

Coaching Children to Support Learning

OUR NEIGHBORHOOD CHILD DEVELOPMENT CENTER

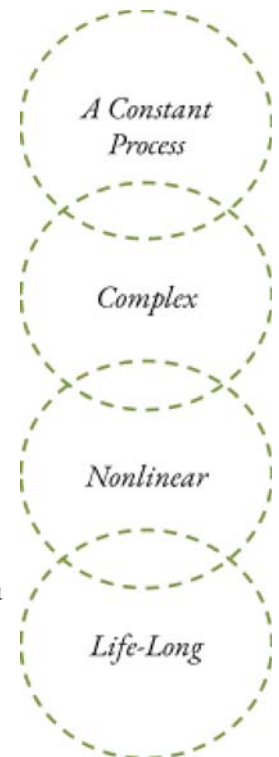


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Young children are learning rapidly, their brains are wired for learning. Brain research has shown that children's development will proceed on a predictable course without adult intervention. Research shows that adults can interfere with or enhance that growth based on their offerings and responses to children. Most caregivers want to support children's learning, but in an ever-changing world, there are a lot of questions adults need to consider as they approach how to coach children's learning.

What is Learning?

Real learning is more than memorizing facts. Sometimes, we struggle to articulate and measure real learning, but we know what it feels like. Think of a time you made a new connection, you discovered something new, or a project you were working on came together. Maybe you made a mistake and realized something in the process. Learning happens every day all around us. Learning includes not just what you learn, but what you are improving. The first time you played baseball, you learned a lot of new rules, techniques, social customs, and muscle movements, but with practice you learned more about the game, improved your skills, and discovered your role. All of that is learning. Sadly, our current education system has minimized learning to the tangible and measurable. Our Neighborhood rejects the idea that things that can be measured have more value than things that cannot be measured. We work with the goal of learning, not just completing a task, mastering a subject, or memorizing information, but genuine learning that you do not measure, but deeply feel.



What Should Children Learn?

There are widely debated thoughts on what children should be learning. The content of what schools teach was largely developed for the industrial age and though it has been adapted, a cohesive philosophy around what we teach children is rare. Some people taut that the basic 3Rs is what children need: reading, writing, and arithmetic. Others use the newly coined STEM, STEAM, or STREAM (Science, Technology, Engineering, Math, and later adding the Arts, and Reading). Still others advocate for soft skills or life skills. Ultimately, Our Neighborhood recognizes that we cannot possibly teach our children everything they need to learn in their lifetime. The future they will live in is going to look massively different than our current world. What we can teach children is how to be learners. Our goal is to teach children to think, problem solve, seek information, and know themselves well enough to understand their values, drives, and learning style. Children should, in our opinion, learn how to be very good at learning.

We cannot teach children everything they need to know. We can teach them how to be lifelong learners.

How Does Learning Happen?

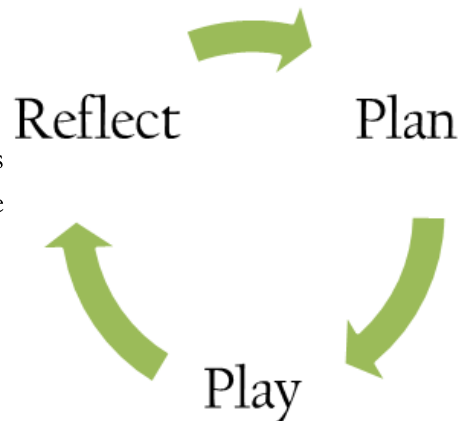
Once we have thought about learning in a new way, we can tackle the fundamental question, "How does learning happen?" Reflect on a time deep learning happened for you:

- When was the last time you would say you learned a lot? What was happening?
- What learnings have you most deeply remembered and integrated into your life?
- How do you believe learning happens?

Social Constructivist Theory

Our Neighborhood believes in social constructivism, simply that children learn best in the context of secure social relationships, and they construct knowledge through play. We believe that learning happens when children are engaged with others in play. While this seems fairly simple, this is a rather new view of how learning happens. Our Neighborhood rejects the old model of teachers being the all-knowing givers of information, and sees children as the drivers of their own learning. Children drive their play, engaging with others, both peers and adults, and revise their theories through engagement with new ideas and information.

We believe in a model of learning that places children, the learner, in the center of the cycle, and sees learning in each part of the process. It is through play that new knowledge is constructed, integrated, and remembered. If play is poorly planned, it is unlikely to result in deep learning. After play, making time for reflection, looking back, exploring images, video, thoughts, and feelings from the experience. It is in reflection that learning is integrated with other ideas and challenged. This reflection drives the planning of deeper and increasingly more complex play, through which more knowledge is constructed. In planning, we gather hypotheses, questions, and resources. After planning, we return again to play.



What is the Role of Adults in Children’s Learning?

In this new model, caregivers are no longer experts that give knowledge, but they still have a number of essential roles they can play to enhance children’s learning and provide deeper support. Adults have a lot of power even in a social constructivist learning environment to shape children’s experiences. As children get older, they will hold more of the learning process, but in early childhood, adults drive much of the plan and reflect steps.

Plan for Learning

Adults support learning largely by creating a plan for children to have intentional experiences. Adults choose the environment, materials, and group structure that holds space for high quality experiences. There are also crucial background elements that provide for children’s basic needs. When children’s needs aren’t met, learning doesn’t happen. Creating a functional schedule and routines is essential to children’s learning.

