

Facilitating preschool friendships

By Mary J. Sullivan Coleman
and Laura Krueger

Facilitating friendships at the preschool level among all children is at the core of the Play and Learn curriculum. Based on early childhood research, the authors believe that all young children learn best through movement and meaningful play with friends. This curriculum lays a framework that uses a trans-disciplinary model of service delivery as the most effective way to teach young children motor skill development along with language, readiness, and social skill development. The curriculum, published in 1999 by Ablenet, has had several printings and the authors have trained early childhood teams across the country from Anchorage, Alaska to San Antonio, Texas. New toys and games have been added over the years, but the basic framework of Play and Learn remains as relevant today as the day it was published. Feedback from early childhood teams using the curriculum has been positive and exciting.

Based on the belief that all children love to move, play, paint and create, and read and write, play areas were developed that meet the needs of any typically developing preschool child, and in addition, meet the goals and objectives of any Individual Education Plan of a child with special needs.

The original eleven play areas described in the curriculum can be simplified for any preschool classroom to include common preschool play areas. The activities



"Friendship is unnecessary, like philosophy, like art. It has no survival value; rather, it is one of those things that gives value to survival." – C.S. Lewis

align closely with early childhood indicators of progress. As stated in Minnesota's Early Learning Standards manual: "A large and growing body of research supports the critical relationship between early childhood experiences and successful learning outcomes." (p.1) Play and Learn is filled with early childhood experiences that lead to successful learning outcomes.

Play and Learn is a twelve month curriculum, organized by typical preschool monthly themes. The book is unique in the way it is written: on the left hand side of the page an activity, such as painting, is written to use with any child; on the right hand side of the page "Try Another Way" presents the same

activity using simple assistive technology for a child with special needs. Thus children can paint together, just using different modalities – a great example of universal design in action. The simple technology is embedded right in the classroom and is always available for any child to use; in this way the technology does not separate the child with special needs, but rather draws all children together. Any activity can be set up as an opportunity for social interaction between children; adults in the classroom become important coaches and facilitators of peer friendships. What child wouldn't be drawn into an activity that involved a robot drawing with markers? Social and emotional

