



I Know Where It Goes! Organizing Your Play Room



Open-Ended Materials

There is no right or wrong way to use open-ended materials — they can be used in many ways. Both younger and older children can use them in a variety of ways, making them ideal for family child care settings.

My ideas for open-ended materials:

Guidelines for Selecting Toys and Materials

1. Choose toys and materials that reflect the children's interests.

Observation is the key. What do the children talk about? What materials are the most popular? Once you know what children's interests are, choose additional materials that will extend their play further. For example, the children in one family child care home were interested in pretending to be stylists and customers in a beauty shop. The provider built on children's interests by providing a piece of cloth (for a neck drape), empty shampoo bottles, combs, barrettes, and a hand mirror (from the discount store).

2. Choose toys and materials that are appropriate for the children's ages (developmental levels).

Materials that have too many pieces (like a 45-piece puzzle), that are too complicated to use (an Erector Set), or are potentially dangerous (a microwave oven or a glue gun) should be avoided. Instead, the materials should promote one or more of the many types of play (see #4), be interesting to the children, and be safe.

A list of developmentally appropriate materials can be found on pages 8–10. This list represents a sampling of materials you might use in a family child care home.

3. Provide toys and materials that can be used in a variety of ways.

Flexibility is important when children of different ages and abilities use the same materials. Objects like a real sofa provide many possibilities for children. For example, the sofa can be a comfortable place to sit with a book, a place to store things under, a place to crawl behind, a puppet stage, or a pretend hospital. Think of all the things a child might do with a paper grocery bag.

In choosing toys for children, many providers tend to think only in terms of toys that have a specific purpose and function: materials like coloring books, "See and Say" toys, Lotto games, and shape-sorting boxes. These "closed-ended" materials may lose their

appear rapidly, may not accommodate children with developmental differences, and often are expensive.

“Open-ended” materials are an alternative. These are nonspecific materials (for example, boxes, paper plates, and yarn) that can be used in countless ways by children and that adapt easily to children’s wide-ranging interests and developmental needs. Some open-ended materials to consider are refrigerator boxes, pillows, pillowcases, blankets, rope, buckets, shoeboxes, and string. Also, try fishing tackle boxes, sorting trays, sleeping bags, shells, dried peas and beans, wood scraps, old magazines, wallpaper books, and rug scraps. Note that many open-ended materials are also “found materials” — waste, scrap, or recycled materials that can be gathered for free or are inexpensive to purchase.

It is also important to provide many “real-life” materials — materials not intended as toys — that children can use to accomplish real tasks or to depict the experiences of their everyday lives. For example, when possible, allow children to use adult-sized tools, old appliances with the cords cut off, and used adult clothing, instead of the toy replicas of these materials. Children love to use real things because these objects enable them to imitate the important adults in their lives.

4. Choose toys and materials that support the different types of play that are typical of young children.

Children engage in different types of play based on their evolving thinking, reasoning, language, and social skills. We need to provide materials that support each of these types of play — materials such as those listed above, that can be used in a variety of ways:

- **Pretending** — materials to pretend and role-play with, such as dress-up clothes, pieces of fabric, a hair dryer (with the cord cut off), office supplies like pencils, note pads and calculators
- **Building and making things** — materials to build and make things with, such as blocks (large and small), wood scraps, cardboard tubes, Styrofoam, carpet scraps

- **Exploring** — materials to explore the properties and functions of, such as string, glue, tape, play dough, water, dried beans
- **Simple games** — materials to make their own games with, such as cards, dice, beans, counters, pads of paper

Remember, always make sure the toys and materials are safe, clean, and well maintained.

Materials That Have the Greatest Play Value

Real Materials	Free, Found, Recycled Materials	Natural Materials

Labeling and Storing Toys and Materials

5. Store toys and materials so that children can reach them.

It is essential that toys and materials be accessible to children. This means storing materials on low, open shelving, in sturdy containers like plastic tubs, and in baskets or boxes on the floor. The main reason for storing materials in these ways is to make it possible for children to find, use, and return the materials they need independently.

6. Use see-through containers or containers without lids so children can see what's inside.

Clear plastic containers work best for storage, but shoeboxes, dish tubs, gallon milk jugs with the tops cut off, gallon ice cream tubs, silverware trays, and open baskets all make serviceable containers as well. The advantages of these types of containers are that children can see into them, they fit on shelving, and they can be carried around easily by the children.

7. Make sure toys and materials are consistently stored in the same place.

If you rotate materials or put them out on the tables or shelves on an irregular basis rather than having them out and available at all times, you will find that the children will use the materials in a less mature manner and will pay less attention to putting them away when they are finished. If materials are not available to children in consistent locations, children are less motivated to care for their materials and they are robbed of opportunities to solve problems, make decisions, and carry out their plans.

