

CORE SKILL: THINK

Active Exploration



What You Need to Know

Young children are interested in everything, everywhere! They're curious by design. They're fascinated by how things work, what they look like on the outside (and the inside!), how things are made, and what they can do. Children learn by exploring – watching, listening, smelling, touching, mouthing/tasting, reaching, grasping, letting go, moving, and making things happen. Young children need lots of opportunities to carefully consider everyday objects, instruments, and events on their own *and* in their own way. This helps children develop autonomy and feel confident in their own abilities to figure things out.

Things to Consider

When exploring, toddlers need to take it all in – sometimes literally! While safety is important, be sure that your environment is not too restrictive. For example, it is normal for young toddlers to use their mouths to explore objects. While making sure that objects are not choking hazards, allow children to explore with their mouths (unless it *really* not okay). Similarly, things might get messy – and that's okay too! Trying things out in new and unexpected ways is important. We don't want children to miss opportunities to learn because of our own discomfort with messes or new experiences.

Some children may be very interested or uninterested in objects or experiences because of sensory sensitivity and preference. Allow opportunities for them to explore from a distance, with modifications (e.g., headphones, dim lights, batteries out of toy), or with a peer model.

Development of Exploration Skills

Between 9 and 18 months, children may:	Between 16 and 36 months, children may:
Approach new events, experiences with others, or materials with interest and curiosity.	Participate in new experiences, ask questions, and experiment with new things or materials.
Find new things to do with familiar, everyday objects.	Combine objects or materials in new and unexpected ways. Show delight in creating something new.
	Use imagination to explore possible uses of objects and materials.

Setting the Stage

Activities and materials that support active exploration:

- ◆ Nature/outside is the perfect environment for exploration and discovery!
- ◆ New and/or interesting materials. Rotate through or introduce new materials that spark interest (e.g., sensory bottles, sticks, animals/insects, play-dough, or water).
- ◆ Hands-on materials and activities. Get children physically involved and messy.



Intentional Teaching Practices to Encourage Active Exploration

OBSERVE	OBSERVE Carefully observe how children explore the world around them. Do they jump right in? Does everything go in their mouth? Do they sit back and take things in at their own pace? Do some children need a little nudge to go and inspect something new? What sparks their interest? Look for signs of children “asking questions.” They do this when they stare a little longer, point, or get closer to something.
FOCUS	Narrate Curiosity and Exploration Focus children's attention by explicitly narrating curiosity and exploration: <ul style="list-style-type: none">◆ Your own: “I wonder what will happen?” or, “I’m going to push it to find out!”◆ Children’s: “I see (Child) looking at the bird. They’re moving closer to get a better look!”
SCAFFOLD I	Use Comments and Questions to Promote Exploration Prompt exploration. Rather than telling children what something does, how it works, or what it can do, encourage <i>them</i> to find out on their own. <ul style="list-style-type: none">◆ “Let’s see...”, “You try!” or, “What happens if you turn it over?” When children ask questions or look inquisitive, notice and encourage this exploration. <ul style="list-style-type: none">◆ “Oh, I see you are looking at the pinecone here; do you want to touch it? How does it feel when you run it against your hand?” Some children may need additional prompting to actively explore new items or experiences. Join in their exploration and model your own curiosity while using comments and questions to narrate.
SCAFFOLD II	Promote Child Autonomy Focus on allowing time for children to explore and arrive at their <i>own</i> conclusions. Don’t rush them. Even though a few seconds may feel like an eternity, or it may seem that children aren’t ‘getting it,’ let things unfold and see where they go. Young children need time to puzzle, wonder, and try.
KEEP IT GOING	Consider what you learned from observing children as well as their reaction to your Focus and Scaffolds. Find ways to build the activities in the Setting the Stage into your regular routines.