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Six Basic Guidelines for

Transforming Your Teaching

to a Child-Centered Approach

As you move toward a curriculum that better reflects children's lives, use the following guidelines. These six steps will provide a more meaningful and rich experience for you and the children in your care. They will also create a stronger foundation for school readiness.

Step One: Set the stage and allow time.

Plan the environment as your basic curriculum, organizing the space and materials in an accessible, attractive, inviting way, suggesting all sorts of choices and possibilities. Allow at least one hour blocks of time for children to engage in open-ended free choice time uninterrupted by adult ideas, agendas, and schedule demands.

Step Two: Open the space. Let children combine different areas

Avoid being too rigid with rules that require props to stay in certain areas. For example, if dress-up clothes cannot go out of the house area, how can children become outfitted cooks at the playdough table or suited firefighters in the block area? Markers and pens may be needed for making signs in the block or dress-up areas, along with books for reading to doll babies or consulting in the design of building construction. Stock your room with an ample supply of open-ended materials (loose parts) that beg to be transported and transformed.

Step Three: Avoid interrupting significant play.

Your goal is to enable children to become truly absorbed in activities of their own choosing. As children move through the stages of play, they are able to sustain complex, cooperative play and language for longer and longer periods of time. Interrupting them with adult agendas defeats your goal of extending their attention span and independence.

Step Four: Keep the cleanup options open.

A well-meaning teacher, concerned that children learn to responsibly care for the room, often asks a child to stop and put away abandoned toys when the child is still in the middle of playing out a script. A firefighter responding to a 911 call wants to play out the story, not stop for a few minutes to pick up some discarded dress-up clothes. Quietly tidy up an area yourself, or observe when the play episode has reached a natural conclusion before requesting the children to clean up. Practice most of your cleanup requirements at cleanup time, rather than during play time.

Step Five: Refer children to each other.

Build a learning community. Young children need to see themselves as competent and resourceful. When you notice a child in need of assistance, point out another child who might be able to help. Model, support, and coach these interactions so that children develop the disposition and skills to use each other as resources. Treat conflict resolution in a similar manner. Provide routines, materials, and activities that require more than one person to make them work.

Step Six: Observe consciously.

Literally think twice before intervening!