

# The Learning Environment & the Gee Whiz Curriculum



# What is the Learning Environment?

The learning environment is truly everything that impacts each child each day. Really? Yes! It includes things like the materials that are available to the children. It also includes your attitude toward each child...positive & negative. The learning environment also encompasses things like how well you engage children in conversations and the daily routines you have in place. As stated above, the learning environment truly does include everything!

So...how can you enhance the learning environment and ensure that it is a positive one for all children? At Gee Whiz, we believe that there are many, many things you can do on a daily basis to ensure that the learning environment in your program is of the highest quality. Most of these things you are probably already doing but it never hurts to review!

This guide is designed to help you recognize the many different aspects of the learning environment and how you can work to enhance each in a simple, and easy, way. Reading through this guide should also help you prepare for your environmental rating assessment in a way that is meaningful to you, the children you serve and even their parents/ caregivers. Please take time to read through this guide periodically to refresh your memory. After all, we know how many different hats you all wear each day and this is our way of providing you with a helping hand.



# 5 Aspects of the Learning Environment



To make things a little easier for you, at Gee Whiz, we are going to help you focus on 5 different aspects of the learning environment. We use the acronym **SMILE**.

**S**<sub>elf</sub>

**M**aterials and Arrangement

**I**nteractions

**L**earning

**E**ngagement

In the following pages, we will break down each of these areas into specific skills and strategies you can utilize in your program with the children you serve and their parents/caregivers. Keep in mind that there are probably many more areas we could address in this booklet but we wanted to focus on what we view as the most important.

# SELF - It All Starts Here!

YOU! You are probably the most important aspect of the learning environment. After all, you plan the experiences, you gather materials, you prepare meals, you provide guidance...in other words...you do it all! Your role is very, very important in many different ways. The first step is to recognize that the children are watching and listening to you every single moment of every day. No pressure there, right?!

So, what should do (or not do) to make sure that you are your best "self" each and every day? Here are just a few ideas:

**Be positive!** Even when things go sideways, it is very important for you to remain positive and to approach situations in a positive way. This can be challenging at times, but it is very important.

**Think before you speak.** The orange juice just spilled all over the floor...for the third time today. A child decides that dumping out the blocks, again, is a lot of fun. You discover a two-year old drawing with chalk on the floor. All of these scenarios could cause you to lose your cool ... and with good reason! But it is very important to remember that in most cases, children are not intentionally being "bad." Instead, they are experimenting or trying new things as they attempt to learn more about their world. A big part of this experimentation is learning about cause and effect. So, your response to these types of scenarios can take what would be a negative interaction and turn it into a positive learning experience. For instance, when a child spills his/her orange juice on the floor, respond with, "Hmmm. Seems like there's a spill. What do you think we should do take care of this so no one falls?" Then, have the child help you clean it up. Same thing with the blocks or even the chalk on the floor. Yelling, belittling or demeaning a child will not stop this type of behavior and for some children, may actually become positive reinforcement and they may do it again and again in order to get your attention. This is definitely NOT the type of attention you want, right?

**Nonverbal communication speaks volumes!** A smile is a great way to give encouragement. Catch a child doing something great? Give a smile and a nod. See a child about to do something he/she knows is not a good idea, simply shake your head and watch. If the child stops, smile and nod. High fives, fist bumps, and, if appropriate for your group, hugs are wonderful nonverbal ways to enhance and build a positive environment in your program.

**Get your rest and eat healthy.** Just as children need to eat healthy foods and get plenty of rest, so do you. There is no way you can be at your best if you are tired and/or hungry. After all, if you do not take care of yourself, how can you possibly take care of others? We know...this is hard but it is VERY important so please try!

**Enthusiasm is contagious!** This is SO true. If you are excited about experiences and activities, guess what? The children will be as well. Also, be sure to join in the fun during free play ... especially when playing outside. Being engaged with the children as they play is a great way to build caregiver-child bonds. Let them direct you! Play is just as important for adults as it is for children but in today's busy world, we too often forget that fact.



