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# ORGANIZING THE CLASSROOM ENVIRONMENT

“Sharing responsibilities in the classroom community helps teachers and students work cooperatively and collaboratively to ensure success.”

*Vicki Gibson and Jan Hasbrouck, 2008*

**T**here are many ways to organize classroom environments and create a structure that supports high-quality teaching and learning.

**Begin by following these steps:**

- **Determine available resources** (amount of floor space and furniture in the room, access to health facilities, and needs for technology and storage areas).
- **Consider how many children** will participate in activities in your classroom.
- **Ensure safe access** around and between furniture placements.
- **Plan adjustments** for children with special needs.

## IN THIS CHAPTER

- Providing Instruction and Practice at the Teaching Table
- Selecting Activities for the Worktable
- Using Learning Centers for Collaborative Practice
- Organizing Materials and Varying Activity Choices



Teach children to follow this routine when they enter your classroom at the beginning of a day.

- 1. Put away personal belongings and sign in to record attendance.
- 2. Check the Business Center or class information board for directions and information.
- 3. Look at a Daily Schedule, noting time periods for activities and the order in which activities will occur.
- 4. Look at the Rotation Chart to gain information about small-group memberships and the order in which activities will occur.
- 5. Look at the Job Chart and determine assigned responsibilities.

Plan ways to arrange furniture and designate work areas that permit:

- clear visibility for monitoring children at all times,
- safe access to all entry areas and walkways,
- easy access to facilities for personal hygiene and handwashing,
- sufficient space for any physical activity, either whole-group or small-group, and
- storage space for instructional materials, either in active use or to be used later.

Throughout the year, you will need space for the following work areas in your classroom:

- 1. **Meeting Place:** Identify a large area that will be used for whole-group activities. Children will report to this area during opening or closing activities and during transitions.
- 2. **Teaching Table:** A teaching table is an area where you will work with small groups of children and provide explicit instruction differentiated to their capabilities and needs. Usually this space includes a table, 4–6 chairs, and shelving to store materials.
- 3. **Worktable:** A worktable is an area used for small-group guided practice using previously taught content and skills. If available, a teaching assistant or a special education provider can work with a small group of children providing extended guided practice. If another adult is not available, children participate in activities that require less direct adult supervision.
- 4. **Centers:** Centers are areas in the classroom used to extend learning through productive play where children apply previously learned skills. Children choose centers and practice responsible decision-making. The number of centers included in a classroom depends on how many children will participate at one time and the availability of space and materials.

Providing Instruction and Practice at the Teaching Table

At the teaching table, teachers work with small groups of children and provide high-quality, differentiated instruction and guided practice. Working with smaller groups of children allows teachers to align instruction with children’s current skills and needs, monitor children’s progress, and provide immediate feedback.

Children are grouped with others having similar skills for explicit, teacher-led instruction at the teaching table. When working with early learners, groups may include 3–6 children. New skills and concepts are introduced in whole-group activities, then explicitly taught with differentiation at the teaching table.

TEACHING TIP

How the teaching table and worktable are used varies depending upon the number of adults in the classroom and the amount of instructional time available each day.



Teachers assign homogeneous (similar-skill) small groups to address children at their point of need.

## Selecting Activities for the Worktable

The worktable is an area used for small-group extended practice. It may or may not include a table and chairs. Worktable activities may or may not be supervised by a second adult, if available.

In full-day programs that include two adults in the room, the teacher provides explicit English Language Arts (ELA) instruction and feedback at the teaching table while the adult assistant provides extended practice using previously taught ELA content and skills at the worktable. In the afternoon, the teaching and worktables are used in the same way, but the content and skills focus changes to mathematics and science.

In half-day programs, the worktable may be used differently. An adult assistant may teach mathematics or science at the worktable while the teacher provides ELA instruction at the teaching table.



If available, a second adult, specialist, or paraprofessional will provide additional instruction or oversee guided practice activities at the worktable.

