



DIMENSIONS

of Early Childhood

Collecting Nature's Treasures



The Building Blocks Model



Play in Natural Outdoor Environments



Literacy Boxes

Volume 43, Number 2, 2015



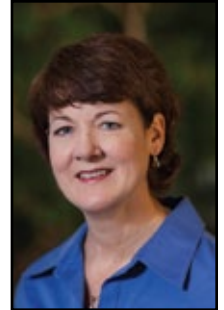
Join us in Tulsa in 2016 for the 67TH Annual SECA Conference!

Meet Our Keynoters!

Kathleen C. Gallagher, Ph.D.

The Whole Child in Harmony: What It Means & What It Takes

Kathleen (Kate) Gallagher, Ph.D. is an educational psychologist and early childhood professional, with over 30 years of experience teaching and leading early childhood programs. She is a Scientist at Frank Porter Graham Child Development Institute and Clinical Associate Professor at the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill. Dr. Gallagher designs and evaluates approaches that promote the development and wellbeing of young children, families, and early childhood professionals – particularly in the contexts of poverty, disability and cultural diversity. Dr. Gallagher’s passion and ability to communicate and elevate the importance of high quality early care and education are manifest in her talk at TEDxUNC 2015, “The Healthy Child: Assembly Required”.



Patrick Mitchell “The Down To Earth Dad”

How to Talk to Dads So They’ll Listen

...Getting (and Keeping) Good Men Involved!

Patrick Mitchell, known nationally as “The Down To Earth Dad,” shows preschool, kindergarten, and primary school educators, child-and-family advocates, policy makers and practitioners how to get good men optimally involved for the sake of children’s cognitive, social, and emotional development.

Patrick is a columnist for *Children’s Voice* magazine published by the Child Welfare League of America in Washington, DC, directs the *National Dads Matter!*™ Project, and he’s the founding editor of *The Down To Earth Dad* monthly newsletter.

The Down To Earth Dad provides school readiness and parent and family engagement “Family Storytelling Night” events, and staff trainings, for programs and schools across America. Patrick lives in Coeur d’Alene, Idaho and is the father of three children.



Stephen Fite

The Magic of Music & Movement

As long as Stephen can remember, he has always loved music. At the young age of five he had big dreams of being the fifth Beatle. That whole British band thing never panned out, but, he has found something just as cool, if not cooler. He has realized his dream of playing before crowds of screaming fans - the very young variety. The bonus is that through his play he is able to touch their lives by aiding in their education.

Stephen Fite is an award-winning children’s musician/writer whose albums have received eighteen nationally recognized honors. Suitable for the classroom, car or living room, his upbeat brand of children’s music has been delighting students, teachers and parents around the nation for three decades. His Concert Tour draws over 70,000 teachers and children to theaters throughout the Southeast and Midwest while his trainings infuse educators with the passion he holds for music as a dynamic tool for teaching.



Southern Early Childhood Association

Editor - Mari Cortez, Ph.D.

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Day Home for Children, Nashville, TN

Dimensions of Early Childhood

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President's Message

Kathy Attaway

The Southern Early Childhood Association (SECA) has long advocated for exemplary outdoor classrooms in every childcare setting. SECA continues its belief that outside time is essential to healthy, happy children. There are so many distractions available for children today enticing them to stay inside. It is sometimes difficult to encourage them to enter the great outdoors. Why should they go out when they have television, iPads, iPods, tablets, laptops, desktops, LeapPads, VTech Tabs, etc? They should go out because the world outside is full of wonders. One of the easiest wonders to access in the out of doors is water. Outside water activities especially come to mind as we enjoy the summer months ahead.

Water play is fun for everyone and affords many opportunities for learning in the early years. When you take water outside opportunities expand to a whole new level of learning. Being outside allows you to interact with water in your environment whether it is urban or suburban. There is usually water available by way of faucets, creeks, puddles, rivers, lakes, hoses and sometimes even rain.

Having water available inside your classroom or play space is a must. However, availability of water outside creates totally different opportunities for exploration. Outdoor play provides essential learning in the early years and has been supported by several pieces of research. Adding water to that outdoor learning especially in the summer time is beneficial to the learning process in several ways, allowing for interacting in a different way, more freedom to explore using senses and physicality, and for creativity and scientific experimenting. Expand language outdoors with water play by using louder voices and new vocabulary such as evaporate and dissolve. As children learn to socialize, negotiations involving play space and equipment sharing will begin to develop in a different way.

During my years in the preschool classroom I had the opportunity to be a part of Summer Camp at my school. Listening to the sounds of outdoor play, especially around the water play, is one of my most memorable experiences. I have very fond memories of playing outside in a creek that ran behind our house during the summer months. Children just come alive and become extremely creative when they are encouraged to play in water outside.

Summer time offers a refreshing change from all of our indoor activities during the school year. On behalf of the Southern Early Childhood Association, I encourage you to take advantage of this time of year and enjoy all the wonders the outdoors can provide, especially through water play. Offer these extraordinary opportunities to the young children in your care.



Words from the Editor

Dr. Mari Cortez

I hope you are having a fantastic summer! Since it is summer time we hope that you are taking advantage of bringing the children outside (weather permitting) to play and explore nature. There are many ways to be intentional about play opportunities for children and in this issue of *Dimensions* we share applicable ideas. For instance, if you need information regarding the importance of outdoor environments on children's health you are going to find the article by Park & Riley titled "*Play in Natural Outdoor Environments: A Healthy Choice*" beneficial as it provides pertinent research regarding the connection between play, outdoor environments and health. Similarly, Hughes provides ideas regarding how to entice toddlers to collect treasures from nature and talk about it in the article "*Collecting Nature's Treasures*." Furthermore, there are many ways to enhance literacy during the summer and the use of literacy boxes can bring a different twist to learning centers or play areas. In the article titled "*Literacy Boxes: Differentiating in Kindergarten With Portable Literacy Centers*" Lilly gives ideas regarding how to create such boxes so that children can have the opportunity to move them freely in the classroom (and maybe outdoors!). Lastly, VanVolkenburg shares a model to work with children on the autism spectrum in her article titled "*Reaching Children with Autism Spectrum Disorders Using Creative Dramatics: The Building Blocks Model*." In this model teachers use creative dramatics to promote play opportunities. We invite you to be intentional in the play opportunities you provide children this summer.

Notas del Editor:

¡Espero que esten teniendo un verano fantástico! Ya que es el tiempo de verano, esperamos que esten tomando ventaja de llevar a los niños afuera (si el tiempo lo permite) para jugar y explorar con la naturaleza. Hay muchas maneras de ser maestros intencionales con las oportunidades del juego para los niños y en este número de *Dimensions* compartimos ideas aplicables. Por ejemplo, si necesita información sobre la importancia de ambientes al aire libre para la salud de los niños pueden leer el artículo de Park y Riley titulado "*El juego en ambientes naturales al aire libre: Una opción saludable*" ya que proporciona investigaciones pertinentes con respecto a la conexión entre el juego, el ambiente y la salud. Del mismo modo, Hughes ofrece ideas sobre cómo atraer a los niños pequeños para recoger los tesoros de la naturaleza y habla de ello en el artículo "*Recolectando Tesoros Naturales*." Además, hay muchas maneras de mejorar la alfabetización durante el verano y el uso de cajas de alfabetización puede aportar un toque diferente a los centros de aprendizaje o áreas de juego. En el artículo titulado "*Cajas de alfabetización: Diferenciación en Kindergarten con centros de alfabetización portátiles*" Lilly da ideas sobre cómo crear este tipo de cajas para que los niños puedan tener la oportunidad de moverse libremente en el aula (y tal vez al aire libre!). Por último, VanVolkenburg comparte un modelo para trabajar con niños en el espectro del autismo en su artículo titulado "*Llegar a los niños en el espectro autista usando artes dramáticas creativas: El modelo del edificio de bloques*" En este modelo los maestros usan la dramática creativa para promover oportunidades para el juego. Nosotros invitamos a que sean intencionales para ofrecer a los niños oportunidades para el juego este verano.

Best/Deseándoles lo mejor,
Mari Riojas-Cortez, Ph.D.
Editor

Collecting Nature's Treasures

Children's interest in "found treasures" can be a provocation for the creation of stories. Follow one teacher's experience with a group of toddlers as she promotes inquiry and "learning by doing."

Eileen Hughes, Ph.D.

Every child starts out as a natural born scientist...
- Carl Sagan

Two-year-old Jorga, holding a straw basket, stoops down with three other toddlers to examine autumn leaves and little stones beneath their feet. The children delight in picking up natural materials to put in their shared basket. Later, Sondra, the teacher, reflects with the children telling them, "Gabe I think that Jorga wants you to know that when we find something we think is important or interesting we put it in this basket." Sondra is intentional and consistent to deepen the children's understanding for observing, communicating and building relationships with each other and with the natural world.

Sondra, the teacher in the learning story described above, developed connected learning experiences with a small group of toddlers who attended a university child development center. As an intern in the classroom, she was assigned as a co-teacher to apply an inquiry-based learning approach with a small group of toddlers. She planned experiences to explore the following questions: *How can the children's interest with found treasures be a provocation for the creation of stories? How can these stories be connected to the indoor curriculum?* This inquiry-based project highlights the instructional strategies that support toddlers, not only to form a relationship with the outdoor environment and with each other, but to practice language, literacy and cognitive skills.

Learning by Doing

Young children learn by touching, listening, exploring and imagining in the natural world through outdoor experiences. Knowing how to cultivate outdoor experiences that will optimize this learning is one key role of the early

childhood educator (McHenry & Buerk 2008). In the past decade, attention to the natural world as an educational context that supports emotional, social, physical, and intellectual development and also promotes altruistic values has become a significant influence on the focus of early educational programs for children. Young (2013) offers a meaningful description of promoting nature study with toddlers by outlining key elements of teacher inquiry employed to support explorations that go beyond just offering experiential activities but rather promote developmentally appropriate scientific investigations (p. 81).

**Children are
natural explorers
and scientists.**

Using a framework inspired by the educators from Reggio Emilia, Italy, this article describes an inquiry-based project using elements that underlie the framework for a cycle of inquiry (Gandini & Goldhaber, 2001) which includes observing, documenting and analyzing children's actions and words (aligns with phases of scientific thinking processes). This approach encourages both teachers and young children to listen, observe, collect information, investigate, reflect and represent ideas. Teachers and children ask questions and as co-learners, engage in the co-construction of shared understanding (Edwards, Forman & Gandini, 2012). By collecting written notes, photographs, videotapes and studying the children's actions, teachers plan subsequent learning experiences that are meaningful to children (Hughes, 2002).

Beginning Experiences: Toddlers Introduction to the Outdoors

In Sondra's classroom, her toddlers typically took walks outside their center as part of their weekly schedule to explore nature on wooded



Photos courtesy of the author

Photo 1: Looking High into the Canopy.

walking trails. The trails bordered an Arboretum, located within a short distance of garden plots that housed chicken coops. For the toddlers, it was new territory to navigate hiking up little hills and running on uneven terrain. The children enjoyed the walks, often collecting little treasures from the outdoors such as stones, sticks, leaves, and pinecones to put in their pockets to surprise them anew when their possessions resurfaced. For the teacher, the nature walks were times to observe and ask questions about ways toddlers explored in the outdoor elements.

