1 MANAGING LEARNING CENTERS

CREATING AREAS

A learning center is a designated area that holds purposeful activities, a variety of materials, and activity directions. Learning centers can work in any classroom because they require no special furniture or arrangement. Some teachers prefer an informal atmosphere with no assigned seats—students work at the centers in chairs or on the floor and keep personal items and school supplies in a box or tote tray. When they finish at one center, they move to another.

Learning centers are also effective in classrooms where each student has an assigned table or desk. A center might be a table or a cart where activities, directions, and materials are provided. Students work at the center or at their own seats.

Centers don't require expensive dividers or furniture. A cart or bookshelf makes a great Library Center. Put a carpet remnant and cushions on the floor near the books. Children can read on the floor area or at their own desks. Design the learning centers the way you want them—on bookshelves or tables, in baskets, on the floor, or under tables. Get your creative juices flowing. The children will love it!

HOW TO BEGIN USING LEARNING CENTERS

Each learning center has a different focus and allows children to participate in a different way. Seven learning centers are described in this volume: Teacher Center, Library Center, Listening Center, Computer Center, Art Center, Writing Center, and Word Play Center. Even if you've never used learning centers you can begin with some that are easily created with materials found in classrooms—the Teacher Center, Library Center, Writing Center, and Listening Center, for example. When these centers are working well, you can add others until you are providing a balance of activities.

ACQUIRING LOW-COST FURNITURE

Make your centers attractive (and comfortable) with low-cost or free furniture. My favorite Library Center featured furniture rescued from a church trash pile. All it required was a home-repair job and a good scrubbing. Parents made cushions from inexpensive fabric and added a bright carpet remnant. The children were thrilled. Here are some sources for low-cost furniture:

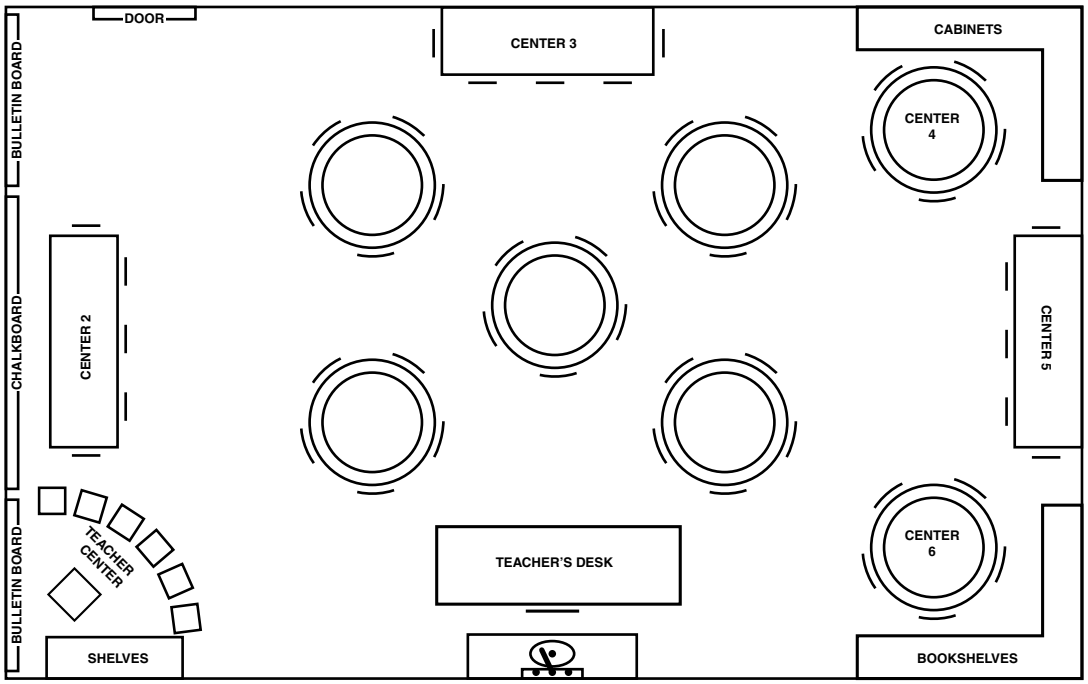
- Ask parents, colleagues, friends.
- Search attics, garage sales, flea markets, rummage sales.
- Check with electric and telephone companies and electrical suppliers (empty wire spools make great low tables).
- Create grant proposals.
- Host creative fundraising events, such as car washes or spaghetti suppers.

