1

A New Way to Design Themes and Activities for Young Children

Wisdom is the daughter of experience.

—Leonardo da Vinci

This book provides activities that you will want to try out in your classroom. It also presents a new way to design themes and activities, one that will guarantee hands-on experiential learning opportunities for young children.

Whether you are reviewing work by Froebel, Piaget, Vygotsky, or the Constructivists, psychologists and educators agree that a developmentally appropriate curriculum for young children needs to emphasize the children's interactions with their immediate environment. This view also is supported by recent neuroscience and brain-based research, which emphasizes that children need hands-on experiential learning opportunities.

The National Association for the Education of Young Children's (NAEYC's) position statement on developmentally appropriate practices notes that "children are active learners, drawing on direct physical and social experience" and that developmentally appropriate practices must "include children's exposure to physical knowledge, learned through firsthand experience of using objects." The High/Scope Educational Research Foundation's active participatory learning curriculum is based on the principle that "children and adults learn best through hands-on experiences with people, materials, events, and ideas," and The Creative Curriculum is grounded in child development theory and research that stresses the importance of hands-on learning.

Young children learn through their five senses, so teachers should provide experiences that allow children to touch, see, smell, taste, and hear. Developmentally appropriate lesson plans reflect the fact that children learn through play and activity. Children need hands-on experiences that enable them to observe and manipulate objects and materials. When designing lesson plans, teachers should focus on what the children will be doing, and on what objects and materials they can provide for the children to handle and observe.

Trying to select themes and develop activities that are developmentally appropriate can be a challenge. One popular approach is for teachers to first decide on a theme, and then gather materials and plan activities to support that theme. I suggest you try a new way to select some of your themes, one that will help you provide additional hands-on learning experiences for young children. Instead of choosing a general theme and then developing activities to support that theme, first think about an object or material that the children can observe, handle, and interact with. Then, develop activities using that object or material. This new approach requires a paradigm shift; it is hands-on learning taken to the extreme.

This book demonstrates how to choose objects and materials and then build developmentally appropriate themes and activities that by their very nature will guarantee hands-on learning experiences. This new approach of creating tactile (object- or material-based) themes should be used to enrich and expand your current program, not replace it. Tactile themes can be used to supplement any curriculum. Whether you use High/Scope, The Creative Curriculum, an emergent curriculum, or incorporate NAEYC developmentally appropriate practices into your own curriculum, this new way of selecting themes and developing activities by focusing on objects and materials will help you provide hands-on learning experiences.

To help you explain tactile themes to parents and families, I have included a sample letter to them in the appendix. This letter discusses the importance of hands-on learning and the use of tactile themes. Feel free to modify the letter to suit your particular situation.

The tactile themes and activities in this book are just a sample of what you can do. My purpose is to inspire by example and to help you become comfortable with the approach of selecting objects and materials first and then building themes and activities around them. Using this new approach, I am certain that when you look around your classroom, home, and neighborhood you will be able to find many objects and materials that you can use to design developmentally appropriate themes to enrich and expand your program, and guarantee hands-on learning experiences for the children in your care.

Once you are familiar with the tactile themes and activities in this book, you should be ready to use this new approach of first choosing objects and

materials and then building themes and activities around them. To help you get started I have included

suggestions for developing hands-on activities in literacy, mathematics, science, social studies, physical development, and creativity; and

activities for the theme boxes. For these activities, I have indicated some of the specific learning that can occur with each activity.

Before deciding to use an object or material, think about the following:

1. Safety. Is the object or material age appropriate for the children to handle and work with? Will the object or material break or tear easily, or will activities using the object or material require close adult supervision?

2. Size. Is the object or material too large or too small for the children to manage on their own?

3. Appeal. Will the children readily work with the object or material?

4. Availability. Can you provide generous amounts of the object or material for the children to interact with?

5. Attitude. Most important of all is your attitude. Will you convey a positive attitude toward the children as they handle and interact with the object or material?