It is reported that children need time to explore a place before more focused observations can occur in order to develop a relationship with their surroundings (Galizio, Stoll & Hutchins, 2009; Golden, 2010). Repeated experiences in an outdoor environment increase children's ability to develop a sense of place

and a relationship with the natural elements. With repeated explorations outdoors, Sondra had time to develop and refine her questions that provided direction for curriculum planning for subsequent experiences. She gathered a small group of children for the outdoor walks, which were scheduled two to three times a week. Equipped with a video camera and writing tools, the teacher walked with the children and listened closely to both their words and actions as they encountered nature. She wondered: *What do the toddlers notice? What will sustain their attention? What are the stories the toddlers will collect in these outdoor experiences?* In this phase of the project, the teacher documented the toddlers' experiences, developed learning goals, and refined questions.

Sondra observed how each child experienced the outdoors in different ways, noticing natural elements up high and those at their feet. One child pulled on a tree root to gather the "big stick" that would not lift out of the ground. One child noted the massive trees by stopping and pointing, "Big tall tree, high up. The branches aren't windy today." Another child with less expressive language abilities stopped, looked up at the trees, pointed to the canopy, and said, "High."

Sondra took a photograph from his view, as she would revisit the places that the children identified as special. The children were delighted with the livestock in the garden and a child yelled out, "**I find chicken hens! The house coop.**"

While toddlers may not use many words, it is the meaning in the combination of their actions and words that provide windows into their thinking.



Photo 2: "I find chickens, hens."



Photo courtesy of the author

Photo 3: Collecting Treasures

Extending the Observations: Building a Culture of Communicative Exchange

Using observations from initial outdoor visits, the teacher extended the toddlers' prior experiences by supplying a basket to collect outdoor materials for them to examine, and later sort, as they shared their memories with each other. This was the first phase of the project. The basket signified a collective effort to gather treasures and memories from everyone. Sondra would hold conversations with the children identifying and describing the collected materials to connect their ideas.

Jorga was excited to tell her friends, "We had a lo-o-ng walk up the trails! I carried the basket."

The sharing of the adventure was an important way for the toddlers to begin revisiting their experiences and communicating their adventures with others. While two-year-olds may not have the same discourse skills as older four or five-year-olds, they do have ideas from their observations that can be shared. This allows the teacher to create a culture for communicative exchange among peers. The following "meeting" occurred when the teacher decided that the children pause in their outdoor adventure and sit outside to discuss their observations over a snack before going back into the classroom.

Jorga: [Points to cover of the book of their outdoor experiences].

Teacher: You want Gabe to notice the items in the picture?

Jorga: Yes, these.

Teacher: What do you want to tell him about those things?

Jorga: (Shrugs) We got these.

*Teacher: Gabe, I think that Jorga wants you to know that when we find something we think is **important** or **interesting** we put it in this basket.*

Jorga: You pick it up and put it in the basket, we have lots!

In this conversation, Sondra acknowledges the children as observers who can take responsibility for recognizing that some of the outdoor materials are worthy of keeping. She places value on their ideas as she facilitates the situation where the children listen to each other. To further the children's abilities to be skillful observers, she encourages them to identify what she should photograph, allowing the children to select the subject matter as they observe the natural setting.

Teacher: What else should I photograph?

Jorga: This one chicken.

Teacher: Can you tell me more about which one?

Jorga: This white one with the white tail.

*Teacher: That is a **good description**. I know which one.*

In addition to supporting the children as observers, the teacher was consistent in her efforts to scaffold the children's use of language

when they described their observations. An aspect of the inquiry approach is for young children to gather information and then learn to describe their observations. Sondra was intentional in her approach to listen and encourage children's rich use of language. The repeated visits outdoors were not merely nature walks or field trips. The teacher fully intended to preserve the children's memories, revisit important observations or ideas, and then connect them to the broader curriculum.

Developing Relationships: With Each Other and the Natural World

In the second phase of the project, the teacher shifted the focus of the experiences in order to build more opportunities for the children to bridge their experiences with the indoor environment. She noted that in the initial visits of the first phase, the toddlers collected materials that held memories that could become stories. With the goal of fostering expressive language, Sondra determined the stories would provide ideas for the design of the indoor environment. Sondra was consistent to gather narrative from the children when she recorded their experiences: she was intentional to facilitate oral and written communication as she placed emphasis on facilitating communicative exchanges among the children. The teacher wrote *with* the children, instead of only *about* the children. Sondra captured the children's observations by drawing, writing and communicating with them as she recorded their words. In addition, she made it a point to tell the children how important their ideas were to the group. This recurring instructional strategy of communicating to



Photos courtesy of the author



Photos 4a & 4b: Recording Ideas

An Excerpt from Sondra's Journal

While out exploring the creatures that live in the garden, I brought a clipboard and paper to **write** down what the children had to **tell** about their observations or about the experience. I wanted to build the idea that their **words are important** and that writing down our words is a way to help us remember our experiences and **share our thoughts and observations**. I wanted to continue to develop the idea that we **can use our words to tell about what we see/find/observe/experience** and that we can use those words in **different ways to communicate** with others what we have learned and experienced.

Collecting Nature's Treasures

the children the importance of their words and ideas was central to the inquiry process.

In the following conversation, Sondra modeled for the children why it is important to keep a visible record of their ideas by writing them down.

Jorga: Why writing those letters?

*Teacher: I am writing the letters so that **I can remember all of the important things** we did today.*

*Jorga: It's **important**!*

Teacher: I think what you have to say is very important. That is how we learn from each other.

Jorga: What does it say?

Teacher: It says "We are sooooo big to the squirrel!"

Jorga: Are you going to put this in the book?

Teacher: Would you like me to?

*Jorga: Yes, in the **book**.*

For a second child who was not as communicative as Jorga, Sondra

used a combination of drawings and words to invite his engagement.

Jorga: Ducks out!

Finn: Why do you want them out?

Gabe: Touches chest- Out me!

Teacher: You want the chickens to come here?

Gabe: Nods and smiles

Teacher: Tell them, "Come out and visit me!"

Gabe: Come me!

Teacher: Gabe what should I write now?

Gabe: No house! [Points to picture/ words and smiles]

In the transcript above with Jorga, Sondra takes time to explain how each child has ideas that are valuable to others and need to be preserved in text. The spontaneous conversations that were transcribed and analyzed provided key ideas that Sondra gleaned for planning the indoor environment. She created a book that held photographs of the children's adventures that would be reviewed

during their gathering times, and all the children would have access to the book indoors. Sondra displayed the book at the entrance to the classroom door along with some of the sorted materials that the children had collected. When their families signed into the classroom, they stopped to read the documented observations as the toddlers showed off the found objects that were displayed with the documentation. This arrangement invited the families and children to communicate as they reviewed the materials and photographs.

Teacher inquiry supports explorations and investigations.

As the children's interests grew outdoors, Sondra added props that the children could carry both inside and outdoors--wooden chickens, squirrels, etc. The children always remembered the squirrels and the chickens and there was as much fascination each time as there had been the first time they had met the animals. Sondra proposed that the props might help the children during gathering times to describe their observations when they were not immediately watching the squirrels or chickens. As the children engaged with the outdoor environment, the materials and each other, the multiple types of relationships were evident.

Relationships with Each Other

An outcome of the facilitated conversations about the outdoor experiences influenced the ways the children formed relationships with each other. As the children developed



Photo courtesy of the author

Photo 5: Hide-and Seek with the Squirrel



Photos courtesy of the author

Photo 6: Storytelling Spaces

dispositions for relating to the environment, they formed bonds with each other because of their shared experiences and ideas. In the following conversation, the children start to connect their ideas as they play hide-and-seek with a gray squirrel.

Addyson: Squirrel go?

Jorga: I see him! Right there, Addyson.

Gabe: Climb high tree!

Madison: There he goes! Over there! Tree!

Jorga: It climbed up higher!

Madison: Branch!

Jorga: Why climbing that tree?

Madison: Other trees!

Gabe: Why go?

Upon analysis, Sondra noted, that the children's conversations

with each other increased over time. Gabe, who was quiet at the onset of the project, participated with the other children more as the project developed. In the conversation above, Gabe asks a question, which is one of the goals of an inquiry approach that encourages asking questions based on observations. Sondra determined that the stories and memories of the small group needed to be shared with the whole class inside the classrooms where the ideas might spread and spark the interests of other children and spread the relationship building that was forming in the small group.

Bringing the Experiences Indoors: Sustaining the Inquiry

Sondra was aware of the importance of building the children's relationships with the outdoors, with the other children, and with

ideas that could be discussed later indoors. With the multiple experiences outdoors and the emerging stories of the chickens and squirrels, Sondra brought more of the experiences indoors.

In Photo 6, Sondra created a place in the classroom for storytelling. She designed an environmental display using principles that inspired children's interest and fostered their imaginations. In the Reggio Emilia approach, educators speak to provocations in the environment that invite children to be creative, imaginative and provide challenge. Materials are thoughtfully organized and arranged with attention to the aesthetic qualities that provide complexity when combined with a variety of materials (Gandini, 2012). Sondra re-created ideas from the outdoors by bringing in open-ended natural materials, and props of the big tree, chickens and squirrels. The light table was used as the background for drawing the children's attention to the carefully and aesthetically displayed materials. Sondra recorded their stories as they demonstrated symbolic representation in their play with the materials. The teachers were thrilled to see the ways in which the children communicated their authentic experiences and transformed them into imaginary play. Through the use of the open-ended materials and props, the toddlers re-enacted the aspects of their observations and began to pretend using the materials, learning narrative skills as they dramatized their stories (Owacki, 1999).

Celebrating the Experiences with Everyone

The light table remained in the classroom with materials rotating in and out, offering the children multiple

Examples of the Children's Stories

The Gray Fluffy Squirrel

- Gabe: My squirrel walks.
 Madison: Chicken hens!
 Addyson: Noisy, noisy chicken.
 Teacher: Wee wee wee! Bouncing on the branch.
 Finn: It's a squirrel, see? [jumps his squirrel from branch to branch]

Making Firewood

- Teacher: You are using this stick to cut the log you stacked up into smaller pieces.
 Finn: I'm cutting all of the pieces up with this saw.
 Teacher: That looks like hard work.
 Finn: The squirrel is moving them over here see? (points to the squirrel)
 Teacher: Oh I see, you are cutting the wood and the squirrel is hauling it over here.

These stories resulted from the pretend play as the children attached meaning to their experiences and the creation of brief narratives for storytelling sustained their playful inquiry.

opportunities to add or delete ideas to their story. The experiences that started with a small group of children outdoors were shared with the whole class. Their stories and shared materials in the indoor environment enabled the class to share the sense of wonder and stories of the small group. Sharing the project with the other toddlers bridged curricular goals and served to pique all the children's curiosity, keeping the memories and relationships sustained over time.

