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Introduction

Why this book? Why now? It's simple: I love planning with themes, and I think they deserve some renewed attention. I developed my passion for themes while teaching kindergarten at a community-based private school in Philadelphia. The school was located adjacent to the campus of the University of Pennsylvania, in an inner-city neighborhood serving a widely diverse group of children. The themes selected for our kindergarten curriculum gave us common ground. We all had something to offer and much to learn. I found myself fascinated by trucks, ships, and small city animals. For example, I discovered that if I stood on a pedestrian walking bridge and did a pulling motion (using a raised arm) to passing trucks, they would toot their horns. I became an expert on parts of a ship and fell in love with the power of tugboats.

The long-lasting impact of learning through themes is impressive, as is the amount of time that goes into this type of teaching. Not until I left the classroom, and had opportunities to reflect on this thematic approach, did I realize how incredibly time consuming it was to delve into themes so deeply. But if I hadn't committed tremendous time and energy to developing each theme, I would have risked losing the inherent value in teaching thematically. I was introduced to theme kits in my position as Resource and Training Coordinator with the Philadelphia Early Childhood Collaborative. The Collaborative has six resource rooms throughout the city that loan theme kits, educational toys, equipment, and resources to anyone engaged with young children. With theme kits the investment of time is up front, and the payoff is long-term. It's time for educators to take a close look at teaching with themes, agree on what makes them effective teaching tools, and discover how theme kits can make this approach practical as well!

Theme-based curriculum takes in a wide range of practice. Not all thematic teaching looks alike, nor should it. But certain elements need to be present for thematic teaching to be appropriate for young children. Let's look at what makes themes an effective teaching tool and what traps we need to look out for. After all, the goats in the classic children's story, "The Three Billy Goats Gruff," were willing to risk life and limb to get to greener pastures; we early childhood professionals could benefit from a harmless walk across a different bridge. The goats had exhausted the supply of nutrient-rich grass by staying in one place for too long; teachers are way too smart to let that happen. We know that the best education for

children comes from constantly evaluating and changing our own behavior to keep the learning rich with fresh nutrients!

Effective theme-based teaching allows us to teach everything in the curriculum while adhering to developmentally appropriate practice (DAP). DAP is based on research about how children learn and develop. These principles of our profession are defined in the National Association for the Education of Young Children's (NAEYC) position statement, "Developmentally Appropriate Practice in Early Childhood Programs." Thematic teaching must be based on these principles to be effective. Theme kits are a means to move from theme teaching that has lost its grounding in these principles to teaching that depends on these ideals. The focus here is on understanding the benefits of good thematic teaching, and on developing and using theme kits to make those benefits a reality.

Themes supported by kits benefit children in a variety of ways:

- Children learn concepts through meaningful exploration over an extended period. Good theme topics encourage each child's involvement across all developmental domains. The learning of basic skills comes naturally from each child's physical, social, emotional, and cognitive engagement with materials and activities that are available for several weeks.
- Children have time to take hold of a concept and to integrate it into their existing knowledge. Themes encourage children to represent their new knowledge through art, dramatic play, building activities, and other areas of the curriculum. Through play, children deepen their understanding of new ideas.
- Children master concepts through repeated experiences with materials and activities. A broad range of experiences will capitalize on each child's preferred or dominant learning mode.
- Children have opportunities to reveal interests, talents, and innate abilities. (After a week of studying trucks, some children will be able to name and describe the differences between a dump truck, a cement truck, a tractor-trailer, and so on. Some will know which truck has four wheels and which has eighteen, which does construction work and which carries materials long distances, or how the movement of a cement truck keeps the cement at a workable consistency.) Math, science, language, and cognitive skills are being built before our eyes—we mustn't diminish the importance of this learning by ending the study of trucks before these concepts take hold.

Teachers and family child care providers also benefit from using themes:

- Classroom management becomes easier as children are *actively* engaged in meaningful work.
- Preparation for class time is lessened. Teachers present more open-ended materials, ending the need for precut materials and prepared worksheets.

