

EMERGENT CURRICULUM with TODDLERS

Learning through Play

Melissa Pinkham

Foreword by
Susan Stacey



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For Kyle, my constant
source of inspiration.

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FOREWORD

Emergent Curriculum for Toddlers

Entering a toddler classroom, what do you see? If you are like me, you first notice the tremendous action. Toddlers are always on the move, but this movement is not random or meaningless. Rather, if we observe carefully and with an open mind, we see that the underlying intent of toddlers is to explore and understand their world. Every object and event is a possibility for investigation. What does this thing do? How does it work? What other things can I do with it? How does it connect with what I've already experienced? There is no stopping a toddler from exploring their environment and the world at large.

From my own experiences, I've noticed that when working with toddlers, some educators get caught up in the high level of action, movement, and messiness in toddler rooms and seek to somehow control it—perhaps through routines or a focus on “learning activities” that require toddlers to “settle down,” as if preparing for later life. Yet play and action *is* their preparation for the future, and educators need to truly believe and trust in the power of play.

In this book, Melissa Pinkham—a seasoned toddler teacher—asks us, “Why?” When the natural nature of these young explorers is to inquire, why would we want them to do anything other than play in an interesting and inviting environment, full of real stuff and authentic experiences, and interact with adults who are in the role of responsive supporter?

There are many misunderstandings about emergent curriculum: that we “follow the child” or that the teacher does not have a voice. Those of us who think and write and read extensively about emergent curriculum know that, instead, emergent curriculum is intentional, carefully thought through, and responsive—a journey alongside children where we are in collaboration with them.

Some believe that routines and care in a toddler setting prevent teachers from digging deeply into what their toddlers are investigating, and it’s true that the daily care part of life with toddlers is a mammoth task. But Melissa clearly explains, in a practical sense, how to observe, reflect, and put our responses into action. Through this type of practice, teachers become researchers, figuring out the underlying meanings of toddler actions and then responding. This is authentic curriculum, full of meaningful learning for the children and insights for the educator.

Perhaps you are working within a team that does not truly value play. If so, this book will be of great help to you. Through the use of real-life examples, Melissa is able to help the reader articulate the learning in every type of play. For those who are working in a setting that requires assessment or who have to convince their coworkers that this approach is rich with opportunities for learning through exploration and discovery, this information will be a huge support.

But perhaps the sentiment that flows most clearly through this book is one of joy. Where is the joy in our classrooms, in learning? In today’s society, it is easy to get pulled into and bogged down by standards and objectives, rules and routines, protocols and expectations. We are living in a high-speed world in a constant state of flux. What do toddlers need from this world? Love and kindness, certainly. Security and safety, of course. And joy should be right up there at the top of this list of needs. Joy in being together and exploring the delights of materials and surroundings. Joy in running around and feeling their body in exuberant action. Joy in discovering the natural world of mud, water, sunshine, and wind. Joy in their relationships with trusted adults and other children.

While we pay attention to development and routines, it is also possible to put into action a joyful learning environment that emerges from our thoughtful responses to children, one that will help them to develop so much more than skills. Emergent curriculum helps develop lifelong learners who simply find joy in learning. We can find our joy in being alongside the children on such a journey, and Melissa explains how.

—SUSAN STACEY

Acknowledgments

This book represents all the teachers who have influenced and contributed to my own thinking process over the past thirty-seven years while working directly with children. I truly believe that when teachers work together in collaboration, we are at our best.

A gracious thank-you to all the families and children throughout the years for the privilege of learning and thinking with you.

To Sarah Thomas, for giving me a classroom where I could practice, teach, and document the toddler's learning journey.

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To Ana Penman, Tracy Marroquin, Patricia Ubaldo-Elbo, and Mercedes Bernardin, the coteachers who joined with me in transforming our full-time toddler program. I have tremendous admiration for their courage and willingness to try something completely out of their comfort zone, even with the smallest pockets of time. Together we learned that implementing emergent curriculum with toddlers takes research, dialogue, and shared reflections.

