

Following the Child's Lead

Teachers can support children's participation, independence, and learning in everyday classroom activities by using a practice called "following the child's lead." Child-initiated interactions are a key characteristic of this practice. Following a child's lead involves planning and adjusting classroom activities based on children's interests, facilitating children's interactions with the social and nonsocial environment, and supporting children's choices to transition from one activity to another.

See a video of this Learning Guide

Learning Guide: Letting Children Take the Lead

- Observe children in your classroom to identify their interests—that is, the toys, materials, activities, and people they find interesting; the things they spend a lot of time doing, choose to do, work hard at doing; and things that make them smile, laugh, or get excited. Provide activities and materials that match children's capabilities and interests. Provide opportunities for children to make choices and engage in the activities, play with the materials, and do the things that interest them.
- During everyday classroom activities, notice when a child shows interest in something or someone. Give the child time to initiate an interaction with the person or thing that has attracted the child's attention.
- Wait and observe to see how the child uses or tries to use materials or interacts with others in the activity. For example, rather than stacking blocks, an infant or toddler might bang two blocks together to make a noise; a preschooler might use a block as a telephone or a car.
- Respond to a child's initiations in the activity by showing enthusiasm, imitating him or her, commenting on his or her actions, or joining in his or her play. Then wait for the child to respond or interact with you or the materials again. Stay focused on the child's behavior and indicators of interest. Be sure to avoid trying to draw the child's attention to something different.
- When the child initiates an interaction with you, make sure your response is related to the child's behavior. Make comments that match the topic of the child's communication. By following children's lead during everyday classroom interactions, you can encourage them to continue to interact with you and others and build on what they are saying and doing.
- Notice when a child loses interest in an activity or material and changes his or her focus to something else. Shift your attention as the child shifts his or her attention to other activities or materials. By scheduling and providing concurrent classroom activities, you can accommodate individual differences in children's interests and enable children to transition between activities as their attention and interests change.
- Schedule plenty of time for child-initiated activity and play throughout the day. Follow children's lead in interactions throughout the day.

You'll know the practice is working if ...

- Children stay engaged in everyday classroom activities for longer periods of time
- Children have fun and enjoy taking the lead during classroom activities
- Children are more independent when participating in everyday classroom activities



A Quick Peek

As Darcy set out paper, paint, and letter/shape stamps in the art area, she thought about how much the children in her classroom loved to use those materials. She watched as Paco, Michaela, and Toby were drawn to the table. "It looks like you can have fun with the stamps today," said Darcy. She noticed that right away, Paco and Michaela began using the letter and shape stamps on their paper, while Toby tried just one stamp and then hesitantly touched the paint with his finger. As he looked at Darcy questioningly, she exclaimed, "Oh! You are finger-painting!" Toby grinned and looked determined as he began smearing the yellow paint on his paper. When he reached for the purple paint, Darcy moved it closer, saying, "Are you going to try purple next?" Noticing that Toby was having a little trouble, Darcy showed him how he could put a dab of paint on his paper. Toby drew circles with the paint, chanting, "Wheels, wheels, wheels." Darcy pointed to his paper, saying, "You're making big wheels!" "Big wheels," repeated Toby. After quite a lot of finger-painting, Toby began wiping his hands and pointed toward cars and trucks in the block area. Darcy said, "All finished?" and helped him out of the smock. "Off to the blocks," said Darcy, as Toby trotted away.

Learn more about following a young child's lead from online resources such as the [PlayCoach blog](#).