- Work becomes more fulfilling and satisfying as children and teachers share excitement and commitment to interesting projects.
- Parents share in the enthusiasm for what children are learning and appreciate teachers in a new way.

Teaching with themes can provide all of these benefits for children and teachers. However, too often themes are used in ways that sabotage children's learning, and actually make work harder for teachers. Theme-based teaching that is not grounded in knowledge of child development doesn't result in real learning. Here are some signs of ineffective thematic curriculum:

- Children are expected to learn new concepts in a week's time and don't have opportunities to manipulate relevant materials. (Children need more time to develop interests and extrapolate meaning.)
- Thematic activities are limited so that not all learning styles are honored. There may be visual presentations, but nothing for children who learn best by auditory and tactile experiences.
- The teacher's goal is to finish the objectives by the end of a predetermined period, often a week; children do not have time to integrate their new learning.
- Children get introduced to concepts but don't have opportunities to apply them.
- Children have limited opportunities to practice their new knowledge and skills. This makes it hard for them to build confidence, and makes it less likely that they will retain what they've learned.
- Children do not have input into what topics to study and how to explore them. This makes it less likely that they will be interested in the theme. It is likely to be harder to hold their attention, and their learning is likely to be shallow.

Developing theme kits, as described in this book, will help teachers avoid the shortcomings of theme-based teaching, while capitalizing on the benefits of this popular approach. Theme kits contain a variety of developmentally appropriate materials and activities that relate to a specific topic, including books, audiocassettes, puzzles, open-ended materials, and play props. The materials appeal to different senses and learning styles (for example, a wild animal theme kit reinforces animal names through visual, auditory, and tactile modalities). They are carefully selected for cultural relevance and inclusion and to avoid bias.

The effectiveness of the materials depends on the relationship of the child and the teacher. A successful relationship comes from the teacher paying attention to the child's responses. If a child doesn't learn the names of farm animals by looking at pictures, the teacher can dig deeper into the theme kit or add something that works to the collection of materials. It

may be the song, the puppets, or the small sorting animals that bring meaning to each animal and its name. For me, it probably would have been the cow-shaped cookies!

The purpose of this book is threefold: to share my passion for themes, to inspire creativity on the part of educators and young children in their use of themes, and to ensure that young children keep alive their sense of wonder and delight in learning new things. As author and lifelong teacher Mimi Brodsky Chenfeld (2000) says in response to her students' excitement over one child's play fire hat, "Be creative, be imaginative, be flexible, be open-minded, be playful, be holistic, be courageous, be tuned into kids, be brilliant, and figure out ways to link a fire to every other subject or topic. In other words, make connections!"

I hope that teachers who use this book will learn about themes that work well; where to find materials and resources; and how to develop, maintain, and use a theme kit most effectively. I hope the theme kit approach to curriculum keeps teachers and children stimulated by the process of learning. Children will learn language, math, and problem-solving skills and science and social studies concepts. They will develop socially, physically, and cognitively every step of the way.

A Note about Terms

Are we teachers, caregivers, early childhood educators, or baby-sitters? Well, we know what we are not! But it is harder to agree on language that suits all people who work directly with young children in a child care or preschool setting. A recent survey on preferred job titles of early childhood staff produced the following results. Home-based providers preferred "family child care provider," and staff in a larger group setting preferred "teacher" (Center for Early Childhood Leadership 2001). This book will use both terms where possible, and use the term "teacher" to apply to all readers where brevity is needed.

