
BACK TO BASICS

Learning Centers

Early childhood classrooms are typically divided into areas called **learning** or **interest centers**. These areas offer children activity choices—some teacher-planned and others child-selected—that support language, cognitive, social, emotional, and physical development. The best centers provide rich opportunities to explore materials and engage in experiences that inform children about themselves, their friends, and their world.

Most classrooms have established learning centers devoted to

- art and creative expression
- block construction
- dramatic play
- science and discovery
- books, writing, and other literacy development
- manipulatives and numeracy development
- music and movement

Ideally, centers devoted to woodworking, water and sand play, and cooking are routinely (if not regularly) offered for the unique learning opportunities they provide.

The most engaging centers reflect children's interests and are modified to reflect children's developing skills. They give teachers opportunities to guide, support, and challenge young learners. Effective centers also minimize guidance and discipline issues because children are engaged and focused.

Use the following guidelines for planning learning centers.

- Offer welcoming, attractive, child-size spaces and furnishings that are easy to clean.
- Arrange furniture and equipment to create paths that encourage easy access to the centers.
- Group noisy centers like blocks, dramatic play and housekeeping, and music together and away from quieter centers like the library and manipulatives.



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- Define each center's space. Use shelving, rugs, or floor tape to avoid accidental and confusing mixtures of materials and supplies.
 - Position the art center near a water supply to make cleanup easier.
 - Arrange centers so you can supervise children by sight and sound.
 - Arrange centers and materials to accommodate children with disabilities and developmental delays. A child who uses leg braces, for example, may need wider paths to move from one center to another independently. Make sure access is as easy for this child as it is for any other child in the group.
 - 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.
 - Change the materials in each center often. Rotate props to keep the center interesting and engaging.
 - Promptly remove broken or otherwise dangerous materials. Show children new materials and give guidance on ways the materials can be used.
 - 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 socialization. Others appreciate the supervisory control limited numbers provide. Obviously, specific activities (like making smoothies for snack) may require special directions. When you limit the number of children in a center, develop a system that is easy for children to understand, remember, and use.
 - Set up learning centers outdoors. With planning, you can bring any center to the playground.
 - Help parents understand the classroom environment. Take every opportunity to explain how a center promotes children's learning through play. ■