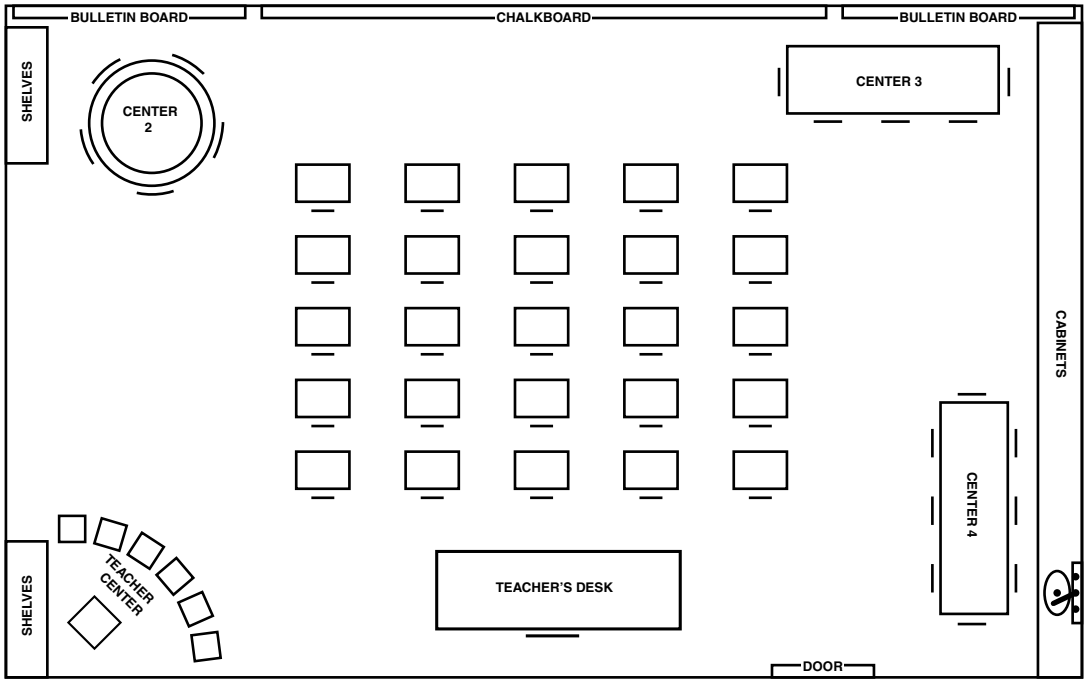
ARRANGING THE ROOM

Here are some practical considerations:

- Organize the room into an active half and a quiet half. Put the Listening, Library, and Writing Centers in the quiet half and the Teacher, Art, Computer, and Word Play Centers in the noisy half.
- Place the Teacher Center where you can see the entire room. Even when you are working at the Teacher Center, you will be able to observe students as they work at the other centers.
- Make sure the Reading and Writing Centers have adequate lighting.
- If you have a sink in your room, place the Art Center near it.
- Place the Listening and Computer Centers near electrical outlets.
- Locate at least one center on the floor. Children like working at floor centers and this saves furniture for other purposes.
- Organize desks in clusters, rather than rows, to create more floor space that can be used for learning centers.

See the illustration of two possible floor plans.





STRUCTURE AND PLANNING

Learning centers require structure. This section describes a three-stage plan for implementing learning centers. First, here are five considerations:

1. Which centers do you wish to use? It's usually a good idea to start with four centers—when these four are working well, add more until you have the total number of centers that you want.
2. What behaviors do you expect from children while they work at the centers? Are they allowed to talk quietly about their work? Will they work as partners? What happens when a child misbehaves?
3. What traffic patterns will help children move easily from one center to another?
4. Who will answer questions about work at the centers? Should a child interrupt the teacher or ask another child?
5. What do children do if they finish their work at a center? Do they move to another center? Are there books or reading games for them to work with when they finish their center assignment? Who is going to clean up? Where will the supplies be placed?

If this is your first experience with learning centers, implement your plan in three stages. As you learn to manage one stage, move on to the next.

