think before you (inter)act: what it means to be an intentional teacher  
by Ann S. Epstein

best brains in science under five: helping children develop intentionality  
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An Out-of-the-Box Training Kit — The Project Approach in the Early Years (Item #4400201) — is available for leading your next in-service training.

Everyone is talking about being an intentional teacher, and this issue of Beginnings Workshop will help you as a director, teacher, or trainer delve more deeply into intentionality. Ann Epstein, author of the book The Intentional Teacher, leads off with an article that focuses on thinking before you (inter)act with children. Then, Judy Harris Helm looks at intentionality from the perspective of children and explores how the project approach can increase children’s intentionality. Applying the principles of intentionality to our work with families comes next with Jody Martin addressing effective communication. And Pam Schiller rounds up this issue by taking a look at the program practices that support intentional teaching.
The heated debate over child-initiated versus adult-directed instruction may be cooling down, replaced by a search for balance. In the landmark report Eager to Learn, the National Research Council (2000) emphasized the need for both approaches, and said teachers must play an active and intentional role in each type of learning:

“Children need opportunities to initiate activities and follow their interests, but teachers are not passive during these [child]-initiated and directed activities. Similarly, children should be actively engaged and responsive during teacher-initiated and -directed activities. Good teachers help support the child’s learning in both types of activities” (pp. 8-9).

While most of us claim to act with ‘intention’ in our dealings with young children, it is worth pausing to reflect on what this term means. In The Intentional Teacher, the author of this article says, “intentional teaching means teachers act with specific outcomes or goals in mind for children’s development and learning. Teachers must know when to use a given strategy to accommodate the different ways that individual children learn and the specific content they are learning” (Epstein, 2007, p. 1).

How do we know which strategy to use? As a general rule, in child-guided learning, teachers provide materials but children make connections on their own or through interactions with peers. Adult-guided learning involves materials and experiences children are less likely to encounter on their own, systems of knowledge they cannot create on their own, responses to requests for help, and evidence that children are ready to move up a level but are unsure how (see sidebar).

This division is not rigid, and research together with our own observations can help guide our practice.

The Role of the Intentional Teacher in Child-Guided and Adult-Guided Learning

Intentional teachers support child-guided learning when children:

- Investigate how things work by actively exploring materials, actions, and ideas
- Establish relationships on their own
- Turn to one another for assistance
- Are motivated to solve problems on their own
- Are so focused that adult intervention would interrupt them
- Challenge themselves and one another to master new skills
- Apply and extend existing knowledge in new ways

Intentional teachers use adult-guided learning when children:

- Are unaware their actions may be unsafe or hurtful
- Have not encountered materials or experiences elsewhere
- Cannot create systems of knowledge (e.g., letter names)
- Are not aware of something likely to interest them (e.g., the smell of flowers)
- Do not engage with something they need for further learning (e.g., shape names in geometry)
- Ask for information or help, especially after trying several unsuccessful solutions on their own

Nevertheless, effectively supporting different types of learning can be a challenge, particularly as we address not only academic subjects (reading, math, and science), but also the content — knowledge and
skills — embedded in social-emotional, physical, and creative development. For example, we agree preschoolers need to grasp the ‘alphabetic principle’ but may be unsure about how to help them learn letters without drilling them. We want children to appreciate different artistic styles, but not by leading them in a ‘compare and contrast’ exercise.

In the rest of this article, we explain how to turn best intentions into best practices in five areas of early learning. The two examples in each area (child- and adult-guided strategies, respectively) can help us think before we (inter)act with children. Knowing how and what we want young children to learn, and applying this knowledge to practice, is what intentional teaching is about.

**Language and literacy**

Child-guided learning: Conversational skills. Children learn to listen, initiate, and respond in conversation with others. This verbal facility is a foundation of literacy development. To promote these essential skills:

- Be careful not to dominate when talking with children. Lean toward more child than adult talk.
- Model active listening. Wait for children to form and express their thoughts. Get down on their level, make eye contact, repeat or clarify what they say to show you have heard them.
- Play games with verbal directions, such as Simon Says (but without winners and losers).
- Expand children’s verbalizations. For example, if a toddler says, “Me, banana,” you might say, “You are going to eat that banana.”
- Support sociodramatic play by providing props for role playing and pretending.
- Pretend to misunderstand ambiguous gestures to encourage children to add words. Use humor. For example, if a child points to his/her head for help with a hat, put a shoe there instead.
- Use questions but not in excess. Ask questions that encourage children to think and expand their answers. Avoid questions that have a single brief or ‘correct’ answer.
- Talk to other adults in the presence of children. Model good syntax and varied vocabulary.