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Theme Kit 7



Babies

*Cuddly, soft, bundled up tight,
Babies wake up all through the night.*

*Chubby cheeks, tufts of hair,
Babies carried everywhere.*

*Wiggling arms, fingers, and toes,
A baby has a button nose.*

*Crying, sighing, a soft coo:
Baby's sounds are just for you.*

*Let's pretend, and be babies for a while,
Get fed milk to make us smile;*

*Or practice being a mom or dad,
Hold baby close when she's feeling sad.*

*Bring on the babies, let's have fun
And play pat-a-cake 'til the day is done!*

Theme Tree

Equipment for babies

cribs
high chairs
cradles
buggy, stroller
baskets—carried on back
slings

Baby names

Caring for baby

feeding—bottled formula,
breast milk, pureed foods
clothes
bathing
play—mobiles, rattles,
“pat-a-cake”

Baby safety

baby on back to sleep
support baby’s head
baby gates, locks, outlet covers

Baby sounds

cries
burps
coo
baby rattles
musical toys

Weights and measures

weight
height
head circumference

Bedtime

lullabies

Mother Goose rhymes

Baby animals

Motion

moving
rocking
crawling
rolling over
bouncing

Introduction

You were once a baby, so was I and every child you will ever teach—so why not enjoy a unit on this universal experience? Babies have a lot to teach us, so open your eyes, your lap, and your hearts, and bring them on! Through ethnopediatrics, the study of parents, children, and childrearing across cultures, we learn that different cultures raise babies in different ways. According to Meredith Small (1999), professor of anthropology at Cornell University, there is no right or wrong style; behavior is either appropriate or inappropriate depending on that culture. While all babies have basically the same biological needs (sleep, food, emotional attachment), Small finds that these needs are being fulfilled in often dramatically different ways from culture to culture. So let's look at how babies are fed, carried, clothed, and stimulated around the globe, and enjoy the journey.

There are wonderful books, beautiful lullabies, and fun dramatic play props for this theme kit. I found it challenging to find accessible and affordable authentic materials representing other cultures and experiences when I built my own babies theme kit. The richness of this unit will depend on the resources available from the families you serve and the surrounding community. This is a wonderful opportunity to include babies with special needs. Appendix 2 includes People of Every Stripe, a company that makes dolls with adaptive equipment, including a doll who is fed through a g-tube. (A gastronomy tube—g-tube—is used to vent air from a child's stomach, or to deliver nutrition directly to the stomach.)

How will the children respond to this topic? Some will sneak the baby bottles and pacifiers into their own mouths when no one's looking. Some will love playing the parenting role: the nurturing, the fussing, the hovering. Others might take the opportunity to work on some sibling rivalry issues. You might enjoy a few weeks of quiet voices, as you can always remind them, "Shh! The babies are sleeping."

Kit Contents

A selection of books about babies

Talk, Baby! (Ziefert)—A book that takes a realistic look at the linguistic and physical developmental milestones of a new baby as her brother patiently guides us through the first fourteen months of her life.

Birth: World Celebrations and Ceremonies (Spirn)—Useful as a teacher resource, this book describes cultural traditions and ceremonies surrounding birth in ten countries.

Just Like a Baby (Bond)—You’ll be tempted to climb into the homemade cradle along with the rest of this extended family.

Babies on the Move (Canizares)—A short picture book that has simple captions and captivating photos.

Babies (Canizares)—Simple photos and captions describe babies’ universal needs.

Baby Science: How Babies Really Work! (Douglas)—The author demystifies babyhood using preschool language.

My Baby (Winter)—“Listen, my baby, to the coo, coo, coo of the turtle-dove.” Treat yourself to this lyrical text and boldly colored and textured description of preparing a *bogolan* cloth to wrap the new baby. Painting cloth with mud is a traditional craft of the Nakunte Diarra women of Mali.

Brown Sugar Babies (Smith)—Full-page photographs show the beautiful spectrum of hues of black children. The author says, “It is my hope that by seeing the diversity of the black children, we will realize how many wonderful colors are represented, celebrate our diversity, and enjoy the sweetness and love that children add to life.”

A Ride on Mother’s Back: A Day of Baby Carrying around the World (Bernhard)—On hips, shoulders, backs, chests, even heads, babies get carried to and fro. Ride along with babies from North America to Asia and all lands in between.

The Babies Are Coming! (Hest)—Follow these babies through their antics as they prepare for a special trip.

On the Day You Were Born (Frasier)—Each baby’s arrival on earth is momentous, yet dwarfed by the grand scheme of the spinning earth.