Effective Instructional Strategies: Inquiry-Based Learning with Toddlers

This learning story offers strategies for teachers to use with an inquiry-based approach that can be embedded into projects with toddlers. Specifically, Sondra used the following strategies to support the children:

- a) Engaging children in observation
- b) Building structures to support collaboration

- c) Facilitating communicative exchanges among children
- d) Designing the environment to sustain the children's interest over time.

It is the frequency, consistency and depth of the use of strategies that influence intentional teaching practices.

Small Group Structure

The teacher created a small group that comprised different ability levels, varied language abilities, and mixed gender. Organizing a small group of toddlers afforded opportunities to focus observations with fewer distractions than one would have in a larger group and increased the time for individual conversations (Lally, 2009; Raikes, Edwards, & Gandini, 2009). By grouping children and creating a common goal, the children were able to connect ideas and develop relationships. Working with the children in the small group, the teacher promoted their curiosity as she facilitated their interactions and

connected their ideas (Turner & Krechevsky, 2003).

Another structure put into place was to create a brief time for the toddlers to gather with the teacher for the purpose of planning or to revisit the children's observations. Adapting the concepts that underlie the High Scope Curriculum, "Plan, Do, Review" strategy design, (Epstein & Hohmann, 2002), Sondra often held the conversations around a snack or a break outdoors.

Engaging Toddlers in Tools for Observation

The following processes for observing, collecting and revisiting observations supported the toddlers throughout the project. It was important that first the toddlers had **extended** and **repeated** experiences to explore the outdoors. The initial observations influenced their later indoor play with the materials they had collected resulting in narratives used to tell stories.

Photography was used **with** the children to identify what should be captured for their picture books. Having the children determine **what memory should be collected** gave them the sense of assuming responsibility for their learning experiences. This supported the children as observers of nature and gave value to their ideas. It is a different view from the adult selecting the content for the photograph: Sondra's actions invited the children to be co-learners. The significance of this process is noted when Sondra talked with the group and Jorga asked, "Are you going to put this in the book?" The children learned that the book carried their valued ideas.

Another way Sondra **collected** and **revisited** with the children was

through drawings. Important observations of the squirrel, the chicken, tree, etc. were represented through written symbols. These symbols were used repeatedly as means of sharing written communication to elicit more oral language. Sondra gave meaning to the symbols, extended the children's one-word utterances, and supported the children in the meaning-making process as they conversed. This worked particularly well with the child who had a language delay. Sondra modeled for the children how to represent ideas through drawing, a key element in an inquiry approach to learning.

Supporting Language Development and Use of Narrative

Early childhood educators are prepared to support toddlers as they acquire oral language by encouraging new vocabulary and facilitating expressive language. Most early childhood educators extend toddlers' single word utterances to enrich vocabulary or extend concept learning. Sondra provided additional instruction to build specific language for the children to use when asking questions. For example, she frequently told the children, *"I notice, or I observe, or I see."* (Johnston, 2012). These sentence frames served as models for the children for the expression of their observations and directed their attention to the act of noticing, which is a fundamental skill used to encourage children in the inquiry process.

Throughout the project, Sondra conveyed to the children how their ideas were important to the group and needed to be recorded. When two-year-old Jorga asked Sondra whether she would put their ideas into their book, Sondra responded,

"I think what you have to say is very important. That is how we learn from each other." Central to an inquiry approach is the collaboration between teacher and students to exchange ideas and to see multiple perspectives (Vygotsky, 1978). When Sondra facilitated a conversation between Jorga and Gabe, she interpreted Jorga's communicative intentions to reinforce Gabe's understanding, using explicit language to build collaboration.

Extend observations by promoting communicative exchanges.

Sondra used strategies to support the children's development of narrative when she encouraged their storytelling. Moran & Jarvis (2001) use the term "co-narration" to describe the shared experience of adults and children creating stories together. When Sondra facilitated the toddler's play at the light table, she facilitated the children's ability to pretend with props, at times co-creating the story or revisiting the actions using the materials. Children develop narrative skills as they dramatize their stories (Owacki, 1999) and as children tell stories, they are learning a sense of community.

Using the Environment to Connect to the Children's On-Going Investigations

The outdoor experiences were not left as nature walks or field trips. Sondra optimized the time outdoors to prepare for and anticipate the

children's learning experiences later in the indoor environment. One of the first ways was to display the documentation and materials for the families and children to see as they entered into the classroom. This interesting gathering place prompted the family members to communicate with the toddlers while the children handled the sorted materials.

The second way in which Sondra brought the outdoor experiences indoors was through the careful design of the physical environment using a combination of natural materials and props that represented the ideas and stories (memories) from the prior outdoor experiences. By arranging material displays, teachers connect the natural world from a larger community outside the classroom to the learning goals of the curriculum. Revisiting with concrete materials allowed the children to re-create an experience and to use their imaginations resulting in their telling an oral story.

Conclusion

This learning story offers educators instructional strategies that foster children's and teacher's inquiry outdoors. Working with toddlers in project work can be challenging due to their developmental age. However, if early childhood educators can think about planning connected experiences that afford children opportunities to assume responsibility for their learning and consider the elements of a cycle of inquiry, then using the outdoors as a context for learning is made very meaningful and provokes the sense of wonder that motivates both adults and children.

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Dr. Eileen Hughes is the Director for the Early Childhood Education Program at Western Washington University. She has held various positions in the field of early childhood education and currently works with undergraduate students and early childhood educators studying inquiry-based approaches. She has studied the underlying principles of the Reggio Emilia approach for the past 25 years and continues to identify questions to further her understanding.



A Tribute to Suzanne Gellens

Suzanne began her career as a classroom teacher, advanced to being a director and recently completed her tenure as Executive Director of the Florida Association for the Education of Young Children (FLAEYC).

Prior to accepting the position as Executive Director, she served as President of FLAEYC (formerly the Early Childhood Association of Florida). From 1997-1999, Suzanne continued her service to the early childhood profession as President of the Southern Early Childhood Association (SECA).

In 2013, Suzanne was recognized for her many contributions to both FACUS/FLAEYC and SECA as the recipient of the SECA Outstanding Member Award. Her dedication and unwavering support for SECA was noted, including her service the last few years as the coordinator for the annual Silent Auction at our annual conference.

In nominating Suzanne for the Outstanding Member award, FLAEYC included these quotes in her nominating letter:

- *Suzanne, in whatever setting she finds herself, bears the "banner" for SECA.*
- *She never lets our board, our affiliates, local coalitions or members of the Florida Legislature forget her early childhood heritage with our state and regional professional organizations.*
- *Suzanne is one of those "behind the scenes, not looking for personal credit" valued volunteers both at the state and regional level.*

It is our pleasure to recognize both her past and present contributions to SECA and we are grateful to count her as one of the "SECA family".

Reaching Children with Autism Spectrum Disorders Using Creative Dramatics: The Building Blocks Model

A major challenge for children with Autism Spectrum Disorder is communicating with others. Creative dramatics can offer an effective approach through play and make believe to counter these challenges.

Julia Byers Van Volkenburg

Samantha, a nonverbal 5 year old female diagnosed with autism, was intently listening to the story Goldilocks and the Three Bears. As I read the book, I acted out the various scenes, encouraging my language group of students with Autism Spectrum Disorders to do the same. We pretended to be Goldilocks and eat from the different sized porridge bowls, sit in the different sized chairs, and sleep in the different sized beds. Finally, we pretended to be the family of bears who discover Goldilocks sleeping in our home. Samantha stared at the book throughout most of the activities. At the end of the day when I walked into the classroom, she came up to me, put her hands up imitating a bear, and said, "Roar, Roar, Bear." These were her first spoken words.

The Center for Disease Control estimates that about 1 child in 68 is diagnosed with Autism Spectrum Disorders (ASD), "a group of developmental disabilities that can cause significant social, communication, and behavioral challenges" (Center for Disease Control, 2014). The three types of ASD are Autism, Asperger's Syndrome, and Pervasive Developmental Disorder-Not Otherwise Specified (PDD-NOS). A major challenge for children with ASD is communicating with others. Since the spoken language abilities of children with ASD vary from verbal to nonverbal, some of them communicate their wants and needs with augmentative and assistive communication devices, methods of communication other than oral communication. These may include picture boards and electronic devices.

Regardless of verbal abilities, all children with ASD have particular challenges with their social language skills. Traditional therapies utilize discrete-trial training and the Picture Exchange Communication System (PECS) to facilitate communication for children with

ASD. However, there are new frontiers to be explored in helping children with ASD communicate more effectively. One of these is creative drama techniques that maximize language development through a model that I have created called **The Building Blocks Model**.

Background on Autism

According to the Autism Society of America, "Autism is a complex developmental disability that typically appears during the first three years of life and affects a person's ability to communicate and interact with others" (2012, p. 1). No definitive cause for autism has been discovered. Researchers continue to search for causes, as well as for effective treatments for autism.

There are many different symptoms of autism. Since autism is a spectrum disorder with linked conditions, its symptoms are similar and can range from mild to severe. Children with ASD also exhibit a variety of unique symptoms that contribute to the need for individualized learning. There is no one-size-fits-all with ASD. Researchers, educators, and parents continue to struggle with guidelines and best practice treatments to help children with ASD. However, any disorder within the spectrum of ASD presents a significant challenge with social language. These social language difficulties can range from mild, such as robotic speech and avoiding eye contact, to severe lack of awareness, often with a complete lack of social reciprocity (Tubbs, 2008, p. 13). Children with ASD also have trouble with generalizations and figurative language. For example, when a child with ASD hears the phrase "It is raining cats and dogs," this child may literally believe that cats and dogs are falling from the sky. Such children are often visual

learners and do generally excel when technology is utilized. Technology tends to provide visual clues that trigger a response.

Varied approaches to therapy and treatments for children with ASD have been suggested; however, most have achieved only mixed results depending on the individual child. This is due to the fact that each child with ASD presents a different pattern of symptomology or a series of symptoms. For this reason, there is no standard practice of treatment for students with ASD in the fields of special education or speech language pathology. The two common treatments, discrete trial training and Picture Exchange Communication System (PECS), are heavily reliant on routine training to get a student to achieve a skill. PECS is a reward-based visual communication system that teaches initiation and helps a child learn incentives for communication. It is a nonverbal communication system, while the discrete trial training is a behavior-based technique in which the desired behavior is shaped by multiple trials. For example, when teaching body parts, the teacher may begin by asking the child to do a very specific task, such as to touch his or her nose. Prompts are used to help the child achieve the behavior and gradually fade away with rewards when the child successfully completes this behavior. Once the child can successfully touch his or her nose, then the teacher moves onto another body part. These treatments have demonstrated moderate levels of success in the ASD population. However, both of these techniques have difficulty with generalization of skills and have been criticized for their routine and often robotic responses. They also do not address understanding and expressing emotions (Delprato, 2001).



