



Learning Centers for Preschoolers

Purpose Statement

Preschoolers learn best through play. Developing learning centers will enhance learning and create an environment where preschoolers are free to explore, create, and experiment.

Before the Conference

Focal Wall, Room Setup, and Decoration Ideas

Choose a focal wall and place a table in front of the wall. Display a Bible and current Bible Teaching for Preschoolers Sunday School curriculum on the table.

Arrange visual displays in the conference room: pictures of preschoolers involved in different activities and teaching pictures related to the concept areas.

Arrange the chairs to create four groups in the room.

Audio/Visual Needs

- Select music from a current Music and More CD to play as the conferees enter the room.

Preparation Steps: Resources to Collect and Prepare

1. Prepare signs to identify the concept areas for the current unit and for the next month. Gather books, pictures, puzzles, and other resources that relate to the concept areas to display near the signs. For example, for a Jesus unit gather books, pictures, puzzles, and other resources related to learning about Jesus.
2. Print handouts:
 - The Art Center (Item 1)
 - The Nature/Science Center (Item 2)
 - The Block Center (Item 3)
 - The Manipulatives/Puzzle Center (Item 4)
 - The Homeliving/Dramatic Play Center (Item 5)

- Using Books and Pictures in Learning Centers (Item 6)
- Using Music in Learning Centers (Item 7)

Plan to distribute the handouts during the time for group assignments.

3. Make signs for four groups:

- Art and Nature
- Blocks and Puzzles
- Homeliving/Dramatic Play
- Music, Books, and Pictures

Lay the signs on the floor to identify each group of chairs.

4. Provide instructions for each group (printed below). Collect the supplies suggested with the instructions. Place the instructions and the supplies with the signs for each group.

Group 1: Art and Nature (or Nature/Science)

- Review guidelines and tips on The Art Center (Item 1) and The Nature/Science Center (Item 2) handouts.
- Choose an art activity in a leader guide for a current preschool Sunday School unit. Mention how the activity relates to the biblical content for the session.
- Locate supplies to do an art activity suggested in next Sunday's session.
- Discuss other items you can use in an art center.
- Open a leader guide for a current preschool Sunday School and find a nature or nature/science activity. Talk about the suggestions for the activity, the materials needed, and ways to make the Bible connection.
- Talk about other ideas for the nature or nature and science center.

Group 2: Blocks and Puzzles (Manipulatives/Puzzles)

- Call attention to guidelines and tips on The Block Center (Item 3) and The Manipulatives/Puzzle Center (Item 4) handouts.
- Select supplies to make blocks:
 Container Blocks: Use plastic baby wipes container; fill container with paper; use tape to close the lid.
 Carton Blocks: Use clean plastic or cardboard milk carton; fill with paper; use tape to close the top.
 Shoe Box Blocks: Fill shoe box with newspaper; use tape to attach lid.
 Paper Sack Blocks: Fill paper sack with newspaper; fold top; add tape to close. (Preschoolers can decorate the sacks before filling.)
- Look in a leader guide for a current preschool Sunday School unit to discover the materials needed for the puzzle center for next Sunday's session. Discuss how the materials will be used and how Bible truths will be taught to preschoolers.
- Create a puzzle by using a felt-tip marker to print individual Bible verse words on index cards. (Use a Bible verse for the current unit.)

Mix the cards, and then put the words in order to read the Bible verse.

Group 3: Homeliving/Dramatic Play

- Review guidelines and tips on The Homeliving/Dramatic Play Center (Item 5) handout.
- Use the leader guide for a current preschool Sunday School unit to find the suggestions for the homeliving or dramatic play learning center.
- Review the materials needed for an activity in next Sunday's session. Talk about ways to connect Bible truths to the activity.
- Open the Bible to the Bible story for next Sunday and demonstrate telling the Bible story during the learning center activity. Think about a song to sing and a way to use the suggested Bible story picture.

Group 4: Music, Books, and Pictures

- Review guidelines and tips on Using Books and Pictures in Learning Centers (Item 6) and Using Music in Learning Centers (Item 7) handouts.
- Review a session in the current unit to see how music, books, and pictures are used in the learning centers.
- Provide the supplies to make a musical instrument:
Shaker: Choose a small container such as film canister or a plastic egg. Fill with items such as beans, rice, or small rocks. Tape lid securely.
- Discuss how to use music, books, and pictures in learning centers to teach Bible truths.

