

Early Years Are Learning Years Learning through Water Play

Nice weather brings many opportunities for fun and learning through water play. Puddles, spray bottles, garden sprinklers, water tables, and wading pools naturally fascinate young children, and water is one of the basic raw materials for learning mathematics and science, developing language, and fostering social skills.

While playing with water is developmentally appropriate regardless of the child's age or abilities, teachers and family members should always consider safety factors when children are anywhere near water. Children can enjoy water play with great abandon, but adults need to be aware that young children can drown in less than an inch of water.

It's always a good idea to reinforce the "walk, don't run" rule – especially around slippery areas. When children play near water, there must be constant adult supervision, with at least one adult certified in water safety and infant/child CPR. It is also recommended that teachers and family members take child CPR instruction and learn about the safety hazards in and around pool areas.

Following are some ideas for safe, fun and educational water play:

- Mathematic concepts can be learned using a variety of inexpensive materials. Assorted containers and funnels can help children develop concepts such as empty/full, before/after, shallow/deep, and heavy/light.
- Individual water tubs at a table are great for enhancing fine motor skills. For younger children, eye-hand coordination can be practiced by retrieving objects with tongs, aquarium nets, scoops, and fingers. Small muscles get a workout as plastic tubes are fitted to funnels and sponges are wrung dry. Very young children may also get many happy

moments repetitively filling and emptying containers.

- Children can learn about measurement by using measuring cups or discovering the best way to squirt long and short distances using squeeze bottles or plant misters filled with water.
- A child's vocabulary is enriched as she uses words such as funnel, surface, float, and strain.
- Adults can promote language acquisition by adding foam or rubber alphabet letters or numbers to a container filled with water to be fished out with nets. Name the letters or numbers they catch, spell out their names, or see who can catch the highest or lowest number.
- Make cleaning up part of the learning experience using rags and short-handled mops to do "grown-up" work.
- Create a dramatic play area for children to wash doll clothes in a tub of sudsy water and hang them up with clothespins to dry in the sun.
- Even on cool days, children can "paint" outdoors with water. Set up a paint shop by providing a large paintbrush and partially fill a large can or small pail with water. They can pretend to "paint" the sidewalk, fence, slide, and other outdoor equipment.
- Provide a water tub for experiments and projects. Boats can be made from found objects or heavy aluminum foil. Older preschoolers can try out predictions by determining which of a variety of seeds and assorted items will float.
- On a hot, sticky afternoon a lawn sprinkler can bring relief. Wading pools are another hot-weather friend (with adult supervision) and children can incorporate sand box and bath toys into the water play.

Early Years Are Learning Years is a regular series from the National Association for the Education of Young Children, and one of many tools NAEYC provides to early childhood educators, parents, and others who support and nurture the development of young children. For more information about the benefits of NAEYC membership, visit www.naeyc.org.