



Creating Invitations for Learning

by Deb Curtis

The birds living in a tree just outside the window of our school generated quite a stir among the three- and five-year-old children in the program where I am a child care teacher. There was much excitement and delight as the children observed the birds build a nest and care for their new babies. To take advantage and extend on this wonder-filled event, I decided to gather some props and materials for our indoor environment and invite the children to more personally explore and represent what they were seeing through the window.

At the local craft store I found some beautiful bird families made from feathers, a set of tiny plastic eggs, and a few bird nests commercially made from twigs and feathers. I also collected feathers, dried leaves, grass, and moss and a variety of small, flat baskets. I carefully arranged these items on the top of a low shelf in the classroom and displayed books about birds and nests nearby. The children eagerly accepted this invitation, imitating the drama they had been observing out the window. They were especially drawn to acting out how the bird parents cared for their babies. The children also designed elaborate nests with the natural materials, sharing their theories about what kinds of nests the birds would like. Over the next month the children continued to play with the birds and nests, poured over the books about them, and participated in many other activities and conversations sparked by this enchanting event in nature and the opportunity to pursue it in active, meaningful ways.

In my work as a preschool teacher I have found that offering information about things that children have limited experiences with, or posing a series of questions to try to encourage

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their thinking doesn't seem to get much of a lively or sustained response. But when I carefully arrange props and representational materials in the environment with a particular focus in mind, the children are delighted to discover and play with them, eagerly share their ideas and theories, and seek more information. Because of this I have been steadily collecting, organizing, arranging, and offering props and representational materials that captivate children's interest.

Designing Invitations

I call collections of interesting and carefully combined materials "Invitations" and I use them in a number of ways:

- Invitations to respond to and enhance an emerging interest, as with the Bird Invitation described above.

When I observe an interest among the group I intentionally organize props and materials for children to revisit and represent their ideas. As I observe their conversations and activities, I get new information for what else to offer to extend the activities and learning possibilities.

- Invitations to help children learn new skills and multiple uses for tools and materials that are a part of the daily environment.

I arrange materials and make displays throughout the regular areas of the room, often including documentation with diagrams, instructions, or photos of children's previous work in this area. For example, I arrange blocks and other block props in specific ways that suggest new possibilities for building and design and include photos of children's previous block constructions. The children use these Invitations as launching points for revisiting their work, adding complex ideas, and trying new skills.

- Invitations to offer activities and experiences with particular content knowledge.

Designing Invitations related to math, science, social studies, literacy, and other content areas of early childhood education gives children experiences in wonderful ways that are engaging and natural for their active learning styles. When creating these Invitations I try to highlight a particular skill, concept, or information, and offer an engaging way to explore or practice the concepts. For example, I created a small sensory tub filled with lavender scented rice and included an array of hollow, plastic, three dimensional geometric shapes for children to fill with the rice. As the children work, they are exploring the physical knowledge related to geometric forms and spatial relationships. We name the words for the shapes as they are filling them — cube, cone, etc.

- Invitations to introduce children to new concepts or events.

When I want to plan for a particular topic or concept, I arrange a collection of materials and props in an accessible place in the room for the children to visit and use throughout the day. I observe their actions and record their conversations so I can uncover their ideas and understandings for further planning. For example, I assembled a display of dolls with different skin colors, photos, and books about the Civil Rights Movement and differences among people. I left them out a few weeks before the celebration of Dr. Martin Luther King's birthday. As the children interacted with the materials, I took note of what they seemed to know and understand about the life of Dr. King. I was surprised to discover how little the children knew about this great man, but also heartened to see their intense interest in his life and work around issues of fairness. The information and interactions spurred by this simple Invitation helped me design more meaningful activities around the holiday celebrations, based on the children's ideas and awareness.

Principles for Designing Invitations

As I have been studying how to collect and create Invitations, I have drawn inspiration from many sources. Maria Montessori and her well-known materials and methods, including Practical Life activities has made such an important contribution to my practice. Fredrick Froebel, known as the father of kindergarten and the inventor of blocks, described his

approach to organizing and offering materials as "Gifts" for learning. The educators from the schools of Reggio Emilia, Italy, talk of "provocation" and have given us innovative ideas for the kinds of materials that engage children and careful, aesthetically beautiful ways to display them. I have also learned from many early childhood teachers and caregivers and their creative collections of Curriculum Prop Boxes. All of these sources are worth studying as you seek to enhance children's use and learning with materials in your environment.

