

Emergent Curriculum

By Elizabeth Jones

An emergent curriculum is designed to promote children's growth in each developmental area, building on each child's strengths. Because it is specific to particular children in a particular program, it is designed by the staff of that program. All curriculum is the outcome of someone's choices among all the things in the world that are there for children to learn. In an emergent curriculum, the choices are made by the people who know the children best and modified as they get to know the children better.

Children learn by doing - touching, experimenting, choosing, talking, negotiating. The curriculum is designed to provide active learning experiences which children can use to construct their own understanding. Adults, like children, learn by doing - and by observing, reflecting and discussing what happens.

Curriculum is what happens in an educational environment - not what is rationally planned to happen, but what actually takes place, here and now. It is different for each child in the program; different children bring different experiences and understanding to the setting, and they pay attention to different things.

The provider who insists on carrying out pre-planned curriculum must ignore what is actually happening for many of the children in the group. Her lesson is the color blue, but Molly's attention is to the leaves blowing outside the window, and Paul is sucking his thumb, half-asleep, and Jenny has discovered a fascinating bit of fuzz at the edge of the carpet, and Paco and Miguelito are giggling quietly together, and Rory's curriculum is Let's See if I Can Make Her Mad. But BLUE is on the lesson plan, and blue is what she's teaching - even if only one or two children are learning it.

The provider who recognizes this variation plans an emergent curriculum in response to it. She begins with ideas for children's learning and provides materials and interactions in organized space and time. But she pays attention to what is actually happening for children, she modifies plans on the spot when necessary and responds to the children's ideas and interests. In this process she is respecting their diversity and, in fact, getting a much more accurate picture of her curriculum than a provider who doggedly proceeds with her plans regardless.

To plan and evaluate an emergent curriculum, providers and other staff engage in a continuing process of putting these pieces together:

- 1) What are our objectives for children?
- 2) What are the developmental tasks of children?
- 3) How do children learn?
- 4) What are the possible sources of curriculum?
- 5) What ideas can we generate together?

Sources of Emergent Curriculum

1. **Adults' interests.** Providers are people with interests of their own which are worth sharing with children. By doing some things they like, they can model knowledge and enthusiasm - even adults keep learning - and stay interested in teaching.
2. **Children's interests.** Children whose own interests are acknowledged and supported don't need to be motivated to learn; their own experience will keep them learning. Different children have different interests; how many of them can be built into the emergent curriculum?
3. **Things in the physical environment.** Children's experience of a place is unique to the place they are in. The man-made things in their physical environment are typically standardized and predictable; thus, unit blocks facilitate orderly building. The natural things are unstandardized and unpredictable - each plant and animal are different - and reflect the local climate and terrain. Children need experience with both.
4. **People in the social environment.** Children are interested in all sorts of people, who they are and what they do. Parents and big brothers and librarians and delivery drivers and neighbors are right there to learn about and relate to.
5. **Curriculum resource material.** Providers need not reinvent the wheel. Libraries, exhibits at conferences, resource centers are full of curriculum ideas ready to use. Use them and adapt them to your own setting, your teaching style, and your children's interests.
6. **Serendipity: unexpected events.** When the unexpected happens in your program, the community, the natural world, providers have choices. They can try to ignore it, or join in briefly, or invent ways of incorporating it into their plans, short or long term. It's important to become skilled in on-the-spot decision making.
7. **Living together: conflict resolution, caregiving and routines.** Cooperation, expression of feelings, conflict resolution, and all daily tasks of living are potential curriculum for young children. Physical care, self-help skills, eating and resting and washing and dressing are the everyday experiences that nurture the growth of young children. Caregiving and the resolution of interpersonal issues are not interruptions to the curriculum, they are basic curriculum.
8. **Values held in the program and community, family and culture.** It is important to be accountable to others' expectations and to evaluate the program in that framework. It is not necessary to teach directly from expectations; learning activities should be developmentally appropriate and adapted to the situation. It is important to define the curriculum planning process clearly so that you know when you are actively engaged in it.

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