# MATERIALS - What & How

Another aspect of the learning environment are the materials available to children each day. Too often, we get busy and just have the same materials available all the time. Changing up the materials is very important for keeping the children engaged and promoting learning across multiple developmental areas. Gee Whiz is adding a component to our monthly program called, "Add & Enhance." This is a list of materials for the different center areas (including outside) that you can add to reinforce out monthly units. Our goal is to help you "mix things up" to enhance the learning environment even more! That said, here are some very basic ideas of materials you should have on hand in each of the most common learning areas. If you are on a limited budget (and who isn't?), thrift stores and/or yard sales can be great resources for toys and materials IF they are in good shape and can be washed/cleaned. Many of these materials can be stored in large plastic tubs to make bringing them out and putting them away easier for you.



## ART

- Paint (all colors)
- Paintbrushes (different sizes for children with different levels of fine motor control)
- Construction paper
- Felt & craft foam
- Colored art tissue
- Coffee filters
- Paper plates (small and large)
- Crayons/markers (washable) - Again, provide both thin and thick markers/crayons.
- Child-safe scissors (loop scissors for children with limited fine motor control)
- Old newspapers/magazines/catalogs
- Watercolors
- Stickers
- Washable stamp pads & stamps

## DRAMATIC PLAY/DRESS-UP

- Clothing - men's, women's, children's - be sure to reflective of different cultures
- Plastic play food (including ethnic foods)
- Empty food cartons stuffed with paper and taped shut
- Toy dishes, silverware, cooking pots/pans
- Play kitchen
- Child-sized cleaning tools (e.g., mop, broom, dustpan, vacuum)
- Dolls & plush animals
- Doll bed and high chair (if possible)
- Plastic hats (must be washable)
- Dress-up clothing for different careers + props associated with each
- Index cards, notepads, crayons/markers
- Toy cash register
- Paper shopping bags (or fabric shopping bags)
- Cardboard boxes - They can become ANYTHING!

# MATERIALS - What & How (Con't)

## BLOCKS

- Table blocks - assorted types based on the developmental levels of the children (e.g., Duplos®, bristle blocks, magnet blocks, etc.)
- Floor blocks (larger, wooden blocks and/or cardboard blocks)
- Toy vehicles (cars, trucks, buses, trains)
- People figures (all ages, male/female, different ethnicities)
- Cardboard boxes (all shapes & sizes)

## MANIPULATIVES, MATH & SCIENCE

- Empty cardboard boxes with flaps taped shut (for building)
- Puzzles (wooden and jigsaw)
- Stringing beads - Just make sure they are safe for children under 3.
- Lacing cards
- Busy boxes
- Playsets
- Unbreakable magnifiers & child-safe binoculars
- Pegboards
- Calculators with large buttons
- Toy cash register with play paper money
- Counters (safe for children under 3)



## LITERACY & WRITING

- Books, books, books! - Board books and paperbacks including poetry, nonfiction and fiction
- Notebooks
- Index cards
- White paper (lined and unlined)
- Writing tools (e.g., pencils, washable markers, crayons)
- Children's magazines
- Cookbooks (can go in DRAMATIC PLAY as well)
- Magnetic or foam letters

## GROSS MOTOR PLAY & MUSIC/MOVEMENT (for indoors or out)

- Large blankets or bed sheets
- Pillows
- Parachute (if available)
- Balls (assorted types and sizes)
- Orange cones
- Hula hoops
- Riding toys (with and without pedals)
- Tricycles
- 4-wheeled scooters
- Large plastic trucks
- Climbing apparatus
- Bubble solution & wands
- Beach balls
- Sand box (if outdoors) including buckets, shovels, rakes, etc.
- Toy leaf rakes
- CD player and CD's OR digital music device the children can use
- Rhythm band instruments

# MATERIALS - Arrangement

When you run a family child care program, space is a premium! For many of you, your home is also your “school.” This makes the arrangement of space and materials a challenge. You will know best how to arrange furniture and materials to meet the needs of both your family and your program. But here are a few ideas to help you get started!

## Interest Areas

### What is an Interest Area?

Some people call these “learning centers.” Others call them “interest areas.” Basically, these are areas in your learning space where there is a “focus.” The focus might be building/construction or art. It might be dramatic play or language. Because you are in your home, you more than likely will not have the type of space a teacher might have in a preschool setting. That is OK! Think about the interest areas that would benefit your group the most and then start there. A rug might be a great way to designate a “building/constructing” area. A child-sized table and chair set might work for an art area. Think creatively! Use the internet for ideas. Pinterest is a great place to start!