Welcoming Babies (Knight)—We sing, we kiss, we touch, we name—babies around the world are welcomed.

Alphababies (Golding)—Meet twenty-six babies each introducing a letter of the alphabet.

Hi, New Baby! (Harris)—These illustrations are so realistic that the characters and their emotions jump out of the book. For example, as the mom sits at the kitchen table with the whole family engaged in eating, we see the baby breastfeeding.

Hush, Little Baby (Halpern)—Collage-like illustrations accompany the text of this traditional lullaby.

Baby Talk (Hiatt)—Soft portrayals of a baby's daily life and touching encounters with his big brother illustrate this book.

Eyes, Nose, Fingers, and Toes: A First Book All about You (Hindley)—A book with a delightful look at baby and toddler body parts and their uses.

Play props

baby bottles

baby cups, bowls, and utensils

baby clothes (include multicultural fabrics)

baby blankets

tub for bathing

fabric representing South America, Africa, and Asia, to make baby slings

baby toys—rattles (a large assortment for sorting), baby books, music makers

photos of women breastfeeding babies (for display)

Commercial products

Chinasprout Hug and Hold Baby puppet (a lifelike baby puppet in a quilted bunting—see appendix 2)

multicultural, realistic baby dolls

baby food grinder

dolls of different ethnicities with special needs including prosthesis, g-tubes, and colostomy bags

selection of lullabies from various countries

Signs to post

PEEK-A-BOO

GIRL

BOY

MAMA

DADA

BABY

Other materials

baby slings

baby equipment (cradle, high chair, stroller, car seat)

baskets made for babies in various cultures

Facts about Babies

- Research has shown a vast difference in physical contact between parent and baby in different cultures. Babies are touched 20–25 percent of the day in traditional American parenting; 90 percent of the day in Korea; 93 percent of the day and 100 percent of the night for babies raised by the Ache Indians in the Mbaracayu Forest of northern Paraguay.
- In Mato Grosso, Brazil, the home of the Bororo people, parents and their baby do not eat for a few days after birth in hopes that this will help the baby cope with hunger.
- Some people in England believe that the day of the week of a baby's birth will influence his or her behavior. Hence the poem (one of many versions):

*Monday's child is fair of face,
Tuesday's child is full of grace,
Wednesday's child is full of woe,
Thursday's child has far to go,
Friday's child is loving and giving,
Saturday's child works hard for a living.
The child that is born on the Sabbath day
is bonnie, and blithe, and good, and gay.*

- Japanese parents give their children names to bring them good luck. Babies receive toy dogs as gifts to symbolize protection for the baby.
- In southwestern Nigeria, Yoruba babies are held by their feet and shaken three times to make them brave and strong. Newborn girls are kept in their homes for six days after birth, boys for eight days because the Yoruba people believe girls are stronger than boys.
- The Hopi Indians of North America use volcanic ash to make babies' skin clean and soft.
- In many cultures a tree is planted in honor of a birth. In Switzerland, an apple tree is often planted for a boy and a nut tree for a girl.
- In China, a baby is considered one year old at birth. A Chinese child's second birthday is an important event. Babies tell their own fortunes by picking from an assortment of objects placed around them.

Sources: Knight, Margy Burns, *Welcoming Babies* (Gardiner, Maine: Tilbury House, 1994); Siegen-Smith, Nikki, *Welcome to the World* (New York: Orchard Books, 1996); www.birthdaytraditions.com; www.indigenusbabies.com

Family Involvement

One way to include families in your program is to write letters. I think it is respectful to children if we include them in the process. At the very least, be sure children know exactly what the letter that is being sent home says, and choose a greeting that includes all the people living in a child's home (mom, dad, grandma, big sister, and so on). Other children might choose to fill in Dear _____ and sign their own names.

Dear _____,

We are working on a theme about babies. We want to learn about babies from all over the world. When you come into my room (child care), would you add your ideas to the Theme Tree?

Do you have any of these materials to loan or give to our class (child care) to help us enjoy this theme?

