

Reading Assignment

Understanding Work Time



Understanding Work Time

What Children Do at Work Time

To support children appropriately at work time, it is important for adults to understand what children do in relation to plans, social settings, types of play, and conversations.

■ **Children are involved in initiating, working on, modifying, completing, and changing their plans.**

After children have indicated a choice or talked about a plan with an adult, they are very likely to get started immediately. The transition from gestures or words to action marks the beginning of work time for each child.

The way young children carry out their plans varies from child to child. Some children stay in one spot, while others move from place to place. For example, Kathryn works very intently at the art table making

a roof for her birdhouse, while Kobe sits on the floor putting together a puzzle. They work for a long time at their projects until each is satisfied with the results. Other children make plans that take them from area to area: “We made cookies, and now we’re takin’ them around to everybody.” Still other children start working in a fairly empty interest area but move when they feel crowded. Darius, for example, lines up all the animals in the block area but moves to the animals in the toy area when several other builders enter the block area.

Some children begin to carry out their ideas — making a fishing-net boat, for example — but then run into a problem, such as what to use for a net. They may modify their original idea, “Let’s pretend it’s a pole fishing boat,” or they may figure out how to make a fishing net. Depending on how long it takes them to come up with a satisfactory net, children may or may not get to use it on their fishing-net boat that day.

Understanding Work Time (continued)

Some children start working on their plans, stop to watch or join another child or group, and then return to what they were doing originally. When Kari, Yusef, and Dominic are ready to put on their show, they recruit an audience of children who obligingly interrupt their own plans to watch and applaud.

Watching young children pursue their plans at work time, we can often see that while choices and plans shape children's initial actions, they can also lead children to actions and problems they did not anticipate. One experience leads to another, and children's play expands beyond their initial plans. Athi and Maddie, for example, planned to put out the fire in Joseph's house, but when Joseph's house was not ready for the fire, they returned to the "planning road map" to choose another place to put out a fire. Cayden could not find any "bee" paper that suited him, but he found some great "ant" paper, so he decided to make ants instead.



Understanding Work Time (continued)

Children spend varying amounts of time executing their initial plans — from 2 minutes, to 15 minutes, to all of work time, to two or three consecutive work times. During one work-time session, some children may make and complete several related plans. Caroline, for example, made a crown, colored it, and even assumed the role of a princess. Other children may begin and complete their initial plan and then go on to something entirely different. Rosie, for example, read a book to Holly, then joined Yen in the sand, and then painted.

Observed as a whole, a group of 18 children at work time can exhibit what looks like a lot of random movement. Observed individually, however, each child's actions generally fit an internal logic that is related to the child's particular purpose. So, while children move from place to place and talk

with one another along the way, their actions more often than not serve some purpose they have set for themselves — to get a book to “read” to their “sick baby,” to take play dough cookies to everybody, to get the right kind of yarn for their nets, to gather up an audience, to put the birdhouse outside for the birds, to find something to stand on to tie the streamers up over their house.

Research and experience have shown that once children start their plans, they are very likely to complete them. In their study of the plan-do-review process, Berry and Sylva (1987) report that “31 of the 34 children who made plans completed them (91%). Furthermore, of these 31 children, 30 immediately started an activity related to their stated plan. Thus, children are purposeful and get down to work right away” (p. 20).

Understanding Work Time (continued)

■ Children play in a variety of social contexts.

During work time, children are involved with others to varying degrees. They watch others, play by themselves, play next to others, and in pairs and groups. These categories of social interaction are similar to those described by Mildred Parten (1932). Parten reported that young children are involved in *onlooking*, *solitary play*, *parallel play*, *associative play*, and *cooperative play*. She observed that younger preschool children tend to watch and play by themselves, while older preschool children tend to play with others. The research of Rubin, Fein, and Vandenberg (1983) supports Parten's finding that as preschool children grow older, solitary play tends to decrease while interactive play tends to increase. In the face of these important observations, adults must recognize that "solitary play does not necessarily mean a child lacks social ability" (Sponseller 1982, p. 218). It may simply mean that

the older preschool child sometimes chooses to play alone and has the confidence to do so.

It is also interesting to note that playing in pairs seems to lead preschool children into more complex play. For example, early childhood researchers have noted that "4½- to 5½-year-old children achieve their highest levels of play when in the company of adults, whereas younger children (3½ to 4½ years old) have higher proportions of challenging play when playing in child-child pairs or in parallel to others. In the company of adults, children in both age groups are more likely to engage in complex play when the adult is actually interacting with them rather than merely being present" (Sylva, Roy, and Painter 1980, pp. 71–73). Further, children playing alone rarely change their level of play, but each child in a pair is more likely to shift toward more complex play, while a child playing in a group is more likely to shift toward simpler play.

