

Why Use Hands-On Materials Rather Than Workbooks?

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“Whatever their particular gifts or talents, all young children need a broadly based program designed to nurture their physical, social, and intellectual development.” *

At the Seabury School Early Learning Center, we focus on the “best of the best” philosophies to facilitate the physical, cognitive, social and emotional growth of each child. We incorporate the educational approaches of Montessori, Waldorf and Reggio Emilia, which all promote the development of the whole child. Each of these philosophies respects the special periods of development unfolding in the lives of young children and recognizes that their intense learning is concentrated in process, not oriented to proffering a product. These well proven, developmentally appropriate educational styles are synchronous with the work of developmental psychologist Jean Piaget and those who further his studies.

Research shows that young children are in a unique time of brain development, in which cognitive learning is based on the concrete nature of sensory experience. Young children learn not just through seeing and listening, but by touching, exploring, manipulating, experimenting, problem solving, and collaborating with others while discussing and verbalizing discoveries. They are motivated by innate curiosity and guided toward ever more complex levels of inquiry, innovation and learning. Thus, the same material may be explored by a 3 year old in a simple, concrete manner, and used by a 5 year old ready for a greater level of skill or abstraction. Scaffolding the learning process means that we may return to a concept or material many times, each time building upon what has come before, and emphasizing a new or different angle. The learning process spirals into increasing complexity.

Hands-on materials are essential as they suit the young child’s brain development and inborn quest for knowledge. We choose quality manipulatives and creative activities, as there are so many ways that they can be utilized at various stages of development. They provide opportunities for children with a variety of learning styles to access information with rich sensory input. Hands-on materials can be used again and again until a concept is mastered. We see the very real benefits of having the freedom and encouragement to repeat one’s experimentation, with the support, social interaction and partnering of peers and teachers. We believe that learning by doing is the most direct and desirable way for the young child to excel. This means exploring qualities and concepts in a three dimensional manner, using the senses to compare and contrast similarities and differences, while integrating the body and brain in the ordering of impressions. Thus, through absorbing sensory information that nourishes knowledge, brain development is enriched, enhancing the child’s life-long potential.

Contrast this type of experience for the young child with classes that promote “kindergarten readiness” through individual workbook activity. The page is a flat, one-dimensional medium and does not provide the multi-faceted textures of sensory experience for the developing brain. A child’s lines in a workbook are either “right” or “wrong” and there is no opportunity to physically manipulate, to compare, contrast, repeat and self-correct as part of the learning process. Because workbook time is an

individual activity, the social process of discussion, problem solving, and collaboration are minimized or even discouraged. Holding a pencil correctly and having the coordination to move it across the page may be an unwieldy or even a tearful experience. In the hands-on classroom, there are many alternative ways to develop the pincer muscle strength and control needed for writing ---activities that utilize scoops, tongs, linked chopsticks, tweezers, play dough, paintbrushes, crayons, chalk and markers. The use of these implements develops the same fine motor skills and eye-hand coordination in preparation for writing, without the frustration of penciled "mistakes." All the pages of a Pre-K and K workbook can be more dynamically taught and learned using hands-on materials, whether the topic is math, language, reading readiness, or problem solving. One of the greatest advantages for children involved in the experiential learning process is that a concept can be revisited until it is mastered, instead of immediately turning the page to a more difficult challenge for which they may not yet be ready. The confidence and positive self-image of the child is reinforced by an attitude of "I can do it!" Experiential learning also allows for greater opportunities to explore complex ideas, abstract concepts, and develop greater depth of knowledge. These are important aspects of education for highly capable children.

At the Seabury School Early Learning Center, we recognize that we serve children who have areas in which they are typically developing and other areas in which they may be demonstrating advanced development. No matter the pace of a young child's learning, there are lifelong benefits to respecting and following their natural stages of development. In offering young children the time and rich experiential environment to progress according to their own learning styles and development, we invite and welcome their personal maturation and growth in reasoning, judgement and action. In so doing, we celebrate each child's successes and guide them confidently to greater challenges.

"The mission of the... preschool is to provide an optimal match between the needs of the population it serves and a responsive early childhood program. When this match is created, each child not only grows intellectually, emotionally, socially and physically, but also develops a love of learning and positive attitudes toward school...The goals of the preschool (*designed for intellectually precocious children*) encompass the nurturance of the whole child. This is not an 'academic hothouse.' Rather, the developmentally appropriate child-centered curriculum is designed to nurture the unique potential of each child." **

**In W.C. Roedell, N.E. Jackson, & H.B. Robinson (Eds.) Gifted Young Children. New York: Teachers College Press*

***Wright, L. & Coulianos, C., Gifted Child Today, Prufrock Press September/October 1991 vol. 14, No.5 (Parentheses and italics in the quote are added for clarity by Judith Nielsen)*