

ORGANIZING LEARNING EXPERIENCES

A developmentally appropriate curriculum may organize learning activities around themes, studies, or projects. This can be an effective way to engage preschool children in critical thinking, collaborative exploration, and development of language and literacy skills. In the context of themes, projects, and studies, children can actively learn with hands-on materials. A strong theme or question provides learning opportunities in many domains. It also includes culturally and linguistically responsive materials and strategies. All these advantages are especially helpful when teaching children who are dual language learners (DLLs). They benefit from the extra time, the use of related vocabulary in both of their languages, and the opportunity to practice their oral language skills in their home languages and English. Themes, projects, and studies are common in preschool curricula but may also be used with older toddlers. They are not a good fit for infants (see “[Organizing Learning Experiences for Infants and Toddlers](#)”).

Here is an example of how a project can develop, based on observations of children. Mr. Jamal noticed the children in his preschool class were very interested in the worms they saw on the playground after it rained. Together, Mr. Jamal and the children decided to plan a project called “Learning How Worms Live.” It included the following:

- Connecting to children’s interests and prior knowledge by discussing what they know and what they want to know
- Assessing the levels of home language and English children might bring to the exploration
- Sharing the planned activities and their purposes with the families to build a home-school connection and address any concerns about live worms
- Reading fiction and nonfiction books about worms
- Learning words about worms in English and the children’s home languages
- Taking a field trip to a local mushroom farm to learn how worms help to enrich the soil
- Doing a large motor “worm wiggle dance” to music in both English and home languages
- Creating a worm farm in the classroom
- Watching videos about how worms live
- Writing, drawing, and discussing their observations
- Counting, comparing, graphing, and predicting worm life
- Persisting with ongoing exploration



UNDERSTANDING KEY TERMS

A review of writings in the field has defined terms to organize learning experiences (Vartuli and Rohs, 2006).

- **Theme:** A topic chosen by education staff or curriculum to organize content into meaningful, related activities. Themes generally apply to the whole class.
- **Project or study:** A more in-depth exploration of a topic or problem that may result in an answer, solution, or product. Projects usually involve small groups or individuals.

Education staff or the curriculum identify projects, studies, and themes. They might also be developed in collaboration with the children or in response to teachable moments that reveal children’s interests. In general, themes, and projects last over several days or weeks to extend learning and application.



CHARACTERISTICS OF SUCCESSFUL THEMES

Themes help education staff organize learning materials and activities. This is useful for children who are dual language learners because it supports their ability to build connections between prior knowledge and new learning in both their home language and English. Themes should be broad enough to allow children to explore through a variety of learning domains but narrow enough so they can focus their attention on developmentally appropriate materials and concepts. A theme that is too broad, such as “transportation,” may be hard to demonstrate clearly for a variety of children. To be accessible for most children, choose a more concrete example of transportation, such as “trucks” and move to the broader category later. Themes also need to be open enough to support each child as they discover aspects of the topic that are most interesting to them. Themes may also be identified from items, activities, or events children are most familiar with in their homes, communities, or cultural traditions.



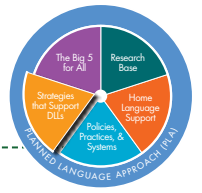
CHARACTERISTICS OF SUCCESSFUL PROJECTS AND STUDIES

Projects and studies should bring focus to a topic, often chosen based on children’s interests and input. Projects and studies support exploration that leads toward a goal, solves a problem, or answers a question. They may work for a whole group or for small groups of children. For example, a few children might wonder how the lid of the trash can works, so they plan with the adult how they could find out. In the next few days, the adult might bring several kinds of clean trash cans for the children to explore, she might give them materials to make their own trash cans, or she might take them to a local home supply store or show videos of cans with different lids and hinges. To conclude the study, the children might draw pictures or dictate what they want people to know about how trash can lids work. This project can later expand to a more broad theme on keeping the classroom and community clean.

Projects and studies have a beginning, middle, and end, but are flexible enough to allow children several ways to explore through a variety of learning domains. They generally have a hands-on component that is especially helpful to children who are DLLs. This active, persistent approach gives children opportunities to learn what is meaningful to them in the time it takes for them to learn it. For children who are DLLs, this allows them to build connections between prior knowledge in their home language and new learning in English.

A responsive approach to toddler learning might include themes or simple projects that provide a framework for organizing materials and explorations, but also offer the flexibility needed to follow each child’s lead.