Photo by Nancy Alexander

Dramatic play, or make believe play, is an important component for children to establish their social competence.

Obviously, the field is open to new approaches, especially treatments like creative dramatics that encourage more spontaneous communication.

What is Creative Dramatics?

Creative dramatics is process-oriented drama consisting of various activities and exercises. It is a group experience wherein each child is guided through a process of self-expression and interaction with others. Creative dramatic activities include puppetry, imaginative playmaking, storytelling, pantomime, sound to movement, and improvisation. The purpose of creative dramatics is not performance for an audience but the process of using activities to develop the social and language skills of the whole child. It creates a pressure-free environment for the child to be guided to develop self-confidence through artistic expression. Creative dramatics begins with play, the natural way that a child learns (Way, 1998).

Creative dramatics is an appropriate strategy for communication

development because students feel confident to speak and free of pressures which are often inherent in a more traditional learning environment. Interestingly, even oral language skills have been enhanced through the use of pantomime, as the success in physical response to story activities leads the child to focus on spoken language to facilitate communication (Tubbs, 2008, p. 293-294).

Why Creative Dramatics Benefits Students with ASD

Despite the need for social language intervention in the burgeoning ASD population, creative dramatics has been slow to emerge as an accepted approach to maximize language development. This is surprising because play experiences, particularly symbolic play, are particularly lacking in students with ASD.

For many children with ASD, the various stages of play never truly develop or occur in a fragmented fashion. Difficulties in motor planning, expressive and receptive communication, imitation, and fine

and gross motor movements are just some of the many obstacles they encounter during play (Mastrangelo, 2009, p. 34).

There are limited opportunities for all students to participate in play activities in the schools today. However, there are even fewer for children with ASD. Usually their schedules are so overloaded with various therapies and activities that they are given fewer opportunities to be exposed to the arts, gym, and free outdoor play with peers. This is a particularly serious deficiency because dramatic play, or make believe play, is an important component for children to establish their social competence. As Lewis (2003) points out, “play, particularly when other people are involved, provides many opportunities for developing social, cognitive, and communication skills” (p. 391).

Creative dramatics offers an especially effective approach to counter these challenges through play and make believe. Structured classroom play activities allow children to facilitate important language skills in a positive and rewarding fashion. Peter (2009) asserts that “drama as narrative pedagogy can offer even the most remote, hard-to-reach, socially challenged children the opportunity to develop a sense of narrative identity and to move toward more effective participation within a social world” (p. 16).

While there is little research on creative dramatics as an effective therapy technique for students with ASD, there are studies that have focused on components of creative dramatics used with children with ASD. For example, Kempe and Tissot (2012) analyzed a high school senior year, mixed classroom in England containing 12 students. Some

students in this study had no special education needs and others were in special education, but the study focused on two female students with ASD. The teacher guided the class through the drama process of creating a play and performing the play. The researchers aimed to analyze the social language skills of the two girls. This study found that the drama process created a “safe space” for the students to have the opportunity to practice social skills that might not have been present in a more traditional learning environment. The study also unexpectedly found imagination skills in the students that had previously not been identified.

Creative dramatics can assist in expanding language skills.

However, this study also uncovered challenges. The first was peer learning. It was difficult to nurture peer cooperation and learning among students on such different levels. The second challenge was helping the teachers to feel comfortable enough with their own backgrounds to fully participate in directing their students with the exercise. These challenges provide opportunities for further research areas.

Another study by Guli, Semrud-Clikeman, Lerner, and Britton (2013) who collectively created and analyzed The Social Competence Intervention Program (SCIP), an intervention program based on creative drama, evaluated the use of SCIP with children with diagnoses of Autism Spectrum Disorders, Nonverbal

Learning Disability (NLD), and Attention Deficit Hyperactivity Disorder (ADHA) compared with typical peers to increase social skills. The children were between the ages of 8 and 14. The results of this study found an increase in social interaction and a decrease in solitary play of participants. It also found increased generalization of social skills outside of the intervention setting.

Schrandt, Townsend, and Poulson (2009) also studied the use of dolls and puppets to teach empathy and social language skills to four children with ASD, ages 4 to 6, through dramatic play vignettes. This study found that the students did exhibit an increase in empathy skills, not only in therapy, but generalized outside of therapy. Interestingly, this study found that some children were more comfortable expressing emotions through the use of puppets and dolls than through ordinary face-to-face encounters.

The research of Schrandt et al. (2009) indicates that children with ASD can develop important language skills of pragmatic language, including interaction with others, nonverbal cues, and recognizing and practicing emotions. Paralinguistic communication skills (the characteristics of how words are spoken), specifically prosody (the melody of language) and rate of speech (how fast or slow someone is talking) can be improved by creative dramatic exercises (Potter & Whittaker, 2001).

Difficulty with metalinguistic language or problems with reflecting and discussing language concepts, can also be explained and illustrated through creative dramatics (Sherratt & Peter, 2006). Overall, creative dramatics provides children with opportunities to generalize in different communication situations rather

A Glossary

- **Autism (ASD)**— A complex developmental disability that typically appears during the first three years of life and affects a person’s ability to communicate and interact with others
- **Discrete Trial Training**— A common treatment and behavior-based technique in which the desired behavior is shaped by multiple trials
- **Picture Exchange Communication System (PECS)**— A common treatment and reward-based visual communication system that helps a child learn incentives for communication
- **Creative Dramatics**— Process-oriented drama consisting of various activities and exercises, including puppetry, imaginative playmaking, storytelling, pantomime, sound to movement, and improvisation



than practice single-scripted communication behavior in a therapy setting (Tubbs, 2008, p. 238). Peter (2009) also found that the under-functioning parts of the brains of children with ASD may be stimulated by playful activity that tends to provoke emotional responses.

Lastly, creative dramatics provides an outlet for creativity and play. Unfortunately, many students with ASD have few if any creative opportunities in the school system. With creative dramatics, students can express themselves in the classroom while interacting with peers in a pressure-free situation to build self-esteem, as well as relationships with peers (Sherratt & Peter, 2006).

The Building Blocks Model

Language Development for ASD through Creative Dramatics: The Building Blocks Model is a creative dramatics model based on Brian Way’s techniques. Brian Way (1998), a pioneer creative dramatist, outlined a hierarchical series of stepping stones of creative drama techniques for educators to use to facilitate dramatic expression with students. His creative dramatic techniques are based on developmental learning to nurture the whole child. These techniques are concentration, pantomime, movement to sound, moods and emotions (role playing), voice and diction, storytelling, and playmaking/improvisation.

It is a hierarchical model. Each part of the model builds on the previous parts because each building block provides the foundational skills to successfully complete the other building blocks. Thus the skills and parts of the preceding building blocks are continually reinforced as each building block contains the

components of the previous blocks. Therefore, by the time a child reaches the playmaking/improvisational level, he or she has internalized the other skills of the preceding building blocks. This is the strength of this model.

The Building Blocks Model is a practical guide, based on the seven components of Way's drama techniques that I have adapted for general education teachers, special education teachers, and speech language pathologists to use to maximize language development across clinical and educational settings for students with ASD. The Building Blocks Model employs Way's techniques due to the effective results gained by applying his development guide to using dramatic expression for maximum language development in students with ASD. Every child, regardless of his or her disability and severity, can participate and benefit from this model. Especially, early childhood educators who encounter children with ASD in their classrooms can benefit from The Building Blocks Model as a tool to help develop their communication abilities.

Practical Examples of The Building Blocks Model

This section will explain each of the seven building blocks. It will provide targeted skills and specific examples to implement each building block. Critically, it will provide detailed examples for educators to utilize each building block in the classroom based on the theme from *The Three Little Pigs*. Regular educators, special education educators, and speech language pathologists can all incorporate The Building Blocks Model into their lessons. This model is particularly useful for

early childhood educators and can be easily adapted into any early childhood learning environment. Early childhood classrooms usually contain the materials needed to implement the model, such as picture books, nursery rhymes, puppets, and art materials. Plus, early childhood educators already use ideas and skills in this model every day in their classroom, such as singing with their students, show and tell, and encouraging imagination with their students. This section provides further insight on how educators can use this model.

Concentration

The first and foundational building block is concentration. Think of concentration as the foundation of a house upon which the rest of the house is built. Without it, the house cannot stand. Concentration involves becoming aware of self and others through the senses and opening the imagination. The targeted skill of the concentration building block is joint attention, the ability to share one's attention between another individual and an object. Specifically, reciprocal eye gaze is



Photo by Elisabeth Nichols

The availability of puppets and books assist children in creative dramatic play.

the most important component in this area. Educators can implement the concentration building block in their classroom with puppet activities by using a hand puppet or marionette to gain the attention of students. They can also use pictures, as well with taste, smell, and touch activities, to improve concentration skills in their students. Educators can move from teaching children to focus on inanimate objects to interacting with humans (student peers, teachers, and parents). A specific example using the theme from the story *The Three Little Pigs* is to increase concentration through a play-doh activity. Students can use play-doh to make pigs and wolves. The goal of this activity is to gain attention and focus through sensory activities (rolling out the play-doh and forming the play-doh into pigs and wolves) and to expand vocabulary and oral language skills as the students describe their efforts.

Pantomime

The second building block, pantomime, is imitation of movement without sound. Pantomime can be used to increase symbolic play and increase production of facial expressions and actions. Pantomime can be utilized in activities by using imaginary objects (e.g. passing a pretend object), acting out situations (daily routines like washing your face), pretending to be characters and exploring facial expressions/emotions, such as show me (happy/sad). A specific example is to encourage students to pretend to be pigs (show facial expressions, walk like pigs, etc.). The educator leads the activity: “You are a pig and you are walking through mud, snorting, running through the grass, eating, picking up sticks, making a house.” The goal of this activity is to imitate

facial expressions and actions to increase receptive language knowledge and to imagine others’ feelings and responses. Students with ASD sometimes have trouble with non-concrete activities, so the educator could also have the students make a paper bag pig puppet to create something tangible for children to use during their pretend play to reinforce pig movements and emotions.

Movement to Sounds (Dance-A-Story)

The third building block consists of singing and acting to songs and parts of stories. This building block targets the skills of following directions, repeating sentences or phrases, increasing vocabulary skills, and understanding spatial language concepts. Movement to Sounds activities include interactive songs (e.g. “Hands, Shoulders, Knees, and Toes”), choral reading activities (e.g. “Polar Bear Polar Bear”), and finger-play activities (e.g. “Itsy Bitsy Spider”). A specific example is to have students sing and act out the “Six Little Pigs Song.”

Moods and Emotions (Role Playing)

The fourth building block is pretending to be someone or something else. This moods and emotions building block targets the skills of generalizing emotions and identifying the feelings and needs of others. The ability to understand the moods and emotions of others is critical in problem-solving skills as well. Examples of activities using moods and emotions are puppetry and role plays (e.g. pretending to be a fireman putting out a fire). A specific example is a *Three Little Pigs* finger puppet and coloring activity. Students share *Three Little Pigs* finger

puppets to explore the story. Each student role plays one of the pigs and later takes turns being the wolf. They identify and discuss the emotions of the pigs and the wolf. They also work together to solve various problems that arise in the story (e.g. how to break into a house, how to build a safe house). Lastly, the educator also leads a discussion on personal safety issues related to the story (e.g. not opening the door to strangers, not talking to strangers, and what to do if you are in trouble such as “tell your mom or dad; yell ‘help,’” etc.).

