

# choice time

How to Deepen Learning Through Inquiry and Play, PreK–2



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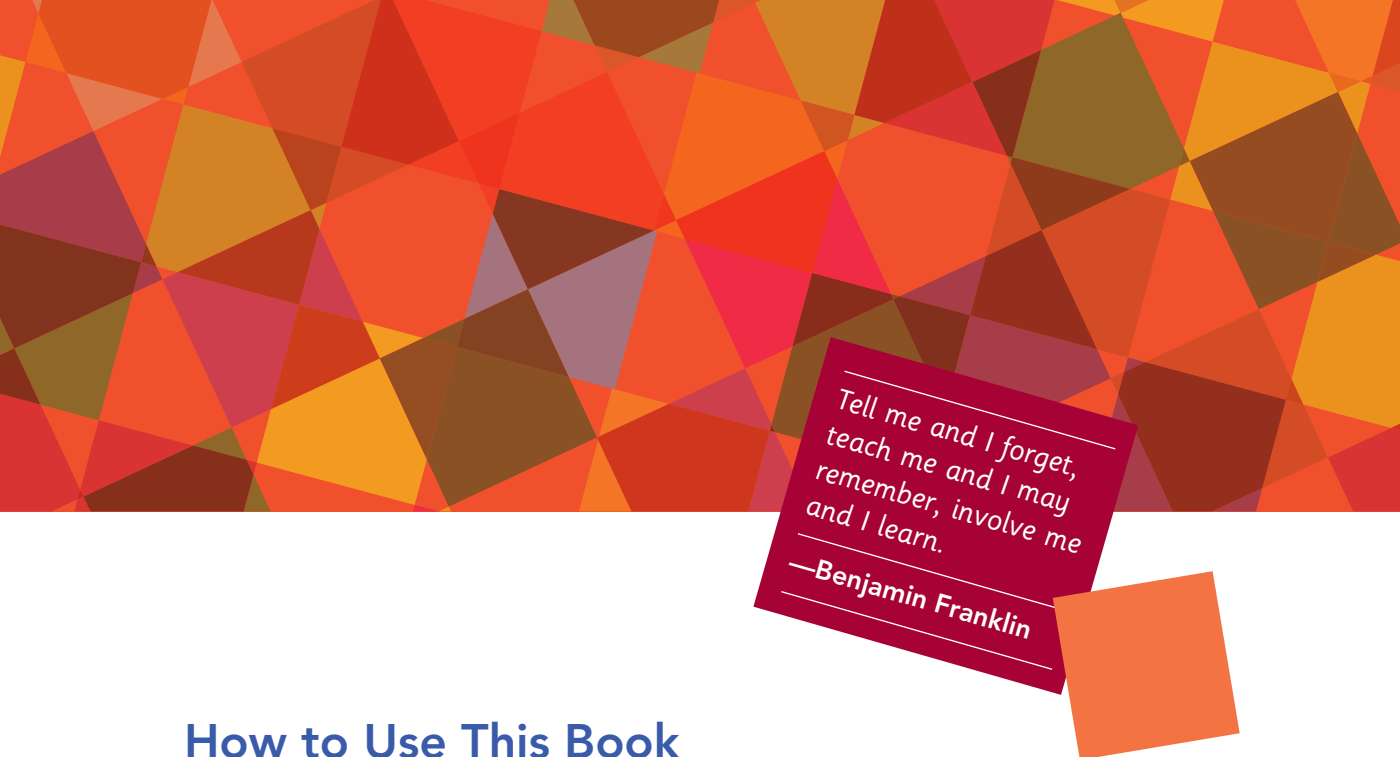
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*Tell me and I forget,  
teach me and I may  
remember, involve me  
and I learn.*

*—Benjamin Franklin*

## How to Use This Book

I wrote this book with two major goals in mind: I want to show what a powerful, authentic, inquiry-based choice time could achieve when placed at the heart of an early childhood classroom. In addition, I want to give teachers everything they would need to implement choice time centers.

### How This Book Works

The book is divided into two parts. Part 1 begins with “Why Choice Time and Play Are Important.” This chapter presents the research on why play is important and what children can achieve through play as well as a description of the different types of play. The second chapter, “The Classroom Speaks,” gives practical ideas for classroom arrangement, lists important materials, and offers suggestions for scheduling choice time in grades preK through 2. The last chapter in Part 1, “A Classroom Where Centers Thrive,” focuses on the management of choice time—how to plan for centers, implement predictable routines, and use the workshop model. I also answer some questions that teachers frequently ask.

Part 2 focuses on what I might often call the meat and potatoes of choice time. It includes six chapters that present centers that will most likely be regular centers in your classroom. I describe the reasoning behind each center, show how to set it up, and list materials you'll need to begin. I also give ideas for introducing the center, provide some helpful minilessons, and suggest useful changes to keep things fresh across the year. This section of the book provides a practical template that can be used for observing, reflecting, and planning next steps in each center.

