


Reflection and Resource Tool for Creating Student Centered Learning Environments in Prekindergarten





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Introduction

Creating a student-centered learning environment in prekindergarten is essential for fostering young children's curiosity, independence, and social-emotional growth. In fact, a classroom environment that is well-planned and organized and expects students are self-regulated is generally associated with stronger student achievement (Day, Connor, & McClelland, 2015).

Even before entering school, children begin developing the ability to navigate different settings and adjust their behavior accordingly. Learning how to navigate different settings and adapt behavior accordingly is an important social and developmental skill that children begin to learn even before entering school. For example, a four-year-old understands that playing with a ball inside the house requires different behavior than playing with a ball outside. In school, Prekindergarten teachers play a crucial role in helping children recognize social and academic contexts and respond appropriately (National Research Council, 2001). Educators foster this awareness by clearly defining expectations and organizing physical spaces that naturally guide appropriate behavior (Bodrova & Leong, 2007). Strategically placed cues and thoughtfully arranged materials help teachers create an environment where children intuitively understand and navigate various learning contexts (Weisberg et al., 2013). Supporting self-regulation in young children is essential, as it enables them to adapt to different settings and expectations (Bronson, 2000).

The classroom is a place where children are actively engaged in meaningful experiences. The room itself and the spaces or learning centers in the room should invite children to explore, converse, inquire, build, and create individually and collaboratively. Teachers design classrooms to help shape and foster learning. Teachers can design classrooms with intention and help shape and foster this kind of learning.

In a high-quality prekindergarten classroom, children are able to:

- Establish trust, build relationships, and cooperate with others
- Feel safe and secure enough to take learning and language risks
- Develop independence through making choices and being responsible for clean up
- Stay focused and engaged in their activities
- Acquire skills and concepts as they select and use materials

Part of the teacher's role is that of manager and decision maker. Among the most important decisions made by the teaching team are those pertaining to the design of the learning environment. In this role the teaching team:

- Sends specific, concrete messages to children about what is expected and valued
- Influences learning by the inclusion of specific materials and equipment
- Supports and extends curriculum and instruction
- Builds a sense of community
- Validates, honors, and nurtures the children's diverse cultures and languages
- Attends to the health and safety of the children in the group

Tool Purpose

The Reflection and Resource Tool for Creating Student Centered Learning Environments in Prekindergarten is designed to help educators thoughtfully assess and enhance their classroom environments to better support young learners. This tool provides guidance on key elements of a high-quality prekindergarten setting, including implementing learning centers, using theme to foster curiosity and deepen understanding, integrating student choice, and learning center management. By using this resource, educators can reflect on their current practices, identify areas for growth, and implement strategies that promote a responsive, engaging, and inclusive learning space.

How to use this document

The intent of this document is to help teachers reflect on their classroom environment and to assist in transforming their classrooms into a place where learning centers encourage a love of learning. It can be used alone or in conjunction with the [**NYSED Office of Early Learning webinar series**](#), Student Centered Learning Environment Best Practices.

This document covers three topics; learning centers in the classroom, incorporating student choice, and integrating the theme into learning centers.

Included are tools that will help teachers reflect on their classroom environment, student choice in the classroom, and how to create purposeful centers based on the current theme of study.

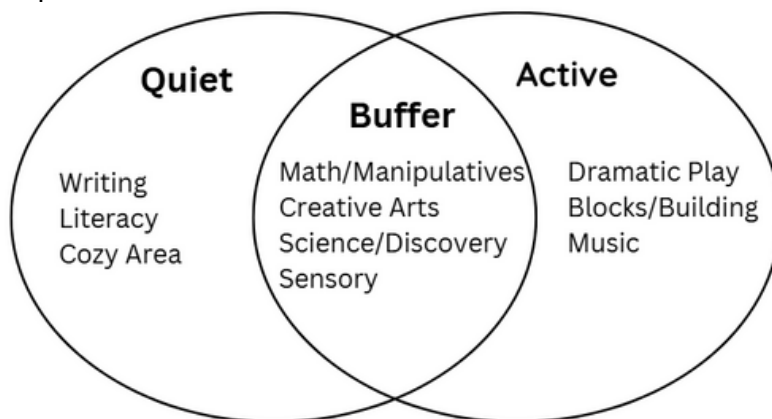


Setting Up Classroom Learning Centers

What is a learning center?