HOW ORGANIZED LEARNING EXPERIENCES SUPPORT CHILDREN WHO ARE DLLS

Organized instruction provides a coordinated approach to learning experiences. This creates a foundation of connected vocabulary for children who are learning a new language and content. It supports children as they make connections between prior knowledge and new knowledge by allowing them to follow their interests within the boundaries of the chosen theme. The extended and intensive learning format encourages children who are DLLs to approach learning in whatever way works for them. They can express their learning in open-ended ways using English or their home language, as needed. Hands-on materials and extra time make it possible for children who are DLLs to build conceptual connections and vocabulary connections. Seeing the same vocabulary in multiple activities helps them practice and refine their understanding. They have more time and freedom to explore materials, express their thoughts, and build relationships with their peers. Education staff can invite children to use learning they have developed within their culture and family. Organized experiences allow adults to include additional supports for home language learning and for dual language immersion, while supporting connections to new words in English. For children who are DLLs, it is important to begin with themes and topics that are anchored in the here and now so they can really see and feel the content. For example, for children who live in a desert area, it is not easy to understand an “under the sea” theme, especially when they speak different languages. Start with a more relatable theme such as “sun and shade.”

Themes, projects, and studies support children as they

- build on their own cultural experiences;
- share their cultural experiences with others;
- learn English words for concepts they already know in their home language;
- learn more sophisticated words and concepts in their home language;
- learn new English words for concepts they have not yet learned in their home language; and
- make connections between their cultural experiences and classroom curriculum.



ENHANCING THEMES, PROJECTS, AND STUDIES WITHIN ESTABLISHED CURRICULA

Many research-based preschool curricula specifically recommend using in-depth learning around chosen topics. Use these within the guidelines of the curriculum with the culturally and linguistically responsive enhancements recommended in this document. Some curricula may not have these components but do encourage using the thematic approach to implement their guidelines. Thematic learning can uphold efforts to implement a curriculum with fidelity when staff make strategic choices where choices don't fundamentally change the learning components of the curriculum. In these instances, follow the curriculum's approach and guidance while using knowledge of children's and families' strengths, needs, interests, and cultural and linguistic backgrounds to modify the curriculum's activities or teaching practices, including choosing themes that are relevant and meaningful. Here are some points to consider when making plans:

- Does this topic allow for variety of learning goals across multiple domains?
- Do children from a variety of cultural backgrounds have some knowledge of this topic to build on? If not, plan to introduce the topic in a meaningful way from the start.
- Are there many types of resources available to support children's learning on this topic, such as books, activities, or local experts?
- How does this topic include children's diverse cultural and linguistic experiences? For example, a theme of “up and down,” can incorporate images of steps, ramps, escalators, and elevators in the children's homes and neighborhoods. Children can use blocks to duplicate those images.



ENHANCING THEMATIC INSTRUCTION

When using thematic instruction, plan multiple opportunities for children to build on what they already know and to extend learning with meaningful, connected activities through the day. When the curriculum introduces a new theme, try these suggestions to build on children’s languages and cultures. For example, a theme on “making music” may include the following kinds of activities:

- Use small group discussions to find out what children already know about making music and what captures their interests.
- Add fiction and nonfiction books about music in English and in the children’s home languages to the book area and other parts of the classroom.
- List key words in exploring this theme and have them translated to add to labels, books, and materials.
- Identify examples of listening, rhyming, and writing music to support *The Big 5 for All*.
- Assign children to teams so they can make music together and build social and emotional skills. Early in the year, try to keep children together who speak the same language, and mix the groups as children learn more of each other’s languages later in the year.
- Document observations of musical instruments in the classroom.
- Experiment using different materials to make different musical sounds, exercising creativity and curiosity as approaches to learning.
- Invite families to bring examples of music and instruments they enjoy.
- Listen to music from different countries related to children’s backgrounds and play along.
- Use the five senses to compare and contrast different instruments and materials to make music in the science area.
- Attend a local music event in the community or invite local musicians to visit the program.
- Count beats and observe repeating patterns to learn the mathematical properties of music.
- Use gross motor actions, such as marching or twirling to the music.
- Continue to use experiences, vocabulary, and instruments over several days or weeks to support depth and breadth of learning for all children. Keep their creations on display for the duration of the theme.
- Take photos, or have the children take photos, and use them to make books, posters, or other materials to document and recall the activities associated with the theme.
- Send information home with families to encourage them to learn about making music with their child at home.
- Build on children’s knowledge in both home languages and English by following children’s leads. Explore other ways to use the materials, add new words to familiar songs, or explore dancing styles and moves. A theme may be self-contained within a few days, or it can be like a web of connected ideas and pursuits that keeps growing. It is not necessary to force all the children to explore the same ideas at the same time.

