



Introduction

An Invitation

Consider this book an invitation to think deeply about the play materials you include in your preschool learning setting and how they—and you—can enhance children’s learning and development.

Think about someone important to you: a spouse, a child, a sibling, a parent, or a dear friend. What motivates that person to be creative and thoughtful? Have you ever observed that person so deeply engrossed in an activity (reading a book, embroidering a design, preparing a meal) that they hardly know you’re there? As we grow, our play transforms into the hobbies and interests that shape and define us. We continue to learn about and better understand the world through the materials we collect and create.

As you make your way through this book, examine yourself as an adult learner. What are *your* favorite things to wonder about? What materials do *you* like to play with? Do you enjoy tinkering in the garage or the garden? Gathering with friends, making others laugh, and delighting in shared storytelling? How about journaling, doodling, dancing, sewing, or playing an instrument? Reflect on your experiences and motivators, see yourself as a joy seeker, and reimagine what play means to you. Through this process of self-reflection, you will nurture a mindset that will help you to think more intentionally and creatively about the materials you include in your early learning setting and how they contribute to an environment that is accessible, inclusive, equitable, and welcoming of all children.

In many ways, our process while writing this book reflects how we hope preschool educators will embrace and use it in their practice. We made a concerted effort to recognize the changing early childhood landscape and incorporate technology. Similar to how teachers consider and respect children’s vast and diverse familial, cultural, and developmental journeys, we sought to honor the diversity of our perspectives, celebrated collective ideas, and integrated our individual styles and interests.

Together, we reflected on our deep connection to play and learning. We recalled stories of our own experiences as teachers, some of which we share throughout the book, and spent time in early learning settings in a wide variety of programs and communities. And, of course, the most important part of the process: we talked. We asked each other questions, wondered out loud, and watched ideas blossom, just as we hope you will share your thoughts, ideas, and inspirations with your colleagues and others who are passionate about the field of early childhood education.

Sections of this book were crafted while engaging with some of *our* favorite playful materials and activities: a favorite coffee mug, a pair of fluffy pajamas, a beanbag chair, sets of colorful markers and highlighters, and brisk walks with our dogs in the crisp night air. Herein lies the heart of this book and the process of its becoming: considering the importance of supporting creativity and learning with the right materials and conversations.

We hope you will celebrate the relationships that grow out of deeper understandings of and new perspectives on the play materials you curate and the learning environment you shape for young children.



About this Book

This book overviews familiar, time-honored play materials as well as some newer ones. In addition to highlighting specific, developmentally appropriate materials to include in your early learning setting, it also provides unique perspectives on ways to use these play materials and encourages you to look at them in a new light. The book is designed to be a resource for preschool professionals who work directly with children or who provide practice-based coaching to those who do.

Part One: Essential Questions addresses the who, why, how, and what of curating the “right stuff” for preschool learning settings. This part provides insight into the development of 3- to 5-year-old children, how to choose play materials and organize them in the learning environment, and considerations about the families and communities you serve. While there are many threads woven throughout this book, we continue to highlight one of the most crucial approaches to teaching: *Always consider the individual needs, interests, and prior experiences of each child and all the gifts they come bearing.*

The other three parts of the book each focus on a specific domain of learning and development:

- › **Part Two: Cognitive Learning and Development**
- › **Part Three: Social and Emotional Learning and Development**
- › **Part Four: Physical Learning and Development**

These parts contain four to five chapters that explore play materials and discuss how they support different aspects related to that domain. Each chapter begins with an overview of suggested play materials and why they are important to incorporate in your early learning setting. These include a range of store-bought, found, and natural play materials.

Select materials are highlighted in a more in-depth way. Alongside the descriptions of play materials are ideas for creative and appropriate ways to scaffold and extend children's thinking. Research on play and the way children engage in play is incorporated throughout.

We believe the most effective use of technology in preschool learning settings requires an integrated approach. In that regard, at the end of each chapter, we include a section titled "Tech Tips" listing developmentally appropriate ways of introducing and using technology to support children's engagement with play materials. Also punctuated throughout each chapter are sidebars titled "Now Try This!," which feature practical ideas and creative uses for select play materials.

At the end of each part, you will find a summary highlighting key points and questions encouraging you to reflect on your own life experiences and how your personal journey shapes the way you teach and interact with children.

Finally, there are two appendices to support preschool educators in their use of this book. **Appendix A** features a table that broadly describes the capabilities of children ages 3 through 5. **Appendix B**, which lists a collection of high-quality children's books, stems from our belief in the power of books to extend and encourage children's deeper engagement and connection with play materials.