Learning centers are designated areas of the classroom where students can engage with materials in open ended ways to practice and strengthen their skills through play-based experiences. In alignment with Commissioner's Regulations Part 151-1.3(a)(3), PreK programs are required to provide instruction that promotes children's development across all domains of learning, and learning centers are an effective way to meet this by offering structured, choice-driven opportunities for exploration and growth. During learning center time, students should be free to choose their area of exploration. These hands-on, play-based learning centers are a potent tool for engaging young learners and fostering development in literacy, math, science, and fine motor skills (Edwards, 2002). Educators can tailor these centers to student interests, classroom themes, and real-world links, regularly changing materials and activities to maintain engagement and support learning objectives.

Learning centers found within a PreK classroom typically includes: blocks and building, creative arts, dramatic play, literacy, writing, math and manipulatives, science and discovery, sensory, cozy corner, and music. When setting up classroom centers, it's important to be mindful of whether the center will primarily host active or quiet activities. Placing a "buffer" center in between an active and quiet center will reduce the likelihood of students interrupting each other.



As Prekindergarten teachers prepare learning centers, it is important that they:

- Are mindful of the varying strengths, skills and abilities, cultures, languages, experiences, and developmental levels of individual students
- Are intentional and purposeful in the selection of materials and activities that they provide
- Avoid the use of worksheets and rote activities as they are not developmentally appropriate and do not align to the purpose of learning centers
- Plan for meaningful interactions and opportunities for extended conversations with all students. Throughout the day, Emergent Multilingual Learners are to be encouraged to converse in the language or languages that they feel most comfortable speaking.
- Allow sufficient time for students to self-select learning center activities, become engaged and to explore and experiment with the materials and activities that they choose (approximately one-third of the daily schedule)

Student Choice: Why it Matters

Children thrive when empowered with choices. Offering them opportunities to choose learning activities fosters engagement, cultivates a sense of ownership, and allows them to transition naturally between activities as their interests shift (Patall et al., 2010). Additionally, student choice supports culturally responsive teaching by honoring diverse experiences and learning preferences, which contributes to a more inclusive and equitable classroom environment (Gay, 2018). In addition to academic benefits, student choice promotes self-regulation and responsibility, reducing behavioral issues and enhancing classroom management (Reeve et al., 2003). By recognizing and honoring children's inherent need for choice, we create a more responsive and enriching learning environment.

Whether referred to as choice time, center time, or learning centers, this designated period empowers students to direct their own learning. Children select their preferred learning center, choose materials, and engage in self-directed play, fostering the development of their own play schemas. Ideally, this student-driven learning should occupy approximately one-third of the school day, encompassing center time, recess, and other opportunities for independent activity selection. Children require ample time to plan, gather resources, and bring their ideas to fruition. They may choose to immerse themselves in a single center for the duration of the period or explore multiple centers, adapting their engagement to their evolving interests.



Balancing the Daily Schedule

The daily schedule and activities designed should encourage children to be self-assured and independent through a balanced schedule. There should be both, teacher-directed (teacher plans, initiates and directs the activity) and student-directed (able to choose their activity, materials, based on their interests and are free to make their own discoveries) learning activities. Recommended best practice is to have one-third of the daily schedule be child-directed. Use the chart below to determine how much of the day is teacher-directed versus student-directed.

My Daily Schedule	Type of Learning Activity	Time Allotted
	<input type="checkbox"/> Teacher-Directed <input type="checkbox"/> Student-Directed	
	<input type="checkbox"/> Teacher-Directed <input type="checkbox"/> Student-Directed	
	<input type="checkbox"/> Teacher-Directed <input type="checkbox"/> Student-Directed	
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	<input type="checkbox"/> Teacher-Directed <input type="checkbox"/> Student-Directed	
	<input type="checkbox"/> Teacher-Directed <input type="checkbox"/> Student-Directed	

Environmental Messages

Often the classroom learning environment is referred to as the “invisible” teacher. Purposefully planned environments send messages to children about how to use materials, what is accessible to them, and set learning expectations. Using the chart below, self-reflect on the environmental message your classroom currently portrays to children.

Classrooms should allow children to feel that:	How is this message conveyed?	Are there any other things I can do to convey this message?
This is a safe and comfortable place		
I belong here and I am valued		
I can make friends and share		
I know what I am expected to do		
I can do interesting work here		
I can find what I need and put things back where they belong		
I can make choices		
I am challenged to try new things		
I can use and share all my languages		

Priorities for My Classroom Environment

Now that you have reflected on your classroom environment, based on your self-assessment, ask yourself, what changes should be made in my own classroom? Use the chart below to determine your next steps.