Instead of rotating materials, provide toys and materials stored in the same locations for long periods of time. When deciding where to store materials in the room, focus on storing similar items together. For example, materials to draw with — crayons, markers, pencils, and pens — all go together on one shelf. On another shelf you might have materials that fasten things together — tape, paste, paper clips, and a stapler.

8. Label shelves and containers so children can find and put away toys and materials when they are finished playing with them.

Labeling means marking the container, shelf, or other space where materials go. Labels really help children know what goes in the container and where to put it when they are done. Labels make cleanup a breeze! Labels can be

- The actual object, such as a bead or Lego (hot-glued to the container)
- A photo of the object or toys
- A tracing of the object or toys
- A drawing of the object or toys

Use labels that children can “read,” for example, pieces of the material itself, tracings, drawings, catalog pictures, box tops, photographs, or photocopies. If some of your children are ready for them, you may also use word labels (always in combination with a label that can be understood visually). When deciding which of the many types of labels to use, the most important consideration is whether the children are able to understand the label.

Enlist the help of parents and children in making labels. Make two labels for each item. To make them last, cover both sides of the labels with clear Con-Tact paper or laminate them. Then tape one label to the container holding the material and another to the shelf.

Sample Materials List for an Active Learning Family Child Care Home

The following list represents some of the many possible materials children could find in a family child care home. Use this list to help plan for materials you want to add to your setting.

Art Materials

Materials for mixing and painting

- _ tempera paint
- _ liquid starch for finger paint
- _ water-color paints
- _ easel
- _ plastic squeeze bottles
- _ jars with lids for storing paints
- _ paintbrushes of different sizes
- _ muffin tins, frozen food containers
- _ sponges
- _ paper towels
- _ smocks or paint shirts

Materials for holding things together and taking them apart

- _ scissors
- _ yarn
- _ string
- _ rubber bands
- _ paperclips
- _ cellophane tape
- _ masking tape
- _ white glue
- _ paste
- _ paper punch
- _ staplers

Materials for two-dimensional representations

- _ pencils
- _ colored pencils
- _ crayons
- _ chalk
- _ markers
- _ magazines and catalogs
- _ paper of different sizes, textures, colors
- _ aluminum foil
- _ wax paper
- _ tissue paper
- _ cotton balls
- _ paper scraps
- _ paper plates
- _ shoeboxes
- _ wallpaper samples
- _ cardboard pieces

Materials for three-dimensional representations

- _ play dough with accessories
- _ buttons
- _ straws
- _ ice cream tubs
- _ empty thread spools
- _ pipe cleaners
- _ clothespins
- _ bits of wood
- _ sequins
- _ cardboard tubes
- _ paper bags

- _ cloth, felt, rug, vinyl scraps
- _ feathers
- _ Styrofoam bits

Pretending Materials

Materials children see at home

- _ telephones, cell phones
- _ old clocks
- _ plastic tool box
- _ soft chair
- _ broom and dustpan
- _ toaster (with cord cut)
- _ nonworking microwave (with cord cut)
- _ luggage
- _ small tables and chairs

Materials for pretend play

- _ props for pretend play (e.g., barbershop, farm, fire station, doctor's office, restaurant, gas station)
- _ dolls, stuffed animals
- _ doll beds
- _ baby rattles, bibs, bottles
- _ clothes and hats
- _ mirror
- _ sleeping bag

Kitchen equipment

- _ child-sized stove, refrigerator, sink
- _ adult-sized pots and pans
- _ cooking utensils
- _ large and small spoons
- _ large and small spatulas
- _ eggbeater
- _ egg timer
- _ ladle
- _ ice cube trays
- _ cake tins
- _ mixing bowls

- _ measuring cups
- _ canister set
- _ sifter
- _ potholders
- _ adult-sized plastic plates, cups, bowls
- _ sponges, dishcloths, towels
- _ napkins, place mats
- _ plastic fruits and vegetables
- _ poker chips, bottle caps
- _ Styrofoam bits, buttons, small pine cones
- _ acorns
- _ cereal boxes
- _ cans, cartons, jars, and bags

Building and Block Materials

Materials to build with

- _ building materials
- _ unit blocks (wooden)
- _ small blocks
- _ cardboard blocks
- _ blocks made from shoeboxes
- _ milk cartons
- _ carpet pieces
- _ bedspreads, old sheets, and blankets
- _ large and small boxes
- _ wood scraps
- _ tubes

Materials to represent with

- _ steering wheel, used keyboard, telephone
- _ small trucks
- _ small cars and people
- _ Tinkertoys
- _ wooden train set and track
- _ barn and farm animals

