

## IN THIS ISSUE

---

**FEATURE ARTICLE:**

**TRUST in  
Children's Play**  
page 1

---

**CLASSROOM HINTS:**

**Overcoming Roadblocks  
to Playing with Children**  
page 12

---

**TRAINER-TO-TRAINER:**

**Partners in Play**  
page 16

---

**NEWS BRIEFS:**

page 17

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# TRUST in Children's Play

By Beth Marshall, Director, HighScope Early Childhood Department

**Editor's Note:** *The articles in this issue were originally published in the January/February 2001 issue of Extensions. As the value of children's play is of timeless importance, we are presenting these articles again with updated references to the key developmental indicators (KDIs) and new sidebars added by HighScope staff.*

At HighScope, I answer many phone inquiries about our curriculum and its everyday implementation at a variety of sites. Many of these calls center around the increasing pressures on early childhood programs to measure results by required child outcomes and performance standards.

Often, a program's funding depends on the ability of its staff to document how well it is reaching these goals for children. As a result, many dedicated, effective teachers are second-guessing their current practices. I hear many comments such as the following from teachers: "I know it's not right for the children, but maybe I should just teach to the test." "I really want to do HighScope, but it seems like I'll have to be more directive to 'cover' these outcomes."

What is a teacher to do? The pressures for documented results are very real. Should teachers

"teach to the tests" against their better judgment about what is best for children? Are there ways to meet assessment needs that don't require teachers to compromise their



This teacher listens closely as the child tells her about his interest in playing with woodworking tools.

educational values? This article explores these questions and describes how programs can meet required standards while using the child-centered HighScope approach.

### Insights From the Children

During this same period, I did a stint substituting in the HighScope Demonstration Preschool. This experience reinforced my belief in the active learning philosophy I have been recommending to the teachers I train. It also convinced me once again that assessment doesn't have to conflict with good teaching practices. As is so often the case, it was listening to and learning from the children that sustained my beliefs.

In daily team planning sessions, my team teacher, Mary, and I discussed and recorded our observations of children — a usual practice in HighScope programs. We wrote many *anecdotes*, or brief, specific reports about individual children's actions and words. These notes and other information about the children served as the basis for generating our next day's lesson plans. (For more about this anecdote-writing and planning process see Epstein & Hohmann, 2012.)

During one day's planning session, Mary and I talked about some interesting water play I had observed at work time. Several of the children — Michael, Kodah, Adam, and Lauren — had been working in the water table with the eyedroppers. They had discovered that squeezing the eyedroppers under water would make bubbles in the water. Their excitement about this discovery gave me the idea to do something with bubbles at small-group time the next day. I decided to give each of the children in my small group some simple materials: a straw and a bowl filled with a mixture of water and dish detergent. (We planned a different activity for Mary's small group.)

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When children pursue their curiosity while working with open-ended materials, the opportunities for learning are almost unlimited!

## The 5 Ingredients of Active Learning

- Materials
- Manipulation
- Choice
- Child language and thought
- Adult scaffolding

The next day's small-group time was a hit with my group! The children were active, engaged, and delighted to discover that they could make a heaping bowl of bubbles, squeeze the bubbles in their hands, and blow more bubbles. As I moved from child to child, their squeals, excitement, and new discoveries were seemingly endless:

*"Mine's getting bigger and bigger and bigger and biggest."*

*"Look, I blew really hard and three [bubbles] are stuck together!"*

*"Mine disappear."*

*"If you blow really fast, you get tons of little bubbles."*

*"I'm cutting my bubbles in half like she did. Then they're going to spill all over the table."*

*"Mine are bigger than the bowl now!"*

*"Adam did one huge bubble."*

*"I made 1, 2, 3, 4, 5, 6, 7. I made 7 bubbles."*

*"When Grammy gives me a bath, I get smelly bubbles."*

*"Her bubbles feel soft like my bubbles."*

*And, from a child in the other small group, "Can we do this at our small group tomorrow?"*

I couldn't believe what I was seeing and hearing! I observed the children engaging with key developmental indicators (KDIs) in the curriculum content areas **Approaches to Learning; Social and Emotional Development; Language, Literacy, and Communication; Mathematics; and Science and Technology** — all because the children were interested, engaged, and having fun as they explored the bubbles! I was bowled over once again by the power and magic of play. (Note: the key developmental indicators are the building blocks of thinking, reasoning, and learning at each stage of development — see "The Bubble Play," on pages 9–11, for a listing of the key developmental indicators involved in the bubble play.)