Voice and Diction

The fifth building block emphasizes using appropriate vocal qualities and the manner of sound for communication. Voice and diction activities allow students to work on speech suprasegmentals of prosody (the melody of language), rate of speech (how fast or slow one speaks), and stress (which words or sounds in words are emphasized.) Specific classroom examples of voice and diction activities are chanting and reciting nursery rhymes, jump rope rhymes, and poetry. One example is for the educator to repeat the rhyme *This Little Piggy* several times with students. This rhyme is:

This little piggy went to market.
This little piggy stayed home.
This little piggy had roast beef.
This little piggy had none.
And this little piggy cried,
“Wee, wee, wee!”
All the way home.

Storytelling

The sixth building block is telling a story, also known as “oral narrative.” Storytelling targets the

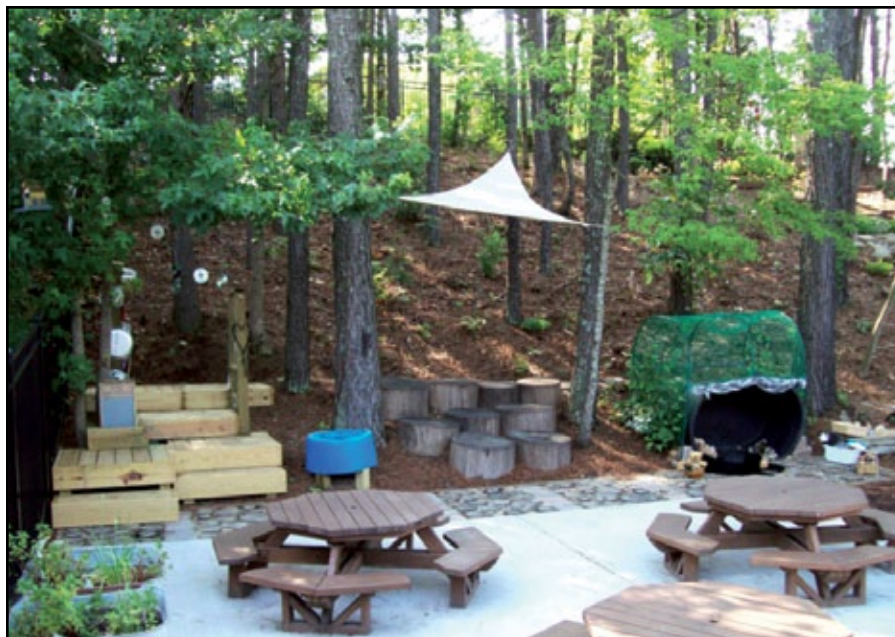


Photo courtesy of Highland Plaza Preschool, Chattanooga, TN/Winner of the 2013 SECA Exemplary Outdoor Classroom Contest

An outdoor classroom can be designed to promote creative dramatics in an early childhood program.

social language skills of following rules of conversation: introducing the topic, staying on topic, rephrasing when misunderstood, using verbal and nonverbal cues to tell the story, and applying receptive and expressive language skills to sequence events, produce grammatically appropriate sentences, increase vocabulary skills, and comprehend language concepts. Examples of storytelling activities for the classroom are felt board storytelling activities, sequencing story cards, and book activities, such as those suggested in *Autism and PDD Picture Stories and Language Activities* (Koski, 2008). A detailed storytelling example is the educator reading *The Three Little Pigs* with students using felt board characters to act out the story as it is being read. The educator asks students questions throughout the story. The educator also encourages the students to collaboratively retell the story using the felt board puppets.

Playmaking/Improvisation

The seventh and final building block is playmaking/improvisation.

This is creating, reacting to, and/or extending a story. Playmaking/improvisation targets pragmatic language skills of changing language according to the needs of listener and situation, increasing peer interaction, and applying problem-solving skills in social situations. Classroom examples of this building block are story extending activities where students add their own versions and Teacher in Role where the educator becomes part of the story as well.

An educator encouraging students to tell their own versions of *The Three Little Pigs* is a specific example of Playmaking/Improvisation. The scenario involves the three pigs going on a journey to build their own home. The students use stick pig masks. The educator holds the wolf mask at one point during the improvisation. To begin the improvisation, the educator prompts interactions through questions such as the following:

- Where are we going to find our new house (e.g. in a city, in the woods, on a mountain, by an ocean)?
- How will we get there (e.g. by car, by plane, by boat, by train)?
- What will we see during our journey to find our new home place?
- Once we get to our new home site, how will we build our homes?
- What materials will we need to build our own home?
- What do we want in our home (e.g. a swimming pool, a toy room, etc.)?
- Will the wolf go on the journey with us? Will the wolf see the homes that we have built?
- Will the wolf be nice or mean?

The improvisation ends when we all “live happily ever after.”

In performing the activities, the students may change roles or introduce new characters to the story. The educator and the students undertake their pretend trip together with the educator as the guide. Collectively, they also solve problems and conflicts that arise during the improvisation.

Conclusion

The Building Blocks Model is proposed as an effective tool for regular educators, special educators, and speech language pathologists to increase language development for students with ASD. This model can be an all-inclusive technique in early childhood environments. This hierarchical model guides children with ASD to expand their language skills through creative dramatics. It is important for children with ASD

to be exposed to creative and enjoyable therapy activities to develop their imaginations and creativity. Through the Building Blocks Model, children can not only practice and develop important and critical social language skills, but foster their confidence in a stress free environment and enjoy important play opportunities confirming that all children are entitled to their childhoods.

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In Memory of

Doug Townsend

Kay Williams

David Bryant

Roger Castillo

Gil Nespeca

Mike Kohl

By Dr. Pam Schiller

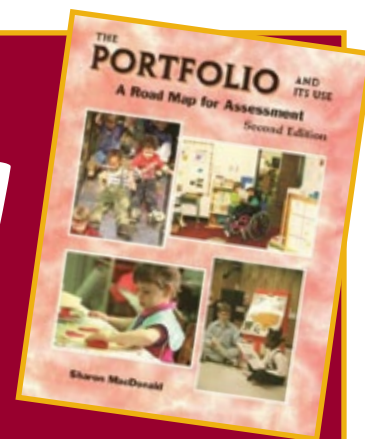
Burr Cheshire

By Dr. Milly Cowles

Kay Williams (mother of Kathy Ennis)

By Dr. Janie Humphries

We Heard You!



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Play in Natural Outdoor Environments: A Healthy Choice

Children's health and outdoor play are a natural connection.

**Mi-Hwa Park
& Jeanetta Riley**

"Time in nature is not leisure time; it's an essential investment in our children's health" (Louv, 2005, p. 120).

Early childhood is a critical time for establishing a strong foundation of healthy habits that will shape children's physical and psychological well-being both in the present and future (Frost, 2010; Sanders, 2006). Having regular contact with natural outdoor environments plays a pivotal role in promoting children's health and well-being (Armitage, 2009; Jacobi-Vessels, 2013; Kernan & Devine, 2010; Louv, 2005; Robinson & Wadsworth, 2010). When children have regular time in the outdoors, including forests, parks, and playgrounds, they have opportunities to release stress, play vigorously, and directly explore nature, which in turn provide physical and psychological benefits (Frost, 2010, Jacobi-Vessels, 2013; Louv, 2005). Active, energetic, and cheerful states of mind restore health and energy to children's bodies. As a result, children who spend more time in outdoor environments usually eat and sleep better than do children who spend less time in the outdoors (Kernan & Devine, 2010; National Environmental Education Foundation/NEEF, 2011; Taylor, Kuo, & Sullivan, 2001). In addition, playing in natural outdoor environments often enables children to build happy childhood memories. Such memories function as a "protective buffer" to help children deal with future life stresses (Elkind, 2007); therefore, to promote children's health and well-being, children need to spend time in the outdoors.

Unfortunately, many children in America are often deprived of contact with the outdoor environment. Frost (2010) described the lack of outdoor activity as a "play, fitness, and health crisis for American children" (p.270) and suggested that "depriving children of their innate need for play and nature should be treated as child abuse" (p. 269). Similarly, Louv (2005) demon-

strated a concern about the reduction in outdoor play and coined the term "nature deficit disorder" to illustrate the seriousness of the crisis. Furthermore, research supports Frost's and Louv's views suggesting that sedentary, indoor activities may increase obesity, depression, attention deficit hyperactivity disorder, attention and memory problems, and compromised immune systems in children (Baldwin & Rudge, 1995; Clements, 2000; Green, Riley, & Hargrove, 2012; Louv, 2005; NEEF, 2011; Taylor & Kuo, 2009; Taylor, Kuo, & Sullivan, 2001; Thigpen, 2007).

Establish healthy habits in early childhood.

This article addresses the importance of play time in natural outdoor environments and attempts to increase early childhood teachers' awareness of the relationship between outdoor time and children's physical and mental health. It outlines potential health benefits of playing outdoors, factors that limit outdoor time, and strategies for teachers to foster children's outdoor activities.

Potential Health Benefits of Outdoor Play

"Outdoor play of any kind helps prevent obesity and related diseases, nurtures physical fitness, and improves development, learning, and overall well-being" (Frost, 2010, p. 261).



Photo courtesy of Jake Drost Head Start, Sulphur, LA

Outdoor play provides physical and psychological benefits.

Natural outdoor environments which allow children to have direct contact with light, soil, wind, plants, and animals are viewed as optimal places to promote their health and well-being (Frost, 2010; Jacobi-Vessels, 2013; Elkind, 2006). While outdoors in nature, children experience a sense of freedom and the joy of learning through endless play with trees, leaves, dirt, and stones.

In recent years, many studies have found that children who spend less time in nature show an increase in chronic conditions such as childhood obesity, asthma, atopic symptoms, attention deficit hyperactivity disorder (ADHD), depression, and vitamin D deficiency (Lovasi, Quinn, Neckerman, Perzanowski, & Rundle, 2008; NEEF, 2011; Taylor & Kuo, 2009). Furthermore, outdoor activities promote good metabolism, musculoskeletal development, pulmonary and cardiovascular functions, anti-microbial detoxification, as well as maintaining healthy immune systems (Kernan & Devine, 2010; Louv, 2005; NEEF, 2011). When children play in natural outdoor environments, they are more inclined to engage in vigorous physical activities (e.g., running, jumping, climbing) that develop motor skills, strengthen the heart, increase lung function, and improve the health of muscles, bones, and joints (Bell, Wilson, & Liu, 2008; Department of Health and Human Services/DHHS, 2009; Fjørtoft, 2001; Maller, Townsend, Pryor, Brown, & St. Leger, 2006; Thigpen, 2007). Indeed, vigorous activities decrease the incidence of many diseases and improve a child's fitness (NEEF, 2011).