Must Do:	Must Do:	Must Do:
↓	↓	↓
Considerations:	Considerations:	Considerations:
↓	↓	↓
Action Steps:	Action Steps:	Action Steps:
↓	↓	↓
Resources Needed:	Resources Needed:	Resources Needed:

Integrating the Theme

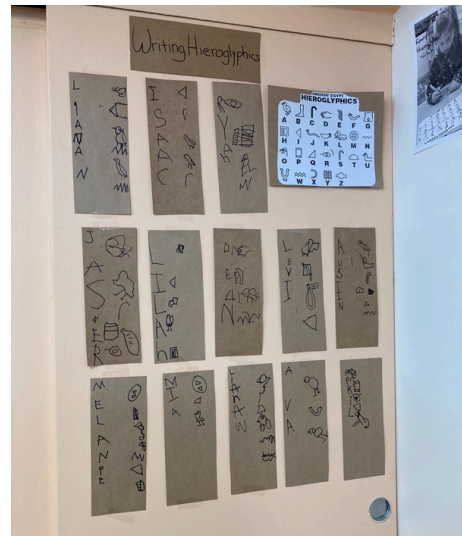
Why should we integrate the theme into the learning centers?

Children are more likely to be engaged and motivated when classroom activities are connected to a central learning theme. Thematic units not only expand vocabulary, but also provide diverse opportunities for students to express themselves through various mediums. Themes encourage connections between different subject areas, supporting the holistic development of each child. When thoughtfully designed, thematic units of study can ignite curiosity, deepen understanding, and make learning experiences more meaningful and memorable.

In a well-integrated prekindergarten classroom, the theme is evident throughout the environment. Teachers use anchor charts, posters, pictures, student-created artwork, and decorations to visually represent the theme, creating an immersive atmosphere that reinforces the learning objectives. This integration helps students see the connections between their experiences and the content they are studying, fostering a rich and engaging learning environment.



Dramatic play turned into a pyramid



Children writing their name using hieroglyphics



Wall display of Egypt



Desert oasis depictions

Example Thematic Planning

Unit Topic: *Transportation:*

Objectives - for the students to be able to identify that there are different ways people and objects can travel.

Essential Question: *How do we get around our community? What different types of vehicles do we see?*

Focus Question: *What kinds of transportation do I use and why? How are different kinds of transportation the same? How are they different? Who operates the vehicles in my community? How do we stay safe when using transportation?*

Student Outcomes: *Students will be able to compare and contrast different types of vehicles, know how to stay safe while in a vehicle and know which types of transportation go in the air, on land or at sea.*

Academic Vocabulary: *Airplane, train, bus, automobile, tracks, bicycle, taxi, stroller, subway, Metrocard, tugboat, ship, helmet, seatbelt, license, cargo, runway, engine, ferry, ambulance, barge, crossing guard, locomotive, airport, bus station, parachute*

Foundational and Supporting Texts:

- *If I Build a Car-* Chris Van Dusen
- *The Little Auto-* Lois Lenski
- *Freight Train-* Donald Crews
- *Airport-* Byron Barton
- *Boat Book-* Gail Gibbons
- *Trash Town-* Andrea Zimmerman

**NYSED does not endorse the use of any particular book or author within this document. These are a sampling of books on transportation.*

Family and Community Engagement: *Invite families to share experiences about using different forms of transportation. Bring in photographs from around the community showing different types of vehicles. Have a bus driver or train conductor or motor man come in and talk to the children.*

Culminating Celebration: *Create a transportation gallery showcasing different vehicles the children created.*

Below is an example of an age-appropriate thematic web created by the teaching team using the plan above for a three-year-old classroom. It can be modified for a four-year-old classroom.

Dramatic Play:

- Create different modes of transportation based on students' interest and experiences
- Make a refrigerator box into a train, a boat, a subway, or an airplane.
- Transform the kitchen area into an airport or subway station

Creative Arts:

- Dip the different vehicles in paint and have the children drive them around a piece of paper, compare the size of the wheels
- Paint and decorate a cardboard vehicle
- Provide sponges and paint for children to create cloud like paintings.