STAGE 1

Center Visitation

For learning centers to meet the needs of all children, you must schedule *every child* to visit each center. (Special-needs children learn best when actively involved in their work, and hands-on center work is great for them.) Stage 1 introduces four learning centers. During Stage 1, divide the children into four teams—assign each team to a learning center for twenty minutes. At the end of the twenty minutes, move each team to a new center so that in one hour and twenty minutes every team will have visited all four centers. Twenty minutes is an approximate time—shorten or lengthen the time if you wish. It may be best to begin with ten minutes and work up to twenty.

Sample Schedule

8:40–9:00	Opening and housekeeping details
9:00–9:20	First center assignment
9:20–9:40	Second center assignment
9:40–10:00	Break and snack
10:00–10:20	Third center assignment
10:20–10:40	Fourth center assignment

Implementing Stage I

1. Set up four learning centers—the Teacher Center and three other centers.
2. Divide the class into four groups—literature groups, interest groups, special-needs groups, basal reader groups, mixed ability groups, and so on. You can call them teams.
3. Make an assignment board so that you can assign teams without an announcement. (See the illustration on page 6.) On posterboard or a chalkboard, tape four envelope pockets, one for each center. Write the name of each team on an index card. The index cards fit into the pockets, indicating the assignments. Use the assignment board to assign the first centers and have a preassigned rotation routine—clockwise, for example.