During the Conference

Procedure Steps

1. Invite conferees to choose a place to sit in one of the four groups.
2. Challenge the conferees by saying: "You are on an important team—God's team. The goal on God's team is to go into the world and make disciples. You are also on another team—your preschool leadership team. The goal is to love, care for, and teach preschoolers about God's love. This is part of making disciples. As a preschool teacher you have an important job! Do you know that attitude and character are formed in the preschool years? We want preschoolers to have a positive attitude about church and God. Their experiences at church should be positive ones. To create positive experiences for preschoolers we want to teach them in a way they learn best—through play."
3. Describe plans for conferees to "visit" the different learning centers while the music plays. (Show the *Music and More CD* to help conferees know about music for preschoolers.) Explain that conferees will spend about 10-15

minutes in the group where they are seated and then rotate to another group when the music stops. Ask the conferees to locate the instructions for the group and begin working together. Continuing starting and stopping the music for the group rotations. (See preparation step 4.)

4. After conferees have rotated to each learning center, invite volunteers to tell about an experience in one of the groups. Ask questions such as: "Did you do a suggested preschool activity? How did the activity relate to the biblical content for the session? How will you use some of the ideas for the preschoolers you teach?"
5. Conclude the conference by thanking the conferees for attending. Pray, thanking God for opportunities to teach Bible truths to preschoolers.



The Art Center



Keep a well stocked art box accessible for children in the art center. Include a variety of paper, crayons, washable markers, scissors, and glue. From time to time, place a “surprise” in the art box such as colored chalk, clear adhesive tape, or stickers. Guidelines include:

- Locate the center next to a water source.
- Provide a safe place for drying paintings.
- Protect surfaces of tables. Use drop cloths under easels or on the floor during messy activities.
- Provide painting smocks to protect children’s clothing.

The Role of the Teacher

Teachers provide indirect guidance through planning and presentation of the materials. As children enjoy the art center, teachers can relate biblical truths, tell portions of the Bible story, and incorporate Bible phrases.

Guidelines for Children

- Handle art tools carefully.
- Art materials are for creating.
- Use art materials as needed, not in a wasteful manner.
- Art materials are not to be put in children’s mouths.
- Keep art materials in the art center.
- Avoid interfering with the work of other children.

Guidance Tips for Teachers

- Avoid models for children to copy and avoid coloring book drawings. These limit a child’s creativity.
- Emphasize the creative process, not the product or end result. Children should be free to create with the materials.
- Allow messes. Creative art is messy.
- Give plenty of time for art activities. The process of creating often takes time and thought.
- Involve children in clean up.
- Try an art activity before using with children. Potential problems can be solved if you take the time to pretest the project.
- Respect each child’s name. Ask the child where he would like his name written on the paper or allow the child to print his own name.
- Make comments such as: “Tell me about your picture. I can see you enjoy painting. You are working hard on that picture.”
- Help the children understand that they only need to please themselves with what they create.
- Teach parents the process of creative art. Help them understand that the purpose of children’s art is not to make something to take home but to provide opportunities for teaching biblical truths and for developing creative skills.

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The Nature/Science Center

Nature and science centers are often viewed where little activity takes place. However, you can utilize nature items to stimulate the senses and create natural learning experiences about God. As a teacher, your goal is to help preschoolers become active investigators of God's world. You can nurture a child's observation skills, classification skills, and estimation and prediction skills through appropriate nature and science activities.

Guidelines for Nature/Science Center

- Choose an area close to a window for the nature and science center. If a window is not available, place the center in a quiet area in the room.
- Display nature items on a window sill or short shelf. Change nature items regularly.

Guiding Nature/Science Experiences

- Allow preschoolers time to interact with the nature materials.
- Provide activities and experiences that do not require much teacher guidance.
- Provide a balance of individual and group activities.
- Permit the children to get their hands dirty.
- Allow children to discover a nature item before showing it to them.
- Give simple answers to preschoolers' questions about nature.
- Avoid using the word *magic* when referring to natural processes.

