What Happens When a Child Plays at the Sensory Table?

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Early childhood educators use several learning centers in a classroom to target growth in different developmental areas, but as a preschool teacher, I was always impressed by how children addressed multiple areas of development at the sensory table. I knew sensory experiences were important for preschoolers. And I wanted to examine my own practice and help other teachers explore the possibilities the sensory table offers. I spent about a year researching, observing, and recording how children play at sensory tables. I have spent many more years sharing what I found.

This article is for all the teachers who have parents walk into their classrooms, stick their fingers in the sensory table (or don’t dare), and ask, “What on earth is this?” The table looks like fun, but it is more than that. The sensory table provides relevant, meaningful learning experiences for children from toddlerhood through preschool.

What is a sensory table?

A sensory table is high enough for children to stand around and has a liner that sits inside a frame. The liner is about six inches deep (enough to hold a variety of materials) and usually has a drain on the bottom for easy cleanup. Water and sand are popular fillers, but almost anything can be used. Some early care providers set out large plastic bins filled with objects and materials on a table for children to explore, but a sensory table provides a different experience. When children can stand around the table comfortably, they can reach materials and play without getting in each other’s way. A washable rug under the table prevents children from slipping on spilled water or other materials and makes cleanup easier.

What do children learn at the sensory table?

Young children learn in all domains of development, including cognitive, physical, social, and emotional (Bredekamp & Copple 1997). Play is one of the most important ways for children to show growth and development in early childhood (Bredekamp & Copple 1997; Bergen 1998); as they play, children practice skills that they are acquiring across the domains.

The sensory table addresses each area of development, and sometimes addresses all of them during one play time. Learning happens when children manipulate their environment and make their own discoveries (Jones & Reynolds 1992; West & Cox 2001). As children practice different roles, explore materials, and imitate what they see and hear, they can communicate their thinking and understanding.

Teachers can facilitate sensory table play by asking open-ended questions and adding new materials. Children can, of course, interact with and explore the characteristics of natural materials like water, sand, and snow. They can also
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build underwater cities with Legos, experiment with spraying colored water onto sand, or pretend to be at a buffet—using tongs to pick up marbles is a favorite activity. Have the children predict what will happen when placing ice dyed red into water dyed yellow. Outdoors, portable tables can provide children with new sensory experiences, like sinking their hands into a table filled with pine cones or pebbles.

Sensory play through different stages of development

Based on my reading about learning styles and child development, I expected to see children’s sensory table play become more social with age—and it did. Sara Smilansky, a developmental theorist, outlines four stages of play in her work (Smilansky & Shefatya 1990; see also Dodge, Colker, & Heroman 2002, 11–13). After observing children’s play at different ages, I identified the first three of these stages in their water play.

In the first stage, functional play, children mainly used their senses and explored sensory questions, such as “What will happen if I pour the water in this cup?” For example, Carly, at almost 3 years old, repeated a pattern of pouring water from one container to another. “Here’s water,” she announced while looking at the teacher nearby. She poured water from a measuring cup to a small cup, back and forth, at one corner of the table while two other children played together at the other end.

The next stage I noticed is constructive play, when children asked questions out loud and seemingly answered them through play. I observed Mark playing with tubes and water. He said, “Let’s make it come up.” He used tubes to build a U shape with a funnel attached to one end. He poured water into the funnel, and water came out the other end of the tube. Mark announced, “It’s like a volcano.” Children like Mark showed that they already knew enough information about the properties of water to ask a question. This behavior demonstrated that they were playing beyond the functional level.

The last stage I observed was dramatic play. The children played together and extended a dramatic theme. Ciara, a 5-year-old, pulled rocks into a pile in the corner of the water table and said, “I’m making a penguin land for all the penguins.” Another child joined in: “Let’s pretend there is an egg storm.” So began a dramatic play scene. The 5-year-olds in the class displayed more of this type of play in the sensory table.

Conclusion

Through my investigations, I made many discoveries about the sensory table that have made me a stronger advocate for its use. Intentional observations over a period of time (Jablon, Dombro, & Dichtelmiller 2007) gave me information on what children were learning. Taking the time to research how children learn through my own observations of pouring water from one container to another. “Here’s water,” she announced while looking at the teacher nearby. She poured water from a measuring cup to a small cup, back and forth, at one corner of the table while two other children played together at the other end.

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Sensory Integration

Sensory integration, defined as how we interpret our surroundings through our senses, allows us to explore and organize our world (Ramirez 1998). The sensory table encourages children’s development of skills through natural exploration and discovery. Children use their senses to explore new objects—to notice differences and similarities among materials and to make connections to what they know. Although this happens naturally for most children, others have difficulty with their sensory input, which may result in learning problems.

Observing children play at the sensory table can give teachers more information about how individuals react to sensory stimulation. Teachers can identify children with difficulties early so that they can get the appropriate experiences and possibly avoid learning issues later.
Sensory Table Play Meets Early Learning Guidelines

The opportunities for learning at the sensory table are consistent with the early learning guidelines created by the New Hampshire Child Development Bureau (Early Learning Guidelines Task Force 2005). I have highlighted each domain, guiding question, and examples of how teachers can use the sensory table to enhance learning.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Domain</th>
<th>Guiding Question</th>
<th>Learning Opportunity</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Physical development</td>
<td>How do young children use their bodies to explore and participate in their world?</td>
<td>Children use fine motor skills to manipulate materials (like marbles) with tongs. Offer water and containers with marbles and tongs.</td>
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<tr>
<td>Social/emotional development</td>
<td>How do young children develop an understanding of themselves and others?</td>
<td>When more than one child plays at the same time, conflicts may arise. As children handle disagreements, they build social skills.</td>
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<tr>
<td>Approaches to learning</td>
<td>How do young children develop and use strategies to solve problems?</td>
<td>As children experiment with materials in the sensory table, they use prior knowledge. For example, a 5-year-old knows that she needs to pour water from a larger container to a smaller one to fill it up with one try.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Creative expression/aesthetic development</td>
<td>How do young children express creativity and experience beauty?</td>
<td>Children may create dramatic play themes at the sensory table—for example, feeding penguins by using figures, rocks, and water.</td>
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<tr>
<td>Communication and literacy development</td>
<td>How do young children develop an understanding of language and use it to communicate with others?</td>
<td>Children often talk out loud, letting teachers in on their thinking. They may ask themselves questions or talk with another child.</td>
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<tr>
<td>Health and safety</td>
<td>How do young children assess and navigate risks and develop healthy behaviors?</td>
<td>A child gains independence in addressing his own basic needs—for example, when he gets a smock to protect his clothing and himself from getting wet or messy.</td>
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<tr>
<td>Cognitive development</td>
<td>How do young children develop an understanding of how the world works?</td>
<td>Children can explore concepts like size and shape by using different sizes and shapes of containers and scoops with sand.</td>
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and to experiment with use of the sensory table clarified for me the learning potential at the sensory table.

Early childhood educators can prove the value of the sensory table to themselves. By closely observing the benefits of children's play at a sensory table, teachers can communicate these experiences to families and colleagues. This knowledge can also help educators plan more effective activities and understand where individual children are in their development. When you offer children time to play in the sensory table, you can be sure you are encouraging learning.

References

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