Toys

- _ Legos
- _ marble games
- _ puppets
- _ puzzles
- _ magnifying glasses
- _ nesting cans, coffee cans, or cups
- _ washers, nuts and bolts
- _ pegs and pegboards
- _ stacking rings
- _ magnets
- _ bead stringing materials
- _ buttons, stones, shells
- _ picture dominoes
- _ parquetry blocks
- _ little people

Reading and Writing

Materials for writing

- _ pencils
- _ crayons
- _ erasers
- _ old computer keyboard (with cord cut)
- _ markers
- _ typewriter
- _ rubber stamps
- _ paperclips
- _ tape
- _ rulers
- _ different kinds of paper: graph paper and paper with
and without lines
- _ envelopes
- _ stamps or stickers
- _ inkpad

Materials for reading

- _ assorted books
- _ photograph books (field trips etc.)
- _ child-made books
- _ beanbag chair or large pillows

Sand and Water Play

Materials for water play

- _ plastic cars and trucks
- _ pans, dishes, and silverware
- _ plastic tubing
- _ squeeze bottle
- _ funnels
- _ measuring cups and spoons
- _ smocks

Materials for sand play

- _ materials also used for water play
- _ shovels, spoons
- _ sifters and strainers
- _ dried beans, peas, sawdust, and wood shavings to add
to sand or substitute for it

Music and Movement Materials

- _ streamers
- _ triangles
- _ bells
- _ sand blocks
- _ maracas
- _ wooden xylophone
- _ tambourines
- _ oatmeal box drums
- _ CDs and music player

Innovative Ideas for Materials

Introducing children to materials they are unfamiliar with or encouraging children to use familiar materials in new ways can generate lots of interest, excitement, and creativity in the children. Below are some innovative suggestions for selecting and using materials.

- ◆ Put **yarn** in a 2-liter plastic soda pop container for easier (and less messy) access for children. Cut a flap in the back of the plastic container, and put the yarn ball in with the end of the yarn hanging out of the bottle top. Tape the back shut.
- ◆ Isn't it frustrating to lose the tops of the **markers** all the time! One solution is to get a 1-foot piece of 2 x 4 lumber and drill holes the exact size of the marker tops in the wood. Insert and glue the marker tops into the holes. Now you have a permanent storage place for the markers and you won't lose the tops.
- ◆ Painting at the easel can be an isolated experience for children. One way to make painting more of a group activity is to build a **large group easel** on the fence outside. Use a sheet of plywood and angle it off from the fence and build a storage tray for paint. You will find more children painting together because of the positive social experiences they are having together.
- ◆ Children love to fit **plastic plumbing pipe** together. Ask a local plumber to donate some with lots of fittings and then store it with the blocks and building toys.
- ◆ Providing only white paper and one or two choices of paint at the easel can be limiting. Instead, try some **"3-D" easel painting!** Attach old shoes, small boxes, or wood scraps to the easel so children can paint them. Clothespins or double-sided tape are often handy for holding the objects on the easel.
- ◆ Another way to add fun to painting is to offer many **more color and brush choices**. Children can paint with cotton swabs, sponge pieces, feathers. You might also provide

children with adult-sized house-painting brushes and cans filled with water and encourage them to “paint” the sidewalk.

- ◆ Would you like a source of inexpensive paper that the children love? Go to any business or office that uses computers and ask the staff for **computer paper** that they were going to recycle or throw away. Often you can get paper in different sizes.
- ◆ **Luggage** is a big hit with preschool children. The children fill the bags (everything from backpacks, to small suitcases, to briefcases) with their treasures and make frequent “trips.” This can promote much cooperative play.
- ◆ To promote pretend play about a topic children are interested in, add props to support their play. For example, try some **camping gear**: a small pop-up tent, sleeping bags, a cooler, flashlights.
- ◆ Cut some **large fabric scraps** in pieces about 3 feet square. Children can use these for capes, dresses, doll hammocks — the possibilities are unlimited. Make at least one fabric square per child.
- ◆ Consider adding some **poker chips** to your toy shelves. Children love them for sorting, building, cooking with, and all kinds of pretending.
- ◆ Don’t throw away excess **twist ties**! Children can use them to fasten things together when building with small toys or doing art projects. Twist ties are similar to pipe cleaners in their uses but much cheaper.
- ◆ Expand your reading and writing materials with the addition of **clipboards, message pads, and folders**. Children often use these materials to incorporate writing into their dramatic play.

- ◆ Empty **tennis ball cans** or **cylindrical potato chip containers** make versatile toys. Children use them for building, pretending, or carrying things.

- ◆ In addition to tableware for people, consider adding a **dog dish** to your play room. Children use them in many ways: for dumping and pouring, for dog and cat play, to hold things. Child-sized **lunchboxes** are another household item that children will use imaginatively.