



Activity Times That Support Early Learning



What Are the Ingredients of Active Learning?

We know that active learning is happening when these five “ingredients” are present: materials, manipulation, choice, child language and thought, and adult scaffolding. Here’s what we mean by each one:

- Abundant **materials** are provided. For example, children have access to crayons and play dough; dress-up clothes; everyday home objects like pots and pans; books; blocks and building toys; scrap materials like buttons and used boxes; and so forth.
- Opportunities are provided for the **manipulation** (handling) of these materials. Stacking blocks, squeezing play dough, and combining pillows and blankets to make a hideout are some common ways young children manipulate materials.
- Children have a **choice** of what materials they will use, how they will use them, and with whom. Choices are a part of every activity.
- **Child language and thought** is encouraged. Children describe what they are doing and how they understand things. They think about their actions and change what they are doing to take new learning into account.
- Providers, caregivers, parents, and other adults provide **scaffolding**. This means they support children’s current level of thinking and encourage them to advance to the next stage. Adults promote children’s reasoning, problem-solving, and creativity.

Activity Times: Caregiver-Initiated Active Learning

Active Learning and Activity Times

Activity times are caregiver-initiated parts of the day that include opportunities for active learning. “Caregiver-initiated” means that the caregiver has an idea for the activity and plans what will happen based on children’s interests and development. The caregiver gets the activity started and then encourages the children to use the materials in their own unique ways. This means that while all the children do the activity (with the possible exception of infants and toddlers), they aren’t following detailed directions from the caregiver or making look-alike projects that are copies of the caregiver’s model.

Why Activity Times Are Important

- Activity times introduce children to materials and experiences they might otherwise miss.
- Activity times allow the caregiver to focus on and support important concepts.

Two Types of Activity Times

Activity times can be built around

- Songs, music or movement activities
- Materials or toys

You might have two activity times in your day; one for songs, music or movement; the other for learning with materials!

Planning Activity Times Using Materials

A concern expressed by many who are learning about activity times is “Where do you get your ideas?” What follows is a list of four sources that you can use when planning activity times using materials.

- 1. Children’s interests.** The most common, and probably most important, source for activity time ideas is children’s interests. Being sensitive to what children like to do, the materials that they like to use, and how they interact and play with each other is the key to building on children’s favorite play ideas during activity times. In one family child care home, the children were laying the large boxes out in a row and then taking elaborate trips on the “airplane.” This led the provider to plan future activity times in which children played with a variety of luggage, made planes (and other things) out of Duplo and Lego blocks, and used old shoe boxes, cardboard strips, and glue to make airplanes, boats, and cars.
- 2. New and unexplored materials or new combinations of materials.** You can introduce new materials during activity times. This gives children the chance to try out the materials and to help decide where to store them. This also gives the provider the opportunity to observe how children use the materials.

Unexplored materials are another source of activity ideas. These might be things from the play room that children have forgotten about. Reintroducing them during activity time may give children new ideas on using these old favorites. Providing new combinations of familiar materials helps children to think creatively. For example, combining small blocks with animal figures might give some children ideas about creating homes for the animals.

- 3. Content you want to support.** Content areas are a logical source of ideas for activity times. For example, one provider noticed that the children were enjoying sorting the poker chips by color during cleanup. This prompted her to plan an activity time based on classification (sorting).

Another way to use content in planning activity times is to identify what content you are *not* observing or recognizing in children's play. Then, plan some activity times focusing on these areas. For example, a caregiver realized that she hadn't seen her children do much writing (forming letters or even scribbling), something children from other years typically did. So, she planned an activity time with old greeting cards and crayons to introduce the idea of writing (children could write in whatever way they chose).

- 4. Local traditions.** Some activity times come from children's interests in local traditions and community events. For instance, one community was the host to a large regional dog show. This inspired the activity of bathing and brushing the household dog. Other activity times might be planned around local festivals, holidays, or seasonal activities that are part of the children's lives — such as collecting fall leaves, decorating pumpkins, preparing a holiday meal, etc.

