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The Teacher's Role



Teaching in a preschool or kindergarten classroom is challenging. It is physically demanding because there is rarely a moment to sit down. It is mentally and emotionally demanding because it requires that you be constantly alert and always searching for ways to extend the children's discoveries and enhance their learning. Teaching young children can be more difficult and demanding than teaching older children! It is also tremendously rewarding when you see young children develop into independent and self-confident thinkers, doers, and problem-solvers.

The following is a list of roles that teachers of young children must assume in order to provide quality learning experiences. By fulfilling these roles, you will teach children to think independently and creatively, to ask questions and look for their own answers through experimenting and exploring, to become aware of their own uniqueness and to value themselves as worthwhile human beings, and to get along peacefully in the world with others.

Planner

Your first and most important job is to plan and prepare the environment for learning. Because young children learn through play, it is essential that you provide the materials and equipment necessary for meaningful play activities that support the development of multiple intelligences. The classroom and the outdoor area must be set up with care so that the children will find interesting, stimulating, meaningful, and challenging things to do in an atmosphere that is orderly, safe, and has a sense of purpose.

Young children also learn best when they feel emotionally safe and supported. When planning your classroom, always keep in mind the children's ethnicities, cultures, languages, and differing abilities. Make sure that your environment, including your books, music, posters, pictures, dolls, dramatic play props, cooking activities, and the overall tone of your interactions, reflects a respect and concern for each child as a unique individual and as a member of a family and a community.

In such a carefully planned learning environment, children will learn that school is a happy, safe, and interesting place in which they can explore, discover, and learn about themselves and the world around them. With this belief system in place they are prepared to move forward into the more structured world of "school" with eager anticipation and ready for success.

Facilitator

When the planning and preparation are finished and children arrive for the day, your role shifts to that of a facilitator. It is your job to make sure that every child has the opportunity to experience

success and learn according to individual needs, styles, and levels of ability. Move about the classroom and the outdoor area while the children are playing. Watch, listen, and talk with the children during their play.

Ask open-ended questions to help children extend their thinking and stretch their vocabulary. Open-ended questions are those with many possible answers. Some examples of open-ended questions are:

- “What did you notice about the paint at the easel today?”
- “What do you think will happen when you put the cork in the water?”
- “Tell me about the lemon.”

For additional questioning ideas, see Bloom’s Taxonomy on page 23.

While moving about the learning environment, be alert for special moments of discovery—“teachable moments”—when a child is on the brink of learning something new. When this happens, move closer and help the child take the new ideas a step or two further. For example, two children have built towers with blocks and they notice that one tower is taller than the other. This is a good time to move in and begin talking with the children about ways in which the towers are the same and ways in which they are different. Suggest measuring the towers and encourage the children to think of ways to do the measuring. They might suggest using a piece of yarn, their hands, their feet, their shoes, a tape measure, or a yardstick. Encourage children to go from that point to measuring other objects in the room, comparing measurements, and “writing” their results on paper.

When you are working with children in this exploratory way, always remember that their learning will be less meaningful if you give them the answer or take over the direction of the activity. When you facilitate children’s learning, you are setting things up and providing materials, time, space, and encouragement so that they can find their own answers in their own way and in their own time. That’s what early learning is all about.

Observer

The children’s playtime is also a time for you to observe each child carefully. Through careful observation of children at work and play

you can begin to see which skills they have mastered and which skills need additional reinforcement. Your observations can give you insight into which intelligences are used more than others by a particular child. They may also raise your awareness of a child's cultural, linguistic, or developmental needs. These observations will help you plan for the next day or week.

If, for example, you see that a child has mastered all of the puzzles in the classroom, make a note of that and plan to provide more difficult puzzles the next day. If you notice that a child is calling all of the shapes in the block center "squares," make a note of that observation and plan to spend more time with that child, mentioning the names of shapes that are encountered throughout the classroom. When that child chooses a block activity, you might go into the block center and say, "I see you've used many triangles in your building today," as you point to the triangles. If that same child chooses to paint circles at the easel, say, "You're painting a circle." By casually mentioning the names of shapes over a period of days and weeks and months of play, the child is likely to learn the names of shapes easily and naturally.

Anecdotal Records

It is helpful to keep anecdotal records of observations like those mentioned above. Make a section in a recipe-card file box with each child's name on it. Write anecdotal notes and the date of the observation on index cards. Be specific. For example, a good notation would be, "Julia completed a ten-piece puzzle without assistance." With this notation, you know that Julia needs to be exposed to more difficult puzzles, and you can plan to provide those challenges in the days to come. Vague comments like, "Julia has good eye-hand coordination" are less helpful to you when you are planning new opportunities for the child. File the cards behind the child's name in the file box.