Photo courtesy of Jake Drost Head Start, Sulphur, LA



Contact with nature is not only fun, it has health benefits!

Playing in natural outdoor environments is beneficial for eye health. Playing in natural outdoor environments with green plants can reduce

childhood myopia (nearsightedness), which has become increasingly common among young children who spend time indoors watching television, using computers, and playing video games (National Wildlife Federation/NWF, 2013). Playing outdoors or having prolonged light exposure may curb the development of or slow the progression of myopia in children, reducing their need for eyeglasses (Charters, 2012; Rose et al., 2008).

In addition to the reported improvement of eye health, exposure to sunlight helps boost children's immune systems (Baldwin & Rudge, 1995). Vitamin D, primarily produced in skin exposed to sunlight, is critical to children's healthy bone development. Vitamin D supports our natural immunity and helps calcium be absorbed into the body. Children who have insufficient levels of vitamin D are more likely to have rickets, cardiovascular disease, metabolic syndrome, hypertension, diabetes, myocardial infarctions, and peripheral arterial disease (Brender, Burke, & Glass, 2005; Huh & Gordon, 2008; Kumar, Muntner, Kaskel, Hailpern, & Melamed, 2009; Misra, Pacaud, Petryk, Collett-Solberg, & Kappy, 2008). Children require vitamin D to maintain proper levels of calcium and phosphorus in the blood to build strong bones (Brender et al., 2005). To produce the necessary amount of vitamin D, children need to go out in the sun every day, absorbing at least 10-15 minutes of sunlight per day (Huh & Gordon, 2008; Misra et al., 2008).

The physical benefits of outdoor play influence the psychological benefits and vice versa. For example, Baldwin and Rudge (1995) reported sunlight entering the eyes facilitates the secretion of serotonin in the



Photo courtesy of Jake Drost Head Start, Sulphur, LA

Exposure to sunlight helps to promote optimal Vitamin D levels.

brain. Serotonin is a brain neurotransmitter, a type of chemical that helps children stay calm and peaceful. Serotonin plays a critical role in controlling depression, violence, and suicidal impulses and in promoting children's focused attention and memory. Serotonin strengthens T-lymphocytes which kills cancer cells and produces endorphins which play a role in producing a feeling of well-being. Therefore, children who spend more time indoors hidden from sunlight are likely to lack serotonin thus becoming more susceptible to depression and impulsiveness. Exposure to sunlight can have a positive impact on their psychological condition and may reduce depression (Levandovski, Pfaffenseller, Carissimi, Gama, & Loayza Hidalgo, 2013)

Similar to the benefits of sunlight, there is some evidence of health benefits from soil. The bacterium *Mycobacterium vaccae* has been studied by the medical community and some findings indicate a health benefit to patients with diseases such as cancer and dermatitis (Arkwright & David,

2003; O'Brien et al., 2004) when they were infused with the bacterium. This bacterium that is found in soil may have benefits for children as they play and "get dirty" because the bacterium could potentially affect children as they have direct contact with soil.

Promote children's health by spending time outdoors.

Playing in natural outdoor environments which provide children with first-hand experience of green spaces, sunlight, and dirt offers a host of benefits including improving their immune system and eyesight, reducing stress levels and depressions, and promoting healthy bones and muscle development. Therefore, it is definitely good to go outdoors to boost children's physical and psychological health.

Factors Influencing Limited Time Outdoors

Although playing outdoors promotes children's physical and psychological health, children today spend less time outdoors than ever before (Larson, Green & Cordell, 2011). Some negative effects of copious amounts of time indoors seen in children today are prevalence and increased rates of:

- Depression
- Obesity
- Asthma
- Vitamin D deficiency
- Vision problems
- Social isolation
- Attention problems (NEEF, 2011; NWF, 2013)

Furthermore, Kernan and Devine (2010) argue that playing in natural outdoor environments should not be thought of as optional for children but should be considered a right and a priority in children's lives to promote their health and well-being.

Given that time outdoors is essential for children, why are they not spending more time outdoors?

One key factor is the perception that being outside is fraught with risk. Fears such as the ever-lurking stranger, over exposure to sun, and accidents may prevent the teachers from encouraging children to play outdoors (DHHS, 2009; Garrick, 2009; Kernan & Devine, 2010; Little, Wyver, & Gibson, 2011; Louv, 2005). While teachers must think about how to reduce risk to create a safe outdoor environment, they must also consider how removing all possible risks could leave children with limited opportunities to be actively involved in physical activities (Kernan & Devine, 2010). This dichotomous perspective brings with it the awareness that safety and risk are not an either/or choice, but both must be considered in children's outdoor activities. The environment must be safe for children while at the same time provide enough freedom and challenge to permit children to stretch their physical and psychological capabilities.

A second factor is the plethora of electronic devices available for children to use (Hofferth, 2009). Children may be reluctant to move away from their computers or televisions even when parents ask them to go out and play. The amount of time children are engaged in sedentary activities including video games, TV, and computers is positively correlated with children's health problems, including obesity (Green et al., 2012; NWF, 2013; Robinson & Wadsworth, 2010). Not only does obesity change physical appearance, but according to NEEF (2011), it can also lead to asthma, diabetes, hypertension, and cardiovascular disease. Being overweight can lead children to reduce vigorous activities and become more easily fatigued, leading to a loss in confidence and depression (Green et al., 2012; Kernan & Devine, 2010). In severe cases, obesity can lead to skeletal deformities, joint disorders, menstrual disorders, and various hormonal diseases (Green et al., 2012). Although many factors contribute to childhood obesity (e.g., eating behaviors and genetics), increased time spent indoors is undoubtedly one factor. Thus obesity prevention is critical. Children must be encouraged to reduce their time with electronic devices and increase their outdoor activities. If forced to do so, children may be resistant; thus, it is better to start with activities that interest them.

Ways to Facilitate Outdoor Activities

Playing outdoors advances the health and fitness of children; therefore, adults must provide access to and opportunities for this play. While some teachers may feel pressured to have children spend more



Photo courtesy of Agapeland Playspace, Marion, SC/
The 2014 SECA Exemplary Outdoor Classroom

Outdoor areas that are designed for exploration and "dirt digging" have health benefits for young children.

time indoors on academically oriented tasks, research suggests that outdoor time is beneficial to children's academic success (NWE, 2013). For example, Skrupskelis (2000) found that children who spend more time in outdoor environments show greater capacity to focus their attention and higher academic performance than do sedentary children. Skrupskelis' research is supported by brain research that indicates exercise supplies oxygen-rich blood to the brain, thus improving brain function (Shaw, 2005). These findings imply that playing outdoors is essential not only for children's health but also for their learning. Children's engagement with instruction might increase through greater nature-induced "shots of serotonin."



Photo courtesy of Agapeland Playspace, Marion, SC/The 2014 SECA Exemplary Outdoor Classroom

An outdoor classroom provides the opportunity to ensure that outdoor time is included in everyday activities.

Outdoor play supports physical and psychological health.

Increasing children's access to the outdoor provides them with more opportunities to develop a healthy mind and body. Indeed, early childhood lays the foundation to develop healthy lifestyles and positive attitudes toward a fit mind and body. How can teachers encourage children to spend more time in natural outdoor environments and less time indoors? It takes the efforts of communities, schools, and families.

- *Communities* can create more green spaces for children to play, including parks, nature trails, and safe playgrounds.
- *Schools* can provide more nature-oriented playgrounds with spaces for children to

come into contact with plants and animals.

- *Teachers* can become aware of the benefits of outdoor activities and create curriculum that takes children outdoors for learning.
- *Families* can use a variety of opportunities to spend time outdoors with their children.

outdoor activities to families. Furthermore, teachers and families can teach children about what to do if a stranger approaches, how to cross streets safely, and how to properly protect themselves from the sun, heat, and other inclement weather (DHHS, 2009; Garrick, 2009). Appropriate planning and scrutiny of outside environments can increase children's safety while outdoors.

Plan Outdoor Time

Teachers need to incorporate time for the natural outdoors into children's daily routines. For improved health and wellness, children need to play at least 60 minutes a day (weather permitting) in the outdoors (NWE, 2013). Although some people may believe that more time doing "seat work" brings higher academic success (Jarrett & Waite-Stupiansky, 2009), more time outdoors may actually increase test scores (NWE, 2013).

Play Together

When teachers play with children rather than sitting and monitoring, they have more opportunities to

Suggestions for Planning Outdoor Activities

The following are suggestions for outdoor activities that teachers can encourage to promote children's health and well-being.

Provide Safety Education

Before going outside, teachers need to make a safety check and monitor the content of natural outdoor environments to provide children with safe areas to play. Additionally, teachers can send family newsletters with information about children's safety in the outdoors, display posters with the school's guidelines for outdoor play, post the guidelines on the school's website, and provide websites about the benefits of

learn about each child's fitness level and thus can provide more individualized activities. In addition, when playing together, the teacher and children can discover various types of plants and animals normally seen only in textbooks. Exploring the real world in its bare natural beauty, they are introduced to the wonders of nature which elicits a genuine sense of curiosity, appreciation, and respect for nature. They can blow dandelion spores, make bracelets with shamrock, and tickle each other's chins with green foxtail. By seeing nature in its four seasons and playing together, the teacher and children can appreciate shared time in nature and, more importantly, build better relationships.

Engage Families

Teachers can also suggest to families that they model healthy habits for their children by encouraging more outdoor time. For example, instead of sitting in front of the computer during the weekend, the family can take a walk around their neighborhood, ride bicycles, or visit nearby parks and forests to hike trails.

Conclusion

Playing in the outdoors should not be an optional activity but part of the daily schedule. Even when time is short, this type of play should not be eliminated. Regular contact with nature can improve children's physical and psychological health and well-being. When children stop spending time in nature, where should they look to maintain their good health and create happy memories?

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SECA's Commitment to Play and Outdoor Learning A Wealth of Professional Resources



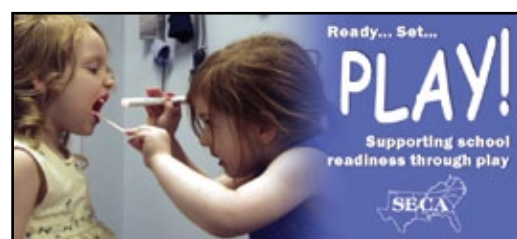
From *Dimensions of Early Childhood* & *Dimensions Extra*

The 2013 and 2014 issues of *Dimensions of Early Childhood* and *Dimensions Extra* featured articles on the programs recognized for Exemplary Outdoor Classrooms. Each issue of the journal highlighted programs and *Dimensions Extra* provided additional resources that could be accessed to assist in developing outdoor classrooms.

Copies of these journals are archived at http://www.southernearlychildhood.org/members_only.php for SECA members.



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From Our Monthly Membership E-mail Articles

These e-mails are archived on the SECA website and available on the "members-only" section of the website. You'll find them under the section, **Members E-mail Articles**. There is an informational article and either a parent or staff flyer (or maybe both!) about the topic. Look for these specific e-mail articles on the topic of play and outdoor learning.