If you are a teacher new to choice time, you might want to use the centers just as I've described them and eventually take off on your own. If you've been using choice time already, I hope that this book gives you some new ideas for variations on your existing centers. In either case, I hope that you will heed the central lesson of this book, which is to tailor the centers to the interests of the children in *your* classroom. A child's engagement is the most powerful asset we have for teaching and learning.

You can continue a conversation about choice time with me and with other teachers by visiting my blog at [investigatingchoicetime.com](http://investigatingchoicetime.com) and sharing your ideas and experiences. I look forward to hearing from you!



## Foreword

I first met Renée Dinnerstein in the mid-'90s when I was a research assistant at the Teachers College Reading and Writing Project (TCRWP). My job was to go to classrooms all over New York City and surrounding areas, day after day, to observe teachers and children engaged in reading workshops. Then I'd head back to the Reading and Writing Project to share findings and observations; this was the time when the TCRWP was morphing from an organization focusing on writing to one that included reading instruction. On a résumé, this would be viewed as a great job, but for an aspiring teacher, a job that enabled one to work with colleagues at the TCRWP and in classrooms like Renée's was an extraordinary gift.

When Lucy Galkins sent me to Renée's classroom at PS 321 in Brooklyn, she told me to watch everything closely because I could find gold there. One day, I had my times mixed up and I arrived early, well before Renée's reading workshop was to begin. She invited me in, explaining that it was choice time. My choice to go in that day changed everything! From that day forward, I made sure I *always* arrived at Renée's classroom early because I did not want to miss the wonder of choice time in her kindergarten. I had struck classroom gold!

During choice time, Renée was often hard to find as she sat alongside children, observing, nudging, and supporting their approximations as they made sense of their world and their learning through their play. Her room was abuzz. There was a lot of action and conversation, but no signs of chaos or conflict. I eavesdropped on and observed children paired up on fluffy cushions, reading together inside a cozy refashioned and beautifully painted refrigerator box; children zooming small trains along subway maps as they taught themselves about directions and puzzled out map symbols together; and a small group working on a model of a suspension bridge that spanned a portion of the classroom while another group built cities in the block area. During any given choice time, there was a kaleidoscope of work and play—children cooking snacks, making plays, creating art, observing the class turtle, and so on. On the surface, it looked seamless and almost effortless, like all of the moving pieces just fell into place, but I always wondered, “How does this happen? What did Renée do?”

I tried to find moments to ask Renée questions or tell her about the striking things children were doing and saying, but it wasn’t easy to have those conversations during class time because when children were in the room, they were Renée’s focal point. The children were (and are) her priority, and they always had her undivided attention. Fortunately, we now have this book in which Renée takes us behind the scenes to the belief systems and planning that lead to robust, engaging, child-centered choice times. As I read it, I felt like I was finally having the conversation I longed to have back in the days when I observed in her classroom. In this book, Renée shares the secrets and stories of choice time so that any teacher might be able to create these authentic, engaging learning opportunities for his or her own students.

When I was looking to teach, Renée was one of the main reasons I applied for a position at PS 321. I wanted to work alongside teachers like her. We were colleagues at PS 321 for several years. Renée’s presence in grade-level meetings was always grounding. She thought of the children first, no matter what. Renée served as any group’s conscience, helping us stay rooted in the real needs of our students as we weathered ever-escalating expectations and occasionally became enamored by the latest teaching fads and tangled up in education



buzzwords like *rigor*, *stamina*, and *standards*. Through her questions and her actions, Renée always reminded us that our true work was to teach *children*, not to teach stuff.

Even though she was more seasoned and experienced than many on our grade level, Renee modeled humility and vulnerability. She asked questions, she shared problems, and always, she remained steadfast in keeping children first and foremost. I learned from Renée the important but simple truth that teaching isn't about *us*, the teachers, but it's about doing what's right for *them*, the learners. I imagine you can detect a theme here.

Over the years, in my work as a consultant, I've asked teachers to think of resources they couldn't live without in their professional lives, including three people, three places, and three things. In other words, "Who and what have influenced you and continue to fuel you as a teacher?" If I were to answer this myself, I would name Renée. Our paths have crossed frequently, from the first time I researched in her classroom, to my years as a teacher at PS 321, to the cobblestone streets of Reggio Emilia, Italy, when I had the incredibly good fortune to participate in a study tour that Renée and Matt Glover had organized, to our shared hotel room at an NCTE conference, when we both felt exhausted and perplexed by the lights and noise of Las Vegas.

Through all of our shared experiences, Renée has become a cherished friend. I admire so much about her and her family, and I realize that not only is she one of my professional heroes, but she is a personal inspiration, as well.

As you read on in this book, you'll know what I know: Renée is a tireless and vocal advocate for the role of play, inquiry, and choice in early childhood classrooms, even when the education climate is storming with corporate reform, classroom rigor, and curricula on steroids. She has worked in schools all over, supporting teachers across the grades as they launched inquiries and created choice times in their classrooms. In this capacity, Renée empowers teachers with whom she works, as many of them have presented stories from their classrooms at local and national conferences.