Providing Safe Nature Experiences

When using nature and science with preschoolers, remember that hygiene and safety are important. Keep a small dishpan of soapy water or moist baby wipes near nature materials so hands can be immediately cleaned after handling nature items. Consider the following safety tips:

- Be aware of preschoolers' allergies. Use an allergy alert notice to notify parents about nature items.
- Read ingredients of prepackaged foods.
- Do not allow preschoolers to touch reptiles; they may carry salmonella.
- Place a bird's nest in a clear, closed container.
- Smooth sharp edges of shells with sandpaper.
- Closely supervise small nature items since they could pose a choking hazard.

Enjoying Nature Outdoors

Take the opportunity, as circumstances permit, to help preschoolers enjoy nature experiences outdoors. Babies and ones can enjoy the outside world when their teachers take them on short walks or for a ride in a stroller. Twos and threes enjoy collecting nature items in paper bags or on "nature bracelets" (masking tape around the wrist, sticky side out). Fours, pre-kindergartners, and kindergartners may enjoy nature scavenger hunts when teachers provide a list of items to find.

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The Block Center



Guiding and Teaching Through Block Play

- Provide block play throughout the Bible-learning time.
- Limit the number of children to four or five or whatever your space will allow.
- Use Bible story conversation, Bible stories, and Bible verses and phrases to reinforce Bible truths
- Guide preschoolers to take blocks down one at a time or to request permission to knock down only their own structures.
- Direct preschoolers not to walk on blocks (except for a balance beam).
- Do not allow preschoolers to kick down blocks, throw blocks, or use blocks for guns.
- Help children understand that accidents happen sometimes.

Building Block Basics

Some simple guidelines for preschoolers can help make block play less stressful for teachers and children:

- Build no higher than your chin.
- Build only in the block center.
- Build on the floor.
- Build with blocks rather than throwing, pushing, or kicking them.
- Build far enough away from the shelf to allow others to use the blocks.
- Build only with your blocks. Never take from a friend's structure without asking.

Equipment for the Block Center

- Cardboard blocks that are durable and easy to handle—best for babies-tuos.
- Unit blocks in a variety of shapes (rectangles, squares, triangles, cylinders, half circles, quarter circles, arches, and a lot more). These blocks are great for beginning building; they help preschoolers master distance, balance, and measurement easier than random-sized blocks. Unit blocks make it easy for a child to build a bridge or an enclosure.
- Duplos®, Legos®, and other specialty building blocks/materials—may be best used separately from unit blocks.

Guidelines for the Number of Blocks to Use

- Babies—a few small blocks (larger than the child's fist) or a few cardboard blocks.
- Ones and twos—12 cardboard blocks or shoe box size cardboard blocks.
- Threes —60 to 70 wooden block units in 7 to 12 shapes.
- Fours-kindergarten—150 wooden unit blocks in 19 to 27 shapes.

Accessories for Block Play

Carpet squares, fabric pieces, traffic signs, modeling clay, flashlights, coffee cans and lids, poster board and construction paper, plastic tubing, PVC piping and fittings, cardboard boxes of various sizes, seashells, stones, vehicles, and animal and people figurines.

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The Manipulatives/Puzzle Center

Guidelines for Manipulatives/Puzzle Center

One of the best ways of ensuring that a preschooler has positive experiences with puzzles and manipulatives is for you to sit beside the child as he works. Preschoolers enjoy conversation and interaction with adults.

- Place puzzles in a quiet area of the room, out of the main traffic area.
- Offer two or three puzzles per session.
- Store manipulatives such as beads and put-together blocks in their own dishpan or plastic container.
- Provide more than one set of the most popular manipulatives.
- Use puzzles and other manipulatives in other learning centers when appropriate.
- Use puzzles that depict realistic objects, animals, and people instead of fantasy figures.

Guidelines for Puzzle and Manipulative Experiences

- Guide preschoolers to remove puzzle pieces one at a time and place them to the left of the board. Working puzzles from left to right helps develop reading readiness.
- Allow preschoolers to work at their own speed.
- Use the Bible in the learning center and use Bible story conversation, Bible phrases and verses, and songs.
- Remind preschoolers to complete the puzzle or put manipulatives back in their containers before moving to another activity.
- Change the puzzles and manipulatives often.