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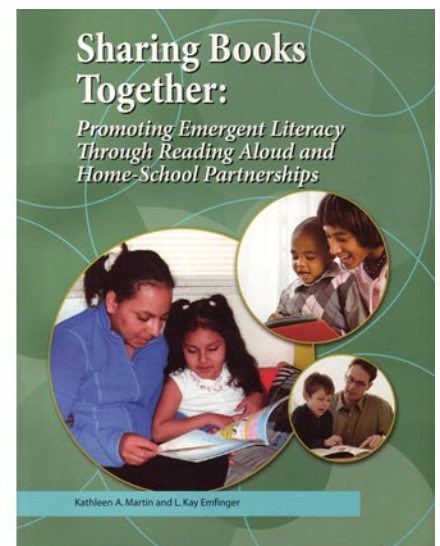
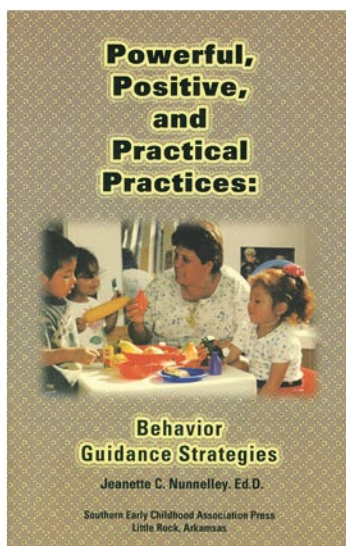
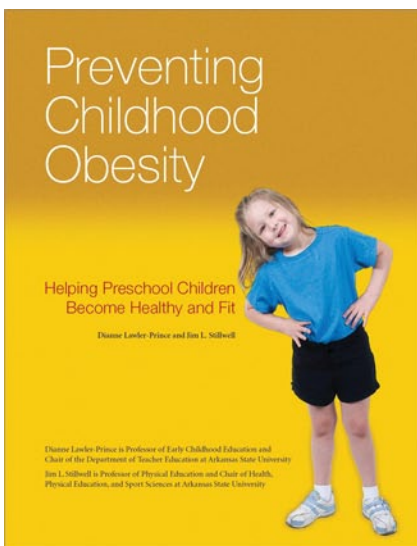
Are You a Local Leader? SECA is Here to Help!

Welcome to a new resource from the Southern Early Childhood Association to support the critical work that you do at the local level! Regardless of what you're called in your state (chapter, affiliate, district), we know that the hard work of growing and maintaining a membership organization happens with you and your leadership. You have been identified as a leader/president of your local organization and we want to reach out to you to share what we have to offer.

Just Ask Us! Making it HAPPEN at the local level will begin to appear in your in-box on a monthly basis. In this brief e-mail, we'll share some resources available through SECA that can assist and support your efforts.

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We know that this summer you're in the planning stages to "rev up" activity again in the fall. **We have a quantity of print books that we'll ship to your local affiliate FREE to use as membership incentives, door prizes and anything else you can develop at the local level.** Just contact us at info@southernearlychildhood.org and let us know where to ship.



Literacy Boxes: Differentiating in Kindergarten with Portable Literacy Centers

Literacy workstations as an alternative to learning centers? Try implementing literacy boxes that make activities available throughout the classroom and at home.

Elizabeth Lilly, Ph.D.

Teachers often use literacy centers in primary classrooms—small areas of the classroom where students work alone or in small groups using literacy materials, organized by the teacher, to independently explore skills and strategies (Ford & Opitz, 2002; Owocki, 2005; Stout, 2009). Most literacy centers contain materials that target specific areas of language and literacy development currently being covered in the curriculum. Debbie Diller (2003) developed literacy workstations as an alternative to learning centers. Literacy workstations can be moved freely about the classroom in boxes, in contrast to traditional literacy centers, which are primarily stationary. According to Diller, the name was changed from literacy centers to work stations to put the focus on the child's work, which indicates that what goes on is not an "extra" activity, but work that is independent, meaningful, and hands-on. Diller believes that the movement of literacy work stations captures the brain's attention and brings novelty to learning, which helps solidify new knowledge. Literacy Boxes, a collection of teacher-made, portable literacy centers that contain differentiated activities and experiences for meaningful learning that facilitate active involvement, are a variation of Diller's (2003) literacy work stations.

Why Use Boxes?

Space is at a premium in many classrooms. Boxes can contain enough books and materials for at least three children, with differentiated activities to meet their individual needs.

The portability of boxes allows children to move to small areas of the room and work quietly. Literacy Boxes are easier to plan and prepare than large learning centers and give flexibility for changing materials more frequently. Types of boxes used can vary from plastic ones,

to shoe boxes, to pizza boxes, to empty boxes for copier paper, which can be decorated or left plain. The size makes storage and accessibility easy.

Literacy boxes are planned and developed with Owocki's (2005) principles for meaningful learning in mind. Meaningful learning, according to Owocki involves the following elements:

- a child's sociocultural experiences
- a child's interests, tastes, and preferences
- the uniqueness of each child's progress
- child-directed talk and social collaboration
- functional activities
- the "active teacher" within each child

Teachers take into consideration not only the language arts curriculum; they provide tailor-made, differentiated activities and experiences based on their knowledge of the children they teach, the social aspect of learning (Vygotsky, 1978), and the belief that children learn in an environment that allows them to explore new ways of thinking as they engage with developmentally appropriate materials and ideas.

Differentiation

We know that children come to school with a variety of literacy experiences, influenced by myriad social, cultural, and economic factors (Lilly & Green, 2004). For example, teachers understand that they will need to scaffold one child's emergent reading of a simple book, while assisting another with beginning and ending sounds. The trick is learning to meet the needs of all learners effectively. Ankrum and Bean (2007) state, "There is evidence that providing *all* students with the same



*A set of materials for **The Little Red Hen** Literacy Box*

reading instruction can be detrimental to student achievement.” (p. 134).

Differentiation of instruction provides a framework for kindergarten teachers to carefully observe their young students, learn about their backgrounds, interests, and early reading development, and provide appropriate, effective strategies to help each child progress towards literacy competence and confidence (Tomlinson, 2009). Research reveals

that low-achieving students may suffer in classrooms where teachers do not differentiate instruction, while high-achievers make only modest gains (McGill-Franzen, Zmach, Solic, & Zeig, 2006). A key element of differentiation is that student differences influence their learning (Tomlinson, 2009). Teachers who differentiate recognize that they will need to offer a wide range of instructional possibilities to reach every child.

Using Literacy Boxes to Differentiate Instruction

Planning lessons that are tailored to individual students is challenging for some teachers, but necessary so that students receive literacy instruction related to their needs. Using literacy boxes, which contain a range of activities for children with differing literacy abilities, offers opportunities for learners to engage in developmentally appropriate, self-directed, and open-ended experiences. Teachers plan activities based on informed knowledge of their children. One child might work on recognizing sight words while another is using the sight words to write sentences. Differentiation becomes more manageable as teachers use literacy boxes to scaffold learning. As children accomplish the tasks in one literacy box, they are assigned another that includes activities that are more complex. Other advantages of using literacy boxes to differentiate instruction are choice, challenge, and collaboration, factors that have been positively correlated with motivation in learning (O'Donnell & Hitpas, 2010).

Developing Literacy Boxes

When planning differentiated instruction in kindergarten using literacy boxes, first think about the unique interests and sociocultural background of the children as well as what needs they have in regards to literacy development. Effective teachers study their students as much as they study the content they are teaching in order to differentiate successfully (Tomlinson, 2009). Observations, interviews, and conversations are all beneficial ways of gathering information on students. Another valuable strategy is to use a short interest inventory (**Figure 1**).

Ideas for Differentiation with Literacy Boxes

- provide a varied level of reading materials
- include a small tape recorder and tapes of the books
- use graphic organizers that vary in complexity
- accept drawing as an alternative to writing
- arrange for some activities to be completed on the computer
- offer activities that are geared to the multiple intelligences
- allow English Language Learners to complete the activities in their home language, as well as English
- use color-coded activities to indicate levels of difficulty
- provide hands-on activities with materials that can be manipulated in various ways
- offer oral activities, in addition to written ones
- include “I Can” lists that offer differentiated activities to do with the same materials

Figure 1. Interest Inventory

Interest Inventory		
Name _____	Age _____	Date _____
Please help me get to know you better by completing the following sentences:		
1. I have _____ brothers and _____ sisters.		
2. I live with _____.		
3. My favorite things to do are _____.		
4. I like to read about _____.		
5. I'm going to be _____ when I grow up.		
6. My favorite television program is _____.		
7. My favorite book is _____.		
8. After school, I usually _____.		
9. My favorite animal is _____.		
10. The best thing about me is _____.		

Children who are already emergent writers can respond to the questions as the teacher reads them aloud; those who are in earlier writing stages can draw pictures in response to the questions.

Ongoing Assessment

Ongoing assessment is a key component in knowing students well and differentiating instruction (Tomlinson, 2009). Informal literacy assessments such as an alphabet assessment, concepts about print assessment, story retelling (**Figure 2**), writing samples, or sight word recognition give teachers a baseline for each child as literacy boxes are assembled. After children complete each activity, a way to document their progress is essential so consider how to collect this data. Some activities in the literacy boxes will generate

products (e.g., a story retelling that is written or drawn), while others are more process-oriented (e.g., a picture sort). Keeping an observational notebook and camera handy will help record pertinent data.

Selecting Materials for Literacy Boxes

Consult the English Language Arts Common Core State Standards and any additional local and state standards to develop literacy boxes that fit the curriculum. It is a good idea to keep a master list of the activities in each box and the standards they cover to make sure specific standards are addressed. As new activities are added to or removed from a box, the list makes it easy to see gaps and make sure certain standards continue to be included.

Books and materials selected for inclusion in literacy boxes can dovetail with any subject being studied. For example, a language arts standard may be to write a nonfiction piece and a kindergarten science standard may be to compare the similarities and differences in animals. A simple way to combine both would be to have children write an *Ocean Animal Fact Book*. (See **Figure 3** and refer to “Under the Sea with Hermit Crab” for additional materials and activities to include in a content-integrated literacy box.)

The “I Can” List

Including an “I Can” list (Diller, 2003) is an effective way to differentiate instruction. The teacher introduces the books and materials in the literacy box to the whole

Figure 2. Story Retelling Assessment

Story Retelling Assessment			
Student's Name _____		Grade _____	
Date _____		Title of Story _____	
_____ Story was read to Student	_____ Text Difficulty	_____ Retelling Response	
_____ Student Read Alone	_____ Advanced	_____ Oral	
	_____ High	_____ Pictorial	
	_____ Moderate	_____ Written	
Story Structure	Includes	After Prompt	Comments
<i>Setting/Characters</i>			
Starts retelling at beginning of story			
Names <i>main</i> character(s)			
Names <i>other</i> character(s)			
Tells <i>when</i> story happened			
Tells <i>where</i> story happened			
<i>Theme</i>			
Identifies goal or problem			
Includes all major events			
Tells events in sensible order			
<i>Resolution</i>			
Tells how problem was solved or goal was met			
<i>Evaluative Comments:</i>			

class. As they discuss possibilities for ways to use the materials, the teacher writes an “I Can” list of suggestions from the children, adding others she has already planned for them to do. Color-coding the list can provide a way to distinguish levels of complexity for each activity. Children using the same literacy box can then be assigned different colors and work their way through the activities on a schedule that scaffolds the skills and strategies needed for each one.