To Betty Jones and Susan Stacey, for your invaluable insight on emergent practices, documentation, and the value of play. You both are my inspiration for teaching and advocacy.

My deep gratitude to founder and director Becca Hackett-Levy of the Northeast LA (Los Angeles) Forest School. Thank you for inviting me to teach and learn along with such dedicated educators: Julissa Tobias, Kendall Markham Shechter, Josie Shabbit, Emily Grunfeld, and Val Kurzovatov. I had the privilege to socially construct knowledge with these educators on a daily basis.

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To Madlen Sarkisyan and Bianca Elsensohn, my fierce and dedicated colleagues. We have spent the last eighteen years working vigorously to make the world a better place for children. Our efforts have not gone unnoticed.

To my mom, Marilyn Bodourian, also an educator, who sat and discussed emergent curriculum with me for hours on end. She taught me early in life that education is a political act, and in order to make change, it begins with our work with children.

To my husband, Lee, for his support in my continuous endeavors as a teacher and writer.

INTRODUCTION

My Journey with Toddlers

Two-year-old Felix is working at the water table. He fills a small container with water and pours it onto the sand below. As he watches, the look of amazement on his face asks, “How and why does the water disappear?” He picks up the container again and repeats the process. His curiosity brings him to drier patches of sand as he realizes more water is needed in those areas. Felix continues his investigation all morning. After a while, he calls out, “The water sinks in the sand!” and begins to understand the concept of absorption.

Kayla, another two-year-old, is mixing colors with paintbrushes at a Plexiglas easel. She mixes an assortment of colors and, with a delighted look, turns to her teachers and announces, “Brown! I made brown!”

Dashiell has entered the toddler program and just separated from his family. He is visibly upset and shares this verbally with his teacher. He asks if he can write a letter to his mom to tell her how he is feeling. His teacher picks up a clipboard and pencil and prints his words as he dictates a letter to his family. “I am sad!” he says. “I want to go home,” and “I miss you.” Soon after, he asks for his own pencil and paper so he can “write” his message. The teacher provides him with these materials, and he writes, using scribbles to create his letter.

These are all examples of emergent curriculum in our toddler program. When educators speak about toddlers, it is usually synonymous with diapering, feeding, separation, and naptime. Some of the language we hear from toddler teachers is about comforting a crying child, setting out toys that are “safe,” keeping up with the diapering and nap schedules, and writing out daily reports, all of which speak only to custodial tasks. But authentic and meaningful curriculum methods for toddler educators are vital to this unique and critical stage of development. Magda Gerber, an infant and toddler specialist who emphasized the idea of respecting infants and toddlers, believed that toddlers are “whole people, aware, intuitive, and communicative. They are natural learners, explorers, and scientists, able to test hypotheses, solve problems, and understand language and abstract ideas” (Lansbury 2014).

Toddler development is at the forefront of learning. It sets the stage for strong and healthy learning dispositions and builds the foundation for deep investigations. Emergent curriculum nurtures this important stage of development because its foci are generated out of the children’s interests and motivations. It respects their inquiries, honors their intense emotionality, and demonstrates their incredible ability to learn (Stacey 2015).

Thematic curricula differ because they are based around a predetermined idea. Usually these topics are chosen by teachers and schools. Many themes have little to do with the child’s current interest, and they rarely meet a toddler’s needs. These curricula are not responsive to the immediate emotional and social needs of a toddler, who deserves the utmost attention and sensitivity. Toddlers have many interests and spend a long amount of time engaging with people, the environment, and peers. Responsive teaching, which is inherent in emergent curriculum, cultivates their sense of self, meets their social and emotional needs, and supports their overall development.

