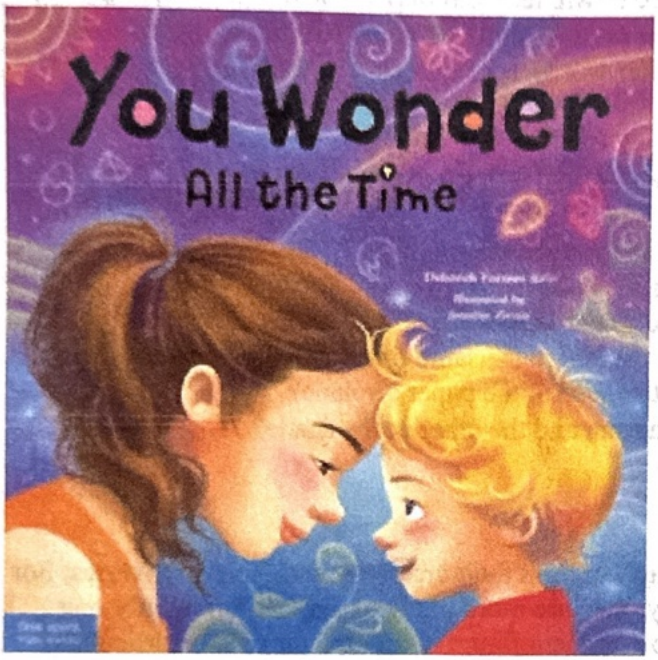
A Collection of Articles

5 Ways to Nurture Children's Curiosity

Adapted from *You Wonder All the Time* by Deborah Farmer Kris



Children's constant stream of *Why?*, *Can I?*, and *What if?* questions can sometimes test the patience of parents and caregivers. But our kids are wired to explore, label, and make sense of their world. And that's a good thing!

Wondering is a form of curiosity. When we ask questions, we are using our observation and reasoning skills. When children are curious, they are not only motivated to learn, but they also learn more effectively. As psychologist Craig Anderson told me, the more wonder and awe children feel, the "more curiosity they express and the better they perform in school."

Here are five ways you can nurture children's wonder and curiosity.

1. Enjoy Nature Together

Spending time in nature is one of the best ways to elicit wonder in children. But you don't need to head to the Grand Canyon or see the Northern Lights to experience the magic of the natural world. Go for a walk, letting children set the pace as they stop to dig in the dirt, jump in leaves, or search for treasures. Explore a local farm, park, or Audubon center. Go to an open field to observe the night sky. Turn over stones to see what creatures live beneath. Identify the birds, plants, and insects that live in your neighborhood. Being in nature not only stimulates children's brains, it supports their emotional well-being too.

2. Explore Cause and Effect

One of my favorite questions children ask is often an unspoken one: *What will happen if . . . ?* This is a great scientific question that helps kids learn about cause and effect.

Of course, this question can also be the cause of mess and stress as children wonder, *What will happen if I drop this egg on the floor?* or, *What will happen if I flush my toothbrush down the toilet?* When necessary, try redirecting their experiments without squelching their curiosity. If they want to know what happens when they turn the juice carton upside down, let them play outside with cups and a jug of water. If they want to know what it's like to draw on walls, mix up some bathtub paint (you can find a recipe online) and set them loose in the tub. In other words, try saying, "You can't do that, but you can do this!"

You can also ask *What if?* to set up simple, cause-and-effect science experiments such as these:

- What will happen if we drop food coloring in the pancake mix?
- What will happen if we sprinkle salt on this ice cube?
- What will happen if we build the sandcastle closer to the waves?
- What will happen if we drop the acorn and the leaf at the same time, and from the same height?
- What will happen if we add a paperclip to the nose of the paper airplane?
- What will happen if we plant one seed in the sun and the other in the shade?

3. Let Them Figure It Out

Giving children explicit instructions for how to play can limit their creativity and their discoveries. For example, when you show children how to use a toy, they are more likely to play with it in only one way: the way they were taught. However, when you let them figure it out on their own—particularly with open-ended toys such as blocks—they get curious and are more likely to find new and creative ways to play. Some of the most *wonder*-ful toys come from the recycle bin: think paper towel tubes and cardboard boxes.

4. Listen and Find Answers Together

One way to support children's wonder is to simply listen to their questions. It feels good when people pay attention. And when we honor children's questions, we validate their curiosity and invite them to keep exploring.

When children pose a question we can't answer, here's a powerful response: "That's a great question! Let's find out." Experiment together. Look up the answer in a book or online. Call a friend or family member who is an expert. All these responses show children that their questions are valued, demonstrate tools they can use to find answers, and encourage them to keep questioning and wondering as they learn and grow.

5. Model Wonder

Children take their cues from us. When we get excited about learning something new, experimenting with a new recipe, or investigating the nest we spot in a tree, we remind them that wonder is a lifelong pursuit.

Take children to the library and pick out books about diverse topics that spark your interest and theirs. Even if you don't read the books before you return them, flipping through pages filled with pictures of dinosaurs, ocean life, pyramids, or cute baby animals can expand children's knowledge and prompt new questions.

You can also inspire children's curiosity by wondering out loud yourself: *The clouds are getting darker! I wonder if rain is coming? I wonder what bird is making that noise? I wonder why the moon looks so big tonight?*

As Dr. Dacher Keltner, director of the Greater Good Science Center, shared with me: "When I think back on my own parenting experiences, some of the best moments are moments of awe. How do you find awe? You plan unstructured time. You wander. You take a walk with no aim. You slow things down. How do you find awe? You allow for mystery and open questions."

In other words, life is better when we wonder . . . all the time.

All Creatures Grand and Humble

Cultivating Empathy for Wildlife in Preschoolers

by Terra Herrmann

It started with a scream on the playground. "Ahhh! A bug!" I went over to the girl who had found a small green beetle by the playhouse slide. She was wailing and hopping from foot to foot, yet she had not run away from the crawley critter.

"Oh wow," I said. "Did you find a beetle? Can I see? I love to look at beetles!"

I scooched in close and made a show of examining the beetle. "Wow! Look at her little antennae! It is so cute how they move around like that to help her feel the world! I wonder if she would like to feel this leaf?"

By now, the girl had quieted down and was watching my every move with interest. I coaxed the beetle onto a leaf and brought it to eye level. "Hi there, little beetle friend! Thank you for choosing to walk onto my leaf!"

"She is so cute! I love beetles," the girl cooed.

"Where do you think she lives?" I asked the girl.

"Umm, plants?" We brought the beetle over to the fence and let her walk onto some leaves. Together, the girl and I went around to the other children on the playground and asked if they wanted to come and see our discovery before she crawled away. From screaming in fear to sharing her excitement with her friends in under five minutes—that is the difference a teacher can make.

Terra Herrmann is a biologist-turned-preschool teacher in Washington state. She is passionate about science education, environmental issues, and the importance of empathy inside the classroom and out. She completed this project as a part of her graduate work with Project Dragonfly at Miami University, Ohio, in conjunction with Woodland Park Zoo.

With a growing emphasis on empathy in education, it can be tempting for teachers to focus on charismatic species, those living things that are beautiful, impressive, endangered, cute, dangerous or rare [illegible]. But if environmental scientists have learned one thing about this world, it is that all species are important to their ecosystems, and sometimes the ones that need the most care and attention are, well, not all that exciting. We also have a complicated relationship with species that are charismatic, but come with the burden of negative perceptions. A prime example of this type of species are sharks, which fit the bill for charisma, but are also perceived as scary or dangerous. Snakes and bees (and sometimes beetles!) also fit this profile, although they lack some of the wow factor that make sharks so iconic.

When we teach children to respect and value wildlife, we are setting them up for a future in which they are better prepared to engage with important issues that face the world they live in. Some species make a natural entry point for young children's interest, but it is important to go beyond these easy targets!

Teach Respect, Not Fear

Children learn how to behave and how to approach situations by watching adults, especially teachers. They may be cautious about new experiences, like interacting with a beetle, but they are also eager to explore and learn about their environment when they feel safe. The important distinction is between respect and fear—the difference between "I do not want to touch the spider because it could bite me," and "I do not want to learn about spiders because they scare me."

Many charismatic species that are perceived as "scary" appear very different from humans. When we see a creature like a snake with no limbs, or a centipede with far more limbs than

we expect, the creature seems alien, and it is more difficult to experience empathy without additional help from teachers. When teaching about animals that are commonly associated with negative traits:

- **Accept your own biases.** There is no shame in disliking an animal, as long as you can recognize that emotion and keep it separate from your teaching. If you have a fear or bias against an animal, tell the kids how you feel, but also tell them about someone who does not share your feelings. This is a great opportunity to model acceptance of diversity in opinions, and let the kids form their own opinions.
- **Make it personal.** When we see an animal as an individual rather than a generic representation of its species, we strengthen emotional connections and the desire to act as a steward for animals [illegible]. Focus on one individual and how they experience the world. Zoos and aquaria often name individual animals in their care and share media updates and educational materials that are a great resource for emphasizing the positive personalities of their "scary" animals. This kind of ambassador animal can build the bridge that leads to empathy.
- **Teach the animal's point of view.** Tell the story of what the animal likes to do when it is minding its own business in the wild. If your geographical region is home to a dangerous species, teach the proper way to behave to stay safe, but never villainize the animal. Instead, explain in accessible terms why the animal might behave in a dangerous way. For example, "A rattlesnake feels scared or angry when people get close. He does not have words to tell you how he feels so he uses his rattle to tell you to go away. If you do not listen he might bite."

Charisma Counts

Iconic and rare critters, like giant pandas or polar bears, are called "flagship species," because they are easy-to-understand focus points for conservation efforts in their region. In media and toy representations, they are often anthropomorphized, highlighting or imposing human-like characteristics onto the animal to make them more appealing and easier to identify with. Suggesting that the child take the point of view of an animal can be a valuable tool for sparking an initial connection to an animal, but representing animals as living human-like lives can actually hinder future learning about real animals [illegible]. To help children create real and lasting empathy for the natural world using charismatic species:

- **Teach the traits and behaviors of real animals.** "Walk like an animal" activities and matching animal tracks to actual pictures of animals are a few ways to foster a connection to the real animal. Seek out books and activities that tell a compelling story of animals behaving naturally. Books like "Catastrophe by the Sea" by Brenda Peterson and "Inky's Amazing Escape" by Sy Montgomery explain the animals' motivations in easy to understand terms, while retaining as many of their natural characteristics as possible.
- **Show animals in their natural habitats.** To encourage a love of nature that extends beyond a child's love of their favorite stuffed animal or cartoon character, do not just focus on the animal itself, but its relationship to the natural world as a whole. When displaying pictures of animals, also include their habitat in the image, in order to solidify the understanding that animals live differently than people and belong in their natural environments. Avoid representations of animals wearing clothes or performing human activities.
- **Know the animals in your room.** Make sure your children have access to plenty of representations of animals, in the form of toys, books, and room decorations, and bring them into your day-to-day activities. You do not have to be an explicitly nature-based classroom to incorporate plants and animals! Be prepared with a baseline level of knowledge about each species you have represented in your room and work that information into your activities.

There is No Such Thing as a Boring Species

Life is all around us, but as adults we often forget about the less flashy plants and animals that are important background performers in the web of life. It is easy to find representations of pandas, lions and tigers as stuffed animals or in storybooks, even though you may rarely encounter them in your daily life. Meanwhile, the unsung heroes of our ecosystems—seagrasses and sponges, mosses and worms—rarely make it into the spotlight. No matter where you live, you are surrounded by overlooked species that help to support human and animal life, and they deserve their time to shine!

Often, these plants and animals may not even register as alive to a young child until they are taught that living things do not need to have a face to have feelings. Teaching this

lesson strengthens empathy, as the children learn that every being has a different experience in the world from their own, and all deserve love and respect. Plants and invertebrates provide a great opportunity for hands-on experiences, either by bringing them into the classroom or by going out into your local environment to explore together.

- **Find your own connection before you teach.** For young children, the whole world is new and interesting. Why would you ever cut off an avenue for exploration by telling them a living thing is not worth their time? Start with open ended questions and let the kids tell you why the species is interesting to them. Is there a plant or animal that you think is "boring"? Challenge yourself to learn five new facts about it that spark your own interest, then bring that content into your classroom.

The best way to get to know a living thing is by meeting them in person. Incorporate plants and animals into your lessons on senses.

- **Make local connections.** Important but overlooked species are everywhere, so take advantage of your own local flora and fauna. In addition to easier access to these living things, you can also build them into the children's sense of place for where they live. When we feel a personal connection to the place we live, we are more invested in caring for it, and when we care for our environment we strengthen our connection to it. Starting out with a strong foundation of empathy for the local environment is the key first step in this cycle (Pisters, Vihinen, & Figueiredo, 2020).

- **Get hands-on.** The best way to get to know a living thing is by meeting them in person. Incorporate plants and animals into your lessons on senses: how does a sage leaf look, feel, and smell? Does it make a noise? How do the seeds sound when you shake them in their packet? Grow an approved edible plant and work it into a class meal to show how plants are tied in to our own lives.

As early educators, we shape the way children perceive the world, and sometimes we aren't even aware of when and how we are doing so. The language we use and the faces we make when we discuss plants and animals make an impression that can set the groundwork for a lifetime. It is important to remember that our own fears, biases, and interests are not the only way of seeing the world, and sometimes can even have a negative impact. When we communicate to children about nature, we need to think critically beyond how we were raised and consider how to best equip them for the world that they are growing into.

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Taken from: Car and Truck Play from Young Children Summer 2022

Gender Differences in Pretend Play

While we could not find research to show children's preferences by gender for truck and car play, our experiences teaching young children suggested that boys more frequently engage in this play than girls. But the story does not end there. A number of factors contribute to who pursues play with cars, trucks, and other vehicles. One factor relates to the teacher and child relationship. The quality of these relationships contributes to preschool children's learning and development, including in academic areas (Williford et al. 2013; Kim et al. 2019). Yet teachers are more likely to describe their relationships with children as closer with girls than with boys (Booren, Downer, & Vitiello 2012). They are also likely to spend more time in the company of girls than boys (Kendrick et al. 2012). (The studies did not describe teachers' genders, so findings might be different with male teachers.) Our inquiry team wondered if we were shortchanging boys in teacher-child relationships, including in their play choices and interests and learning from play.

In addition, societal views about play and about gender are another factor that limits teacher involvement and shapes assumptions about play. Dramatic play for girls often concerns daily

chores or tasks, involving events such as food preparation or baby care, behaviors female teachers may be more familiar with. Boy play, by contrast, often involves action, "danger," and commanding language (Sheldon & Engstrom 2005; Weisberg et al. 2015). These findings align with those from other studies showing differences in play themes, activity levels, and social patterns for girls and boys over time (Whitebread 2018; Peyre et al. 2019). We wondered whether our absence from truck and car play discouraged girls from joining or whether it affected the quantity and quality of verbal feedback that children—predominantly boys—received in this area compared to areas where we spent more time.

Freddie rushes to the block area and lines up eight cars. He waits for Dakota. When Dakota arrives, Freddie "drives" each car out slowly, making "vroom" and "beep" sounds. He selects one for Dakota, but only one of the many cars in his possession. Frowning, Dakota drives his car around the rug, making a variety of car sounds.

Ms. Susan, the pre-K teacher being observed, notices their play and talks to the boys about sharing and taking turns. She divides the eight cars evenly between them. Shortly thereafter, Freddie leaves the block area.

When the same play scenario repeats over several days, Ms. Susan asks the boys why Freddie needs so many cars. Freddie replies, "You have to have a parts car." In Freddie's and Dakota's rural community, family members' livelihoods may depend on trucks and cars. When they break down, having access to replacement parts is crucial.

Ms. Susan is surprised by the logic and clarity behind Freddie's answer, and it causes her to question some of her assumptions about the meaning and value of the boys' play.

The girl players invited a level of verbal interaction and drew on scripts not always apparent in the same-gender boy play we observed.

"Can I play?" Natalie asks a group of three boys. "You sure can," Eban replies. Natalie puts a red car on the loader's bucket and transfers it to the yellow dump truck. She then piles up a red car, green jeep, blue car, and yellow four-wheeler in the yellow dump truck.

"My cars are driving to Florida," she says. "They are going to meet their moms and dads. Come on, they are going to the beach. They are going to swim and build sandcastles." The boys follow, and together, they line up the cars on the edge of the rug, as if they are at the beach on the sand, looking out over the ocean.

Teachers' Attitudes Toward Play

Some teachers' attitudes and beliefs about play may present obstacles to children's progress in play (Logue & Harvey 2009; Logue & Detour 2011). Other teachers may be ambivalent about certain kinds of play, such as superhero play, and are hesitant to become involved because they

do not want to be perceived as condoning play fighting or because they believe playing about "negative" themes may promote that behavior (Coplan et al. 2015). Many teachers feel pressured by the academic demands in their pre-K classrooms, guiding play toward academic outcomes by structuring themes and props rather than supporting child-initiated and open-ended play (Logue & Harvey 2009).

As we learned more, we acknowledged that while we frequently joined housekeeping play, we spent very little time in truck and car play. We wondered if, in fact, our own lack of knowledge and experience with this theme influenced what we did and did not see in play and limited the ways we extended and enriched play opportunities.

We wondered if we were undervaluing some play and underestimating the social competence of some children based on verbal ability or skills—for example, boys during truck and car play.

Teachers' Observations About Play.

