

The Early Learning Environment





An Environment is a living, changing system. More than a physical space, it includes the way time is structured and the roles we are expected to play. It conditions how we feel, think and behave; and it dramatically affects the quality of our lives.

Jim Greenman

12,000 hours

This is the approximate amount of time a child will spend at a childcare centre if they begin as an infant and attend until elementary school.

For adults working at a centre, for many years, this number represents a fraction of the hours spent.



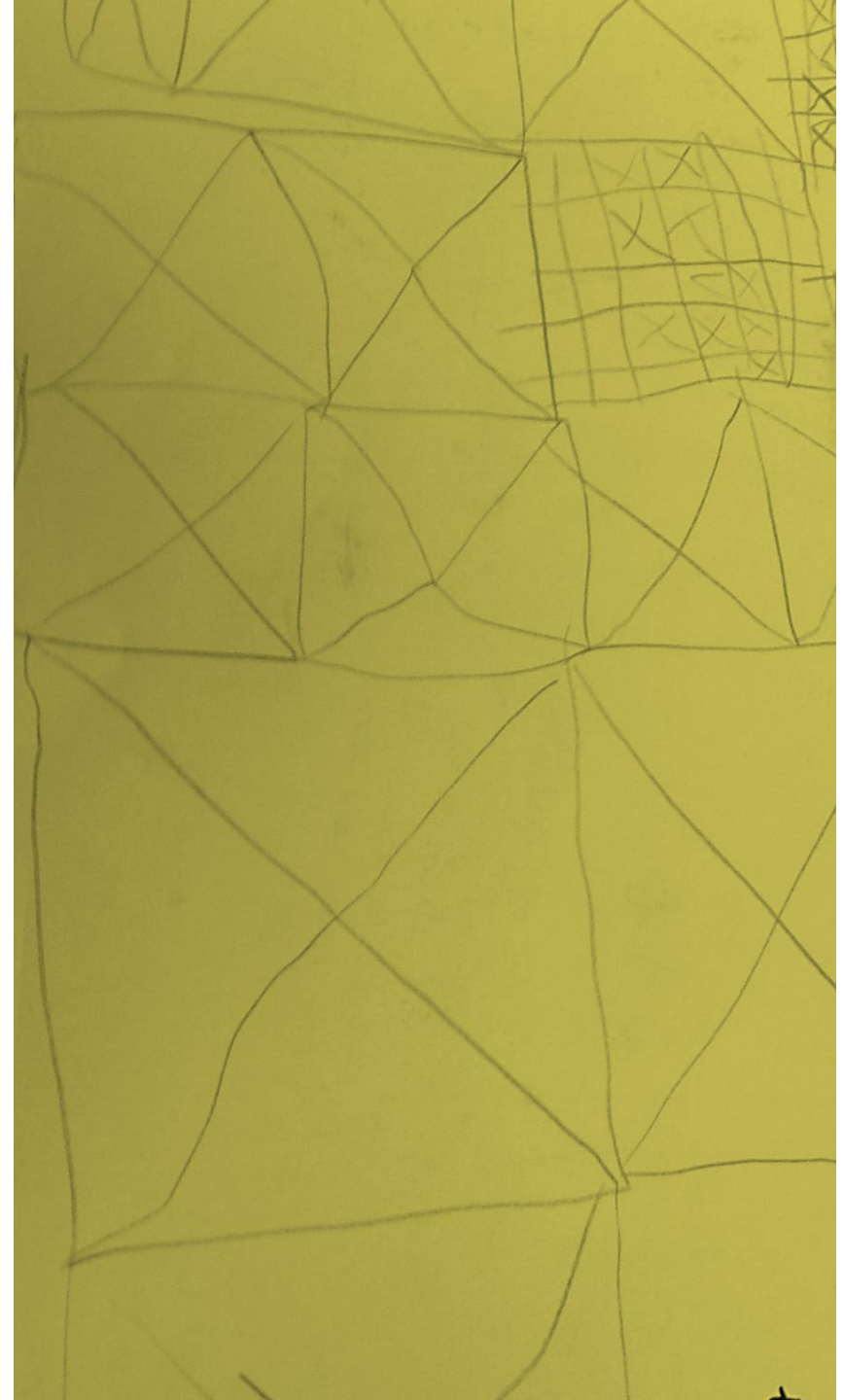


Our classrooms are places where children and adults **live together** – places for childhoods and adult work lives. What if... instead of calling these places classrooms, we called them **living rooms...**

Would this change the way we felt and thought about our spaces?

