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A Home Arranged For Learning

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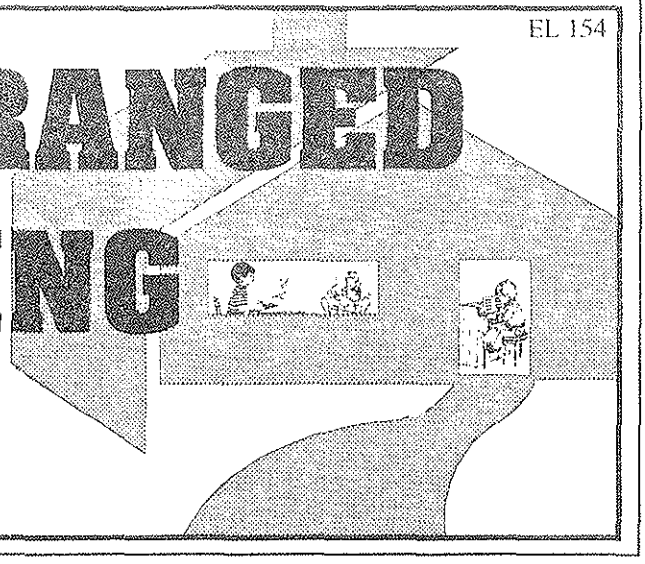
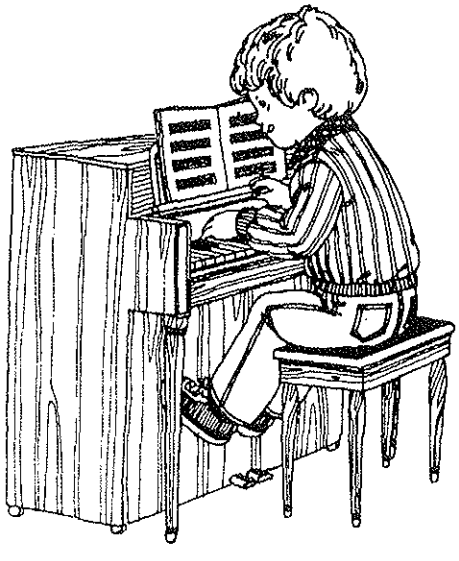
A HOME ARRANGED FOR LEARNING



UTAH STATE UNIVERSITY
COOPERATIVE EXTENSION

By Don Carter, Ed. D. and Carroll Lambert, Ed. D. Revised by Thomas R. Lee, Ph. D. April 1992

People used to believe that how a child turned out was predetermined. All children do seem to follow the same stages of development and in the same sequence. But, those whose life circumstances have been more favorable, and who have had a more enriched learning environment, progress more rapidly than those whose opportunities for learning have been limited. As evidence accumulates regarding the importance of the early years, there is increasing need to focus attention on the child's experiences and environment.



This publication suggests some ideas for parents who wish to utilize the home living area in such a way that it will contribute to the development of the young child, without negative impact on the family as a whole.

THERE'S NO ONE WAY

In general, there is no one way to add to the learning opportunities available to the child at home. There are fundamental differences in home environments due to different styles of living, social class and educational differences, and variations in space, furnishings, values, and family size. It would be unreasonable for parents to expect that they should provide everything which will be mentioned in this publication. We will describe a variety of situations from which parents may choose, as they make use of whatever space, facilities, and equipment is available to help them serve the needs of their young children. The goal of enriching the learning environment need not be achieved at the expense of living together compatibly.

EYE LEVEL

In adapting the home environment to the needs of the preschool child, a good place to begin is with the need for things at the child's eye level, such as mirrors, pictures on the wall, and display of the child's own creative productions. Hopefully, the child will be able to see his whole image in a mirror without having to stand on anything, and decorative wall hangings or pictures need to be at the child's eye level in some area, such as the child's own room. Walls of hallways, doors, or other such places may be used to display the child's work at a level appropriate to his own height and line of vision.