Play Themes Connected to Children's Contexts

From our observations, the themes represented in truck and car play of (mostly) boys from small, rural communities often focused on a combination of a day-in-the-ordinary rural life and risk and adventure. Commonly observed play themes involved work (transport, construction, car repair, rescue) and racing, punctuated with loud sound effects and urgent and commanding language ("Hurry up! The dump truck is way ahead!").

We also observed that the communication styles used while children engaged in these play teams contrasted with the conversations and verbal negotiations we typically saw in the housekeeping area (for example, "Emergency! Fire over there!" versus "How about you be a mommy, and we take our babies for a walk?").

Implications for the Classroom

Teacher reflection and continuous improvement are basic tenets of developmentally appropriate and equitable practice (NAEYC 2019, 2020). As we became aware of the funds of knowledge many of the children shared from their lived experiences—knowledge that we did not have—we could see that many of our cultural and gender-based assumptions limited both their learning opportunities and our own.

When observing less-verbal play, for instance, we noted deficits when we could have looked for strengths: Rather than seeing truck and car play as complex in its own way, we judged it to be less complex than the more verbal play in the housekeeping area. We saw where, in our eagerness to promote oral language or to keep the classroom quiet and orderly, we had missed rich nonverbal communication among children and generous displays of social reciprocity and warm welcomes to all players. We had privileged expressive language over receptive language and over children's shared meaning. In doing so, we had missed opportunities to assess learning because we did not acknowledge truck and car play as an effective teaching and learning context. We also intervened in ways that actually interfered with the stories children wanted to tell. With

these and other lessons in mind, we offer some considerations about teachers' roles in play in "Observing, Joining, and Extending Play: The Teacher's Role" below. We also provide suggestions for eliciting and supporting deeper language and thinking during car and truck play in "Suggestions for Extending Truck and Car Play" below.

Closing Thoughts

Exploring truck and car play through a systematic inquiry process challenged assumptions we did not know we had. We knew such play was important to children, but we recognized that none of us spent much time in that center. We did not expect to have trouble entering the play, but we did. We assumed our attempts to guide the play would be welcome, but they often were not. We acknowledged that we were more comfortable engaging in play that reflected our own lived experiences. We questioned whether we had been disadvantaging children's lived experiences by not paying close attention, not sharing in their enthusiasm, or not learning about their vocabulary and content knowledge. We wondered about how the degree to which we jump

into guiding play before understanding its meaning and value affected our relationships with children and the benefits they gained from our teacher intervention.

Learning to differentiate the meanings of the "beeps and vrooms" vehicles and to recognize the depth of the play have made us more responsive teachers and have allowed us to honor the diverse experiences of the children in our care. Fundamentally, this is essential for advancing equitable teaching and dismantling our biases about children's capabilities so that as teachers, we can celebrate and promote inclusive learning for all children.

Suggestions for Extending Truck and Car Play

It was clear that we needed to adapt our roles in children's play to connect with and incorporate children's interests, prior experiences, questions, and needs. Given this lesson, we offer some practical suggestions for building upon truck and car play in ways that elicit and support children's deeper language and thinking skills. They helped us to appreciate the rich stories from children and to enrich our curriculum.

- Learn truck and car vocabulary and use it to help children make higher-order cognitive connections. Instead of just labeling cars or car parts, look for cause-and-effect connections and ways to elaborate on simple scripts: "Oh, no! I think this axle might be broken. What do I do now?"
- Experiment with ways to gain acceptance into play that teachers have not traditionally joined. Take your cues from the children. Ask children for advice or expertise when you need it.
- Elicit children's content expertise to create classroom manuals or repair checklists to use in dramatic play. If a child has a family member with specialized knowledge, invite them into the classroom to talk about their trucks or to bring their vehicles for an in-house

field trip. Family or community members might be able to bring a fire truck, rescue vehicle, or even food truck to school for children to see and explore.

- Add a tool-making station to the truck and car area, where children can make tools for auto repair.
- Encourage girls to join truck and car play. Include symbolic props that extend storytelling play beyond the immediate action of driving or repairing. An ice cream truck with money, maps, vacation props, and so on could extend play possibilities. Recognize that teachers' active engagement in an area may also attract girls to that area.
- Add picture books to truck and car areas (especially with corresponding trucks and cars) to extend concept development and vocabulary. Suggestions include *T Is for Turbo*, by Michael J. Myers and illustrated by Richard A. Wright; *Trucks and Diggers: Let's Get Driving!*, by DK; and *Cars and Trucks and Things that Go*, by Richard Scarry.
- Use digital tools, like video and audio recorders, cameras, and apps—most are available on cell phones and tablets—to document children's play, inspire conversation, and deepen understanding. Some children are completely absorbed and talk little during play. But they often will talk about the play later, when reflecting on photos or videos.
- Include documentation of the skills and knowledge embedded in truck and car play as part of formative assessments demonstrating children's competence.
- Examine and rethink the classroom guidelines about where truck and car play can occur and how much time is allocated for it. Remember that research on dramatic play suggests that at least 20 minutes of uninterrupted time is necessary for children to develop play scripts with enough complexity to support deeper thinking.
- If your participation in play is initially rebuffed, do not give up. Truck and car play is not an area where children may be accustomed to teachers' involvement. Teachers first may need to prove they are interested and respectful of the play.
- Finally, make time to talk with your fellow teachers about what you see, what it might mean, and how to build these understandings into the curriculum. This requires one to reflect on implicit biases or assumptions about the play and the context of children's experiences.

Beyond Banning War and Superhero Play

Meeting Children's Needs in Violent Times

Diane E. Levin

Four-year-old Jules is particularly obsessed. Telling him no guns or pretend fighting just doesn't work. When he's a good guy, like a Power Ranger, or Spiderman, he thinks it's okay to use whatever force is needed to suppress the bad guy, "because that's what a superhero does!" And then someone ends up getting hurt. When we try to enforce a ban, the children say it's not superhero play, it's some other kind of play. Many children don't seem to know more positive ways to play, or they play the same thing over and over without having any ideas of their own. I need some new ideas.

This experienced teacher's account captures the kinds of concerns I often hear from teachers worried about how to respond to war play in their classrooms (Levin 2003). Expressions of concern about play with violence tend to increase when violent world events, like 9/11 and the war against Iraq, dominate the news.

Play, viewed for decades as an essential part of the early childhood years, has become a problem in many classrooms, even something to avoid. Teachers ask why play is deemed so important to children's development when it is so focused on fighting. Some are led to plan other activities that are easier to manage and appear at first glance to be more productive. Reducing playtime may seem in the short term to reduce problems, but this approach does not address the wide-ranging needs children address through play.

Why are children fascinated with war play?

There are many reasons why children bring violent content and themes into their play. They are related to the role of play in development and learning as well as to the nature of the society in which war play occurs (Carlsson-Paige & Levin 1987, 1990; Cantor 1998; Levin 1998a, 1998b, 2003; Katch 2001).

Exposure to violence. From both therapeutic and cognitive perspectives, children use play to work out an understanding of experience, including the violence to which they are exposed. Young children may see violence in their homes and communities as well as in entertainment and news on the screen. We should not be surprised when children are intent on bringing it to their play. Children's play often focuses on the most salient and graphic, confusing or scary, and aggressive aspects of violence. It is this content they struggle to work out and understand.

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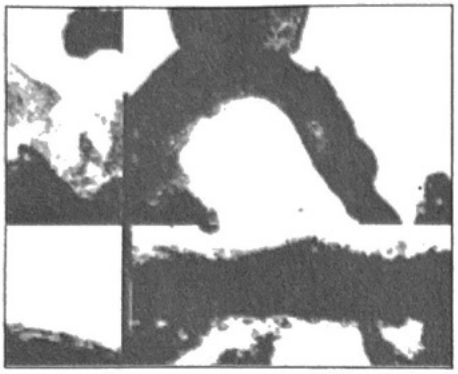
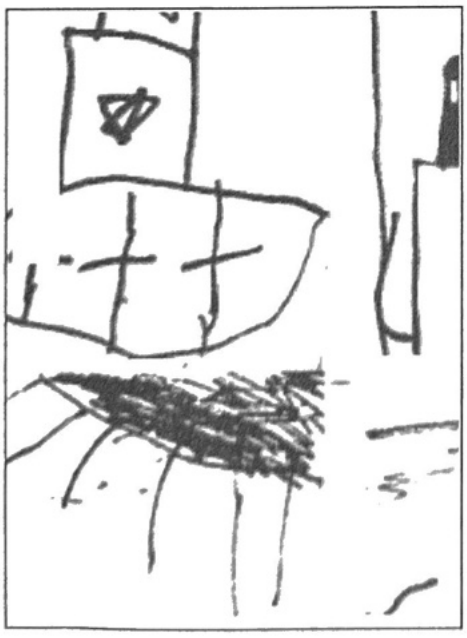
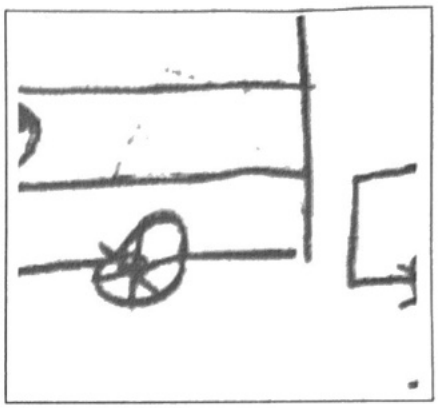


Typically, the children who seem most obsessed with war play have been exposed to the most violence and have the greatest need to work it out.

Need to feel powerful. Most young children look for ways to feel powerful and strong. Play can be a safe way to achieve a sense of power. From a child's point of view, play with violence is very seductive, especially when connected to the power and invincibility portrayed in entertainment. The children who use war play to help them feel powerful and safe are the children who feel the most powerless and vulnerable.

Influence of violent, media-linked toys. Children's toys give powerful messages about what and how to play. Open-ended toys, like blocks, stuffed animals, and generic dinosaurs, can be used in many ways that the child controls. Highly structured toys, such as action figures that talk and playdough kits with molds to make movie characters, tend to have built-in features that show children how and what to play. Many of today's best-selling toys are of the highly structured variety and are linked to violent media. Such toys are appealing because they promise dramatic power and excitement. These toys channel children into replicating the violent stories they see on screen. Some children, like Jules, get "stuck" imitating media-linked violence instead of developing creative, imaginative, and beneficial play.





Teachers' concerns about war play

There are many reasons why teachers are concerned about war play and why they seek help figuring out how to deal with it.

Lack of safety in the classroom. Play with violence tends to end up with children out of control, scared, and hurt. Managing aggressive play and keeping everyone safe can feel like a never-ending struggle and a major diversion from the positive lessons we want children to learn.

Old approaches not working. Many veteran teachers say that the bans they used to impose on war play no longer work. Children have a hard time accepting limits or controlling their intense desire or need to engage in the play. And children find ways to circumvent the ban—they deny that their play is really war play (that is, they learn to lie) or sneak around conducting guerilla wars the teacher does not detect (they learn to deceive).

Worries about the limited nature of the play. Like Jules, some children engage in the same play with violence day after day and bring in few new or creative ideas of their own. Piaget called this kind of behavior imitation, not play (Carlsson-Paige & Levin 1987). These children are less likely to work out their needs regarding the violence they bring to their play or benefit from more sustained and elaborated play.

Concerns about lessons learned from the play. Seeing children pretend to hurt others is the opposite of what we hope they will learn about how to treat each other and solve problems. Children *learn* as they play—and what they play affects what they learn. When children are exposed to large amounts of violence, they learn harmful lessons about violence, whether they are allowed to play it in the classroom or not.

At the same time, children do not think about the violence they bring into their play in the same way adults do. Jules focuses on one thing at a time; he sees the bad guy as one dimensional without thinking about what makes him bad. He thinks good guys can do whatever hurtful things they want because they are good. Except when he gets carried away and hurts another child, Jules probably does know that at some level his play is different from the real violence he is imitating.

Reconciling children's needs and adults' concerns

In our society children are exposed to huge amounts of pretend and real violence. There are no simple or perfect solutions that simultaneously address children's needs and adults' concerns (Carlsson-Paige & Levin 1987). However, there is much teachers can do working with and outside of the play to make it better for everyone (see "Approaches to Working with Violent Play" and "Approaches to Working Outside Violent Play," p. 4).

More important now than ever

There is no perfect approach for dealing with children's play with violence in these times. The best strategy is to vastly reduce the amount of violence children see. This would require adults to create a more peaceful world and limit children's exposure to media violence and toys marketed with media violence.

Given the state of the world—including the war against Iraq, which is erupting as this article goes to press—children now more than ever need to find ways to work out the violence they see. For many, play helps them do so. We have a vital role in helping children meet their needs through play.

Approaches to Working with Violent Play

- **Address children's needs while trying to reduce play with violence.** Banning play rarely works, and it denies children the opportunity to work out violence issues through play or to feel that their interests and concerns are important. Trying to ban media-controlled imitative play, or even just contain it, can be an appropriate stopgap measure when problems become overwhelming. However, a total ban on this kind of play may leave children to work things out on their own without the guidance of adults.
- **Ensure the safety of all children.** Involve children in developing rules for indoor and outdoor play that ensure safety. Help children understand the safety issues and what they can do to prevent injuries (physical and psychological) to themselves and others. Encourage children to paint, tell stories, and write (as they get older) to deal with issues of violence in ways that are safe and easier to control than play.
- **Promote development of imaginative and creative play (rather than imitative play).** To work through deep issues and needs in a meaningful way, most children require direct help from adults. How you help depends on the nature of children's play (Levin 1998b). Take time to observe the play and learn what children are working on and how. Use this information to help children move beyond narrowly scripted play that is focused on violent actions. Help children gain skills to work out the violent content they bring to their play, learn the lessons you aim to teach, and move on to new issues.

We must create an approach that addresses the unique needs of children growing up in the midst of violence as well as the concerns of adults about how play with violence contributes to the harmful lessons children learn.

Approaches to Working Outside Violent Play

• **Encourage children to talk with adults about media violence.** As children struggle to feel safe and make sense of violence—regardless of the source—they need to know that we are there to help them with this process (Levin 2003). Start by trying to learn what they know, the unique meanings they have made, and what confuses and scares them.

When a child raises an issue, it is helpful to start with an open-ended question like "What have you heard about that?" Respond based on what you learn about their ideas, questions, and needs. Keep in mind that children do not understand violence in or out of play as adults do. Try to correct misconceptions ("The planes that go over our school do not carry bombs"), help sort out fantasy and reality ("In real life people can't change back and forth like the Power Rangers do"), and provide reassurance about safety ("I can't let you play like that because it's my job to make sure everyone is safe")

• **Try to reduce the impact of antisocial lessons that children learn both in and out of play.** It can be helpful to encourage children to move from imitative to creative play so they can transform violence into positive behavior. Then talk with them about what has happened in their play ("I see Spiderman did a lot of fighting today. What was the problem?"). Help children to connect their own firsthand positive experiences about how people treat each other to the violence they have seen ("I'm glad that in real life you could solve your problem with Mary by . . . "). These connections can help defuse some of the harmful lessons children learn about violence.

Talking with children about violence is rarely easy, but it is one of our most powerful tools. It is hard to predict the directions in which children might take the conversations, and teachers often find it challenging to show respect for the differing ways families try to deal with these issues.

• **Work closely with families.** Reducing children's exposure to violence is one essential way to reduce their need to bring violence into their play. Most of young children's exposure occurs in the home, so family involvement is vital. Through parent workshops and family newsletters that include resource materials (such as those listed at the end of this article) teachers can help families learn more about how to protect children from violence, help children deal with the violence that still reaches them, and promote play with open-ended toys and nonviolent play themes (Levin 1998a, 2003). In addition, families can learn about how to resist the advertising for toys linked to violence in ways that keep the peace in the family (Levin 1998a; Levin & Linn in press).

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GEORGE LUCAS EDUCATIONAL FOUNDATION

THE RESEARCH IS IN

Dos and Don'ts of Classroom Decorations

What you put on your classroom walls can affect your students' ability to learn.

By *Youki Terada*

October 24, 2018

© Kenita Sutherland

The walls in Kenita Sutherland's classroom are lively but not overwhelming.

Heavily decorated classrooms can bombard students with too much visual information, interfering with their memory and ability to focus, a *new study* (https://www.sciencedirect.com/science/article/pii/S0022096518300390) finds.

This is just the latest study to examine the relationship between classroom environment and students' executive functions, which include skills like memory, attention, and self-regulation. While teachers have good intentions when decorating, many classrooms end up

being "sensory-rich" in a way that "could hamper children's learning gains rather than help," according to psychologists Pedro Rodrigues and Josefa Pandeirada, who coauthored the study.

To understand how decorations affect learning, Rodrigues and Pandeirada recruited 64 children between 8 and 12 years old to perform attention and memory tasks in two groups. For the high-decoration group, the walls of the room were covered with numerous pictures of ordinary objects and scenes, such as cars, musical instruments, and trees. Walls in the control group's room, on the other hand, were bare.

© Kendra Caralis

Inclusive role models and quotes can boost students' sense of belonging.

The children performed a series of tasks designed to test their attention and memory. In one attention test, for example, they observed a laptop screen, pressing a button if an X appeared and doing nothing if a K appeared. In a memory test reminiscent of the electronic game Simon Says, the children observed nine blue squares that changed to yellow in varying sequences, which the children attempted to repeat. A total of four tests were given—two for memory and two for attention.

