

RuralInstitute

**CHILD &
FAMILY**

**TIP
SHEET**



Rural Institute Child and Family Tip Sheet

The Child Care Plus Center was based at the Rural Institute from 1987 to 2012. The nationally-focused Center supported and promoted inclusive early childhood environments.

Child Care Plus is no longer an active project. However, the materials are still relevant. To address the needs of a broad audience, Rural Institute staff updated several Child Care Plus resources in 2021. The following updated resources are included in this document:

Create a Learning Environment

Building Skills Through Toys

Communicating with Children

Making Connections with Children

Communicating with Families

The updated views expressed in this document may not reflect the original Child Care Plus purpose, or the official position of the Rural Institute for Inclusive Communities or University of Montana.



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https://scholarworks.umt.edu/ruralinst_early_childhood/

Create a Learning Environment



A child's environment communicates expectations and supports their development. The space around children impacts their sense of order, invites play, and promotes feelings of ownership.

Sense of Order

Children receive play cues when materials are organized (paper is stacked by color, glue is in a small box, etc.). Their play becomes more engaging and complex. Children thrive when they can organize and put toys away. Children can:

- Match materials to pictures or words on the shelves
- Refill storage containers
- Sort items into boxes

Invite Play

Interesting materials invite children to explore the world around them. Open-ended materials need imagination and have no "rules." They heighten children's willingness and ability to explore.

Consider mixing up materials. For example, place large sheets of paper and pencils in a block area. Offer cardboard boxes and tubes, bird seed, or yards of fabric to kids to play time and see what happens!

Another strategy to invite play is to add "props." Empty baby food jars, small spoons, bibs, and a doll bed with blanket gives the child a clear invitation to play.

Create Ownership

Children are more likely to play with toys and each another when they feel part of the community. You can arrange the space to provide children a feeling of ownership and belonging. For example, make sure children can reach art materials and toys on their own. Ask children to arrange the play space and decide how to display their creations.

Arrange Space to Support Learning

Children with disabilities may not learn from the environment the same ways other children do. They may wait for adult direction or miss subtle cues. For example, the arrangement of a play kitchen may not offer enough information for some children, and they may not play in this area because they are unsure what to do there.

Look at the space from a child's perspective and think about the messages they receive from the environment. Things to keep in mind:

Every child needs to be able to move freely. If a child uses a walker or wheelchair, more room is required in the play areas, and toys should be within reach. Physical accessibility sends an immediate and positive message, and allows children to learn with their peers.

Play materials must match the children's interests and ability levels. For example, a reading area should have books for a child learning numbers and books to practice turning pages.

Consider the messages you send with the toys. A baby's rattle should not be offered to a child with a disability. There are other interesting toys to hold and shake, such as keys or measuring spoons. Children form opinions about their peers based on what they do and what they play with. Giving infant toys to an older child tells children that this child is not their peer.

Arrange toys and materials in a way that suggests how to play with them. A child who finds blocks forming a pen around farm animals gets a clear idea about what to do with these toys. You can give explicit cues by:

- Combining toys that may not go together. For example, put spoons in the block area.
- Arranging items as if someone had played with them. Place blocks to represent plates and food, and place spoons to suggest eating.
- Setting up enticing play scenes. This exposes the child to a variety of toys and playmates, and encourages play in all activity areas.
- Providing enough of the same materials so that children can play together. Supplying four or five spoons allows cooperative play.

Environmental arrangement is a simple and powerful strategy. Thoughtfully arranging your space adds learning opportunities to children's play.

Building Skills Through Toys



Children learn important skills from interacting with peers and play materials. Here are some things to think about when evaluating toys for a group-play setting.

Toys should be:

- Durable
- Visually inviting
- Easy to clean and sanitize
- The right size for the space or room arrangement
- Versatile, with more than one use
- Safe for the age and stage of every child

Toys should also be:

Accessible

The equipment or toy should allow each child to use the toy without help. For example, a teeter-totter with handlebars and a back rest can be used by children of varying abilities.

Adaptable

It is more important that each child can play with a toy in some way than it is for children to play with a toy in the same way. A water table, for example, offers a sensory play experience for kids with a variety of skill levels.

Cooperative

Some materials inspire collaborative play, such as a parachute or wagon. Children may express their wishes, use turn-taking skills, or discuss rules for play when playing with cooperative toys.