And now, Renée has empowered us all by writing a book that matters so much. By sharing research and classroom anecdotes, Renée has given us a rationale for and a vision of choice time that can be transferred and tailored

to any classroom. Even if you have never had the pleasure of watching Renée at work in her own classroom, you'll find that she writes in the same way she teaches, side by side with you, working tirelessly to get it right, staying true to her values, and always, always keeping her eyes on children.

—Kathy Collins

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Stand aside for a while and leave room for learning, observe carefully what children do, and then, if you have understood well, perhaps teaching will be different from before.

—Loris Malaguzzi, *The Hundred Languages of Children*



# Why Choice Time and Play Are Important

Some years ago, my daughter visited my classroom during choice time. Observing the children at play—turning the dramatic play corner into a doctor’s office, constructing spaceships from toilet paper rolls and egg cartons at the art table, using a screwdriver to take apart a broken telephone at the science center, using tubes and funnels to “invent” a machine at the water table—she said, “I feel like I’m walking into *King of Hearts!*” In this French movie set during World War I, alerted to an oncoming invasion, villagers flee to the countryside, accidentally

leaving the gates of the town asylum open. The asylum residents wander about the town in wonder and amazement, happily assuming the jobs of the absent villagers. Although they understand some aspects of these roles, they add their own sometimes comical interpretations as they attempt to re-create what they perceive to be life in the outside world.

That morning in my classroom, my daughter observed children engaged in activities where they had the opportunity to imagine in very big ways. During choice time, children have the freedom and opportunity to try out ideas, seek answers, test predictions, navigate new social interactions, and experiment with a variety of materials in both structured and unstructured ways. *I'm going to see how many Unifix cubes it takes to go all around the classroom. I bet it will be more than a hundred!* As they play, children imagine themselves to be scientists, artists, doctors, mathematicians, architects, and inventors as they design and construct imaginary worlds. *We made a plan to build a spaceship. Here's our drawing. It has all the important parts because I found a diagram of a spaceship in a space book. Now Ian and I are going to build it with blocks.*

Children's play during choice time is literally fueled with imagination, and as Sir Ken Robinson (2006) has noted, "creativity is putting your imagination to work, and it's produced the most extraordinary results in human culture." Young children, of course, put imagination to work instinctively. They don't

need anyone to teach them how to invent games and make up stories. They're naturals! In fact, as Diane Ackerman has observed, play is a natural part of life for all animals (except ants), and across species, play "invites problem-solving, allowing a creature to test its limits and develop strategies" (2000, 4). Through play, children learn the social mores that help them succeed in life (Brown 2010).

Early childhood educators have always understood the importance of play—in all its many forms—in the lives of their students. *Free play* is spontaneous and



**Figure 1.1.** Building a boat in the block center

filled with make-believe as children pursue the fantasies of their unencumbered imaginations (Hirsh-Pasek and Golinkoff 2003). A twig becomes the sword of a swashbuckling pirate, or a piece of flowing fabric is transformed into a superhero's cape or the gown of a fairy princess. Free play is entirely child directed and free of adult intervention.

The play my daughter observed in my classroom is what is sometimes called *guided play* (Hirsh-Pasek et al. 2008). Guided play takes place in a purposeful environment that's been carefully planned to stimulate and support children's curiosity and creativity. As students interact with one another and the materials, teachers observe, record, confer, occasionally participate, or facilitate, and they use this information to plan next steps. However, the *children* decide how they will explore and interact with the materials, not the teachers. Although both types of play are important for the developing child, this book focuses on implementing inquiry-based, guided play in the classroom.

During choice time, children choose to play in a variety of centers around the room. Each center has been carefully designed and equipped to support play and inquiry that will nurture children's growth and development. The materials and activities in each center change over time in response to students' needs and interests and the academic focus of the curriculum. Examples of common centers are dramatic play, art, science, math, building (blocks and Legos), and music.

## Recognizing and Honoring the Many Forms of Play

Before they ever come to school, children naturally learn and grow as they play with each other and with adults. This learning is essentially effortless—a natural consequence of play. Seeing this, it just makes sense that developmentally appropriate practices in classrooms should tap into the natural energy of play that children bring with them to school. In a 2012 position paper, the National Association for the Education of Young Children (NAEYC) notes the many

benefits of children’s play to developmentally appropriate practice. To clearly see each of these benefits in action, all you have to do is picture the children playing in the imaginary doctor’s office on the morning my daughter visited my classroom (see pages 101–102). As the NAEYC paper notes, children’s play has a number of advantages:

