and Early Learning Standards (CDELS)* with engaging experiences that promote learning across all domains.

3. Even very young children are trustworthy partners in learning.

ET2 is open-ended and guided, in part, by children. Each child's play provides insights into their interests, questions, and ideas.

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

Differing needs, interests, and group dynamics are expected and respected. Thus, *ET2* 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.

ET2 strives to promote positive connections between toddlers and two-year-olds and their families, community, and environment.

Explorers Curriculum for Toddlers and Twos Using Topic Packets

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

Explorers includes a collection of topics for playful investigation. Examples include:

- Boxes, Baskets, and Bags
- Green and Growing (Plants)
- Neighborhood Creatures
- Putting Together and Taking Apart
- Shadow and Light
- Things That Roll and Spin

Each topic focuses on authentic, firsthand experiences. They are inspired by the things in a toddler's immediate world and by typical toddler play behaviors.

A curriculum packet is provided for each topic.

Curriculum packets can be found online under the resources tab at www.ASUChildhoodServices.org. New packets are added periodically. It is recommended that each group or classroom has daily access to the curriculum resources that support their current topic of interest.

There are several ways to share and store curriculum packets.

(Practically) Paperless Curriculum

Curriculum packets can be viewed online on a tablet computer or downloaded to a favorite device. Educators who use a digital version of the curriculum may still wish to print picture cards and other resource materials intended for children.

Commercial Printing

PDF files can be printed at copy shops and office supply shops. This may be a good choice for larger programs that need to print copies for numerous groups.

DIY Printing

Curriculum packets can also be printed on a home or office printer. Printing one packet at a time as it is needed may be a more affordable option for many programs.

Whether you opt for commercial printing or print on your own, printed packets can be stored together in a 3-ring binder. Or, store each packet separately in a 3-prong folder. Curriculum storage will depend on individual and program preferences.

Using topic packets (cont.)

Topics can be used in any order.

Educators observe, talk with, and think about children in their group. We notice, “What do children seem most interested in right now?” Because we choose the topic that seems like the best fit for children’s interests, topics can occur in any order. Decisions may also be guided by the resources that are accessible to the program.

Educators are urged to “zoom in” to focus on children's particular interests.

For example, one group using the *Neighborhood Creatures* topic might be most interested in cats, dogs, and other pets. A second group might be more interested in backyard wildlife, such as squirrels or insects. Although both groups have the same broad focus on neighborhood creatures, their activities may differ significantly.

Often, not every activity in a topic packet will be used.

Educators choose the pieces that feel like the best fit for their group’s ages, abilities, and interests. As a result, some suggestions in the topic packet may be skipped or adjusted. Educators may also substitute their own unique activities to support children’s interests.

Educators almost always “re-run” songs, books, and play experiences!

It is an expectation that activities will be shared numerous times over 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.

Topics take longer than just one week.

Groups focus on the same topic for two, three, or four weeks – or maybe even longer. It is believed that a thorough, unhurried investigation of any highly engaging topic is more beneficial to young thinkers and learners than a sprinkling of many different topics. Thus, children and adults are invited to continue a topic for as long as it sustains children’s interest.

Groups of older two-year-olds may wish to incorporate some activities from [Explorers Preschool Curriculum \(EPC\)](#).

Each ET2 topic pairs with one or more EPC topics. For example, the ET2 *Neighborhood Creatures* topic works well with the *Songbirds and Squirrels* and *Insects* topics in EPC. Educators who work older twos and young threes may prefer to pull from both curricula.

Explorers Curriculum for Toddlers and Twos

Curriculum Components

Play Environment

Toddlers and two-year-olds learn best, and most, through open-ended play. That's why almost all of the space we share with children is purposed for play. And, it's why the vast majority of our day is spent in play.

The first three years of life are a period of exceptional growth and change. A group of 12-month-old toddlers usually have very different play behaviors and needs than a group of 30-month old children! Our play spaces reflect what we know about children's development and will change as children grow.

Here are some factors to consider.