Designed for Two

Materials designed for two allow children to play together. The toy may have two seats (a two-seated tricycle) or a handle and a place to ride (a wagon) or two entrances (a tunnel or barrel).

Interactive

Toys should encourage children to interact. Children communicate with each other verbally and nonverbally (smiles, frowns, hand signals) when they play face-to-face. Adding a dishpan of sand or water may increase opportunities for children to watch each other's play and communicate. Easels placed side-by-side maximize children's interaction better than ones that are back-to-back.

Adapting Toys

Here are some ideas on how toys can be adapted so kids with a variety of abilities can play together.

Make Toys Easier to Grasp

You can make toys easier to grasp by:

- **Adding a knob.** Glue a ball, a large bead, or a small peg to a puzzle or wind-up toy. If a puzzle piece has no handle, attach a spool, bead, or drawer pull.
- **Attaching a ring.** If a stuffed animal is large and does not have arms or legs that are easy to grasp, attach a bracelet or metal ring securely to the animal.

(Make sure the improvised piece is firmly attached to avoid a potential choking hazard.)

Make the Toys More Intriguing

Children may not know how to play with a toy, or a toy may have lost its appeal. Consider:

- **Group toys to suggest a play theme.** Surround a stuffed animal with feeding equipment or arrange an airplane puzzle next to toy airplanes. Grouping helps children make play connections and sparks imagination.
- **Add a surprise element.** Adding a sensory experience or using the toy in an unpredictable way can make familiar toys interesting again. Freezing pretend food before putting it in the play kitchen or putting clothes on a stuffed animal add a surprise to ordinary play.

Increase the Interaction Value

Adaptations can create new opportunities for children to interact.

- **Provide duplicates of the same toy.** Have enough blocks, paints, crayons, scoops, etc., for small groups of children to use at the same time. Children are more likely to interact and share if there are enough toys for all.
- **Add props.** When it is impossible to provide duplicate toys, arrange toys with props. Grouping a ball with large plastic hoops and construction cones increases the chances that children play together.

Add Extra Sensory Input

Children may not be able to process information with one or more of their senses; adaptations add extra sensory input.

- **Add food extracts.** Adding smells may prompt children to use toys differently. For example, adding vanilla extract to playdough may encourage a child to pretend to bake. If you have children in your care who exhibit Pica (compulsive eating of nonfood items), make sure any items you're scenting are not toxic if ingested.
- **Add new texture.** Attach Velcro dots to blocks, include sponges with water play, or add sand to finger paint. Be aware that some children may have adverse reactions to certain textures.
- **Vary temperature.** A warm stuffed animal may encourage more cuddling. Changing the temperature of the water from one day to the next can add a fun surprise to water play.
- **Increase visual contrast.** If a child has difficulty seeing where a puzzle piece fits, use paint or markers to darken the space where puzzle pieces go. If a child cannot distinguish between two parts of a snap, paint one part of the snap a different color. When coloring or painting, it is helpful if the color of paper is different from the color of the table.

Communicating with Children



Communication is the act of sharing ideas, feelings, and concepts with others. Communication can be verbal and nonverbal. Some children may have difficulty expressing themselves. Other children may have difficulty understanding what is said to them. It is important to identify and encourage all children's attempts to communicate.

Nonverbal Communication

Children use many different nonverbal methods to communicate with adults and each other.

Facial expressions are one of the earliest ways a child communicates their needs. A smile, frown, pout, or stare convey important messages. A child may look at an object to show they want it, or make eye contact with an adult to start interaction.

A child's physical **position** to an object, activity, or person is another communication signal. Children who back away from an activity or pull away from an adult may be expressing discomfort. When children feel secure in a setting, they are more likely to join play activities. A frustrated or anxious child may move toward a familiar adult for comfort. A worried child may stand to the side.

People use **gestures** to express themselves. A child may communicate by pointing to a toy, raising both arms toward an adult, or shaking their head from side to side.

Encourage Communication - Use Fewer Questions

Adults often ask questions to communicate. Asking questions can be a useful and effective way of getting information. However, asking a lot of questions may discourage communication. Children may not know how to answer or feel pressure to respond.

Consider using descriptive statements to encourage conversations.

