

TIPS FOR EARLY CARE AND EDUCATION PROVIDERS

Simple Concepts to Embed in Everyday Routines



Researchers from around the country offer helpful tips that you can practice to help the young children in your care grow and learn. The tips are based on concepts of learning and development that can be worked into everyday routines. Each tip describes a concept, why the concept is important, and a step-by-step description of how to put the concept into action. We hope these concepts are useful in supporting all the children in your care.

The concepts include:

- Engaging Children in Social Object Play
- Using Children's Interests in Activities
- Using Visual Cues to Make Choices
- Playing Together with Objects: Practicing Joint Attention
- Book Sharing
- Uncovering Learning Potential
- Peer-Mediated Support: Teaching Children to Play with Each Other
- Learning Words During Joint Attention
- Predictable Spaces
- Predictable Routines
- Distracting and Redirecting Children to Engage in Appropriate Behavior
- Narration
- Moving and Exploring
- Following the Child's Lead in Play
- Appreciations
- Asking Thinking Questions

Publication compiled by:

CONCEPT

Engaging Children in Social Object Play

WHAT:

Social object play means playing with toys or other objects in a way that encourages talking, looking, or engagement between a child and a caregiver and/or a peer. The child and the adult or peer play together with an object, usually taking turns that build on each other's activity to keep the play going. Social object play should be fun. The caregiver and the child share in this fun together, meaning there are mutual smiles or laughs, and the child shows interest in continuing the activity.

WHY:

Social object play is an important skill that helps children grow in their social development and their communication with others.

HOW:

Adults can engage children in social object play by following these steps:

- Step 1:** Provide toys or objects that the child enjoys playing with. Pay close attention to what objects the child shows interest in. Sometimes you can tell what interests the child by paying attention to what the child looks at or reaches for.
- Step 2:** Once the child begins to play with the toy or object, join in by imitating what the child is doing.
- Step 3:** Take turns doing what the child is doing with the toy or object. Balance the turns so that neither partner is taking more turns than the other. For example, if the child is building a tower, take turns adding blocks to the tower.
- Step 4:** Expand the play routine. Once you and the child have taken many turns, expand the play routine. Bring in other toys or objects to make the activity longer. Here are some examples:
 - If the child is building a tower with blocks and you are taking your turn to help build the tower, encourage the child to knock the blocks down when all the blocks are used. The crashing of the blocks should be fun and motivate the child to repeat the activity (rebuild the tower and crash it down again).
 - Once the routine of building the tower and knocking it down is mastered, expand the activity by adding a toy figure just before the tower crashes or using a truck to help push the tower down.
- Step 5:** Make sure the play routine is fun and motivating for the child. Look to the child's attention, involvement, and enjoyment that show the play routine is fun and motivating. The more motivated the child is, the longer the play routine will last and the greater the opportunities for practicing social and communication skills.

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CONCEPT

Using Children's Interests in Activities

WHAT:

When you are planning activities, use children's interests to guide you. When transitioning to an activity that the child does not prefer, use favorite interests to help motivate and engage the child.

WHY:

Children have different interests. They are more likely to transition or engage in an activity that includes their special interests.

HOW:

Adults can use children's special interests in activities by following these steps:

Step 1: Make a list of the special interests of the children in your care. They may include:

- toys or objects, such as trains, blocks, music toys, certain books, or movies
- topics, such as dinosaurs, maps, or the alphabet
- characters, such as Dora the Explorer or Thomas the Tank Engine
- activities, such as bouncing a ball, spinning, or singing
- certain colors, numbers, or songs

Step 2: Make a list of the activities during the day that are difficult for the child to do or transition to.

Step 3: Think about different ways that you can include the child's interests in these activities.

Here are some examples:

- If a child does not like playing with blocks or other manipulatives, tape pictures of the child's favorite cartoon character to the blocks.
- If a child has trouble doing art projects, create an art project based on the child's favorite book or song.
- If it is hard for you to get the child to wash his hands, try singing a favorite song only when he is washing his hands or have him wash his hands and a dinosaur (or another favorite toy) at the same time.



Courtesy of The Shield Institute

Using Interests—A teacher took a photo of the child's favorite toy to begin to teach the child how to put together a puzzle.

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CONCEPT

Using Visual Cues to Make Choices

WHAT:

When it is time for children to move to centers or play areas in the room, offer a choice of where to go. If a choice of location is not available to a child, offer a choice within an activity, such as “Do you want the red cup or the blue cup during lunch time?” Using pictures to inform children of their choices is a good way to help them understand.