I immediately thought back to the phone calls I had been getting at the office. This experience was a strong reminder that, for me or any teaching adult, one of the most important roles we play in the preschool classroom is to be supporters of young

“As teachers or caregivers, we need to take our cues from the children – instead of thinking ‘What child outcome, learning goal, or rubric must I cover today?’ we need to find that sense of wonder and curiosity in ourselves.”

children’s active learning through play. And it’s our job to find and support the content or learning that happens in that play.

### Play – A Magical Experience

Young children’s play is creative and even magical. Young children bring curiosity as well as a sense of discovery and delight to their play. As teachers or caregivers, we need to take our cues from the children – instead of thinking “What child outcome, learning goal, or rubric must I cover today?” we need to find that sense of wonder and curiosity in ourselves: “I wonder how I can support Dali as he continues to build tall spaceships with the cardboard tubes and boxes?” or “I’m curious about whether and how the children will use the donated cell phones in their play.” If teachers could keep this perspective in mind, perhaps some of the stress and frustration I heard in those voices on the phone would dissipate. These adults could get back to doing what they know is best for children – supporting their active learning by joining in play.

I have come to understand that to be a successful supporter of children’s play and learning, I must truly trust in the process of active learning. I have come to think of this trust in a broader sense, summarized in the letters **T-R-U-S-T**. Let’s take a closer look at what each letter stands for.

### TRUST – A Definition

**T – Time.** *Take **time** to enter children’s play and show children your playfulness.*

In our Demonstration Preschool classroom, the children sing “It’s time to put the books away” as a transition from greeting time to the period when they read the message board. One day, a child added the verse “It’s time to put the teachers away.” The rest of the children were delighted as the teachers joined right in with the giggly singing. More invented verses followed: “It’s time to put the parents away,” “It’s time to put the babies away,” and “It’s time to put the children away.” The adults took time to be playful and to really respond to the children. If they had been too eager to get through the “real business” of the day, they might have rushed through this transition



When teachers respect children's discovery process, relationships and learning can blossom.

“Adults show their respect by entering the play and following the children's lead – by playing in the same way the children do and by allowing children to direct the play.”

and missed out on an opportunity to support children's learning. And what did the children learn? That they can have fun with language, that they can modify and change their songs, that the adults have a sense of humor and can share a laugh with them (further building their relationship), and that school is a pleasant place to be.

**R – Respect.** *Adults respect the children's intentions and ideas.*

Adults show their respect by entering the play and following the children's lead – by playing in the same way the children do and by allowing children to direct the play. On one day at work time, Chris, an adult, was playing with some children who were pretending to be princesses in a castle. The children were “hiding from a dragon.” Chris put on a hat and a cape (like the other “princesses” were wearing) and called the children “Princess” when she spoke to them. She helped as they arranged pillows on the steps to make their castle. The princesses had decided they needed magic wands (chopsticks) that would “freeze” the dragon if she got too close, so Chris had a “wand” too. Elana, the child who was the dragon, modified the play. First she was a dragon, then she was a “fire dragon” that could melt through the “freezed ice,” next she had her own wand that “freezed” the princesses, and finally she was a “nice dragon” who became their pet.

Chris respected Elana's ideas and followed along with her changes. She helped explain the ideas to the other princesses by repeating and restating Elana's words. (“The dragon says she can melt our ‘freeze wands’ by breathing fire on them – now what will we do?”) The other princesses eagerly played through the new ideas and came up with their own strategies for staving off the dragon. (“We have to go to the basement. There aren't any windows there and the dragon can't get in.”) Because she respected the children's intentions and ideas, Chris encouraged them to do their own problem solving, pretending, building, and most of the speaking. She knew that when the children carried out their ideas, they were the ones doing the thinking and the learning.

**U – Unfold.** *Watch for and support the key experiences as they unfold in children's play.*

Observe what children do with the materials, the ways they manipulate them, and the choices they make. Decide what these observations tell you about the children's interests, so you will know how to support them. Chris did this when she followed along with each new twist of the dragon play; along the way, she made mental notes of the rich range of key developmental indicators that children engaged with: *pretend*

“Appropriate assessments for young children are based on observational anecdotes of what children are typically doing in play. Therefore, we must be careful not to impose our ideas of what we would like to observe children doing.”



