
FEATURE

Always busy: Little learnings for idle moments

Every teacher sometimes bumps against challenging—and unanticipated—waiting time. This may happen when too many children need to wash their hands at one sink, when the lunch trays are a bit late, when the group has evacuated the building in a fire drill, or even when a parent is delayed at the end of the day. Discipline needs creep in quickly when children are bored and start looking for something to do.

Use these moments—every bit of time is valuable for young learners. These tidy activities can reinforce concepts or skills, they can spark new conversations and vocabulary, and they can support learning across all developmental domains.

Preparing for little learnings

Because it's impossible to anticipate every instance of waiting

time, it's wise to be ready. Think about your classroom schedule. You already know the vulnerable times and circumstances. And think about the children in your group—their needs, interests, and goals—and prepare simple props and materials that you can put into use quickly. Some little learning props might be in your pocket, while others might be stored in a special emergency prop box. In any case, remember the value of every learning opportunity.

Adapt how you use the props according to the number of children who seek engagement, the time of day, acceptable noise level, and the space you have available. Be creative and be prepared.

Mystery bag. A cloth bag that contains mystery games is a valuable prop for little learnings. It can be as big as a discarded pillowcase, but a smaller bag will allow easier storage. Consider a

colored nylon shopping bag that folds into its own 3-inch case. A cloth bag is more durable than a box and is a perfect hiding place for variations on guessing, sorting, classifying, and identifying games, all essential to building literacy and numeracy skills.

Ideas for games:

- Put a collection of plastic fruit in the bag. Pass the bag and ask children to guess the fruit by its shape. Older children can choose, identify, and start a story with the fruit. Each subsequent child chooses, identifies, and adds to the story including mention of the new fruit.
- Put large floor puzzle pieces in the bag. Ask children to draw a piece out of the bag and add it to the puzzle. If the puzzle isn't familiar, make sure you have a picture of the finished image to display.
- Make a collection of numeral

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cards from 1 to 5, 10, or 15 according to the numeracy skills of the children in the group. Put the cards in the bag and give the children access to counting bears, chips, or Lego® bricks. Invite children to draw a card from the bag and match the numeral on the card with the appropriate number of objects in one-to-one correspondence.

- Make lollypop props of colored circles stapled to one end of a craft stick. Decorate the circles with pairs of objects, numbers, or alphabet letters. Increase ease and durability by using stickers and covering the circles with clear, adhesive-backed vinyl. Invite each child to draw one stick from the bag and to tiptoe around the group seeking its match.

Remember to re-stock the bag

after a few uses to keep the games fresh.

Finger puppets. Use simple finger puppets to hold children’s attention while you give instructions or tell a story. Make or buy the puppets and, if possible, have several puppets in different categories—animals, vegetables, and family figures, for example.

Encourage dialogue between the puppets and the children. Use a collection of animal puppets, for example, to engage children in vocal and movement activities. For a quiet activity, give each child a puppet and play Simon Says. For example,

“Simon Says, ‘put your puppet on your nose.’”

“Put your puppet on your shoe.”

Continue playing and increase

the challenges according to the skills of the children.

Identifying attributes.

Encourage both self-awareness and the ability to notice similarities and differences with a sorting game. For example:

“If you are a child, stand up.”

“If you are a child wearing blue shorts, sit down.”

“If you are a child who is standing and also has curly hair, sit down.”

“If you are a child who is standing, has curly hair, and pockets on a shirt, sit down.”

Continue until one child is standing. Repeat with different attributes.

Measuring. Use measuring sticks to reinforce observation skills and size relationships. Make a set of measuring sticks by cutting 1-inch-wide lengths of heavy cardboard. Vary the length of each stick, from 2 to 12 inches. Invite each child to select a stick and to seek and identify something in the room that matches the length.

Color chips. Help children build observation skills by sorting and matching pairs of objects. Build an inexpensive collection of sample paint chips, at least two of each color. Invite matching or sorting by color intensity—shades of red, for example. Build a similar collection with pairs of picture postcards. Younger children can simply match pairs of images. Older children can identify specific attributes—a bucket or a cat, for example—that appear in several different cards.

Silent show. Encourage observation skills and memory in a silly, quiet game. Gather the children in a circle. Start the game by

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making a funny face and then tap your head once. The first child in the circle mimics your funny face, taps, and then makes a different face. The second child repeats the first two, with head taps between, and then adds to the sequence, and so forth.

Who am I? This little learning reinforces oral language and thinking skills. Cut out pictures of animals. For durability, mount each picture on cardboard and cover with clear, adhesive-backed vinyl. Pin an image (without the child seeing it) on the back of a child's shirt, and ask the child to turn to let the other children in the group see the picture. The object is for the child to identify the image by asking questions of the group. For example, "Do I have four legs?" "Do I fly?" "Do I live on a farm?"

Increase the challenge of this activity with pictures of foods or of the children in the group. Simplify by limiting the category—common pets or pictures of equipment on the playground, for example.

Categories. Build listening and classification skills as well as physical agility with this prop-free activity. Name a category like animals, colors, or the names of the children in the group. Then name different items in and out of

the category. For example, if the category is foods people eat, you might call out *lettuce, squash, fire engine, peanut butter, bread, fence*, and so forth. When the children hear a word that doesn't fit in the category, they signal by squatting and standing again quickly. Insert incorrect items often enough that the children keep moving.

Vary the game with fractured nursery rhymes. Start reciting a familiar nursery rhyme but deliberately change a word or phrase. For example, "Hickory, dickory, dork. The mouse ran up the stairs...." When the children identify a changed word, they raise both arms into the air. Continue the rhyme until all the children have identified a fracture, and then recite the rhyme together correctly.

Clearly there are endless variations in little learnings. Use your knowledge of the children in your group to build your own, ensuring engagement, skill development, and no wasted time. ■

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