

Energize Your Program and Each Other with New Ideas

By Christine Belinda, Early Childhood Program Specialist

Although consistency and routine are profoundly important in our work with children, new ideas and opportunities are vital as well. Simple additions and modifications in our programs, routines, and ourselves can inspire interest, invite learning, and invigorate our work. Whether you are a one-person operation or part of a large program, consider implementing a few new ideas and opportunities to energize your program and each other.

Create a new ritual of coming together

Most educators have gathering times and rituals where the group comes together, such as birthdays, circle meetings, story times, etc. Some are daily, weekly, or intermittent. Brainstorm new rituals to come together, such as Music Mondays, where all are encouraged to bring in music that their families listen and dance to. Or try Forest Days like Ally at the [bakers and astronauts](#) blog, where a large part of the day is spent outside. Building rituals in coming together strengthens relationships and community.

Make a Wonder Board

Create a Wonder Board, such as a large wipe off board or chalk board, as a place to share things we wonder about and things we find wonderful. Encourage children to draw, write, and create the things they find curious, interesting, and inspiring (adults can help). Model the “*I wonder*” concept to children by sharing your own curiosities and include them on the wonder board. Model practices such as placing a picture of something you find inspiring. Use the Wonder Board in daily meetings, one on one time, or whenever it is relevant.

Take 5

Many educators are trying to find the right balance of environmental materials and choices to not overwhelm children, yet still inspire and deepen their play. Start by cleaning the environment really well. Next, take out 5 items (or more!) and then add 5 new (or not). Adding five new is up to you.

Practice Creating Optimism

It's important to have a sense of optimism in our work and in ourselves, but it may take practice to start thinking this way. Try this activity with adults: Gather paper, pen and scissors. Reflect on some of the negative thoughts you might have, such as "I'm not creative," or "I'm not smart enough". You can choose whether or not to share these ideas with others. Choose one negative comment to write on the piece of paper. Imagine yourself saying this to someone else. Most likely you would not say this type of negative expression to anyone; the thought then being: *why would we ever say this to ourselves?* Even if the comment is something we need to work on, think about how the idea could be presented in a positive manner, such as "I'm going to read about art experiences to learn more about creativity."

Reflect next on what you feel proud of in your work, what strengths you have, or characteristics that make you special. Chose one and write it on the same piece of paper. Next, read aloud the positive comment and think about how it makes you feel and how this contributes to your work. Can you see yourself saying this to someone else? The last part of this activity is to cut the paper in half separating your two written comments. Take the negative comment and cut it into small pieces and throw it away! Take the positive comment and put it somewhere that you will see it often to remind yourself of your strengths and positive way of thinking. Continue to practice creating optimism!

"It is just as necessary for teachers as for children to feel confidence in their own ideas." ~ Eleanor Duckworth, *"The Having of Wonderful Ideas" and Other Essays on Teaching & Learning*

Yo, Yo, Yoga

Moving and exercising are extremely important to our well being and keen thinking. Add simple yoga, movement, and stretching throughout the day with children to energize and stay alert. We know exercise is important to the body, but it is equally important to the brain.

Try the STAR activity: **S**mile, **T**ake a deep breath (stretch your arms over head while taking in a deep breath) **A**nd **R**elax (slowly release the deep breath and lower arms). Visit the local library for DVDs and books on movement, exercise, and yoga for children.

Embrace Art

Being surrounded by beauty and interesting images makes us curious and adds to the vibrancy of learning. Art can also make us feel good about where we are. Along with using the children's art creations, add new and innovative art to your environment. Here are a few ideas:



- Use interesting images from magazines, wrapping paper, maps, sheet music, posters (look at thrift stores), and of course, the children's art. Contact a frame or craft shop for donated recycled mat board that can be used to mount art work on. Look around your environment for interesting places to display items.
- Bring nature in by displaying beautiful items of nature, such as feathers, rocks, tree branches and stumps, and leaves.
- Fill empty plastic bottles with colored water and line up near a window for light to shine through.
- Enlarge children's drawing on copiers and display.

Create a Top 10

Create your top 10 list of things you love, can't teach without, find interesting, and inspiring. Find a time to either share these lists together or exchange lists with others caring for children, including parents. Use your top 10 lists for staff meetings, inspiration, or self reflection. Here is a sample:

1. Books: *You Go Away* by Dorothy Corey and *The Kissing Hand* by Audrey Penn
2. A pocket apron with paper, pen, sticky notes, note paper, tissues, camera, and cell phone (programmed with all emergency information needed)
3. A flip style camera/video recorder
4. Clay & play dough
5. Blocks of any kind
6. Good junk and recyclables for inspiring art materials
7. A song book (book with all our favorite songs)
8. Library card
9. Early Education blogs
10. Nature in any form

Go Visiting

Connect with other programs working with children and start the process of building relationships and collaboration. Start by inviting other programs to visit your program with hopes that you also can visit their programs. Suggest bringing a notebook and camera (remember to get permission to photograph) to jot down all

the great ideas you see (and maybe your Top 10 lists!). Although it can be difficult to schedule, it is very beneficial to visit other programs to learn new ideas and become acquainted with each other's work. Some programs try meeting at night or on the weekends. Follow up with any questions through email or phone conversations. Some groups decide to continue and deepen their collaborations by establishing study groups to explore building their work caring for children.