Compared to children in the bare-wall room, children in the high-decoration room

performed worse on all tests, which suggests that too much visual stimulus can be a distraction.

"Overall, the results from these studies indicate that children could have difficulty in ignoring visual distractors when these are embedded in the surrounding environment," the study authors explain.

CLASSROOMS SHOULD BE ENGAGING, NOT DISTRACTING

That's not to say that every wall must be bare. In 2015, a team of researchers in the U.K. *analyzed 153 classrooms* (/sites/default/files/2020-08/902e4a_6aa724a74ba04b46b716e528b92ad7fc.pdf) and found that students benefited most when the walls had some decorations. "The displays on the walls should be designed to provide a lively sense to the classroom, but without becoming chaotic in feel. As a rule of thumb, 20 to 50 percent of the available wall space should be kept clear," the researchers wrote.

So what do researchers say teachers should do?

- Display student work. Students not only feel a greater sense of responsibility for their learning but are also more likely to remember the material (*Barrett et al., 2015* (/sites/default/files/2020-08/902e4a_6aa724a74ba04b46b716e528b92ad7fc.pdf)).
- Feature inspiring role models. Putting up images—and short stories or quotes—featuring heroes and leaders can help students gain a greater sense of belonging and aspiration, especially when their backgrounds and interests are represented. Strive for inclusion, but avoid token or

stereotypical representations—they can be damaging to students' self-esteem (*Cheryan et al., 2014* (http://ilabs.washington.edu/sites/default/files/14Cheryan_etal_Meltzoff_Designing%20Classrooms.pdf)).

- Avoid clutter. Keep at least 20 percent of your wall space clear, and leave ample space between displays so they don't look disorganized. Resist the temptation to keep adding decorations—it's better to swap them out than to keep adding more (Barrett et al., 2015).

- Visual aids—like anchor charts, maps, and diagrams—are OK. Posters that reinforce a lesson, rather than distract from it, can *boost student learning* (/article/why-students-forget-and-what-you-can-do-about-it). But don't forget to take down ones that are no longer helpful (*Carney & Levin, 2002* (https://link.springer.com/article/10.1023/A:1013176309260); *Bui & McDaniel, 2015* (https://www.sciencedirect.com/science/article/pii/S2211368115000200)).

- Avoid displays of student scores or grades. Many teachers use data walls to motivate students, and while they can work for high performers, they can backfire for struggling students, leading to feelings of shame and demoralization (*Marsh et al., 2014* (http://journals.sagepub.com/doi/abs/10.1177/0895904814531653)).

- Let in natural light. Don't cover up your windows with decorations unless you have a problem with glare or outside distractions. Students who are exposed to more natural light in their classrooms outperform peers who get less natural light in math and reading (*Cheryan et al., 2014* (http://ilabs.washington.edu/sites/default/files/14Cheryan_etal_Meltzoff_Designing%20Classrooms.pdf)). If you don't have windows, making sure the room is well lit can boost achievement (Barrett et al., 2015).

- Balance wall colors. You don't have to stick with four white walls—try having a single feature wall painted a bright color, with the rest being muted (Barrett et al., 2015).

DEVELOPING BRAINS

While decorating walls is a favorite pastime for many teachers, young children may not respond as teachers hope.

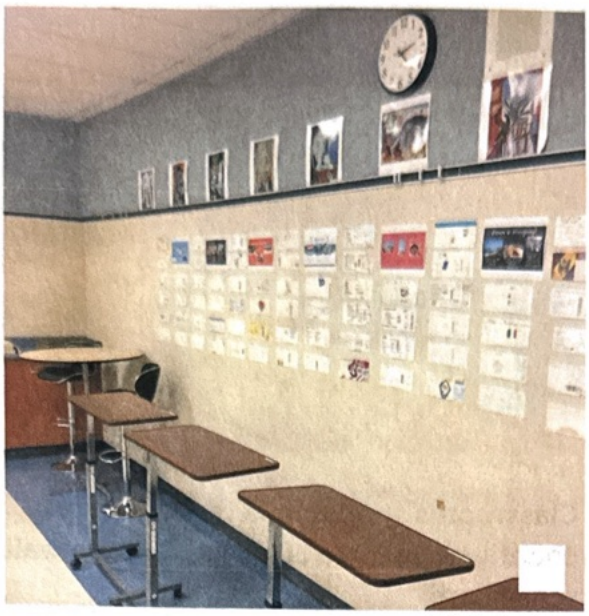
Courtesy of Amy Mileham

Classrooms should look lively but not chaotic, with 20 to 50 percent of the wall space bare.

"Our findings could be related to the fact that children's cognitive capacities are still under development, including executive functions responsible for the filtering of irrelevant information for a given task," explain the study authors. A teacher may have little difficulty ignoring a wall full of decorations, but young students may find themselves unable to look away and focus on a lesson.

Children aren't born with fully developed executive functions—they have to develop these skills over time, according to Harvard's *Center on the Developing Child* (https://developingchild.harvard.edu/science/key-concepts/executive-function/). Children who have adverse experiences—such as neglect, abuse, or violence—or *learning disabilities* (http://www.imedpub.com/articles/executive-functions-and-their-rolein-learning-disabilities.pdf) are at greater risk of impaired attention and self-regulation skills. So classroom distractions may be harming the students who need the most help.

THE THIRD TEACHER



© Nichole Murray

Displays of their work can help students feel a greater sense of responsibility for their learning and boost their memory of course content.

This study is the latest in an emerging field looking at classrooms as the *third teacher* (https://www.tandfonline.com/doi/abs/10.1080/00405840709336547?journalCode=htip20)—after parents and the teacher—which views the environment as essential to supporting learning. The idea is hardly new; approaches such as Reggio Emilia and Montessori put it at the forefront of pedagogy, giving classrooms a prominent role in shaping how students learn. Recent studies have shown evidence for the role that classrooms play in learning: A *2014 study* (http://journals.sagepub.com/doi/abs/10.1177/0956797614533801), for example, found that young students spent more time off-task when classroom walls were highly decorated, while *research on flexible classrooms* (/article/flexible-classrooms-research-scarce-promising) shows that optimizing physical characteristics of classrooms such as light, color, and seating options can improve academic performance by as much as 16 percent.

The takeaway: Classroom walls should feel warm and lively but not overcrowded—keep 20 to 50 percent of the wall space clear, and fill the rest with student work, inspiring pictures, and learning aids.

Understood®

Dyslexia in preschool: 4 signs you might see

By The Understood Team
Expert reviewed by Sheldon H. Horowitz, EdD

Even before kids start reading, you may be able to spot signs of **dyslexia**. That's because dyslexia can affect language skills that are the building blocks for reading. Here's what you might see in preschool-age kids.

1. Speaking like a younger child

Delayed language development is often one of the first signs of dyslexia. Your child may mispronounce a lot of words, like saying "aminal" instead of "animal." At school, your child may not talk as much or may not know as many words as other kids do.

2. Calling things by the wrong name

Dyslexia affects the way the brain processes language, including trouble coming up with the right word. Your child may hand you a spoon when you ask for a fork. At school, your child may struggle with learning and naming numbers, colors, and the letters of the alphabet.

3. Trouble rhyming

Your child may have trouble filling in the rhyming word in nursery rhymes (like "One Two, Buckle My ____") and may have even more trouble making up new rhymes. At school, your child may not recognize rhyming words like *dog*, *log*, and *hog*.

4. Not following directions

Kids with dyslexia often have **trouble following directions** that have multiple steps. They may only "hear" the first or last few words. You may ask your child to put on shoes and a jacket, but your child only gets a jacket. At school, your child might need to be reminded a lot about classroom rules and routines.

Explore **signs of dyslexia at different ages** and steps to take **if you think your preschooler might have dyslexia**.

Pretend play allows children to experiment with and learn about the power of language, how it affects us and those around us. It also helps them to understand that words give us the means to re-enact situations, to put our point across and to make ourselves heard and understood. Pretend play offers the perfect opportunity to expose children to new vocabulary, and the more different scenarios they are introduced to, the more scope there is for widening their vocabulary.

PENTAGON FOR LEARNING & PLAY, 2022

So what are we looking for?

- Speaking and Listening
- Recognition of the use of making marks to communicate a message
- Understanding the use of literature (books or digital) as tools to support children's personal learning inquiries in play
- Joy and learning dispositions

Oral Language play is the vehicle where this can happen
Marks on paper are a form of communication
Starting to use the letters that they know
Parallels to literature that they know
Joy of literature and imagination
Intentional teaching purposes:

Intentional Teaching Practices

- To communicate directly with students what the teacher has noticed they are doing and learning about as they play
- To highlight strengths, skill development and increased knowledge while playing
- To celebrate the cultural capital, dispositions, skills and knowledge a child contributes to the play experience
- To assist the teacher to plan further relevant responses to the child's personal play inquiry
- It is assessment for learning, not assessment of learning

Teachers become the "Guide on the side"
We support them by enriching the environment, giving them language prompts, recognizing and responding to what they want to do
We are very intentional in what we want to do being sure that we don't take over
We need to notice what children are doing as they play and then using an intentional approach "learning stories" being and observer and being able to respond to what we see
We might use a book or a video
If they are struggling with decoding, or know certain words, then we would use more intentional methods

Notice =
Recognize = These three guide us as we interact with the children on the floor
Respond =

Record = Reflection time what we see

Play context:

How Learning Stories can shape Intentional Teaching

Notice

After working so hard all morning to create your hut today, you decided to sit in it and eat lunch today together. Over lunch, you planned how you were going to use the space for your play in the afternoon. Ollie, you said that it was a "bunker" and you needed to defend it from the invaders. Leah, you suggested that the invaders were actually "wild bears" who were hungry and wanted to eat you. Stu and Luke, you thought both ideas were good, and offered a way to play "bear hunters" as a group. When you finished your lunch, you all raced off to start your bear hunting game!

This was just a snapshot of the play – genuine conversation from a rich play environment
In low language classrooms where children do not have well developed oral language, teachers talk about 80% of the time.

Higher oral language classrooms, the teachers talk about 50% of the time.

Recognise

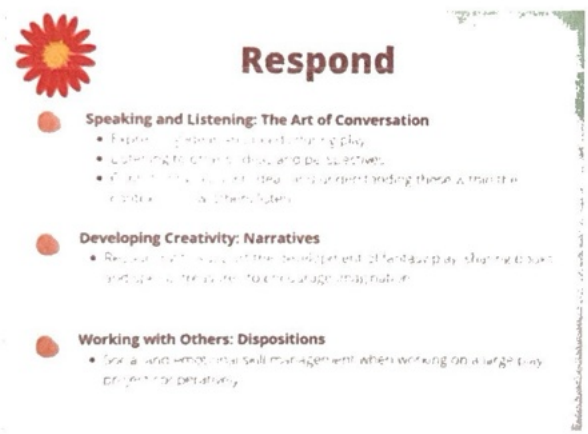
Bear Hunters

- Speaking and Listening
- Making Marks: Writing as a Communication Tool
- Literature tools to develop further knowledge
- Developing higher order dispositional skills

Making marks developed from their play in that they needed to make signs – they were able to tell the teacher what the sign said

Level of negotiating was of high order. They wanted to keep playing together so they shared ideas and arranged them into ways to play together

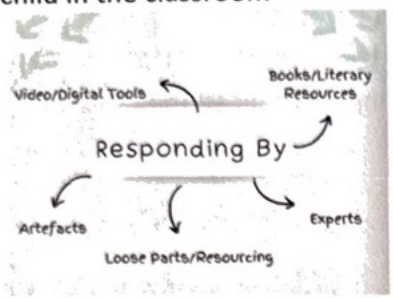
"The relationship between oral language and literacy learning is strongly reciprocal. Children draw on their oral language when they learn to read and write, and in turn, their progressing literacy learning enriches and expands their oral language and metalinguistic awareness"



What is important when observing pretend play is knowing that your presence might end up altering or destroying the play. We don't want to get too close. It takes the children out of their imaginative state. By observing with your back to the play, it seems that you are not paying attention, but you can hear and model language if they get stuck. Ex. "Ollie, I hear that Leah has an idea, when you are finished, would it be okay for Leah to share her idea?"

Perspective is a developmental skill which younger children have not developed. They are very egocentric.
Good active listening
Developing creativity and imagination how do we set up a culture of play Insuring that it is a safe place to pretend, not ridiculed for pretending. Children should be able to engage in imaginative play for as long as they want to.
We need to be champions of pretend play because ultimately it is literacy
Supporting them to work cooperatively

Thinking about where a child needs a knowledgeable other – it could be the teacher or another child in the classroom



Make sure that the literature and toys in the classroom relate to what the children are interested in and in what they are playing. You won't want to interrupt the play as it is happening, but you might use the books as a reminder of what they were playing or the next morning as a provocation for extended play.

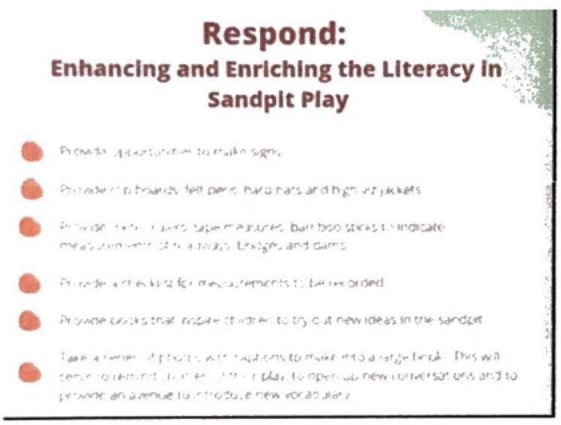
Children should always be able to write anything that encourages them to make marks.

Lots of language as they discover as they play

They talk about the transportation of sand as they move it across the area patterns of thinking water play, sand play,

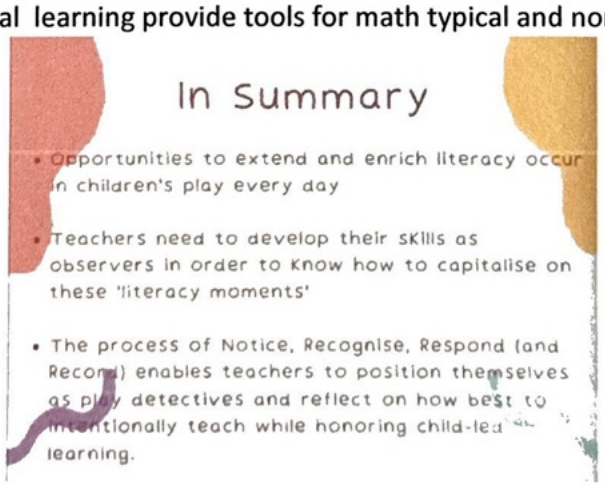
Transformation and transportation

A lot of science and technology about how sand and water change



Reasons to make signs

To encourage Mathematical learning provide tools for math typical and nontypical



Create classroom books

LITERACY OCCURS ALL DAY! NOT JUST WHEN CHILDREN ARE GATHERED FOR A STORY.
If a child looks bored, say, "I can't wait to see what you are going to do today" and make sure that there are lots of materials available.

Feature Story

December 2017

How Learning to Put on Rain Boots Leads to Academic Success

Catherine Koons Hubbard

It is easy to accept that a one-year-old baby is not yet able to dress herself unassisted, or to put on socks and shoes without help. Even people who do not spend their days working and playing with very young children understand that babies and toddlers follow a gradual progression in terms of motor development.

When discussing academics in early childhood, however, some policymakers and administrators often make the mistake of believing that earlier is better. They insist that early reading leads to greater success in the classroom, and they are eager to push so-called benchmark skills while ignoring the skills that ought to come first.

As nature preschool teachers, we often find ourselves in the middle of this conversation. Parents who enroll their children in our programs are, for the most part, in favor of outdoor exploration and play. At the same time, they want their children to enter kindergarten with all the necessary tools to succeed. For many parents, this means a focus on math and literacy.

Our own approach to school readiness, therefore, is not what they expect. We start by having children learn to put on their own rain boots.

We do not mean this in the metaphorical sense. We mean it quite literally. Managing rain boots – or socks, or even warm-weather sandals with straps - are an important part of the kindergarten readiness process.

Learning how to dress one's self falls into what occupational therapists call "Activities of Daily Living". ADL skills include self-feeding, toileting, and personal hygiene, such as blowing one's own nose. Those of us who teach in nature-based classrooms appreciate that learning to care for one's personal needs while also playing outdoors is not easy. In our program, which takes place in Wisconsin, there are coats, hats, and scarves to manage; there can be emergency bathroom needs; and then there's the challenge of blowing one's nose on a chilly day while wearing waterlogged mittens.

We understand that mastering ADL skills takes time and will vary based on individual needs. Nevertheless, we have seen that, as children gain confidence in caring for themselves, they also develop an increasing level of comfort and confidence in being in nature.

We place a great deal of value on self-efficacy at our nature preschool, that is, on children knowing that they have the skills they need to navigate new situations. Unlike self-esteem, which often depends on praise from others, self-efficacy develops when children have opportunities to discover their personal strengths. These will range from child to child. Some children discover an aptitude for balancing on logs and ice. Others develop empathy for animals. Still others are good at making friends, at playing cooperatively, or at solving problems. It is our hope that by the end of the year, they all feel confident in their ability to put on their own rain pants and boots.