Younger toddlers (12-18 months)

- They're top-heavy and far less steady on their feet than older toddlers. Offer sturdy furniture to pull up on or grasp for balance. Place your bulkiest toys at floor level rather than on higher shelves, so that they are easier to reach and use.
- They need plenty of wide-open space to move around. Limit or eliminate large play seats, such as exersaucers, that take up floor space and restrict movement. Expect toddlers to carry toys around the room as they play.
- Because mouthing things is a normal and appropriate sensory strategy for toddlers, materials should be sturdy and easy to clean. Forego noisy, battery-operated toys in favor of simple play objects that invite children to play at their own pace and in their own way.
- They often dump out containers of materials. This is developmentally appropriate exploratory play, not naughty behavior. They can be encouraged to help pick up, but patient adults should also be prepared to spend time resetting play areas throughout the day.

Older toddlers (18 - 24 months)

- This is a highly physical age! Offer low, soft mats for climbing or other safe options for active play all through the day.

- Group toys that work together well on low shelves. You'll want duplicates of the most popular play objects: lots of dolls, trucks, favorite loose parts, and so on. Strive to create a space with plenty to do but that isn't overly cluttered or crowded.
- They enjoy playing at floor level, traveling around the room, and standing to work at low tables. They may sometimes want to sit in chairs to play but should not be required to do so. Toddlers inherently know that standing offers a greater range of motion for the torso and arms.
- Consider placing a few simple pegboards, matching sets, or other invitations to play on your low tabletops to draw children's interest during playtimes.

Two-year-olds

- They're becoming increasingly focused on building with blocks, working simple puzzles, stringing large beads, and other tasks that require concentration. Creating different zones within the play space for louder, more active play and quieter, more focused play can be helpful.
- They may begin to appreciate well-defined play areas that are similar to preschool learning centers. However, because twos tend to group together when something interesting is happening, play areas need to be large enough to accommodate more players.
- This is a period of rapid social development! Conflicts are common as children begin to stretch their social navigation skills. Ensure that there some more private (but supervisable) places where a child can find space when they want to retreat or regroup.

It can also be helpful to have more than one space for each kind of play. For example, children might engage in dramatic play in a play kitchen area or go to a different play area to use a dollhouse, barn, or other building playsets with props. This enables children to find more or less busy places to meet their play urges.



The materials and arrangement of play space will vary depending on the children's age and ability. However, all play spaces for toddlers and two-year-olds should ideally offer age-appropriate opportunities to engage in the following kinds of play.

Large Body Play

Very young children need opportunities to move and engage in active play throughout each day. Our indoor and outdoor spaces include invitations for children to climb, tumble, run, hop, push and pull large things, or use their whole bodies in other ways.

Schematic Play

Children experience play urges to empty or fill containers, gather and carry materials, and interact with play objects in other schema-driven ways. Our play spaces include many open-ended materials, and children have the freedom to use them in their own ways.

Sensory Play

Sensory experiences can be soothing or stimulating. Children often have age-specific opportunities to scoop and pour sand or similar materials, dabble with paints, squeeze clay or playdough, crumple and tear paper, and scribble with chalk, crayons, or other tools. Close, responsive supervision is always provided to protect health and safety.

Constructive Play

Children are invited to use blocks and other construction materials for lining and stacking up, balancing, and building. There is at least one area in our play space that is especially suited for playing this way.

Imaginative Play

Simple, realistic props encourage children to think about, talk about, and imitate familiar roles and experiences. Children can find collections of materials that go together to enhance and expand their play. Many of these play objects are homelike and authentic.

Retreating and Relaxing

Being a toddler or two-year-old is hard work! Our play spaces include soft, comfortable places where a child can choose to relax or recharge.

Each packet includes examples of play objects that may be especially appealing to children who are interested in the topic. For example, children who are fascinated with shadows and light may be drawn to toddler-safe flashlights, translucent toys in a sunny window, and unbreakable mirrors.

Invitations to Play

Each topic packet includes ten or more **invitations to play**. These rich, planned play experiences are designed to foster children's learning and development. These are one of the most crucial parts of the curriculum!

Invitations to play follow a six-step cycle.

1. Become familiar with the planned play experience.

Read through the entire activity page, front and back. Then, visualize sharing the experience with your group of children. Make predictions about the things that your children are likely to want to do with materials. This will guide you as you choose materials and arrange an invitation to play.