Considering Your Own Environment

- Draw a simple floor plan of a room you are currently familiar with. You don't need a lot of detail.
- Use the three assessment tools to consider your environment:
 - Assessing from the Child's Perspective
 - Assessing for Family-Friendly Environments
 - Assessing from an Educators Perspective



Early Learning Environments...

- are welcoming spaces...beautiful and joyful, both indoors and out
- reflect and enrich the lives and identities of children and families participating in the program and respond to their interests and needs.
- are responsive to the interests and abilities of each child.
- support choice, independence and self-regulation.
- are vibrant and flexible spaces.
- promote learning through play based experiences.
- have been identified as a key feature in supporting children's learning.



The Early Learning Environment – 4 Elements

Physical

Purposeful
arrangement of
space, furnishings,
lighting, sounds,
smells



The Early Learning Environment

4 Elements

Psychological

Children and adults feel: safe, feel free to explore and to learn, feel valued.



The Early Learning Environment

4 Elements

Social

Secure relationships with caring and responsive adults; collaborative learning groups; supporting independence and self regulation



The Early Learning Environment

4 Elements

Temporal

Time for adults and children to pursue their interests and to do their work; how and when transitions occur is planned



What makes a space welcoming, beautiful and joyful?

Look around you, is this space welcoming, beautiful or joyful?

- How does the furniture, lighting, textures or sound (**the physical environment**) you make you feel? (**the psychological environment**)
- Does this space send a message or make a statement? Do you feel welcome? How do you know what to do here? (**the social environment**)
- Do you know when you need to do things? Do you have enough time? (**the temporal environment**)



Embracing the idea of the environment as a significant educator in early childhood education programs requires expanding your thoughts beyond room arrangements...

When making decisions about the environment you will need to consider:



- What do you value for children and what values do you want to communicate? This very much depends on your image of the child.
- What will the social and emotional culture of the room be? Will children see a place for themselves and their families in the room?
- How will the children and adults experience their time?

Building Confidence

Practicing with real tools

It is important to give children time to investigate with real tools and explore and discover things out with them. Using tools is an essential step towards building critical thinkers and problem solvers.



Alexander helped me to help him to use his building set too in our outdoor classroom. Marley used her muscles to carry a big stick over all by herself.



Gabby helped measure the sticks finding the numbers 2 and 3 side by side for 23". Then she helped me. These branches we used for our bulletin boards in the classroom.



Outside in the woods some of the children noticed the poles were knocked down, they enjoyed climbing them so they worked together to place them back and climb again.



Inside and outside the classroom the children practiced their hand eye coordination, when using the hammers and nails.



Helping someone to place the last boards for our bridge. There was really concentrated hard as they didn't use their finger.



There was the first to connect our rope bridge for ourselves.



Working together to place the last boards for our bridge.

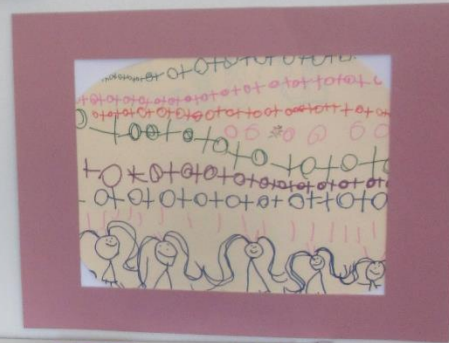
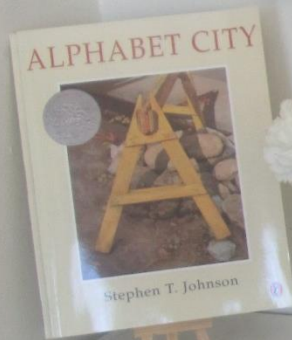
Consider this and the next few images. Think about the environment and messages which are being communicated.











How does this space make you feel?

What do the educators value?

What is their image of children?