Adult-guided learning: Vocabulary. The number of words young children can understand and say (receptive and expressive vocabulary, respectively) depends on the language they hear. To help build their vocabularies:

- Talk with children throughout the day, using words that describe the materials, actions, people, and events in their lives. Vary experiences (e.g., go on field trips) to introduce new words.
- Read books that are rich in vocabulary and interesting ideas to spark questions and discussion.
- When you use words that are new to children, provide familiar synonyms and definitions. Put the words in context, e.g., “We debated whether to put the markers in the writing or art area.”
- Encourage children to describe materials (attribute words), how they use them (action words), how they move (direction words), and what they think and feel (idea and emotion words).
- Describe your own intentions and actions, e.g., “I’m going to the house area to see what’s cooking for lunch. It smells sweet and spicy!”

**Mathematics and science**

Child-guided learning: Orienting things in space. Understanding where objects are located and their relationship to one another is the foundation of geometry. To develop these concepts:

- Create different types of spaces in the classroom and outdoors, including small spaces to crawl around in, large open areas to move freely, and things to go over, under, around, and through.
- Provide construction toys (e.g., blocks, boards), and ample space and time to play with them.
- Provide other materials children can move and rearrange such as doll house furniture, and shelves and pedestals for displaying their artwork.

Adult-guided learning: Understanding position, location, direction, and distance concepts. Preschoolers are beginning to view people and objects from perspectives other than their own. To help them apply these concepts in concrete ways:

- Make comments and ask questions that focus on spatial relationships, e.g., “You jumped over the book and crawled under the table”; “Where will your road turn when it reaches the wall?”
- Provide opportunities for children to represent things by drawing, building, and moving, e.g., the three bears sitting at the table. Children can also
make and interpret simple maps of familiar things, such as how the classroom is arranged.

- Create occasions for children to give directions, e.g., while leading others at large-group time.

**Social-emotional development**

Child-guided learning: Developing a sense of community. A community is a social group with common interests, whose members receive and give one another support. To build community in the classroom:

- Create an atmosphere in which children are expected to be kind and supportive. Use phrases such as ‘our class’ and ‘all of us.’
- Arrange the room to include open areas where large groups can assemble and enclosed areas conducive to intimate interactions.
- Establish a consistent daily routine. A shared schedule creates a sense of togetherness.
- Organize group activities so children who opt to play alone at choice time have an opportunity to interact with their peers. Encourage but never pressure or require children to join the group.

Adult-guided learning: Creating and participating in a democracy. Democracy is treating others with respect and equality. It entails compromise and negotiation, skills young children are beginning to develop. To help them apply these social ideals in concrete (not abstract) ways:

- Encourage children to consider alternatives to reach a goal and anticipate consequences, e.g., “Can you think of another way to do that?” “What if they run through the block area again?”
- Build children’s skills in perspective and turn-taking. Ask them to repeat back what they hear before adding their own ideas. Use role play to encourage adopting other viewpoints.
- Acknowledge (rather than praise) when you see children working together. Comment on how teamwork can help everyone reach their individual and collective goals, e.g., “You helped each other put away the heavy boards. Now we can all get ready for outside time!”
- Deal evenly with all parties in a conflict, including children who act aggressively. They do not intend to be ‘bad’ but have not yet learned how to satisfy their needs in more acceptable ways.

**Physical movement**

Child-guided learning: Stability skills — turning, twisting, bending, stretching, swinging, swaying, pushing/pulling, rising/falling. Most stability skills develop through exploration and discovery. To encourage children’s spontaneous interests in these movements:

- Provide equipment to practice these skills, including wide ramps and beams (on the floor or close to the ground), push and pull toys, rocking toys, swings, and wheeled vehicles.
- Offer cues to perform specific skills. For example, cues for bending include spreading your legs, holding out your arms, and bending in stages to keep your balance. Rather than direct children, use yourself as an example, e.g., “I find it easier to bend if I hold out my arms.”
- Incorporate stability skills in large-group activities, e.g., ask children to suggest body parts to bend and straighten as they move to the beat of the music.
- Challenge children to extend a movement, e.g., “I wonder how we could stretch just one side of our bodies.”