The child's reach level is also important. She should be able to reach bathroom fixtures, perhaps with a stool that stays by the sink. Shelves, which hold materials for her use, should be at her eye and reach level. Clothes hooks and hangers, tables and chairs, and similar items, need to be child size, so she can be comfortable and more self-sufficient.

Adaptations of the home environment will need to be based on recognition that children learn through their senses. The child's involvement with materials can effectively be promoted by attractive display of play materials such as a child's table with a puzzle on it; or a shelf where manipulative toys are displayed. These and other similar arrangements serve as invitations to active learning.

ACTIVITY AREAS

Children need room to move and to be actively engaged in play. The design of activity areas has a strong impact on behavior. If a corner has been equipped with such child-sized equipment as a stove, dolls, table and chairs, dress-up clothes, kitchenware and utensils, arranged in such a way as to establish a boundary and confine the area, it may be expected that home living play will take place there. However, if trucks, blocks, or manipulative toys share the same space, no definition is available to the child, and the area communicates an unclear and confusing message. The establishment of activity areas may serve as a helpful approach to guidance and liberate the child to engage in his best creative behavior. Activities such as water play, painting, cutting and pasting, need not always be forbidden, and need not be available only upon invitation from an adult. Areas can be defined in such a way that there are certain areas where behavior is acceptable which would not be acceptable in other places.

CHOICES AND DECISIONS

One of the ways children learn is through the choices and decisions they have an opportunity to make. If variety is available, then they have opportunity for choice, and need not be directed to each activity by an adult. Such a situation promotes resourcefulness on the part of the child, and enables the parent to be selectively involved in his activities.

PLANNING

Establishment of activity areas calls for planning to achieve the goals desired. It is particularly important that not all resources be utilized at once. The storage closet may be nearly full, but the materials displayed for use can be much more limited. Overstimulation, discordant themes, and distraction may work against learning. In contrast, simplicity, variability, and novel stimuli in the environment, which easily can be achieved through planned selection and rotation of materials, may help to sustain interest and provide motivation.

DISPLAY AND USE OF TOYS

Activity areas which might be utilized in various rooms at different times might include an area for the display and use of manipulative toys, such as puzzles, blocks, and building materials. These are probably best displayed on shelves in such a way that each item may be seen individually by the child. This invites the child to come and play there. Shelves make it possible to display materials attractively and in an orderly way. If pictures or outlines are used on the shelves as guides for placement of items after use, they promote the development of matching, sorting, seriation, and categorization skills. They also help to change the nature of the clean-up task. Putting things away can be as enjoyable as taking them out if the situation has been structured well, with cues to help the child deal with the task, with challenge to provide interest, and if there is encouragement from an aware adult to help add motivation. The use of a toy box is a poor substitute for shelves because it robs the child of so many learning opportunities.

HOME LIVING AREA

A home living activity area will provide chances for both boys and girls to act out roles of various kinds. This kind of area also gives the child an opportunity to act out problems or fears. Dramatic play gives the child a way to gain a sense of control over the fearful situation or event. Providing clothes and accessories for dress-up increases the fun and learning. The home living area can also be used to promote opportunities for sorting, classifying, and categorizing. And, again, cleaning up can be an enjoyable part of the activity if there is a place where all items of a particular kind belong, and the child is provided with clues (such as a pictures of shoes to help him to know where matched pairs of shoes are to be placed) to help him meet the challenge which the clean-up situation provides for him, and if his efforts are reinforced with recognition and affirming responses.

