Director’s Corner: Why Explore?

Early childhood educators utilize a broad continuum of teaching strategies to facilitate children’s learning. For example, at the beginning of the school year, we directly teach one hand-washing strategy with an accompanying song so that all the children learn the “best-practice” procedure, but we invite more open-ended discussion to negotiate the classroom meaning of “be a kind friend”. Also, we provide multiple opportunities in the context of dramatic play, block building, sand table exploration, playdough creation, etc., for children to discover ways to interact effectively with their peers, all with the support of adults who model appropriate behaviors.

The same continuum of strategies applies to our support for learning in all developmental domains, including self-esteem & independence, interaction & cooperation, communication, discovery & exploration, physical capabilities / health & safety, and artistic expression & appreciation. We use the more “teacher-directed” strategies when they are efficient and effective for learning facts, rules, techniques, and other procedures. Discovery approaches via play and other open explorations are very useful for helping children notice interesting features of the world, themselves, and others, observe cause and effect relationships in the physical and social spheres, and begin to ask questions about how things work. Such discoveries serve as “preparation for future learning” in that they spark interest and build experience that serves as a foundation for inquiry activities that are structured and guided by the teachers to help children build key concepts in all of the topic areas within science, math, social studies, literature, the arts, technology, etc.

Since young children are essentially universal novices, they benefit from having a range of opportunities to safely explore interesting spaces and materials both indoors and outdoors. These explorations promote interest, engagement, and creativity – essentially a positive and proactive approach to learning. Exploring also strengthens skills in all developmental domains.

- Self-Esteem & Independence – pride in achievements & motivation to independently explore
- Interaction & Cooperation – inclination to work and learn collaboratively
- Communication – emphasis on descriptive language to share discoveries
- Discovery & Exploration – disposition to experiment and extend learning via the inquiry cycle
- Physical Capabilities, Health & Safety – skilled and safe use of bodies with purpose and control
- Artistic Expression & Appreciation – investment in creative outlets, both your own and others’

To give a concrete example, exploring playdough enables children to independently pursue their own ideas and projects, as well as to experiment with different tools and materials that we provide with the playdough. Working with playdough strengthens children’s hand muscles, encourages eye-hand coordination, and builds tool use skills – all in ways that are within their developmental reach. When peers are involved, the playdough work affords children the opportunity to learn social interaction skills for sharing and conversation skills for communicating their ideas and making their requests known. Either individually or with peers, children can build artistic expression skills for both visual arts and pretend play. In my Director’s Corner articles this year, I plan to share the benefits of children learning through explorations of nature, literature, cooking, construction, etc. We hope you will explore with us!