When you are developing lesson plans, think creatively. Themes can be merged or contrasted, and there is no rule concerning appropriate time limits when it comes to doing a theme. Unfortunately, some teachers think about lesson plans in terms of a five-day block of time: Monday through Friday. Children need time to reflect and make comparisons. There is no reason why the children cannot study a subject for two weeks or two months. Be flexible. What should determine the time spent on a theme is the children's interest level. Observe the children carefully. Their questions, responses, and actions should help guide you to new themes and activities.

You may find it easier to develop activities for some objects or materials than for others. If you are unable to develop several hands-on activities for a theme, it is a warning sign that the theme may not be developmentally appropriate for the children in your care. Do not be discouraged if your initial attempts do not work out as well as you had hoped. Give yourself time to adjust to this new approach to selecting themes and developing activities.

Remember that the tactile themes in this book and the additional themes that you choose to develop using this new approach should be used to enrich your current program, not replace it. When you are ready to develop your own tactile themes and activities, use the following overview as a guide, keeping in mind that learning cannot be compartmentalized.

Literacy is more than learning the ABCs. It involves all aspects of language. Reading is about the meaning of words. To comprehend the written word children must have many experiences so they can relate to the ideas being presented in a book. Literacy activities include but are not limited to

- opportunities to talk (express ideas) and listen,
- vocabulary development,
- visual discrimination,
- letter recognition—upper and lowercase,
- phonological awareness,
- reading experiences,
- writing experiences, and
- dramatic play.

Mathematics is not just about numbers. Mathematical activities should involve logical thinking and include but not be limited to

- mathematical vocabulary,
- rote counting,
- one-to-one correspondence,
- number recognition,
- fractions,
- seriating and ordering,
- estimating,
- measuring,
- weighing,
- pattern recognition,
- creating and reading graphs,
- geometric figures and shapes, and
- spatial relationships.

Science for the young child is about using the five senses, observing, and wondering. Set up experiments with the children's help and invite the children to speculate about what might happen. Do not concern yourself if some experiments do not work out as planned. It is the process and not the outcome that is important. Scientific activities include but are not limited to

- scientific vocabulary,
- using the five senses,
- speculating and wondering,
- experimenting,
- developing observation skills,
- making comparisons,
- studying cause and effect,
- sequencing,

- using scientific equipment,
- classifying (using both child- and adult-suggested criteria), and
- observing and caring for people, plants, and animals.

Social studies for the young child begins with developing a positive self image. When children feel good about themselves, it is easier for them to relate positively to others and function as an individual that is part of a community. We need to provide experiences that help children learn to value themselves, their families, and other individuals, including those from different cultural, ethnic, racial, and religious backgrounds. We also need to provide opportunities to avoid stereotyping and sexism by emphasizing the sameness of different peoples and their positive contributions to the community. Social studies helps children understand and develop a connection to the larger community that includes their school and neighborhood. Social studies activities include but are not limited to

- learning about yourself and your family,
- learning about other children and their families,
- learning about different cultures,
- valuing different peoples and their customs,
- learning to avoid sexism and stereotyping,
- learning how to cooperate with others,
- dramatic play,
- developing an understanding and connection to the community,
- trips and demonstrations,
- developing a responsible attitude toward the environment, and
- developing a sense of social and community responsibility.

Physical development is every bit as important as intellectual development. Physical development activities include but are not limited to

- gross motor control,
- fine motor control,
- eye-hand coordination,
- eye-foot coordination,
- spatial awareness,
- temporal awareness,
- sensory awareness,
- body awareness, and
- balance skills.

Creativity involves more than doing music and art activities. It is a way of approaching the world. We need to plan activities that will encourage divergent

(Continued)

(Continued)

thinking, adaptability, and flexibility of thought in young children. Activities to foster creativity should be a part of all aspects of the curriculum and include but not be limited to

- stimulating thoughts and ideas,
- fostering an attitude of acceptance toward trying new ideas,
- encouraging the children to think of and try multiple ways to solve a problem,
- using materials in new and different ways,
- open-ended art experiences,
- movement,
- music, and
- dramatic play.