BOOK AREA

A book area, or library, is particularly valuable. As is true of each of the activity areas, or each set of shelves, the area should be made as attractive as possible so it will extend its own invitation to the child to go there and enjoy the materials which she sees are available to her. Books should be displayed individually, standing partially open on the table or shelf, so the child can see the whole face or cover of each of the books. This kind of display offers a much more powerful attraction than a stack of books where only the top book can be seen on its face. Good lighting, a rug, and a comfortable chair for the child, will add to the setting. Sometimes the child will choose to lie on the rug and look at books; and at other times she will prefer to use the chair. A choice is essential. When an adult reads to the child, or to the children, the activity may take place on the rug, in the book area, or may shift to another part of the house to make use of a couch or other comfortable setting for the group. In this case, the provision of choice of book, by the child, coupled with the individual display of the books available at the time, provides opportunity for choice, growth in self-esteem, and meeting individual needs and interests.

LISTENING CENTER

A listening center with a tape player and children's tapes, including those with accompanying picture book and story, may be established in a small space, perhaps coordinated with the book area in which there is a rug, chair, and table. The player might be on a table, of child's height, or on a low shelf. Favorite stories of the

parents may be taped, to be heard at the child's convenience. And, the child may be encouraged to tell stories of her own, in order to provide the pleasure of hearing herself, and in order to promote language development.

ART MATERIALS

Art materials offer rich learning experiences, and the manner in which these materials are arranged and displayed will influence the content and the effectiveness of the learning situation. Such activities as pasting, cutting, and painting, can most effectively enrich the child's experience world if they take place in areas designed for their use, with materials selectively displayed to stimulate interest and provide motivation. Again, a cluttered box which holds materials of a variety of kinds, limits what the child can learn. In contrast, if scissors, texture materials, paper, paste, and paints are available in receptacles of their own, it is easier to select appropriate materials from storage for the activity desired, and to establish a display that will attract the child into the appropriate activity. Small boxes, muffin tins, trays, other open containers, may all be used for presentation

of materials for collages and other such uses while maintaining a sense of order. For example, to arrange all materials of one color together, in an arrangement which features several colors, helps the child to develop color awareness and her capacity for discrimination.

In most homes it is unlikely that all the activity areas will be available at all times, and it is probably desirable that only a limited number of activity areas be in use at any one time. Rotation and change provide opportunities for stimulation of interest while avoiding over-stimulation and confusion. Also, when considering designing activity areas for the child, it is well to remember that the child is and needs to feel like a member of the family. It is unwise to establish all these areas in an isolated part of the house where the child would be excessively isolated from other family members or activities.

HOMES OF VARIOUS SIZES

Use space in various parts of the house, wherever it can be adapted to young children's needs without imposing on the needs of others. There may be no family room, or the child may not have a room of her own, but a shelf in the kitchen for hers own utensils (regular size but discarded from family use) for stacking, banging, and other play activities, will provide her with an interesting activity in a strategic location. Perhaps there could be a small table reserved for personal use by young children; there may be space in a corner of some room which could be designated as a

child's (or children's) play space, and designed as an activity area of one kind, and then another, to provide opportunities for learning. And, among other things, the child may learn that her things do not belong to others, and others' things do not belong to her. If she is provided with space and equipment such as tables and chairs which are intended for her own use, then her projects can extend for as long as she is involved and interested in them. It is frustrating to have to terminate an activity and clean up because the table she has been using must now be reverted to family usage. If others respect her belongings, she can learn to respect the possessions of others.

SUMMARY

Play is a child's work. It is how he or she learns. The effort to arrange areas in the home that stimulate and invite creative play will greatly enrich the child's world. If they are well-planned, such arrangements can teach important skills and concepts. They foster resourcefulness and self-esteem as children are able to choose their own activity. Having their own area conveys to children that they are important members of the family too.

Don Carter was formerly head of the department of Family and Child Development, Utah State University. He has three children. Carroll Lambert has taught preschool children in, and was supervisor of the Child Development Laboratory at USU. She is the mother of two children, both boys. Together, they have given lectures and served as consultants to Head Start programs in eighteen states and four Canadian provinces. They have published articles in The Journal of Home Economics, The Utah Educational Review, Childhood Education, and The Journal of Marriage and the Family. Thomas R. Lee is a Family and Human Developement Specialist and revised this publication April 1992.

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