2. Gather materials.

Materials are listed at the top of the page. These materials are often examples to get you started. There may be times when you substitute other, similar materials based on what you have available.

3. Arrange an invitation to play.

This usually occurs before children join you. Or, you might arrange an afternoon play invitation while children are resting. Your goals are to place materials in an area that is safe and appropriate for play, and arrange them in a way that will spark children's curiosity.

4. Wait, watch, listen.

Rather than showing children what to do with materials, let them discover materials in their own way. The *Play Possibilities* section of each activity page lists a few of the many ways that children might choose to play.



5. Occasionally respond to encourage and extend play.

Children benefit from uninterrupted opportunities to focus on their play, so our goal is not to always be center stage as they use materials. Often, we step back to give children space for independent play and experimentation.

However, there are also times when children want to show us what they are doing or invite us to join them in other ways. At these times, we become partners in learning. We mirror children’s enthusiasm, listen closely to their ideas, and respond with curiosity of our own. We may extend play by offering new words or new resources.

With ET2, the quality of our interactions matters. Educators may find that they are quite busy responding to various children throughout a play experience. Many different children receive several minutes of individualized, high-value interactions, along with opportunities to explore independently.

The *Interactions to Support Learning* section of each activity lists a few of the many ways that an adult might interact with children at play. Each interaction should be unhurried and well-matched to the child’s play interests. It is not expected that an adult will engage in all of the listed interactions during a single play session!

6. Reflect and repeat.

Our observations of children provide insights into their ideas and interests. We can use what we notice about children’s play to fine-tune our next play invitations. For example, we might make small changes to our space, add additional materials to support an emerging interest, and so on.

We know that young children learn through repetition, so play experiences aren’t just “one and done.” Instead, we offer each play experience at least several times. This invites children to deepen their knowledge and skills with each occurrence. We may even circle back to a play experience again several months later, noticing how children’s play changes as they get older.

Invitations to Play

Boxes, Baskets, and Bags

An Even Bigger Box

Let's investigate the biggest box we've ever seen! What play possibilities does a cardboard appliance box hold?

Materials

- A very large cardboard box, such as a box from a washer or dryer.

Safety Spotlight

Many oversized boxes are held together with large staples. Remove these if you can. If you cannot remove staples from your box, cover them with duct tape.

Crowding can be challenging for toddlers. Provide especially close supervision during this experience.

Turn the box so that the opening is on one side. Place it in your indoor or outdoor play space.

Play Possibilities

Watch and listen to notice how children explore the very large box. You may see children investigate and play in some of these ways.

- Climb inside the box.
- Knock, slap, or drum on the box to make interesting sounds.
- Notice how their voice sounds different when they are inside the box.
- Try to move the box by pushing or pulling it.
- Pretend to hide in the box.
- Notice that there is less light in the box. It is dim/dark inside.
- Create a den by bringing pillows and blankets into the box.
- Pretend that the box is a home, dog house, or another familiar place.

Helpful Hints

Families or a colleague may be able to share a box from a recent delivery. Or connect with local retailers that sell and deliver appliances. Alternatively, large, sturdy cardboard play structures can be purchased from many toy shops.

10
Explorers Curriculum for Toddlers and Twos
Arkansas Childhood Services.06/21

front of page

Play Experience Title

This is what you'll list on daily activity plans.

Materials

These are things you'll gather and prepare.

Safety Spotlight

Some experiences include important notes to protect children's health and safety.

Play Possibilities

These are examples of some ways that children *might* play during this experience.

Helpful Hints/Did You Know?

Many pages include tips for a smooth experience or background information for educators.

Interactions to Support Learning

These are examples of ways that an adult *might* respond when children seem interested.

Including Every Explorer

These are strategies to adapt curriculum for children who are younger or older, and/or children with special needs.

Build and Strengthen

These are connections to the Arkansas Child Development and Early Learning Standards (CDELS).

Boxes, Baskets, and Bags

An Even Bigger Box (cont.)

Interactions to Support Learning

Notice how children show that they want to interact with you. Once children invite you to join in the play, follow their lead. Here are some responses that may be a fit.