Portfolio

Add these observations to a collection of children's work, developmental checklists, and parent observations and you have a good overview of the child's strengths, needs, and interests. Many teachers put such collections together into a box or set of folders called a "portfolio." Portfolios are used for assessment and for planning, and they enable the teacher to provide an individually appropriate experience for each child.

Model

Social skills such as cooperating, getting along with others, and communicating effectively to solve problems can be modeled through actions and words. You will be teaching politeness and courtesy when you say “please” and “thank you” to the children and to other adults in the room. When you look at your lesson plans or read a note from a parent, you are modeling the importance of reading and writing. When you wipe up a spill or help put the blocks back on the shelf at clean-up time, you are showing by example that taking care of the classroom and keeping it neat and orderly are important things to do. When you’re feeling upset or angry, you can teach children how to deal with strong emotions by expressing your feelings in a socially acceptable way. Modeling is a very powerful teaching technique. It’s amazing how quickly you will begin hearing your own words and seeing your own actions reflected in the children’s behavior.

Modeling During Play

Another way to serve as a model for children is by entering into their play. The reasons for entering into their play are to help them get started with new or unfamiliar materials or to help them through difficult social experiences. If, for example, there is a new game and the children don’t understand how it works, play the game with the children until they are able to do it themselves. As soon as you think they can handle it without you, move on and encourage them to continue independently. If you see that a child is standing off to the side of the dramatic play center, feeling unsure about how to participate with others, join in the play and pretend to be a neighbor who has come for tea. Sit down at the table and invite the reluctant child to serve you tea. As soon as you see that the newcomer has been accepted into the play environment, step out of the situation and encourage the children’s play to progress.

Keep in Mind

It is important to remember to enter into the play for only as long as you are needed. You are not there to “call the shots” or direct the play activity. As soon as you see that the children are able to take charge, step away and move on.

Support System

Children need the safety and security of knowing that you will be there for them when they need you. There will be times when an

adult's assistance is truly needed—opening a sticky glue bottle, getting a drippy painting to the drying rack, getting a CD or computer game started, unfastening tight buttons for a quick trip to the toilet, or providing hugs and comfort for a child who has fallen down or bumped an elbow.

At the same time, you must be constantly alert to ways to support the children's emerging self-help skills. Encourage children to help each other. For example, if a child asks for help putting on a paint smock, do not quickly put it on for him or her. Instead, encourage the child to try it independently. If, after trying alone, the child still needs help, suggest that he or she ask a friend for help. This accomplishes several goals:

- ❶ It encourages children to be helpful and nurturing toward one another.
- ❷ It frees you from the task of putting on and taking off smocks throughout the day.
- ❸ Children learn a lot from each other, and oftentimes peer instruction is the most effective form of teaching

The same rule applies to all sorts of self-help situations, like buttoning and zipping jackets, wiping up spills, hanging up sweaters, and putting on shoes. Don't be too quick to come to a child's rescue. Helping too quickly denies children the opportunity to learn to solve problems for themselves. Children who never take care of their own needs often feel helpless and powerless. Build up children's feelings of self-worth and self-confidence by enabling them to accomplish simple tasks such as buttoning their own sweater independently.

Provide Scaffolding

Another way early childhood teachers support children is by providing "scaffolding" for learning. Just as a new building under construction requires scaffolding to support its progress, young children benefit from having an adult or an older, more experienced child support their progress in making sense of the world around them, helping them accomplish tasks that are too difficult for them to do alone. The primary ingredient in providing scaffolding is you! When children are engaged in play throughout the room, stay tuned in to their needs. Watch for "teachable moments," and be ready to help children develop new skills that build on existing skills. For example, if a child is having difficulty working a puzzle, you might sit with the child and talk about the shapes of the pieces, helping them match curved lines to curved lines and parts of pictures to

related parts. Talk them through the activity and support their emerging skills and knowledge.

Team Player

Whether your title is “teacher,” “assistant,” “aide,” or “caregiver,” there’s a good chance that you will share your classroom with other staff members. Many classrooms for young children have at least two adults and often more, depending on the number of children. Each staff member is an important part of the teaching team. In the early childhood classroom, team members should work together very closely, joining forces to facilitate learning for the children. As with any type of team, each member has specific responsibilities. It is important that each team member’s responsibilities are clearly understood by all so that the classroom can function smoothly and effectively.

