

Family and Community Activity Settings, Natural Learning Environments, and Children's Learning Opportunities

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Children's Learning Opportunities Early Childhood Research Institute staff are doing studies to learn more about how family and community life provides children different kinds of natural learning opportunities. Institute staff are identifying, developing, and evaluating ways of using family and community life as sources of children's learning opportunities for infants, toddlers, and preschoolers with or at-risk for delays in their development (Dunst & Bruder, 1999).

We have used ideas from social systems (Bronfenbrenner, 1992) and activity theory (Wertsch, 1985) for organizing our thoughts about the opportunities, experiences, and events that help young children develop everyday knowledge and skills. We have borrowed the term *activity setting* from O'Donnell, Tharp, and Wilson (1993) for describing these children's learning opportunities, but have modified the definition to fit the purpose and goal of our Institute.

WHAT IS AN ACTIVITY SETTING?

Everyday family and community life is made up of many different experiences providing children rich arrays of learning opportunities. A parent holding a

baby on her lap while playing "I'm gonna get you" and pointing to and talking about a blue bird sitting on a tree limb are examples of these kinds of everyday learning. So are dropping breadcrumbs into a fish or duck pond and playing in a pile of leaves. Putting a child's hands on a bottle or cup and helping her take a drink, and asking a child to lift his arm while putting on a shirt, are other examples of everyday learning. Going to a neighborhood park or indoor playland to climb on the playground equipment, and going to a petting zoo or farm to play with the animals are other examples of everyday learning. We call the social and physical places where learning takes place *activity settings* because they are places where children participate in activities encouraging learning about the people and things in their world.

An *activity setting* is a situation-specific experience, opportunity, or event that involves a child's interactions with people and the physical environment. An activity setting happens whenever a child finds herself in a particular place or situation where people, materials, and objects in those settings either encourage or discourage the child from doing something. Children's Learning Opportunities Institute staff are identifying activity settings that promote children's learning.

SOURCES OF ACTIVITY SETTINGS

Activity settings are found in many different parts of everyday family and community life. They can be found in daily routines like waking up, dressing, and mealtimes; non-daily routines like visiting grandparents for Sunday dinner and going to twice a week T-ball games; family rituals like saying prayers and having dinner talks; family and community celebrations like holiday dinners and going to fireworks displays; family outings like shopping and car, bus, or subway rides; and special events like going to a puppet

show or on family vacations and outings.

Activity settings also "just happen" as a result of opportunities that arise naturally like coming across a bird's nest on a neighborhood walk, running into a friend at an older sibling's baseball game, being invited to stay over night at a cousin's house, finding a flower in bloom on a walk around the yard, finding morning dew on a plant leaf, and playing with a neighbor's puppy who wanders into the child's back yard. Any and all of these experiences provide many different kinds of opportunities promoting child learning.

We now know from national surveys of family and community life that activity settings and learning opportunities happen in 22 different categories of everyday living. The categories are listed in the Table. Family activity settings are ones that happen in and around a family's home like meal times, bedtime, having a picnic in the backyard, and parent/child play times. Community activity settings are ones that happen in other places like church, a community park, and a shopping center.

Table
Categories of Family and Community Activity Settings and Learning Opportunities

Family Life	Community Life
Family Routines	Family Activities
Parenting Routines	Family Outings
Child Routines	Play Activities
Literacy Activities	Community Events
Physical Play	Outdoor Activities
Play Activities	Recreation Activities
Entertainment Activities	Children's Attractions
Family Rituals	Art/Entertainment Activities
Family Celebrations	Church/Religious Groups
Socialization Activities	Organizations/Groups
Gardening Activities	Sports Activities/Events

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ACTIVITY SETTINGS AND LEARNING OPPORTUNITIES

A finding from our research is that any one social or physical location is the source of many different kinds of activity settings, and any one activity setting is the source of many different kinds of learning opportunities. The Figure shows these relationships in the form of a pyramid where the number of learning activities increases as participation in activity settings increases.

Some examples should help illustrate the relationships shown in the figure. A kitchen is a location including such things as a table, chairs, sink, cabinet, and refrig-



Locations and Activity Settings as Sources of Children's Learning Opportunities

erator. Any one of these (e.g., table) provides such varied opportunities like learning to eat with a spoon, drinking from a cup, having "conversations" with other family members, playing with toys or kitchen utensils, gesturing for more to eat or drink, etc. Similarly, a stream or a pond are locations that can include such things as water, pebbles, a bridge, and fish. Any one of these (e.g., water) provides opportunities to learn and do things like splashing, dropping or throwing stones, and wading or swimming in the water.

Our findings show that different children experience different kinds of learn-

ing opportunities depending on where they live, what they and their parents enjoy doing, and what parents value and desire for their children and families. A child, on average, can be expected to find himself or herself in some 16 different home and some 25 community locations where learning takes place. These 40 or so different locations, on average, result in child participation in about 150 activity settings, which, in turn, give rise to more than 200 different kinds of learning opportunities promoting child development.

RESEARCH TO PRACTICE

Findings from our Research Institute indicate that everyday family and community activity settings are the **real life natural learning environments** that make most sense in terms of children learning important life skills. Ways of increasing child participation in natural learning environments are described next.

Natural learning environments are not places but the many different kinds of learning activities happening in different places. A useful exercise is to use the Table to think about and make lists of the many different activity settings occurring in the 11 family and 11 community categories making up the fabric of everyday family and community life. You will be surprised at how many things you can come up with.

Natural learning environments include experiences involving children's participation in activities with adults, with other children, with the physical environment, and sometimes with objects and materials playing alone or with someone else. Everyday natural learning environments are ones that provide children a variety of learning opportunities and experiences. Don't limit yourself to just one or two kinds of learning opportunities. Thinking about all the different places and activity settings that children experience as part of everyday living can increase learning opportunities for children.

The majority of everyday natural learning environments include activities

that do not require lots of planning or structure, or cost very much or anything at all, for children to benefit from family and community learning activities. Learning can and does take place as part of the opportunities children have available to them day in and day out. Coming up with "Things to Do with Young Children" lists can be very helpful for parents wanting their children to become more involved in different kinds of learning activities.

The best activity settings are ones that provide children lots of opportunities to do lots of different things. Thinking about activities that encourage children to practice what they already do well and try new things will open up all kinds of possibilities for new kinds of learning.

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