Sensory:

- Set up a car wash station in the water table, complete with toy cars, sponges, soap, brushes/ toothbrushes and towels
- Add construction materials to sensory bins such as loose gravel, dirt, small stones

Transportation



Science:

- Make paper airplanes out of different types of paper; discuss why they fly
- Float and Sink activity

Math and Manipulatives:

- Set up a sorting game-land, sea and air
- Patterns - car/truck/car/truck
- Matching-four wheels, two wheels, three wheels

Language/Literacy/Writing:

- *If I Build a Car*- Chris Van Dusen
- *The Little Auto*- Lois Lenski
- *Katy and the Big Snow*- Virginia Lee Burton
- *Trash Town*- Andrea Zimmerman
- *Airport*- Byron Banton
- *Freight Train*- Donald Crews
- *Boat Book*- Gail Gibbons
- Word wall - transportation words
- Writing paper with vehicles on it

Blocks and Building:

- Add vehicles, human figurines and signs
- Add roadways, or have children create their own by using masking tape
- Add airport accessories
- Create a construction site
- Add pictures of different roads, bridges, railroads

Music/Movement:

- Stoplight beanbag toss game
- Traffic light song
- Here is the Engine (Fingerplay)
- Wagon Song (colors)

Example Thematic Learning Center Planning Page

Theme: **Transportation**

Center	Week 1 Weekly focus Question: What kinds of transportation do I use and why?	Week 2 Weekly Focus Question: How are various modes of transportation similar and different?
Blocks and Building	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ♦ traffic signs ♦ vehicles of different types ♦ neighborhood pictures 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ♦ Add trains, boats, motorcycles, airplanes
Math and Manipulatives	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ♦ strings, cubes, linking chains to measure with ♦ premade chart long / short 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ♦ cut outs of semi trucks with different numbers of dots on each ♦ cut outs of wheels to put on the trucks
Dramatic Play	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ♦ large cardboard box to create a bus/car/train/airplane ♦ chairs for seats ♦ steering wheel 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ♦ continue with week 1 set up (unless children are not interested)
Creative Arts	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ♦ Shape cut outs ♦ Pictures of different vehicles ♦ Use shapes to create vehicles 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ♦ matchbox cars ♦ paint ♦ box with sides
Literacy and Writing	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ♦ fiction books about transportation ♦ non-fiction books about transportation ♦ word wall to add new words 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ♦ Create a graph ♦ Cut outs of different vehicles
Science and Discovery	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ♦ Different types of paper ♦ Picture directions on how to make a paper airplane ♦ runway 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ♦ Legos ♦ Unifix cubes ♦ tub of water ♦ make boats and see if they float
Sensory	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ♦ soapy water ♦ Cars, trucks ♦ Toothbrushes 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ♦ water ♦ blue water beads ♦ boats

Example Thematic Learning Center Planning Page

Theme: Transportation

Center	Week 3 Weekly Focus Question: Who operates the vehicles in my community?	Week 4 Weekly Focus Question: How do we stay safe when using transportation?
Blocks and Building	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ♦ bulldozers ♦ people ♦ backhoes 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ♦ hard hats ♦ safety vests ♦ stop signs
Math and Manipulatives	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ♦ cut outs of vehicles ♦ cut outs of drivers 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ♦ safety sign bingo ♦ bingo boards ♦ bingo markers or chips
Dramatic Play	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ♦ turn the dramatic play area into a mechanic's garage ♦ tools ♦ chairs for waiting room ♦ clip boards to write what is wrong with the vehicle ♦ receipt books 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ♦ fire fighting equipment ♦ hoses ♦ spray bottles ♦ large boots ♦ fire fighter clothes
Creative Arts	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ♦ pictures of vehicles ♦ pictures of people who drive the vehicles ♦ paper to draw on ♦ different types of drawing materials 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ♦ pictures of traffic signs ♦ different colors of paper ♦ cut out letter or stencils
Literacy and Writing	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ♦ add books about construction vehicles ♦ books about farm vehicles 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ♦ after listening to the story, <i>How Do Dinosaurs Stay Safe</i> by Jane Yolen, draw how dinosaurs stay safe ♦ paper to draw how they stay safe
Science and Discovery	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ♦ pictures of bridges, ramps ♦ blocks to build ramps ♦ vehicles to see what makes the vehicle go faster/slower 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ♦ pictures of parachutes ♦ people ♦ string ♦ material to make parachutes
Sensory	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ♦ add dirt, sticks, small rocks ♦ blocks, wooden logs, cardboard tubes for creating tunnels ♦ people and construction vehicles 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ♦ cotton balls for clouds ♦ black paper to make runways ♦ toy airplanes

Thematic Planning Directions

Reflect on the unit/topic of study that will be implemented in your classroom. It is suggested topics span 2-4 weeks depending on materials available and interest of the students. Use the following pages to brainstorm ideas for your next unit/topic.