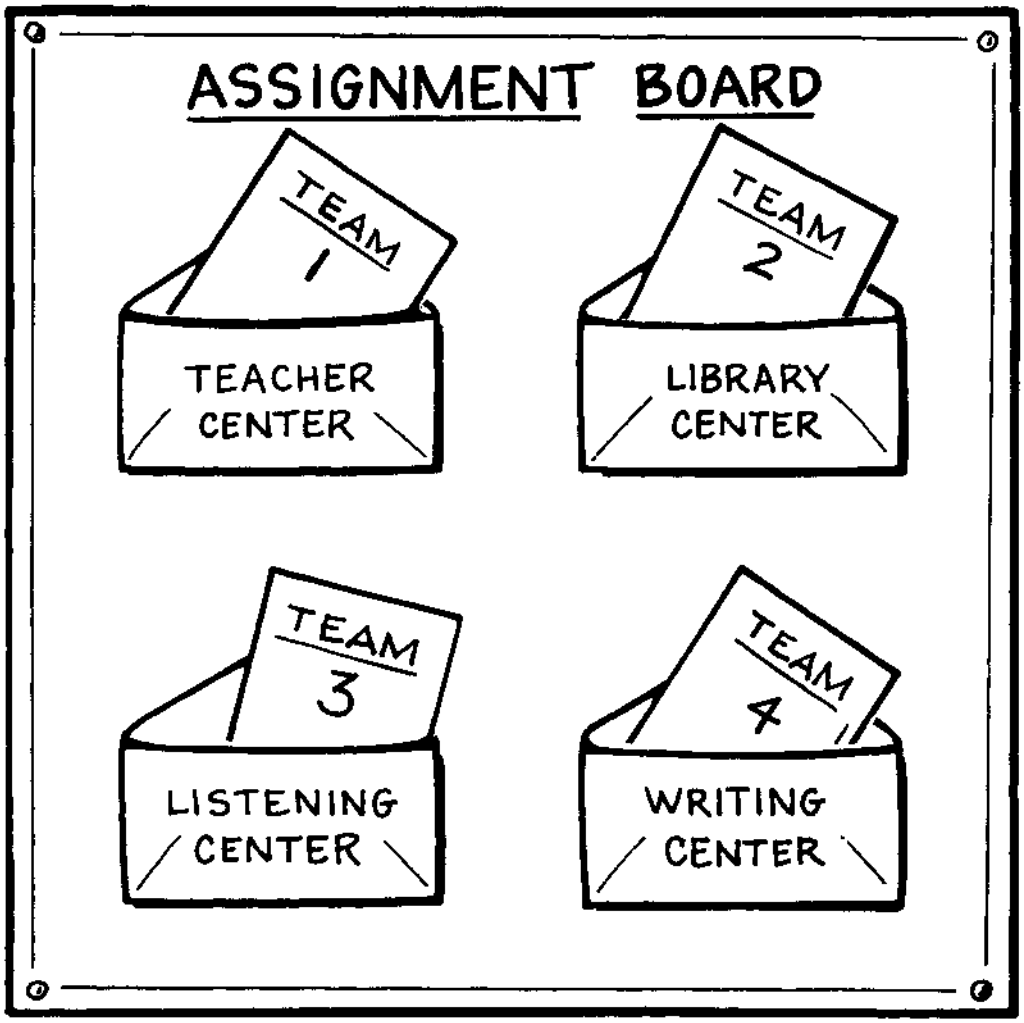
Ten-Day Training Program*

Students can work independently or with partners at the centers. A ten-day training period helps children learn important procedures so that work at the centers will go smoothly. Ten days may seem like a long time to spend on training, but you will find that the time is well spent.

Instead of working with one team yourself, spend the first week circulating and helping at all the centers. Observe groups working, praise good behavior, and stop unwanted behavior.

Day 1. Conduct a class meeting, announce team assignments, and explain behavior expectations and traffic patterns. Have each team practice walking from one center to another. Then let the children help develop a set of class rules for working at the centers. Write them on a chart for display.

**Note: Ten-day training program adapted from Project CHILD (Changing How Instruction for Learning is Delivered). Courtesy of the Institute for School Innovation (www.ifsi.org), Sarah Butzin, Ph.D., executive director.*



Day 2. Explain the assignment board and introduce each center. Explain the purpose of each center and show examples of the kind of work that will be done there. Explain where to get materials, find the task assignment, and put finished and unfinished work. Have children role-play getting materials and putting finished and unfinished work away. Have them practice walking to and from the centers once again.

Role-play using a soft voice (whisper). Many children can be reading aloud and playing games at the same time without disturbing each other if the voice level is low. Have a hand signal to use in case the noise level gets too high.

Days 3 to 5. Each day, review the rules and expectations. Use the assignment board to assign the teams to four centers. At each center (including the Teacher Center), provide an independent activity that the children can complete in

twenty minutes. If twenty minutes seems too long, change the schedule to accommodate a shorter time. As children work, you should circulate, observe, answer questions, and praise good behavior. When center time is over, have a class meeting. Discuss what went well and what needs improvement. Be consistent in enforcing your expectations. It's easier to learn good habits than to unlearn bad ones!

Days 6 to 7. Continue to review the class rules and use the assignment board. If the centers are functioning well, continue to circulate as you did the previous three days. If the centers are running smoothly, sit with the children at the Teacher Center while they complete an independent activity. Continue to observe the behavior at the other centers to see if teams can work independently.

Days 8 to 10. Continue to use the daily assignment board. By now, children should be on task at the learning centers. If they are, begin group instruction at the Teacher Center. If the centers are not functioning well, continue observing for a few more days. Stay at Stage 1 until you are comfortable with it and ready to add more centers. This could be several days, weeks, or months.

STAGE 2

Center Visitation

Stage 2 expands the number of centers to five or six. During Stage 2, assign each team to a learning center for twenty minutes (or whatever time period worked well in Stage 1). Children still spend an hour and twenty minutes visiting four centers, but they do not visit every center every day.

Sample Schedule

Day 1	Children visit centers 1, 2, 3, and 4. (Close 5 and 6.)
Day 2	Children visit centers 1, 2, 5, and 6. (Close 3 and 4.)
Day 3	Children visit centers 3, 4, 5, and 6. (Close 1 and 2.)

When you close the Teacher Center, work with children at other centers, such as the Writing Center or the Word Play Center. You may wish to work with special-needs children every day at the Teacher Center. After they work with you, have them visit three other centers that are open that day.

Implementing Stage 2

1. Create one or two new centers in addition to your four existing centers.
2. For each new center, tape an additional envelope pocket to the assignment board.
3. Periodically, provide "Free Choice Day." During one or two twenty-minute sessions, open all the centers and let children decide which ones to visit. Don't require that teams stay together at the centers. If a center is full, children can take an activity from the center to work with at their desks.