Many children, especially those who have just turned three, are new to helping themselves. We do not advocate simply leaving them to figure it out unassisted. However, when parents ask, "But will they be prepared for school?" while simultaneously pulling socks onto feet and lifting feet into boots, we realize that we need to be better at sharing the importance of foundational skills.

Foundational skills in the preschool years include developing large and fine motor skills, developing self-regulation, learning to follow directions, and learning how to think through problems. Teaching a child to put on his own gear encompasses all of these.

As children learn to dress themselves, they are strengthening physical development, improving coordination and memory, and learning spatial and body awareness. Learning to manipulate one's own gear also serves the very practical purpose of freeing up parents' and teachers' time, while enabling children to fix any problems that may occur when playing outdoors, such as dislodging pebbles and sand from their boots or taking off mittens.

We do understand that this process takes time, time that often feels unavailable. A parent frequently has to make a choice between letting a child struggle with boots and being twenty minutes late for school. That is one the reasons we have made teaching children how to put on, and take off, their outdoor gear an active part of our preschool curriculum. Rather than feel that the time we spend on our boots is keeping us from other activities, we try to view the process as an important activity unto itself.

It is worth noting that because our program begins outdoors, children at our nature preschool start by learning to take their outer gear off. This works well, as taking gear off tends to be easier, and because it fits in nicely with our daily routine. We will proceed, however, to putting outer gear on when we feel the children are developmentally ready.

In October of 2015, journalist Kimberly Marselas wrote an article called "Losing Our Grip: More Students Entering Schools without Fine Motor Skills". It quickly made the rounds on social media, highlighting an alarming trend in which kindergarten teachers reported that a growing number of children lacked the basic motor skills of previous generations. They did not have the hand strength to manipulate glue bottles or manage paper and pencils. They were unsure how to cut with scissors. Several children lacked the adequate trunk strength to sit still for extended periods. One of the reasons given, beyond the increase in screen time, was a decrease in unstructured outdoor free play. Unstructured is the key word here: outside time is not enough. The freedom to play in a nebulous way is something all children need.

If children lack the hand strength and coordination needed to manage paper and scissors, and if, at age five, they are still clutching their pencils in their fists, we are not setting them up for academic success; we are setting them up for occupational therapy.

This is why we have a made a point of communicating to our families the multiple ways in which nature-based play supports large and fine motor development. We explain that by pulling caps off acorns, shucking corn, and building fairy houses in the woods, the children are strengthening their fine motor skills. When they use sweep nets, pond nets, and rake up leaves, their core strength improves, along with their muscles and stamina. And when we encourage children to manage, with as little help as possible, their own outdoor gear and rain boots, they are developing not only motor dexterity and strengthening body awareness, but are also growing in confidence and self-sufficiency. They are learning not to give up when faced with new challenges. They are learning that even things that are difficult at first get easier with repetition. This is what leads to academic success. Just imagine how well your children will do, we tell parents, knowing that on the first day of kindergarten they have the necessary skills to put on their very own rain boots.

About the Author

Catherine Koons Hubbard is Preschool Director at Schlitz Audubon Nature Center, in Milwaukee, WI.

TikTok - Toddlers can read

'Out with the old': Boston Public Schools attempts to raise reading scores through overhauling instruction

By Naomi Martin Globe Staff, Updated October 8, 2023, 8:46 p.m.

98

3rd graders substantially below level on MCAS in Boston/country

Kindergarten teacher Adina Thomas helped her students tap out sounds in words at the Haynes Early Education Center in Roxbury, part of a reading revolution in Boston Public Schools aimed at bringing instruction in line with the latest brain science. Jessica Rinaldi/Globe Staff

Adina Thomas perched on a chair before her kindergarten class one morning in May, her students squiggling cross-legged on a colorful carpet.

"Plug!" she said.

The kids lifted their hands together in a prayer position pointing forward. "P-, l-, uh, g-," they said in unison, chopping their hands downward with each sound, then swinging them like a baseball bat as they blended the sounds together: "Plug!" As they repeated the exercise with more words — "spray," "slip," "group" — the students beamed with confidence.

Thomas, a teacher at the Haynes Early Education Center in Roxbury, is on the front lines of a reading revolution in Boston Public Schools. After years of dismally low reading scores — only 32 percent of third-graders scored proficient on last spring's English-language arts MCAS test, and about 20 percent of Black and Latino third-graders did — the state's largest school system is making a dramatic shift toward "structured literacy," instruction that draws on a body of research, known as "the science of reading," about how the human brain learns to read.

The district's "Equitable Literacy" program puts a heavy focus on phonics, to help kids sound out words, and knowledge-building, to help them understand what they read. It also aims to eliminate discredited strategies — like teaching early readers to guess at unfamiliar words using pictures or context clues instead of sounding out — that have permeated American reading instruction for decades.

BPS leaders realized the district needed "a fundamental shift in how we teach reading — because it's not working," said Christine Cronin, the district's executive director of professional learning.

Boston's overhaul, which comes at an especially critical time as educators try to help kids recover from the pandemic, is part of a movement that many schools across the country are navigating. But in Massachusetts, progress has been slower than in many other states.

Crucially, Boston is making the shift citywide, a massive challenge in a district that has long given each school, and even classroom teachers, broad autonomy to teach as they see fit.

Superintendent Mary Skipper vowed the district will see better results for kids because it has made a commitment to the new approach for the long haul.

"Equitable Literacy is going to be here for a long time," Skipper said. "We're not going to do what's been done in the past, which is announce something, and then the following year, announce something different."

Sofia Coar held up her writing board to show that she spelled the word "sock" correctly along with her fellow kindergarten classmates at Haynes Early Education Center. Jessica Rinaldi/Globe Staff

Already the shift is winning applause from the state Department of Elementary and Secondary Education, which in an otherwise critical review of the district last year, praised Equitable Literacy as a bright spot in BPS that marked "the first time in recent memory that BPS has adopted a unifying academic initiative."

The state has even awarded the district a contract to train educators across Massachusetts this year on play-based learning, featuring BPS's homegrown literacy curriculum, Focus on Early Childhood, which includes activities like reading about construction alongside sand play, or reading about owls, and then dissecting their pellets.

BPS has spent more than $8.25 million on Equitable Literacy since 2022, officials said, and at least $600,000 since 2021 on training early elementary teachers in the science of reading.

It's early, but BPS reports promising internal results so far: The proportion of kindergartners meeting grade-level benchmarks in phonics and phonological awareness rose last spring to 73 percent and 67 percent, respectively, from 69 percent and 62 percent in spring 2022.

In 2018, the district briefly mulled scrapping Focus for an off-the-shelf curriculum, but instead decided to improve Focus because of research showing it was narrowing racial gaps in vocabulary, and because other curriculums didn't reflect BPS's diversity. The district consulted with experts, made sure the lessons covered the state's English, science, and social studies standards, and created "decodable" books that allowed kids to practice sounding out words featuring diverse characters in Boston and beyond — like "Yousef at the Arboretum."

The books "center Boston families and Boston kids," said Brooke Childs, director of early literacy. "Children learn when they're able to contextualize it in the place where they live."

As part of a shift toward evidence-based reading instruction, Boston Public Schools enlisted experts and its own educators to produce "decodable" books that help students practice phonics lessons while reading texts that include diverse characters, local and global settings, and real-world topics.David L. Ryan/Globe Staff

The pandemic offered an opportunity for reinvention. While schools were shuttered in 2020, the district scrapped a reading intervention program in use in some schools that was generally not backed by proponents of science of reading. That August, BPS put schools on notice that they needed to follow the science of reading and ultimately adopt evidence-based instruction.

"It was a perfect opportunity to say, 'Out with the old, in with the new,' " said Dwayne Nuñez, principal of Ellison-Parks Early Education School and a former literacy coach. "Moves like that actually made me feel like we were serious about the work."

Dwayne Nuñez, serving as a BPS literacy coach in May, worked with Harrison Ransom, left, and Eliana Hector on a reading exercise during their kindergarten class at the Haynes Early Education Center as part of a shift toward evidence-based reading instruction. Jessica Rinaldi/Globe Staff

Since then, the district has mandated that teachers in prekindergarten through second grade receive training in the science of reading, with 92 percent receiving such training so far, officials said.

And BPS has added literacy coaches to help teachers translate that training into their classroom practices. Each coach oversees five to 12 schools, Childs said. Though schools should ideally have their own coaches, she said, they're still making a big difference, especially as teachers work to unlearn habits they were taught in college and have used for years. For example, though the district has long had phonics programs, teachers often didn't prompt children to sound out every word when they read aloud, she said.

Thomas, the Roxbury kindergarten teacher, said Nuñez's coaching has been career-changing.

"Honestly, Dwayne has been a godsend," Thomas said. "This job is not easy."

Lesley Ryan Miller, BPS' chief of teaching and learning, read with kindergarten students Javonni Alexander, left, and Kamari Combs during a May class at the Haynes Early Education Center. Jessica Rinaldi/Globe Staff

Some education advocates think BPS should have just gone with an entirely new curriculum with high ratings, instead of revising and supplementing Focus, since Boston's scores have been so low.

"Kids are not reading," said Edith Bazile, founder of Black Advocates for Educational Excellence. "How can the district say they're doing a good job? You cannot overcome the data."

Tiffany Hogan, director of the Speech and Language Literacy Lab for Mass General Hospital Institute of Health Professions, who studies BPS's reading instruction, said the district's approach follows the latest brain science on how best to teach reading, but changing student outcomes can take years. In an urban district like BPS, she said, improvement requires not just instructional changes, which are hard enough, but also tackling thornier issues like teachers' subconscious racial biases and students' hunger, housing, and other needs.

Yet she believes BPS is on the right track.

"They're poised to really make some significant changes and potentially be leaders" nationwide, Hogan said.

Deckary Barth held up his correctly spelled word as he worked in a breakout group of four students with his teacher Adina Thomas during their kindergarten class in May at the Haynes Early Education Center. Jessica Rinaldi/Globe Staff

A key part of sustaining change in large organizations is building a shared mission and sense of community, Hogan said, something BPS strives for in monthly meetings among principals and academic coaches.

Last spring, Mary Driscoll, a BPS regional superintendent, stood before a room of administrators in a colorful Hurley School classroom adorned with Spanish words. She asked them to say aloud the names of kids who'd made big strides because of Equitable Literacy. The educators, one after another, responded.

"Selma." "Noah." "Jasmine."

A solemn silence fell.

"Thinking of the young readers we brought into the room, we owe it to them to make a good plan and stick to it," she said.

BPS leaders say Focus keeps lessons fun and relevant to kids' lives.

It was in that spirit that Jemma Joseph, a kindergarten teacher, sought to connect her students' home lives to a book one morning last spring at the William Monroe Trotter Elementary School in Dorchester. After reading aloud "Be a Friend to Trees", she led a discussion about trees and recycling. Kids used words like "shelter" and "oxygen."

Jemma Joseph, a kindergarten teacher at the William Monroe Trotter Elementary School, in May discussed a book about protecting trees with her students. Administrators say this type of reading instruction has been shown to build students' knowledge about real-world topics so they can understand more texts they encounter. David L. Ryan/Globe Staff

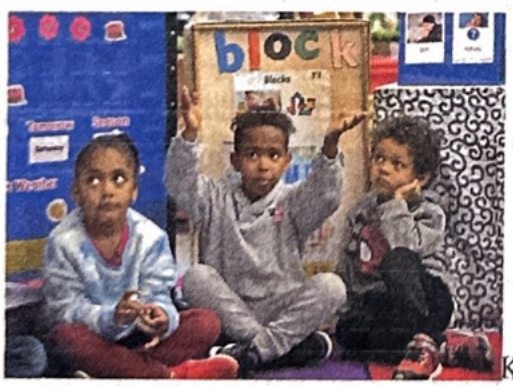
Next, the kids rotated among several "centers": "shopping" for fruit and vegetables using recycled bags, drawing seedlings the class was growing, building pint-sized chairs using wood blocks, and making collages with recycled scrap paper.

Trees are "amazing," said one student, Lia Ramirez, as she cut brown paper. "I've read all about them."

The Trotter principal, Sarita Thomas, said such lessons ensure all kids receive high-quality instruction for the first time in BPS.

"Finally, we're setting a bar across every school in this district," said. "It's really doing the work of getting rid of the haves and the have-nots."

Staff writer Mandy McLaren contributed reporting.



Kindergarten student Imraan Mohamad, center, raised his hands to discuss a book about saving trees while his classmates Maya Baraka, left, and Tristan Miller, right, sat beside him at the William Monroe Trotter School. The state and experts have praised BPS' efforts to infuse reading instruction with research-based practices. David L. Ryan/Globe Staff

Making Your Environment "The Third Teacher"

by Margie Carter

"In order to act as an educator for the child, the environment has to be flexible: it must undergo frequent modification by the children and the teachers in order to remain up-to-date and responsive to their needs to be protagonists in constructing their knowledge."
Lella Gandini (1998)

The Italian Schools of Reggio Emilia are acclaimed for the stunning environments their educators have created, and they provoke us to recognize the instructive power of an environment. This is not a new concept, but in their schools we see vibrant examples of learning environments that dazzle our senses, invite curiosity and discovery, and most importantly, foster strong, respectful relationships. Reggio educators seem to have a different notion about the role of the environment in educating children, for unlike the typical U.S. early childhood classroom, their walls aren't covered with alphabet letters, calendars, and job charts. Nor do you find commercially produced bulletin board displays, labels on every shelf and surface, or rules posted. What could they be thinking?

In the name of early education, homogenization and institutionalization are sprouting up everywhere in early childhood programs across the United States. Our programs have been developing what author and Harvard educator Tony Wagner (2001) calls "a culture of compliance" aimed at regulations, not dreams for children and ourselves. For instance, teachers in a Head Start Program told me they were dinged "out of compliance" because they had a replica of the solar system hanging from the ceiling, not at the children's eye level. A child care teacher described how the children's enthusiasm for using the block area to create "the tallest building in the world" quickly waned when her director arrived with a reminder of the rule not to build higher than their shoulders. These and many other stories tell me that we are not working with the idea Gandini suggests above, creating flexible environments that are responsive to the need for children and teachers to construct knowledge together. If we want our environments to be teachers in this way, it's time we do some careful reexamination to see how our standards and rating scales have begun to limit our thinking, and how commercial and political interests are shaping more and more of what we do.

In my opinion, if we are to embrace the idea of the environment as a significant educator in our early childhood programs, we must expand our thinking beyond the notion of room arrangements and rating scales. We must ask ourselves what values we want to communicate through our environments and how we want children to experience their time in our programs. Walk down the halls and into the classrooms of your program. What does this environment "teach" those who are in it? How is it shaping the identity of those who spend long days there?

When Deb Curtis and I were writing *Designs for Living and Learning* (2003) we found ourselves in a dilemma. We were eager to share photos of the inspiring environments we had begun encountering and working with programs to shape. But, we feared people might just flip through the pages looking for "decorating" ideas and bypass the text explaining the underlying concepts and principles the photos represented. Indeed, we have

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continued to invent training strategies to engage teachers in constructing their understanding of the environment as the third teacher in their room.

Strategy: Bring words to life

Depending on their learning style, people take different paths to bring words to life for their everyday teaching practice. I like to find inspiring quotes and have teachers pair them with their own visual images or ideas about how these words might be reflected in an actual environment. For instance, offer a selection of provocative quotes about environments, such as the following, and have your staff choose one to either draw a representation of what it means to them, or create a collage of magazine pictures.

- *First we shape our buildings. Thereafter they shape our lives.*
  Winston Churchill

- *More than the physical space, (the environment) includes the way time is structured and the roles we are expected to play. It conditions how we feel, think, and behave; and it dramatically affects the quality of our lives.*
  Jim Greenman

- *Our thoughts as reflected in our designs, in turn shape children's beliefs about themselves and life.*
  Anita Olds

- *The environment is the most visible aspect of the work done in the schools by all the protagonists. It conveys the message that this is a place where adults have thought about the quality and instructive power of space.*
  Lella Gandini

- *Every person needs a place that is furnished with hope.*
  Maya Angelou

Strategy: Eliminate as well as supplement

An environment that is crowded or cluttered may obscure the values you have in mind. Try to gather some sample pictures of the contrast between cluttered, harsh, or boring environments and well organized, thoughtfully planned ones and go through them one by one with some questions for discussion (see box on adjacent page). For instance, if you were a child, what might your experience be in this environment?

Strategy: Explore values for your environment

Use some of your staff meeting time to identify the values that you want reflected in your environment. Pass out a set of blank index cards and ask teachers to use one for each value that they want to be influencing their work with children. Collect these, and together organize them into groups with common elements. Then, to move these values from abstract ideas to practical examples, assign each group of cards to a dyad or cluster of teachers with the task of using the back of the card to outline or sketch how this value might be specifically reflected in the physical environment and also in the social emotional environment created by your policies, routines, and rituals. Consider values for the adults as well as the children. Keep the following ideas in mind to prompt your staff should they need it.