Learning through Reflection

I entered into the world of a full-time toddler program after almost thirty years as an early childhood educator. My teaching experiences were mostly with preschoolers, although I had the opportunity to teach toddler programs at Pacific Oaks Children’s School in Pasadena, California. There the toddler programs consisted of

two-and-a-half-hour mornings of open-ended play, snack, and a short circle time at the end of the day. My role as a teacher focused on guiding toddlers through social interactions, supporting them in conflict resolution, and introducing them to a variety of developmentally appropriate activities. At the time, I felt we were addressing the needs of the toddlers to their fullest. Curriculum was about sensorial experiences, emotional development, and socialization. I wasn't paying attention to the toddlers' inquiries beyond these basic needs. Emergent practices, in my mind, took place in the preschool classrooms because I had thought toddlers' inquiries stayed focused solely on social and emotional growth. Unintentionally, I wasn't actually recognizing the learning domains as curriculum emerging, and I was not documenting the learning and progression of curriculum. After I taught in a full-time program, I recognized that toddlers too have inquiries about their world beyond social and emotional growth. My role as their teacher grew. I began to listen to their ideas and built a meaningful and responsive curriculum to extend their inquiries.

Flash-forward thirteen years. I accepted a position as a mentor toddler teacher and curriculum director at a preschool in the Los Angeles area. At the time, I was not intending to implement emergent curriculum with toddlers. My main focus was still supporting children in their emotional and social development and introducing them to a group setting.

Our toddler program met daily for six to eight hours a session, with long periods of free, uninterrupted play both inside and out. There were few teacher-imposed interruptions except for the necessary transitions to create routine. This allowed the children to have plenty of time to investigate their ideas. Our toddler teaching team consisted of three teachers with fifteen toddlers. Our goal as teachers was to slow down, reexamine our practices, and really observe the children. What surprised us the most was how extended periods of time allowed the children's play to develop and expand into thoughtful and complex ideas. We watched as toddlers engineered and built water canals in the sandbox using natural resources. They transformed a plant hedge in our small play yard into a magical forest, using language to share and connect with one another. Both children and teachers spent days constructing a variety of bridges and testing their structural integrity.

Through this process, our teaching team learned to trust children and their growing investigations.

Emergent curriculum provided us with the opportunity to develop confidence in the children's inquiries and put aside the need for scripted and thematic curricula. Together we celebrated this new understanding of emergent curriculum with toddlers. It truly provided opportunity for deep, contextual learning. This became an important element in the quality of the toddlers' play.

Our weekly newsletter, which documented the children's learning, turned a new lens on our teaching. We felt strongly that the toddlers' interests deserved respect and visibility. Through this documentation process, we observed expansive, in-depth themes arising out of their inquiries. We noticed the toddlers had interests that continued for weeks at a time. As teachers, we also found the time, even on the busiest of days, to share and reflect on the toddlers' play and continually think about our own practices. I was humbly reminded that toddlers are truly capable and committed to their own education (Hammond 2009).

Most recently, I began a new position as a lead teacher of toddlers in an urban forest school. This begins another chapter in my teaching journey. I work alongside vibrant and curious children and teachers, discovering their inquiries in beautiful green spaces with all the loose parts we need provided by the forest. It is an optimal space for learning.

In this book, I invite teachers into the process of developing curriculum together with toddlers. Emergent curriculum has a place in toddler programs. Your thoughts, ideas, and reflections about children matter. Emergent curriculum makes space for teachers to think about the toddlers' developmental needs, respond to their constant inquiries, and encourage others to develop a new perspective when thinking of toddlers. Join me on this journey in reflecting on children's play, incorporating their ideas into your planning, and bringing emergent curriculum to life in your toddler programs.

Being Curious: What Is Emergent Curriculum?



How often have you heard teachers of toddlers say, “I want to try emergent curriculum with my toddler class, but I don’t know where to start?” or “How do we teach toddlers without a thematic, scripted curriculum?” Some ask, “How can I implement a curriculum in a program that has so many daily caregiving responsibilities?” “What is the teacher’s role in emergent curriculum?” or “How do we evaluate the progress and development of toddlers?”