STAGE 3

Center Visitation

Stage 3 allows students greater choice of centers and incorporates a management chart instead of an assignment board. The management chart is used two ways:

- As a wall chart for children to check off the centers they visit
- As a teacher chart to check off the work the children complete at the centers

Groups (teams) of students meet with the teacher in the Teacher Center. When children are not in the Teacher Center, they choose which other centers to visit. Teams are not required to stay together at the centers. This allows children to work with all the students in the room, and special-needs children are not "locked" into an inflexible group. For this reason, Stage 3 should be your goal even if it takes a while to reach it.

At first, require children to stay at each center for the full twenty-minute session. Then let them choose another center. Provide books or games (see Section Five of this volume) for those who finish center tasks early. Later, try letting children change centers when they finish their assignment, rather than waiting the full twenty minutes. Every child should make a daily visit to the Library Center *or* the Writing Center—if these centers are full, books or writing activities can be taken to a table or desk.

If a center is full, children can work at their seats or on the floor near the center. You may have to limit the number of children who can work at a particular center (the Listening or Art Center, for example) to the number of chairs at the center. If this is the case, put a number card on the wall that tells how many can work at the center.

Learning Center Management Chart

	Learning Center						
Student							

Note: Management chart courtesy of Ardyth Ann Stanley.

Allow one hour and twenty minutes for students to visit centers. Tell children that they are responsible for visiting every center. Teach them how to keep track of center visits on the management chart. If more than four centers are open, allow them two days for visiting every center and completing their work assignments.

A few children will probably need more structure than this. They cannot handle free choice of centers on a daily basis. Continue to assign them to centers as you did in Stages 1 and 2, but let them help you plan their schedule. Give them "Free Choice Friday." If they respond well, add other Free Choice days, one at a time, until they are responsible for their own schedule all or most of the time.

Implementing Stage 3

1. Photocopy the management chart shown on page 9, fill in the students' names, and write the names of the centers in the spaces across the top. Hang the chart at eye level. You may want to make a larger version of the chart on posterboard.
2. Post the time that each team is to meet with you at the Teacher Center.
3. Have children check the chart to indicate which centers they visited.

PROVIDING MATERIALS

The success of a learning center classroom largely depends on the teacher providing sufficient center materials and directions to keep children motivated and on task. In Stages 1 and 2, provide separate assignments for each team that extend the learning that takes place at the Teacher Center and fits with the team's ability level—there should be different expectations for different ability levels. For instance, if you have created a Writing Center, have every child writing, even though some are better at writing than others. Be sure that each assignment can be completed in the twenty-minute time period in which children will be at each center. And since some children will work faster than others, provide activities from this book for the children who have finished their assignment. Use games shown in Sections Three and Four even if you have not yet set up a Word Play Center.

Help children to be self-sufficient at the centers by providing activities that vary in difficulty level so that each child can work at an appropriate level. Where possible, make the activities self-checking. Provide an assignment card

with clear directions, answer keys, and samples of finished products (that is, work samples, assignments). Finished products should be basic so that children create their own work rather than copying the finished product. Provide common materials—paper, pencils, and so on—so children don't have to bring anything to the center with them.

KEEPING TRACK OF WORK

Keeping track of each student's work may seem like an impossible task, but it is not. Hands-on activities at the centers cut down on paperwork. At each center where assignments are products, provide containers—boxes, folders, or baskets—for finished and unfinished work.

Photocopy the management chart once again and fill in the students' names. In the space across the top, write the names of products you are checking. Each day, inspect the centers and check off successful completion of each child's work. Another idea is to have a place in your grade book for center work. As it is finished each day, put a check or grade to let you know it is completed. Toward the end of the week you can see at a glance who needs to complete work or go to a center not yet visited. This is especially important when students are choosing centers rather than being assigned to centers. Some centers, like the Library Center, can be "anytime" centers. Students can go there when they finish their work at the other centers.

Provide each child with a portfolio for keeping finished work and writing samples. Provide each team with a box for storing portfolios. Keep the boxes of portfolios in a place that is available to you and the children. Allow time each week to distribute finished work for children to file in their portfolios.

EVALUATING LEARNING AT THE CENTERS

It is important to give children feedback frequently. Use multiple forms of assessment, because there are many ways to make children aware of their progress (Owocki, 2001). The following methods work well in a learning center environment.

Observation

Teacher observation is a powerful evaluation tool. The Teacher Center is a natural place to observe individual children daily. Even if you are observing groups, you will be able to assess individual reading behaviors. Observing children as

they work helps you know what each child is doing, determine which children need help, plan what each child needs next, and note progress over time. Observation allows you to immediately create send-home activities for extra practice. Here are some suggestions to get you started in observation.

