

# Reading Assignment

*Work Time: Teacher Habits  
That Are Hard to Break*



# Work Time: Teacher Habits That Are Hard to Break

*By Michelle Graves*

Work time is a time of opportunity for both children and adults. For children, it is time to follow through on their own intentions in a supportive social setting. During work time, it is normal to see some children playing alone and others working together in small groups. Whether children have chosen to play individually, in pairs, or with several playmates, you can be sure that the play has a definite purpose in their minds. Through this purposeful play, they encounter and solve problems. They also construct knowledge about themselves and the people, materials, ideas, and events that surround them.

For adults, work time is also full of opportunities. In the HighScope Curriculum, adults see children as unique individuals with differing interests and ability levels. Work time is a time for adults to

observe the special characteristics of children and to use these observations in supporting and interacting with them.

Attempting to carry out work times that reflect this HighScope perspective may cause you to rethink classroom routines that you may have been using for years. Implementing this active learning approach to work time takes trust — trust that children have the ability to make decisions, solve problems, and learn academic, social, and emotional concepts within a framework based on their initiative.

On the road to developing the trust needed to create a true learning climate for children during work time, you may encounter some pitfalls involving common, hard-to-break adult habits. This article explains how you can replace those habits with new work-time strategies and routines.

## Work Time: Teacher Habits That Are Hard to Break (continued)

### The Adults' Role at Work Time

At work time adults interact with children thoughtfully, in ways that encourage each child's development. To do this successfully, consider the following strategies:

1. Begin by designing interest areas stocked with materials that appeal to young children.
2. Wait and watch before entering children's play. Make conscious decisions about where to place yourself, based on what children are doing, how that play can be supported, and who might be most receptive to that support.
3. Observe the actions and language of children to gain a better understanding of what interests them and how they react to the involvement of others in their play.
4. Offer comfort, contact, and simple acknowledgments to children as needed.
5. Play side by side with children on their level.
6. Have conversations with children, taking your cues and leads from them, asking questions responsively and sparingly.
7. Encourage children to solve problems by watching and listening to them, referring them to one another, and remaining calm throughout the process.
8. Develop a system for recording your observations of the children.

## Work Time: Teacher Habits That Are Hard to Break *(continued)*

### Pitfalls to Avoid

#### **Pitfall 1: Setting up learning stations for specific activities.**

Most teachers who are learning the HighScope approach understand that giving children choices is an important principle. Sometimes their way of implementing this principle is to set up daily “learning stations.” Early in the morning, before children arrive, they select certain materials to set out on tables or on the floor in each of the classroom areas. On a typical Monday morning, for example, they might set out a selection of play dough and play dough tools in the art area; toy trucks, cars, road signs, and interlocking road pieces in the block area; pegs and pegboards in the toy area; and a doctor’s kit and doctor clothes in the house area. As children arrive, teachers tell children



*Children choose materials to use however they like.*

## Work Time: Teacher Habits That Are Hard to Break *(continued)*

what the choices of the day are and then ask children to choose from these limited activities. The next day the choices are different. While this approach does provide some choices to children, it closes off many more.

### **Pitfall 2: Limiting the number of children who can play in an area.**

Teachers often express concern that if children are free to choose where they will play and what they will play with, there may not be enough materials or adequate space in the interest areas for children to play without conflict. To prevent such problems, their strategy is to limit the number of children who can go to an interest area during work time. This may be done in a variety of ways. Some teachers have area boards with pockets or hooks attached to them. When the hooks or pockets representing the



*Children have the choice to play in whichever area they want. If space becomes an issue, we can use this as an opportunity to problem solve.*

## Work Time: Teacher Habits That Are Hard to Break *(continued)*

number of children allowed in that area are full, it is “closed.” In earlier versions of the HighScope Curriculum, we experimented with this strategy but found that it creates too much frustrations for children who want to play at an area that is “full.”