WHY:

Giving choices that you select can help with transition difficulties. Making the choices visual, such as showing a photo or an object that represents the areas or activities, helps children understand their choices. Giving choices instead of directing children can help those who resist transitions. Offering choices can also help children who do not know which activity to choose and tend to wander.

HOW:

Adults can give children visual cues for making choices by following these steps:

- Step 1:** Take photos of the favorite areas, centers, or activities within the setting. Include different play spaces, like the art area, book area, eating area, and the outside space. You can also choose an item from each space that the child recognizes as a symbol of that space. Here are some examples:
- a favorite book can be a symbol of the book area
 - a paint brush can be a symbol of the art area
 - a train can be a symbol of the train table
 - a sippy cup can be a symbol of the snack area
- Step 2:** Put all of your photos and objects in a specific location so it is easy for you or other staff to find them when it is time to move from activity to activity.
- Step 3:** When it is time for children to transition, pull out two photos or objects that represent two desirable activities or locations. Go to the child and get down to her eye level, so the child can see the photos or objects clearly.
- Step 4:** Offer the choices to the child. For example, while holding up the toy train and paint brush, ask, “Kate, do you want trains or art first today?” The child may need help making a choice as she learns what the photos or objects represent.
- Step 5:** If all of the children need to go to the same location, such as the playground, also offer a choice. For example, while holding up a shovel and a piece of chalk, ask, “Sam, do you want sand or chalk first today?”
- Step 6:** Praise the child for making a choice! Give a high-five or say, “Great job making a choice!”



Courtesy of Division TEACCH

Each object represents a favorite toy at different centers—farm table, music center, table top play, art

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CONCEPT

Playing Together with Objects: Practicing Joint Attention

WHAT:

Joint attention is a social exchange, usually between a child, caregiver, and an object that interests the child. A child engages with an adult, usually by pointing to, sharing, or showing an object. Joint attention also can happen when a child is looking back and forth between an object and the caregiver, often sharing enjoyment, such as smiling, laughing, or showing and maintaining interest.

WHY:

Joint attention is an important skill that predicts language development and social outcomes. Adults can make play more beneficial for children by playing together instead of only side by side without interacting. Examples of playing together include engaging with the same toy, exchanging gestures, looks, laughs, and smiles, talking with each other, or playing a simple game

HOW:

Adults can engage children in joint attention by following these steps:

Step 1: Find an object or activity that interests the child.

Step 2: Engage the child in a game or activity using this object, making sure that both players (you and the child) are necessary to play the game. Here are some examples:

- rolling a truck back and forth
- bouncing a ball back and forth
- building a tower, taking turns adding blocks
- taking turns flipping the pages in a book

Step 3: If the child shows interest and enjoyment, keep practicing the activity. If the child appears to lose interest, transition to a favorite activity or preferred object. Keep track of all the two-player games the child seems to enjoy and practice them daily.

CONCEPT

Book Sharing



WHAT: Book sharing is not just “reading a book” to children. Rather, by sharing time together while looking at and talking about books, children and adults have fun and children learn.

WHY: Children like books. Books have fun pictures. The pictures, and the related words and events, can help children learn new words and cause-effect relationships.

HOW: Adults can engage children in book sharing by following these steps:

- Step 1:** Pick a book with pictures that are colorful. Avoid books with abstract pictures and pictures that show many small characters and objects. Those books will be too complicated and distracting for younger children.
- Step 2:** Talk about the picture on one page, then ask the child to point to the picture you name. Make it fun and interactive. You do not have to read the text on the page. Keep your language simple.
- Step 3:** Give the child a turn to say something and to turn the page.
- Step 4:** After sharing the book, be sure that toys related to the book are available for play. As you and the child play with these toys, repeat the words you used when you shared the book. This will help the child learn that the words apply to both pictures and objects.

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CONCEPT

Uncovering Learning Potential

WHAT:

All children are capable of learning. Some may need more support from their caregivers than others. To promote learning, you can get children's attention, provide clear instructions, persist in your request, and help them respond appropriately.

WHY:

Many children miss out on hundreds of learning opportunities every day because they are not paying attention to what others pay attention to. Missed learning opportunities can hold children back in their development. Over time, lack of progress may lower adult expectations. This can be prevented.

HOW:

Adults can help children reach their learning potential by following these steps:

Step 1: Expect that each and every child can learn.

Step 2: Give clear instructions. Always be sure the child understands what is expected. If your instructions are clear, the activity will result in a more positive experience. Here are a few tips:

- Get close and at the child's eye level to get her attention.
- Tell and show the instructions to the child. Using pictures or demonstrating can help.
- Use simple and clear language.

