

“THINKING OUTSIDE THE BLOCKS”: USING WHAT YOU'VE GOT IN CREATIVE WAYS

One of the biggest challenges for a teacher, preschool or otherwise, is to keep the "material" fresh, interesting and appealing. If you're bored with the curriculum or routine, chances are the kids are too.

One helpful tip is to rotate toys and materials. When I was a kid, my mom would surreptitiously hide some of my toys periodically. When they came out a few weeks later, they were much more appreciated!

Another technique is to create new games and activities with things they have used a million times--blocks, toy animals, kitchen equipment, water and sand boxes, play dough, etc. The activities and the skills they reinforce can be broken into categories.

VISUAL AND AUDITORY DISCRIMINATION

The ability to observe and listen carefully, and to find likenesses and differences between things, is one of the most important skills necessary for later academic tasks.

1. Attributes--color, shape, etc.
 - a. At first, use only color as the criteria: give kids each a handful of colored wooden beads; ask kids to "hold up a yellow bead." As they learn the shapes (cube, ball, etc.) ask for one of these instead; as they become more familiar with both colors and shapes, try "Does anyone have a blue cube?"
 - b. Have several baskets, and have children sort beads according to color, shape, etc.
2. Perception/Spatial Relationships
 - a. Dip various sides of blocks in washable paint and stamp onto construction paper; let dry. Have kids guess which block made which shape, later use for matching.
 - b. Line up several different toy animals; have the kids close their eyes. Take away one animal and see who can guess what's missing.
3. Listening Skills/Following Directions
 - a. Distribute several toy animals, one per child. Make the noise of a particular animal, and have the child who has it hold it up. Also do this with riddles, i.e. "This animal has a curly tail."
 - b. Give directions using blocks and baskets, or other small objects and containers: "Put the yellow block under the blue block." Or "Simon Says put the green block behind your back." This is great for vocabulary development.
 - c. In the "play kitchen center," pretend blocks are "cookies"--"Put the blue cookie in the oven, the red one on the stove."

READING/PRE-READING SKILLS

Any activity that helps kids to associate print with meaning can be considered a pre-reading skill. The letters in a child's name are often the most motivating to present and can help reinforce the letter/sound association. Reading aloud is very important in helping children learn about language, as well as developing skills such as predicting outcome, learning about sequence, etc.

1. Letters
 - a. Make letters out of anything and everything--cookie dough, play dough, clay, pieces of yarn on glue shapes, Tinker Toys, etc.; make giant letters and cover with pictures of objects that start with that letter.
 - b. Bury plastic letters in the sand and have kids guess what letter it is by feeling it; or use a feely box.
 - c. Trace letters in sand, rice

- d. On hot summer days, use a paintbrush and colored water to paint letters on the sidewalk.
- e. Give child his name tag and have him find matching letters in the magnetic letter set.
- f. Put lower case letter on each of several toy cars; kids "drive" them into "garage" (paper cup with "door") labeled with matching upper case letter.

MATH/PRE-MATH SKILLS

Anything having to do with quantity, size, shape, weight is great reinforcement for concepts of number. Use vocabulary words like more/less, bigger/smaller, shape/texture words like round, square, flat, bumpy (this also reinforces language development.)

1. Use various containers and small objects to reinforce the above vocabulary words.
 - a. Weigh blocks, beads, etc. on a balance scale; use vocabulary like heavier, lighter; predict and estimate how many it will take to balance a given toy, etc.
 - b. Stand blocks on end or stack; use vocabulary like taller, shorter, and longer.
 - c. Make a "train" with baskets and animals; use ordinal numbers ("Who is first in the train," "Who is second?" etc.)
2. Graphing is a skill which is important to later academic tasks, and is easy to do in a concrete way. (skewers with beads, etc.) Graph birthdays, favorite colors, pets, etc.

SOCIAL SKILLS/BEHAVIOR

Many behavioral issues are best handled "when the iron is cold," rather than in the heat of the moment. When a certain situation has been a problem in the past, it is likely to recur. Books and puppets can often be very helpful in illustrating or reconstructing a problem or situation.

1. The Berenstain Bears books are often just what you need to talk about an issue in a non-threatening way. Using a character in the book to discuss a problem or a way of dealing with a situation can be very effective.
2. The dress-up corner can be used to facilitate role-playing as a follow-up activity. A scene from the book can be re-enacted or you can create a variation.
3. Puppets can be used in a similar way. The puppet can "confide" in you, ask the kids for advice, or play the "bad guy."
4. Stories and puppet play are also a good vehicle for learning to identify and express emotions in socially acceptable ways.

