



So you want to know more about...

Emergent Curriculum

What is it?

Emergent Curriculum (Jones and Nimmo, 1994) describes curriculum that adapts to the children and teachers who are using it. Children and adults have different interests and learning styles. Instead of teachers carving curriculum plans in stone, this approach empowers teachers to meet children **where they are**. Teachers are active learners and model investigation and problem-solving skills as they explore topics with children.

Teachers using emergent curriculum start with a concept or book that is meaningful to their group, then brainstorm related concepts and activities across the disciplines: math, science, language arts, creative arts, movement and social skills. One single activity can have several types of curricular content. Taking a field trip to a pumpkin patch, includes the life cycle, transportation, math (counting pumpkins and comparing sizes), and simple physics (*how can we get these big heavy pumpkins up the hill*).

When interest areas converge, it gives children more time to explore. It also helps them scaffold learning — kids who are strong at math can use that confidence to help them explore areas in which they are less competent.

After an initial brainstorm, teachers take time to map out planned activities that will cover all the interest areas as well as the various developmental needs of children in their class. Teachers adapt curriculum as they go. Activities that don't engage the children can be modified or replaced, and activities that really spike their interest can be extended. The resulting plan of activities is called a **curriculum web** because all the links between content areas make the plan resemble a spider's web.

At our centers, you will rarely find a teacher directing a large group in a single activity. We tend to break the class up into smaller groups and act as facilitators rather than directors.

Another thing you're likely to see in our programs is on-going projects. Children need extended time to explore concepts and build on them. Projects encourage social skill building while children learn from each other's ideas and abilities. Projects also promote self-help skills such as time management and problem-solving.

Parents often wonder how their child's particular skills or deficits will be addressed in an emergent classroom. Will they be left behind or bored? Children with special needs are actually more likely to be engaged in an emergent classroom because teachers plan open-ended activities with different levels of challenge and success. Instead of being isolated by their individual abilities, children are integrated because of them. A play-based, project approach ensures that all children are a vital part of the curriculum.

Why We Use a Play-Based Curriculum

Parents often look at a busy preschool room and wonder where the curriculum fits in. It's always there! Children learn about the world and things in it by exploring. They need multiple, extended opportunities to examine objects, act on them and see how they react, and explore how they can be used. Young children are little scientists at heart, constantly testing their observations and theories.

Think about colors. It's certainly possible to tell a child that red and blue make purple. But if a child discovers that for himself, he's likely to do more experimenting with other colors. He'll realize that different amounts of each color yield different shades. He'll also notice that other colors can be mixed with different combinations. Best of all, he'll

remember these facts because he had a **concrete experience** with the concept.

Children playing in our classrooms are learning to count, sort, classify, create, imitate, build, and all sorts of complicated cognitive tasks. We might call it play, but for them, it's very important work.

This all may look like a lot of fun. Hopefully, it is! But this isn't an accident. Every activity we set out at our interest centers is carefully planned to meet the cognitive and emotional needs of the children who will be exploring it. Wouldn't it be great if more workplaces were play-based?!

Mixed-Age Grouping

Some visitors wonder how any curriculum can possibly meet the needs of children of varying ages with wildly varying developmental needs. The truth is, even children the same chronological age can have very different needs. When we evaluate a child's placement in a classroom, we look at whether their developmental needs will be helped or hindered by joining that group. We don't expect or even *want* all the children in a group to be in the "same place," emotionally and cognitively.

We want the children in a group to complement each other's needs and strengths. In a classroom that is limited to children 12 months through 24 months, for example, all the children in the group are likely to face developmental hurdles together: separation anxiety, biting, and difficulty sharing are pretty much guaranteed. Imagine being a parent of quintuplets versus the parent of five children each spaced one year apart. The younger kids learn from the older kids, and the older kids learn from the younger kids. The same give-and-take happens in our classrooms. One might guess that the younger children would benefit more from a mixed-

age group than an older child, but mixed-age group learning is not all one-way. A younger child can have better social skills than an older one, for example. Even the act of watching a younger child face a challenge will teach an older child something about problem-solving, testing, and perseverance.

Emergent curriculum is what makes our mixed-age group classrooms work. Teachers plan with the needs of all their children in mind. Writing in journals, for example, can be a challenging (and satisfying) accomplishment for children who are still scribbling, and for those who can only copy letters, as well as for children who are beginning to spell phonetically.

Last but certainly not least, mixed-age groups also allow teachers to stay with children several years, providing consistency and reducing the stress of transitions.

Process versus Product

Some activities are **goal- or product-oriented**: "Put these shapes together to make a train." The problem with this kind of teaching is that is closed-ended: kids who can't make the pieces look like a train will feel like (or be considered) failures. At Gretchen's House, our activities are more **process-oriented**. We try to supply materials and ideas as springboards, and let children's imaginations take them places. If children are exploring the shapes and glue and paper and using them creatively, we consider that successful use of time and materials. It's easy to explain process versus product in terms of creative arts, but we use this philosophy

in **all** our interest areas. In the math center, we are less concerned that children come up with a specific answer than we are that they are trying different strategies to solve a problem. In science, we encourage them to observe, explore, and articulate opinions. And so on.

By focusing on process, we give children tools and methods to solve novel problems, **and** we instill in them the confidence that, given a little time and patience, they can figure things out for themselves.

Frequently Asked Questions

I learned to read when I was three, I think you should start teaching my child to read now, too. It's never too early. It's never too early to encourage reading skills when children demonstrate interest and abilities, but if adults force the issue, it can actually discourage development of these skills. As parents, we have to realize that our children may have very different interests and abilities than we do. Although we can coax a child to read early or do algebra or whatever, it becomes more **our** accomplishment than **theirs**. That takes away their intrinsic satisfaction, which is a powerful motivator for learning all through life.

My child excels at math and I don't think your program is challenging her enough. Most children do not excel at everything at the same time, so you can rest assured that

your child is always being challenged in some skill area in our programs. That said, if you have specific ideas about ways we can provide more challenge, please speak to your child's teacher. We strive to accommodate individual differences so that children can experience confidence and competence in all kinds of tasks.

Why don't you ever do worksheets for practice? Worksheets are closed-end activities and they're usually a surefire way to extinguish a child's enthusiasm for a concept because they involve no **interaction** or **immediate feedback**. We might offer a fun puzzle page as an extra activity for children who have already explored a concept in depth, but we don't consider worksheets to be an effective teaching (or learning) tool.