Adult-guided learning: Stability skills — transferring weight, balancing, jumping/landing, rolling. Children who have mastered simple stability skills are ready to tackle more difficult ones with adult guidance and support. To help them develop these foundational skills:

- Provide equipment to promote these skills, including narrower but still low ramps and beams, things to jump over (string, tape), and inclined mats for rolling.
- Offer cues to perform specific skills. For example, cues for rolling like a log include keeping your legs together and your arms at your sides or over your head. Use yourself as an example, e.g., demonstrate or say, “When I roll, I try to keep my arms against my sides.”
- Give stability challenges and encourage children to invent their own, e.g., “Roll as if your legs were glued together,” or “What’s another way we could roll? Gina says to roll in a circle.”
- Build on children’s interests and imagination. Design a balance trail using equipment children enjoy walking on. Act out a group story that involves these skills, e.g., searching for buried treasure on a
Being an intentional teacher both challenges and enables us to join with young children in discovering and inventing the world.

Visual art

Child-guided learning: Making simple representations. Young children represent things with one or two details of interest to them, and are often not concerned about accuracy. To respect and support their artistic intentions:

- Accept what children create and do not ask them to include more detail. They may interpret this request as disapproval and lose interest or motivation.
- Show interest in the details children do include. Comment on their features and how children created them, e.g., “You drew a big red circle with a smaller blue one inside.”
- Never presume to know what a child is representing — or even that they are representing anything. It is easy to misinterpret their artwork. Instead, invite them to tell you about it.

Adult-guided learning: Making complex representations. Just as children’s language becomes more complex, so does their visual art. They add more details, strive for accuracy, and reflect more aspects of their individual and social lives. To help them execute their ideas:

- Encourage children to observe and describe things in detail, even when they are not making art. Use pictures and photographs to help them view things from different perspectives.
- Call attention to the artwork of others, both artists and peers. Do not worry about children ‘copying’ images or techniques. They will use what they see to carry out their own ideas.
- Provide opportunities for teamwork and collaborative art activities. As each child contributes something (an idea, an image, a technique), it opens up possibilities for the others.
- Label and store ‘works-in-progress’ so children can elaborate them on subsequent days.
- Display and discuss children’s artwork. Sharing their art with peers, parents, and others helps children think about what and how they made each work, and inspires them to try new things.

Intentional teaching respects the importance and excitement children attach to their own learning. It also recognizes the significance of what we do as professionals. Teaching with intentionality requires that we be knowledgeable about child development, curriculum models, observational assessment, and proven instructional strategies. Being an intentional teacher both challenges and enables us to join with young children in discovering and inventing the world.

References


Child-guided vs. adult-directed — is the debate over?: Epstein says the debate between child-initiated and teacher-directed teaching is being replaced with a more balanced approach. Do you and your teachers agree? Talk with teachers about the debate and come to your own conclusion about what a balanced approach means. Ask teachers to estimate the amount of each kind of teaching and learning that goes on in their classroom and see if it reflects this new idea in best practices.

How do you know which strategy to use?: Good question! And Epstein helps you find the answer for your program. To help teachers understand when to intervene with adult-guided learning, videotape a segment of the classroom day for teaching teams to review on their own. See if they can identify times in the video that opportunities for child-initiated learning were missed as well as when opportunities for adult-guided learning were overlooked. Work with the teams to develop strategies for capturing these lost opportunities in the future.

Using Beginnings Workshop to Train Teachers
by Kay Albrecht
What might happen if the children in our classrooms developed efficient, productive minds, a determination to use them, and joy in doing so? Would they be better able to solve world problems when they grow up? What would minds like that look like and how can we support that development?

We can begin by looking at adults that do that today and see what they are like. In December 2008, Discover Magazine profiled the Best Brains in Science Under 40 (5 under 20 years). Daniel Burd, age 17, with great persistence designed and redesigned his own experiments until he developed a plastic that degrades faster reducing what goes in landfills. Says Daniel, “I just got tired of all the plastic bags falling on my head every time I opened the closet.” Terence Tao, one of the most prolific mathematicians in the nation describes his thinking, “Research feels like an ongoing TV series . . . there are still plenty of cliff-hangers and unresolved plotlines that you want to see resolved, but unlike TV, we have to do the work ourselves.” Doug Natelson, a condensed matter physicist, captures the joy of thinking: “It’s a lot of fun to learn how to get down and really work at these scales.” A characteristic common among these young men and women is a great sense of purpose and joy in learning. They set their own goals, pursue answers to their own questions, and enjoy the challenge of their work. In fact, these characteristics may be just as important to their success as their academic foundation.

Intentionality as a child goal

One of the challenges for teachers is to support the acquisition of knowledge and skills. Another is to engage children in the intellectual life by supporting the development of traits such as curiosity and the disposition to be thoughtful. Recently there has been much discussion of the role of intentionality in teaching, thinking before doing, and acting with purpose during the teaching process. Intentionality is not just a characteristic of successful teachers; it is also seen in successful scientists, mathematicians, artists, and any profession where careful, self-directed thinking is needed. So how do we help children become intentional? When do we start?

