

Teaching to the Ways Children Learn

There is no one best way to educate all children. We must discover a child's areas of strengths and characteristic approaches to learning. We must, as much as possible, bring the teaching to where the child is.

H. Gardner, *Frames of Mind*, 1983

Children deserve having materials and information presented in a way that engages them in their own learning. To ensure all children's success, educators must be knowledgeable about how they learn, be able to identify a child's strengths; and know how to develop strategies and techniques that encourage each child's learning.

Much has been discovered through the years about how a child learns. Our teaching practices have evolved in an additive fashion.

Piaget: A sequential flow occurs through stages of development at individual rates. Learning is based on relating new experiences to prior knowledge. Concrete, hands-on experiences and activities work best to develop a pattern of problem solving and logical thinking.

Vygotsky: Language and thought are interrelated and interdependent. An integral process of language as a means of structuring and representing knowledge is strongly supported. The "zone of proximal development" suggests the support and assistance needed for children to continue to stretch beyond what they can comfortably do.

Constructivists: Learning is an ongoing experience where children continually act upon and organize their experiences as they try to make sense of their world. The cycle of learning starts with awareness, moves to exploration, to inquiry, to utilization, and on to new awareness.

Brain Research: The neuroscientists are discovering individual uniqueness in how the brain takes in, sorts, stores, and uses information. Optimal age ranges for learning specific information have been suggested. Information must be meaningful and engage the child for learning to occur.

Multiple Intelligences: Each person has multiple types of intelligence and has more dominance in some areas of intelligence than in others. The areas of dominance suggest the preference for learning style and method of processing information.

Learning Styles: Children think and learn in many different ways. While all children can and do learn, there are variations in how they concentrate, absorb, process, and recall information.

The Value of Play: Play is the fundamental, natural, universal activity of children. Understanding the stages and development of play guides teachers in their program planning.

Active Learning: Learning occurs more easily for children who are fully engaged in meaningful activities.

- Children choose from available activities, materials, and experiences for a substantial portion of the day.
- Experiences are meaningful and learner-centered.
- Children have opportunities to ask questions, solve problems, and think independently.
- There is a range of expectations for all children.
- Children have opportunities to make decisions and to be creative.
- Learners are respected and trusted.
- Adults learn along with children.
- Mistakes present opportunities to learn.
- Content areas are integrated.
- Assessment is a part of the daily routine.

Research suggests that each child is born ready to learn, has his or her own rate of development, and has individual strengths and weaknesses. These findings continue to reinforce the uniqueness of each child. One of the greatest challenges of educators is ensuring the success of all children. Teaching must be based on how the child learns.