Children engage with many key developmental indicators during their play.

*play; observing; classifying; communicating ideas; having fun with language; making and expressing choices, plans and decisions; solving problems encountered in play; cooperating and collaborating; building relationships with children and adults; and more.*

**S – Shield.** *Shield the children from the demands of child outcomes, learning goals, and rubrics.*

Although these may be requirements in your agency, they should not affect children’s active learning and play. It is the adults’ responsibility to recognize and support the key learning experiences that take place during the child’s play and to understand how these connect to the agency’s standards and learning goals. It is the child’s role to have ideas and to try out those ideas in play.

Appropriate assessments for young children are based on observational anecdotes of what children are typically doing in play. Therefore, we must be careful not to impose our ideas of what we would like to observe children doing (for example, turning a child’s painting experience into a “count the spots” activity because we want to see

“As an adult in the classroom, I must be an advocate for children's play. I can do this by sharing – with parents, administrators, or funders – the key developmental indicators that I've observed children engaging with during a play event.”

how high the child can count today). A good rule of thumb is to try to stay true to the child's *intent* in a play situation rather than imposing our own intent.

**T – Translate.** *Translate the child's play into learning statements that will make sense to adults.*

As an adult in the classroom, I must be an advocate for children's play. I can do this by sharing – with parents, administrators, or funders – the key developmental indicators that I've observed children engaging with during a play event. At the end of one day, Mary, a classroom adult, told Adam's mom about how he “read” the message board that morning. On the board, there was a circle with a slash through it taped to a teacher's picture – he had “read” this correctly as a message that one of the teachers was out sick (KDI 26: Reading: Children read for pleasure and information).

Mary also reported how Adam later wrote a similar “no” symbol on a piece of paper and taped it to his spaceship to tell other children not to come aboard (KDI 29: Writing: Children write for many different purposes). She also explained to Adam's mom how his use of the “no” symbol was actually an early form of reading and writing.

For longer-term assessment, Mary could also have translated her observations of Adam into data using COR Advantage, the latest online version of HighScope's child assessment tool, the Child Observation Record (COR).



When teachers translate their observations into learning statements, they can communicate these to others in terms of child development and meaningful outcomes.

## What TRUST Means

**T – Time:** Take time to play and be playful with children.

**R – Respect:** Respect children's intentions and ideas.

**U – Unfold:** Watch for and support the HighScope key developmental indicators (KDIs) as they unfold in children's play.

**S – Shield:** Shield the children from the demands of child outcomes, learning goals, and performance standards.

**T – Translate:** Translate the child's play into “learning statements” (such as those in the HighScope KDIs and COR Advantage, the HighScope Child Observation Record) that will make sense to parents, supervisors, and funders.

## Communicating Required Information

The example in the preceding section illustrates how, by translating our child observations into learning statements (such as those provided by the KDIs and COR Advantage), we can help others understand why supporting children's play in active learning settings is the best way to support children's development. This approach allows programs to meet their required standards in ways that are appropriate for the children and consistent with what the research shows us to be best for children in the long run (Schweinhart & Weikart, 1997).

So, TRUST the process of active learning through play, trust your children, and trust yourself as a knowledgeable supporter of children's play. To meet mandated child outcomes, standards, and rubrics, I would also encourage you to trust in the HighScope KDIs and COR Advantage. With few exceptions, the KDIs and COR Advantage will cover what is required in the various standards.

Together, these sets of developmental benchmarks provide a framework that tells us how children actually develop and learn. This approach contrasts with other ways of measuring program effectiveness, which focus on where children should be at the end of the learning process. I've decided that my role in the classroom isn't to “get children to perform” but rather to support and encourage children as they develop. Being a supportive partner with children in their play is by far the best way for me to accomplish this.

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The HighScope key developmental indicators (KDIs) are a framework adults can use to identify and understand what abilities children are developing and how they are learning from their play activities.

