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Preschool Planning Guide

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When planning learning for young children, there are several ideas to consider. First, it is especially important to provide activities, projects and themes suited to the age and individual needs of each child. Second, carefully think about each of the following elements while planning.

- **Age appropriateness.** Consider the ages of the children in the program. A single age group (all 4-year-olds, for example) has different needs from a mixed age group of preschoolers. The curriculum should be suitable for the developmental level of each age group and should offer a range of activities. Set group goals after assessing the needs of a particular age group.
- **Individual appropriateness.** Think about each individual child and focus on his or her development. Children follow similar growth patterns, but the time frame for each child differs. Individual interests, abilities and family background must be understood before you can meet the needs of each child. Goals and objectives should be set for each child.

Learning is best when new information builds on old knowledge. Planning should center on the child, the family and the child's everyday experiences. As the child develops and grows more independent, he or she becomes less self-centered. This leads to expanding teaching plans.

- **Family and culture.** Children should not be separated from their family and culture. Plan activities with respect for family differences and wishes. Involve families in program planning as much as possible, realizing that each family has a different way of contributing. Some families may choose to be very involved, and some may choose not to.
- **Teacher values.** Consider what you as a teacher and caregiver believe to be important. Question your own interests, your personal philosophy and the program philosophy.
- **Transitions.** A variety of factors such as the length of the day or the daily schedule affect planning. Transitions are times that occur between activities and can disrupt the flow of play. Avoid too many transitions, and give children enough time to become absorbed in their play. A skillful teacher plans carefully to ensure that transition times are smooth.
- **Curriculum.** After preliminary planning, it is time to choose (or to help the children and/or parents choose) themes, projects and activities to build the total curriculum.

Themes are selected that relate closely to the child's immediate world. For example, activities associated with home, family, yards and neighborhoods hold the most meaning for the youngest child. As children develop, their knowledge base and interests expand. In this same way, new or additional information can be added to the curriculum.

Themes can be used for a brief time (for example, "St. Patrick's Day"), but usually should last at least a week. One theme will usually lead to another; for example, "dinosaurs" may lead the children's interests to "bones," "fossils" or "creatures." The teacher's role in planning themes is to observe closely and take notes on the children's interests. Interests are determined by observing and listening to the children's discussions and play. Play cues can aid the teacher in choosing new topics. Teachers help children develop interests through planning and presenting a variety of materials, including books, pictures, activities and explorative projects.

Group or individual projects may be ongoing or brief. They can be very child directed mixed with teacher selected. Allowing the child to set the pace and the path of exploration will lead to new ideas and experiences. Projects can be as simple as "mud pies," or as complex as "cameras" and "photography."

Activities are specific strategies planned to achieve theme and developmental goals. Making volcanoes, water color painting or scarf dancing are activities. Activities are supported by materials available in the learning centers. Activities may be repeated or may be one-time occasions.

- **Group time.** Planning individual times and group times is important. Individual or alone times can be provided by free choice in activities, a quiet area and rest time. Children coming together as a group is often called "group time" or "circle time." The whole group or a few smaller groups may be formed. During these planned times, all areas of development may be addressed in a social setting.

Songs, finger plays, dramatics, science, math and physical activities can be used during group time. Begin with simple songs and finger plays with groups of children. More complex group activities will be planned as more familiarity with the group occurs. Group times should fit into the whole curriculum and support themes and projects. Plan group opportunities for inside and outside, and for loud and quiet activities.

- **Physical environment.** Whatever is planned must be flexible and changeable, depending on the needs of the children and opportunities unseen during initial planning. The most complex part of planning the physical environment is coordinating the learning centers. Learning centers are often permanent areas in the room, with materials that change according to changing themes. An environment that encourages flexibility and spontaneity for children's play is essential. Examples of learning centers, suggestions for materials and role playing ideas include:

Dramatic play — Dramatic play allows children to construct social and emotional knowledge, role play, and understand other's perspectives.

Ideas: Housekeeping; restaurant; grocery store; bakery; flower shop; automobile repair.

Block area — For maximum use and creativity with dramatic play, the block area works well placed nearby. Like the dramatic area, blocks are extremely valuable for learning about size, quantity, space, length and shape.

Ideas: Train station; store; caves; cities and towns; camping.