## Storage Matters!

Again ... you are utilizing your home space as your program space (in many cases). This makes storage solutions more important than ever! Plastic bins with lids can be a great way to store things like dramatic play materials. When you need them, just bring out the bin. When the day is over, the children can help pack them up and put them away. This also teaches children responsibility! There are so many different storage options out there. Check your local discount department store or online retailer for options.

Baskets and/or bins with lids can be great tools for organizing materials for quick set-up and then putting away. Think about materials and toys that have many pieces. You can create baskets/bins for these and print out a picture to tape to the front of the basket/bin. This helps children put materials/toys back where they belong at the end of the day. Again, a great way to promote responsibility!



# MATERIALS - Arrangement

A place for diapering. A spot for group experiences. Your outdoor place space. All of these areas are important and require thought and planning. At Gee Whiz, we totally understand how challenging this can be when your living space and your teaching space are one in the same. Here are few ideas on how you can maintain your living space while incorporating your “teaching” space at the same time.

## A Place for You & Your Family

In the end, your home is your home. While it may double during the day as your “teaching space,” it is your home. Make sure to have a place you can sit during the day that is comfortable for you. That may not be the floor! If space is an issue, consider smaller upholstered chairs instead of large couches. Make sure any upholstery you choose can be easily cleaned because it will need to be!

Plan a place which can be your “office” space. You will need a place to do paperwork, send emails, attend webinar training, etc. This does not need to be an entire room! It could simply be a small table in the corner of your bedroom or a section of the kitchen counter. You might need to keep you paperwork in a portable file box with a handle so you can stash it in a closet and easily retrieve it. Again, think creatively!



## Learning Everywhere!

When planning how you will use your space, make sure to remember that learning takes place everywhere! That includes indoors, outdoors and even in the bathroom (when potty training and learning to wash hands). While you might not have a lot of space to work with, you can have a rich learning environment nonetheless. For instance, perhaps you don't have a “permanent” water play area. No worries! A long plastic tub that you put on a picnic table and fill with water can work as a water table just as well as one you need to buy. A large cardboard box added to your outdoor play space can be transformed by the children into so many things. And... once the children are done playing with it, it can be recycled.

If you have a designated space indoors for your program, you can use rugs, bookcases, and storage devices to divide your space into interest areas (as mentioned before). You can also set up interest areas outdoors simply by adding materials. For instance, maybe you want to set up an exploration area where children can dig in your backyard. Just add child-safe trowels, hand rakes, garden gloves, buckets, etc.

Make sure you have plenty of materials and arrange your outdoor play space so that it is safe for children as they engage in free play. For instance, if you have a climbing apparatus, you do not want to put a sand play area near there. Riding toys should have an area where they must “stay” as well. This would be far from where children are running. Safety is the key!



# INTERACTIONS - So important!

Each day, you are engaged in many different interactions. Sometimes, you interact with an individual child. Other times you interact with a small group or even the entire group. You also interact with parents/caregivers. When you think about how many different interactions you actually engage in each day, you will probably be amazed!

The interactions you have with each child, the group and parents/caregivers are all very important! This section will help you identify ways you can enhance your interactions throughout the day to further create a positive learning environment.

## INTERACTIONS WITH CHILDREN:

**Talk, Talk, Talk!** We cannot say this enough...the more you talk to children, the more language they will absorb. Even children who are nonverbal will build future vocabulary and language skills by listening to you talk. So, when children are playing or participating in experience, describe their actions. Use plenty of robust vocabulary as you do so.

**Be Proactive, Not Reactive.** See a child with the block in his/her raised hand? What do you do? Wait for it to go flying through the air or in a calm voice state, "(Child's name), blocks belong on the ground"? Which do you think is more proactive? The second option, of course. The key to being proactive is to be attentive to what is going on around you. Remember, young children do not yet have a well-established understanding of cause and effect as well as "right" and "wrong." Most are still working on the skill of understanding these concepts. Therefore, you need to be alert and prepared. Also, make sure your "school rules" are stated in the positive so children know what to DO and not what NOT to do. For instance, "We go down the slide" instead of "Don't climb up the slide." Another example would be, "Please put the lids back on the markers when you are done using them" instead of, "Don't leave the lids off the markers." Stating rules in the positive is an easy way for children to remember what they should do.