The Sensory and Aesthetic Elements in the Environment

Some things to consider for both inside and outside spaces:

- colour
- texture
- living things
- sound
- smells
- storage
- order and organization

Colour

- Neutral background colours let the children's work take centre stage.
- Natural materials and colours create a calming environment.



Texture

- Texture provides visual interest in a space.
- Environments need soft and hard surfaces.



Living Things

- Living things provide a connection to the natural world for children and adults.
- Natural materials, though not currently living, also provide a connection to the natural world.



Lighting

- Natural light is wonderful.
- Many different types of light within a space creates interest.
- Incandescent light gives a homey feeling to an environment.



Sound

- Children need the opportunity to experiment with sound.
- The sound scape of a space should not be harsh.

Smells

- Often this element is overlooked.
- Consider herbs and plants with wonderful scents.
- Spices can also add scents.



Storage, Order and Organization

- The way items are stored affect children's ability to access materials independently.
- An environment where materials are stored in neat organized ways looks visually less cluttered. This will have a calming affect on the people in the space.





Are you feeling
excited or
challenged by
the possibilities?

Start with what you have...



Children Will Need guidance...

“If children haven’t experienced open-ended materials or been trusted to work with adult tools or fragile objects they will benefit from some initial encouragement, coaching and side-by-side modeling of playing with the materials.”

- introduce things gradually
- remember you will have to introduce new children to these ideas once the classroom culture has been established
- try not to be discouraged, if something doesn’t work consider another way of introducing or storing a material.
- remember that the children are capable.