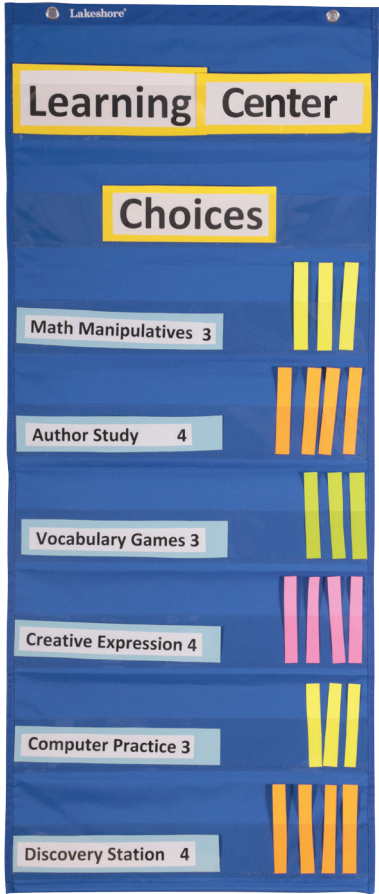
## Using Learning Centers for Collaborative Practice

Centers are used for extending children’s skill development—socially, emotionally, and academically. Collaborative activities also extend language development, increasing proficiencies for oral language and deepening vocabulary word knowledge.

Centers may reflect themes or specific skills related to classroom instruction. The purpose for using academic centers is to extend children’s learning, using previously taught content and skills. Other centers may be used for productive play so younger children can relax and enjoy learning at school. Including centers that develop social and emotional skills is critical for young learners.

### Use these steps to create centers:

- 1. Determine the instructional purpose** for each learning center. For example, a home center may be included to encourage social and emotional development through role-play. Language and literacy centers encourage children to apply previously taught reading and writing skills.
- 2. Gather items to be included in each center.** Choose fewer items for each center in the beginning to support efficient cleanup and maintain order. Add more options as children demonstrate the maturity to manage more materials and choices.
- 3. Determine ways to teach, model, and practice** routines for using each center so that expectations are clearly communicated and children know how to participate and clean up.
- 4. Designate an area in the classroom for each center.** Post a sign that names the center and includes a numeral to indicate how many children may participate at one time.



With early learners, some centers are focused on practicing specific skills while others encourage creative play or artistic expression.





Storing materials safely and out of reach prevents problems. Labeling containers and contents facilitates use of resources when shared by teacher teams.

## Organizing Materials and Varying Activity Choices

Once you collect materials for a center, store them in plastic tubs with lids. Include a card that lists the items in the container. When centers are shared with other teachers, the list helps keep things organized and stored for later use. Sharing your center materials will decrease the workload for creating learning centers and allow you to change centers efficiently with much less effort.

Some learning centers will not change substantially throughout the year. For example, media centers or reading centers may require that you change the content or materials, but their basic setup will remain the same. Some centers that may remain in your classroom all year include a home center, block center, art or creative center, and science discovery and mathematics centers.



Learning centers vary in content, balancing academic activities with creative play to promote physical, social, and emotional development.

Learning centers do not have to be complicated. Balance choice options for centers based on the purpose for using each learning center. Ensure that children engage in learning activities that are not always focused on academics. Include some centers that encourage imaginary participation such as fine arts and dramatic play. Include simple board games where children choose a game or an activity from a shelf of options and share materials, cooperating with others by taking turns.

Changing learning centers may occur every two weeks, but there is no set schedule. Center themes and purposes can be coordinated with the current curriculum content and skills taught in classrooms. Learning center materials and activities should include familiar content and require skills that have been previously taught in small groups with adults so that children participate successfully without immediate adult guidance.



Although there is no set schedule, changing learning centers approximately every two weeks maintains children's interest and enables teachers to align center activities with curricular themes.

TEACHING TIP

Many backdrops for centers may be created using a large cloth whose design represents your theme or center purpose. You can attach the cloth to the back of storage shelves or bookcases, or drape cloth over an appliance box that is cut open and propped up as a low divider between learning centers.

Most supplies for centers can be easily collected around the house, or at discount or thrift stores. Store supplies in plastic bins for easy cleanup. When introducing a new center, explain expectations and review cleanup routines.

For additional creative play center ideas, see the Appendix, page 53.