Anyone who has seen a toddler throw a toy from the high chair, watch an adult pick it up, and then joyfully create a game of the process understands that very, very young children are perfectly capable of setting their own goals and acting with a purpose. We see intentionality also in the child who develops a poking game while the teacher is reading a book to the group. Focusing that intentionality on worthwhile and positive experiences, integrating it with required knowledge and skill development is the challenge.

Curriculum approaches

One way to do this is to support children’s development of ‘habits of mind’ which Katz, 1993, describes as dispositions, ways that children approach experiences. Teachers can make sure that children have a say in how they spend their time, help them make choices, and discuss the outcomes of those choices with them. An example of an approach that encourages thoughtfulness and intentionality in children is the High/Scope Curriculum. This curriculum maximizes intentionality with a participatory education model which includes child choice in a plan-do-review sequence and teacher support of learning. Longitudinal research has shown programs like this result in a decrease in crime and an increase in initiative, social relations, creative representation, and overall development (Schweinhart et al, 2005).

Another way to help children become intentional is to use curriculum approaches which provide opportunities for children to investigate what they find intensely interesting. Teachers organize learning experiences for
young children in many ways. These approaches can be arranged on a continuum of child-initiation or how much of a role children have in determining the direction of study (see figure 1). All these approaches are valid and valuable ways to teach young children, and they often exist side by side in the same classroom, sometimes on the same day. The far left of the continuum is teacher-determined content and instruction of a single concept, such as how to cross the street. Moving to the right on the continuum, different approaches become less teacher-determined, more focused on integrating concepts from several content areas, and more based on child-initiation. On the far right is project work. Projects emphasize child-initiation and integrated learning. Projects are multidisciplinary, thought-provoking, and emotionally involving.

Although all approaches can be valuable, spending little time on the child-initiated side of the continuum is less likely to develop intentionality. When experiences never venture into teacher-directed inquiry or project work, students are less likely to develop the habits of mind for finding answers to their questions, or to experience a positive sense of accomplishment when they learn what they wanted to learn and share that learning with others.

Project-based learning is an excellent way to develop intentionality because it builds on the child’s knowledge and background experiences and provides opportunities for children to extend these. The early years are a period of rapid intellectual growth. Research into early cognition indicates that by the time children are four years old, they have developed a complex, interconnected knowledge base about the world and how it works. Catherwood, in a review of early cognition research, believes that the essential task of early educators may be to help children further articulate their knowledge and link that knowledge to their verbal expression. Experiences that support the child in making connections, according to Catherwood, “enhance the richness of neural networks in the child’s brain” (1999, p. 33).

For children in the early years, project-based learning is easily implemented through the project approach, a three-phase structure for in-depth study of a topic that interests students (Helm & Katz, 2001; Katz & Chard, 2000). Following the three phases (see figure 2 on page 52) helps teachers respond to the children’s curiosity to make project work engaging.

Although thematic teaching and teacher-directed inquiry can be engaging also, experiences that the teacher selects can be less motivating for children. For example, tallying and charting preferred flavors of ice cream can be less interesting than charting and graphing children’s questions; for example, during the bee project children charted how many children had been stung by a bee.

Children learn strategies for directing their own learning in project work. When children found a big garden spider during The Garden Project, enthusiastic, inquisitive comments such as “He’s got long legs!” “He’s got knees!” “How many knees does he have?” led to questions such as “How does it eat?” or “Will he bite?” An interview of an expert on spiders, the reading of many books, the creation of a spider web, and the building of model spiders enabled the children to learn many strategies, experience the thrill of discovery, and develop confidence in their ability to direct their own learning. Problem solving events also occur in project work such as how to work as a team, how to make a model stand up, or how to obtain needed materials. While reviewing documentation (photos, drawings, and teacher notes of their conversations) children become reflective and learn to think about how they learned and what was helpful. They think about what worked, what did not work, what they did well, and what they could do next. This kind of thinking, at a preschool level, is a lot like the thinking process of the top scientists.

**What teachers can do**

How much children learn to be thoughtful depends on teacher strategies and support. Some of these strate-
When you see a child with an intense interest, be his voice, especially if he can’t voice it. (“I think Anthony might be wondering what makes that bowling ball come back up the ramp.”)

Add materials to the classroom related to children’s interest as they emerge. Encourage children to contribute materials. (As children’s interests shifted from farming to products of corn, the teacher brought in some items with corn in them. The collection was quickly taken over by children’s contributions.)