Structure for Activity Times

Preparation
Before the Activity Time

Beginning
of the Activity Time

Middle
of the Activity Time

End
of the Activity Time

Structure for Activity Times Using Materials or Toys

Preparation

Well before the activity begins:

- Plan what you will do.
- Gather your materials and sort them into individual containers, making sure each child gets about the same amount of materials.

Beginning: Introduce the Materials

Start with an opening statement. Opening statements might

- Describe the materials.
- Connect the materials to children's previous play.
- Be a short, open-ended story connected to the materials.
- Focus on a content area.

Pass a set of materials out to each child.

Middle: Support Children's Ideas and Learning

The caregiver can

- Move from child to child.
- Watch what individual children do with the materials.
- Listen to what children say about what they are doing.
- Imitate or copy what a child is doing by using the materials in a similar way.
- Talk with children about what they are doing.
- Refer children to each other for ideas and assistance.
- Bring out back-up materials as needed.

End: Bring the Activity to a Close

These techniques will help assure a smooth closure to the activity time:

- Give children a 3-minute warning.
- Ask the children to help clean up.
- Let the children know where they can find the materials again.

Caregiver-Initiated or Caregiver-Directed?

For each activity time, first decide if all the ingredients of active learning are present: materials, manipulation, choice, child thought and language, adult scaffolding. Then decide if the activity is caregiver-initiated or caregiver-directed. If you think it's caregiver-directed, decide what you could do to let children experience all the ingredients of active learning.

1. Crepe Paper Collage

- **Beginning:** It is activity time and the caregiver begins with this opening statement:
“Yesterday I noticed how much fun everyone was having moving with the paper streamers that we took outside. So, today I have many different-colored streamers that you can make a collage with. Look in your baskets and take out the glue, the crepe paper streamers, and the paper. Let’s see what you can do with these materials? Okay, you’d better get busy!”
- **Middle:** One child begins to tear her paper streamers in pieces and eventually glues them on the construction paper. Another child glues them on as whole pieces without tearing them. One child crumbles the streamers into little balls and plays a game of toss and catch with them. The children are busily working. The caregiver observes the children. She tears her paper streamer into pieces. She makes comments about what she see the children doing. She moves over to the one playing catch and she crumbles her own paper streamer into a ball and joins the game. She moves to the child who is gluing and copies what the child is doing. Together, she and the children talk about their work. She gives the children a 3-minute warning to prepare for cleanup.
- **End:** The children clean up by putting the extra or unused materials in their baskets and their collages in their cubbies. The caregiver finishes cleaning up the table.

Consider this activity. *Are all of the ingredients of active learning present?*

- *Materials*
- *Manipulation*
- *Choice*
- *Child thought and language*
- *Adult scaffolding*

Is this activity caregiver-initiated or caregiver-directed?

2. Making Bookmarks

- **Beginning:** To start the activity time, the provider reads a short poem from a book of children's poetry. When she finishes, she asks the children, "Do you remember what people do to mark their place in a book?" Children begin to share ideas, talking about what they know about bookmarks. The provider accepts their ideas and repeats their descriptive words. As she passes out the materials, she says, "In your baskets, there are materials you can use to make your own bookmarks. Let's see what you can make." The materials include wide strips of card stock (heavy paper), rubber stamps and ink pads, yarn pieces, and markers. She also has a 3-hole punch on the table.
- **Middle:** The provider moves to each child, getting down on their level, observing how children use materials and making comments about what she sees. She listens to the children as they describe what they are doing. One child punches holes in his card stock and ties pieces of yarn in the holes. Two children use the markers to write letters on the front and back of their strips. One child ties two pieces of card stock together. One child uses the ink pads to stamp both his hands and calls them his "tattoos." As she moves from child to child, the caregiver imitates some of the children's actions with her own set of materials.
- **End:** Following a 3-minute warning, she asks the children if they would like to keep their bookmarks here, or take them home to use with their books.