These are common concerns when tackling the momentous task of educating toddlers, especially under the pressure of directors, families, school agencies, and the community at large. Toddlers are fast, impulsive, irrational, and emotionally vulnerable. This can make the idea of implementing emergent curriculum feel overwhelming. Predetermined themes in a toddler program may appear to be more manageable as teachers follow a developed curriculum and implement the topics into their programs. However, an abundance of research shows that when teachers focus on supporting the immediate development of the

child, especially in the toddler years, this cultivates a love of learning. Toddlers are very present and active, and they have the potential to be fully engaged in the learning process. When teachers plan topics that are unrelated to the immediate interests of toddlers and try to stay rigid to the theme, there is potential to create power struggles, decrease the opportunity for autonomy, and take away opportunities to promote curious minds.

Let's use the example of a thematic curriculum and the children's responses that I recently observed in a toddler program located in the beach community of Aptos, California. The teachers announced to the children that the theme of the week was "deserts." Cactus cutouts were placed on the table for the children to paint, the teachers sang a song about deserts at circle time, and pictures of desert animals were placed out on a low board for children to view. The toddlers in this particular group seemed more focused on their own ideas: playing with babies in the dramatic play area, digging large holes in the sand, and painting different surfaces using brushes and water. The toddlers had many inquiries in their own play: What does it mean to take care of a baby? How deep can I dig? What is under the sand? When we paint with water, why does it change the surface's color and then the water disappears? However, the teachers insisted that the toddlers paint what they had made available inside, wanted the toddlers to pretend they were animals in the desert instead of playing with baby dolls, and taught about the animals in desert climates instead of investigating holes with the children.

In this case, the scripted curriculum took the natural sense of inquiry out of learning with children. As often happens in toddler programs, the teachers got locked into a theme versus listening to the toddlers' inquiries. Was the theme of deserts connected to the toddlers' world? Was it really necessary to teach toddlers about deserts, especially considering their own community was coastal land? Were the teachers responsive to the toddlers' interests? From my observations that day, it was clear that the teachers were more concerned about their own teaching of the theme than the interests the toddlers were demonstrating through their play. When curriculum is relevant and contextual and speaks to the emotional and social complexities toddlers experience on a daily basis, teachers will find engaged learners, fewer power struggles, and an environment that is responsive and supportive to all.

Let us begin to take a look at the practice of emergent curriculum, the reasons it benefits this sensitive stage of a child's life, and why teachers' observational skills are essential to effective and meaningful curriculum.

What Is Emergent Curriculum?

Emergent curriculum is a method of planning wherein many of the ideas evolve from toddlers' interests and questions. Toddlers have many inquiries about the world they live in and bring these questions to their environments. For many children, toddler programs become the first place where they can investigate their ideas.

Emergent curriculum is co-constructed by both children and adults. This means that teachers and children have a partnership in the learning process. Teachers play a role in creating an environment that provides the toddlers with materials to support their thinking. Toddlers bring their inquiries and questions to the teachers, which in turn support the teachers' curriculum planning. Through observation, reflection, interpretation, and planning, teachers gain an understanding of the children's curiosities and can thoughtfully plan a curriculum that supports all of the areas of a toddler's development.

When teachers begin practicing emergent curriculum with toddlers, the first task is learning how to observe the children's interactions with the environment and the people in it. Many teachers view observation as a way of just watching what children do. Instead, imagine observation as a way of listening to the children to develop an understanding of what they are thinking. Observation begins with active listening, which leads to reflection and interpretation. (See chapter 3 for more about observation.)

One basic requirement of emergent curriculum is understanding the value of play in toddlers' learning. This calls for teachers to trust the essential role of play in a child's development, as Elizabeth Jones and John Nimmo urged decades ago in their foundational book, *Emergent Curriculum*. Play allows toddlers plenty of active participation with their environment as well as the opportunity to investigate their ideas. When toddlers play, they make sense of their questions through the physical environment. Through play, toddlers interact with objects, often with repetition, to develop an understanding of how things work.

They use open-ended materials such as sand, dirt, blocks, and water to find a deeper meaning to their questions.

