



# Preschool Learning Centers

“A Bible verse begins to have meaning for a preschooler when it relates to what he is doing. In a preschool department/class, teachers offer a variety of activities which are directly related to the session’s materials. As the children enjoy the activities, teachers tell Bible verses, Bible thoughts, or a Bible story.”

Preschool teachers use the following learning centers to guide preschoolers in learning the key foundational concepts about God, Jesus, Bible, Church, Family, Others, Self, and the Natural World:

**Art**  
**Blocks**  
**Books**  
**Homeliving/Dramatic Play**  
**Music**  
**Nature & Science**  
**Puzzles/Manipulations**

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#### Adapted from the following Sources:

*Teaching Preschoolers: First Steps Toward Faith*, by Sanders and Bradberry, LifeWay Press, 2000.  
*Love, Laughter, and Learning*, by Mahand and Van Brink, Convention Press, 1996.  
*Learning Through Play “Blocks,”* by Church and Miller, Scholastic, 1990. (Tips for the Block Center)  
*How to Guide Preschoolers*, by Strickland, Convention Press, 1981. (Guidance Suggestions for the Block Center)  
*The Block Book*, by Hirsch, National Association for the Education of Young Children, 1996. (Stages of Block Play)  
*The GIANT Encyclopedia of Science Activities*, edited by Kathy Charner, Gryphon House, 1998.

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### Through Art, a child . . .

- Has the opportunity to be creative.
- Learns to make decisions by choosing different art materials.
- Begins to learn shapes and colors.
- Builds self-confidence.

### Tips for the Art Center

1. Avoid models for children to copy or coloring sheets.
2. Food items (macaroni, beans, etc) are not to used as art activity. Using food items as “disposables” teaches wastefulness; many die every day from starvation.
3. Use 12”x18” paper for art activities.
4. Emphasize the process over the product.
5. Creative art is messy.
6. Give children plenty of time for creative art.
7. Involve children in cleanup.
8. Try a new art activity before using it with the children.
9. Ask the child where he would like for you to put his name on the picture.
10. Allow the children to do the work themselves.
11. Encourage children to explore and experiment with the art materials.
12. Help parents understand that art is a process and provides opportunities to teach Biblical truths to their children.

### Guidance Suggestions for the Art Center

- Handle art tools carefully.
- Art materials are for creating.
- Use art materials as needed; encourage children not to be wasteful.
- Glue, paint, chalk, or any other art materials are not to be put in children’s mouths.
- Keep art materials in the art area.
- Draw on your paper only.
- Take turns using the art materials.
- Allow two to four in the art area at a time (whatever you decide).

### Stages of Creative Art

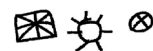
Stage 1 - Basic Scribbles (simple circles, lines, and random marks on paper)



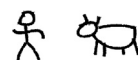
Stage 2 - Diagram Shapes (ovals, squares, triangles, & diagonal crosses)



Stage 3 - Design Stage (combination of diagrams and shapes such as a radial sun)



Stage 4 - Pictorial Stage (designs are combined to make pictures of humans, houses, & plants)



### An Art Center Needs...

- To be located near a water source.
- A place to safely dry paintings.
- Painting smocks to protect children’s clothing.
- Plastic tablecloths, newspaper, or large paper to protect tables and floors.