TRANSITIONS

Transitions between activities are an ongoing issue, and it is helpful to have a "bag of tricks" in order to keep things moving smoothly! Some of the ones I have found are:

1. Keep a gum machine or other container in a place that is visible but out of kids' reach. When it is time to change activities, announce that you are setting the timer. When the timer rings, if everything is put away and kids are in their places, the "star of the day" gets to put a scoop of pegs, beads, colored popcorn, etc. into the jar. When the jar is full, the whole class gets a party or other special activity.
2. A musical tone from a xylophone is an effective attention getter, especially if the kids each get to strike it once, but only when they are in their places.
3. Make the kids feel like heroes: "Oh, I wish I had some magic fairies to clean all the toys away." (Close your eyes and pretend to go to sleep.)

Terrific Toddlers: Ideas for Keeping Up With Your Exuberant Explorer

Under 24 months

• Emptying containers; pouring

1. Try putting several small, light objects in a medium size laundry or utility basket: have him empty the contents into another basket of similar size.
2. Make a paper chain together: then have her pour it from one plastic pitcher to another.
3. Use measuring cups, inside an oversize plastic bowl, to pour macaroni, nuts in shells, small seashells, pieces of foam rubber, etc.
4. Try "pouring" a "Slinky"-type toy from one large pitcher to another!

• Throwing

1. Use bean bags, netting balls, foam rubber dice, ping pong balls, foil balls--have your child "throw" (or drop) various balls into a laundry basket.
2. Try pitching or dropping pennies or other small items into an ice cube tray--success is almost assured!
3. Use a large light ball (beach ball, etc.) to knock down a tower of plastic blocks.

• Pushing, pulling

1. Make a "car" from a large cardboard box; cut "doors" on the sides. Let your child take his favorite animals or dolls for rides by pushing the "car" around (you can add a handle for pulling, and the "car" can do double duty as an indoor wagon!)
2. An inexpensive plastic cart on wheels is great for pushing, as well as making clean-up more fun.
3. A "train" of small boxes or baskets attached with a short piece of yarn is fun to pull, and can also be used for sorting various types of toys into different "cars" of the train.

• Sorting, matching

1. A cardboard chest of drawers or a small hardware chest with drawers can provide hours of fun pushing, pulling, hiding and finding objects.
2. Socks, gloves, etc.
3. Wooden beads--sort by color, shape or size
4. Make a "Feely" box: have two each of several objects. Put one of each in a large paper bag or box, and have the matching objects out on a table. Hold up an object on the table, and see if your child can locate the matching object inside the box by touch.
5. Your child will enjoy one-to-one matching, such as putting empty spools into an ice cube tray: putting cupcake papers into sections of an old muffin tin: putting halves of plastic eggs into an old egg carton, etc.
6. Try matching sounds: demonstrate several sounds (for instance tapping a spoon on a pot,

crumpling a piece of paper): then have your child close her eyes and guess what is making a particular sound.

7. Make "paper cup garages" and have him drive cars into their matching garages.
8. Try matching scents by putting various spices and extracts on cotton balls: have your child close his eyes and guess which two match.

• Blowing

1. Try experimenting with different ways of making bubbles.
2. Tie a feather to a string and see how far your child can make it move by blowing it.
3. Do "straw painting": put a small puddle of thin paint in the middle of a sheet of paper: have your child blow through a straw to make designs.
4. Experiment with different types of "boats" (paper cups, containers, etc.) and sails.

Age 2 up to 3

• Communication/Language

1. Play a direction-following game ("put the red block on the box"); try putting things in silly places (i.e. a shoe on a chair) and have your child correct the mistake.
2. Children this age love to hear about when they were babies; put together your own scrapbook of pictures of your child as a baby, and pictures of her doing things now that she couldn't do then
3. Make a "texture" book--write and explain a "texture" word (hard, soft, furry, etc.) for each page, and find bits of fabric and other small objects (perhaps from a nature walk) that fit this description.
4. Make a large "picture recipe" on a poster board, and then follow the directions with your child to make the dish.

• Arts and Crafts

1. "Tie-dyed" tissue wrap (use as wrapping paper): fold a piece of plain white tissue paper into smaller and smaller squares; fill two or three sections of an egg carton with watered-down paint of different colors. Dip corners of paper in different colors and then open to dry.
2. Make and decorate a bird feeder using an empty bleach or soda bottle.
3. Try printing using a shallow pan of paint and a variety of objects of different shapes (pine cones, feathers, etc.).