- fabric from other countries
- baby toys
- information on your family traditions
- baby accessories such as receiving blankets, a food grinder, baby clothes
- equipment such as a high chair, a car seat, baby gates
- baby carrier (backpack, sling, basket)

Here are some activities we will be doing:

- caring for baby dolls—bathing, feeding, playing
- pureeing baby food
- observing a real baby (any volunteers?)
- learning lullabies and nursery rhymes

Get ready to ask me these questions at the end of this unit of study:

- What do all babies need?
- How are babies carried in some other countries?
- What is a baby telling you by crying?
- What is your favorite lullaby?

Thanks for all your help.

Your daughter (son),

P.S. Don't be surprised if I start using baby talk and acting like a baby for a few weeks—I'm just playacting!

Ready, Set, Go!

Daily routines

Arrival

Collect baby photos from the children. Make copies (so you don't damage original photos) and prepare Welcome Baby cards. When children arrive, they can post their cards on the baby board.

Breakfast

Children can take turns feeding each other with close supervision.

Circle

Try good old-fashioned "pat-a-cake" clapping games.

Free choice

See the interest areas described below.

Small group time

Explore baby toys. Talk about shapes, colors, action words (push, pull, poke), and more.

Rest time

Play or sing some soothing lullabies.

Interest areas

Dramatic play

- baby equipment
- baby dishes, utensils
- empty boxes of baby food (an assortment of ethnic foods)
- baby clothes, dolls, blankets

Manipulative and math center

- Provide nesting cups.
- Fill baby bottles with different amounts of water and place in order from least to most full.
- Fold old-fashioned baby diapers (fold in half, and half again).
- Count and sort baby socks.

Art and projects

- Babies can see black and white for the first few months. They are attracted to strong, bold patterns. Put black and white paint at the easels.

Sensory station

- Invite a baby, and children will use their senses to observe. They can get an idea of the sweetness of breast milk by adding a teaspoon of sugar to a cup or so of warm milk.
- Let children apply baby powder and baby lotion.
- Make baby cereal and ask children to describe its taste and texture.
- Water temperature is important at bathtime, and milk temperature is important at feeding time. Teach children how to test water and milk for warm temperature. Introduce a water thermometer.

Library

- See the list of books in Kit Contents.

New discoveries

- How absorbent are diapers? Try an experiment with different brands of diapers. How much water can they absorb before they become saturated? Share your results with parents.

Writing center

- Set out a large picture collection of babies doing different activities and showing different emotions. Provide blank books made of construction paper. Children can use the pictures to make their own books about babies.

Music and movement

- What kind of music do babies like? Ask parents to send in some of their favorite music.
- Have an assortment of musical baby toys available.
- Introduce multicultural lullabies.

Activity Ideas

Baby food

Babies need to eat soft foods. Making baby food is simple, and the results are nutritious and economical. Try recipes from the Wholesome Baby Foods Web site for starters (see Resources).

Rattle sorting

Collect baby rattles. Be sure to have an assortment of rattles in different materials (plastic, wood, cloth, and maybe even silver), colors, and sounds. Explore ways to sort the rattles, discussing names for color and other attributes. Teach children how to make tally marks; chart sorting results (material, color, sound, and so on).

What's in a rattle?

Collect plastic soda bottles or wide-mouth juice bottles. Wash and dry them thoroughly. Let children experiment with filling the bottles with different items. Provide aquarium stones, rice, sand, beans, and other small objects. Children can use scoops and funnels to fill bottles. Lids can be glued on. What conclusions can the children draw? Does a full bottle make as much sound as a less-full bottle? What material or quantity makes the loudest sound? Which bottle was hardest to fill?

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Recordings

- Chinese lullabies*. 1996. Taiwan: Wind Records.
- Cuban lullaby*. 2000. New York: Ellipsis Arts.
- Lullabies of Latin America*. 1999. Los Angeles: Rhino Records.
- Under the green corn moon: Native American lullabies*. 1998. Boulder, Colo.: Silver Wave. Many different tribes represented.