

DEVELOPMENTALLY APPROPRIATE PRACTICES IN COOP PRESCHOOL

Pressures in American society placed on our children to be perfect, and to perform at an above-average level, are great. Many of us regularly question if we are giving our child “enough” in terms of academics, even as early as the preschool years. Nobody wants to miss an opportunity to help his or her child succeed. However, this recent “push for perfect” often overlooks what is developmentally appropriate for children.

A recent study showed that parental academic expectations had a positive, but short-lived effect on children. In other words, higher parental expectations were indeed linked to an increase in academic skills in preschool children; however, by kindergarten the other children had already caught up. Unfortunately, it was also discovered that this push for academics, and the high expectations of parents, came with a price: the children pushed to perform academically were less creative, showed more anxiety when performing tasks, and tended to think less positively about school (Rathus, Spencer A., *Voyages-Childhood and Adolescence*. Pp. 337).

The co-op preschool recognizes the disservice of pushing children to learn before they are developmentally ready (or in inappropriate ways). Many of the co-op preschool practices are based on the theories of child-development specialist Jean Piaget. He discovered while observing his own children at play that young children actively construct their own understanding of concepts and “operations” (such as numbers, classification, logical reasoning and cause and effect). He concluded that in order to fully understand these concepts children needed to act on objects, interact with people, and think and reflect on their experiences. He demonstrated that learning is most successful when children are given tasks to perform that are highly relevant to their experiences.

When we watch our children have fun in the co-op preschool, it is easy to forget that they are exploring and learning at the same time. Much of what is vital and essential about play is invisible to the eye of the casual observer. With the right perspective and understanding of child development, one can begin to see the deep thought that accompanies play and begin to celebrate the process! It is the co-op’s goal to promote and encourage the type of discovery and learning that comes through a child’s natural inclination. In general, making children sit for a long period of time is detrimental to how children learn. By providing many different areas for the children to explore, the preschool is supporting a child’s characteristic mode of learning through activity and experiences.

Below are the different areas and activities you will find in the preschool, and the type of learning that is happening in each area, as well as ways that you, as the parent/teacher, can increase this learning.

Playdough Area: This area, while great fun for children and adults alike, is actually building fine-motor skills. Encouraging children to cut the playdough with scissors, use the rollers, and push in cookie cutters all help children build dexterity. As an adult, it is hard not to build your own creations; however, we encourage you to instead comment on what the children are doing. This helps them to increase their language skills. Factual comments like, “You cut all that playdough into tiny pieces”, or “I see you have rolled out your playdough into one long roll. Tell me about that” encourages the child to verbalize about what they are doing. The more they interact with others, the more they learn. Playing with playdough also helps build skills for distinguishing shapes against a background, an emerging reading skill (it’s not always about letters!). This area can help children develop the scientific concept that substances remain the same, even when the shape changes. You can demonstrate this by showing children how the same ball of playdough can be a heart shape first and then a square shape next.

Art Area/Self-select area: Like playdough, the art area encourages fine-motor skills. All of these activities prepare your child for the demands of handwriting later. Fine-motor skills tend to develop slowly during this age, but by providing many opportunities to practice, and appropriate adult support, children can develop great proficiency. Pushing a child too early into fine-motor development can cause great frustration and is usually unsuccessful. Children are also learning math skills as they observe the relationship between space and size, as well as the concepts of symmetry, balance, and design. As an adult in this area, you can offer factual comments on the art that is being produced, as well as gently encourage new skills. Comment on the colors used, brush strokes, or ask them to tell you about their painting. When a child asks you for help in writing their name, or cutting something,

ask them to show you what they can do first...then offer help. Of course, if they are not interested yet in writing anything, that is ok. You can do it for them, perhaps slowly describing what you are doing, or spelling their name aloud as you write. This helps build language. This is also the age when children want to start labeling their paintings (you can help them write the title of the painting, or what each individual figure is). Sometimes their paintings elicit long, elaborate stories. Be ready for anything!

A bit about language: One of the best ways to build a child's vocabulary is to talk to them! At the preschool, we provide many opportunities for the children to interact with adults and other children. As an adult in the classroom, one of your most important jobs is to carefully listen to the children, make factual comments to them, and offer well-placed expansions of their sentences to enhance the meaning. For example, if a child says, "Look at my car go", you can repeat back, "You put that ramp up higher, and it made your car go faster".

The teacher will also be working to increase your child's vocabulary by integrating new words and concepts into what the class is studying that week/month. Children learn much better in context. You can help by engaging your child at home with conversation about what they are studying at school!

Blocks: While this is a great area for fine-motor skills (stacking, building) and gross-motor skills (crawling and moving carefully around friends), this is also an area that promotes language. Children develop language skills as they learn to negotiate and describe what they are doing (they love letting us know the symbolic nature of the block they are using!). Blocks also build imagination. While most store-bought toys perform only one task, blocks can be anything at any time! As an adult in this area, your job is to encourage language as well as share your own imagination! Help the children talk to each other; have one explain to the other what they are building. Help them to negotiate problems and how to work together. Help them think of probability; "If we try to build the bridge with those thin blocks, what do you think will happen?"