- *It helps develop self-regulation.* Children take turns playing different roles at different times. One child wants to be the doctor *now*, but she has to wait her turn.
- *It promotes the development of language.* Drawing from their experiences, the children support each other in using the particular language of a doctor’s office: *fever, X-ray, medicine.*
- *It promotes cognition.* All the children must *think* their way through the play in very intentional ways. *I am in a doctor’s office. What should I do next?*
- *It promotes social competence.* As children execute a successful play experience together, each of them is empowered by the role she or he plays in its success.
- *It gives children opportunities to explore the world.* In dramatic play particularly, children bring the world into their play, where they can explore it safely. Today it’s a doctor’s office; next week it might be a camping expedition or a fire station.
- *It provides opportunities for children to interact.* It’s difficult to play “doctor’s office” by yourself, so children must interact and co-construct all the meaning and decision making.
- *It provides opportunities for children to express and control their emotions.* All sorts of emotional issues can arise in play: fairness, inclusion and exclusion, a lack of understanding, varied expectations, success and failure.
- *It helps children develop their symbolic and problem-solving abilities.* Two chairs placed side by side make an examination table. But wait—it’s not long enough for the “patient” to lie down on. *Let’s get two more chairs!*
- *It gives children opportunities to practice emerging skills.* The doctor writes a prescription, carefully sounding out the words, “Pills for a cold.”

The bottom line is, when children are at play, they're not just playing—they're learning. Play is the engine that drives their learning.

## Play in Challenging Times

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Given the clear, unequivocal position on play as developmentally appropriate practice by the NAEYC, you might think time for play is a given in early childhood classrooms everywhere. Unfortunately, opportunities for play are disappearing from children's lives, both inside and outside school. Early childhood teachers who believe strongly in the efficacy of play are often thwarted by today's education climate. Common Core State Standards, teacher ratings, and high-stakes testing draw our attention away from what we know is best for children. Running records and math assessments eat up hours of classroom time. The advocacy group Alliance for Childhood published a scathing report, *Crisis in the Kindergarten*, documenting the harm being done by transforming "public kindergarten from places where love of learning was thoughtfully nurtured into pressure-cooker classrooms where teachers are required to follow scripts, labor under unrealistic one-size-fits-all standards, and test children relentlessly on their performance" (Miller and Almon 2009, 15). It goes on to say that kindergarten has "ceased to be a garden of delight and has become a place of stress and distress" (15).

Stress and distress, of course, have developmental implications that extend beyond the classroom. In 2012, the American Academy of Pediatrics published "The Importance of Play in Promoting Healthy Child Development and Maintaining Strong Parent-Child Bond: Focus on Children in Poverty." The article warns:

To effectively preserve play in the lives of economically disadvantaged children, its presence in schools . . . must be supported. In schools, the need to support social and emotional learning and healthy child development must be held alongside the need to increase academic scores. Otherwise, school engagement might suffer and efforts at creating a better-prepared generation might fail. (Milteer, Ginsburg, and Mulligan 2012, 209)

Is it possible for a teacher of young children to support social and emotional learning and healthy child development alongside academic learning, especially in the face of so many outside pressures? I believe it is possible and that a play-based curriculum best supports children across a wide spectrum of development. When planned thoughtfully, provocative and enriching centers can support and enhance reading, writing, mathematics, and phonics curriculum and also give children opportunities to be playful, self-directed, creative thinkers. The chapters that follow will help you imagine possibilities for these kinds of centers, but first it's important to understand the nature of play itself and all the ways curriculum might be developed with a focus on play. After all, as teachers, it's important that we are specific as we articulate, implement, and share with families, administrators, and classroom visitors the important learning that takes place while children are working playfully at their centers.

## The Many Forms of Play

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If you think again about the classroom scene my daughter witnessed on the morning she visited my classroom, it would be easy to label the children's actions simply as *play*, as in, "Look, they are playing." *Play*, however, is a very general term that can refer to a whole range of actions. In fact, almost anything, if undertaken in a playful spirit, could be called play and would come with all the benefits outlined earlier. But different types of play require different kinds of thinking, actions, and interactions. When planning for play-based curriculum, it's important to be very clear about these differences because they help us see ways to tie play to specific academic areas.

In describing what play should look like in kindergarten, *Crisis in the Kindergarten* (Miller and Almon 2009) distinguishes between twelve categories. Three of them—rough-and-tumble play, risk-taking play, and gross motor play—take place mostly outdoors and are outside the scope of this book. (For more information about recess and outdoor play, see the 2010 book *Playing for Keeps: Life and Learning on a Public School Playground*, by Deborah Meier, Brenda S. Engel, and Beth Taylor). The other nine types of play encompass the forms of exploration that support children's social, emotional, creative, and intellectual growth.



## Artistic Play

In artistic play, children use a variety of materials to create and symbolically express both personal and aesthetic ideas. A well-equipped art center might include everything from clay to drawing tools to collage supplies. The thinking children do in artistic play is focused very specifically on the potential of different materials. It's possibility oriented—*What could I paint with these acrylics and that large blank paper?* (see Figure 1.2)—and children often revise their thinking as they play. Artistic play might also spring up spontaneously in other centers. For example, a child exploring leaves in a science center might decide to paint a picture of a tree in full autumn color.



