

Making the *MOST* of Creativity in Activities for Young Children with Disabilities

Linda Crane Mitchell

In one corner of the preschool classroom, Nathan, age four, is exploring a tub of props related to the theme of community helpers. He discovers items typically found in a medical office—face masks, goggles, tongs, empty pill bottles—and pom-poms of various sizes and colors. Large white shirts hang close by where the “doctors” can find them.

After examining the items, Nathan, a young child with a communication disorder, dons a shirt, goggles, and a mask. He picks up the tongs and begins to fill a pill bottle with pom-poms. He notices me sitting close by and invites me to join in. “Let’s play doctor!” he says, while dressing me in goggles and a mask. During our 10-minute playtime, we identify the words for the items in the tub and try to pick up different-sized pom-poms with the tongs.

Our brief encounter during a creative play activity is an opportunity to enhance Nathan’s communication skills and at the same time encourage his fine motor skill development.

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Creativity is the ability to invent or make something new, using one’s own skills without the specific use of patterns or models. Creative expression develops through a child’s participation in dramatic play, movement, music, and the visual arts. Teachers should plan daily activities that encourage the development of creative expression and meet the individual needs of children.

Inclusion of children with disabilities (cognitive, communication, physical, sensory) and specific learning needs in the regular classroom challenges all early childhood teachers to provide appropriate curriculum for children with differing abilities. Appropriate practices as defined by NAEYC are both age and individually appropriate (Bredekamp

& Copple 1997). The appropriateness of a program depends upon the degree to which learning is scaffolded for individual children—matched to the child’s current abilities, with all the necessary supports to allow for successful completion of a task (Smith, Miller, & Bredekamp 1999). Thus, for young children with disabilities, the program should produce meaningful interactions within the early childhood environment (Carta et al. 1991).

Research support

Throughout the past decade research in education has emphasized the need for a more blended approach in preparing both early childhood and early childhood special educators (Miller & Stayton 1998). Early childhood educators must have the knowledge and skills to meet a range of needs and abilities within their classroom as well as possess a foundation of best practices and the ability to adapt curricula to meet the needs of children with disabilities (Kilgo et al. 1999).

The guidelines in *Developmentally Appropriate Practice in Early Childhood Programs* (Bredekamp & Copple 1997), published by NAEYC, and *DEC Recommended Practices* (Sandall, McLean, & Smith 2000) developed by the Council for Exceptional Children/Division of Early Childhood (CEC/DEC), support appropriate intervention strategies to promote the engagement of young children with disabilities within inclusive environments. Wolery, Strain, and Bailey



(1992) articulate important justifications for helping children with special needs to reach their potential.

Research has shown that young children with disabilities develop skills more easily if these are embedded in authentic play activities (Davis, Kilgo, & Gamel-McCormick 1998). This process is widely recognized in early childhood special education as activity-based intervention (Bricker & Cripe 1992). Modifications to the environment and curriculum activities are essential if children with disabilities are to benefit and make developmental progress.

Strategies promoting creativity

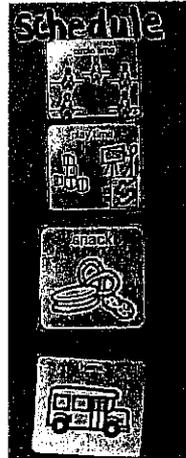
The use of the **MOST** (**m**aterials + **o**bjectives + **s**pace + **t**ime) strategies when planning curricular activities can help early childhood teachers plan more effectively for all children, including those with disabilities.

M—To plan creative activities, a teacher must consider the *materials* to be used and ensure that they will meet the needs of all of the children participating in the activity. By changing materials or adding special items, teachers make modifications to meet the needs of individual children. Materials may be modified for children with motor needs, for example, taping paper to the table during an art activity to prevent its slipping or adding larger size paint brushes to the art area.

O—Embedding *objectives* in creative activities can be accomplished by selecting specific IEP (Individualized Education Plan) objectives for individual children to work on during the activity. In the scenario about Nathan playing with a tubful of medical office props, labeling objects could be one of his IEP objectives. Natural embedding of specific objectives in creative activities encourages skill development within the context of play.

S—*Space* is an essential consideration as teachers plan creative activities. For children with physical or visual needs to actively participate, changes in the environment may be required. For example, planning for additional adaptive equipment, such as a wheelchair, may ensure a child's involvement.

T—*Time* is the final important element. Children who have disabilities may need additional time to actively engage in an activity. With this in mind, teachers



should make plans flexible so children have the time they need to complete activities.