A Story of a “Beautiful” Fountain

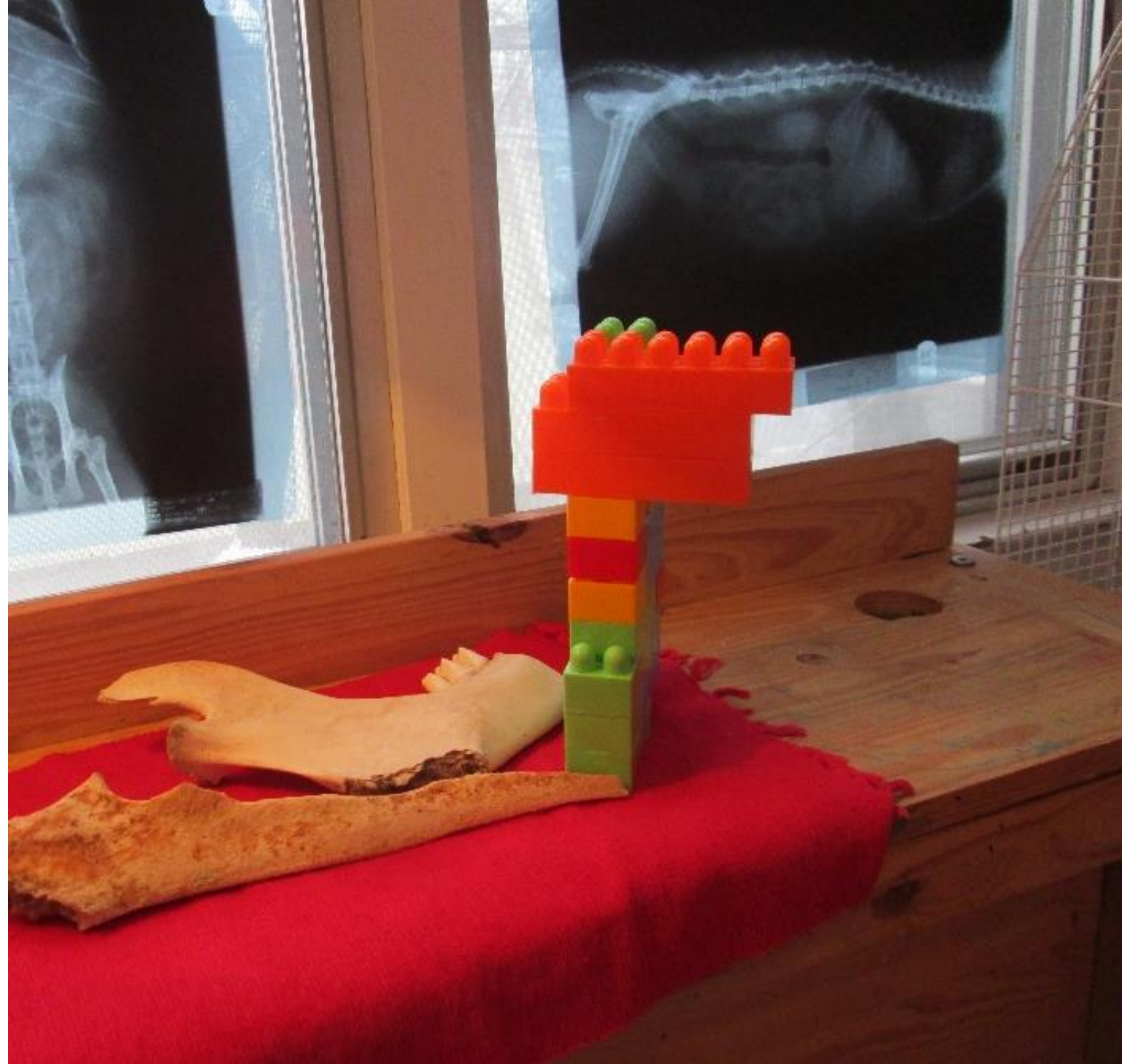




Now that you have your wonderful environment, what do you do next?

Learning Materials: A Key Component of the Early Learning Environment

“Materials in early childhood programs are the bones of the curriculum and the foundation of the teaching and learning process. They support the program values, and frame the possibilities and actions for living and learning with children. Collections, offerings, and arrangements of materials reflect your values, what you believe children are capable of , and how you see your role.”



Learning materials typically fall into three categories:

Structured – The object has one use or purpose. (scissors, puzzles)



Learning materials typically fall into three categories:

Semi-structured – The object suggests a purpose, and may be used as a springboard for imaginative play. (dolls, trucks, small animals)



Learning materials typically fall into three categories:

Open-ended – The objects may be used for any number of types of play where children represent their thinking and learning. (blocks, “loose parts” such as rocks, tree cookies or lids)

All three types of learning materials can be combined to create learning experiences for children.