Teachers

Typically, the teacher is the staff member who has special training in Child Development or Early Childhood Education and is held accountable for the children’s educational experiences. Because of this special training and accountability, it is the teacher’s job to plan and implement the curriculum, implement classroom management techniques, assess children’s growth and development, make referrals for special needs, and report progress to parents. While most teachers welcome suggestions from other caregivers, the final decision in all matters related to the children’s education lies in the teacher’s hands.

Teaching Assistants

Other caregivers, such as assistants or aides, are typically responsible for helping the teacher manage the classroom and implement the curriculum. Division of specific duties will vary from classroom to classroom and should be decided upon by each teaching team. Team members should sit down together at the beginning of the school year and talk about how they will divide the responsibilities.

Because each teacher has his or her own style, it is usually a good idea for an assistant to begin the school year by observing the

teacher. This will help the assistant get a feel for the teacher's methods. When the assistant is uncertain about something the teacher does or expects, it's important to ask questions and come to a mutual understanding of what is expected of him/her.

Effective Communication

The adults in the classroom must communicate with each other daily, especially before and after school. When the children are in the classroom, there is no time to engage in lengthy discussions about teaching practices or philosophies. During class time, all members of the teaching team need to devote their full attention to the task at hand—facilitating the children's learning. Therefore, using a notebook system is an effective way to communicate with team members. Write down questions, ideas, and suggestions that come to mind throughout the day. At some point in the day, each team member should check the notebook to see if there are any messages or points for discussion. The notebook serves as an ongoing two-way communication system.

This is especially important in full-day programs that employ different morning and afternoon staff. Before the morning staff goes home for the day, vital information must be communicated to the afternoon staff. This is essential for continuity in the child's day and for smooth overall operation of the program. In addition to the "communications notebook" method, set aside a block of time once or twice a week for a team meeting. This special time gives each team member a chance to share ideas, questions, suggestions, and concerns. It's also a good time to visit with each other, get to know each other, and build healthy relationships.

Handling Conflict

As with every close relationship, conflicts and misunderstandings will arise from time to time. It happens in families, in friendships, in marriages, and in teaching teams. In order to prevent little problems and misunderstandings from getting out of control, each team member must share his or her concerns clearly and directly as soon as possible. Little things left unspoken can become big problems! Talk things out, face to face, with honesty and mutual respect. When all team members work at establishing and maintaining a healthy working relationship, their effectiveness in the classroom is strengthened and the school days are happy, productive times for everyone.

Questioner

Dr. Benjamin Bloom was a noted educator who contributed greatly to the field, especially in the area of cognitive development. He created a system to categorize thinking skills, known as Bloom's Taxonomy. As you ask children open-ended questions to extend their learning, ask questions from each category. You might even find it helpful to post a copy of the taxonomy at several of the learning centers to serve as a reminder.



Bloom's Taxonomy

Category

Knowledge

Recalling bits of information

Children identify, name, define, describe, match, and select.

Comprehension

Understanding the meaning of the experience

Children explain, classify, summarize, predict outcomes, and sort objects.

Application

Using what was learned in a new situation

Children solve problems, demonstrate discoveries, and modify and rearrange materials.

Analysis

Breaking an idea or activity into separate components

Children separate, order, subdivide, estimate, and infer.

Synthesis

Combining parts to make a whole

Children combine, create, design, compose, construct, and rearrange.

Evaluation

Making value judgments

Children criticize, compare, justify, conclude, discriminate, and support.

Sample Questions

What is the name of _____ ?

Where is the _____ ?

What different kinds of _____ are there?

What happened first? Next? Last?

How are _____ and _____ alike?

How are they different?

Why do you think _____ happened?

What might have caused _____?

Tell me about _____ .

How else could you use _____?

What would happen if _____?

What would you use to _____?

How would you make _____?

What would you need in order to _____?

How do you know this is a _____?

In which group does this belong? Why?

Is this a _____ or a _____? Why?

Can you think of a new way to _____?

Draw a picture about _____ .

Tell me a story about _____ .

How could you make _____?

Pretend that you are a _____ .

Which do you like best? Why?

What do you like about _____? Why?

What don't you like about _____? Why?

What is the best thing about _____? Why?

What is the worst thing about _____? Why?

Adapted and developed by the author from a number of sources over a period of years. See, among other sources, Bloom, B. S. (1969). *Taxonomy of Educational Objectives: The Classification of Educational Goals*. United Kingdom: Longman Group.