Manipulatives and puzzles are effective tools for teaching biblical truths. By providing a variety of materials that meet different skill levels, teachers are able to relate each child's experiences to Bible phrases, Bible story conversation, Bible stories, and Bible characters. This learning environment enables preschoolers to not only encounter Bible truths, but to internalize them and apply to daily life as well.

Types of Puzzles and Manipulatives

- Puzzles—the wooden inlay puzzle is the most common type of puzzle used with preschoolers.
- Photo Puzzle—enlarge one or two photographs of the children involved in Bible learning activities. Glue the photographs to poster board; cut into the number of pieces appropriate for your age group.
- Construction, pull-apart, and put-together toys—nesting cups, pegs and pegboards, and assorted sizes and colors of beads or buttons for lacing and sorting provide opportunities for the child to interact and engage in Bible story as teachers use Bible story conversation.
- Games—a variety of games require manipulative skills. Games for preschoolers should be played in a cooperative, rather than competitive, manner with simple and flexible rules. Shape sorting games, sorting games, listening games, card and envelope matching, and number/counting block can be used with preschoolers.

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The Homeliving/Dramatic Play Center

Preschoolers enjoy pretend play. Pretend play for young preschoolers reflects the roles that are most familiar to them, primarily housekeeping or home-related activities. Activities may include meal preparation, bedtime routines, pretending to be Mommy or Daddy, or even being the family pet.

Most children naturally engage in dramatic play between 18 months and 2 years of age. Children begin pretending with trucks, dolls, and dishes. By four or five, their play is more complex and inspired by props and everyday experiences. Fives and sixes are capable of engaging in more complex dramatic play.

The homeliving/dramatic play center contributes to the child's feelings of security at church because furnishings and materials are similar to items at home.

Guidelines for Homeliving Center

- Locate the center in a corner of the room clearly visible from the door.
- Place the center near other noisy centers such as blocks.
- Consider placing a rug in the center to reduce noise.
- Attach an unbreakable mirror to the wall.

Guidelines for Teachers

- Use pictures, stories, or visitors to give children the information they need to pretend.
- Make the center's physical setting appealing and inviting.
- Provide adequate props for play.
- Guide play with conversation, but intervene only when necessary.

Cooking with Preschoolers

Cooking is a favorite activity for preschoolers. Use these guidelines as you cook with preschoolers:

- Supervise cooking activities at all times.
- Locate electrical appliances next to an outlet to avoid tripping over a cord.
- Use short-handled wooden or plastic spoons for stirring.
- Place a plastic tablecloth underneath a table for easier cleanup.
- Inform parents of cooking or tasting activities by placing a sign outside the room door. Ask parents about allergies to the food items being used.
- Let children measure, pour, stir, and taste.
- Always wash hands before beginning to cook.

The Bible has much to say about our relationships with family members, friends, and others in the community. The homeliving/dramatic play center provides an abundance of opportunities for us to share these biblical truths with preschoolers and help them realize how these truths apply to their daily lives. In the homeliving/dramatic play center, a child may discover, "I can do what the Bible says!"—and that is a wondrous discovery indeed.

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~ Using Books and Pictures in Learning Centers ~

Guidelines for Choosing Books

- Can be read in 5-10 minutes (ages 3-5).
- Written in simple language, few words on page.
- Durable with hardcover, cardboard, or laminated.
- Simple, realistic, and colorful pictures.
- Contain repetitive words or phrases.
- Do not contain fantasy or cartoon characters.
- Do not contain animals or objects that take on human characteristics.

The Most Important Book

- Remember that the Bible is the most important book ever written.
- Provide opportunities for babies and ones to touch the Bible. As you hold a baby in your lap, encourage her to pat the Bible. Invite a one-year-old to hold the Bible and gently turn the pages.
- Allow a child who is walking to carry the Bible around the room.
- Guide a child to open to a Bible marker.
- Allow a preschooler to observe your love and respect for the Bible to guide her to realize that the Bible is a special book.