Adapt this approach for a project or study. Begin with a problem or question and use the variety of activities and resources to work with small groups of children to find the answer or solution.



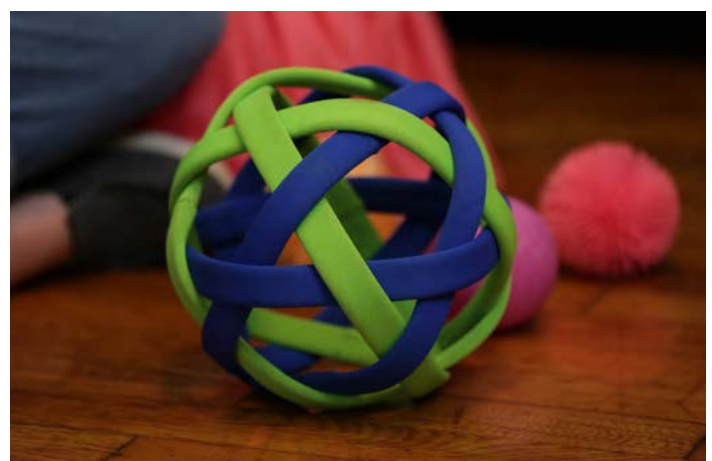
ORGANIZING LEARNING EXPERIENCES FOR INFANTS AND TODDLERS

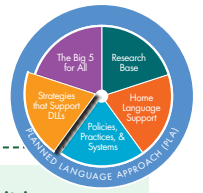
Developmentally appropriate learning experiences for infants are typically individualized based on their developmental level, interests, and needs. Daily schedules also tend to be individualized because infants are fed, have their diaper changed, and take naps according to their individual schedules and needs. Themes and projects, which are more group-oriented, do not fit this approach to infant learning. A responsive approach to toddler learning might include themes or simple projects that provide a framework for organizing materials and explorations, but also offer the flexibility needed to follow each child's lead. Themes or projects that are based on children's interests can create a focus area around which adults can follow each child's lead while tying learning experiences back to the common concepts and words. This process also allows adults to include each child's home culture and invite families to participate in the experience.



IMPLEMENTING ORGANIZED LEARNING EXPERIENCES IN FAMILY CHILD CARE

Family child care providers and programs with small groups and mixed ages can all work successfully with themes, studies, or projects. For example, Miss Luna cares for two toddlers and two three-year-olds in her home. Her curriculum allows her to provide interesting and developmentally appropriate learning experiences in a relaxed atmosphere. She noticed that all the children were pulling and tugging on the one ball she put out in her yard, so she planned to build on their interests. She got more balls made of different materials and used lots of interesting words to talk about them as the children played. She asked families to provide her with pictures of balls they have at home, and then made them into a book so she could talk with each child about balls they play with at home and in her care—using their home languages. She showed the children how to try different ways of rolling, kicking, and throwing the balls. For the older children, she added some simple ramps and baskets to add to the play and the conversation. Each day she took photos of the children playing with the balls and showed them in the following days, saying things like “Remember when Amaya kicked the ball with her foot? See how David put the ball in the basket?” Each day she could see the children using more words and helping each other do fun things with the balls.





DISCUSSING THEME IDEAS ON HOME VISITS

Home-based programs use established home-based curricula. Within the guidance of the chosen curriculum, home visitors might encourage families to think about activities and materials that link common words or ideas. For example, if parents engage their child in simple food experiences, such as preparing a snack or pretending to cook with pots, pans, and safe utensils found in the home, they might look for books with a cooking theme or songs and rhymes, such as “pat-a-cake.” Home visitors can help families understand that children learn best when they build on something they already know. They might also share that children build language when they have lots of opportunities to practice new words. This is a good way to support families as they use culturally relevant items and activities to support the home language.

For children who are DLLs, it is important to begin with themes and topics that are anchored in the here and now so they can really see and feel the content.



REFERENCE

Vartuli, S. and J. Rohs. 2006. “Conceptual Organizers of Early Childhood Curriculum Content.” *Early Childhood Education Journal* 33 (4): 231-237.