Science — Science leads to learning about the child's physical "self" as well as environmental awareness, plants, animals and the world.

Ideas: Sea life; insects; machines; tool shop; measuring, pouring, mixing; recycling.

Writing area — Pre-writing activities serve to help children to build knowledge in all areas of language development, including speaking, writing and pre-reading skills.

Ideas: Post office; restaurant; books; valentines; writing individual stories.

Book area — Book areas encourage children to learn all aspects of printed language, including learning about authors, illustrators or artists, and the value and joy of reading.

Books should be chosen according to past and current themes and projects. This area should be cozy, comfortable, well lit, and may be decorated and rearranged according to themes.

Sensitivity should be given to gender equality, culture, personal abilities, and race or ethnic background in the story line and pictures in books.

Art area — Art areas enable children to explore color, form and texture through self-expression and creativity.

Ideas: Brushes, paints, markers; molding clay, Play-Doh®, rolling pins, child-sized scissors; collage materials; shaving cream; yarn, fabric, tape, glue.

Be creative and imaginative in designing learning centers and materials for each. Other centers could include music, creative expression, manipulatives and puzzles, math and number areas, and the outdoors. Learning experiences happen anywhere a child is encouraged to explore.

When you are planning specific activities, remember to include the development of the whole child. A single activity may involve several aspects of development (thinking, feeling, moving). Teachers must plan for learning to occur in all facets of the child's development.

Prop boxes — Prop boxes are excellent for sparking creative play and imaginations. To make a prop box, begin with an empty copier or computer paper box with a lid.

Cover the box with contact paper and label it with an appropriate title.

Ideas: Office/business box; dress up box; sports shop box; grocery store box; hair salon box; repair shop box; veterinarian box; school box. Think of any kind of situation that might inspire dramatic play for which a prop box could be collected.

After selecting certain titles, notify staff members and parents about the prop box project and ask for donations. Shop at local rummage or garage sales or at thrift stores. You may get some bargains — many people are willing to donate or reduce the cost of items for projects like this! Contact local businesses for any contributions — hair salons might have empty shampoo bottles, old haircut capes, etc. Remember to send a note of thanks to any business donors with pictures of the children using a particular box. Post or publish pictures in the parent's newsletters showing the "results" of the collection project.

Put one prop box out at a time. When the children begin to lose interest in a particular prop box, try some mixing and matching. Introduce different items and take cues from the children. Their enthusiasm will give direction for new ideas and collections. If a prop box isn't used or seems boring after a while, store it away for a time. A new theme or classroom project might spark interest and different uses for the same box.

A webbed guide to planning

Begin planning by brainstorming, using the radius planning sheet provided in Figure 1. Referred to as a "webbing sheet," this tool will help teachers relate to and plan for all areas of development using a central theme. A project may be a theme in itself, or it may be contained within a theme. The planning sheet is used to organize each day in the week and may be posted for both the teacher's and parent's benefit.