Values for children:
- being a home away from home
- connecting children to their families
- helping children to be powerful and active
- providing softness
- being a steward of the natural world
- seeing oneself as a capable learner
- recognizing and being curious about different perspectives
- forming mutually interesting and respectful relationships

Values for adults:
- feeling valued and respected
- having tools and time to do what is needed
- being intellectually stimulated and engaged
- providing opportunities to collaborate and grow professionally
- experiencing oneself as part of a caring, learning community
- finding strong relationships with children, their families and co-workers

Strategy: Set goals and address barriers

Showing teachers inspiring early childhood environments usually generates one of two responses: either excitement about making changes and adding lots of new things, or a litany of comments like "the licensor would never allow that; my kids could never handle that; we don't have that kind of money" and so forth. Help your staff work with the notion that in many cases, "less is more" and we want to be creators, not consumers when we set up our learning environments. After looking at examples of inspiring resources (Curtis & Carter, 2003; Greenman, 2006; Harvest Resources, 2006; Isbell & Exelby, 2001), give teachers worksheets, such as the one above, to identify their values, goals, and barriers to overcome.

Conclusion

Despite my concern that a focus on the design of learning environments could mislead teachers into a home decorating, superficial window dressing mindset, I've found that when we continually emphasize that the environment is actually a powerful teacher, early educators are provoked to

If you were a child, what might your experience be in this environment?

Study each picture with the following questions in mind:

- *What does this environment tell you the teacher values and expects of you?*
- *How do you think you might behave if you spent your days in this place?*

- *What is in this environment that helps you focus and be intentional about your use of time?*
- *What support and guidance might you need to benefit from this environment?*

get beyond notions of Martha Stewart. Thinking about the environment as a communicator and shaper of values can stir up a new sense of the significance of early care and education work. When teachers and parents find themselves in environments that are beautiful, soothing, full of wonder and discovery, they feel intrigued, respected, and eager to spend their days living and learning in this place. Aren't these the very feelings we want the children to have?

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Worksheet for Considering the Environment as a Third Teacher

(developed by Ann Pelo and Margie Carter)

	Value: create connections and a sense of belonging	Value: Engage the senses, invite physical play	Value: provoke curiosity, intellectual engagement	Value: _____
Aspects of our environment that support this value:				
Aspects of our classroom environment that undermine this value:				
Changes we will make to bring this value more fully into our environment:				

Worksheet for Goal Setting and Addressing Barriers

(developed by Margie Carter and Deb Curtis)

Goals for next Monday	Goals for next school year	Goals for next three years	Barriers to overcome	Support I need
Things to add:	Things to add:	Things to add:	In me:	Specific support to ask for:
Things to eliminate:	Things to eliminate:	Things to eliminate:	In the environment:	
Things to change or rearrange:	Things to change or rearrange:	Things to change or rearrange:	In our policies:	Specific education or training to seek out:

Schedules: Make Them Visual

by Jane Humphries and Kari Rains
January/February 2017

Article Link: *http://www.exchangepress.com/article/schedules-make-them-visual/5023383/*

Over the years we have found that strategies utilized in special education classrooms are often applicable in other classroom environments. One of those strategies is the use of a visual schedule. It is with this tool that we have observed children becoming better regulated. The trick to making this a successful strategy is learning how to design the schedule and 'strategies to implement.' But before we investigate that further, we must first start with understanding the perspective of a child struggling in a busy classroom environment.

A Child's Perspective

There are many children for whom the constant barrage of sounds is difficult to process. They get lost in the words, movements, and sounds that are a constant in the classroom. Imagine yourself with headphones on that you cannot take off, tuned to fairly loud music playing in your ears and the other adults around are talking *at you* and, the next thing you know, you are being rushed into the next room to participate in an activity: What activity and why? People are touching you, giving you social cues that you don't understand, and you look around and think, "I don't know if I want to do this!" and so you run from the activity. What happens next? You're in trouble!

Now, let's imagine the same scenario. This time the adults get your attention with a light touch, they tell you what is going to happen next, and you *see* in a succession of pictures *where* you are going and *what* you will be doing. In addition, the adults have placed in strategic areas within your environment visual schedules that reflect regular things that you do in your day, such as getting ready and going outdoors or participating in a meal. What you begin to see is what is taking place within your world — the expectations — and all of a sudden you begin to feel a sense of comfort and belonging. It was these exact feelings that one program wanted to try and nurture with two children in their care: one in the toddler room and the other in the preschool classroom.

A 'First, Then' Visual Schedule for Zoe

Zoe was a two-year-old who struggled during transitions. These times of transition typically ended in meltdowns because the idea of stopping and changing to something else was easier said than done. Zoe's teachers, Sharon and Pauline, had heard about the "First, Then" visual schedule at a recent training. The schedule was designed to provide positive behavior support. In beginning the process of implementation, the presenters emphasized the importance of observing a child for a few days to document times and events so that they better understood when and where difficulties arose: early morning, certain activities, before lunch or nap, or late afternoons when change in teachers and lots of hustle and bustle took place. Further, the presenters encouraged the teachers to understand who seemed best connected to the child.

Over the next few days, Sharon and Pauline began their observations by documenting times and events when Zoe struggled, and also determined who Zoe was most receptive to. It became clear that Sharon, the long-term teacher, was the person Zoe was most connected with; Pauline had only been the teacher in the classroom for the past three weeks. Both teachers noticed that if Pauline orchestrated the transitions, Zoe was sure to meltdown. But if Sharon led the transition, Zoe tended to follow a little better. Their

observations also confirmed that drop-off and pick-up times were, by far, the hardest times for Zoe. Because of this, it made more sense for Sharon to introduce the idea of the 'First, Then' schedule. They decided to design and implement a visual schedule around these identified times of greatest difficulty for Zoe.

Designing the 'First, Then' Schedule

'First, Then' visual schedules are fairly simple, and are perfect for younger children like Zoe. With the help of their director, Sharon and Pauline began the process with these steps.

They met with Zoe's parents to explain the idea behind a visual schedule. This included obtaining their permission and encouraging them to participate in the picture-taking necessary to make the picture cards. The parents also agreed to be involved in the use of the schedule when they arrived in the mornings and left each day to reinforce its use with Zoe.

Next, Sharon and Pauline elicited the help of their director who assisted in gathering the materials to make the visual cards: durable white cardstock, a computer to create words and pictures, scissors, Velcro® squares large enough to mount on the back of the cards as well as on the schedule to attach the images, and access to their center's laminator. (Clear contact paper works just as well.)

The teachers used the computer to divide an 8.5" x 11" piece of cardstock into two equal sides with a bold line drawn down the center. They typed the words **'FIRST'** in bold in the top center half of the paper; in the middle of the paper they inserted a bold horizontal line. Then, they typed **'THEN'** centered on the paper in bold beneath the bold horizontal line and laminated the sheet.

Meantime, they took photos throughout the day of Zoe waving goodbye to her parents at the beginning of the day as well as pick-up in the afternoon, putting things away in her cubby and taking things out at the end of the day, doing her favorite tabletop activity when she arrived, and getting in the car to go home.

Next, they downloaded the photographs to a printer, mounted them on a piece of cardstock, and laminated the sheet.

What Zoe's teachers recognized was that it was important to begin the visual process schedule with pictures of routines and activities that Zoe liked to do. Sharon and Pauline both talked to Zoe about the images and described what they meant. They invited Zoe to help hang up her schedule by the daily class schedule.

Implementation

During the first few days of drop-off and pick-up, Sharon helped Zoe move her pictures from 'First' to 'Then.' When Zoe got comfortable and began to initiate changing her schedule, Pauline began to go with her and talk about first and then. More pictures were added for additional activities as Zoe gained success using her 'First, Then' schedule. This included circle time with her classmates, participating in and transitioning between activities, as well as going out and coming in from the playground. As each new set of cards was added, Sharon and Pauline allowed a couple of days of consistent use to support Zoe's understanding.

After three weeks of consistent use, the teachers noticed a big difference in Zoe and her transitions in the classroom. Her parents were delighted that drop-off and pick-up times were so much more enjoyable!

While it was extra work and effort, both Sharon and Pauline felt successful, were pleased with Zoe's progress, and saw that their classroom ran more smoothly as a result. When talking with their director, they agreed to share their experiences at the all-staff meeting. When their colleagues asked questions about the strategy, their director encouraged them to consider using it in their own classrooms. The preschool teachers eagerly agreed to give this new strategy a try, adding it to their repertoire that already included a 'Sequential Visual Schedule.'

A 'Sequential Visual Schedule' for Diego

Diego was a four-year-old in the preschool classroom. His teachers, Ana and Charles, determined that before they could design and implement a schedule, they needed to observe Diego for a few days. During that time they discovered that Diego had great difficulty and anxiety understanding the preschool schedule. He reacted by bursting into tears and becoming frantic and angry, often feeling 'tricked' about what was going to happen next. As much as the teachers tried to remind him and the other children of the expectations for the day at morning circle time, Diego would continually ask the teachers throughout the morning, "What we doing?"

The teachers' observations helped them to recognize that they had a fairly predictable and sequential routine. They found that eating meals, washing hands/bathroom times, circle time, learning centers, naps, and outdoor time happened regularly throughout the mornings and afternoons. On certain days there were a few additional activities including music, going to the indoor play area due to inclement weather, or exploratory walks in and around the building with the teachers. The teachers also noted that Diego was much more receptive to Charles and would seek him out for assistance.

Because Diego was older and the activity in the classroom was a little more detailed, the 'Sequential Visual Schedule' was a perfect fit. While simple in appearance, the beauty of this schedule is its ability to frame for the child a process of steps that support consistent routines and sequential steps done throughout various classroom activities. This would allow Diego to see, in picture form, what would be happening first, second, third, fourth, fifth, and sixth.

As the teachers did for Zoe, Ana and Charles pinpointed two of the most challenging times of the day for Diego: 1) entering into and transitioning during center time, and 2) after naptime.

Designing a Sequential Visual Schedule

With the help of their director, Ana and Charles were excited to begin designing a visual schedule for Diego. Following the design steps handout created and shared by Zoe's teachers at the staff meeting, the teachers:

talked with and obtained permission from Diego's parents, reporting back to the director their support and eagerness to help their son with his anxiety in the classroom. They were also hopeful that if this strategy worked in the classroom, they could discuss implementing it at home.

took pictures of Diego doing each step of entering into and transitioning throughout center time and the routine after naptime. The teachers downloaded and laminated the pictures, along with placing Velcro® on the back of the cards so they could mount them to the main visual schedule board.

purchased an 11" x 14" poster board; the numbers 1 through 6 were labeled and spaced equally down the left side of the board, and Velcro® was attached to each space beside the number. The board was laminated so that the pictures could be interchanged throughout the day.

Ana and Charles felt confident and eager to implement the use of the new schedule with Diego. When talking after school that day, Ana mentioned to Charles the interest she had observed from other children in the classroom. The two agreed that they would closely observe not only Diego's reactions to the new visual schedule, but those of his classmates as well.

Implementation

The next morning Diego helped Charles choose the place where the schedule would be mounted in the classroom. The pictures relating to the center-time routine were already placed on his schedule. It was here that he talked with Charles about which center he would go to first, second, third, and so on. Throughout the morning, Diego frequently went over to the picture schedule, touched the pictures, and asked Charles, "What we doing?" Charles would simply point to the picture and Diego would nod his head and continue playing. Before naptime, Diego and Charles placed the pictures in order of what would happen after he woke up from nap. While there were a few bumps in the road over the first few days of implementation, Ana and Charles began to notice diminishing anxiety in Diego, who seemed calmed by the schedule that allowed him to process where he was supposed to be and what he should be doing in the classroom.

As Zoe's teachers did for her, Ana and Charles began to add more pictures to the schedule: eating meals, washing hands/bathroom times, circle time, going outdoors, music, going to the indoor play area on inclement weather days, and class exploratory walks in and around the building. When pictures were a challenge to photograph, they downloaded pictures from Internet resource sites. As each new set of cards was added, the teachers allowed a couple of days of consistent use to support Diego's understanding.

After a month of creating and adding to the visual schedule and consistent reminders to "check your schedule," the teachers noticed a big difference in Diego and his transitions. Overall, the teachers felt that this approach was a big success for Diego. They also observed other children checking the schedule for help in understanding what was going to happen next. Ana and Charles shared with Diego's parents how to design and implement a visual schedule for their use at home. They reported developing one to help him at home with dressing for school and getting ready for bed. When talking with the director about the success with Diego, the director asked that they share their experience with their colleagues.

Making it Visual for Everyone

At a staff meeting, Ana and Charles shared Diego's story. They, along with Zoe's teachers, determined that based on their experiences they needed to make their classrooms more 'visually friendly' for all children. A classroom activity picture schedule was designed and implemented to help keep everyone on task and to offer a visual perspective to the children. These visual schedules were large enough for everyone to see and they portrayed typical events throughout the day to include transitions to and from school, mealtimes, group times, going outdoors and coming indoors, and the ever-important bathroom breaks. After obtaining permission and talking with parents about the new classroom-wide strategy, pictures were taken by the teachers and downloaded to a printer for design purposes. The various events were mounted on colorful poster board, laminated, and placed in strategic areas around the classroom. The teachers found that because the children could *see* what was taking place within the classroom,

expectations were set, and a noticeable difference in the overall group transitions throughout the day became more manageable and less hectic.

Visual Schedules for Everyone

The design and implementation process experienced by these teachers supported the use of visual schedules for all children, which increases their understanding of what is taking place around them and their role when participating. Schedules support children's ability to learn new things and to increase their flexibility over time. Visual schedules helped Zoe and Diego remain calm and reduced the incidence of emotional upset and challenging behaviors. With increased independence, this strategy boosts children's self-esteem and allows them to engage with others and their environment in deeper ways which ultimately supports their overall learning.

Resources

Autism Speaks
www.autismspeaks.org

Education.com
www.education.com

Indiana Resource Center for Autism
www.iidc.indiana.edu

Oklahoma Assistive Technology Centerwww.theoatc.org

Visual Aids for Learning
www.visualaidsforlearning.com

ABOUT THE AUTHORS:

Jane Humphries and Kari Rains are with an Oklahoma based company called Creative Educational Strategies & Services. They are dedicated to providing educators, administrators, parents, and other caregivers with the information and research that supports best practices when working with children and adults,especially those who struggle in the areas of social and emotional development. Learn more about their work at www.fiddlefocus.com.

The 5 Best Toys of All Time

• By Jonathan Liu January 31, 2011 (m.wired.com/geekdad)

Here at GeekDad we review a lot of products — books, toys, gadgets, software — and I know it's impossible for most parents to actually afford all of the cool stuff that gets written up. Heck, most of us can't afford it either, and we're envious of the person who scored a review copy of a cool board game or awesome gizmo. (Disclosure: that person is probably me.) So while we love telling you about all the cool stuff that's out there, I understand that as parents we all have limited budgets and we sometimes need help narrowing down our wishlists.

So to help you out, I've worked really hard to narrow down this list to five items that no kid should be without. All five should fit easily within any budget, and are appropriate for a wide age range so you get the most play ot of each one. These are time tested and kid-approved! And as a bonus, these five can be combined for extra-super-happy-fun-time.

#1. Stick

What's brown and sticky? A Stick.

This versatile toy is a real classic — chances are your great-great-grandparents yed with one, and your kids have probably discovered it for themselves as well. It's a required ingredient for Stickball, of course, but it's so much more. Stick works really well as a poker, digger and reach-extender. It can also be combined with many other toys (both from this list and otherwise) to perform even more functions.

Stick comes in an almost bewildering variety of sizes and shapes, but you can amass a whole collection without too much of an investment. You may want to avoid the smallest sizes — I've found that they break easily and are impossible to repair. Talk about planned obsolescence. But at least the classic wooden version is biodegradable so you don't have to feel so bad about pitching them into your yard waste or just using them for kindling. Larger, multi-tipped Sticks are particularly useful as snowman arms. (Note: requires Snow, which is not included and may not be available in Florida.)

As with most things these days, there are higher-end models of Sticks if you're a big spender, from the smoothly-sanded wooden models (which are more uniformly straight than the classic model) to more durable materials such as plastic or even metal. But for most kids the classic model should do fine. My own kids have several Sticks (but are always eager to pick up a couple more when we find them).

One warning: the Stick can also be used as a sword or club, so parents who avoid toy weapons might want to steer clear of the larger models. (On the other hand, many experts agree that creative children will just find something else to substitute for Stick, so this may be somewhat unavoidable.)

Although she is not generally known as a toy expert, Antoinette Portis has written this helpful user manual for those ding some assistance in using their Stick.

Wired: Finally, something that *does* grow on trees. **Tired:** You could put someone's eye out.

2. Box

Another toy that is quite versatile, Box also comes in a variety of shapes and sizes. Need proof? Depending on the number and size you have, Boxes can be turned into furniture or a kitchen playset. You can turn your kids into cardboard robots or create elaborate Star Wars costumes. A large Box can be used as a fort or house and the smaller Box can be used to hide away a special treasure. Got a Stick? Use it as an oar and Box becomes a boat. One particularly famous kid has used the Box as a key component of a time machine, a duplicator and a transmogrifier, among other things.
Still stuck for ideas? Check out this Box user manual by Antoinette Portis for a few more ideas.