In play with the people in their environment, toddlers learn about interpersonal relationships and begin the process of understanding the art of socialization. In addition, toddlers learn through their physical bodies by climbing, jumping, pushing, running, and other large-motor activities (Maguire-Fong 2015). Play is a necessary component of emergent curriculum because it is self-initiated and allows children to be actively engaged and to take charge of their own learning.

Honoring Toddlers' Unique Development

During the first three years of life, a tremendous amount of growth occurs in a child's brain. Children from ages birth to three experience extensive changes in every area of their development. This includes social and emotional growth, motor skills, language, and cognitive growth. This sensitive stage of development gives teachers the opportunity to create a curriculum that focuses on the specific needs of a toddler (Hyson and Tomlinson 2014).

Toddlers experience emotions intensely and are acutely aware of their environment. A toddler's developmental undertaking is to understand what they are feeling, develop ways to regulate their emotional impulses, and find healthy outlets for self-expression. They also become interested in relationships and begin to build trust with others and their environment. Teachers of toddlers must serve as social and emotional coaches.

When teachers implement emergent practices, toddlers' sensitive needs are addressed through the curriculum. Teachers can recognize and nurture these huge milestones by integrating strategies and tools that are emotionally supportive to toddlers' development as they work through this stage. Let's look at some of the reasons emergent curriculum is essential to toddler development.

Separation Anxiety: Saying Goodbye

In the example presented, the toddler teacher incorporates the separation process as an important area in the curriculum. How can teachers support the toddlers in building trust in the school environment? What types of strategies can they follow to foster trusting relationships with teachers? (Separation anxiety is discussed in more depth in chapter 5.)

Two-year-old Miles has just separated from his mother and is working through separation anxiety. His teacher, Patty, recognizes his emotional vulnerability and the need to connect with his teachers and the program. Since separation is an essential developmental task for toddlers, the teachers discuss and develop ways to implement supportive strategies through curriculum. Patty stays close and provides Miles an object from home, a family photo. This allows him to stay connected and work through his separation in healthy ways.



Developing Autonomy: “I Can Do It!”

Another important phase in toddler development is the process of navigating their budding sense of autonomy. Toddlers are transitioning through the stage of dependence to independence. Since emergent curriculum acknowledges and takes into consideration their developmental stages, this growing autonomy is addressed within the daily practice. This minimizes the excesses of power struggles that are inherent in toddler programs, since the curriculum provides the toddlers with opportunity to experience independence in responsive and respectful ways.

Two-year-old Fiona is very interested in the small sink that is used for hand washing inside. Ana, her teacher, observes Fiona’s fascination with bubbles and sponges. Since the sink inside has a specific purpose, Ana redirects Fiona outside to the water table and adds a liquid soap with sponges and dishes for Fiona to explore. Ana is responsive to Fiona’s curiosity and need for autonomy, while at the same time teaches respectful boundaries about the environment.

Two-year-old Fiona is redirected to the water table for dishwashing.





Toddler playing in water and sand

Brain Growth: A Sensitive Period for the Development of the Brain

A toddler's brain produces more than a million neural connections each second and undergoes incredible changes in the early years. This development is influenced by many factors in a child's environment, including their interactions with adults. The relationships toddlers have with their teachers, peers, and caregivers are vital for healthy brain growth (Jensen 2000). Curriculum plays a major role in this phase of neural development, and emergent curriculum is sensitive to and respectful of this critical stage. When teachers use rigid themes that are irrelevant to these areas of development, they are missing opportunities to influence and strengthen the brain.

Just recently I observed a toddler program where the teachers were introducing a theme of apples during the fall season. The toddlers, however, appeared more interested in the community garden located on the school grounds. After visiting the garden, the toddlers asked questions about the mint herb they tasted. The children were also intrigued by the cherry tomatoes, zucchini, and squash they harvested when visiting the garden. The toddlers were excited about the garden and wanted to discover everything they could. The teachers, although impressed with the toddlers' inquiries, felt the need to stick to the theme of apples. At one point during the day, the teachers were even discouraging the children's request to visit the garden and instead tried to engage the toddlers in an apple-tasting activity. The toddlers became frustrated with the activity and refused to participate.