Understanding Work Time (continued)

■ Children engage in different types of play.

Based on their emerging capacities and interests, children play with people and materials in ways that involve a range of interactions — from simple exploratory manipulation to complex social and imaginative play. The types of play that preschoolers are typically involved in include **exploratory play, constructive play, pretend play, and games.**

Exploratory play. This relatively simple type of play involves manipulating materials, trying out new actions, and repeating them, all of which enable the child to practice what Smilansky and Shefatya (1990) describe as “physical capabilities and the chance to explore and experience the material environment” (p. 2).

At work time, children involved in exploratory play spend time manipulating materials to see what will happen — squishing and patting play dough, filling



Understanding Work Time (continued)

and emptying containers, cutting paper into little strips, standing all the blocks on end, running their hands through a tub of buttons, smearing glue all over a piece of paper. In these explorations, many of the key developmental indicators will be seen (e.g., 17. Fine-motor skills, 34. Shapes, 45. Observing, etc.).

Constructive play. The development from exploratory play to constructive play is “a progression from manipulation of a form to formation; from sporadic handling of sand and blocks to building something which will remain even after the child has finished playing. The child expresses activity through these ‘creations’ and recognizes himself or herself as ‘creator’” (Smilansky and Shefatya 1990, p. 2).

Children involved in constructive play build towers, roads, bridges, and buildings; make birthday cakes out of clay and pegs; hollow out rivers in the sand;



make up songs and dances; nail together boats and birdhouses; create structures and figures out of Tinkertoys, straws, pipe cleaners, and wire; cut out, staple, glue, and tape together kites, hats, masks, collages; draw and write pictures, designs, cards, and books. As they do these things, children exhibit

Understanding Work Time (continued)

a variety of KDIs, particularly those that involve using oral and written language, making representations, and learning about relationships in the physical world (e.g., 33. Part-whole relationships, 40. Art, 50. Communicating ideas, etc.).

Pretend play. This type of play involves pretending and acting out “what if” situations: “What if I were the mom and you were the baby?” Children imitate the actions and language of others, using objects as make-believe props and taking on a variety of roles. One child puts on a chef’s hat and says to himself, “I’m makin’ burgers.” Another group of children play dentist. As the mommy and daddy drive their baby to the dentist, their car (made of blocks) has a flat tire. While mommy and daddy change the tire, the dentist drills and brushes the baby’s teeth with dental equipment made from Tinkertoys. “Now sit real still and this won’t hurt,” he advises.



Many KDIs are seen in children engaged in role play, especially KDIs that involve relationships with other people (e.g., 12. Building relationships, 13. Cooperative play, 22. Speaking, etc.).

Understanding Work Time (continued)

Games. Preschoolers enjoy playing conventional games such as dominoes, cards, board games, hide and seek, and catch. Generally, they play games cooperatively rather than competitively and with little concern for sticking closely to the rules. Their aim is not to win but to have a good time hiding and looking for people, spinning the spinner and moving the pieces around the board, or picking up and trading cards with one another. Preschoolers are also beginning to invent their own simple games, such as “jumping bears” — one child pushes a plastic counting bear off the big block into the box, then another child pushes another plastic bear off the block into the box. They take turns repeating this pattern until all the bears have “jumped.” As they play these simple games, key developmental indicators occur (e.g., 4. Problem solving, 13. Co-operative play, 38. Patterns, etc.).

When preschool children can freely choose their play activity, as at work time, they are most likely to



Understanding Work Time (continued)

be involved in constructive play, followed by exploratory and pretend play, and finally, by simple games whose rules they have adjusted or invented to suit themselves (Bergen, 1988).

■ Children carry on conversations.

The characteristic elements of work time — intimate settings, pretend play, shared goals, a common focus, and sympathetic partners — encourage children to converse with peers and adults. When children converse among themselves at work time, they often talk in quiet, enclosed spaces — for example, under a blanket draped over two chairs that then becomes a tent or secret hiding place. Many conversations between children at work time occur when children are involved in pretend or role play, which by its very nature depends on dialogue and shared imagination.

What Children Do at Work Time: A Summary

- Children are involved in initiating, working on, modifying, completing, and changing their plans.
- Children play in a variety of social contexts.
- Children engage in different types of play.
- Children carry on conversations.

Adapted from: Epstein, A. S., & Hohmann, M. (2012). The HighScope plan-do-review process. In N. A. Brickman, J. Burd, J. Tangorra, & M. Weiner (Eds.), *The HighScope preschool curriculum* (pp. 278–282). Ypsilanti, MI: HighScope Press.