## The Bubble Play: Using the Key Developmental Indicators and COR Advantage to “Find the Learning”

The HighScope key development indicators (KDIs) are a framework adults can use to identify and understand what abilities children are developing and how they are learning from their play activities. The key developmental indicators are closely tied to COR Advantage, the latest version of HighScope’s online child assessment tool. Below are some examples of things children said during the bubble play described on pages 2–3. Following the statements below, we show how the key developmental indicators and COR Advantage can be used to identify the developmental accomplishments reflected in each child's statements. (The corresponding COR Advantage items are given next to each statement; the key developmental indicators are listed at the end of each group of statements.)

### Statement:

- “I’m cutting my bubbles in half like she did. Then they’re going to spill all over the table!” (Category: Language, Literacy and Communication, Item L. Speaking, level 4)

Key developmental indicator — 48. **Predicting:** Children predict what they expect will happen.

### Statements:

- “If you blow really fast, you get tons of little bubbles.” (Category: Science and Technology, Item CC. Experimenting, predicting, and drawing conclusions, level 3)
- “Mine's getting bigger and bigger and bigger and biggest.” (Category: Mathematics, Item U. Measurement, level 3)
- “Mine are bigger than the bowl now!” (Category: Mathematics, Item U. Measurement, level 4)

The key developmental indicators are closely tied to COR Advantage, the latest version of HighScope's online child assessment tool.

## The Bubble Play Continued

- “Adam did one huge bubble.” (Category: Mathematics Item S. Number sense and counting, level 2)
- “I made 1, 2, 3, 4, 5, 6, 7. I made 7 bubbles!” (Category: Mathematics, Item S. Number Sense and Counting, level 3)

Key developmental indicators — 22. **Speaking:** Children express themselves using language; 31. **Number words and symbols:** Children recognize and use number words and symbols; 32. **Counting:** Children count things; 36. **Measuring:** Children measure to describe, compare, and order things.

### Statements:

- “Mine disappear.” (Category: Language, Literacy and Communication, Item L. Speaking, level 2)
- “When Grammy gives me a bath, I get smelly bubbles.” (Category: Language, Literacy, and Communication, Item L. Speaking, level 3)
- “Her bubbles feel soft like my bubbles!” (Category: Language, Literacy, and Communication, Item L. Speaking, level 4)

Key developmental indicators — 23. **Vocabulary:** Children understand and use a variety of words and phrases; 46.

**Classifying:** Children classify materials, actions, people, and events.

### Statement:

- “Can we do this at our small group tomorrow?” (Category: Approaches to Learning, Item A. Initiative and planning, level 2)

Key Developmental Indicators — 1. **Initiative:** Children demonstrate initiative as they explore their world; 55. **Decision making:** children participate in making classroom decisions.

### Statement:

- “Look, I blew really hard and three [bubbles] are stuck together!” (Category: Mathematics, Item S. Number and counting, level

Beth Marshall is director of early childhood education at the HighScope Educational Research Foundation in Ypsilanti, Michigan. She has written and developed training materials for HighScope on a range of topics including adult learning, art with young children, adult-child interactions, scaffolding children's math learning, and the impact of brain research on early childhood practices. She is the author of the book *HighScope Step by Step: Lesson Plans for the First 30 Days*, coauthor of *Small-Group Times to Scaffold Early Learning*, and contributing author to *International Perspectives on Early Childhood Education and Care*. Ms. Marshall contributed to the development of the Preschool COR and PQA assessment instruments. She was the project director and trainer for HighScope Ireland and for the Khululeka HighScope Teacher Training Centre in South Africa, and co-primary investigator for the Numbers Plus Efficacy Study funded by the US Department of Education, National Center for Education Research.

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## The Bubble Play Continued

2; Category: Science and Technology, Item CC. Experimenting, predicting, and drawing conclusions, level 3)

Key developmental indicator — 31. **Number words and symbols:** Children recognize and use number words and symbols; 49.

**Drawing conclusions:** Children draw conclusions based on their experiences and observations.

### Statement:

- “If you blow really fast, you get tons of little bubbles.” (Category: Language, Literacy, and Communication, Item L. Speaking, level 5; Category: Science and Technology, Item CC. Experimenting, predicting, and drawing conclusions, level 3).

Key developmental indicators — 49. **Drawing conclusions:**

Children draw conclusions based on their experiences and observations. 50. **Communicating ideas:** Children communicate their ideas about the characteristics of things and how they work.

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