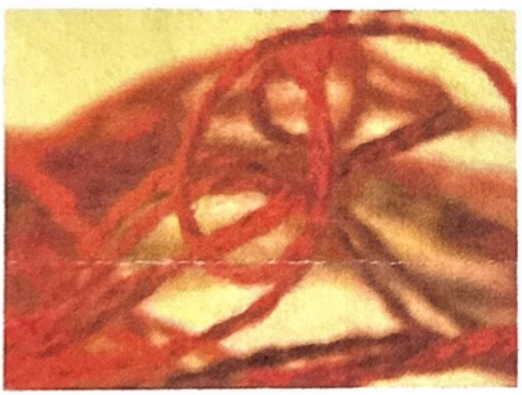
The Box may be the most expensive item on my list, available from many retailers and shipping companies, but they can often be had cheaper if you know where to look. Amazon is one of my main sources of the small- to medium-sized Box; I include one with virtually every order I place there. If you don't mind second-hand toys, the grocery store, bookstores and recycling centers are also great sources for Boxes. Oh, and the best place for the extra-large version is an appliance store (though sometimes they'll try to sell you an appliance along with it, which could get pricey.)

Note: If you're in a pinch, Laundry Basket is a similar item and can often be substituted for Box in some instances, though it's generally not as great for costumes (other than a turtle). And if you're thinking of using Box for your next building project, Mr. McGroovy's Box Rivets make a great optional accessory.

Wired: Best celebrity endorsement: Calvin & Hobbes.

Tired: Paradox: what do you put Box in when you're done playing with it?

#3. String



My kids absolutely love String — and when they can't find it, sometimes they substitute other things for it such as scarves or blankets, but what they're really after is String. Now, I should start off by saying that String is *not* intended for toddlers and babies: it is a strangulation hazard and your kids must be old enough to know not to put it around their necks. However, when used properly your kids can really have a ball with String.

The most obvious use of String is tying things together, which my kids love to do. You can use it to hang things from doorknobs or tie little siblings to chairs or make leashes for your stuffed animals. Use String with two Cans for a telephone (and teach your kids about sound waves), or with Stick to make a fishing pole. You'll need String for certain games like Cat's Cradle — there's even an International String Figure Association for lots more information. String is a huge part of what makes some toys so fun — try using a yo-yo or a kite without String and you'll see what I mean. Try the heavy-duty version of String (commonly branded Rope) for skipping, climbing, swinging from trees or just for dragging things around.

Although you can buy String at a store, it's generally sold in much larger quantities than your children will probably need — usually my kids are happy with roughly two or three feet of it. I actually have no idea where it comes from, because I don't remember buying them any, so it must be pretty easy to come by.

Wired: It really ties everything together. There's a reason "no strings attached" is a benefit.

4. Cardboard Tube

Ah, the Cardboard Tube. These are kind of like the toy at the bottom of a box of Cracker Jacks — they come free with a roll of paper towels and other products but you have to wait until you get to the end of the roll before you can finally claim the toy. (Perhaps this explains why my kids — who love the small size — go through toilet paper so quickly.) The small- and medium-sized are most common, but the large versions that come with wrapping paper can be more difficult to obtain — I had a roll of Christmas wrapping paper that lasted about three years before my kids finally got the Tube. There's also an extra-large size that is sometimes sold with posters, and a super-sized industrial version which you'll generally only find from carpet suppliers. (Of course, carpet stores aren't toy stores, and while their product also goes by the name Cardboard Tube it's hardly the same thing and probably shouldn't be considered a toy.)
My kids have nicknamed the Cardboard Tube the "Spyer" for its most common use in our house, as a telescope. (Or tape two of them together for use as binoculars.) But if you happen to be lucky enough to get a large size, the best use is probably whacking things. Granted, Stick is also great for whacking, but the nice thing about Cardboard Tube is that it generally won't do any permanent damage. It's sort of a Nerf Stick, if you will. If that sounds up your alley, look up the Cardboard Tube Fighting League — currently there are only official events in Seattle, San Francisco and Sydney, but you could probably get something started up in your own neighborhood if you wanted. Or if you're more of a loner, perhaps the way of the Cardboard Tube Samurai is a better path.

Obviously if your own kids are younger you'll want to exercise discretion about these more organized activities, but it probably wouldn't hurt to provide them with a Cardboard Tube or two just so they'll get used to the feel of it. You never know if your kid will be the Wayne Gretzky or Tiger Woods of Cardboard Tube Fighting, right? Best to give them the opportunity so that if they show some particular aptitudes they'll have that early advantage. And if not, well, there are still plenty of people who enjoy playing with Cardboard Tubes casually without all that pressure.

Wired: Comes free with purchase of toilet paper, paper towels, and wrapping paper. **Tired:** Doesn't hold up to [illegible]husiastic play.

5. Dirt

When I was a kid one of my favorite things to play with was Dirt. At some point I picked up an interest in cleanliness and I have to admit that I'm personally not such a fan of Dirt anymore — many parents (particularly indoor people like me) aren't so fond if it either. But you can't argue with success. Dirt has been around longer than any of the other toys on this list, and shows no signs of going away. There's just no getting rid of it, so you might as well learn to live with it. First off, playing with Dirt is actually good for you. It's even sort of edible (in the way that Play-doh and crayons are edible). But some studies have shown that kids who play with Dirt have stronger immune systems than those who don't. So even if it means doing some more laundry (Dirt is notorious for the stains it causes) it might be worth getting your kids some Dirt.

So what can you do with Dirt? Well, it's great for digging and piling and making piles. We've got a number of outdoor toys in our backyard, but my kids spend most of their time outside just playing with Dirt. Use it with Stick as a large-format ephemeral art form. (Didn't I tell you how versatile Stick was?) Dirt makes a great play surface for toy trucks and cars. Need something a little gloopier? Just add water and — presto! — you've got Mud!

Dirt is definitely an outdoor toy, despite your kids' frequent attempts to bring it indoors. If they insist, you'll probably want [illegible]et the optional accessories Broom and Dustpan. But as long as it's kept in its proper place, Dirt can be loads of fun.
Wired: Cheap as dirt. **Tired:** Dirty.

Back in January, to help you save time sorting through all the reviews and gift ideas, I wrote about the 5 Best Toys of All Time. (If you haven't read it yet, go ahead. I'll wait. The rest of this post won't make as much sense otherwise.) Since then, I've had a lot of people chime in about what should have been on the list, or what else I should add if the list got longer, and I had various reasons for narrowing it down to the five I picked.

Some of the contenders:

Bubble Wrap was actually in the running — I had even picked out a photo to use — but I ended up leaving it out. The biggest problem with Bubble Wrap (which, don't get me wrong, is perhaps still up there in the top 10 or so) is that it's a single-use item. Once it's popped, it loses most of its charm.

Rock has been suggested, and is also a terrific toy, but can also do quite a bit more damage than most of the others I ended up keeping. As a parent, I have to admit that Stick and String both have safety issues, but Rock isn't something to be taken, er, lightly.

Ball, which is related to Rock, also had quite a few fans ... but it just wasn't really in keeping with the rest of the list. You'll notice that none of the items on the list are actually things that are packaged and sold as toys. That's the whole point. Sure, Ball is a quintessential toy, but I was really looking for things your kids turn into toys rather than things that start off as toys. You can make a Ball out of String, but you can't really make a String out of Ball. So I dropped it.

One item came up again and again in the comments: **Tape**. I have to admit, I should have thought of it. My kids love playing with tape so much that I got them their own tape dispenser (though they still take mine). It's certainly another toy that has many uses, and comes in small (Scotch) or large (duct) versions. My kids are pretty attached to it. Still, compared to the other items on the list, tape isn't cheap, and is generally non-recyclable.

But after pondering it for a while over the past week, I think I've made my decision about #6 on the list of Best Toys of all time...

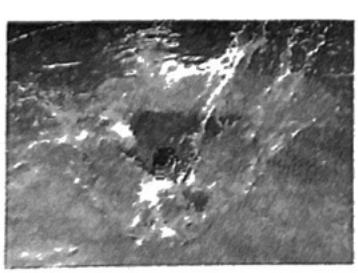
6 Water

That's right. Water is another classic. Heck, it's older than Dirt, by some accounts, and I mentioned already that combining the two gives you Mud, another great toy. It's a necessary accessory for many other toys, like water guns, swimming pools, and sprinklers (yes, that's a toy, too). Parents usually like to treat it as an outdoor toy, though the indoor version can be fun with the optional Tub. And though it's often thought of as a summer toy, there are winter versions available, too: Snow and Ice (may not be available in all locations).

Of course, just as with screen time, you need to carefully manage your child's exposure to Water: they'll literally die without it, but too much of it can be deadly as well. It may seem odd that I'm recommending a toy that has such inherent dangers, but chances are you already have Water and (I hope) have been instructed in its uses.

Wired: Need some fun? Just add — you guessed it — Water. **Tired:** Ironically, you use it to clean, but it needs to be cleaned up.

But here's one more thing about Water, and this is where I get serious. Sure, we love to play in it. We have entire theme parks built around it, and we think of it as free or cheap because, hey, we can turn on a tap and there it is. But all around the world, there are people who are literally dying of thirst, people who simply can't imagine why we would put out a sprinkler and spray water *on the ground* so that our kids can run around in it. We can't solve all of the world's problems, but it turns out that drilling wells and providing safe, clean water for people around the world doesn't take as much money as you might think — as much money as, say, we First-Worlders spend during the holidays every year.



The Mindful SEAT

S is for Senses and Sensations Begin by checking in with your senses, starting with sounds. What sounds do you hear near and far? Faraway sounds, closer sounds, the sound of your breath, even sounds from inside your body, like your heartbeat. Now, as you breathe you might notice smells in the air- food, fresh air, noticing smells that are pleasant as well as those that are unpleasant. On your tongue you might discover lingering tastes or perhaps just a taste of the air. Whether your eyes are open or closed, just notice what is in your field of vision as shapes, shadows and colors, as well as the spaces in between these. Lastly bring your attention to sensations up starting at the edges of your body. Notice your back and legs resting on the seat behind and beneath you, the temperature of the air against your skin as well as the texture of clothing. If you feel comfortable, you might begin to explore sensations deeper in your body, but just tuning into sensations ground us in the present, and brings us into the ventral vagal window.

E is for Emotions Now turn your awareness away from just senses, and notice how emotions begin to arise and pass, perhaps even originated in sensations. What emotions are present in this very moment? Joy or sorrow? Anxiety or relief? Rage or peace? Boredom or curiosity, or anything else, just notice these

emotions like visitors from beyond, name them, and watch as they arise and pass in both your body and your mind.

A is for Actions With an awareness of your senses and emotions now, are there any urges or impulses to action that you notice? Do you want to stretch your body? Eat? Punch something? Do something harmful or something productive? Just notice these urges in your body and mind, and watch them pass if you can.

T is for Thoughts Lastly, what thoughts are present right now? Any judgments about yourself or the world? Or maybe if you do notice your mind wandering, you might just nudge it back to the present.

Try the mindful SEAT at different points in your day, both the easier and more difficult ones, and get to know your own mind, body and triggers that much better. You might even write these out about a past event and get some perspective. Once we've identified these sensations as sensations, emotions as emotions, thoughts and actions as just those, we empower ourselves to some perspective and make a healthy choices. It might look like this

Sense/Sensation: *I can see my boss is coming over to talk to me, I feel my heart pounding.* **Emotion:** *I'm scared!* **Action:** *I want to hide and run out of the room.* **Thought:** *There must be something wrong with me… Or is there?*

Once we've identified these sensations as sensations, emotions as emotions, thoughts and actions as just those, we can empower ourselves to get some perspective and make a different choice. like a healthy body choice like exercise, a self-compassion practice, a relational choice like reaching out to a friend, or another skill to relax and regulate your mind and body back to safety and thriving. When we slow down, we can watch our emotional responses arise first in the body, almost in real time, and then choose a new response to what we encounter.

The CALM Reminder

A number of years ago I heard a great acronym from a colleague that we can use for a mini body scan or relaxation practice, when we are feeling flooded with strong emotions, anxiety, anger, or anything else setting off our limbic alarm system.

The practice is as simple as the acronym. "The CALM Reminder" helps us check into and then relax four big zones of our body (C-Chest, A-Arms, L-Legs, M-Mouth). Those four zones offer great information about our emotional state. What's more, when we relax our body zone by zone, it becomes physiologically almost impossible to also be stressed, anxious, angry, or otherwise overwhelmed by difficult emotions.

A Body Scan Practice: The Calm Reminder

This practice can expand or contract depending on the amount of time and attention you have—from just a few minutes, up to ten or fifteen. Start by finding a comfortable position to stand, sit or lie down. Allow your eyes to close if you feel comfortable. Begin with a few expanded breaths, allowing your body to relax as you extend the out-breath.

C-Chest

After a few breaths, bring your awareness to your **chest** and **torso** area. First scan your chest, opening and lifting it, creating enough room for your lungs and belly to fully expand. Bring your awareness to any sensations there.

Is your breath shallow and short, or slow and even? As you regulate your breath, you regulate your body and brain, and in turn your emotions, impulses, and attention. Is your heart beating fast or slow? Is there any tightness or tension in your chest?

Allow your breath to expand your chest, releasing any tension there. Lastly, tense all the muscles throughout your chest and torso, hold for a count of three as you notice what tension feels like, then allow your muscles to relax and feel the tension flow away and relaxation flow in with the next few breaths

A-Arms

Shift your awareness now into your arms, from your shoulders down to your fingers. Lift and drop your shoulders once and let your arms fall to your sides or into your lap. Now scan your awareness upward from your hands through the forearms and upper arms.

Are they shaking or still? Can you just allow them to settle if they are shaking? Are they tensed partly into fists? If so, just release that tension. Are your hands sweaty or clammy?
Scan up your arms to your shoulders, continuing to notice any other sensations that might give you a clue as to your emotional state.

Lastly, squeeze your fists, tense your arms all the way up to your shoulders and hold for three breaths, feeling the tension, and then just release the physical and emotional tension, and let your arms relax completely. Take three more breaths, enjoying the relaxation you feel in your arms.

L-Legs

On the next breath, direct your attention down to your **legs**, from your hips down through your toes, allowing your attention and breath to flow through your thighs, calves, and feet. Often our legs can be shaking with anxiety, or hold tension and stress. Notice if your legs are communicating anything in this moment, and just allow them to become still if they are.

Then, gently begin to squeeze the muscles in your feet, up through your legs and around your waist, holding that tension for three breaths, noting the sensations, and then release. Take three more breaths as you feel the tension flowing out of your legs.

M-Mouth

Lastly, shift your awareness to your **mouth** and jaw, a place where many of us hold tension and clench our muscles without realizing it.

What expression is your mouth communicating inwardly and outwardly- stress, anxiety, anger? Notice this and any other sensations in your mouth and even

the rest of your head and neck. Now clench your mouth and other muscles around it, holding for three breaths and release.

As you let go of the tension, allow your mouth to relax into a small smile to yourself and to the world around you. Take a few more moments to enjoy the sensations of relaxation and smiling.

As you come to the end of your practice, you might take time to reflect on where in your body you tend to hold emotions and tension, and adjust or breathe into those areas before finishing your practice. Remember too that at any point in your busy day you might choose to check in with your body and relax yourself. Perhaps before or during tense moments at work, after you read the news, with a partner or your family, or even before bed, you can CALM yourself down with this simple acronym.

3 R's Practice

The Three R's: An Introduction to Mindfulness

One of the best introductions and explanations of mindfulness comes from my colleague Brian Callahan called "The Three R's" of mindfulness. This practice also teaches us how to can bring mindfulness to everything in our lives. The three R's are Rest, Recognize and Repeat, and in this practice we can also see how mindfulness impacts our brains.

Rest

You can begin by finding a place to rest your awareness. I prefer to use the word rest, as this doesn't have to be a huge effort. Think of an anchor, which effortless holds a boat in place as it drifts, but not too far. Perhaps on your breath, perhaps on sounds or other senses around you, or perhaps on an image, in front of you or a mental image.

Recognize

Soon enough, your mind will wander off, no matter how interesting the anchor, or how exciting or boring, your breath might be. In that moment, just simply recognize the fact that your mind is wandering. In fact, *this* is the moment of mindfulness, not the fact that your mind has wandered, but that you recognized it. When you recognize *where* the mind has wandered, that's a moment of insight, getting to know your mind's habits. The more you practice, the more you see what your mind (and body) do in different situations.

Each time you name where the mind has gone, you practice "naming it to tame it" and quiet the limbic response, directing blood to the outer cortices and out of the amygdala and alarm system and strengthening those brain regions associated with self regulation.

So that the reality is not that mindfulness is keeping your mind perfectly still or thought-free but in fact every time your mind wanders, even if it wanders 1000 times, its just 1000 opportunities to practice mindfulness and gain yet another insight into your own experience to respond more skillfully.

Return

Once you've noticed where and when your mind has wandered, gently guide your awareness back to your anchor. As you do this, you are "working out" and building capacity and connection in the prefrontal cortex where you regulate your attention.
But each time we direct our wandering awareness back with kindness and compassion, like a child or puppy who has wandered off, we practice building the muscle of self compassion. If we can forgive ourselves for a little mind wandering in a moment of meditation when the stakes are low, we can practice forgiving ourselves and being kind in more challenging circumstances as well. The muscle of Self-compassion continues to grow.

Repeat

Guess what, your mind is going to keep wandering, so we just start fresh again in the cycle, constantly reborn in the present moment with another opportunity to practice.

The Three R's is something we can practice both formally and informally. Formally essentially means as a meditation, or like a workout for your brain. Take ten or thirty or however many minutes to rest your awareness on some kind of anchor-breathing, sounds, sensations or whatever, and recognize when your mind wanders and return. But we can also informally in daily life practice the three R's as well, to walking, to eating, to working, to conversations, and in that way bring awareness and compassion to anything that we do.