- Describe what you see children doing with words like *inside*, *outside*, and *next to*.
- Imitate children's actions as they experiment. Experiment together. What sounds can we make?
- Help children clear chairs and other barriers if they want to work together to move the very large box.
- Play a simplified version of hide-and-seek by pretending to search for children who are in the box. (Supervision is still needed.)
- Try shining child-safe flashlights in the box or place a tube of rope lights in the box.
- Provide crayons or chalk for drawing on and in the box or stickers for attaching to the box.
- Follow the child's lead in pretend play games.
- Calmly support children's social development as they interact together in the box.

Including Every Explorer

Some children may feel anxious about crawling into a large box. It is darker than the rest of the room, and it can be noisy inside. Rather than insisting an unwise child, provide safe and supportive ways for them to watch from a distance. Describe what other children are doing and help them find the words to explain preferences to peers. ("Don't knock while I'm in the box. It's too loud.")

This experience offers special opportunities to build and strengthen:

- Social and Emotional Development - SE1.2, SE 2.2
- Cognitive Development - CD1.1, CD2.2, CD2.3, CD3.2
- Physical Development and Health - PH1.1, PH1.3
- Creativity and Aesthetics - CA3.1
- Mathematical Thinking - MT 1.1, MT 3.1, MT4.1

back of page

Explorers Curriculum for Toddlers and Twos
Arkansas Childhood Services.06/21

Daily Routines and Events

Care Routines

Much of our day with toddlers and twos is spent in daily care routines: arrival time, meals, toileting and diapering, and nap. Rather than viewing these as chores that take time away from other activities, we recognize that each daily routine adds value to our day. In fact, when we consider relationship-building, self-help skills, and the sequence of familiar events, we realize that care routines offer rich opportunities to support children's development!

Each ET2 packet includes suggestions of ways to incorporate a topic of learning into our daily care routines. For example, children participating in the *Boxes, Baskets, and Bags* topic may have a keen awareness of containers that are a part of everyday routines. These might include diaper bags, snack boxes, a backpack of outdoor supplies, and more.

Real-Life Events

Toddlers and twos are also eager to explore their world by going on short walks or going for buggy rides. And, there are many fascinating things to be seen by looking out a window or through a playground fence. We can sometimes plan special opportunities for children to observe something that will interest them and deepen their knowledge.

An educator with young toddlers might invite them to wave to dog walkers who pass by the window of their room. An educator with two-year-olds might arrange for them to go outdoors to watch someone refilling bird feeders and birdbaths. Both of these real-life experiences spark conversations and support children's interest in the *Neighborhood Creatures* topic.

Responsive Caregiving

During daily care routines and real-life events, adults notice and respond to children's interests. We become curious alongside children, talking with them about what they see or what is happening. We listen to their questions and engage in back-and-forth conversations, and we might even take photos for children to look at and talk about later.

Seeing the world through a topical lens can become a natural part of each day we share with toddlers and twos. This habit offers many opportunities for children to make connections, learn new words, and build relationships with us and with others who are part of our program community.

Playful Songs, Rhymes and Games

Each ET2 packet includes several topical songs, nursery rhymes, fingerplays, and/or simple games to share with children.

Sharing throughout the day

These simple activities are perfect for sharing informally with just one child or a small group of interested children. This can occur during playtimes as children seem interested. Songs, rhymes, and games can also be used as transition activities with a group of children. For example, one educator might sing songs with children before lunchtime while another educator finishes preparing for the meal.

Face time, not screen time

Most of the songs in the ET2 Curriculum are traditional songs or piggyback songs, meaning that they offer new words to tunes that children may already know. If educators are unfamiliar with the tune of a song, they might use online videos to learn it during their time away from the classroom. Later, they can sing the song with children without using videos or other music players. The responsive human connection from singing songs with a favorite person is far more valuable for children than watching musical cartoons!

Welcoming children's participation

Many ET2 songs and rhymes include active movement components. Children are encouraged to clap, stomp, hop, and move their bodies in other ways. Moving to music is enjoyable for many children, and it helps children develop a sense of rhythm. Educators with very young children sometimes notice that children watch intently but don't join in. They're listening and thinking about what is going on.