Teacher Center Observation. If you hold regular reading conferences with children, you will be observing all of their reading behaviors. These are some behaviors to look for as children work with you in small groups:

- *Emergent readers:* Observe children as they recognize letters, blend phonemes, produce rhyming words, isolate consonants, and identify or blend onsets/rimes. (*Onset* is the consonant at the beginning of a syllable; *rime* is the rest of the syllable. Onset /b/ plus the rime /ake/ blends to make the word *bake.*) Comprehension is very important, even for early readers—in retelling or dramatic play they should be able to retell or reenact the story, showing that they understand the meaning.
- *Developing readers:* Observe to see if they know regular letter-sound correspondences and use them to figure out words. See if they can use onsets and rimes to create new words with blends and digraphs. (*Blends* are two consonants together; each consonant keeps its sound: /br/. *Digraphs* are two letters that make a different sound from the individual letter sounds: /sh/.) At this stage they should recognize 125 to 150 high-frequency words as they read and should be somewhat fluent in materials on their reading level. They should be able to summarize text, compare books by the same author, and talk about books that relate to the current theme.
- *Independent readers:* See if they can easily read short, regularly spelled words and if they can figure out longer words by using spelling patterns. Independent readers should be reading fluently, more focused on meaning than vocabulary, and more guided by print than by illustrations.

Plan to observe children frequently as they work at the other centers. While you observe, children at the Teacher Center can finish an assignment or take a few minutes to read independently or with a partner. Every two weeks, plan a special observation day. To do this, close the Teacher Center and use the time to observe and take notes as children work at the open centers.

Library Center Observation. These are some behaviors to look for:

- Emergent readers should hold books and turn pages correctly, read (or pretend-read) daily, choose reading in their free time, and choose a variety of genres—literature, fiction, nonfiction, and informational text. They should be able to point to words as they read, and say some of the

words they point to. They should also be able to use illustrations to make predictions.

- Developing readers should read daily. They are able to read books with more complex themes and story structures, handle more sentences per page, figure out some unfamiliar words, and self-correct when they mispronounce or misread a word. They can understand causes and effects, themes, and the intent of the author.
- Independent readers should read chapter books—perhaps a chapter a day. They eagerly participate in "Author Studies," which compare several books by the same author. They successfully read a variety of genres—literature, trade books, nonfiction, poetry, and plays. They read easily and fluently.

Listening Center Observation. Children should be intent on material they are listening to. They should choose a variety of listening activities and be able to retell or discuss a book after they have listened to it.

Computer Center Observation. Children at all reading stages can be taught to log on and off independently and work with software at their level. If children are working as partners, observe to see how they work together. If one child is figuring out all the answers or dominating in some way, make an adjustment. You may have to change the partnership or allow only half the computer time for each one so each can work alone. Some computer programs provide scores. Have children record them on index cards and keep them in their portfolios. (See the section on hard copies.)

Art Center Observation. Most art projects should be connected to the reading, writing, listening, and thematic instruction going on in the classroom. Children at all reading levels can create artwork showing that they have comprehended material that they have read or listened to. Art is especially important for emergent readers and writers because they are not able to write a lot of text. But their artwork can tell a story, describe characters, and show what they know about a topic even before they become fluent writers.

Writing Center Observation. These are some behaviors to look for:

- Emergent writers are eager to write and communicate meaning. Some beginners are still using scribbles, strings of letters, and drawings as they write. But as children progress, they begin to use words from classroom charts, labels, or the Word Wall (see Section Three for more on this) to create simple stories, labels, signs, and greeting cards. They should be able to write responses to something that they read, even if they are still in the scribble stage. They will read (or pretend-read) their own writing and the writing of others in the class (Schickendanz, 1999).

- Developing writers' skills are often linked with their reading skills—the better readers are the more accomplished writers. At this stage, children can write for meaning and can improve their writing through feedback from you or their peers. They should be spelling words correctly from the Word Wall and making reasonable attempts to spell words that they have not previously used (Hall, 1981). The writing workshop, in which children write every day, is especially helpful; for more on writing workshops see the Writing Center described in Section Three.
- Independent writers have the skills, patience, and maturity to go through several writing stages. They should be able to publish books using process writing, also described in paragraphs on the Writing Center in Section Three.