Step 3: Help the child complete the task after you have made sure the child understands your instructions. Provide as much help as needed for the child to participate, but make sure the child makes an effort, as well. Do not have the child just go through the motions.

Step 4: Give many opportunities for practice throughout the day, reducing your help as the child learns the routine. Your goal is for the child to participate with less and less help over time.

Step 5: Engage the child throughout the day in what you and others are doing. Letting children occupy themselves or wander for long periods, rather than engaging in social learning with adults and other children, deprives them of needed learning opportunities and can slow their progress.

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CONCEPT

Peer-Mediated Support: Teaching Children to Play with Each Other

WHAT: Peer-mediated support means teaching children specific social skills to help them play with friends who have social difficulties.

WHY: Social development is an important part of children's development. Research tells us that early social skills and friendships predict positive social and academic outcomes for all children. Teaching children how to initiate play with their peers encourages friendships and allows them to bond by socializing.

HOW: Adults can teach peer-mediated support to children by following these steps:

- Step 1:** Teach all children basic social skills during large group times, like circle time. Some skills may include:
- getting a peer's attention, such as tapping a friend's arm or saying the child's name
 - sharing by giving an object, such as a toy or snack, to a classmate
 - sharing by asking for an object
 - giving compliments
 - giving a play instruction
- After teaching these skills, have children practice and show you the skills.
- Step 2:** Encourage children to use these skills with each other during daily activities, including free play, outdoor play, meal time, and transitions.
- Step 3:** If a child is playing alone for a period of time, ask a peer to practice one of the social skills she has learned, such as sharing or asking the other child to play.
- Step 4:** Praise children every time you find them practicing their social skills with peers. This will call positive attention to the child and the behavior and will motivate other children to practice their social skills too.

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CONCEPT

Learning Words During Joint Attention

WHAT:

Joint attention is when a child shares an object or activity with a caregiver. A child might point to an interesting object, look back and forth between you and an object, or show interest by holding up or giving you an object. Adding words during periods of joint attention can help children pair words with objects and activities and help them learn new words.

WHY:

Adding words during joint attention can help children learn new words and stimulate their language development.

HOW:

Adults can use words during joint attention by following these steps:

- Step 1:** Follow the child's lead so that you use words about objects that the child is interested in. Following the child's lead means joining in the activity or playing with an object that interests the child. Paying attention to what the child is looking at or reaching for can give you a good idea of what interests the child.
- Step 2:** Add a playful action to extend the child's activity, like making objects move in new and interesting ways. Make sure you and the child are taking turns with the object. Combine the child's actions and your actions with words that match the action, object, or activity.
- Step 3:** Use simple and animated language when teaching new words. Try to avoid long sentences. Instead, insert short phrases about the shared object or activity. If the child continues to show interest in the shared object, repeat the words and phrases. Here are some examples:
- If a child likes playing with a toy frog and makes it jump, you can say, "Frog is jumping!"
 - When it is your turn, you can make the frog do a different action, like flying, and say, "Flying frog!"
- Step 4:** If the child does not start using the new word ("frog"), encourage its use in a different way. You can ask the child to do something with the object ("Make the frog hop!") or ask a question about the object ("Who's hopping?"). Even if the child does not say the new word right away, continue to insert words into joint attention during play and other activities.

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CONCEPT

Predictable Spaces

WHAT:

Predictable spaces are spaces in your setting that are used for the same purpose on a regular basis. For example, you may have an area for snack time and another area for circle time. Predictable spaces give children information, like “What am I doing?” and “Where am I doing it?”

WHY:

Most children like predictability. Predictable spaces provide consistency in the child’s environment and give cues about what the child is supposed to be doing.

HOW:

Adults can arrange predictable spaces by following these steps:

Step 1: Separate the caretaking environment with furniture to create clear boundaries where the same activities happen from day to day. Here are some examples:

- block area
- dramatic play area
- reading area
- eating area
- art area

Step 2: For multi-use areas, such as table tops which could be used for art, lunch, or other activities, use visual cues to tell the child what to expect. Here are some visual cues for different activities at the same table:

- A visual cue for art could be placing paint cans on the table.
- A visual cue for lunch could be a plastic table cloth, placemats, or simply placing lunch boxes on the table before inviting the children to come to lunch.



Courtesy of The Grove School of Cary

Predictable Spaces are clearly divided: dramatic play, block area/circle time space, math/sensory, table top construction

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CONCEPT

Predictable Routines

WHAT: Predictable routines answer questions for children, such as “What am I doing?” “Where am I doing it?” “How long will I do it for?” and “What will I do next?”