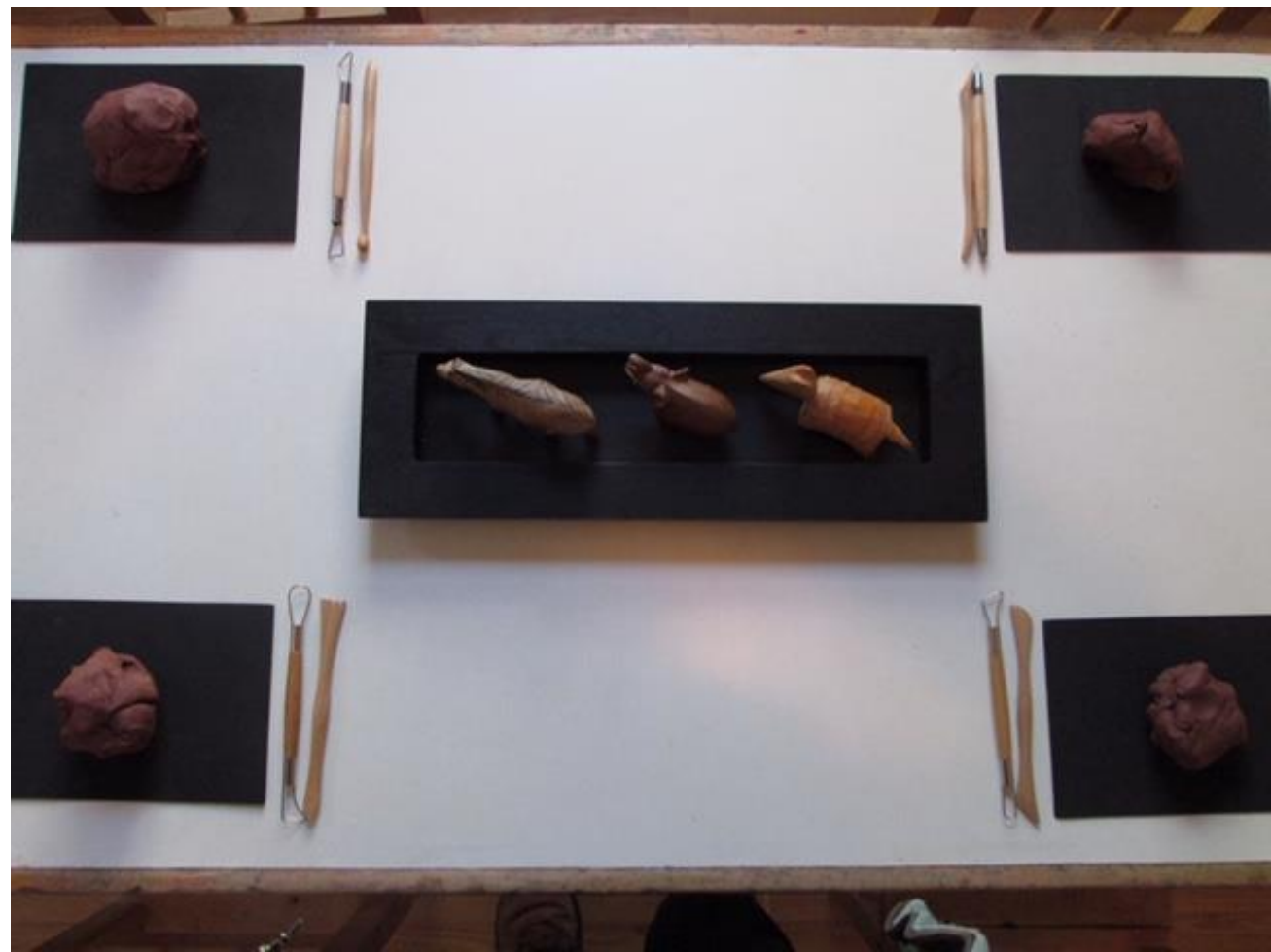


Some Principles for Considering the Possibilities of Materials

- Select materials using an enhanced view of children as capable, confident and curious.
- Invent new possibilities for familiar materials
- Consider beautiful and visually interesting materials
- Choose materials that can be transformed
- Provide real tools and quality materials
- Supply materials to extend children's interests



Consider this and the next few images. Use your list, *Considering the Possibilities Of Materials* to think about what has been offered to the children.





Arranging Materials as Invitations for Attention and Focus

- Place in an accessible location.
- Provide a background for the materials (this can be a tray, a cloth or a frame).
- Sensory materials form an important foundation for the experience.
- Create orderly beautiful arrangements by:
 - Storing diverse items in matching containers.
 - Grouping together similar materials (similar in colour, in size, or material)
 - Giving attention to size, scale, and levels
- Arrange materials to suggest how they might be used.
- Display books and other visual representations with the materials.
- Layer materials to offer complexity.

“Layer materials to offer complexity” What does this mean?