**Listen, Listen, Listen.** As important as it is to talk, it is equally important to listen. Young children are just beginning to use language to share needs, wants and ideas. Be patient! Sometimes it takes them a little while to say what they want to say. It is also helpful to reflect back to a child what you think you heard them say in order to verify. This is especially important when children are sharing feelings. For instance, if a child is upset because he/she lost a favorite stuffed animal and is sharing these feelings with you in his/her own way, you can reflect back with something like, "It sounds like you are very upset because you cannot find your toy (name of animal)." Not only does doing this assure you understood what the child is saying, it provides you with an opportunity to help the child put words to emotions.



## INTERACTIONS WITH PARENTS/CAREGIVERS:

Guess what? Everything we listed above for children applies to interactions with parents/caregivers as well...especially listening and being proactive! It is very important to really listen to parents/caregivers when they share information with you. Not only is this respectful, the information they share can provide keen insight into each child that you would not otherwise have. Take time to listen carefully and, if needed, make notes as well. Additionally, be proactive and not reactive with parents/caregivers as well. For instance, make sure that new parents/caregivers have copies of your attendance policies IN WRITING when they enroll. This will make things much easier for you if issues arise in the future. The same goes for issues regarding a child's behavior. Address the problem the first time it occurs and not the 10th. View the parents/caregivers as an ally. After all, you are both on the same team and you ultimately want the best for the child.

# LEARNING - Every day...all day

Learning does not take place in a vacuum and it certainly does not take place in a workbook! Learning is something that takes place every day during experiences, daily routines and free play. Your role is to facilitate learning in as many ways as possible. Taking advantage of teachable moments, setting up activities on the spur of the moment and using daily routine times, like eating, as learning opportunities are just a few of the ways you can make sure that learning is a part of each child's day. At Gee Whiz, the curriculum provides numerous activities and experiences that help you address all 10 developmental areas. Our picture codes enable you to easily connect each learning experience to the developmental areas it addresses. We provide the foundation...then it is up to you to "build the house" based on the individual children in your group.

This section will give you tips to help you plan your own learning experiences while also helping you see how daily routine times like handwashing and eating facilitate learning. It is very important that you understand this concept so you can share it with parents/caregivers. Too often, parents/caregivers think of "learning" in terms that relate to more formal schooling like worksheets and craft projects. It is your job to help them see that playing in the dirt and painting are very important learning opportunities for young children.

## PLANNING ACTIVITIES

When planning experiences for the children in your group, it is important to ask yourself, "What are the goals I hope to accomplish by doing this activity with the children?" If you cannot answer this question, then STOP! Doing activities just for the sake of "doing something" is not an effective planning approach. Instead, ask yourself these three questions:

- 1) What skills do I want the children will develop by doing the activity?
- 2) How will I evaluate if the children develop these skills?
- 3) What adaptations will the activity or experience need so that all of the children can participate?

## INDIVIDUALIZE!

Are all two-year-olds the same? Is a four-year-old the same as a toddler? Of course not! Each child is unique and special in his/her own way. Individualizing experiences is very important because it helps you adapt activities to each individual child's needs and developmental levels. For instance, maybe you want to play a game that involves throwing a ball but you have a child that has limited eye-hand coordination. Perhaps you could roll the ball with this child instead. Individualizing does not need to be hard or complicated. Just ask yourself, "Do I need to adjust this activity for (child's name)?" and if so, "What can I do to make it match his/her developmental needs?"

The Gee Whiz curriculum includes tools and information to help you individualize. Check out our User's Guide on our website for more details as well as samples of our Individualization Web and Observe & Reflect Grids.



# LEARNING - Every day...all day (con't)



## LEARNING DURING TRANSITIONS

Every day the children make many transitions. They arrive. They depart. They move from group time to learning center time. They go outside. They come inside. You get the point. Transitions are a natural part of every day so why not turn them into a learning time as well? Singing a song, reciting a chant, looking for a specific color, etc. are all ways you can help children transition from one experience to another. The Gee Whiz curriculum includes a transition idea each day. The goal is to help turn a routine time into a learning time. You can do the same thing on your own! For instance, you might want to adopt a clean up song that you sing each time it is clean up time. You could also create a rhyme to say when it is time to tuck in for a nap. Be creative! If you have more advanced children in your group, challenge them to help you come up with transition ideas. You might just be surprised at what they suggest!