Relationship building between teacher, caregiver, and child is an important contributor to healthy brain growth in the early years, but the teachers lost an opportunity to build a relationship through learning because of the rigid adherence to the theme. What would have happened if the teachers had listened to the toddlers and allowed them to pursue their inquiries in the garden? Imagine if the teachers brought fruits and vegetables from the garden for a tasting activity. Toddlers learn by being physically engaged with the materials and people in their environment, and these components create the strongest neural connections in the brain (Zero to Three 2006).

Developing Learning Dispositions with Toddlers

The most effective and meaningful learning takes place when the topic or idea is of interest to the child. Children make sense of their world through play. This occurs when activities are self-initiated, which results in creating a strong love for learning. In other words, toddlers feel excited about learning and derive pleasure from discovering something new. Learning is intrinsic for the toddler, meaning the toddler is self-motivated to want to learn. Emergent curriculum encourages strong learning dispositions because it engages children in developing curiosity, problem-solving skills, persistence, and focused attention (Gronlund 2012). Developing these dispositions in toddlerhood builds a lifelong foundation for learning.

In this toddler program, the teachers observe the children's desire to cook and create mixtures using plants and raw materials. The teachers respond by adding spices and edible dried flowers to invite the children to explore the process of scientific inquiry. Two-year-old Naomi finds delight in this exploration and invites another toddler, Irene, to join. More ingredients are added, mixed, and ground. The two toddlers talk about their creation: "It's cake!" "No, it's miso soup!" This activity extends in many directions for a long part of the morning and reflects their desire to stay involved in the activity and further their investigation of spices. Natural materials are intriguing to toddlers and can support healthy dispositions for learning.



Dispelling the Myths Surrounding Emergent Curriculum

There are a host of questions and myths that may prevent teachers from implementing emergent curriculum into their programs. Here are some common misconceptions.

How is emergent curriculum different with toddlers than with preschoolers?

The toddler stage of development looks and feels very different from a preschool child. Toddlers are at a unique stage, and responsive curriculum is essential to their growth. Teachers not only listen to the children, but they also must rely heavily on their observations to understand the nonverbal messages that provide additional information about a child's inquiries and questions. A toddler's interactions with the environment are also new and exciting. Inquiries such as dumping, climbing, digging, and water play are the focus of their learning. This active and significant development in a toddler's life is supported through emergent curriculum because it focuses specifically on toddlers' interests, extended through the teachers' planning.

Are children the only source of ideas in emergent curriculum?

Many sources in emergent curriculum provide a framework for teachers. In my own experience when training teachers on the practice of emergent curriculum, the most common misconception from the participants is that children's ideas are the only source when developing curriculum; thus teachers have a passive role in planning. However, many sources contribute to the curriculum, and teachers are still the planners and organizers. A collaborative joint effort between teachers and students is essential to developing curriculum. The children's ideas are but one of the sources for emergent curriculum:

- toddlers' inquiries, ideas, and investigations
- teachers' ideas and values

- toddlers' developmental tasks
- the emotional climate of toddlers' environment, including family circumstances such as a new sibling or a home relocation and anything that is central to the children's life
- the caregiving routines, daily rituals, and values that make up family and community life
- unexpected moments that spark wonder or curiosity

All these sources, which will be further explored in chapters 3–6, provide direction to the teacher in developing a responsive curriculum for toddlers (Jones 2012a).

Is there organization and planning in emergent curriculum?