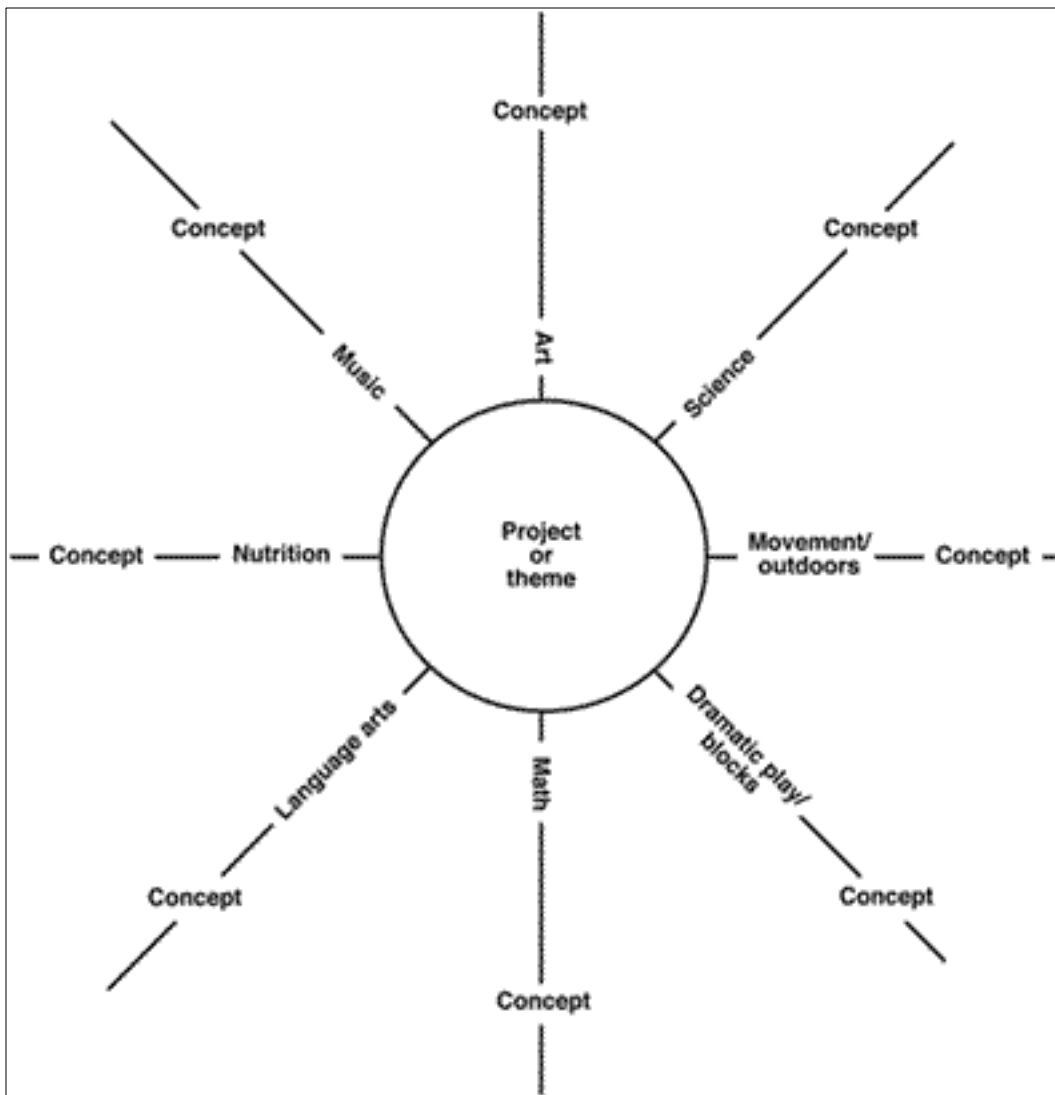


Figure 1. A webbed guide to planning. "Concepts" refers to concepts that children might construct.

In summary

Quality learning experiences for children are enhanced by a well-planned curriculum. Select activities, projects and themes that are appropriate for the age and development of the children in the program. Appreciate and acknowledge the family differences and cultural heritage of each child. Never discourage one gender or age from a particular theme area or activity. Promote and plan activities that encourage the development of the whole child, including physical, mental, emotional and social aspects. Take joy in observing each child's learning experiences and progress.

Curriculum planning guide.

Develop your curriculum planning using this example as a guide for daily activities. Remember to include activities that involve all areas of a child's development. Schedule curriculum areas to fit your daily routine for mornings and afternoons.		
Weekly theme	Field trip/project plans	Special preparations
Community helpers Day, date (Friday, April 30)	Call fire department to schedule trip Thursday	Mix paints, pull books
Curriculum areas	Activities	Materials or action
Physical self	Music and movement	Cassette tape, helper hats
Language development	911 phone game	Telephone, scenarios
Social, emotional self	Feelings, faces	Small group, mirrors, teacher interaction
Creative self-art	See large group activity	
Cognitive self-math	Ladder — distance, up, down	Ladder for counting, measuring
Cognitive self-science	Water play	Various-sized tubes, garden hose, funnels
Creative expression	Photo/story of fire station	Yellow paper, instant camera
Dramatic play	Sirens, phones, fire hats, boots, etc.	Prop box
Sensitivity to diversity	Terms: firefighters, mail carriers, etc.	Review books, posters
Small group activities	See social/emotional activity	
Large group activities	Big box fire engine, field trip preparation	Refrigerator box, paints
Alone/quiet time	Books on community helpers in book area	Review for diversity

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