Address
526 Main St.
P.O. Box 68
Henderson, MN 56044

Phone
507-248-3294

Fax
507-248-3810

Web site
www.closingthegap.com

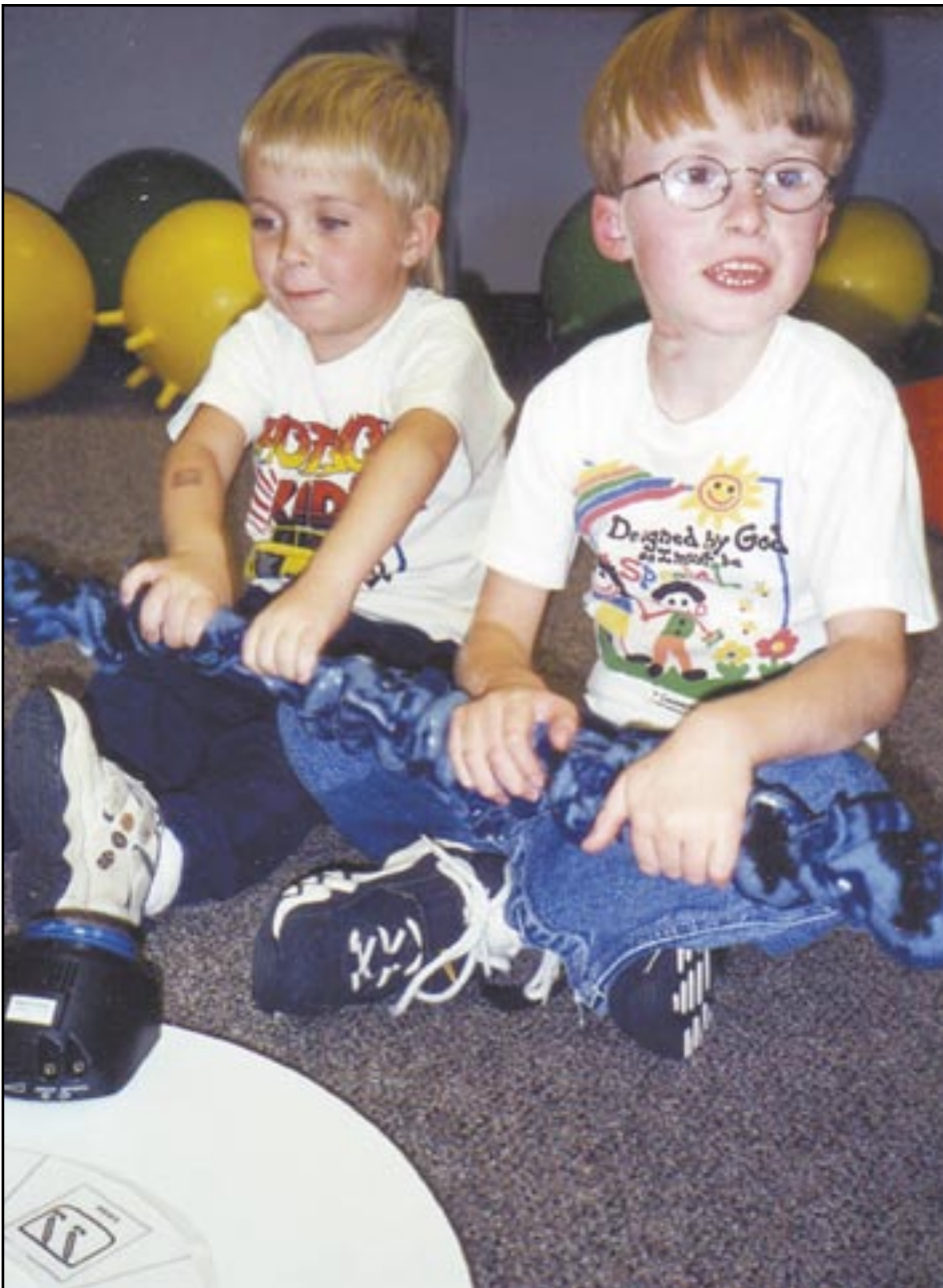
E-mail
info@closingthegap.com

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Let's Move! Friends can move together with the bungee cord and listen for directions with the step by step which is positioned on a lazy susan in the middle of the circle.

growth is enhanced as the children giggle and play together with highly motivating activities.

Visual symbols are used to support and benefit all visual learners. Symbols are used on communication devices and are incorporated into daily activities and routines. Simple visual schedules have proven helpful to many preschoolers in learning the routine of taking jackets, boots, hats and mittens on and off, as well as hanging up backpacks. Parents have successfully used visual schedules for dressing routines at home also.

Preschoolers learn important independence skills when they check off their own visual schedules as they move from play area to play area, or work station to work station. Small visual "pooh meters" have helped preschoolers begin to recognize that "tigger bodies" are for the gym and playground and "pooh bodies" are for circle time and art projects.

Let's take a closer look at the Play areas that provide the framework of this curriculum:

Let's move!

Since physical and motor development is critical in early childhood, wide ranges of movement activities are important in the preschool classroom. Ways to set up creative obstacle courses, swing and gym activities, and cooperative sensorimotor games are at the core of Let's move. A favorite cooperative sensorimotor activity is the bungee cord or Co-oper Band, a circular, stretchy resistance band. Play and Learn shows the reader a developmental range of activities with the bungee cord, incorporating the important learning elements of routines and music. A September activity begins with singing "Wheels on the Bus". Different actions have been developed to go with each verse of the song. These actions promote teamwork among the children as well as help them develop good sitting posture, upper body strengthen, and use of the two sides of the body together. Visuals are used with each verse of Wheels on the Bus, further promoting language understanding and inclusion of children with a range of language abilities.

Since repetition with variation over the school year is a key element of the curriculum, bungee cord activities are woven throughout the school year, beginning with simple bungee routines, then adding new developmental challenges every few months as the children progress. Think about how much fun it is to learn the readiness skills of colors through bungee movement, a colors song, and brightly colored bean bags which are thrown in the middle of the circle as each color is sung! The possibilities are endless. This one movement activity can facilitate motor, language, social and readiness skills for a child. The authors often say that if they were stranded on a desert island with twenty preschoolers and they could only take one toy...they would take a bungee cord!

Let's read and write!

Early literacy experiences are essential in helping children build receptive language skills and set the foundation for later reading and writing success. Ways to set up early literacy experiences for all children and early pre-writing activities are at the core of Let's read and write.

The curriculum's monthly themes and activities each include excellent children's literature books. The books were carefully chosen to show both cultural diversity as well as diversity of ability. The books celebrate all

children and promote awareness of similarities, helping children learn more about each other and their shared interests, ultimately using literacy as yet another stepping-stone for building friendships.

Children love books and Rochelle Bunnett's Friends in the Park or Friends at School and Beverly Bishop's coloring book My Friend with Autism are wonderful examples of books that celebrate children. Weaving these books into weekly literacy experiences helps set early foundations of compassion and understanding among children. The life size Pacer puppets, with their engaging preschool script called "Count Me In", is yet another way to help all children have friends and "be counted in."

There are many other ways to weave literacy throughout the child's day. For example, using digital photographs of preschool children to make simple books, illustrating imaginative play or how to play a preschool game, are very engaging and help children learn to love books. For many children, especially children with autism, these books give visual support, helping them understand what they might do with peers in the imaginative play area or how to engage in a game such as Lucky Ducks.