Predictable routines; safe, organized environments; respectful responses from teachers; and continuity of care are vital to early educational settings and crucial for toddlers to build trust and feel safe (Barry and Kochanska 2010). Likewise, structure and planning are necessary components of emergent curriculum. I remember having the privilege of assisting Elizabeth (Betty) Jones (coauthor of the 1994 book *Emergent Curriculum*) at a staff workshop on emergent curriculum. Halfway into the interactive session, a teacher raised her hand and asked Betty, “So, in emergent curriculum, the children just play freely without the teachers planning anything? The children can just do whatever they want, and teachers sit back and do nothing, without any structure?” I’ll never forget Betty’s strong and passionate reply: “Emergent curriculum is highly structured! It requires thinking, observation, planning, and teacher engagement” (Jones 2012b).

My experience has been that many teachers dismiss emergent curriculum as having no thoughtful planning, no recording, and no organization of any kind on the teachers’ part. For many teachers, the idea of structure in an emergent curriculum is nonexistent because in many people’s minds, structure equates rigid schedules with

preplanned and teacher-led activities. When teaching young children, it is helpful if we redefine the word *structure*; instead of seeing structure as a controlling factor, let's try conceiving of structure as a plan that is fluid, with flexibility, collaboration, and thoughtful preparation. When Betty was discussing structure, she was not referring to teacher-directed activities filling the day. She also did not imply that the children were on a rigid schedule. Betty used the word *structure* because emergent curriculum is a thoughtful and well-planned way to create curriculum.

Creating a structure while implementing emergent curriculum is essential. What does this mean?

- Emergent curriculum requires teachers to become astute observers and really see toddlers in action. Teachers listen and observe the toddlers' developing inquiries and later reflect on their observations.
- Because teachers view observation and reflection as important tools in understanding learning, they are equipped with notepads, cameras, and video to capture the toddlers' developing inquiries.
- Emergent curriculum involves a written collaborative plan between teachers, sharing and discussing observations and reflecting on the developing interests of the toddlers. The plan also includes the interests of the teachers, developmental tasks, and other factors that influence curriculum.
- Through the information they gather and analyze, teachers create a responsive environment with invitations and provocations that are meaningful to the toddlers.

Can I complete required assessments while following an emergent curriculum?

In a word, yes. In many state-funded and accredited programs, teachers are required to fill out different types of assessments to demonstrate various developmental measures. This information provides accountability to the agencies that rely on government funding. Teachers who implement emergent curriculum can still complete required assessments.

When teachers have a long list of specific objectives that must be measured, it is easy to understand a resistance to child-centered curriculum approaches. But emergent curriculum creates an opportunity for a teacher to slow down, be present with children, and really observe their interactions. Emergent curriculum addresses assessment requirements through the teachers' observation of toddlers interacting with materials in the environment. Teachers use a specific observation of the toddlers' interactions for assessment. The following is an example of a teacher observing, reflecting, and using data for record keeping.

In an Early Start toddler program, block play is of interest to several of the children. There are different types of blocks, including wooden unit blocks, foam blocks, and magnetic building materials called Magna-Tiles. The teachers pay particular attention to this inquiry and listen carefully to the toddlers' questions. One child, Andre, is busy working with wooden blocks. Andre is trying to stack the rectangular blocks on top of the smaller square ones. The stack of blocks falls down, and after repeated attempts Andre

INVITATIONS AND PROVOCATIONS

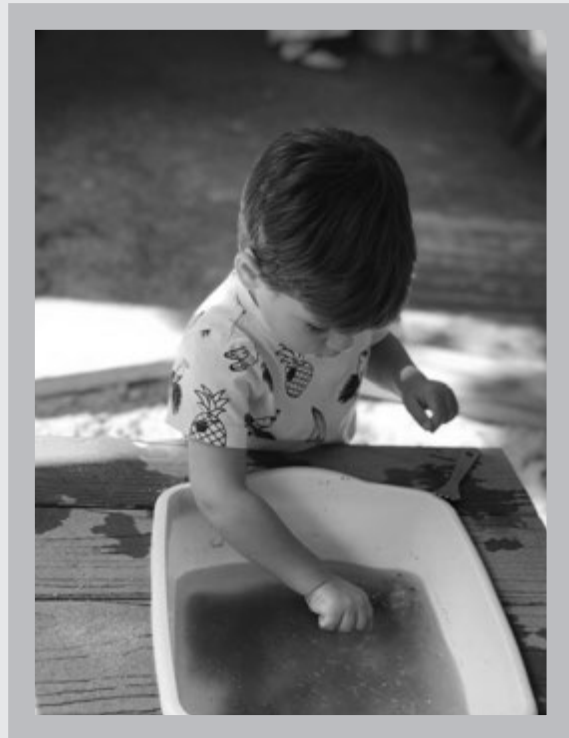
The terms *invitation* and *provocation* are often used interchangeably in early education. Yet these words have different intentions. Let's take a look.