Don’t jump in and tell children answers or go immediately to a book or the Internet. Today answers can be found in seconds, but this creates child dependence on adults who have mastered the skills of reading and writing and not how young children learn. (In a project on turtles, the classroom turtle began to act strange and stopped eating. Through child designed experiments, observations, and research the children discovered the concept of hibernation. The impact on children would have been vastly different if the teacher immediately had consulted the computer.)

Don’t be afraid to provoke children’s thinking. Challenge them to find an answer, create a model, or do observational drawing. (When Maddie painted a bee after capturing it, she focused on the parts of the bee and how they connected.)

Using these strategies, children can be encouraged to think deeply at this age and build that foundation for thoughtful, intentional work. Perhaps the next great scientist is in your block area, or perhaps, a future, really terrific, intentional teacher!

References


Figure 2

The Three Phases of a Project

Phase 1: Beginning
- Identify potential topic initiated by children.
- Build children’s background knowledge.
- Narrow topic further.
- Help children create list of questions to investigate.

Phase 2: Investigation
- Collect resources for investigating topic (books, videos, artifacts).
- Help children use resources.
- Arrange to meet with experts on topic.
- Arrange field site visits.
- Note new questions.
- Help children record and represent what they’ve learned.

Phase 3: Culmination
- Guide children to reflect on what they’ve learned.
- List what children know now.
- Help children find a way to share their learning (make a book, give a presentation, visit another class).

Another [challenge] is to engage children in the intellectual life by supporting the development of traits such as curiosity and the disposition to be thoughtful.
Acting ‘intentionally’ means acting purposefully with a carefully considered goal in mind. We know that the intentional teacher:

- creates clearly-defined learning objectives when planning a lesson for her children
- assesses their progress and modifies activities as needed (Epstein, 2007)
- develops clear communication objectives regarding her program, child development in general, and the child’s progress
- provides this information in such a way that parents can understand and access it easily
- assesses periodically whether the communication system or materials are effectively being used by the parents and modify, if needed.

When families and teachers work as a team and communicate freely, it can provide benefits for everyone in the program. A teacher will feel more effective and confident if the relationship with families involves two-way communication and is one of mutual respect and support. Families benefit because they can feel secure and confident when they leave their children with the teacher. This two-way communication creates a solid partnership that provides essential information to both parents and teachers.

Another important factor in two-way communication is addressing parent concerns. Ann Epstein (2007) advises:

“Parental concerns should never be dismissed, nor should they be seen as the ‘enemy’ of appropriate practice. Rather, they should be respected, and teachers should emphasize the commonalities between home and school goals for children’s education” (p. 20).

Teacher-guided versus Parent-initiated communication

An effective early childhood program combines child-guided and adult-guided educational experiences (Epstein, 2007). In much the same way, an effective atmosphere of communication exists when there is a combination of teacher-guided and parent-initiated communication, where teacher and parent have active roles in the communication process. The teacher plays an integral role in the parent-initiated communication and the parent has a significant, active role in the teacher-guided communication.

Intentional teachers understand that both modes of communication are valid and that offering both to parents will allow them to choose what works best for them with their schedule and style of communicating. For example, parents who have three children in a school for several years may actually need less communication because they have a good rapport with the teachers and management and trust that their children had a good day:

- They have gained lots of knowledge over the years and know the quality and consistency of the school.
- Their children may be older and can share about their own day.
- By their own choice, they need less communication.
- They would then be using less of the parent-initiated technique of communication.
- They would rely on basic daily communication that the teacher provides.

There will always be those new parents who have never experienced leaving their child in someone else’s care and will need a great deal of communication initially.
These parents will want to absorb everything they can about child development and will want to know every detail of their child’s day.
They will definitely use the parent-guided means of communication until they are comfortable.
Then will rely more on the information the teacher offers each day.

It’s being able to read the communication style and expectations of each parent that is being ‘intentional’ about communicating.

Having said this, it is still very important to let all parents know about the various means of communication that are available. Some communication pieces will be obvious in the classroom environment and some will need to be explained. Encourage parents to take advantage of all the resources that are provided and to participate in any interactive communication vehicles that exist. Be sure to give positive reinforcement when a parent uses resources. Survey parents and ask for feedback to help you focus on specific communication techniques or tools that are most effective.