5 Mindful Walking ideas for Kids and Teens

I never learned mindful walking as a kid nor did I ever even hear about it until my first Mindfulness Based Stress Reduction course in my early 20's. Shortly after that, my practice of mindful walking deepened when I went on my first retreat with hundreds of participants in the rolling hills of southern Vermont, and a morning mindful walk was part of the ritual. From that simple practice of mindful walking, a mindful awareness began to permeate so many other daily activities and my life and outlook began to fundamentally change.

But a few childhood memories stand out from before I ever learned "mindful walking," and these still resonate in my teaching kids and teens today. One of my favorite memories is the sweet Audobon Society camp where I spent a number of summers growing up. One particularly vivid memory stands out to me: a group of eight-years-olds walking in the woods, following our counselors' instructions to make no sound and leave no trace. In that way, we would walk softly on the earth, not frighten away the animals and be able see more on our journey. Or, as an adult, I look back and wonder, maybe the counselors were just trying to get us to quiet down.

It was years later doing the silent walking on the Vermont retreat that I reflected back in those childhood memories of walking silently in the woods. It takes so much intentional focus, concentration, body awareness and deliberate intention, or, well mindfulness, to walk as silently as possible, especially over crunchy leaves and sticks in the forest. I share this story often when I teach ways to playfully engage kids, schools, counselors, families and even camps in ways to integrate more mindfulness.

With this inspiration in mind I want to share **six** different ways we can bring more mindfulness into walking to kids and teens.

a. Silent Walking

Like my own experience as a kid, the basic instruction here is simply *to walk as silently as possible*. Maybe even add in the suggestion of leaving no trace behind that someone could follow our footsteps and track us. When we deliberately walk as silently as possible, whether it's over a carpet, creaky floor boards, or crunchy leaves on the forest floor, we are marshalling all of our attention to the act of walking, aware of the sounds and sensations in our muscles and at the soles of our feet. What's more, making something playful is one of the best ways to teach,

and certainly one of the most fun ways to learn. So find a reason to be a spy or scout, a Ninja, a tracker, or someone else who has to move in absolute silence, leaving no trail behind them, and watch how attention and awareness shift right into the present.

b. Silly Walking

I believe that Jan Chozen Bays is the first one who was inspired by the old Monty Python, *Ministry of Silly Walks*, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=eCLp7zodUiI sketch to consider it a potential mindfulness practice. Think about it, after you've watched the sketch, of course. The more ridiculous your walk is, the more you have to focus on it to not fall over, and the more your self-consciousness and ego fall away the more you give yourself over to this totally goofy practice.

Kids can enjoy the video as inspiration, and often rather than going right into full on silliness, I'll suggest walking at first like yourself, then turning up the silliness to level one, then five, all the way up to ten, and then easing back down again.

This approach helps the more self-conscious among the kids (and us) ease into the activity, and practice transitioning between different mind and body states, often a challenge for kids and teens alike. Exploring the contrasts between silliness and seriousness helps kids strengthen our skills of self-regulation, body awareness and control.

c. Walk as If

It's not just walking in silence or silliness that can inspire greater awareness. As a teen and tween, theater games like walking as different characters or with different emotions brought me and my fellow theaters nerds right into the moment with new awareness. Or, as one drama teacher at workshop I was leaded reminded me, what you learn in performance is *presence,* and that's pretty close to mindfulness. What's more, walking like other people or with other people inspire more empathy and compassion. You can call out the different characters below, or write these and more on popsicle sticks or cards and have kids pick them out and switch every so often.

A few suggestions:

- Walk like a sugar addled five year old for a minute… then
- Walk like a heartbroken teenager…
- Walk like you just won the lottery…
- Walk like your team just lost a big game…
- Walk like you are heading to see an old friend…
- Walk like you are in a big hurry…
- Walk like you are going into a math test you haven't studied for…
- Walk, as Thich Nhat Hanh suggests, "as if your feet are kissing the earth…"
- Walk like yourself…

I always love adding "walk like yourself" into this practice, because it again helps boost awareness of our body in different emotional states, including what our usual emotional state is on any given day. What's more, when we discuss what thoughts and feelings come up, kids often talk about noticing when they walked like they were sad they didn't see as much, or when they were in a hurry, they cared less about other people. These can be powerful insights and lead us to…

d. Appreciative Walking

Positive psychology helps us to remember to notice what's going well in the world, appreciate the beauty or "take in the good" as Rick Hanson likes to say. This simple practice just encourages us not to move in any particular way, but to notice the beauty in the world around us. We can try to notice the life growing in the midst of the city, or the beauty or changes in what we see on a daily walk.

e. Balancing Acts

Walking is fundamentally about listening to and balancing our bodies. Watch a baby learn to walk, and you can see how much deliberate attention goes to just standing up without toppling over. After we are a little older, balance is not such an issue, but we can add a balance challenge, and with it add more awareness. Think about just making a little competition or having fun with practices like:

- Walk a tightrope, or simply imagining that you are

- Imagine walking over thin ice
- Balance an egg on a spoon and walk
- Try to balance something on your head as you walk
- Walk with coins or action figures balanced on the toes of your shoes

Sounds countdown:

- Allow your eyes to close if it feels comfortable
- Now stretch your ears to hear the farthest away sound possible, using your superhero listening abilities, perhaps outside of the building
- And now coming a bit closer, sounds closer to the building, nearby the building, or inside the building at a distance… (footsteps, voices, other sounds)
- Closer still, you might bring awareness to sounds inside the room… (the fan, computer, other sounds)
- Now noticing sounds close by, (your neighbors breath or rustling clothing or creaking chair, or even your own)
- Now noticing sounds inside your body (heartbeat, breath, pulse, stomach growling)
- Can you notice the sounds of your own thoughts?
- Listening back outwards again, perhaps noticing sounds from the left….
- From the right, near and far…
- In front…
- Behind you…
- From above…
- From below…
- Sounds inside of sounds…
- Spaces between sounds…

- And even try covering one ear and the other, cupping your ears both forward and backwards…

Visualizations

Some imagery and metaphors:

Below is a brief list of metaphors I have compiled from other therapists and meditation teachers. You can try envisioning thoughts as:

- being carried gently downstream on leaves, some moving fast, some stuck swirling in place
- items being carried past on a conveyor belt
- words or pictures marked on parade floats, or signs carried by marchers in a parade
- autumn leaves falling from trees and landing softly on an empty, accepting blanket of consciousness
- being highlighted, one by one, as a karaoke video highlights lyrics
- bubbles floating past in the air
- clouds forming and unforming, passing by against the blue sky
- scenery passing by the windows of a train
- animals, such as happy and sad fish swimming through the water in an aquarium, or angry and peaceful birds flying by
- traffic seen from high above; some thoughts may be big buses that cannot stop, others may be motorcycles zipping from lane to lane, and still others may be stuck on the side of the road
- scenes and characters in a movie
- leaves blowing across your path
- raindrops hitting a windshield before being wiped away
- specks of dust floating in a ray of sunlight

Metaphors for remaining present and aware in the face of challenges

- You are watching the cars of a roller coaster or carnival ride go by, with ups and downs, twists and turns, but you're not climbing on board
- You are throwing a stone into pond and watching the ripples it makes, but not getting bounced around them
- You are a bee flitting from flower to flower, and you return back to the hive with sweet new insights from the world

Counting to 10 Breaths for Kids:

1. 🦄 **Unicorn Breaths**

Number one breath is for the unicorn,
Roll back your wings and extend your horn.

2. 👦👦 **Double Breathing**

I breath in as you breathe out,
Count to two as we breathe about!

3. **Three Wishes Breath**

Three wish each breath, the genie says to you,
Breathe a wish for you, for me, and the whole world too!

4. 🐈 **Legged Friend Breath**

Breathe in like a kitty with your soft fur,
A long exhale with a relaxing purr.

5. 👋 **Five Finger Breath**

Trace five fingers nice and slow,
Up and in, out and down as you go!

6. 🛑 **Stop Sign Breath**

Six is Stop sign breath when you've got too much speed,
Stop, Take a Breath, Observe and Proceed!

7. 🌊 **Seven Seas Breath**

Breathing like the waves of the seven seas,
Your breath out fills the sail with a cool ocean breeze.

8. Figure Eight Breaths

Imagine your breath now twirling on skates,
Breathe in and breathe out for lazy eights,

9. ☁ **Cloud Breath**

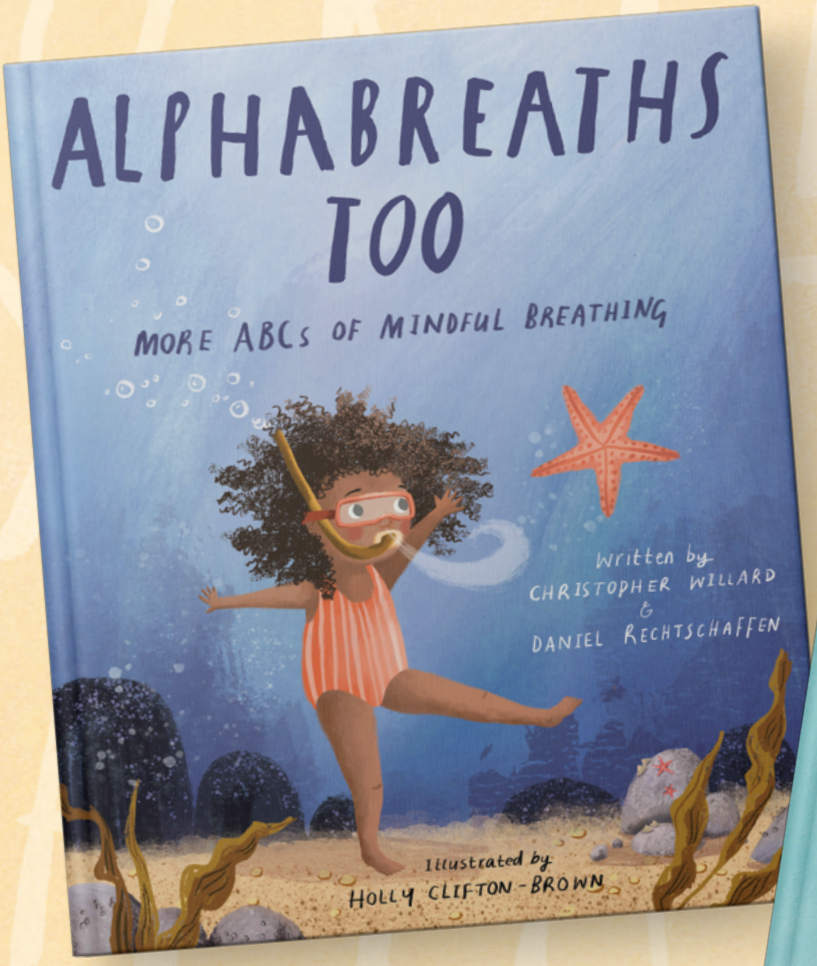
Breathe in floating up all the way to cloud nine,
Breathe out relax, goodnight sunshine!

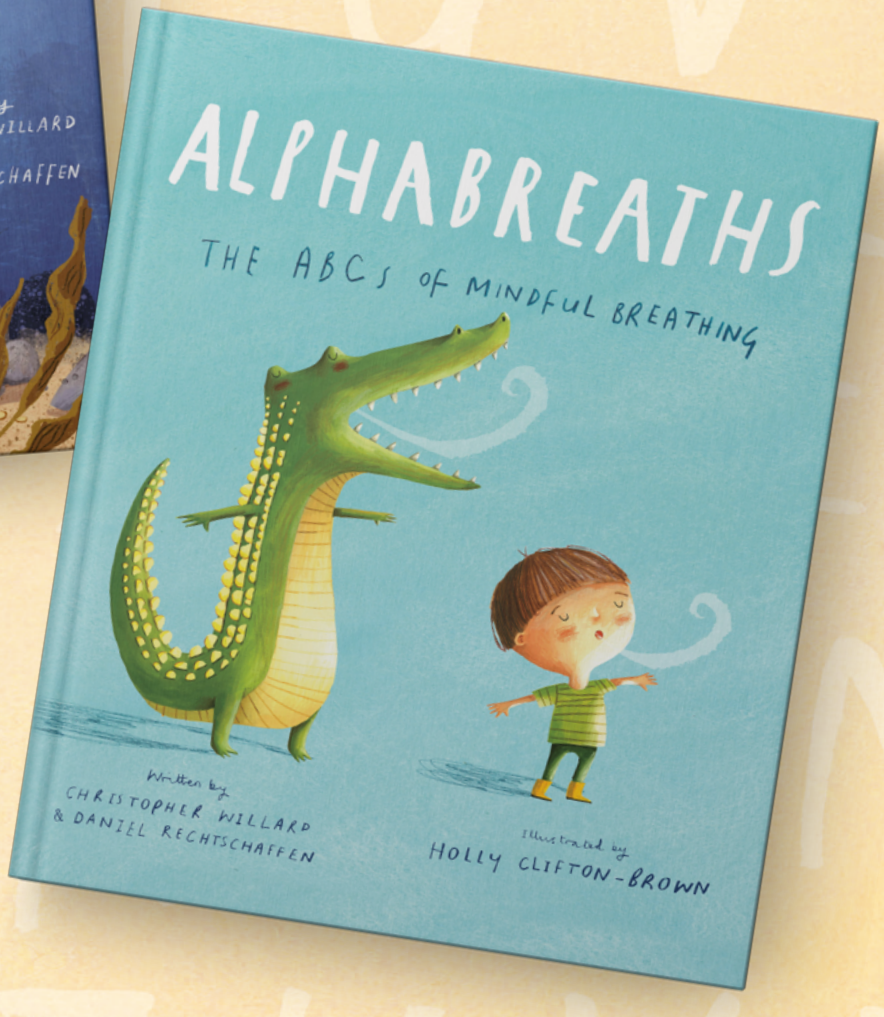
10. 🐑 Counting Sheep

Into your bed count ten fluffy sheep,
A soft breath in, and baa for a breath out as you float off to sleep.

STORYTIME KIT

Five activities to explore and experiment with mindful breathing





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What Is Mindful Breathing?

Mindful breathing is when we pay attention to the feeling of our breath in our bodies. When we focus on the natural flow of our breath, it helps us to feel calmer and clearer. When kids practice mindful breathing, they can follow the inhale and exhale in fun, engaging ways—like the breaths we've created for *Alphabreaths*—and enjoy all the benefits that come from that!

As a warm-up, you can start with Question Breath to give children a chance to check in with how they feel. Encourage them to share their answers.

Q Question Breath

As you breathe in, ask yourself how you are feeling. As you breathe out, answer.

MAKE UP YOUR OWN ALPHABREATH

Many of the breaths in the *Alphabreaths* books were invented by or adapted from kids themselves. Here's a chance to get even more imaginative and create your very own breaths! ***You can adapt the following steps based on age and how much time you have.***

1. Think of something that you love or admire that can help you focus on your breath. For example, it can be an animal, a superhero, your favorite food, something in nature, or anything else that makes you feel good.

2. How does this (animal/superhero/food/thing) make you feel? Does it help you feel calm when you're frustrated or brave when you're nervous? Does it cheer you up when you're feeling down?

3. Now comes the fun part: How can you act it out as a breath? What will you do as you breathe in? What will you do as you breathe out?

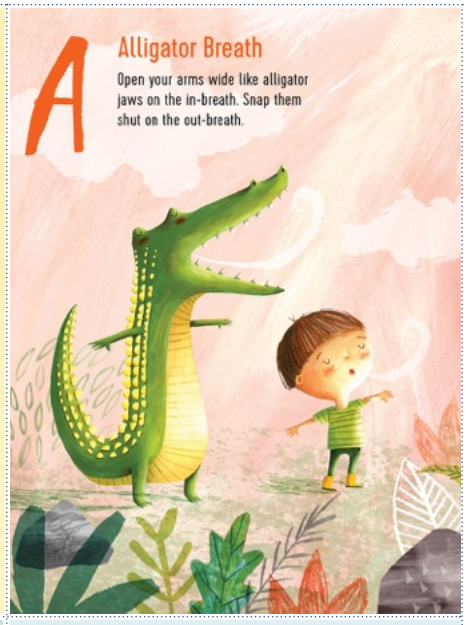
4. Describe your breath. You can use one of these examples to guide you or write it in your own words.
   - Breathe in, feeling brave and strong like a lion. Breathe out, letting out a powerful (but quiet) roar. [Breathe in, feeling _____ and _____ like a _____. Breathe out, letting out a _____.]
   - Breathe in and imagine you are a superhero. Breathe out and imagine how you will help someone. [Breathe in and imagine you are a _____. Breathe out and imagine _____.]

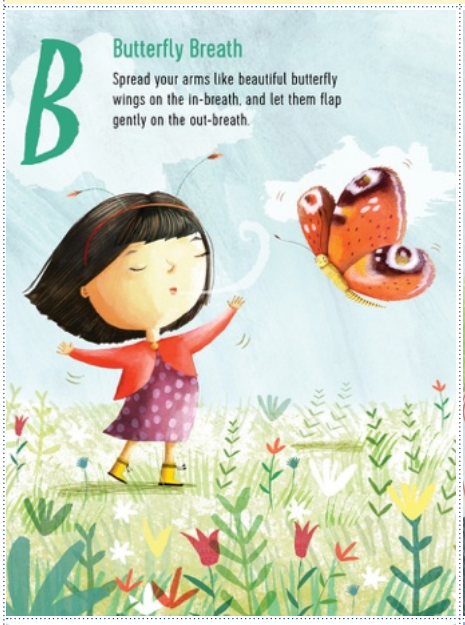
5. Draw a picture of your breath. At the top, write the letter, name, and description.