The most important source for my learning about collecting and arranging Invitations in my child care room has been from the children themselves. When children are offered interesting open-ended materials, which are thoughtfully combined and arranged, you will see them work in amazing, yet predictable ways.

- Exploring — Children are drawn to the sensory aspect of materials.

Principle: Look for collections that have textures, interesting surfaces for touching or looking at or looking through, things that make sounds or move in interesting ways. Natural materials are always a good source for this kind of exploration.

- Transforming — Children are completely mesmerized with transforming materials and rearranging the world around them.

Principle: Look for materials and substances that can be changed, moved, reconfigured, or otherwise have some kind of cause and effect quality.

- Organizing and Designing — With an interesting, varied collection of materials preschool children will organize them by their attributes or use them in beautiful designs.

Principle: Find collections of materials that have similarities and differences and can be used for sorting, patterning, and designing.

- Building and Constructing — Young children like to put things together in relationship to each other, to connect things to other things, and to use building and construction materials to represent many aspects of their ideas and understandings.

Principle: Along with typical early childhood construction materials, seek out interesting shapes and sizes of items for building as well as things that can be used to decorate constructions. I also look for loose parts and recycled materials that resemble parts of something else, such as an airplane wing, a boat shape, or a dinosaur's scales.

- **Dramatizing** — With limited props preschool-age children will turn anything into dramatic play.

Principle: Keep an eye out for props and figures that can be added to any of the above background materials for an adventure or story.

- **Drawing** — Drawing is a natural medium for young children to express their ideas.

Principle: Regularly provide tools for children to draw and write as a part of Invitations.

- **Reading** — Children will thoughtfully study books and visual information related to a collection of props they have been using for exploring and representing.

Principle: Include resource books, stories, photos, posters, diagrams, and instructions to enrich the use of the materials by offering new suggestions and extensions, and support the development of literacy skills.

Collecting, Arranging, and Displaying Invitations

The set of materials I gather depends on the focus of the Invitation I am creating. I always make sure that the collection has at least three or four aspects from the list above so the children will have a variety of options for combining and using the materials. I am always searching for items that convey a sense of magic and wonder, treasures that beg to be a part of a drama or creation as well as those that are substantial and have an important aspect or function. For example, in an Invitation to explore stones, I gathered a set of identical stones of varying sizes that are smooth and heavy to touch; they can be seriated by size, balanced and stacked into a tower, or designed as a habitat for a drama using a family of plastic snakes. Included with the collection are books about designs in nature, rocks, and snakes.

I have found that the way materials and props are offered is as critical to their use as what is offered. Thoughtfully col-

lected and carefully placed materials help children focus on what is available and spark their ideas and actions. When arranging the display, it is important to position the materials in an orderly fashion so the children can see what is available and the possibilities for their use.

- Designate an accessible location with enough space for one to four children to work with the Invitation, such as a low shelf, counter top, or small table. If I'm creating an Invitation in a regular area of the room, I make sure it is out of the way of the typical use and traffic flow.
- Provide a background for the materials such as a cloth or a tray to highlight the materials and define the work area. I think of this as offering figure/ground support like a puzzle, or a blank artist's palette to invite the work that will be done.
- Offer collections of like objects, for example all metal tools in the sensory table, all wood containers for sorting, or all natural baskets for storage. These like objects create a context for the materials so the Invitation does not look cluttered.
- Place like objects in baskets near the tools and materials they can be used with so the children can see what is available and how the materials relate to each other.
- Arrange the materials in beautiful ways that suggest how they might be used. For example, design a beginning pattern with tiles, partially build a small construction, offer an example of a simple drawing done with colored pencils, place the correct number of beads in the section of a tray with the corresponding numeral.

Scouting for Invitations

Once you begin providing interesting open-ended materials and observe the marvelous ways the children use them, you will be eager to search for and provide more. Always be on the lookout in thrift stores, craft stores, garden shops, and garage and estate sales. You can develop an eye for the perfect treasure based on what you have seen children do with similar materials. You can also take a chance and offer children something that jumps out and captures your own curiosity. It's always delightful and surprising to see the children's unique ideas and approaches. What better way to offer learning experiences — as an invitation to wonder, explore, and create in as many ways as possible!