## LEARNING DURING MEALTIMES

Do you feel like you are serving meals and snacks constantly? Well, that is because you are! Mealtimes and snacks provide more opportunities to promote learning in a meaningful way. Here are just a few ideas on how you can accomplish this goal. We are sure you will have more ideas as well.

- Have the children set the table! This is an excellent way for them to practice one-to-one correspondence.
- Talk about the colors, shapes and textures of foods while children eat.
- Have children count the number of peas or green beans or even apple slices on their plate.
- Use terms like *whole*, *half* and *quarter* as the children enjoy foods like apples or oranges.
- Build vocabulary by naming foods and talking about how they are grown (and/or processed).

## LEARNING DURING HANDWASHING, DIAPERING, TOILETING AND TOOTHBRUSHING!

Spend a lot of time doing these routine activities? We are SURE you do! Again, they can easily be turned into learning opportunities with just a little thought and effort. Here are a few ideas to get you started.

- Sing a song as children brush their teeth. Not only will this help them brush long enough, it will also enhance language and vocabulary.
- Practice following three-step directions when toileting (e.g., wipe, flush, wash).
- Hang things above the diapering area for infants/toddlers to look at while diapering. Talk about what the infant sees as a way of building vocabulary.
- Count the children's teeth as they brush. This is a meaningful way of exposing them the numerals.

# ENGAGEMENT - Are you engaged?

What is Elena doing in the book center? Why does Jose look upset? Who is banging those blocks on the floor...and why? Being engaged means being alert and aware of what the children are doing. It also means asking questions, opening the door for meaningful conversations. We fully understand that you need to prepare lunch or wash sippy cups, but it is also very important for you to be engaged with the children as much as possible. Why? Because when you are engaged, YOU learn! You become more aware of each child's unique developmental needs. This helps when planning and adapting learning experiences, sharing information with parents/caregivers and completing developmental screening tools. So, how can you ensure you are engaged? Here are a few ideas!

**Put down the cellphone.** We get it...we really do! Keeping your cellphone handy is important in case a parent/caregiver calls BUT it is also extremely important to be engaged with the children. Let new parents/caregivers to your program know that during certain times of the day, you may not answer your phone immediately. Encourage them to leave a message and ensure them you will call back as soon as possible. The exception to this, of course, would be a true emergency. Checking email, texting and surfing the web have become a part of our daily lives and can be such a distraction if not kept in check. Make sure that you spend more time engaging with the children during the day and less time looking at your phone.

**Ask open-ended questions.** Open-ended questions are great conversations starters! These are questions that begin with words like HOW? WHAT? and WHY? Generally they are also questions that cannot be answered with one word and often, there is no right or wrong answer. For instance, when children are playing with blocks and their tower topples over, you might ask, "Why do you think the tower fell?" and then continue with, "How could you build it differently the next time?" These types of questions not only engage children but also challenge them to problem-solve and think.

**Keep learning styles in mind.** Some children are visual learners. They learn best by watching. Other children are auditory. They learn best by listening. Still others learn kinesthetically...through touch. The only way you will learn how each child in your care learns best is by engaging with them on a consistent basis. Chances are good you will find that most children are a blend of different learning styles. This is very common. The key is that unless you engage with children, you will not know which way they learn best. So watch...listen...and learn!

**Let the children lead you.** OK...we should probably clarify. The children are not going to prepare their own lunches or decide the daily routine but they can, and should, have a role in planning experiences. They can also add their own ideas to activities you set up and initiate. This gives the children ownership and also encourages them to test their own ideas. Both are very powerful ways to promote the learning environment!



# You CAN Do This!

The learning environment of your program is critical. No one wants to engage or participate in an environment where there is little choice, limited engagement and ideas and opinions are not valued. Your role in setting up a supporting, positive learning environment is very, very important. We hope that this booklet has been useful in helping you better understand just how important that role is AND how you can assure that the environment in your program is as good as it can possibly be.

If you have questions or comments to share, we would love to hear from you! Please feel free to send an email to [customerservice@geewhizeducation.com](mailto:customerservice@geewhizeducation.com) at any time.

Our hats are off to you! We know how hard you work each day to support children and families. The work you do impacts so many and we cannot thank you enough for all you do.