Describe what a child is doing

"The doll is having tea with you."

Describe what the group is doing

"There are five of us having snack, so I need five cups."

Describe what is happening

"Everyone is getting wet in this rain shower!"

Here are a few more examples of descriptive statements to encourage conversation:

- Rather than "How old are you?" say "You had a birthday!"
- Rather than "Where are your shoes?" say "You don't have shoes on your feet!"
- Rather than "What book do you want to read?" say "I found two books that look interesting, and I can't decide which one to read today."

Making Connections with Children



The rewards for putting time and energy into connecting with a child come back to you in many ways. When children are in a caring environment, they learn to treat one another with care.

Positive relationships with children:

- Allow children to thrive. Children need consistent relationships to feel safe and learn about the world around them.
- Allow you to understand the child, their temperament, strengths and needs.
- Provide information for selecting toys and arranging the environment.
- Give a sense of satisfaction as the children grow and learn.

General hints to build relationships with children

Maintain a sense of optimism. Believe children have the desire and the right to be successful.

- Be curious about each child's unique strengths, interests, and needs. Your understanding influences everyday actions such as how to communicate with a child and what activities to plan.
- Be caring and see the child first, even during challenging days and situations.
- Be consistent. Use the same voice tone, response to problems, and degree of warmth from one day to the next.
- Be an effective communicator. Listen more than you speak.
- Be self-reflective. Be aware of your tone of voice, body language, facial expressions, and emotional triggers.

Specific things you can do to build relationships

There are many ways to build relationships and connections with children. Here are a few that fit in the daily routine.

- **Greet each child warmly.** Get down at the child's level or look into the child's face, and use their name.
- **Join a child at play.** Quietly ask, "Can I sit by you for a minute while you paint?" and then pay attention.
- **Write a short note.** "I had fun watching you build castles in the sand box today."
- **Follow up on a child's interest.** "Yesterday, you told us about your boat. I found this book on boats for us to read together."
- **Respond.** When you catch yourself ignoring a child or a child's request, don't let the moment pass. Take a deep breath, relax your facial expression, bend or kneel down, and say, "I think you have something to tell me and I want to listen."



Communicating with Families



Working with families is an important part of working with children. Ideally, child care providers, teachers and families learn from and support each other. Here are some ideas to keep in mind as you communicate with families.

Approach each partnership as a new beginning

Some parents have had bad experiences in the past. They may worry that they and their child will have a hard time fitting in. New beginnings allow teachers and families to identify strategies that meet everyone's needs.

View each family as unique

Every family's needs, interests, and concerns vary. Recognize each unique family and communication style. The impact a child with a disability may have on a family is difficult to predict. Each child and family will need different supports and resources, so listen to each family's story.

Be respectful

Be slow to judge and quick to give parents the benefit of the doubt. Be especially sensitive about cultural, language, and social differences.

Ask questions

Parents may not know what information you need. Asking respectful questions can give you information about the child and the family. Open-ended questions (Tell me about John's favorite toys) provide more information than yes / no questions (Does John like to build with blocks?). Encourage families to share successes and challenges.

Listen as much as you speak (maybe more)

Avoid approaching parents about an issue with the solution already decided. Leave room in problem-solving for parent feedback and suggestions. Make certain your actions and words reflect your goal to partner with families.

Be honest

Tell parents what you really mean because you want them to tell you what they really mean. If you do not know how to position their child so they can play with toys in the water table, say so. It may seem easier to talk around an issue, but a direct approach is more likely to lead to positive outcomes.

Maintain confidence

Families may share information with you that is not shared with everyone. Examples of confidential information include a child's diagnosis, medications, or family life. Guard and respect each family's right to privacy.

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MonTECH is Montana's free assistive technology program that loans devices and equipment to support independence. The MonTECH team serves children with challenges, including those who have communication issues, learning disabilities, impaired vision, hearing, or mobility, and those who exhibit behaviors related to a disability. MonTECH can also provide specially adapted toys and a wide range of buttons (called 'switches') that can activate the toy with a light touch of a finger, foot, knee, head, or any body part that can move.

In addition to free loans of equipment, MonTECH offers free 1:1 training on how to use that equipment. Any Montanan any age can utilize MonTECH's services. Please call or write for more information:

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