Figure 1.2. What could I paint?

## Sensory Play

Play that specifically engages a child's senses—touch, taste, sight, smell, hearing—is sensory play. Sensory play involves thinking about similarities and differences (*This one is rough; that one is smooth.*) and also connections (*This pencil eraser smells sort of like cinnamon.*). A center might be devoted specifically to exploring with one or more senses, but sensory play will also be incorporated into so many other kinds of play. Finger painting, for example, is artistic play but it's also very sensory in nature. Children exploring seashells will naturally feel them and notice the different textures, and children sorting coins might smell their different metallic odors. Children playing at a water or sand table will have lots of opportunities to heighten their senses.

## Fine Motor Play

When children work on puzzles, sew pillows or dolls, string beads into necklaces, and sort materials at the science and math centers, these are all forms of fine motor play. Fine motor play helps children gain control over the mind-hand



**Figure 1.3.** By threading a needle, this kindergartner is also refining his motor skills.

relationship—*How do I get this thread through that hole?* (see Figure 1.3)—and develop the skills necessary for writing and drawing and all sorts of other work and life tasks. Centers of all kinds might purposefully include possibilities for fine motor play, and of course unplanned opportunities spring up naturally as well (a screw falls off a microscope and has to be reattached, for example).

### Rule-Based Play

Because they are based on rules, card games and board games engage children in a particular sort of thinking that's dif-

ferent from their thinking in most other kinds of play. A child playing Candy Land or crazy eights has to follow steps, understand predetermined goals, and use complicated strategies to play the game. And of course there is the added dimension of winning and losing that can color all the thinking associated with rule-based play. You can include card and board games in different centers, but you can also invite children to invent their own games and then teach other children the rules and strategies they will need to play.

### Mastery Play

When children learn to construct buildings without the blocks constantly crashing, they master the skill of balance. If a child can follow a predrawn plan and construct a bridge with K'Nex as designed, she has mastered how to use those materials intentionally. In mastery play, children use a process of thoughtful trial and error to stay with a skill until they've mastered it. Children who engage in mastery play are necessarily projecting their thinking into the future. They know if they just keep trying and doing, they will eventually get it. Mastery play is likely to be incorporated into all kinds of other play, depending on the different skills the play entails.

## Construction Play

Construction play is exactly what it sounds like: it's any play that involves building! A block area, of course, is the classic place for construction play. With blocks of all sizes and shapes, children work with clear intention to build all sorts of structures, from boats to bridges to skyscrapers. The design-oriented thinking children use during construction play is rich and multifaceted. They solve problems and develop language skills as they collaborate. The unit configuration of the blocks (one long block equals four smaller blocks, and so on) helps them internalize mathematical concepts, recognize symmetry, and understand balance, weights, and angles. While a block center is specifically devoted to construction play, children might also build sets for plays or puppet shows or construct furniture for imaginary houses in dramatic play.

## Make-Believe Play

Make-believe play can spring up anywhere in the classroom anytime the energy of play turns toward *Let's pretend*. . . . Having built a spaceship in blocks, children will naturally make believe they are astronauts traveling to other planets. Even children manipulating pattern shapes or counters in a math center might suddenly decide the shapes are jewels and they are pirates who've just made away with them. A dramatic play center, of course, is designed for make-believe play and is equipped with a variety of props that suggest different imaginative scenarios. As children make believe, their thinking is rich as they incorporate fantasy, practice saying new words, negotiate social relationships, and solve problems.

## Symbolic Play


Symbolic play involves using one object to represent another. For example, a child who holds up a wooden block, declares, "This is a lion," and then roars loudly is engaging in a form of symbolic play, connecting fantasy and reality. Children sometimes engage in symbolic play for its own reward, but most often they incorporate it into other types of play. For example, the same block that was a lion "just for fun" might quite purposefully become a cell phone during make-believe play and be used to call 911. At some level, most artistic play

is also symbolic. A child who paints a flower on a canvas or sheet of paper is creating a visual symbol for a mental image of something she may have seen in a garden or a flower store (or simply imagined). By creating symbols during various types of play with a variety of unstructured materials, children internalize the relationship between symbol and reality necessary to comprehend the symbolic language of print (Cohen 1988).

## Language Play

Anyone who's ever watched a roomful of children erupt into uncontrollable laughter just because someone said, "There's a wocket in my pocket," knows that children love wordplay. When they experiment with rhymes, repetitions, and funny combinations of words, tell stories, and sing songs, particularly songs they've made up, children are playing with language and also developing mastery of the many workings of words. Language play springs up naturally as children play together in different centers, and it's not unusual to hear them use language creatively and uniquely as they experiment with new words, hum songs, or describe rules for a game.