Unit Topic: *Name the topic and objectives of the unit.*

Essential Question: *An essential question is an authentic, child-friendly question that connects the knowledge and skills that children should develop throughout the unit. Essential questions are 'big' questions for which there is no single answer.*

Focus Question: *Focus questions represent the major inquiries of the unit. They are built over time and require children to make connections across all content areas.*

Student Outcomes: *Student outcomes are the learning targets for children. What are children able to do as a result of the instruction?*

Academic Vocabulary: *Academic vocabulary words help children understand the unit focus questions and access complex texts. These words can be supplemented by vocabulary in read alouds.*

Foundational and Supporting Texts: *Foundational and supporting texts include a combination of quality fiction and non-fiction texts that can be read throughout the unit. Foundational texts help students interpret and answer the essential/focus question(s). Supporting texts foster students' understanding of essential/focus questions while also bolstering learning centers and the needs/interests of individual students.*

Family and Community Engagement: *Opportunities for inviting families to share their experiences and knowledge with the class, foster a home-school connection and encourage the extension of learning outside of the classroom.*

Culminating Celebration: *A culminating celebration is an opportunity to reflect on the unit with the children, as well as to note and celebrate the growth and learning that has occurred.*



Thematic Planning

Reflect on the unit/topic of study that will be implemented in your classroom. It is suggested topics span 2-4 weeks depending on materials available and interest of the students. Use the following pages to brainstorm ideas for your next unit/topic.

Unit Topic:

Essential Question:

Focus Question:

Student Outcomes:

Academic Vocabulary:

Foundational and Supporting Texts:

Family and Community Engagement:

Culminating Celebration:

Use the blank visual below to plan out your own thematic learning experience.

Dramatic Play:

Creative Arts:

Sensory:

Blocks and Building:

Topic

Math/Manipulatives:

Language/Literacy:

Science:

Music/Movement:

Thematic Learning Center Planning Page

Use the chart below to list thematic materials needed each week for each center.

Theme:

Center	Week 1	Week 2
	Weekly Focus Question:	Weekly Focus Question:
Blocks and Building		
Math and Manipulatives		
Dramatic Play		
Creative Arts		
Literacy and Writing		
Science and Discovery		
Sensory		

Thematic Learning Center Planning Page

Use the chart below to list thematic materials needed each week for each center.

Theme:

Center	Week 3	Week 4
	Weekly Focus Question:	Weekly Focus Question:
Blocks and Building		
Math and Manipulatives		
Dramatic Play		
Creative Arts		
Literacy and Writing		
Science and Discovery		
Sensory		

Center Checklist

Blocks and Building Center

- ☐ A carpeted location away from foot traffic, with enough space for building substantial structures
- ☐ Shelving to hold several different types of blocks and building materials (e.g., wooden blocks, connecting blocks, foam unit blocks, multiple shapes of blocks)
- ☐ Props, materials, and accessories that extend block and building play and reflect students' diversity (e.g., figurines, vehicles, road signs, ramps)
- ☐ Art and craft materials and supplies for children to plan and create additional structures and accessories (considerations for threes and younger fours: chunky writing utensils, safety scissors)
- ☐ Selections of photographs, posters, and texts representative of the students' languages about building and landscapes' rotated to link to specific themes and/or learning goals (considerations for threes and younger fours: board books)

Goal(s):

Materials Needed:

Center Checklist

Creative Arts Center

- ☐ Dedicated space near a clean-up area
- ☐ Multiple work surfaces for individuals and groups (e.g., tables, easels, floor areas)
- ☐ Age-appropriate three-dimensional and tactile objects for sensory exploration and experimentation (e.g., beads, string, modeling clay, rocks, pinecones)
- ☐ Variety of drawing, painting, and natural materials for exploring color, form, and texture (e.g., brushes, straws, paint, different sizes of paper)
- ☐ Displays of children's artwork and storage for ongoing projects
- ☐ Illustrated books and sample artwork, at children's level, organized by theme or genre and inclusive of diverse cultures and art forms

Goal(s):

Materials Needed:

Center Checklist

Dramatic Play Center

- ☐ Space for up to four children in a noisy area of the room
- ☐ Variety of props for dramatic expression that reflect diversity (gender related clothing, diverse play food items, ethnic dolls, etc.)
- ☐ Play props and materials that promote dramatic play and role playing (e.g., office equipment, puppets, cash register, pretend money, stuffed animals etc.)
- ☐ Authentic props and materials (e.g., calculators, writing materials, clipboards, arts/craft materials for making signs and props, coupons, newspapers, etc.)
- ☐ Play equipment and furniture that can be moved and converted (e.g., table and chairs, shelving, kitchen, safety mirror, benches, storage bins etc.)
- ☐ Multiple text types, including narrative, informational, and other kinds of texts; books with diverse characters and topics; and books at varying levels (include board books for threes and younger four-year-old children)

Goal(s):

Materials Needed:

