

LEARNING THROUGH DOING

Samantha from South Africa writes;

I am not in the habit of soliciting advice from the internet but I know that you are a seasoned professional in this field and maybe you could give me some help.

I work in the morning. My mother watches my 2 year old while my 3 year old goes to a play school. In the afternoon when I am home, I want them to get the maximum benefit of having me around. How should I structure the afternoon so that I cover all the necessary skills, etc. that they should be learning.

Things I think need covering are:

- Fine motor skills
- Arts and crafts
- Outside time - working in the garden, riding toys, throwing, jumping, etc.
- Reading
- Listening to music

Am I maybe over- structuring their afternoons if I try to stick to a plan?

Any help would be wonderful.

Jean replies,

It sounds like you have a fine understanding of many of the kinds of activities that help children learn. I would not, however, turn your afternoons into structured school time. The best thing a parent can do is to continue with your normal routines and just incorporate the learning into the doing. What I mean for example, is when you go to the grocery store with your girls, play learning games in the fruits and vegetable section, such as; can anyone find a red fruit, etc.

The best gift a parent can give their child is lots of life experiences. Take them on outings, such as the zoo, or a museum, the post office, etc. The more real experiences the child has before entering school, the more she will be aware of how things work and why.

Then, what I would do is to expand on the outing. If you go to a farm one day, then perhaps you could read a book about a farm the next day or you could sing a song about what you saw at the farm. You could try to find a snack that reminds you of the farm, or you could set up your own play farm. Once you have established an interest in a subject "the farm" you can talk about the colors you saw at the farm, the sounds that the farm animals made, the number of cows, etc.

Another idea, is to just read lots of interesting stories to your children and base learning activities on the story. You could act out the story, move like the animals in the story, sing a song about something in the story, make an object mentioned in the story such as a pig puppet.

One of my favorites, is to just take advantage of snack time or lunch time to teach or review basic concepts. There are so many things that children can learn related to food. You can talk about the shapes, the color, size, texture of food. You can notice changes that happen to food when you cook it or freeze it. Your children can count out snacks, or table settings. You can teach beginning fractions by cutting sandwiches and other foods into half or quarters.

You mentioned small and gross muscle development. This is very important at this age. Children need lots of practice with arm and hand muscle control before they can learn to hold a pencil correctly in order to be able to write. You can have your children pick up small items to develop small muscle control and you can have them throw things to develop arm muscle control.

Playing outside is an excellent afternoon activity. Watching plants grow in a garden and helping to care for them is a great learning experience. Riding bikes and swinging are great for developing coordination.

Cooking with your children is another fun parent/child activity. Let your girls help you make cookies or cocoa, or other simple cooking experiences.

Craft projects, like building a structure together out of old boxes is fun. Crayons can turn large boxes into houses, car washes, trains, etc.

I hope this helps, just don't get too structured and especially don't have your children doing busy work with no relationship to their lives (like work sheets) And most important, when doing art projects, let your children experiment with the materials. It doesn't matter what the end product is, it is the process of experimenting that is what is teaching so many useful things to your child.

I applaud you for wanting to work with your children. You will all be rewarded for it in the end.

Jean Warren, Preschool Express