An *invitation* is when teachers set up materials that welcome children and encourage investigation. Some children find ways to incorporate the materials into their play, and others might not. For example, shells placed in a water table or flowers presented with playdough might invite some children to engage with the activities and create their own ideas.

A *provocation* is when teachers arrange materials that go a bit deeper than an invitation. A provocation allows the teacher to access the children's thinking a bit more and involves the teacher's presence and observation. It includes objects that are thought-provoking, interesting, or surprising, that create a response from children. For example, a provocation at the playdough table might include artificial and dried flowers in addition to the live flowers from our invitation above. This type of setup creates an opportunity for questioning: What is the difference between fresh and dried flowers? Do the artificial flowers grow in the ground? Were they alive? What materials are used to make them?

begins to get frustrated. The teacher recognizes in the moment that this is a good time to support Andre in his block-building attempts while also recording information for assessment. The teacher comments, “Andre, it looks like you are getting frustrated because the block tower keeps falling down. I wonder what would happen if you used the rectangular blocks on the bottom? This is the block with the longer sides and shorter ends. Do you see? What would happen if you

Sam, a two-year-old child, is using nesting cups and shells outside at the water table. It first appears that Sam is simply filling up the cups and pouring the water back into the water bins. Sam’s teacher, Ana, carefully observes his actions and notices that Sam is actually sorting the different shells that Ana placed in the water bins for a provocation. After close observation, Ana notes that not only is Sam sorting the shells by size, but he also is sorting by their different attributes. This is important information for Ana to document in her developmental assessment of Sam.



place the rectangular blocks on the bottom and add the square blocks on top?” Andre leans over and picks up the square block and says, “Square block!” Then he picks up the rectangular block and says, “Big square block!”

Through observing Andre working with blocks, the teacher can assess several measures. Andre understands the two-dimensional shape of square, but is still developing knowledge of the rectangle. Other information the teacher can assess includes understanding of cause and effect, taking initiative in play, and developing knowledge of balance and size. Having developed heightened skills as an observer and listener, the teacher can extract the learning from Andre’s interaction with the blocks and use this data for the required assessment. Observation makes it possible for teachers to understand the educative value in toddlers’ play and use this data for different assessment requirements.

When we clear up misconceptions surrounding emergent curriculum, teachers and parents enter the learning process with an openness to begin the practice of joyful collaborations with toddlers and coteachers. ▀

Introduce an emergent curriculum to a toddler classroom

Toddler development is at the forefront of learning. It sets the stage for strong and healthy learning dispositions and builds the foundation for deep investigations. Authentic and meaningful curriculum methods for toddler educators are vital to this unique stage of development. Educators require resources that are specifically written for this crucial time of life. *Emergent Curriculum with Toddlers* addresses and defines the practice of emergent curriculum and its specialization and integration into toddler programs.

An emergent curriculum for a toddler class can look quite different from a preschool class in terms of the children's developing interests, the teacher's observational skills, and the emotional and social climate in the program. It provides an opportunity to develop confidence in the children's inquiries and put aside the need for scripted and thematic curriculums.

Emergent Curriculum with Toddlers invites teachers into the process of developing curriculum together with toddlers, and addresses common concerns that often make emergent curriculum with toddlers appear overwhelming. The process of emergent curriculum has many benefits to the field of early childhood and can create a generation of self-motivated and vibrant learners.



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