Helping parents to become more intentional with their children

In her article, ‘Mapping Family Resources and Support,’ Tess Bennett (2007) says, “The teacher is an early childhood professional who is intimately involved with the family on behalf of the child.” We know that the relationship a teacher develops with a family can have a powerful effect on the child’s learning. The learning can be further enhanced if teachers help parents to
Intentional Communication Checklist

There are some basic components that every communication area should have such as:

- Children’s artwork displayed and framed in the Communication Area labeled as The Art Gallery
- Lesson plans
- Daily schedule of routines
- Teachers’ schedules
- Daily Note with specific information about the child’s day in cubby or in the child’s file folder
- Field trip information posted in advance
- Menus and Allergy Reports
- File system with individually labeled children’s folders containing documentation of their work (writing samples, artwork, dictated stories)

There are some ideas which could enrich your communication area such as:

- A comfortable environment that is welcoming with a small couch or bench for parent and child to transition into the classroom or to sit and talk at the end of the day.
- A bookshelf with resources like parenting books, family magazines, educational videos or DVDs, children’s books that relate to the theme, books on tape.
- A scrapbook with pictures of children involved in learning and playing together.
- What We Did Today Poster with a short synopsis of what the children did each day and a ‘kick off’ question for the parent to ask the child about on the way home.
- A Parent Pocket to hold articles, activity ideas, and newsletters. This could be a plastic holder attached to the wall or a pocket folder hung on the bulletin board.
- An easel with announcements or pictures of the children located near the door so parents can see it when entering and exiting.
- An Interactive Bulletin Board for parents to post information about their travels, their business, and their culture to share with other families.
- A media center which could include a monitor, computer, DVD, and VCR player. The parent information could be displayed in PowerPoint® format on the monitor. This could include the monthly theme, lesson plan, calendar of events, field trips and special theme days, menu, classroom schedule, birthdays, Child of the Month, and pictures of children in various activities. This takes up less space and offers lots of pertinent and updated information. Parents could also view educational and parenting videos in this area.
- Video tape classroom activities and send video clips to parents through e-mail with a caption of what their child is learning.

become more intentional in their interactions with their children. You can do this by:

- Educating parents on child development through articles and e-mail links so that they can learn more about their child’s age specific development, the latest brain research findings and parenting issues. A good example of this is the Body, Mind and Child web site (www.bodymindandchild.com) which hosts interviews with early childhood education experts.
- Giving them activity ideas to extend the learning at home. Provide handouts of activities, songs, and finger plays that relate to your theme or the skills and concepts the child is working on.
- Providing information regarding the developmental level and progress of their child. You can do this through daily and weekly notes and monthly progress checklists that relate to the theme and concepts being taught. Ultimately you will be providing them with the tools to be more intentional in their interactions with their children.

As their child’s first teacher, a parent is a teaching partner in the classroom and we need to acknowledge the teaching they are already doing. When talking with parents, the intentional teacher needs to ask about the favorite things parents are doing with their children at home and ask them to identify what they think their child is learning. This can be done while informally talk-
Ultimately, you will be providing parents with the tools to be more intentional in their interactions with their children.

A more formal two-way communication technique can be implemented by offering family conferencing opportunities at least twice a year. These conferences allow for trust to be built, increases mutual knowledge and respect, and allows sharing about the program, the child, and community resources. Ultimately, it will help foster good home-school connections. After you have described the child’s strengths, interests, or abilities during the conference, you can suggest activities parents can do at home to extend the learning that is going on in the classroom. Supplying a handout of ideas that are specifically geared to their child is most beneficial. Informing them of the resources in the Parent Lending Library is also an option. Simple activities that use readily available household items are best. Even everyday tasks like doing laundry or setting the table offer learning opportunities such as sorting, counting, matching, and learning new vocabulary. Keep the child’s developmental level in mind when guiding parents to activities in resource books or with activities that you provide. You don’t want them to become frustrated if the activity does not work or is at the wrong level for their child.

Communicate frequently with parents to find out if they are enjoying the extended activities at home. Sending an e-mail is an option if you don’t get a chance to see them on a daily basis. If parents are not doing these extended activities, you might want to modify activity ideas or offer alternative suggestions. And of course, the more information you provide parents about their child’s program or specifically about their day, the more inclined they will be to try to extend the activities at home, especially if they know the child enjoys block play, for example, or listening to books on tape.

In order to provide the best program for children and families, teachers need to be intentional in their communication with parents. Just as we can help children to learn, we can help adults to learn more about their children and be more intentional in their interactions with them. Providing parents with information on child development, activities to extend learning at home, and specific information about their child’s interests and abilities will give them the tools to be more intentional with their child. And providing a space where they can access this information themselves as needed empowers them in regard to their child’s educational experience. The result will be a meaningful learning experience for all involved and a positive start for children and families.

