
BACK TO BASICS

Learning centers

Early childhood classrooms are usually divided into areas called *learning* or *interest centers*. These centers are designed to maximize opportunities for children to choose activities that support learning goals for children's cognitive, language, social, emotional, and physical development. Centers provide rich opportunities to explore materials and engage in experiences that help children learn about themselves, their friends, and their world.

Typical early care and education classrooms have learning centers devoted to

- art and creative expression,
- block construction,
- dramatic play,
- science, cooking, and discovery,
- books, writing, and other literacy activities,
- manipulatives and spatial relationships,
- music,
- numeracy activities, and
- movement, balance, agility, and physical strength.

The most engaging centers reflect the children's interests. They give teachers opportunities to guide, support, and challenge young learners according to learning goals for individual children and children in groups. Effective centers minimize guidance and discipline issues because children are engaged and focused on developmentally appropriate materials and scenarios.

Suggested guidelines

Use the following guidelines for planning learning centers that support children's development.

- Offer welcoming, attractive, and child-sized spaces and furnishings that are developmentally sound, sturdy, safe, and easy to clean.
- Arrange centers so you can supervise children by sight and sound.
- Group noisy centers like construction, dramatic play, and music together and away from quieter centers like manipulatives, art, and science.

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- Arrange furniture and equipment to create paths that encourage easy access to different centers.
 - Define each center's space. Use shelving, rugs, or floor tape to help children maintain order for themselves.
 - Position the art center near a water supply to make cleanup easier.
 - Arrange centers and materials to accommodate children with disabilities and developmental delays. A child who uses leg braces, for example, should have the same ease in accessing centers as children who move more fluently.
 - Display center materials in a neat and inviting manner—within children's reach. Order encourages children to work independently and return materials to their proper places for the next users.
 - Rotate materials in each center to sustain children's interest and curiosity. Introduce new materials and give children guidance on ways the materials can be used.
 - Promptly remove broken or otherwise dangerous materials.
 - Create an open area for large-group activities like dancing, parachute play, and other large-muscle play.
 - Actively decide whether to limit the number of children playing in a center and how to communicate your decision. Some teachers feel that limiting the number of children impedes developing friendships and social decision-making. Others appreciate the supervisory control provided by limiting numbers. If you choose to limit the number of children in centers, develop a system that's easy for children to understand, remember, and use.
 - Set up learning centers outdoors. With planning, you can bring any center to the playground—the outdoor classroom.
 - Help parents understand the classroom environment. Take every opportunity to explain how a center promotes children's learning through play. ■