WHY: Young children like predictability. They need to know what is expected of them and what they can expect throughout the day. Predictable routines provide this information clearly and consistently.

HOW: Adults can develop predictable routines by following these steps:

- Step 1:** Make a list of activities that occur in the program on most days, for example, toileting or diaper changes, lunch, snack, free play, outdoor play, and circle time.
- Step 2:** Sequence these activities so that they happen in the same order most days. There may be small changes from day to day. For example, different materials may be used for art, or there may be different visitors each Wednesday, but most activities should occur in the same sequence.
- Step 3:** Warn children when there will be a transition from activity to activity. Here are a few tips you can try:
 - Use a visual or ringing timer.
 - Say, “Two more minutes, and we will clean up.”
 - Use a transition song, such as a clean-up song.
- Step 4:** Alert new staff to the importance of staying consistent with routines.



Courtesy of The Grove School of Cary

Predictable Routines: A daily schedule may be broken down into smaller predictable routines.

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CONCEPT

Distracting and Redirecting Children to Engage in Appropriate Behavior

WHAT: This concept means distracting and redirecting a child from one activity to another or away from challenging behaviors.

WHY: Sometimes distraction or redirection is all that is needed to change children's challenging behavior and make them forget about whatever was causing the behavior. When children are upset, you can show them a toy, lead them to another activity, or choose a new playmate to help focus attention away from undesirable behavior. These strategies can lead to a "reset" in behavior, for the better. This works best when the child really likes the distraction and redirection object or activity.

HOW: Adults can help redirect children to more appropriate behaviors by following these steps:

- Step 1:** Be aware of settings (time of day or activity) where children are more likely to show challenging behaviors. For example, a child may engage in more challenging behaviors during certain group activities, like snack or circle time. A child also may show more challenging behaviors at certain times of the day, such as in the morning just after arrival, or in the afternoon before going home. During these times, stay close to the child so that you can step in immediately, if needed.
- Step 2:** Make a list of the child's favorite activities and objects. Have pictures of these objects or activities or the actual objects or activities together in one place.
- Step 3:** During each activity or interaction, state clear expectations, such as, "Lilly, we use nice hands."
- Step 4:** If distraction or redirection is needed, show the desired object or activity or its picture.
- Step 5:** Verbally guide the child toward the new object or activity. "Lilly, look! Let's give your favorite doll a bath!" If needed, hold the child's hand as you transition to the new activity.
- Step 6:** Praise the child for transitioning and support the child in playing with the new object or activity.

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CONCEPT

Narration

WHAT:

Narrate daily routines with children. Don't just do it; talk them through it.

WHY:

Routine times are the perfect opportunity to incorporate more language into a child's life. Caregivers dress children every day. They feed them. They play with them. You're going to be doing these activities anyway, so why not use your words to build a child's brain along the way!

HOW:

Use daily activities to surround children with rich language by following these steps:

- Step 1:** Talk about what you're doing, as you're doing it. Be as descriptive as possible, including different action words, to grow your child's vocabulary. For example: "Let's eat some yummy watermelon for a snack. I'm slicing the round watermelon in half. The watermelon is smooth and green on the outside but it's juicy and red on the inside."
- Step 2:** Don't forget about math! Shapes are everywhere and there's always something you can count. Use words like *big/small*, *tall/short*, *under/over*, *more/less* to begin laying your child's foundation for learning math. For example: "This slice of watermelon is a circle. If I keep cutting, I can make triangles. Look at the little black seeds that are inside the big watermelon. I think this piece has more seeds than the other piece. Let's count them."
- Step 3:** Use child-directed speech with a higher-pitched, exaggerated quality when communicating with young children—to both engage a child in the activity and encourage him to respond.
- Step 4:** It's never too early to have a conversation with a baby. Diaper changes, baths, and tummy time are great opportunities to narrate. Every gurgle, coo, and laugh is a baby's way of participating. It's your job to respond by putting words to what you think the baby is communicating and adding more.
- Step 5:** Take narrating a step further by talking about the past/future and thoughts/feelings. For example: "This watermelon is delicious! Remember when we had watermelon at our picnic last week? It was so hot outside but the watermelon was cold and juicy. The juice rolled down your chin and made your hands sticky." Thinking and talking about events beyond the "here and now" helps build a strong pre-literacy foundation for a child because it requires him to respond using more complex language.

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CONCEPT

Moving and Exploring



WHAT: Moving and exploring is allowing children to crawl or walk around a safe space and explore objects or activities of their choice.

WHY: Children learn by exploring their environment and moving the objects in it. Children's actions as they move and explore create opportunities for learning and practicing motor skills.