Don't stop just because children are quiet! Keep singing or rhyming, and do it again soon. If you have a teaching partner, encourage her to join in with you. As you repeat the experience over time, children will begin to participate more and more. Soon, you may even hear them singing songs and chanting rhymes to themselves as they play.

What about our old favorites?

Not every song, rhyme, and game we share with children has to be topical. You are welcome to share any song or rhyme that you and your children enjoy, any time. You may also find that children request a topical song or rhyme months later, long after you've moved on to a new topic.

Picture Books

Each ET2 packet includes a list of at least a dozen children's books to support the topic. Most books on the list are available in board book format, making them well suited for active groups. It is not expected that programs will purchase each entire book list. Instead, the list may provide guidance and inspiration as educators select books from their storage area and/or pick a few books to purchase.

Offering a variety of books

The quality of books matters, even for the youngest readers. The books that are recommended in the ET2 curriculum offer benefits such as these.

- They include visually appealing illustrations that capture a child's interest. High-quality pictures help set the tone and bring a story to life.
- Or, they include large, clear photos of real people, animals, and things. Actual photos are ideal in factual books for children of all ages.
- Some ET2 books tell simple, relatable stories with a clear conflict and resolution. Older toddlers and twos can make predictions and recall the sequence of the story.
- Some ET2 books invite children to participate by playing with words or joining in rhyming or predictable text.

Sharing books with children

Sharing a book one-on-one with an interested child is often the most appropriate and enjoyable literacy experience for toddlers and twos. When we interact with individuals or very small groups of children, they have better opportunities to see, participate with, and talk about books.

Especially with younger toddlers, we rarely read a book cover to cover. Children often enjoy pointing to and talking about things they see on the page. They may want to help turn the pages, and they may want to hear a favorite part several times. Their interest in a book may last just a few moments before they are ready to move on to something else.

Some older toddlers and two-year-olds may also enjoy a brief, playful group storytime. As with all activities with children this age, they are invited but not required to join. Children who are not interested in a story are always allowed to get up and go play. This helps all children develop positive feelings about storytimes and being read to.

Concluding a Topic

At the end of each ET2 packet, you'll find a few notes about concluding a topic with toddlers and twos. A topic doesn't stop because of an arbitrary date on the calendar. Instead, it comes to an end gradually when children's interest begins to wane and as a new topic begins to capture their attention. The end of a topic is a time to reflect on our documentation of children's learning and to talk with our professional thinking partners about where children seem to want to go next.



Finding Out More About ET2 Curriculum

Explorers Curricula are developed and supported by Arkansas State University Childhood Services. Curriculum packets can be found under the resources tab at www.ASUChildhoodServices.org.

To find out more about professional development opportunities related to *Explorers Curriculum for Toddlers and Twos*, contact Marcy White, MWhite@AState.edu.

Explorers Curriculum for Toddlers and Twos Summary

Ten main ideas from this Getting Started guide are summarized below.

1. *Explorers Curriculum for Toddlers and Twos* (ET2) supports all domains of child growth and development, including physical, cognitive, communicative, social, and emotional development
2. ET2 focuses on topics that children are curious about and can have firsthand experiences with in real life. A resource packet is provided for each topic.
3. ET2 is an unhurried and flexible curriculum that invites educators to choose topics that children are most interested in and work through them at their own pace.
4. Ample opportunities to play (in a thoughtfully arranged and equipped play) space occur every day.
5. Planned learning experiences are invitations to investigate and play. Adults arrange materials to spark children's curiosity and then watch, wait, and listen to see what children do.
6. Well-timed, well-matched educator responses support and extend children's learning. The focus is on the quality of adult-child interactions, not just the quantity of interactions.
7. Repetition is vital to the ET2 curriculum, so each book, song, and learning experience is almost always shared several times, not just once.
8. Children's choices are respected in the ET2 classroom. Many experiences occur with individual children. Any whole group activities are optional, and children are free to participate or do other things.
9. ET2 activities can be modified to meet the needs of younger or older toddlers and younger and older two-year-olds. Strategies are also provided to support children with special needs.
10. Daily care routines are recognized as ideal times to build relationships and foster development. They aren't just events that occur between learning times; they **are** essential learning times!