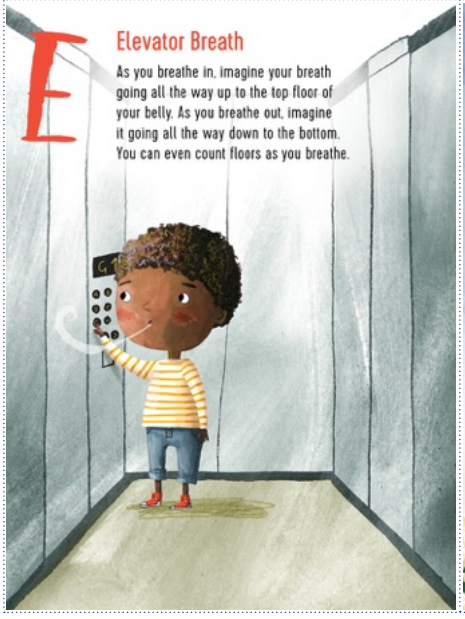
6. Teach someone how to do this breath, then do it together.

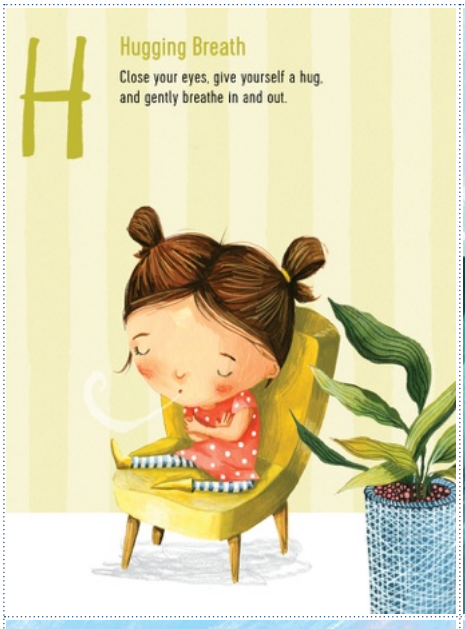
Alphabreaths Matching Game

- Cut out the cards and shuffle them.
- Lay the cards facedown.
- Player 1 turns over two cards.
- If the letters on the cards match, the player takes them and turns over two more.
- If they do not match, the player turns them facedown and player 2 takes a turn.
- Play continues until all the cards have been picked up.
- The player with the most card sets wins.



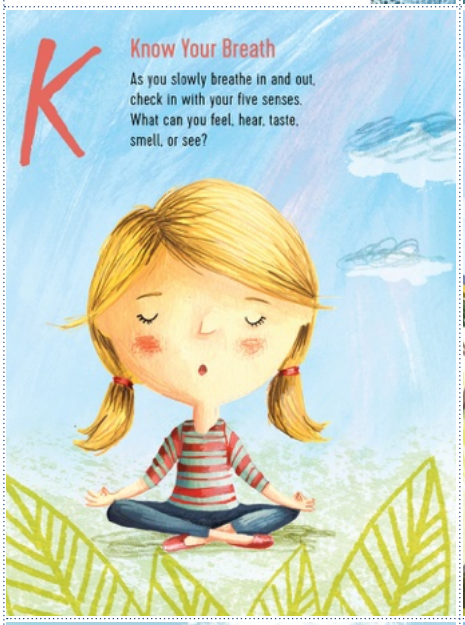


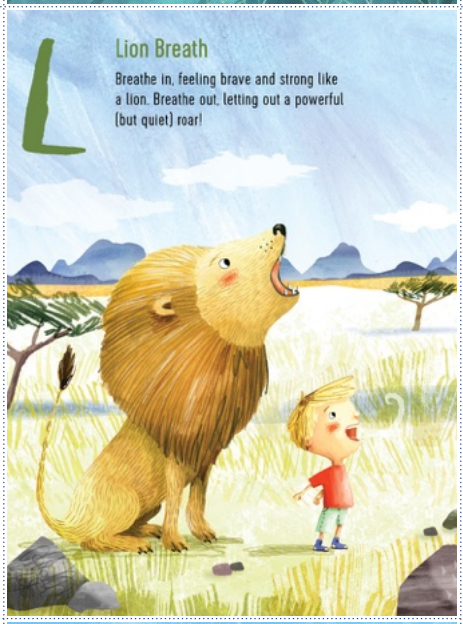


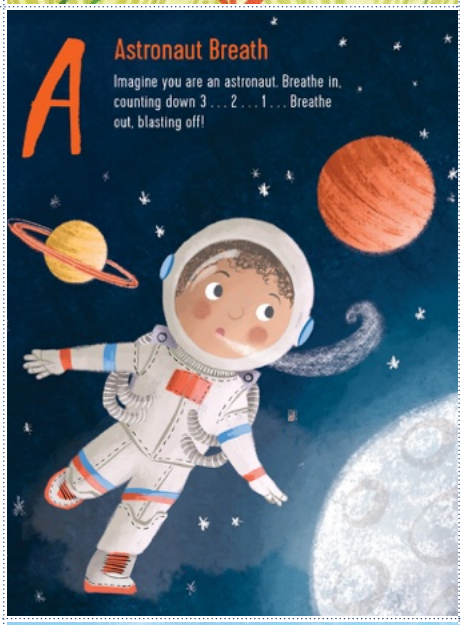

H
Hugging Breath
Close your eyes, give yourself a hug, and gently breathe in and out.

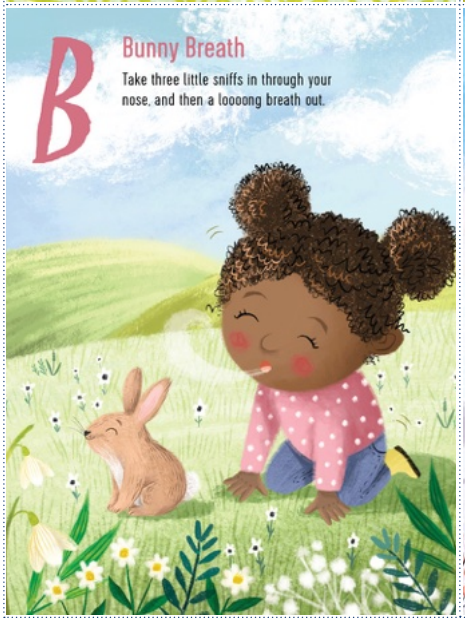

I
Ice Breath
Sit very still like you are frozen in ice. Notice how your body moves as you breathe in and out.


J
Join Your Breath
Join the rhythm of your in-breath and out-breath with a friend, so that you are breathing in and out together.

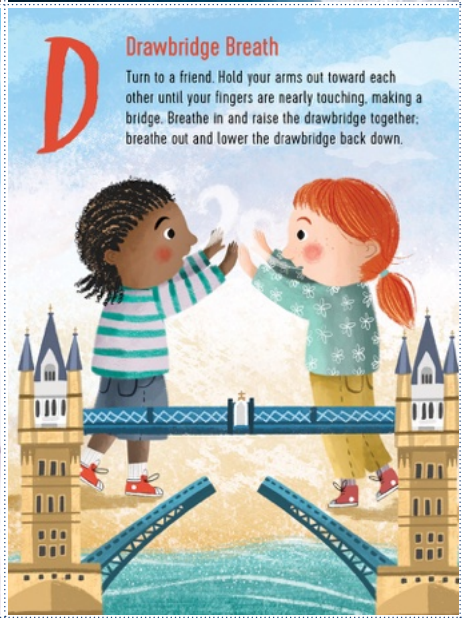

K
Know Your Breath
As you slowly breathe in and out, check in with your five senses. What can you feel, hear, taste, smell, or see?

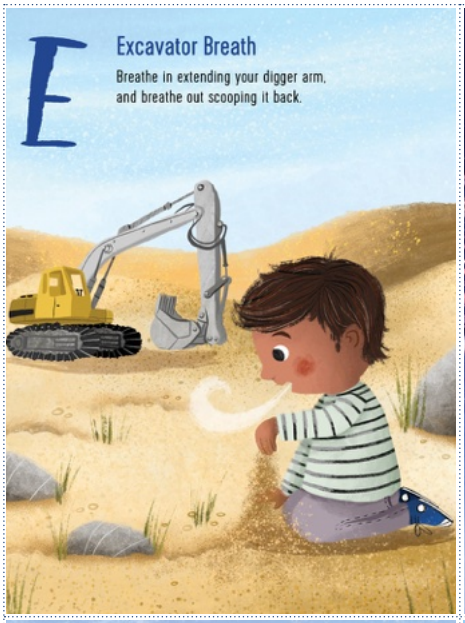

L
Lion Breath
Breathe in, feeling brave and strong like a lion. Breathe out, letting out a powerful (but quiet) roar!

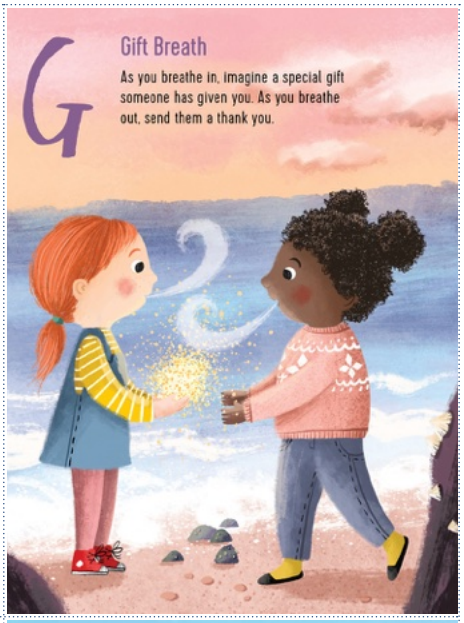

A
Astronaut Breath
Imagine you are an astronaut. Breathe in, counting down 3 . . . 2 . . . 1 . . . Breathe out, blasting off!

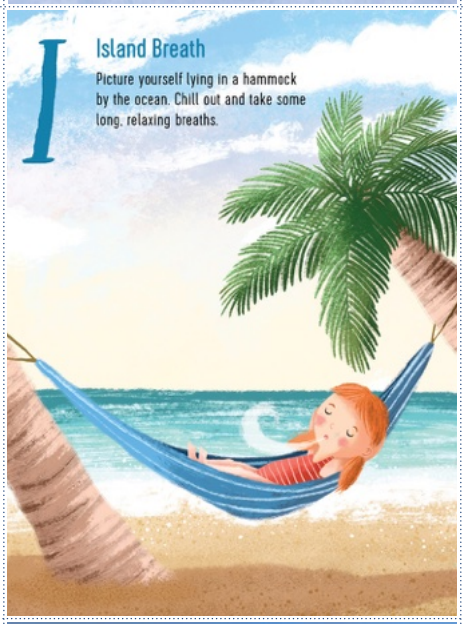

B
Bunny Breath
Take three little sniffs in through your nose, and then a loooong breath out.

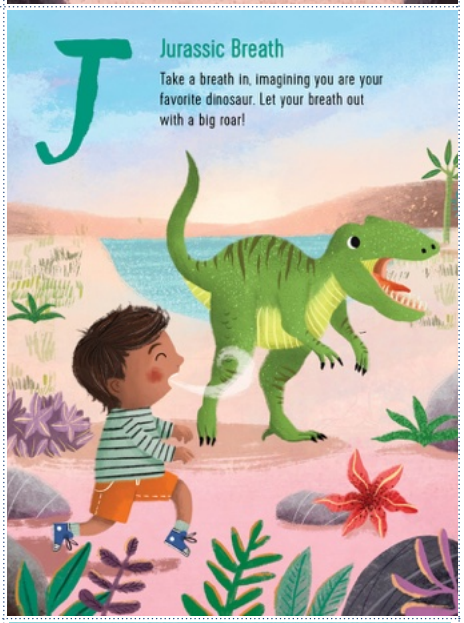

C
Chocolate Breath
Hold up an imaginary mug of hot chocolate. Breathe in through your nose, smelling the delicious drink. Then breathe out through your mouth, like you are blowing on your hot chocolate to cool it off.

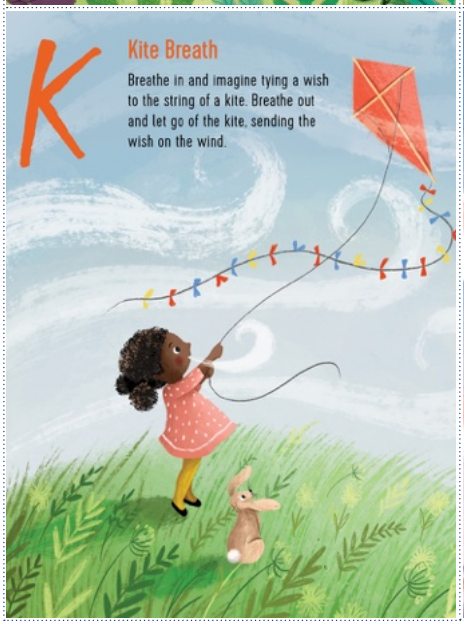

D
Drawbridge Breath
Turn to a friend. Hold your arms out toward each other until your fingers are nearly touching, making a bridge. Breathe in and raise the drawbridge together; breathe out and lower the drawbridge back down.





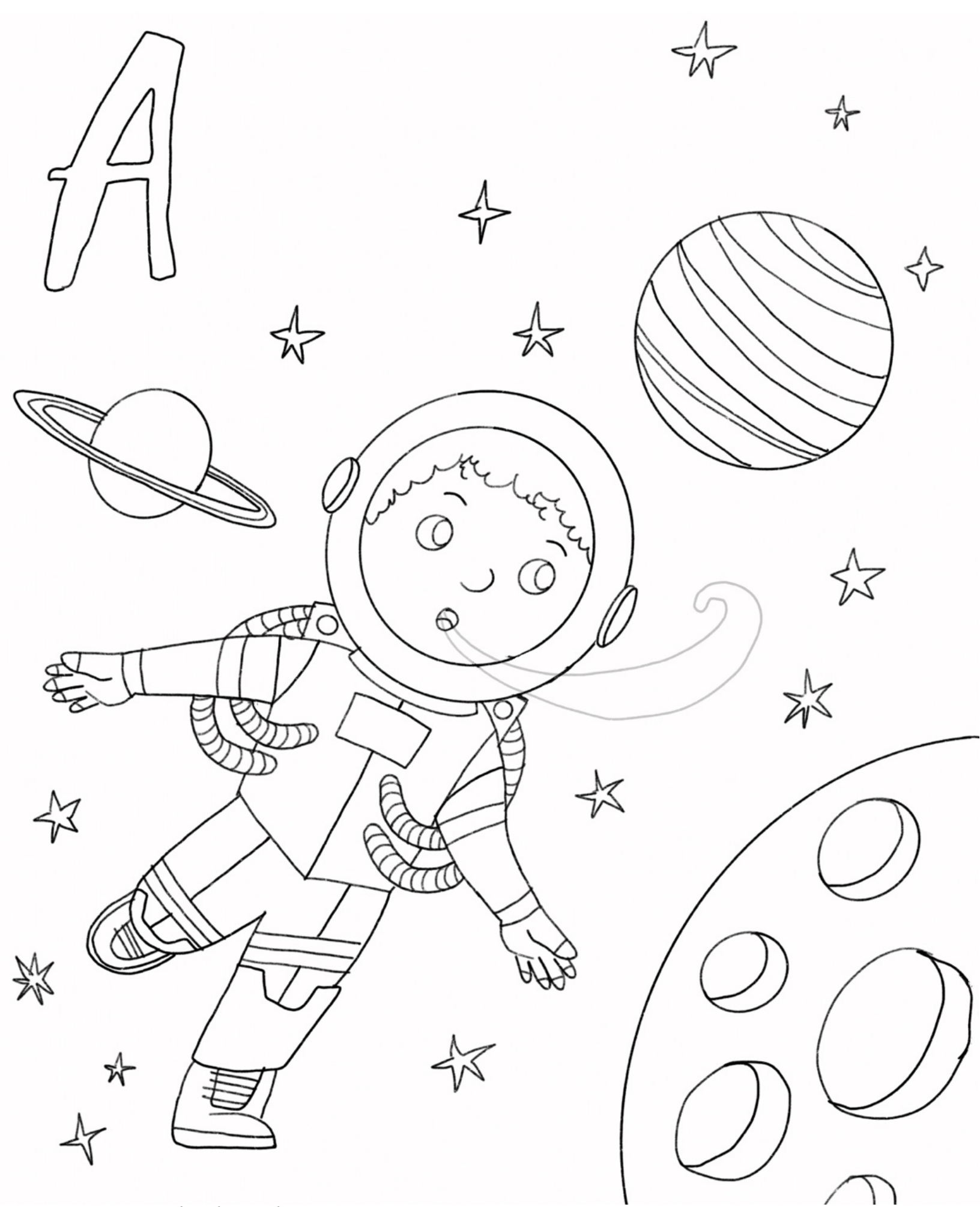






Daily Breaths

- Put the cards in a jar.
- Each day pull out a card to practice that breath.



Astronaut Breath Coloring Sheet

Superhero Breath Coloring Sheet