

Keeping it REAL



Mary Barlow explains why we must allow children to be actively involved in their learning...

find out more
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Children learn through having sensory motor experiences and through being active learners. Educators Mary Hohmann and David Weikart defined active learning as learning in which the child, by acting on objects and interacting with people, ideas and events, constructs new understanding. No one else can have experiences for the child; children must do this for themselves.

Sensory motor experiences come through feeling, smelling, hearing, looking at and listening to, objects. As babies explore materials with their eyes, hands, feet and mouths they experience direct tactile contact. The active learning experience comes through the choices we give children in what they do, by giving opportunities to select their own materials and goals, and through offering materials that are natural, interesting and open-ended, that children experience every day; materials that are large and heavy but easy to handle and appropriate.

Active learning means giving children space and time to explore these materials by themselves, with their peers and with you. Watch as children explore materials using all their senses and notice as they experiment by mixing things together. Recognise their awe and wonder as materials combine and transform, and offer appropriate tools to allow the play to develop.

Children engage as active learners: you will hear them talking about their experiences and this will give you the opportunity to join in that conversation and extend their language and interest.

Your support as a partner in children's play is paramount. Stand, kneel, lie down or sit with the children, chat with them and pick up on

their interests and ideas. Talk about the choices they have made, watch what they do with materials and join their play. There will be opportunities to encourage the children's thinking, to build on what they say and to answer questions. As children's independence grows, refer them one to another for ideas and conversation. Children will not know the consequence to many of their actions, so show understanding and patience during conflict and mishaps.

Adults and children use plastic objects every day. These plastic objects are similar in many ways – they are often smooth and they have no smell and no taste. By offering a wide range of objects that are not plastic, we increase the opportunities for children to explore and learn.

Get them involved! Contrast a passive experience with an active learning experience...

Passive

When asked what he had been doing at nursery, Jonny replied, "I've been playing with dinosaurs, they eat pasta." "Eat pasta?" I replied. "Yes, in the tough spot." The next day I noticed the tough spot on a table with neatly placed dinosaurs inch-deep in dried pasta shells.

Active

During the children's playtime they were encouraged to take the dinosaurs outside into the orchard. There, the dinosaurs have a cave to live in that the children and staff made out of rocks and stones, and a mud swamp, where the children have been mixing water and soil. Some of the children fetch their Wellingtons and join the dinosaurs in the mud.

Jonny made the dinosaurs lunch by mixing leaves and twigs together with water and soil in a plant pot. As he picked up the pot he noticed water dripping from holes in its bottom, which led to a problem-solving opportunity for his peers and for the early years workers involved in the children's play.

An early years worker remarked that she thought some of the dinosaurs could fly; this extended the play into the trees, and as playtime came to an end, the children and dinosaurs sat on a blanket under a tree to share *Bumpus Jumpus Dinosaurumpus*. A staff member suggested: "After lunch we could all have a Bumpus Jumpus afternoon!" The children were transfixed by the world of real experiences with dinosaurs.

That night I asked Jonny about his day at nursery and he shared with me one or two dinosaur moments, concluding that "dinosaurs eat leaves from trees in the orchard". Oh, and by the way, he knew it was an apple tree...