Tips for Using Books

- Sit on the floor.
- Hold a book so child can see it as you read.
- Encourage preschooler to talk about the book.
- Allow preschooler to turn pages.
- Allow a younger preschooler to skip around in the book and stop when something catches his interest.
- Substitute child's name in story as appropriate.
- Respect the child who chooses to look at books alone.
- Provide time for the child to ask questions, look at pictures, or respond to something in the book.
- Encourage preschoolers to play out the story.

Guidelines for Choosing Pictures

- Use two kinds of pictures with preschoolers: biblical or Bible story pictures and present-day pictures.
 - Biblical pictures portray Bible stories and scenes on the child's level of understanding.
 - Teachers use present-day pictures to translate biblical truths into everyday experiences for preschoolers.

Note: Many of the same guidelines for evaluating illustrations in a book hold true for choosing pictures to use with preschoolers.

Values of Pictures

- Provide the opportunity to recognize things that are familiar.
- Allow children to identify with situations common to their experiences.
- Stimulate conversation which give teachers opportunities to gain insight into the child's thinking.
- Stimulate children's curiosity.
- Provide opportunities for worship as children look at pictures of things God made.
- Encourage children to use their imaginations to create original stories.

Tips for Displaying Pictures

- Babies—place pictures in cribs or on the floor for easy access. Laminate pictures or place pictures in picture holders.
- Older preschoolers—use picture holders.
Picture holders: piece of cardboard same size of picture and four laminated 3-by-9-inch paper rectangles (9-by-12-inch construction paper cut in four equal strips) for each corner—place rectangle diagonally across each corner, fold it over the back of the cardboard, and tape it in place; slip picture under each corner.

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Item 6

~ Using Music in Learning Centers

Music is used when a child is involved in learning centers. Music activities are integrated throughout the room and used in a variety of ways to guide and reinforce Bible teaching. Soft music played in the background creates a calm learning atmosphere.

Preschoolers draw as they listen to a Bible verse song. Kindergartners create a music store in the dramatic play center and make their own instruments from household objects.

Songs and musical instruments help teachers communicate biblical truths. Music is the key to teach and reinforce biblical truths.

Tips for Using Music

- Play a recording of quiet instrumental music.
- Invite a musical guest to come to your room to play an instrument and sing.
- Record your preschoolers singing songs and place the tape in the room for them to use.
- Use *Bible Teaching for Kids Music and More CD* to locate songs suggested for the session. (Play the CD when you are in your car or at home to learn the songs for teaching preschoolers.)
- Sing. Sing often. Sing even if you sing off-key. Preschoolers do not care how you sing; they only want to hear you sing.
- Include the children's names in a song whenever possible. Be sure to use every child's name once you begin singing names in a song.
- Sing songs that use words and concepts preschoolers can understand. Avoid songs with symbolism. Literal-minded preschoolers will misunderstand meanings of symbolic or abstract songs.
- Accept each child's individual response to music. Encourage each child's creativity.
- Create a calmer environment with instruments by providing instruments of the same type at the same time (different types of shakers or rhythm sticks).
- Use new words to familiar tunes. Create a song to fit what you need.

Songs to Familiar Tunes

Sometimes you cannot find a song that expresses what you need. You can create your own song! Use a familiar tune and sing the words you need. Sing children's names, a Bible verse or phrase, or instructions. Create a song with repetitive words and phrases. Choose a tune you know well. Change the words as necessary. Encourage preschoolers to create songs, too. Here are some sample songs to familiar tunes:

- To the tune "Row, Row, Row Your Boat," sing: "Clap, clap, clap your hands. Andrew claps his hands. Clapping, clapping, clapping, clapping. God made Andrew's hands."
- To the tune "God Is So Good," sing: "I can thank God. I can thank God. I can thank God. Thank You, God, for food."
- To the tune "Mulberry Bush," sing: "Open the Bible, what does it say? What does it say? What does it say? Open the Bible, what does it say? Jesus said, 'I love you.'"
- To the tune, "Farmer in the Dell," sing: "Jasmine comes to church. Jasmine comes to church. Jasmine stacks the blocks at church. Jasmine comes to church."

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Item 7