### **Pitfall 3: Discouraging children from moving materials from one area to another.**

Left to their natural inclinations, children often shift materials from area to area. They may take trucks from the block area and ride them throughout the room, or they may take toy food, pots, and pans to play with in a house they’ve just built in the block area. In such situations, we often hear adults telling children to keep the trucks in the block area or the food toys in the house area. Teachers often have a rational explanation for their rules — they may feel that moving trucks throughout the classroom could



*Henry and Naveah brought the play dough and rollers from the art area to the house area for their burger shop.*

disrupt other children’s play or that taking food items from the house area will create a problem when other children go there to complete their work time ideas. Confining materials to one area,

## Work Time: Teacher Habits That Are Hard to Break (continued)

however, interferes with the plans we have asked children to make.

### **Pitfall 4: Having a special “project of the day.”**

During work time in some classrooms, children can choose freely among all the interest areas and materials, but teachers also introduce a special “project of the day.” These projects can range from using baby dolls and wash tubs in the house area to painting with eyedroppers in the art area to taking a walk outside with one of the teachers. At planning time, children are free to choose from any of the standard areas and materials or to make a plan to do the special project, which is usually available on a limited-time basis. Such special projects generally occupy all of one adult’s energies, preventing them from supporting and learning from children’s self-initiated projects. For this reason, it’s better to save such special projects for small-group time.

### **Pitfall 5: Pulling children away from play to test and improve their skills.**

In some programs, there is pressure to complete screening tests and develop individualized educational plans (IEPs) that target the children’s “weak areas.” Work time becomes the natural choice for completing these tasks. The feeling is that because all the children are busy carrying out their plans, adults are free at this time to conduct tests or drills with individual children or small groups of children. However, this practice ties up an adult’s attention and disrupts children’s work on the plans we have asked them to make.

### **Pitfall 6: Assigning team members to one area for all of work time.**

Some teaching teams decide to station themselves in a single area for the entire work time. Sometimes

## Work Time: Teacher Habits That Are Hard to Break (continued)

these choices are made because of a teacher's special qualities. A teacher who is good with tools may be assigned to the construction area; a teacher with an art background to the art area; and so on. Though this practice does take advantage of each adult's special strengths, it limits their ability to focus on and learn from the wide range of children's play.

### **Pitfall 7: Settling conflicts for children.**

Work time is a busy, sometimes noisy time of the day that is often full of conflicts over materials and relationships with others. Adults have a natural inclination to want harmony in a classroom. Because they can sometimes see solutions to problems that children cannot, stepping in to direct the solution may seem like a good idea. For example, the adult might say, "Here, give James this doll so he'll stop

crying. You can use this pretty one over here." However, if the adult would instead take the time to help children arrive at their own solution, the children would learn much more about solving their own problems.

### **Pitfall 8: Setting no limits or expectations.**

The HighScope philosophy emphasizes decision making as a goal for children, but this doesn't mean that children should always do whatever they want, whenever it suits them. Carefully setting and maintaining *reasonable* expectations and limits helps children feel safe and secure in their environment. However, set expectations cautiously, considering the safety of individuals and materials to be of primary importance. Also, set them in a way that makes sense to the children and can be realistically enforced. For instance, "no hitting" or "no breaking

## Work Time: Teacher Habits That Are Hard to Break *(continued)*

toys” rules are not likely to work successfully in a preschool classroom. On the other hand, setting the expectation that children will work through the consequences of such actions has more learning value (e.g., having Ian bring an ice pack or tissue to the child he hit, or asking Rachelle to tape back into the book the page she tore).

### Why Break These Habits?

Many of the adult habits just described suggest a tendency on the part of the adult to retain control of the classroom environment and the actions of the children. When we retain too much control over children by limiting their choices of materials or areas, they have little opportunity to develop self-control, learn from the consequences of their actions, or master the skills necessary to accomplish their goals.



