

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, collaborating, listening, smelling, touching, tasting, building, taking things apart, observing, comparing, moving, and making things happen. Children need plenty of opportunities to carefully consider everyday objects, instruments, and events on their own *and* in their own way. This helps children learn autonomy and feel confident in their own abilities to figure things out and seek new information.

Things to Consider

When exploring, children need the freedom to follow their interest and really “dig in.” While safety is important, be sure that your environment is not *too* restrictive. For example, let children climb, balance, dig, push and pull, or crawl even if it means they skin a knee in the process. Expect and accept that things may get messy! Trying things out in different 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 for exploring toys or materials in the ways they were intended be used (e.g., pair a child who explores a toy car orally with a peer who is pushing the car down a ramp to see how fast the wheels can spin).

Development of Exploration Skills

Between 36 and 48 months, children may:	Between 48 and 60 months, children may:
Regularly show initiative.	Frequently show initiative.
Seek out new information with adult support.	Demonstrate an eagerness to learn about and discuss a range of topics, ideas, and activities.
Explore new play and tasks with adult support.	Make increasingly complex observations of objects, materials, organisms, and events.
Use the five senses to observe objects, materials, organisms, and events.	Explore new play and tasks both independently and with adult support.

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 or introduce new materials that challenge children and spark their interest (e.g., live animals or insects, play-dough, water, new blocks or building materials, increasingly difficult puzzles).
- ◆ Experiments: Set up true scientific experiments for children to explore, observe, and discover (e.g., worms in 4 bottles all with different environments/conditions).
- ◆ 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? Do they sit back and take things in at their own pace? Are there some materials/experiences that children avoid or are afraid of? Do some children need a little nudge to go and inspect something new? What sparks their interest? What kind of questions do they ask? Do they follow up with more questions or exploration, or do they lose interest?
FOCUS	Narrate Curiosity and Exploration Focus children's attention by explicitly narrating curiosity and exploration: <ul style="list-style-type: none">◆ "I wonder what will happen if I put water on this?"◆ "(Child) and (Child) are watching and following an ant to see where it lives."◆ "You're watching the wheel on that truck spin around and around. It can go fast and slow. I wonder if the wheels on this little car will spin faster or slower?"
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 them to <i>find out</i> on their own. <ul style="list-style-type: none">◆ "You're wondering if this will roll. Let's see what happens."◆ "Hmmm, you want to know what squirrels eat. How can we find that out?"
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 the children aren't 'getting' it, let things unfold and see where things go. 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.