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3. Making Sandwiches

- **Beginning:** The caregiver says to the group, “Yesterday I noticed many of you were pretending to work at a sandwich shop. I saw some of you taking orders, making sandwiches, and buying sandwiches. Today for activity time, I think it might be fun if we make our own sandwiches and then we can eat them for lunch. I have lots of ingredients here for us to use. Let’s all get started. Here is a bun for each of you.” She passes a paper plate with a hot dog bun to each child.
- **Middle:** The caregiver gives explicit instructions on how to construct the sandwiches. She begins by telling the children to open their buns. She then gives them a choice to put on mayonnaise, mustard, or both. The children wait to use each ingredient and smear it on their sandwich. After everyone finishes, she tells them to pick up their shredded lettuce and put it in the bun. She cautions them, “Only use a little, because we have more ingredients to add.” The caregiver continues with the rest of the ingredients in this order: tomatoes, pickles, salami, bologna and finally, cheese. When one child asks to put on the cheese after the tomatoes, the caregiver states, “It’s not a sandwich if the cheese doesn’t go on last.”
- **End:** When the sandwiches are complete, the caregiver wraps them up and writes each child’s name on his or her sandwich. She tells the children that they will eat the sandwiches later for lunch. Next, she takes out a large piece of paper and writes the word “BUN” on it. She asks the children if they can list the ingredients they put on their sandwich. One child suggests cheese. The caregiver corrects the child by telling him, “Not yet, what came after the bun?” Most children just look at her, so she simply writes down the ingredients in the correct order.

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4. Magnet Magic

- **Beginning:** Ms. Connie is trying out an activity she read about on an Internet Web site. She has a basket with one magnet and an assortment of items, some that are attracted to the magnet, and some that are not. She also has a chart titled “Magnet Magic” with a line down the middle. One column is labeled “YES,” the other column is labeled “NO.” Ms. Connie says to the children, “Today we will explore magnets. I have a magnet and lots of other things. We will predict if each object sticks to the magnet or not. Let’s begin.”
- **Middle:** Ms. Connie holds up an item from her basket and asks the children, “What do you think, will this stick to the magnet or not?” Some children say yes, some say no, some say, “What is it?” Ms. Connie explains what the object is and then asks, “How many say ‘Yes, it will stick?’ Raise your hands so I can count how many yeses and how many noes.” She counts out loud and says, “Five yeses. Okay, how many say ‘No, it won’t stick to the magnet?’ ” Turning to Ramona, she says, “You can only vote once, is it yes or no? You have to make a decision; you can’t raise your hand for both. So which is it going to be? Yes or no?” Ramona shrugs her shoulders and says, “I dunno.” “I’ll just put you down for a yes,” says Ms. Connie. Then she says, “Three noes and five yeses. Now let’s see who wins. I’ll try to pick up each object with my magnet to see if it sticks or not. This first one isn’t sticking, so the noes win this round. Let’s do it again with the next item.” Ms. Connie continues in this manner with all 10 items in her basket.
- **End:** When she finishes, Ms. Connie says that each child may have a chance to try to find something in the basket that will stick to the magnet. She explains that they only have one turn to try something. After everyone gets one turn she announces it’s time to go outside.