Dramatic Play: For many preschool aged children (especially 3-5), this area, and dramatic play in general, holds great appeal! Believe it or not, this area helps strengthen children's memory, language, logical reasoning, imagination, and creativity. That is a lot to pack into "Let's play post office"! This area is also vitally important in the development of peer relations. Children in the dramatic play area learn to regulate emotions, negotiate, resolve conflicts, communicate their needs and feelings, enter play situations with others, and increase language skills. They get to freely try on different adult roles and make decisions. They are forming abstract thought and applying symbolism through improvisation. As an adult in this area, you can play with the children (although many of us have forgotten how to play pretend!), or sit back and enjoy the dialogue...just stay close enough to help with any negotiation or problem solving opportunities. The children are still developing these skills.

Science/Puzzles: This area promotes the skill of predicting outcomes, and other math skills. As children watch the colored water as it tries to mix with the oil, they are drawing conclusions. When they look at the log under the microscope, they are forming questions. Your role in this area is to ask questions and promote further reflection. When a child is working on a puzzle and is stuck on a piece, you can say, "I wonder what would happen if you turned it this way?" When a child is looking at the log, ask them what they see. Question them as to why the colored water might not mix with the oil. In this area, it is good to provide just enough structuring and support of the task to bring it within the child's reach. Try not to do the puzzle for them, instead, help them turn the piece that does not fit and let them push the piece in place. This is also a good area for factual commenting. In addition, comments like, "You worked hard to finish that puzzle. I like how you really stuck with it" help to build confidence and self-pride.

Sensory Table: Many scientific discoveries happen at this table: the concept of sinking and floating, concepts of empty and full, volume and weight, as well as the tactile experience of different materials. As an adult in this area, you can help the children see how the contents of one container can fill up the other, even though they are shaped differently. You can address the speed of different materials as they pour through the wheels. You can also talk about texture and weight.

Outside Play: This area helps to develop gross motor skills. Climbing, running, jumping and digging helps promote confidence and competence in this area. As a parent in this area, it is important to remember that skills are still developing and perceptual judgment is still immature. The adult role is to help as much as needed, but to be aware when children want to try something on their own. Phrases like, "I see you can climb this by yourself! I will be here if you need me" are helpful.

Story time: Here children are working on sitting still and listening...a difficult task for many three and four-year-olds. They are also being encouraged to share their ideas and learn the value of their words. They are building vocabulary as well as learning patience while others are speaking. Children are usually anxious to share; as an adult in this area, you can help children to be respectful and wait their turn. Sometimes saying, "Why don't you tell me in my ear, and I will help you remember to tell the class when it is your turn" can help an anxious child who is desperately wanting to share.

Snack: Pouring water and using tongs all help to develop fine motor skills in children. They are also learning friendly behavior by passing food when it is requested by others, and self-control when they only put one item at a time on their plate. They are also learning conversational skills. As an adult during snack time, your job is to listen! You can also encourage discussion by asking questions during this time. This is a great place to share culture as you talk about food, as well as increase a child's vocabulary.

Field Trips: Learning is always happening, even when the children leave the preschool! What might look like just a fun day at the Post Office is really a learning extension of the current curriculum the children have been exploring already in the classroom. Young children learn best through experiences, or through experiential learning. Playing Post Office at school, then going to a real Post Office helps children make a connection that has value in their lives. Your job as a parent working during a field trip is to keep a close eye on the children you are in charge of. Asking leading questions about what the children are seeing, and showing your own interest, can really help keep the children engaged (besides helping to build their vocabulary and modeling life-long learning). Safety is always important, and an attentive eye is critical during field trips.

Music & Dance: Each preschool day includes music and an opportunity for your child to develop aesthetic appreciation. Besides encouraging the use of large muscles and helping to develop large motor skills, music time encourages creative expression. Finger play during music time can help with small motor coordination. Children learn to follow directions, share their space with other children, and increase their understanding of language and rhythms. During music time, it is good to participate yourself. Children love to see their parents dance and sing with them. This is your time to model appropriate behavior, or help children to follow the directions in a song by doing it yourself. Some children are not comfortable during music. Never force a child to dance. You can gently encourage them, but some children would rather only observe.

Clean Up: Clean up time is not for grown-ups only! Clean up stresses cooperation and a better understanding of time sequence and transitions. It encourages respect for property and a strong sense of responsibility. It can help produce satisfaction from a job well done, and encourages children to have a feeling of belonging and importance to the preschool. All children perform better with a warning for when clean up is about to begin. Five minutes is usually enough. Depending on the age of the child, different levels of clean up involvement can be expected. For all children, helping them get the task accomplished by giving short, simple directions is a good idea. It seldom works to tell a child to "clean the block area". As a parent, you need to get down to their level and say, "Jimmy, you can put the cows in the basket, and Carol, you can put the cars in the box". You could also pose your request as a question, "I wonder how many animals you can pick up while I sing my song?" As you participate yourself, you can ask a child to help you. Most importantly, it is a good idea to stay involved during clean up and keep the children focused..