*This teacher supports the boys as they problem solve over sharing a toy.*

## Work Time: Teacher Habits That Are Hard to Break (continued)

The following four tips for sharing control at work time can help you to **avoid some of the pitfalls:**

1. Begin by making a list of all the ways you do have control over your classroom. Things on the list might include arranging and equipping the interest areas, setting the basic elements of the daily routine, planning group times, and deciding which interaction strategies to use. Making this list may help you realize that the classroom is not “out of control.”
2. Instead of deciding beforehand to limit children’s choices of activities or play spaces, observe children carefully as they play. Then, if space is inadequate or specific material is especially popular, add space or additional materials in the interested areas as needed. If you find that 10 of your 20 children choose to go to the block area every day, make that area the largest in your classroom, and add building options to the house, toy, and art areas.
3. Try letting children move materials from one area to another. Then, after a short trial period, compare the level of chaos or frustration created when children can move things and complete their ideas with the level of frustration created when you tell them they can’t.
4. Keep your special “project of the day,” but instead of setting it up at work time, save it for a small-group time. After you have introduced a new experience, such as eyedropper painting on coffee filters, add those materials to the art area, so they become yet another choice for the children to make during future work times.

## Work Time: Teacher Habits That Are Hard to Break (continued)

It is important to remember that even when control is shared, children need a secure environment with consistent adult support to deal with the difficulties that inevitably arise when we encourage them to make choices. For example, if children move all the materials from one area to another and this disrupts the work of others, an opportunity arises for children to negotiate an acceptable outcome, but you will need to be available to support their negotiations. If your energies are tied up in leading special activities or pulling individuals or small groups out for assessments or skill drills, you will not be available as a support person.

Also, releasing yourself from the expectation that you have to play, lead, or manage children's activities at work time gives you the opportunity to enter into play and converse with children in meaningful ways. When you have to make daily decisions about which materials to set out or are constantly dealing with negative behaviors of children who are frustrated by the limits on their choices, you rob yourself of the joy of sitting side by side with children and learning about them as they learn through play.

# When Work Time *Is* Working

*Everyone who works with young children is well aware that there are days when everything seems to go awry. Just as common are those days when everything seems to run smoothly and you can't believe your good fortune to be able to "play" while you work. Recently, I experienced one of those "it just feels right" work times. Here's what happened:*

At the start of work time, as we looked around the room, we saw five children in the block area building a car "to go to California"; six in the computer area; four using markers, tape, and scissors in the art area; one pouring sand through a sieve at the sand table; and four in the house area pretending to be a family (a mother, baby, cat, and dog).

After watching for a few moments, I went to the art area and began drawing with markers, and my



team member Carol went to the house area, where she was immediately welcomed with a "cup of coffee." As work time evolved, some children shifted playmates and activities while other small groups stayed together, working on the same activity throughout the entire 45-minute period.

## When Work Time Is Working (continued)

Here are some of the morning's highlights for us:

- Watching Meghan and Carlos pretending to be dog and owner. Carlos carefully tied a string around Meghan's wrist, then led her on a walk around the classroom, stopping in front of the dog-food bowl, so her "dog" could get a drink of water and some dog food.
- Participating in the car ride to California. On the way, we learned that it would take a "long, long, long, long, long, long" time to get there, so it was important to stop first for lunch at McDonald's.
- Offering support to Alejandro as he worked on designing a mask for his friend Steven. When the mask kept slipping from Steven's face (it was tied loosely with string), one of the teachers said, "I notice it keeps slipping down. Is there anything you might use to hold it in place?" Alejandro then got masking tape and taped the mask to Steven's forehead.
- Observing that Victor stopped shooting at children in the room when Kyliah said to him, "You know, real guns really hurt people — they get dead, and then you can't see them anymore."
- Listening to Tyler say to Jordan at the computer, "You've been there for a lot of turns. Here, you hold the mouse one time, then give it to me, then I'll give it back." Then we watched them play for an additional 10 minutes, using Tyler's idea.
- Having time to support Soraya (who recently had a new baby join her family) by sitting next to her, covering her with blankets when she

## When Work Time Is Working (continued)

crawled into the baby crib, and softly singing her a lullaby while she rocked and made sucking sounds with her mouth and occasional crying sounds.

Each work time in HighScope classrooms is unique. Watching children's ideas develop, becoming an active partner in activities generated by children, and observing the learning that took place in these and other incidents made this a work time that really worked!