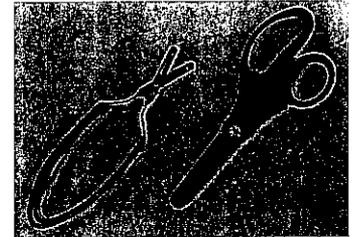
A planning grid (see "Intervention Examples Using the MOST Approach") illustrates MOST concepts and provides a format teachers can use to plan further on their own.

Planning tips

Adequate modifications to creative activities are essential to encourage the participation of children with autism or communication, physical, sensory, or other specific learning needs. Following is a list of tips for teachers in planning for children with varying abilities.

Materials/modification of materials

- add pictures and visual cues to give directions and to use for communication
- label materials with words and pictures
- add props (real objects) to facilitate interaction and hands-on participation
- provide alternate items such as adaptive scissors and larger paint brushes that are easier to hold and use
- stabilize materials to prevent slipping or falling

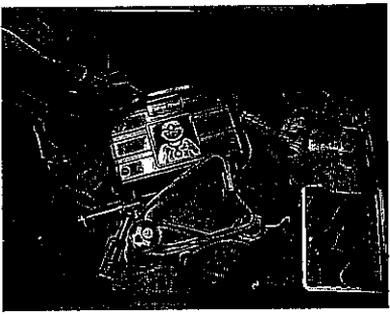


- model activities
- build in use of communication devices
- add tactile and visual stimulation such as bright, contrasting colors

- use other defining devices as assistance
- add scents to paints/playdough as sensory cues
- give verbal and written (visual) descriptions

Space adjustments

- create dedicated areas for specific activities
- use visuals to designate activity areas
- limit the number of children allowed to use an area at one time



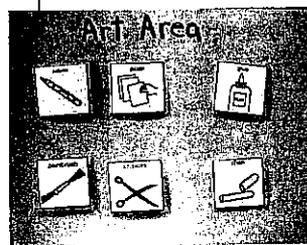
- make sure there is adequate space for children's movement with and without adaptive equipment
- acquaint children with an activity space in advance
- provide movement cues with visuals, sign language, or braille
- add auditory and tactile cues when appropriate

Time considerations

- match the number of activities to a child's coping ability
- permit enough time for a child to become fully engaged
- prepare children for transitions with auditory/visual cues
- allow additional time for completion of activities
- require fewer activities

Intervention Examples Using the MOST Approach

		M = Materials Modifying materials	O = Objectives Embedding objectives
Disability	Creative activity		
Visual impairment	Pretend play	Use paint or colored tape to outline the edges of the furniture in the area to increase the child's ability to focus. Include bright-colored materials, large pictures, and large print.	The child will increase his or her social skills through participation in pretend activities with peers.
Hearing impairment	Music "Row, Row, Row Your Boat"	Incorporate the use of sign language into songs. Use songs that incorporate motions.	The child will use sign language to communicate with others during daily activities.
Autism	Visual arts "Sponge paint"—dipping shaped sponges into paint and creating pictures on construction paper	Provide plastic gloves for the child to wear during the activity (to manage an oversensitivity to textures). Make and display a chart showing step-by-step directions for the activity.	The child will use visual cues to assist in the completion of daily activities.
Physical (e.g., cerebral palsy)	Movement "The Freeze"—children move to music, wave streamers, and stop when the music stops	Attach a strap or piece of Velcro to the streamer to make it easier to hold.	The child will increase the use of the right arm and hand through participation in fine motor activities. The child will use a walker to provide needed support for movement during daily classroom activities.



Conclusion

Inclusion of children with various disabilities in regular early childhood programs challenges early childhood teachers. Literature throughout the past decade indicates that children with disabilities can acquire skills more easily if they are included in programs with their typically developing peers (Mitchell

2002). To effectively plan creative activities, teachers must consider each child's unique needs—ensuring that appropriate *materials* are used, IEP (Individualized Education Plan) *objectives* are embedded, and *space* and *time* are adequate. As a planning tool, MOST strategies can assist teachers in meeting the challenge of helping all children to benefit fully from participation in creative activities.

S = Space Adapting the environment	T = Time Providing adequate time
Keep the space consistent. Acquaint the child with the area in advance.	Build in time for the child to interact with peers. Use a peer-buddy system to promote engagement.
Seat the child close to the teacher during music activities.	Review the words (motions) to the song prior to singing.
Arrange the furniture so the child can work alongside or with a peer during the activity.	Follow a flexible schedule so the child has enough time to complete the activity.
Create adequate space for the child to move using a walker.	Increase the time when the music plays to support the child's participation.

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