Ideally, in a single day at school, a child would experience play—and the thinking and experience that come with play—in many different forms as he engaged with the carefully planned centers in his classroom. Children from prekindergarten through second grade can engage purposefully in all these different types of play as long as teachers are thoughtful about increasing sophistication and depth as children mature. Kindergartners and second graders might both experiment playfully with magnets, for example, but the second graders will build on past experiences and be expected to demonstrate increased complexity and profundity of thought.



To better understand how children naturally engage in different forms of play, you might observe a group of children engaged in free play over a period of time, say ten or fifteen minutes. Keep a running record of what they are doing and saying, and then try to label the different

actions by the forms of play they represent: artistic, sensory, fine motor, rule-based, mastery, construction, make-believe, symbolic, or language. What do you notice? Are there patterns? Did one play form dominate the session? Do some children seem drawn more to certain forms of play?

## Considering How Children Are Different

Understanding different types of play is important to the development of play-based curriculum, but so is understanding how children experience play in different ways. A little close observation is all it takes to begin thinking about how children bring different strengths, interests, and tastes to their play. Watch a busy classroom over time, and you'll notice the child who always takes the lead in organizing make-believe scenarios. You'll see the child who prefers to work quietly alone (see Figure 1.4) or in very small groups, drawn to anything he can observe closely. Another child is always giving his classmates advice on how to make things work more efficiently, and another is drawn to any play where she can move and make a little noise.

In teaching reading or mathematics, we differentiate instruction based on the needs of each student, and the same differentiation is essential to a play-based curriculum. When planning centers, we must consider our students' needs and capacities for interacting with materials and one another. Howard Gardner's theory of multiple intelligences is a helpful frame for thinking about the different ways children engage in play, and a play-based curriculum is most effective when it supports the strengths and proclivities of multiple intelligences.



**Figure 1.4.** Aubrey spends some time alone writing.

In *Frames of Mind*, Gardner describes nine different intelligences and explains, “In ordinary life . . . these intelligences typically work in harmony, and so their autonomy may be invisible. But when the appropriate observational lenses are donned, the peculiar nature of each intelligence emerges with sufficient (and often surprising) clarity” (2011, 9). Every child has the capacity to integrate more than one of the intelligences. However, individual children usually exhibit an intuitive strength in one of the intelligences over the others. When planning centers, it’s helpful to consider how different learners will benefit from particular centers and also how centers can be open enough to support a variety of learning intelligences. Let’s consider each of these now with an eye toward how the different intelligences might be supported in a play-based curriculum.

## Linguistic Intelligence

Children with high linguistic intelligence are drawn to both spoken and written language. They enjoy using language to express themselves and to make things happen in the world. An ABC center, a writing center, and a poetry center all specifically support written language, but you might also consider having paper and markers in all centers so children who are drawn to writing can make notes, signs, and messages connected to their play. For spoken language, dramatic play centers provide many opportunities for children to play with words, make up stories, and use language for a variety of purposes. Children with high linguistic intelligence may also enjoy acting, creating puppet shows, or keeping a notebook of thoughts and ideas.

## Musical Intelligence

A child who exhibits musical intelligence will be particularly sensitive to the many sounds in the environment and will be drawn to musical patterns. These children enjoy centers where there are opportunities to experiment with rhythm instruments and where they can create and record their own compositions (see the child writing her own music in Figure 1.5). Musical intelligence can be supported in other centers as well. If a class is investigating birds, for example, you might introduce a listening center where children can hear and identify various bird songs. You can encourage children to add background music as they act



**Figure 1.5.** Creating an original composition in the music center

out stories or make up songs to help them learn number patterns. Basically, any ways you can imagine having children incorporate sound or song into their play will support musical intelligence.

## Logical-Mathematical Intelligence

Children with high logical-mathematical intelligence quickly recognize patterns, solve problems, and interpret graphs of information more abstractly. Math centers certainly support logical-mathematical intelligence, but you can also think about ways to embed math and problem-solving opportunities into other centers. You might place a tape measure in the block center, for example, or a calculator in the imaginary store. Children with logical-mathematical intelligence also enjoy applying logic to their questions and will delight in a survey center where they can interview classmates, gather and interpret data, and then create a document—perhaps a graph or pie chart—to illustrate their findings.

## Spatial Intelligence

Children with high spatial intelligence enjoy figuring out possibilities for how space might be used—arranging furniture, designing the layout of a village built with blocks, organizing shelves and storage. Using spatial intelligence, a child sees perspective in a painting or understands that a story or a piece of

writing is made up of distinct parts. Any materials that support children in planning or designing can be incorporated into centers to bolster spatial intelligence—even storyboards in the dramatic play area!

## Bodily-Kinesthetic Intelligence

Gym and outdoor recess are the highlights of the day for children with high bodily-kinesthetic intelligence! These children need to move around, and they enjoy physically active art or construction projects over physically passive activities. They gravitate toward dramatic play or block-building centers. Once you understand and appreciate children’s bodily-kinesthetic intelligence, you can use it to help them engage more thoughtfully with all kinds of content. Some children who might never choose a math center, for example, will go happily to an indoor hopscotch center where they can use their bodies while adding and subtracting the numbers that appear on a roll of dice (see Figure 8.2). Or in an ABC center, groups of children might use their bodies to make letters, photograph them, and add them to an alphabet book. The key is to imagine ways for these children—as much as possible—to engage their whole bodies as they play and learn.