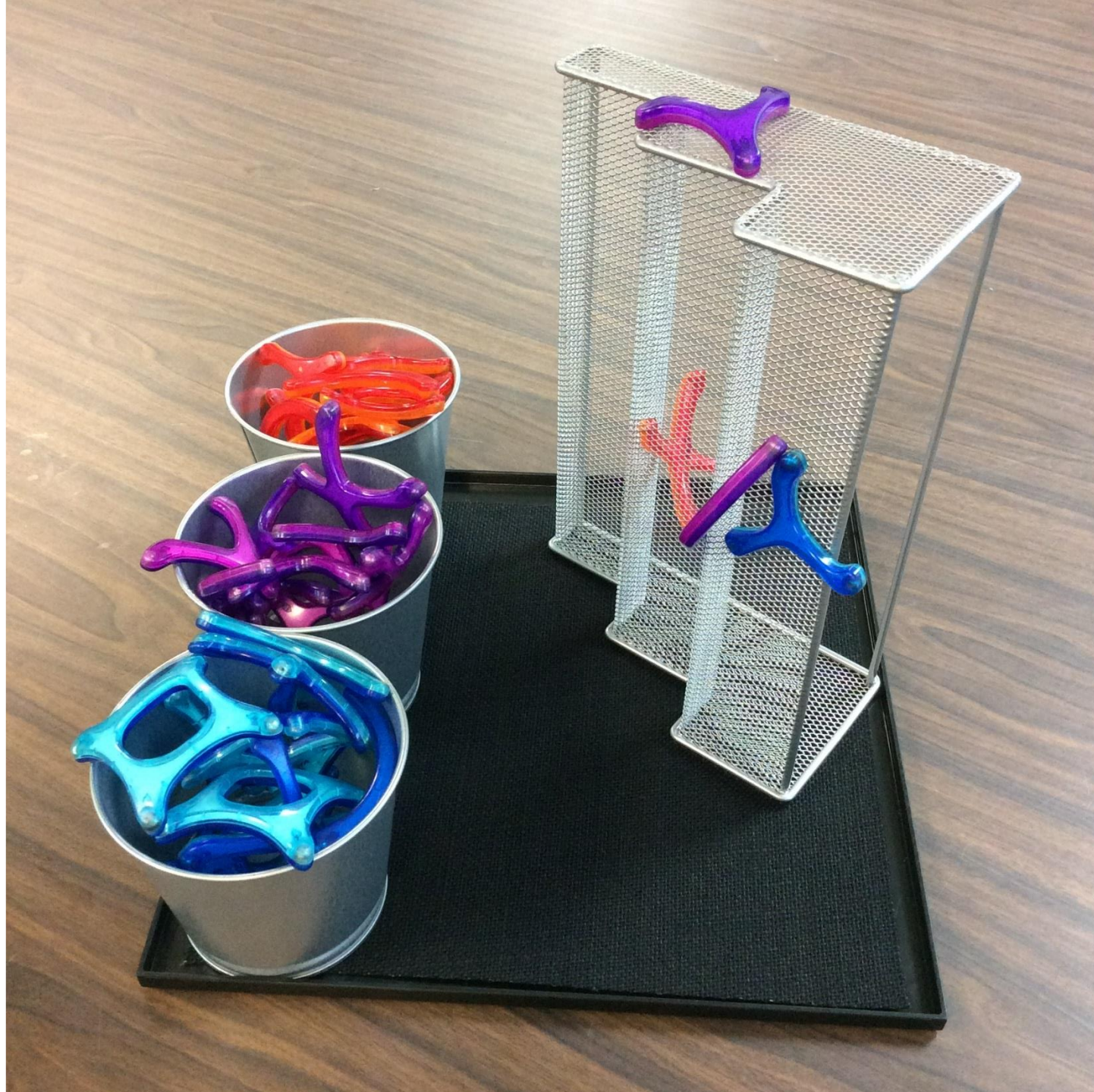
Jean Piaget named the kinds of play that he observed children use as part of their learning. Moving from the simple to the complex.

- **Sensory Play** - is any activity that stimulates children's senses: touch, smell, taste, sight and hearing. ..
- **Functional Play** – an action, sometimes repetitive that a child finds enjoyable, naturally exploring scientific processes. Ex. opening and closing things, filling and dumping, stacking and knocking over, rolling an object back and forth (something to experience)
- **Constructive Play** – uses materials to create something in an organized goal oriented way. Ex. building with blocks, painting a picture (something to create with)
- **Symbolic/Fantasy Play** – is role playing or make believe. Ex. pretending to be a baby, or driving a car using a pretend steering wheel. (something to pretend with)
- **Games With Rules** – games with other children with pre-established rules. (something to play)

When designing an invitation or play experience, offer materials which can support each of the levels of play.









The importance of sensory materials for play experiences...

“Providing a sensory base such as sand or playdough, and gradually adding materials related to the different kinds of play extends the amount of time and the complexity of children’s play. Sensory materials keep children reinvesting in the invitation, which allows them to see more possibilities for the other objects available to build or design something, create a drama or make up a game.” p. 72



- Will invitations stay the same as the children play? **No**
- Should they? **No**
- Can children add their own materials? **Yes**



Working by the light table because the dragon looks "Scary"



A dragon puppet is created in the art area.



Showing the mouse to another "Dragon".
Does he want to eat him?



Look again at the materials offered on your table and on the table with extra materials.

Can you create an invitation taking into consideration what we have just discussed.



Take a few moments to think about what we have talked about today.

Write the answers to these questions?

- Do you have ideas about what you might try tomorrow, with the children.
- Do you have ideas about what you could do in the near future?
- What is a long term plan or dream for your environment?