Word Play Center Observation. Children at the Word Play Center should be occupied with two types of activities, *dramatic play* and *games.*

- Dramatic play includes talk—talk while constructing the plot and planning what the characters will say, and talk during the actual role-play (waitress, astronaut). Both types of verbal exchanges are important in language development. Expect to observe that the children will spend much of their time in planning what they will do. Sometimes planning will take more time than actually playing the characters. This is characteristic of this type of learning experience.
- Manipulatives and games include word scrambles, crossword puzzles, magnetic letters, and reproducible games from this book. Look to see how children are using the manipulatives and note which children need help. And look to see how children use answer keys. Do they check their work with the key, or do they need an answer key to assist them as they play the game?

Reading Conferences

Meet individually with children so that you can listen to them read aloud. Keep a record of each conference—note rate of reading, fluency, problem-solving strategies, and comprehension. Offer support, recommend strategies to try, and suggest books they might enjoy. Check their reading log and encourage them to choose materials from the different genres. If they are fluent enough to keep a response log, check what they have written. Offer support and suggestions where needed.

Writing Samples

Meet weekly with each child to go over work in each one's writing portfolio. Journals are another good tool for documenting growth over time. Let children publish (see Section Three) and share some of their finished products. Praise their achievements and help them decide where they need more work.

Running Records

Running records assess word-recognition accuracy. As a child reads aloud, the teacher uses a recording tool (such as a photocopy of what the child is reading) to record deviations from the written text—self-corrections, mispronunciations, teacher intervention, and so on. Running records help the teacher see what types of mistakes are made and provide information about decoding strategies, reading rate, and fluency. For more information, see Sharon Taberski's *On Solid Ground: Strategies for Teaching Reading K–3* (2000).

Retelling

Retelling can be used as a stand-alone evaluation or part of the reading conference. The child reads or listens to a story (or other text) and retells it to the teacher. Retellings provide a valid assessment of a child's understanding of the text. They assess comprehension, familiarity with story structure, and the ability to recall and summarize information. Keep notes on each child to document growth over time.

Self-Checking

Self-checking helps children take responsibility and become independent learners. Provide ways for children to check their work at the learning centers. Provide only one activity per day that you must check.

The reproducible games in this book include answer keys. Don't require children to learn words *before* they can play a game. Allow them to learn *as* they play. As they learn, they will use the answer keys less and less often. Note this in your observations.

Hard Copies

At the centers, children produce a variety of work samples—writing samples, artistic creations, scripts, word lists, reading logs, journals, and so on. All are evidence of learning. Make a folder for each child and keep samples of work that document progress.

LEARNING CENTERS AND SPECIAL-NEEDS CHILDREN

In her book *Strategies for Developing Emergent Literacy,* Wilma Miller (2000) presents a detailed discussion on special-needs children, including ESL, LEP, LD, ADD, AD/HD, EMH, severely mentally disabled, and children with hearing impairments. She concludes that "well-organized and well-equipped learning centers make it possible for children with special needs to learn a great deal on their own through playful interaction with materials while teachers provide attention to individuals or small groups" (p. 284). A Web site that links to resources for parents and teachers about the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA) is http://ed.gov/offices/OSERS/IDEA/the_law.html.

Section Three of this volume provides detailed descriptions of each learning center and all the activities mentioned here. The following paragraphs outline briefly how each center's activities are helpful to children with special needs.

The Teacher Center

Special-needs children can fit into all activities that occur at the Teacher Center. Here are some approaches to use at the Teacher Center and how each can help children with special needs.

- *Reading aloud, big books, shared-book experiences, and predictable books.* Children with poor vocabulary skills can learn from listening to someone read and reread books containing new words that are introduced and illustrated; ESL students greatly benefit from shared-book experiences (Robinson, Ross, and Neal, 2000).
- *Choral reading.* Research has shown that choral reading, using big books, and using books with repetitive language improve comprehension and word identification in LEP children (Miller, 2000).
- *Language experience approach (LEA).* Miller states that "LEA is probably the most single useful approach for teaching all types of children

with special needs" (Miller, 2000, p. 284). Language experience is also appropriate for children who are culturally or linguistically different from mainstream reading materials because LEA matches both the experiences and language patterns of the learners (Hall, 1981).