**Figure 1.6.** Friends reading together in the reading nook

## Interpersonal Intelligence

Children with high interpersonal intelligence are keenly sensitive to the feelings of others and they often recognize when another child is sad and offer comfort. These children enjoy playing in ways that allow them to interact thoughtfully with their classmates—for example, small-group center activities, particularly reading with friends in the reading nook (see Figure 1.6) or working on a group project at the art table. In dramatic play, these children often take on the roles of caregivers. Interpersonal intelligence is required for a class to feel like a community, so it’s important to support its development in all children, even



those who don't exhibit it in obvious ways. Talking with children about how to recognize another's feelings is a good first step toward helping children use their interpersonal intelligence to guide their play more effectively.

## **Intrapersonal Intelligence**

Children with high intrapersonal intelligence have self-confidence and are able to express their feelings and ask for specific help with assignments. These children find inspiration in the more challenging centers, particularly when the activities are extensions of class studies. The key to supporting intrapersonal intelligence is observing children at play and figuring out ways to use their interests to suggest new and exciting challenges.

## **Naturalistic Intelligence**

Children with high naturalistic intelligence are very aware of the environment; these are the children who can identify every subway line in New York City or who remember that you have to pass three bodegas on the way to the park. They see patterns in the environment and are interested in how objects, people, and animals interact. A good sense of direction comes from naturalistic intelligence, and children who are strong in this area may be challenged by a map-making activity or by making a guide to the school or a familiar place. If the dramatic play center needs to be redesigned to represent a class investigation (as a firehouse or market or barbershop, for example), children with naturalistic intelligence will have an eye for detail that will lend authenticity to the space. Any play that can happen outdoors and involves children noticing and exploring the environment will support children's naturalistic intelligence.

## **Existential Intelligence**

Children with existential intelligence think big thoughts and ask challenging questions about life and existence: *How did the stars get into the sky? Why don't they fall on us? Do you think that someday people will be able to live forever?* The kinds of questions these children ask can't always be answered, but they can be explored and the key is to support these explorations. To encourage these children, consider setting up a research center (see children



**Figure 1.7** Firehouse research

doing research about the firehouse in Figure 1.7) where children can use the Internet and nonfiction books to find out and record information related to their questions (or a class study). An observation center where children watch the sky or animals or people can support existential thinking. In a survey center, these children might be drawn to composing abstract, higher-

order questions. And because big questions can occur at any time, consider creating a “wonder wall” or some other space where children can go on their own to record a big question.

If we expect children to think creatively and make interesting connections to the curriculum, we need to recognize and respect children who, like adults, have many ways of interacting, discovering, remembering, and learning. With thoughtful planning, you can create choice time activities that will appeal to the many kinds of learners in a classroom.

Multiple intelligences can be a useful lens through which you observe children. As you collect notes on students across the year, consider reviewing them from time to time with this lens in mind. What picture of each child emerges when you consider what you’ve observed over time? Do the child’s choices, actions, and interactions suggest a dominant intelligence? Are there ways you might support each child even more intentionally to explore the world from a position of strength?

## Planning with Student Interests in Mind

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Before a new group of students ever arrives at school, we use our understanding of different kinds of play and different intelligences to set up the classroom and establish enriching centers for children to explore. This preplanning serves many purposes:

- It is multilayered.
- It provides a framework and vision for how each center will be organized.
- It allows us to be ready with the necessary tools and materials.
- It gives us the clarity and confidence we need to explain the educational learning that will take place at each center to parents, peers, and administrators.

As soon as the children walk through the door, however, a different sort of planning begins, and it's all based on these *particular* children who have experiences and interests all their own. No two groups of children are exactly the same, of course, and any particular group will be different two months from now than it is at this moment. So in addition to learning styles, it's also incredibly important to consider children's interests as centers and choices evolve over time. This is why planning for centers is based on careful observation and is ongoing, fluid, and responsive.

After we've organized and introduced centers, we carefully observe how children are using the centers and also which children are attracted to which centers (and which they avoid). We listen carefully. What are children talking about? Is there a particular interest children have that we might incorporate more strategically into their center activities? If we see, for example, that a group of children has a keen interest in vehicles but shies away from the art center, we might shift the focus of the art center to constructing different vehicles. We could plan a class minilesson to brainstorm different types of cars and trucks students could build and then invite the vehicle builders to draw

up plans for their creations using graph paper, pencils, rulers, and books and pictures for research. We would observe again, studying how their work was evolving, and then we'd plan next steps. Do we need more minilessons? A shelf to display what children have created? Will we invite children to write about their vehicles or draw and label diagrams?