For children needing help learning the sequence of turning pages and reading a book or for a child unable to motorically hold a book, a simple assistive technology device, such as AbleNet's little Step-by-Step communicator, can be very helpful. With 75 seconds of sequential recording time, you can record many of the popular preschool books. Each time the child activates the switch, one page of the book is read. The child turns the page, activates the switch, and another page is read. And it's a great activity for two friends to do together...one friend activates the switch, the other turns the pages. At this early stage of reading books, stabilizing the book on a slant board and securing the Step-by-Step with velcro can further enhance the reading experience. The BookWorm, another literacy tool from AbleNet, holds up to four stories per memory module and can easily be adapted with a single switch for easy access. Because the BookWorm is highly motivating, it naturally promotes turn taking skills as well as builds vocabulary and language comprehension skills.



Let's Read! Any preschool book can be programmed on a step by step...a great early literacy tool.

Let's paint and create!

Art projects in Play and Learn are called "cooperative art in process," because art activities are set up as an art project that children work on together over several days rather than focusing on individual art projects that children take home each day. Again this cooperative process promotes

social and emotional skill development since the natural set up of the project requires turn taking, problem solving and working together – all of which are also important social skills. In September, the "Welcome Back to School" activity directs the children to create and paint a bus together. A simple handmade book with digital photos shows



Let's Play! Any battery operated game such as Peanut Party can be adapted with a simple switch, making it possible for All children to play a game together.



Let's Paint and Create! Painting a bus with friends is a great way to be welcomed back for a new school year.

children converting a big cardboard box to a wonderfully painted school bus, with children riding together. This is first read to the children so they understand the sequence and process of the art project.

The children transform their own box, beginning by all working together to paint the bus orange, using small paint rollers. On subsequent days, the children cut out wheels, fill in headlights with crumpled tissue paper, create steering wheels with toobers, and install a little Step-by-Step communicator with Raffi's "Wheels on the Bus" song. Now the kids are ready to take each other for a ride! The child who can't physically get into the bus, is positioned at the entrance of the bus and collects bus tokens from the riders, using a voice output communication device, such as a Step-by-Step which says "one token please." Thus all children work together, painting and creating, riding and singing. Fine motor and social skill development are enhanced when children are motivated through meaningful play.

In addition to several three-dimensional projects during other months, there are fifteen foot sheets of paper mounted on the

wall, where children work on art together. A spring activity helps children create a long very hungry caterpillar. The curriculum describes a wide variety of developmentally appropriate painting and art tools that children can use to accomplish the task. For the child who is unable to hold tools, an adapted paint n' swirl can add yet another fun painting option. One friend squeezes the small paint bottles while the other friend activates the switch to spin the paint – how exciting for two friends to paint and create together!

Let's play!

Core beliefs in Play and Learn are that children learn best through play and that play motivates children to try harder and remain focused. A range of sensory table experiences, manipulative toy suggestions, and highly motivating preschool games, such as Elefun and Peanut Party, are described in the curriculum. Most importantly, the activities illustrate all children playing together.

Gardening at the sensory table is a favorite activity. Line a sensory table with heavy plastic and let the gardening begin!! Preschoolers use little shovels to fill the table with black dirt; then break up the dirt clumps using their fingers. The children sprinkle winter wheat grass over the dirt and cover the seeds with a thin blanket of dirt. Within ten days, the grass is thick and several inches tall, much to the children's delight! The fun has just begun because all children can water the grass together, either using squirt bottles (great for fine motor skills) or a switch activated water pik with a power link. And when the grass is too tall, cutting with scissors has never been so motivating! Gardening at the sensory table can be the beginning of a great functional life skill with years of enjoyment.

This is the framework of Play and Learn, a model that addresses the important early childhood domains of language and literacy development, creativity and the arts, cognitive development and physical and motor development. All of these domains support the most critical domain for every child: social and emotional development. The ability to develop friendships and relationships is at the heart of real success in school and life...and the seeds of learning those skills are planted in preschool.

References

Mary J. Sullivan Coleman & Laura Krueger, *Play and Learn: A Motor-Based Preschool Curriculum for Children of ALL Abilities*, 1999, revised 2002

Early Childhood Indicators of Progress: Minnesota's Early Learning Standards 2005, Minnesota Department of Education

"Count Me In" Pacer Puppets: <www.pacer.org>.

If you are interested in learning more about the curriculum or planning a workshop with Mary and Laura, you can e-mail them at: <mcoleman@visi.com> or <LJnKrueger@aol.com>. You can also go to Ablenet's Web site at <www.ablenetinc.com> and click on Play and Learn. Look for a new activity idea from Mary and Laura each month at Ablenet's Play and Learn resource link.