Center Checklist

Literacy Center

- ☐ A quiet, comfortable area of the classroom
- ☐ Books in multiple formats (e.g., listen to recordings/digital books, interactive books)
- ☐ Books and texts (about 20) that are on display, forward facing and rotated often according to current interests, topic, and/or theme, and relevant to the cultures and languages represented by the children in the classroom (considerations for threes and younger fours: board books)
- ☐ Multiple text types, including narrative, informational, and other kinds of texts; books with diverse characters and topics; and books at varying levels
- ☐ Props to extend book experiences, such as flannel boards and pieces, puppets, and other story character figurines
- ☐ Computers/devices with developmentally appropriate games and activities linked to learning goals; scheduled to limit time and use based on age

Goal(s):

Materials Needed:

Center Checklist

Writing Center

- ☐ A table and chairs to accommodate at least two children
- ☐ Materials for making simple books including a stapler or paper fasteners
- ☐ Variety of writing implements to include markers, crayons, colored pencils, elementary pencils, and regular pencils (considerations for threes and younger fours: chunky writing utensils, safety scissors, finger-paint)
- ☐ Word strips with a picture and a word that coincide with the current or previous themes bound together for children to use as a sample
- ☐ Word wall depicting topic/theme-base words; common words and rare words with illustrations or depictions
- ☐ Clipboards with paper and pencils attached or white boards with dry erase markers and an eraser so children can take the clipboards to write around the room
- ☐ Upper/lower-case alphabet stamps and ink pads, alphabet charts
- ☐ Variety of sizes of paper to include lined and unlined paper, letter tiles or magnetic letters for sorting

Goal(s):

Materials Needed:

Center Checklist

Math and Manipulatives Center

- ☐ Workspaces for children to work with materials, including tables and floor areas
- ☐ Shelves to hold sets of several different types of objects, sorting bins, graph paper, materials for making patterns
- ☐ Posted math visual aids such as number lines (including flat number lines), number lists and representations, calendars, simple graphs, height measurement stick, etc.
- ☐ Games and activities: games that rely on counting, puzzles (knobbed puzzles for threes and younger fours), pattern games, games with dice or number spinners, matching games, math computer games and apps
- ☐ Selections of books and texts that feature counting, themes with shape patterns, comparisons, and representative of the children's languages
- ☐ Manipulatives such as pegs, sorting materials, Cuisenaire rods, nesting and linking cubes, shape patterns, counting beads, measuring tools, scales etc.

Goal(s):

Materials needed:

Center Checklist

Science and Discovery Center

- ☐ Workspaces and tables for individuals and groups to conduct experiments and make observations (e.g., wall space, tables, floor areas)
- ☐ Selections of books and texts representative of the children's languages about science; rotated to link to specific themes and/or learning goals
- ☐ Variety of tools and materials for using senses, observing, and experimenting (e.g., natural materials, magnifiers, art supplies for recording, measuring devices, trays, droppers etc.)
- ☐ Selection of science games and puzzles that include topics such as healthy bodies, animals, weather, living things, space, movement, etc.
- ☐ Displays and collections of natural objects (e.g., rocks, leaves, sand, dirt, roots) and depictions of science-related topics (e.g., posters, models, graphics, digital displays, videos)
- ☐ A location near sunlight with growing plants with paper and writing materials to draw or record observations
- ☐ Paper and writing materials to draw or record observations (considerations for threes and young fours: chunky writing utensils)

Goal(s):

Materials needed:

Center Checklist

Sensory Center

- ☐ Dedicated space near a clean-up area with a table or area specifically designed for sand, water or other sensory play
- ☐ Props to extend play and talk in the sand table such as small figurines, cars and trucks, scoops, buckets, paper with scissors for cutting
- ☐ Interesting materials that are rotated to provide a variety of sensory and language experiences such as hay, dirt/mud, sticks, rye, pretend or real grass, oobleck (cornstarch and water), bubbles, or finger paint
- ☐ Props to extend play and talk in the water table such as small water droppers or basters, sink and float materials, or adding colors to the water
- ☐ Mop, broom, and dustpan for cleaning up spills
- ☐ Smocks to protect clothing from getting wet in the water table

Goal(s):

Materials needed:

Center Checklist

Cozy Corner

- ☐ A location near a quieter learning center such as the book, writing or creative arts center
- ☐ Soft furnishings (i.e. soft chair, oversized pillow, cushions, etc.) for the child to sit, lay, or stretch out on
- ☐ A selection of sensory bottles and tactile items the child may fidget with (i.e. small fidget balls that can be squished in their hands)
- ☐ A selection of non-fiction and fiction books about feelings including board books for threes and younger fours
- ☐ Emotion faces that the child may point to if they want to convey an emotion and are unable to articulate it
- ☐ A selection of soft materials such as dolls, animals, or puppets
- ☐ A non-breakable mirror that the child can use to see their reflection in
- ☐ A bin with writing materials such as small clip boards, paper of assorted colors and sizes, and writing utensils