- *Songs and chants.* Songs and chants can be hands-on and include many learning styles. If you make singing a reading activity, special-needs children can quickly learn to chime in and read aloud with you and take turns pointing to the words. Special-needs children benefit by getting some body action into group reading activities, so hand motions and simple instruments make this activity especially appealing.
- *Storytelling.* All children love to tell and listen to stories. Storytelling develops oral language, vocabulary, and comprehension.
- *Book talks.* All children can talk about books they are reading because the learning center approach allows children to work with partners and to read at their own levels.
- *Individual and small-group instruction.* The Teacher Center is a natural place to work with special-needs children using scaffolding strategies that provide ongoing support. Anne Soderman, Kara Gregory, and Louise O'Neill (1999) give a detailed description of this strategy in *Scaffolding Emergent Literacy: A Child-Centered Approach for Preschool Through Grade 5.* (See Additional Resources at the back of the book.)
- *Reciprocal teaching.* Research shows that reciprocal teaching has positive effects on high-risk children; participants functioned well during these lessons and their listening comprehension improved (Burns, Griffin, and Snow, 1999).
- *Individual conferences.* Reading conferences can be adjusted to fit the needs of special-needs children.
- *Children's presentations.* Special-needs children should participate in presentations such as puppet shows, art shows, and the Author's Chair, all conducted at the Teacher Center.
- *New activity instruction.* Even more so than children without special needs, special-needs children always need an introduction to learning center activities because they will be working independently at the centers.
- *Games.* All children learn quickly through games because they are engaging and multisensory, and children play them again and again. This volume includes reproducible games at different levels. You can use the games as they are or adjust them to fit the level of a child in need.
- *Pocket charts and flannel boards.* Pocket chart and flannel board activities allow children to touch and move as they learn. These work at any reading level and are especially effective with special-needs learners.

The Library Center

The Library Center should be equipped with multilevel and multiethnic reading materials so that children can select those that suit their interest and their reading level. It is a good idea to allow children to borrow books to read with someone at home. Intervention programs that involve parents or caretakers have had positive effects on reading achievement both in kindergarten and in later grades (Robinson, Ross, and Neal, 2000).

The Listening Center

Digital books, videotapes, and other media approaches are especially useful because they are multisensory—more than one sense is used while learning. They also allow for repetition.

The Computer Center

Computers are helpful to special-needs children because they are highly motivating. Computer-based learning is multisensory—children look, listen, speak, touch, and move as they learn. (See "Recommended Software" in the Computer Center, Section Three.)

The Art Center

Special-needs children gain a sense of achievement through art. They can illustrate their writing, draw a story, make characters, decorate books, make book jackets, and so on. The Art Center also encourages children to express their cultural heritage through art.

The Writing Center

At the Writing Center, children write at their own level. Writing reinforces reading because a good writing program increases the amount of time that children spend with text. In fact, some programs for struggling readers have used writing as an aid to reading (Clay, 1975). Special-needs children may be at the very early stages of writing (scribbling, writing strings of letters, and so on). Let them begin where they are and they will soon see themselves as writers. This is important because, like the other language processes (reading, listening, and speaking), writing is learned through practice.

The Word Play Center

The Word Play Center is a learner-centered environment that stimulates children's imaginations. Special-needs children can work at their own levels and yet share multisensory, thematic activities through social interaction and creative play. The themes represent real-life experiences that expand vocabulary and provide opportunities for learning language using problem solving, listening, speaking, art, music, and cooking. In addition, dramatic play at the center increases vocabulary and comprehension for all children, including those with special needs. ESL students in particular develop content knowledge through play.

To find more resources for children with disabilities, visit these Web sites (Burns, Griffin, and Snow, 1999):

- Special Education Resources on the Internet (SERI): http://www.seriweb.com
- National Information Center for Children and Youth with Disabilities Resources: http://www.nichcy.org/#about
- Parents Helping Parents Resources: http://www.php.com
- Family Village Resources: http://www.familyvillage.wisc.edu
- Office of Special Education Programs Resources: http://www.ed.gov/offices/OSERS/OSEP/index.html