HOW: Adults can engage children in moving and exploring by following these steps:

- Step 1:** Set the stage. Provide a safe space in which a young child can be on the floor and move freely. Place a few interesting toys or objects around the space in order to encourage exploration. During these times, stay close to the child so that you can step in immediately, if needed.
- Step 2:** Follow the child's lead. As the child moves around, approaches, and makes contact with the toys, follow and talk about the child's actions.
- Step 3:** Talk about the toy and label it, as the child holds, looks at, and plays with the toy. For example, if the child crawls over to a rattle and picks it up, you can say: "That's a rattle! Wow, listen to the sound it makes when you shake it!"
- Step 4:** When the child begins to lose interest, show different ways to play with the toy. Talk about what you are doing and what the toy is doing. Then give the child a turn to play with the toy. For example, you can say: "Let's tap the rattle on the floor. The tap makes a cool sound! You try tapping!"

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CONCEPT

Following the Child's Lead in Play

WHAT: Following the child's lead in play means actively engaging the child in activities and with objects that he or she chooses and/or prefers.

WHY: Children are like little scientists. They learn by exploring their environment. This exploration helps them form ideas about how the world works, which they can then test through active play. To promote this type of active learning, it's important that children have the opportunity to do activities that they are interested in, while an adult follows their lead and acts as a facilitator.

HOW: Adults can follow the child's lead in play by following these steps:

- Step 1:** Spend time each day following the child's lead in play. Provide an environment that has plenty of toys and constructive materials, such as blocks, markers, and clay. You follow the child's lead by allowing the child to choose an activity and engaging in it together.
- Step 2:** Observe the child closely, simply narrating what the child is doing, such as, "I see you are drawing a person."
- Step 3:** Imitate and elaborate. Join in the child's activity by imitating. For example, you can say, "I think I will draw a person too." Make simple elaborations of the child's play, such as, "Mine's a boy, and yours is a girl." Allow the play to progress by following and expanding on the child's play.
- Step 4:** Help and have fun! If the child is frustrated or needs help, provide assistance so the child can continue to pursue her interests but do not take the lead away from the child. Express your enjoyment and have fun!

Geraldine Dawson, Ph.D., Director, Duke University Center for Autism Diagnosis and Treatment

CONCEPT

Appreciations

WHAT:

Appreciations is a positive exchange that begins with offering a genuine compliment and in turn, reciprocating with a “thank you.” This tip is most appropriate for preschoolers and older children.

WHY:

Teaching children to express and receive words of appreciation fosters social awareness and relationship skills.

HOW:

Adults can help children express and receive words of appreciation by following these steps:

- Step 1:** Talk about how appreciating means being thankful for what someone else has done or said. Brainstorm words and phrases that show appreciation and things the child might appreciate in a peer. Talk also about how to accept appreciations with a sincere “thank you.”
- Step 2:** Show the group what it looks like to verbally appreciate someone by modeling with another adult or with a child. Focus on appreciations of effort, accomplishment, or social skills. For example, you can say, “I appreciate that you put those books away” or “I appreciate when you share the building blocks with me.” Avoid references to physical traits.
- Step 3:** Place children in pairs and ask them to think of something they really appreciate about the other person. Have the pairs take turns giving and receiving an appreciation in a kind manner. Ask children to share some of their appreciations and tell what it felt like to receive an appreciation from a peer. Ask how it felt to be kindly thanked for the appreciation they offered.
- Step 4:** Ask children to offer appreciations at various points in the day, such as, after they work together on a project, share a toy, or play together on the playground. These regular reminders will likely lead children to show appreciations on their own.

CONCEPT

Asking Thinking Questions



WHAT: Thinking questions are questions that cause children to think and talk about what they are thinking. With opportunities to practice, children can think and learn to express the how/why of what they did, know, or feel.

WHY: Asking thinking questions helps children think about their own thinking and practice how to explain it to others.

HOW: Adults can ask three broad types of thinking questions:

Doing questions: Ask how/why the child *did* something.

- If a child is pretending to cook, ask what the child is cooking and how he did it.
- If the child puts blocks in a pile, ask why he chose those blocks or put them in a certain arrangement.

Knowing questions: Ask how/why the child *knows* something.

- If the child says that he knows that there are lots of blocks in the corner, ask him to explain how he knows that there are lots of blocks and not a few blocks.
- If a child says that this is a small bear and that is a big one, ask how he knows that one is bigger than the other.

Feeling questions: Ask how/why the child *feels* something.

- If a child appears upset with another child, ask how the other child makes him feel.
- If a child says that he is excited, ask why.

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