Over time, planning for centers must also be responsive to the interests of the class as a whole. For example, if a classwide study of the neighborhood has taken a particular turn to an interest in bridges, then center activities might be directed toward that interest. We might

- add books and photos of bridges to the block center and art center;
- provide art materials that lend themselves to bridge construction, such as cardboard strips, string, and yarn;
- challenge children in the math center to use manipulatives (triangles, squares, rectangles) to build a bridge; or
- add books about bridges to the reading nook.

We can also connect center activities to reading workshop. If we are studying folktales, we can provide pigs and a copy of *The Three Little Pigs* in the block center as an incentive for children to re-create the story. Usually just a few small props are enough to inspire children to make connections without having been explicitly told to do so.

As we observe and interact with children in centers, our minds are always on both the present and the future. We are thinking carefully about what's happening and also making plans for how best to extend the center work to support children's growth and development. This in-the-moment planning keeps us focused very specifically on the particular strengths and interests of a group of children, and it ensures we offer the focus and clarity children need to support their explorations.

## Communicating with Families

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All parents and caregivers want their children to succeed. People may differ in their definitions of success, but nobody wishes a child to be unhappy and unsuccessful. Some families and caregivers instinctively understand the benefits of inquiry, play, and choice. Others may be afraid that choice activities take time away from important academic lessons. It's our responsibility to open positive lines of communication with families, keeping them abreast of the learning that is taking place in our classrooms.

Some families enjoy receiving weekly or monthly newsletters describing what is going on in their child's classroom. To convey the importance of the work children accomplish during choice time, we need to prioritize it and be specific about the explorations taking place. We might highlight one or two activities in each newsletter, describing the play that takes place and how reading, writing, and math are integrated. If children are exploring magnets at the science center, we could include a recording sheet on which a child has documented what a magnet will and will not hold, a few notes from our observations, and a transcript of children having a conversation about this phenomenon.

Sending home a weekly calendar at the start of each month worked best for me (see Figure 1.8 on the next page). Besides showing the flow of each day, I included the title of the chapter book I was reading, the focus of our reading, writing, and mathematics work, our social studies and science projects, and also some of the highlights for choice time. Parents came to expect this and complained if it arrived late! They were able to glance at the schedule to see what their child was doing each day and use this information to engage their child in talk about school. Of course I let parents know that this schedule was more like a road map of our week and not a timetable that I kept to with a stopwatch. What was most important was that parents viewed me as a partner. We, too, need to consider parents our partners and allies in our yearlong voyage together. After all, they are trusting us with their most important treasures!

Fall		Kindergarten 2-239						Renée Dinnerstein and Rohini Thakor			
Mon.	8:35 Settling in and Independent Reading	9:00 Morning Meeting	9:20 Bridge Study and Choice Time	10:55 Music Ms. Gbaje	11:40 Lunch	12:00 Shared Reading and Reading Workshop	1:00 Outdoor Play	1:45 Writing Workshop	2:40 Read-Aloud and Singing		
Tues.	8:35 Settling in and Independent Reading	9:00 Morning Meeting	9:20 Choice Time	10:20 Math	11:00 Outdoor Play	11:40 Lunch	12:30 Shared Reading and Reading Workshop	1:10 Writing Workshop	2:00 Read-Aloud	2:15 Body Movement Ms. Sachs	
Wed.	8:40 Science (Ms. Bell) Room 102	9:35 Morning Meeting	9:50 Bridge Study and Choice Time	11:00 Shared Reading and Reading Workshop	11:40 Lunch	12:30 Math Games	1:00 Outdoor Play	1:40 Read-Aloud	2:00 Reading with Fourth-Grade Buddies (Bridge Books)		
Thurs.	8:35 Settling in and Independent Reading	9:00 Morning Meeting	9:20 Choice Time	10:20 Math	11:10 Read-Aloud	11:40 Lunch	12:30 Outdoor Play	1:15 Writing Workshop	2:15 Shared Reading/Reading Workshop (Every third week/ grade meeting)		
Fri.	8:35 Settling in and Independent Reading	9:00 Morning Meeting	9:15 Social Studies and Choice Time	10:10 Gym Mr. Polsky	10:55 Music Mr. McGarry	11:40 Lunch	12:30 Shared Reading and Reading Workshop	1:00 Outdoor Play	1:40 Project Research Groups	2:25 Read-Aloud and Singing	

Science Focus at Choice Time Science Center: Snails

Social Studies Inquiry Investigation: Bridges (working with our fourth-grade buddies on this investigation)

At "research groups," (Reading Centers) children are preparing for a class "camping trip" (inspired by a Berenstain Bears book that Lee shared with the class). The reading groups, based on children's suggestions, are Trees, Flowers, Forest Animals, Goldlocks and the Three Bears, Little Red Riding Hood, Rocks, Stars. Coming out of this research are ideas for choice time projects.

For read-aloud, I am reading *Ramona the Pest*.

**Figure 1.8.** Using the class schedule to communicate with families