References


Didn’t think of that!: Martin applies intentionality to family communication and scores a real hit in the process. Work with teachers to implement each of the strategies mentioned in this very helpful article. You just might find that family communication expands dramatically as teachers become more intentional and help families do the same with their children. There is even a checklist to assess successful progress.
program practices that support intentionality in teaching
by Pam Schiller

The key to being intentional is simply the act of thinking before doing. Intentional teachers think about all aspects of the learning environment from the arrangement of the classroom to the delivery of instruction prior to acting. Intentional teachers continue thinking as they move through the routines of their day. They are ‘fully present’ with students — giving thoughtful responses to the many questions and comments that occur spontaneously throughout the day. They are constantly monitoring their curriculum and are willing to make adaptations to lessons that fall short of gaining children’s interest or do not have relevance.

Intentional teachers are knowledgeable about what constitutes ‘best’ practice in the early childhood classroom. They focus on developmental domains because they understand that domains define the way that children develop and are the foundation for lifetime learning. They make sure that students have daily experiences that support their physical, social, emotional, cognitive, and linguistic development. Intentional teachers weave content information (literacy, math, science, and so forth) into developmental domains as opposed to focusing on these areas at the expense of developmental domains.

Teaching is an art, using instinct and intuition, but it is also a science, requiring knowledge of research findings related to both human development and subject content. Intentional teachers blend art and science to achieve optimum outcomes for their students. They use their intuition to fine tune, but they base the core of their practices in scientific research.

Here are some practices that support intentional teaching.

Setting up the learning environment

The classroom environment sets the tone for learning. Making thoughtful decisions about the environment helps create a welcoming atmosphere where children will be motivated to learn.

- **Keep the learning environment cozy.** The size of the learning environment affects how children play and interact (Tegano, et al., 1996). Children feel large in comparison to their surroundings. Tegano suggests that when children feel large in relationship to classroom space they enter into more complex and prolonged periods of play. Maria Montessori supported this notion when she insisted that children have child-sized materials to work with and when she specifically identified small work areas in the classroom.

- **Reduce clutter.** The human brain receives between 35,000 and 42,000 bits of information every second—everything within the visual pathway, including the temperature, the feeling of clothing, smells of perfumes, and on and on. The brain is constantly trying to filter out most of these stimuli in order to focus on specific information. Overly decorated rooms and rooms that are cluttered with ‘stuff’ overload the brain and interfere with its ability to narrow information down to what is relevant. Make sure that in the learning environment there is a place that allows the ‘eyes’ to rest—a place void of stimuli. Place important information in front of learners and eliminate what is not important. Rotate materials to help reduce clutter.

Choosing curriculum

Curriculum when broadly defined is every experience children encounter in the learning environment. After all, in the early years, every experience, planned and unplanned and routine, is wiring brain structure and capacity. An intentional teacher’s goal will be to make sure that each child has a minimum of one experience in each domain area, each day.
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Beginnings Workshop

Use routines effectively. Routines help children feel safe. They use routines like adults use their watches. Routines help children judge time and feel in control because they know what comes next. Although routines are important they should not be rigid. If children take a special interest in examining seeds they find outdoors, an intentional teacher will take advantage of this opportunity and allow the interest to drive the activities even if outdoor time expires.

Know developmental continuums. Learning builds on itself. Continuums help children take what they learn from one skill and apply it to the next. Intentional teachers understand the progression of skills. They build their curriculum continuums of skills. For example, in math, children have to have the proper vocabulary before they are able to sort and classify items by attributes. If Audrey doesn’t know colors and shapes, she cannot possible sort items by colors and shapes.

Use the ‘Windows of Opportunity’ as a guide. The ‘Windows of Opportunity’ (see box, p. 59) is a scientific framework that identifies neurological wiring opportunities. The windows open at birth and unfold chronologically up to puberty. An intentional teacher uses this framework to identify key moments when specific experiences will help children wire necessary lifelong skills in each developmental domain. When a window is missed, optimum wiring is diminished. The ‘Windows of Opportunity’ help define ‘best practice’ in the early childhood classroom.

Delivering information

Scientific research has provided a number of significant findings that allow knowledgeable teachers to optimize learning for children. When brain compatible strategies are used to deliver information, memory and alertness are increased and students are able to learn without losing the joy of learning.

Ensure that students feel safe. The brain will always pay attention to safety and well-being before anything else. Learning is inhibited when children feel threatened. For example: if the room temperature is too hot or too cold; if children are tired or hungry; or, if they are fearful of the teacher, the results of failure, or another child; the ability to focus on instructional material is impaired.

