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## HOME MADE TOYS AND LEARNING MATERIALS

When seeking to set up an early childhood program for the pre-school aged child, the question of appropriate materials arises.

### *What kinds of materials should be provided?*

Toy catalogues are full of blocks, brightly painted objects that can be manipulated, Legos and puzzles, all of which are appealing—and expensive. In thinking about what to include in an early childhood setting it is better to begin with the needs of children in that setting rather than to focus on toy catalogues.

### *Children’s needs*

Children learn by experimenting with objects—holding, climbing on, touching, tossing, throwing, tasting, dropping, pulling apart, and putting back together—using all their senses. When children have explored an object and discover what it is like—round, hard, sticky, smelly, soft, etc.—they begin to understand more about their world. So, an ECCD setting should provide opportunities for children to manipulate a variety of objects. The challenge is to provide the children with enough variety. This variety exists in the child’s environment.

- natural objects

These include: acorns, nuts, leaves, shells, pine cones, sand, stones. These can be sorted, lined up from small to large, counted, arranged, taken apart, smelled, etc.

- ‘found’ objects

These can be used as they are or made into things that children can manipulate and play with, and include :

- bottle caps that can be painted for the purposes of sorting, stacking, making designs, counting, etc.
- plastic bottles that can be filled and made into shakers or cut and used to pour water and/or sand
- scrap material that can be used to make dolls, bean bags, toss toys
- used food boxes that can be used to make stacking blocks

- tin cans that can be painted and used to sort by size and color
- old clothes for dress-up and cut apart for scrap material
- toilet paper tubes cut to different lengths, painted, sorted, used for art work
- thread spools for counting, sorting, making designs
- heavy cardboard that can be cut and used as threading boards and puzzles
- corn cobs that can be shellacked, painted, cut to different lengths
- real objects

Children can handle small hammers, brooms, cooking utensils, mops, buckets, screwdrivers, rounded scissors, etc.

- messy materials

Children love to experiment with things that make a mess—clay, soap and water, paints, paste, play dough. If you have these things in the setting be sure they are in a place away from objects you don't want to get wet, and where it is easy to clean up afterwards.

These are all things that can be found within the child's world. Early childhood programs in the USA are not particularly good at being inventive when it comes to equipping a classroom, since they generally have resources to allocate to equipping classrooms. This is not true in the Majority World. So people have been very creative in devising appropriate play materials for young children.

## Resources

Good Manuals and Guides have been developed by ECCD programs around the world to help people make their own materials. Thus there are many sources that can provide ideas on how to make appropriate play materials for children inexpensively, using primarily materials that are already available within the country. Some good resource manuals include:

*Locally Made Play Materials for Young Children: A Handbook*, put together by Niki Abrishamian at UNICEF Namibia.

*Learn as You Play* developed by the Regional training and Resource Centre at the Kenya Institute of Education in Nairobi Kenya.

*Helping Children Learn*, by Zakiya Kurrien at the Center for Learning Resources, Pune India.

*Playing and Learning: A Resource Manual on Cognitively Oriented Programme for Preschool Children* by Indira Swaminathan and published by the Aga Khan Foundation, India.

*Toys for Fun: A Book of Toys for Pre-school Children*, edited by June Carlile, available from Teaching Aids at Low Cost (TALC) in the UK.

*The National Early Childhood Education and Care Programme Play Equipment and Furniture Production Manual*, Ministry of Community Development and Women's Affairs, Zimbabwe.

*Look, Live and Learn: A Mobile Creches Manual on Fun-filled Learning.* Mobile Creches, Bombay India.

## **Buy Tools not Toys**

When donors began funding ECCD programs, many of them provided imported toys since there was a dearth of locally-made toys. In most countries it is no longer necessary to import large quantities of commercial toys. Local entrepreneurs have copied the designs of expensive toys and are making them locally. So, even when purchasing toys it is possible to contract to have them made locally rather than importing them.

UNICEF now uses the slogan *Buy Tools not Toys*. UNICEF advocates providing communities with tools with which the people can make toys for ECCD programs, rather than buying expensive commercial toys that need to be replaced and thus are a continuous drain on program resources. Tools can be used to make new materials as they are required and tools can be used for other construction activities in the community. The tools that could be provided include hammers, a variety of saws, sewing machines, finishing tools, paints, nails, screwdrivers, etc. As a part of training, teachers use the tools to make toys for their program.

## **Cautions**

It would be irresponsible for us to give the impression that home-made toys are always the best and right choice for an ECCD program. Like any good idea, it must be carried out with an awareness of the shortcomings:

- Toys made from discarded materials must be carefully crafted. If made exclusively from “junk” materials, they may be flimsy, unappealing to children, unclean, and/or easily discarded by children and teachers.
- When asking that toys or equipment be constructed locally, it is important to set up some basic parameters of quality, and some basic quality checks. For example, it is important that local toy makers be aware of the dangers of using paint containing lead, and the importance of finishing products carefully, so that they do not contain splinters. It is important for the toy makers to understand the ways children will use the toys, and to make sure that the toys are durable, safe, appealing, and well-constructed.
- The toys that are made need to be appropriate to the developmental level of the children. In addition, they must be constructed carefully, so that they can be used for learning. For example, blocks made to use in learning to count, to measure, and other math concepts, (in the style of Cuissenaire rods) must be made to scale, so that two half-inch blocks do in fact measure one inch, etc.

*The Consultative Group on Early Childhood Care and Development, 1998.*

Early Childhood Counts: Programming Resources for Early Childhood Care and Development. CD-ROM. The Consultative Group on ECCD. Washington D.C.: World Bank, 1999.