Making Center Time A Pleasant Experience

As a teacher of three and four year old children, one of the most frustrating times of the day for me, is “center time.” I assign children to go into a specific center. Children stay in the center for 10-15 minutes until I tell them to rotate to another center. It seems as though I never get to interact with the children during this time. I am constantly telling them to return to their assigned center or I am calming them down for being aggressive with other children and the materials in the center. Any suggestions for making center time more manageable and a more pleasant experience for everyone?

Center time is a very important part of the day for children in early childhood programs. In fact, it is so important that a significant portion of your daily schedule should be dedicated to it. According to Harms, Clifford & Cryer, authors of The Early Childhood Environment Rating Scale, a significant portion of the day is defined as a third of the total hours your program operates. For example, if your program operates 11 hours, children should have “center time” for a total of three hours and 40 minutes during the day.

Children learn important concepts about their world when they have the opportunity to freely explore materials. For “center time” to be valuable, teachers need to understand that children need many opportunities to:

Make choices
Allow children to choose where they would like to play, what materials they would like to use, and with whom they would like to play.

Explore ideas that interest them
Children build their knowledge through exploration of materials that are interesting and relevant to them. Many times a teacher chooses what topic children will explore. However, if this topic is not interesting or relevant to a child, he/she will find ways to disrupt or ignore the planned activities. It is the responsibility of the teacher to observe the children and see what common topics they use throughout play. Then teachers can utilize those observations to plan activities which the children find interesting and are more eager to participate.
Investigate materials for a longer time
Children need longer periods of time to process thoughts, understand concepts, and build on ideas. When a teacher stops a child’s play and has him/her move to another area, this interrupts the child’s thought process and impedes learning.

Especially during center time, many teachers make the following inaccurate assumptions:

If I let children choose where they want to play, I will lose control over the classroom
When children are allowed to choose their activity they are less likely to be involved in disruptive behavior because they are engaged in an activity they find intriguing. Children become disruptive and aggressive when we make them participate in activities that are not of interest to them or even relevant to their life. If children were allowed to move around the room more freely, the teacher would be able to spend more of her time engaged in positive conversations with individual children.

All the children have to experience all the centers in a classroom everyday in order for them to learn.

We allow children to play with various materials in order for them to learn about the world around them. Through play, children learn concepts related to math, science and language and literacy. They develop social skills by playing in small groups and utilize large and small muscles. A child who chooses to play in the block area everyday can still accomplish all of the above goals.

Children do not have to be in the dramatic play area or housekeeping area in order for them to develop social skills or role play various family roles. They do not have to use manipulatives to learn math concepts. They do not have to be in the reading area in order to experience language and literacy concepts. It is the responsibility of the teacher to be a facilitator of learning. As teachers, we can set up the learning environment so that children can create their own learning and develop the necessary skills for them to be successful when they enter school.

If you have a child who chooses the dramatic play area everyday and you want to encourage her to explore another part of the classroom, utilize her interest in dressing up and the baby dolls.

As the teacher, you could move some of the dress up clothes and baby dolls into the block area and allow her to utilize the materials in different ways. The child may choose to use these materials to dress up as a construction worker. She can use the blocks to build a house for her doll or a bed. She could choose to make a sign to put on the building or draw a map of how to get to her pretend house.

By moving a few items out of their “usual” center and into the block area, you’ve created the opportunity for this child to use the same materials in another area of the classroom without forcing her to leave her materials and pursue a completely different activity. Through her play, she is developing skills in math, language, literacy, and science. She is developing social skills and utilizing large and small muscles.

Another way to help this child may be to bring materials into the center she always chooses. Using the same example above, the child that chooses the dramatic play area everyday, you may choose to bring some art materials or blocks into the dramatic play area and see how this child incorporates the materials into her play.

As a teacher, you will be more effective and can create a more positive learning environment when you ask yourself, “What materials can I provide this child to help him/her explore and learn new skills,” instead of “What am I going to do to keep this child in his/her assigned area until I tell him/her to move?”

Center time does not have to be a time of high anxiety or frustration. Teachers should use it as an opportunity to facilitate a positive, supportive learning environment in which children feel free to explore and grow.

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