Literacy boxes provide a variety of ways to differentiate instruction.

A Literacy Box in Action

Ms. Mungol, a kindergarten teacher, based her Literacy Box on *The Little Red Hen*. She introduced the story to her young students, reading it aloud and setting the stage for them to explore the activities in the literacy box. Three activities of varying complexity were contained in it, including flannel board pieces, story circles, and vocabulary cards. Puppets were an additional choice. After Ms. Mungol modeled each of the activities, the children began to work independently. When the children completed their tasks, Ms. Mungol was able to quickly measure their accomplishments using informal assessments.

Literacy Boxes at Home

Involving families is crucial in developing early literacy skills and

Differentiated Activities in *The Little Red Hen* Literacy Box



Retelling the Story with Story Circles



Retelling the Story with Flannel Board Pieces

strategies. Home learning activities, simply designed experiences that give families and children time together to read and play, are one way to connect school and home and extend literacy learning (Lilly & Green,

2004). Literacy boxes can be used as home learning activities and checked out by families on a rotating basis.

A letter from the teacher can be included in the literacy boxes, listing

Figure 3. Sample Literacy Boxes

Literacy Box	Skills & Strategies	Children's Books	Materials	"I Can" List
Under the Sea with Hermit Crab	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • word identification • word categorization • expository writing • narrative writing 	<p><i>A House for Hermit Crab</i> (Eric Carle)</p> <p><i>Down by the Bay</i> (Raffi)</p> <p><i>Over in the Ocean: In a Coral Reef</i> (Marianne Berkes)</p> <p><i>A Swim Through the Sea</i> (Kristin Joy Pratt)</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • laminated pictures of ocean animals • sea shells • bingo cards • paper in fish shapes • blank journal • pencils, crayons, markers 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • sort cards • play a memory game • play Ocean Animal Bingo • make an Ocean Animal Fact Book • write a verse for an innovation, "Under the Sea," based on "Down by the Bay"
On the Farm with the Little Red Hen	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • story structure • main idea/ summarizing • word identification • oral language skills 	<p><i>The Little Red Hen</i> (Paul Galdone)</p> <p><i>Farmer Duck</i> (Martin Waddell)</p> <p><i>Duck in a Truck</i> (Jez Alborough)</p> <p><i>Old MacDonald had a Woodshop</i> (Lisa Shulman)</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • flannel board pieces • blank story circles • vocabulary picture cards • puppets • pencils, crayons, markers, paper 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • retell the story using the flannel pieces or puppets • draw the story sequence on the story circles • write words and play vocabulary games
Learning the ABCs and words with the Coconut Tree	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • letter recognition • letter-sound correspondance • high frequency • sentence construction 	<p><i>Chicka Chicka Boom Boom</i> (Bill Martin & John Archambault)</p> <p><i>Alphabet Mystery</i> (Audrey Wood)</p> <p><i>LMNO Peas</i> (Keith Baker)</p> <p><i>Alphabet City</i> (Stephen Johnson)</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • alphabet letters • cut-out of coconut tree • cut-outs of coconuts with sight words on them • pencils, crayons, markers, paper 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • use alphabet letters to spell your name on the trunk of the tree • place the letters in ABC order • read the sight words and place them on the coconut tree • write sentences using the sight words

the materials included and explaining how to use them (Figure 4). Additionally, the inclusion of an evaluation form or blank journal will give families the opportunity to write about how they liked the literacy box and provide any suggestions for improvement. Children who are English Language Learners could be provided literacy boxes that have directions and a family letter in their own language as well as English. A great way to introduce literacy boxes to families would be to hold several workshops at varying times to accommodate different work schedules.

Conclusion

Children come to kindergarten with varying degrees of literacy. Some already know how to read, while others are struggling to learn the alphabet. Differentiation is a necessity and a key to reading success. Literacy boxes provide a variety of ways to differentiate instruction, while offering kindergartners meaningful and engaging literacy activities.

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Figure 4: Letter to Families



Dear Families,

Welcome to “On the Farm with The Little Red Hen.” Inside this Literacy Box you’ll Find:

- The Little Red Hen book
- flannel board pieces
- blank story circles
- vocabulary picture cards
- puppets
- pencils, crayons, markers, paper

Begin by reading the story to your child. When you have finished the story, here are some ways you can have fun together.

- help your child retell the story using the flannel board pieces or puppets
- have your child draw the story on the story circle
- have your child write the vocabulary words on the paper and illustrate them

There is a blank journal included in the box. Please write a short entry describing your experiences with the Literacy Box and suggesting any ideas you have for making the activities more enjoyable. Happy reading!

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About the Author

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The SECA Reporter Becomes a BLOG!

The summer 2015 issue of *The SECA Reporter* will be the last in the form of a newsletter. With the advance of technology, there are new ways to provide information that enhance the member experience and provide for interactive communication among our members throughout the SECA states. We'll continue to produce our e-newsletters such as *The Leadership Letter* and *Public Policy Notes*, but we think that changing *The SECA Reporter* to another information format will allow us to keep you updated more frequently and provide another avenue for you to participate professionally. ***The SECA Reporter will now come to you in the form of a BLOG post with a new post at least once a month.***

During the last couple of years, we've moved from "print and mail" to 24 hour on-line access and in the process have increased the resources and content that we can provide. You can now go on-line and access your copy of *Dimensions of Early Childhood*, the e-mail archives, public policy information and other resources anytime it fits your schedule. You no longer have to wait for these resources to appear in your mailbox.

We're looking for innovative and creative ways to serve you better and to provide member value. You've probably noticed the change in the way the monthly member e-mail looks. That's just one of the changes that we've initiated to make our member resources more relevant and useful.

You'll receive notification when the posts are made and we hope you'll share your thoughts and ideas with your colleagues. *Let us know what you think about this new adventure at SECA!*

The Board and Staff of the Southern Early Childhood Association



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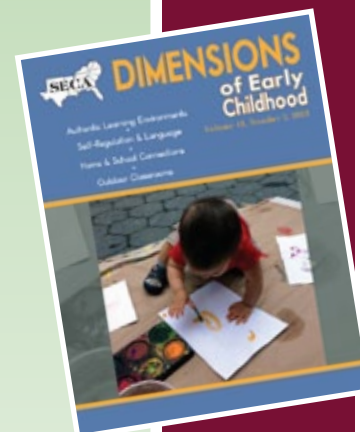
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The event is hosted by the Early Childhood Association of Oklahoma, SECA's state affiliate, and the proceeds will support their work on behalf of children and families in Oklahoma. Registration for the event will be available on the SECA conference registration form.

Experience the rich jazz, blues and gospel history of Tulsa, and round out your Friday at SECA 2016 with a fun filled night at the Oklahoma Jazz Hall of Fame!

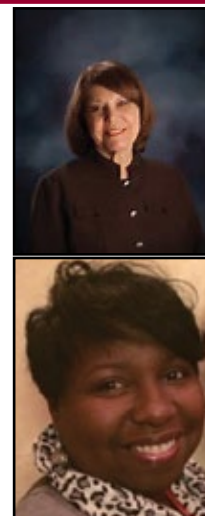


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Nancy P. Alexander is Executive Director of Northwestern State University Child and Family Network in Shreveport, Louisiana. She has a Master's Degree from Northwestern and additional graduate hours in adult learning and early childhood education. Her work involves staff in their roles of helping program directors and teachers implement ongoing improvement. She is the author of two books, *Early Childhood Workshops that Work: The Essential Guide to Successful Training and Workshops*, and *Nailing Jelly to the Wall: Defining and Providing Technical Assistance in Early Childhood*, both published by Gryphon House.

Juliette Semien is a child care specialist for NSU Child and Family Network following over 10 years as a center director. Her job responsibilities include training and technical assistance. Additionally, she is a certified CLASS observer and certified for interrater reliability with TS Gold. She has a BS in Family and Consumer Sciences with a concentration in child development and family relations from Northwestern.

Look for It!

More 2016 Conference Information Coming Your Way

We're working hard to complete our planning for the 2016 conference and we've included information in this issue of *Dimensions of Early Childhood* about our conference keynote speakers, the Director's Seminar, Trainer's Institute and a special event sponsored by the Early Childhood Association of Oklahoma, our state affiliate. Stay tuned for more information on:

- Tours of programs in the Tulsa area
- Special sessions for home visitors
- Information on opportunities to learn about the newly revised ECERS-R
- Special sessions for our colleagues who are Spanish speakers
- The schedule of educational sessions that will be available
- And much, much, more!

Check our website regularly for updated conference information. We're beginning to share all the wonderful things we will offer and know that you'll be as excited about the educational opportunities at SECA 2016 as we are. See you in Tulsa next year!

Are You Our Next SECA President?

It's time again to select our candidates for SECA President for a term beginning in 2017. The winning candidate will assume office as President-Elect in 2017, serve as President in 2018-2019 and end their tenure on the Board as Immediate Past-President in 2020.

Kathy Attaway is completing her term as President in 2015 and will assume the office of Immediate Past-President in 2016. Carol Montealegre, currently our President-Elect, will assume the office of President in 2016.

According to SECA Election Policies, nominations may be made in the following ways:

- By state or local affiliates.
- By individuals who are SECA members.
- By individuals who are SECA members and wish to self-nominate.

The SECA Nominating Committee will interview all nominees for the position prior to the 2016 annual conference in Tulsa, Oklahoma on February 11-13, 2016. This year, the SECA Nominating Committee will be composed of representatives of the following states: Alabama, Florida, Kentucky, Louisiana, Mississippi, and South Carolina. State affiliate presidents have been asked by President Attaway to appoint their state's representative.

Persons who wish to submit for consideration by the Nominating Committee should send the following to the SECA office by October 1, 2015.

- A letter of interest stating their qualifications and rationale for submitting for consideration.
- A resume or professional vita.

For more information about SECA election policies and procedures, click [here](#) to access the SECA Policies and Procedures Manual. You'll find the information about the election policies on pages 37-39 and more information on the Nominating Committee on pages 28-29.



President Kathy Attaway, 2014-15



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Give Your Students the Gift of Attending a Professional Conference



Students from Fayetteville Technical Community College in North Carolina who attended SECA 2014 with a matching grant from SECA.

The Southern Early Childhood Association is offering a matching grant program to student groups to assist in attendance at the 2016 SECA conference. These grants will be available to the following groups:

- **Technical/community college or university student groups**
- **Student affiliates or chapters** that are recognized by the SECA state affiliate.
- **High school** student groups.

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