Planning Center Activities for Creative Play

Teachers should vary activities for learning centers to include both skill practice and creative play. Young children benefit from activities that encourage social and emotional development through role-play to increase their oral language proficiency.

Use fewer items in each center to support efficient cleanup and promote order until children learn routines and procedures. Add more options as children demonstrate the maturity to manage materials and self-regulate their behaviors. Here are some suggestions for creative play centers:

| LEARNING CENTER THEME | SAMPLE SUPPLIES  |
|-----------------------|--|
| Bakery Center         | Plastic mixing bowls, measuring cups, eggbeaters, cookie cutters, cookie sheets, wooden spoons, empty food containers                |
| Beach Center          | Beach ball, sand bucket and shovel, plastic sunglasses, hats, folding lawn chairs, towels  |
| Camping Center        | Cot, sticks (for fire), flashlights, plastic lantern, backpacks, sleeping bags, camouflage shirts, small tent (if space)             |
| Dishwashing Center    | Plastic tablecloth (to protect floor), plastic tubs (for soapy water), dish rack, empty dish soap containers, plastic dishes, aprons |
| Dress-Up Center       | Oversized clothing, jackets, shoes, hats, gloves, plastic jewelry, handheld mirrors  |
| Fire Station Center   | Wagon, short step stool, rain boots, slicker-type raincoats, firefighter hats  |
| Housecleaning Center  | Small brooms, vacuum, mop, dust pan, rags, empty spray bottles, feather duster, plastic furniture or empty shelf to clean            |
| Office Center         | Old computer (unplugged), writing paper, stamp pad and stamps, old telephone, eyeglass frames (no lenses), clipboard                 |
| Repair Shop Center    | Old appliances, telephones, toys, child-safe tools (screwdrivers, wrenches), flashlights, pretend money and cash register            |

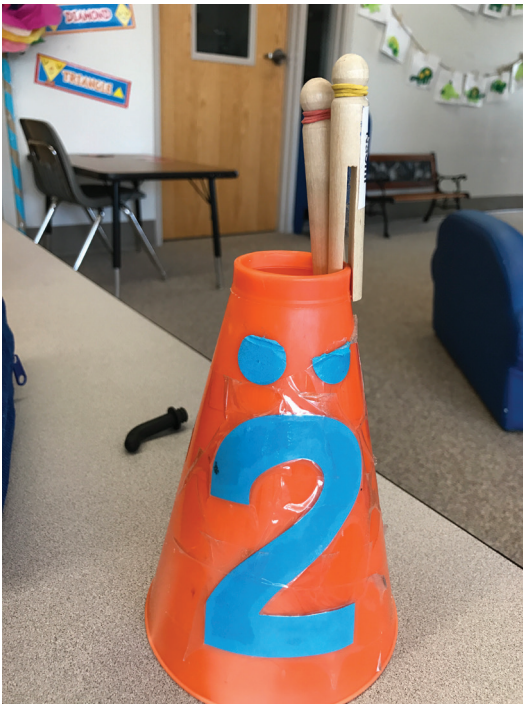
Regulating Attendance in Learning Centers

Regulating attendance in each learning center ensures safety and facilitates cleanup during transitions. Most centers include activity options and materials that will accommodate 2–4 children, depending on the available space and the type of activity choices included in the center. Some centers may limit attendance to 1–2 participants due to availability of equipment or materials, or to encourage behavioral compatibility if children are working in a small space.

Establishing a method for communicating expectations about how many children may attend each learning center at the same time is easy and affordable. You can create and use a sign or an athletic cone with a numeral printed or taped on it to regulate attendance in centers. Each learning center should have its own sign or cone to avoid confusion.

If children do not recognize words in print or numerals and the quantities represented by numerals, draw small shapes near the numeral on the cone or sign to illustrate how many children can attend the center. Combining the numeral with the shapes helps children understand how many can attend a center.

Post the sign or set the cone near the entry of the learning center when the center is available for use. Remove the sign or cone when the center is closed and is not an option or choice.



For children still learning to recognize print or numerals, include small shapes to indicate the number of children who may attend a center at one time.