Goal(s):

Materials needed:

Center Checklist

Music Center

- ☐ A variety of music instruments, such as rain sticks, drums, triangles, xylophones, maracas, etc.
- ☐ Posters with familiar songs the class sings
- ☐ Props such as scarves, ribbons, finger puppets, small beanbags, hula hoops, etc.
- ☐ Tape recorder or CD player to listen to diverse music
- ☐ Clipboard, paper, and pencil to write songs
- ☐ Books about instruments or music
- ☐ Materials for creating instruments (e.g., boxes, rubber bands, strings)

Goal(s):

Materials needed:

Appendix A

Additional Center Material Suggestions

Ensure that classroom materials reflect the variety of students' languages and cultures. Please remember that, when purchasing materials for classroom learning centers, materials should be age appropriate and safe for use with young children. (This is not an exhaustive list)

Art Center

- tempera and finger-paint
- crayons and markers
- table
- vinyl smocks
- chalkboard easel and chalk
- non-spill plastic paint pots
- easel
- paintbrushes
- child-sized safety scissors
- rolling pin
- clay and hammers
- glue and paste
- collage materials
- tissue paper
- newsprint
- yarn and string
- feathers
- craft sticks
- recycled art materials
- various writing instruments
- various sized of paper
- wood glue and wood scraps
- old greeting cards
- books about art

Blocks and Building Center

- block shelf
- variety of unit blocks
- accessories, such as diverse and multicultural people, animals, cars, trucks, boats and street signs
- props such as trees and benches
- cellophane, material or other fabric to make rivers and lakes
- block patterns for labeling
- architectural block set
- tunnel and arch set
- hollow blocks
- work vehicles
- railway and traffic sign set
- bucket of vehicles
- tool set
- graph paper
- plain paper and clip board
- pencils
- colored pencils or crayons
- books about buildings or construction

Science Center

- storage area
- table scale or balance
- prism
- color wheel
- easy-view magnifier
- giant magnet
- plastic magnet wands
- theme study items
- weather props
- plants
- fish tanks or class pets
- items to be weighed or sorted
- paper
- writing instruments
- displays of natural objects or science-related topics
- variety of tools and materials for using senses observing or experimenting
- games and puzzles related to science
- science books

Sensory Center

- sand and water table with cover
- props for experiments
- boat set
- sand molds in geometric shapes
- water play set
- double sand and water wheel
- sand builder set
- plastic scoops and funnels
- sand sieve and containers
- vinyl smocks
- water droppers or basters
- multiple materials to match theme
- water beads
- cotton balls, other theme items



Language / Listening Center

- forward -facing library shelf
- sequencing shapes and pattern cards
- flannel board with easel stand
- felt primary shapes
- flannel board story kits
- child -sized safety scissors
- rolling pin
- clay and hammers
- glue and paste
- collage materials
- tissue paper
- newsprint
- yarn and string
- feathers
- craft sticks
- recycled art materials
- various writing instruments
- various sized of paper
- wood glue and wood scraps
- old greeting cards
- books about art


Math / Manipulative Center

- sorting mats or trays
- table
- connecting blocks
- magnetic activity center
- strings and pattern cards
- lacing sets
- knobble puzzles
- early concept puzzles
- occupations, community, family and children of the world puzzles -diverse and multicultural
- colors and shapes bingo
- primary shape sorter
- geo boards and peg boards
- assorted counters
- attribute blocks
- pattern stacker
- interlocking cubes
- games or activities that rely on counting dice or spinners
- posted developmentally appropriate math visual aids, such as number lines, calendars, simple graphs, shape and counting posters
- books or texts that feature counting, shapes or patterns

Dramatic Play Center

- diverse dolls, doll clothes and furniture
- realistic dress -up clothes and props, not costumes
- puppets and puppet stand
- table and chairs set
- kitchen set
- kitchen utensils, pots and pans
- food sets (representing different cultures)
- fruits and vegetables with basket
- plexi -mirror
- housecleaning set and stand
- variety of phones
- career hats (plastic only), clothing and props

Music Center

- box of dance props such as scarves and ribbon wands
 - assorted diverse music
 - musical instrument sets
 - hula hoops
 - small bean bags
 - CD player / audio station
 - parachutes
- 

Appendix B

Below is an additional example of a thematic learning experience that allows students to learn content knowledge through play experiences for a four-year-old classroom. This can be modified for a three-year-old room.

