

## Classroom Learning Centers or Discovery Centers

Discovery Centers are sometimes called Developmental Learning Centers, because they support children's learning at their level of understanding. Hopefully, they help bridge new learning and develop higher level understanding. Centers might be set up on tables (reading areas, writing centers). The block area can become the pretend beach or ocean or river, using blocks to create a boundary. The housekeeping area can become the research lab, using the refrigerator and shelves for science tools, notebooks and containers. Learning centers can also be interactive bulletin boards, flannel boards, sand or water tables or a large floor graph with a bucket of sea creatures! Math games, science questions, seastars or shells for sorting and/or observations may also be the bases of centers.

### Dramatic Play Area:

Given interesting and engaging materials and a "story" to make sense of, children will use props and their imaginations to transform themselves, peers and the environment to engage in a learning experience. They love to play act the roles and assign roles to each other as they take on more and more complex play. The teacher's role is important since she/he can provide more props, questions for more depth, support for problem-solving and/or direction for the play based on the goal of the classroom learning.

Puzzles, books for reading, games and sorting materials encourage children to make sense of the information embedded within the activities. It doesn't mean that the teacher is not needed; he/she can be an important part of the experience. Let the child take the lead. Discovery centers are for independent choices, and it is important to allow children to take on roles of independence in the classroom.

Discovery centers allow children to self-initiate and independently choose based on their interest. Trusting children to make those choices is important, even if it means you have observed them going to the same area five days in a row! Inviting children into a different center can happen by simply being physically present and showing an interest in the materials and/or activity of that center.

Observations, checklists and anecdotal notes of what is being chosen, level of interest and the engagement in the activity provide useful information. Teachers can then make decisions about the centers based on interest. Asking questions and gathering student comments also provide useful information to share with parents.

Allow children ample time to explore and discover at their own pace. Center time should be 1 hour to 1-1/2 hours in duration. Children need time to use tools, touch and explore objects, and use language to describe with peers and teachers. Encourage children to use the centers appropriately, to "explore like a scientist" and to "tell other scientists in the room what you find."

Centers for the Alaska Seas and Rivers unit might include:

- a sand table with shells
- a water table with shells and plastic marine animals and plankton nets
- a tub of water with shells and rocks
- a magnet board with pictures of freshwater or marine animals
- a flannel board with simple silhouettes of freshwater or marine animals for retelling of stories
- commercial games that support the unit goals
- a pan balance scale with shells/rocks for weighing and comparing
- the Alaska Sea and River Bingo game
- a table with inviting books
- sea animal puzzles and/or old calendars/pictures of plants and animals for cutting and making puzzles

Additional background, ideas, and photos can be found in the book: **15** ***Instant & Irresistible Learning Centers That Build Early Reading & Writing Skills*** by Deborah Hillstead and Marjorie Fields and other Learning Center resources available online.