- Design Environments
- Offer Materials
- Structure Groups for Learning
- Create Schedule and Routines
- Provide for Children’s Basic Needs

Join With and Coach Play in the Learning Process

In the moment, you can enhance or interfere with children’s play. There is a process for a reflective adult to step in and step back based on what they’re observing and their goals. Your role ultimately is to un-intrusively help children go just a little bit deeper in their learning.

- **Be careful not to interfere, direct, or take over.** - Research has shown when adults get too involved in children’s play, children disengage and follow the adult instead of thinking and going deeper in their learning.
- **Instruct and draw boundaries when necessary.** - In light of that research, adults sometimes back off too much. We must draw boundaries and instruct children to be able to keep them safe and facilitate deeper learning process, especially around children’s use of tools or materials. Ex: “Markers are for paper.” or “This is the drill bit, it moves very fast and is sharp, keep your hands clear.” or “Babies like gentle touches like this.”

- **Observe.** - Depending on what children are learning, sometimes they just need you to observe as a secure base. Simply your presence might provide children with the security and confidence they need to engage deeply. This is commonly seen when young children look back to you for reassurance or older children say, “Look at me.”. Children aren’t necessarily needing anything except presence to dive in to their process.
- **Sportscast.** - Sometimes children need more than just our presence and we reflect back what we see and notice. The goal of sportscasting is to increase conscious awareness of what’s already happening. For young children experiencing some frustration, this can be just what they need to stay engaged. Ex: “You’re putting the marker on the paper but that part isn’t making any color.” or “He is pulling the string too.”
- **Ask open ended questions.** - The goal of an open ended question is to invite children’s deeper thinking and ideas out. Open ended questions are questions without a right or wrong answer. Be mindful, this strategy can be really overused especially with young children who are not very verbal. Ex: “Tell me about what you’re making.” or “How do you think that happened?” or “What do you think the baby is thinking now?”
- **Provoke new ideas.** - To help children make new connections or go a little deeper, adults can offer their own reflections and possibilities. This can also be overused and intrusive, but if intentional, it can be quite powerful. The goal is that the adult offers the idea to children, not insists on their idea. Ex: “I noticed a lot of friends building towers with blocks, do you think we could build towers with this clay?” or “I wonder if..”
- **Act as a play partner.** - Playing alongside children is another way to model and provoke new ideas. We think of this mostly as a parallel player, not actively shaping the play but subtly modeling. Ex: Rolling clay into long piece when most children are making balls. Or Drawing a picture of a tower that a child built.
- **Offer least possible help.** - When children need our physical help to move a little deeper in the play we offer just enough to get them to the next thing. If we don’t help then, children may not get to that next step or worse, they may feel like they can’t rely on others for help. If we over help then we rob children of a learning moment. It can be a fine line to offer just enough help. Ex: Helping children start a game hide and seek then backing out of the game. Or. Using our hands over their hands to hear the click of a marker closing.

Promote Reflection

To keep the play moving deeper, part of our role is to promote reflection on and learning from play. Like planning, in the early years this role is largely in the hands of the adults. Reflection is a crucial part of the learning process and eventually the goal is that children will engage in their own reflections to deepen their process. Ultimately, our goal is that children will know what they enjoy and why. We want to

help children see their unique strengths, struggles, personality, motivation, and approaches to learning. Adults can create regular structures that promote reflection and make reflection a part of everyday conversations. Our language also shapes children’s experience; language that invites reflection avoids judgment, labels, and evaluation.

- Promote Everyday Reflection
- Retell Stories
- Have a Family Meeting
- Make Children’s Learning Visible
- Offer Regular Feedback

Coaches invite players to evaluate what was working or not working from the last game. They show videos of the game to reflect on and videos of the opponent’s game to learn from. Giving players opportunities to get regular feedback from experiences and dialogue improves practice. A reflective family meeting structure would include time for gratitude or celebration in addition to problem solving. Simple tools like the Rose and Thorn of the Day invite children to build their reflective practice.

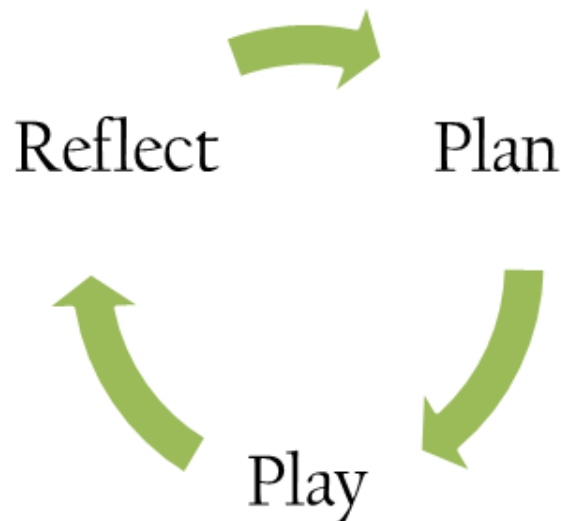
Adult's Role in Reflective Learning

Create Reflective Structures

How can I support children to see this learning in a new way and think deeper about themselves, their process, and this topic?

Create Intentional Experiences

- ★ What experience might drive children's learning deeper?
- ★ How can I make this a great learning experience?



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🎙️ Sportscast.

❓ Ask open ended questions.

🗨️ Instruct and draw boundaries when necessary.

💡 Provoke new ideas.

▶ Act as a play partner.

🤝 Offer least possible help.