Present information in ways that challenge children to use multiple senses. The more senses that deliver information to the brain, the more likely the brain will attend to that specific information. Teach children using visual models, music, manipulatives, and concrete examples. When studying oranges, touch them, taste them, feel them, and smell them.

Nurture curiosity. Curiosity is the fuel of learning. Children are born curious. Bring unusual items into the learning environment; for example, a boat motor part, a bird egg, a fungi, or strips of plastic tubing. Urge students to question, to explore, to experiment, and to compare. Encourage imagination and thinking outside the box. Invite children to create alternative endings to stories. Ask ‘what if’ questions. What if there were only two colors? Accept the non-traditional. Refrain from rote memorization.

Keep lessons short. Just like eating six small meals a day is better for digestion of food, shorter, more frequent lessons are better for the ‘digestion’ of information. The brain can only hold on to a few pieces of data at one time. If students don’t have an opportunity to process information (make sense of it and establish meaning for it) before additional information is introduced, it is likely that information will be lost. Brighter students have no trouble separating the important part of a lesson from the less important parts and then quickly moving forward to process it. Slower learners, however, can get easily bogged down. When they are overloaded with too many details, they get stuck.

Tap into prior knowledge. When past learning is used as a springboard or a bridge to new information, the student has a head start on processing the new information. The brain is always searching for patterns. How is this new information similar to what I already know? Learning is the accommodation of new information that occurs when students are able to make sense of and establish meaning for that information.

Provide time for practice. Practice allows learners to make sense of information. When they are able to apply ideas to real-life situations, they have a much better chance of remembering and conceptually understanding what they are learning. Practice requires feedback from the teacher and self-evaluation by the learner. This ensures that the practice is accurate. Practicing something the wrong way prolongs the time it takes for mastery.
Encourage students to think about information in complex ways. When topics are suitable for higher level processing, have students apply, analyze, synthesize, and evaluate what they learn. Each of these processes enhances and strengthens learning. These processes help students attach meaning and make connections to past learning, and in so doing they increase retention.

Keep learning active. Children have short attention spans. They do most of their learning on their feet. Research suggests (Sousa, 2005) that when learning is interactive and active retention of information increases significantly. When children teach skills to their peers, they have a 90 percent chance of retaining the information. Hands-on learning increases retention by seventy-five percent.

When children are moving they are increasing their oxygen levels, which in turn fuels their neurotransmitters, which in turn increases their alertness. Sitting for long periods of time decreases oxygen and therefore inhibits alertness (Jensen, 2005).

Interacting with children
Teachers make a profound difference in whether a child will have a desire to learn and whether the information learned is valued and used or simply committed to memory. Children look to their teachers as role models. They strive to be recognized by their teachers. They strive to please. Every teacher, every caregiver, holds in his or her hands the power to shape a child’s entire future. The teacher-child relationship can not be underestimated.

Build trust. Trust is the foundation of social and emotional intelligence. Social and emotional intelligence are necessary for cognitive achievement. Trust develops as children begin to know that you will meet their needs. Trust develops over time.

Be ‘fully present.’ Take the time to listen to each child’s comments and statements. Respond as if their words are crucially important. We are born as fledglings. We need to be recognized and nourished by others. Nothing you are doing in the classroom is
more important than children’s need for interaction and recognition. Be there — fully there!

An intentional teacher will help develop intentional students. Intentional teachers make thoughtful choices about the classroom environment, curriculum activities, and student interactions. Intentional students make thoughtful choices about their participation in the classroom. They model the thoughtfulness demonstrated by their teacher. They think before they act. For example they might ask themselves, “Which center offers something that motivates my curiosity?” “What story do I prefer to hear?”

Every teacher’s goal is to help children move forward in their educational journey. An intentional teacher has a map (knowledge of development and research) and a plan for this journey. The intentional teacher consults the map often, uses intuition to make detours when necessary, and always keeps his or her thinking on how to best pack each child’s suitcase with the essential tools that will be needed for a joyful and productive journey.

References


It’s all there: Schiller gives programs a to-do list of ideas for improving intentionality with good programmatic practices. Start at the beginning of the article and work your way through each topic. You may be surprised at how much support for intentionality will result from your efforts.

One a day!: Convene teachers to assess their current curriculum plan to make sure children are getting at least one experience per day in each domain of development. Then, ask them to keep count of how many children participated in each of the planned experiences. Use the results to target children who are falling through the cracks.

Fully present — what does that really mean?: Use technology again here to see if teachers are fully present during their teaching. Videotape short segments of intentional teaching and let teachers self-evaluate their success at being fully present during the interaction. Repeat to see if things are changing based on the discoveries made.