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5. The Fishing Derby

- **Beginning:** Mrs. Jamie decides to base her activity time on a local tradition of great interest to the children — The Annual Fishing Derby. It is a few days after the weekend-long festival, and the classroom is buzzing with talk of fishing, festival games, and rides. Mrs. Jamie passes out baskets containing fishing items, including bobbers, non-lead sinkers, fishing line, rubber worms, lures with hooks removed, and different-sized hooks protected in plastic containers. Children get excited about what they see. They all start talking about the items and what they saw at the Fishing Derby. Mrs. Jamie watches and listens.
- **Middle:** The children continue to talk about their experiences. Some children ask about items they are unfamiliar with. Other children provide ideas. When there is a lull in the children's conversation, Mrs. Jamie brings out some additional items, the kind that children can try on and pretend with: waders, fishing hats, and vests. She also has some child-sized fishing poles that she made from old curtain rods she had around the house. Several children try on the fishing attire and pretend to fish using the rods.
- **End:** Mrs. Jamie tells the children that they have 5 more minutes to play with the materials, and asks them where they should store them in the play room. Some children suggest placing the items in the house area so that they can continue to play with them. Mrs. Jamie agrees and tells them to take them there on their way to outside time. The children place the items in the house area and put on their coats for outside.

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6. Making Pumpkin Faces

- **Beginning:** Oneida, the caregiver, decides to do an activity time based on a local tradition: making pumpkin faces. The night before, she cuts out four pumpkin faces (one for each child and one for herself). She cuts out two triangle eyes, a rectangle nose and a smiley mouth for each pumpkin. To introduce the activity, she shows children the model of the pumpkin face that she has made. She points to the eyes and asks the children to tell her what they are. They say “eyes.” She repeats this for the nose and for the mouth. She then passes out a pumpkin face to each child and tells them that they get to make a pumpkin face just like hers.
- **Middle:** Oneida tells the children to point to where they think the eyes should go. She then comes around to each child and glues their eyes down. If a child points to a spot that Oneida doesn’t think is the right place for the eyes, she moves the child’s finger to the “correct” position. She repeats this for the nose and for the mouth.
- **End:** Once all the faces are complete, Oneida asks the children to once again point to the eyes, the nose, and the mouth. She then collects the pumpkin faces from each child and tells them that they can take them home to show their families what they’ve made.

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7. Exploring Pumpkins

- **Beginning:** Rosita, the caregiver, decides to do an activity based on a local tradition: carving pumpkins. She has two small pumpkins, one for each of the children, two safety carving knives, and two spoons. To begin the activity, she shows one of the pumpkins to the children. She asks what they think is inside. One child says “candy,” the other child shrugs his shoulders. “Would you like to find out?” Rosita asks. “YEAH!” they shout. She tells them it might be messy so they have to protect the table and their clothes first. Together, she and the children cover the kitchen table with newspapers. The children each put on an old paint shirt and she helps them roll up their sleeves. She carefully cuts the top off one of the pumpkins and both children eagerly look inside. “Ewww, it’s gooey!” says one child. “It smells good in there,” says the other. Rosita gives the pumpkin to one child and cuts the top off the other and gives it to the other child. She tells them, “You can use your spoon to scoop out the insides.”
- **Middle:** Rosita positions herself between the two children. One child uses the spoon to carefully take out seeds. The other child uses her hands to pull out handfuls of the pumpkin innards. Rosita watches what each child does. She says what she sees, labeling the children’s actions with words. Eventually, the children get the pumpkin seeds and flesh scooped out. They squeeze, poke, and spread the pumpkin pulp and seeds around on the newspaper. Rosita asks them if they would like to make faces on their pumpkins. The children don’t answer her because they are too busy exploring the seeds and the gooey pumpkin. Rosita decides that this might be more important for the children to do now. Perhaps they will be more interested in making faces on them tomorrow. So, she copies what the children are doing and squeezes, pokes, and spreads the pumpkin around too.
- **End:** At the end of the activity time, Rosita gives the children a 5-minute warning. She gives them a bowl to put the seeds and pulp in. She puts the pumpkins on the counter and together with the children, gathers up the newspaper and puts it in the trash. They all go to the sink and wash their hands.

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Activity Time Planning Form

Idea	
Materials <i>Back-up materials</i>	
Beginning <i>Opening statement</i>	
Middle <i>Your ideas for scaffolding children at different developmental levels</i>	
End <i>Warning and transition to next part of routine</i>	
Follow-up Ideas	