Dramatic Play:

- Fishing on a plastic mat
- Have students paint a box to be a canoe or fishing boat with oars, tackle box, etc.
- Pond picnic and birdwatching with props

Creative Arts:

- Mural of pond life-children paint background and add pond life as they learn about different parts of the ecosystem
- Easel paint with twigs/brushes made with pond grass
- Clay to create ponds with accessories
- Display Monet's water lily painting to inspire children for easel painting

Sensory:

- Nest building with clay, twigs, leaves, fibers
- Create a pond in a sensory table by using sand and water, rocks, plastic aquarium plants, plastic ducks, fish, turtles, insects, etc

Pond Habitats



Blocks and Building:

- Add plastic bugs, fish, turtles, plants, stuffed beavers, ducks, and raccoons
- Add blue fabric for children to use as a pond

Math/Manipulatives:

- Butterfly matching game
- Pond animal pattern mats
- Turtle bingo, using turtles for markers
- Flannel board with pond animals and plants. Arrange from smallest to largest and then reverse the order

Language/Literacy:

- *In the Tall, Tall Grass*-Denise Fleming
- *Jump Frog, Jump!*-Robert Kalan
- *In the Pond*-Anna Milbourne & Mat Russell
- *What's In the Pond?* – Anne Hunter
- *From Tadpole to Frog*- Wendy Pfeffer
- *Pond Circle*- Betsy Franco
- *Butternut Hollow Pond*- Brian J. Heinz
- Word Wall in the writing center with new vocabulary

Science:

- Display terrarium of real pond water with a shop light to view small plant and animal life. Supply magnifying glasses.
- Study the frog life cycle in a classroom terrarium
- Learn about some different species that have webbed feet and why (ducks, frogs, turtles, otters, beavers)
- How do lily pads float? (sink/float experiments)

Music/Movement:

- "The Green Grass Grows All Around" song
- "Duck, Duck, Goose" game - gross motor
- "Move like a _____" movement using pond animals
- "Five Speckled Frogs" – counting

Appendix C

Center Question and Statement Starters

Block Center

Tell me about what you built.

Why did you choose to build this?

What could you add to your structure?

What do you think will happen if we....?
(added more blocks, added animals, put one more block on top?)

How do you think you could make that.....?
(taller, wider, longer)

Dramatic Play

Who are you pretending to be?

How can we set up our play area to look like a store?

What do you need to make.....? (any food)

How do you get ready for....? (work, school, bedtime, etc.)

What can we do if....? (the baby starts crying, we run out of milk, etc.)

Creative Arts

What do you think we could do with....?
(beads, glue, scrap paper, etc.)

How did you create....?

What else can you add to your creation?

What story does your picture tell?

What do you like best about your artwork?

Music and Movement

What sound does your instrument make?

What happens if you tap it softly? Loudly?

Can you make a pattern with your sounds?

How is your instrument different from mine?

How would you move if the music was slow? Fast?

Math and Manipulatives

How did you decide to sort them?

What happens if you add one more?

What can we use to measure how tall it is?

What do you notice about the sizes?

How did you make that shape?

How did you figure out how many.....you have?

Science and Discovery

What do you notice about this (leaf, rock, bug, etc.)?

How are these two things the same? Different?

How does that feel? Smell?

What else can you do with....? (magnifying glasses, microscope, magnets, etc.)

Question and Statement Starters

Writing Center

What are you writing about today?

Why did you choose to write about that?

What are some words you know?

I noticed you wrote Can you tell me more about that?

What are the sounds you hear?

Literacy Center

What do you think will happen next?

How did this book make you feel?

What surprised you about the story?

Has this ever happened to you?

Would you have done the same thing or something different if you were the person in the story?

Sensory Center

How does this feel to you?

What can you do with this material?

What objects can you find?

What do you like best about this material?

If you could add something to this what would you add? Why?

Cozy Area

Why did you choose the cozy area today?

How are you feeling?

What is your favorite thing in this center and why?

Is there something you would like to add to this area?

Is there something I can do for you?

General Questions/Statements

Tell me more about...

Why do you think that?

How did you make that?

What will happen if....?

How did you decide.....?

Tell me more about....

General Questions/Statements

How did you come up with that idea?

What do you think will happen next?

How does that work?

What are you making/doing?

I wonder....

What would you do if...?

Appendix D

Resources



Early Learning Webinar Series

Planning for High-Quality Prekindergarten Program



NYSED Office of Early Learning Video Series

Reading Rockets: Themed Book Lists





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