**Art**

**Blocks**

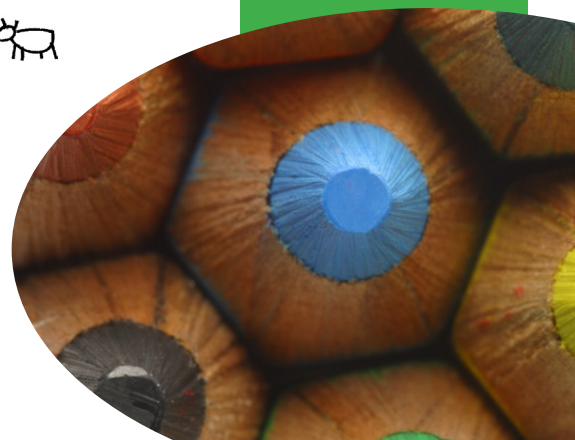
**Books**

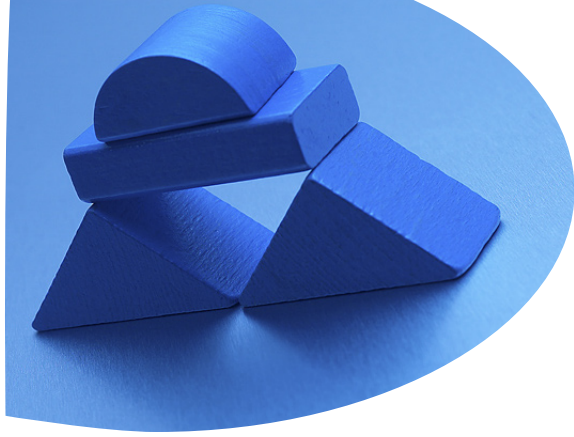
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### Through Blocks, a child...

- Has opportunity to use his large muscles.
- Chooses sizes and shapes.
- Learns to use his own ideas.
- Learns to make decisions.
- Begins to recognize the rights of others.

### Tips for the Block Center

1. Keep it simple.
2. Keep it spacious.
3. Use low shelves for storage.
4. May use selves to separate the center from other parts of the room.
5. May use a low-pile area rug or carpet to build on. (Use a non-skid liner under rug.)
6. Set building boundaries. Use colorful tape lines to indicate areas for building.
7. Limit the number of children in the area. (Teacher/Director is needed to guide younger preschoolers.)
8. Enhance Bible teaching and inspire building by using pictures.
9. Ideal setup
  - A. Store blocks and accessories on shelves by using items with matching shapes for easy cleanup. (Storage shelves need to be supported by a back.) Match-up puzzle outlines may be cut from colorful construction paper and attached to the shelf with clear adhesive plastic. Store blocks from left to right and top to bottom. Begin with the smallest blocks in the upper left corner and work across the shelf in progression of size, eventually having the heaviest blocks on the bottom shelf. Place rectangles and triangles side ways so preschoolers may see their length.
  - B. Display small items in clear plastic boxes that are outlined with simple shapes and labels.
  - C. Mark off a parking area for large wooden trucks and cars with colorful tape. May use match-up puzzle outlines for these.
  - D. Stand pictures against the wall at floor level. Pictures need to be seen easily by the child.
  - E. Use a sign-up system or some other method to help children learn to take turns.
10. Make wooden blocks from hardwood and sand them smooth.
11. Use other accessories like carpet squares, cardboard cylinders, smooth boards for ramps, hard hats (disinfected), fabric pieces, wallpaper and other home remodeling materials, toy traffic signs, transportation toys, sheets or blankets, 33mm film containers, and wooden spoons.

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(Blocks continued on next page)







## Guidance Suggestions for the Block Center

- Always build on the floor.
- Guide a child to build no higher than his chin.
- Build only in the block center.
- Walk on the floor rather than on blocks (except for toddlers and Blockbusters)
- and pieces of wood used for building.
- Build with the blocks rather than throwing, pushing, or kicking them.
- Build far enough from the shelf (two or three feet away) to allow others to use the blocks.
- Keep your hands on a car as you are making it go fast.
- Allow only four friends in the block center at a time (or whatever limit you decide).
- Never take blocks from someone else's building without permission.
- You may knock down your own building but not someone else's.
- Take turns with friends when using the blocks or toys.
- Help clean up.

## Stages of Block Play

Stage 1 - Blocks are carried around and are not used in construction.

Stage 2 - Building begins. Rows are made either vertically (stacking) or horizontally (on the floor).

Stage 3 - This stage involves a great deal of repetition, but bridging also takes place. Bridging consists of two blocks with a space between them, connected by a third block.

Stage 4 - Enclosures are constructed. Enclosures are four blocks placed in such a way that they enclose a space.

Stage 5 - Decorative patterns begin to appear. Much symmetry is seen, but the structures are not named yet.

Stage 6 - Structures are named for use in dramatic play. The names relate to how the structure will be used.

Stage 7 - Building often reproduce or symbolize actual structures with which the children are familiar. There is also a great deal of dramatic play around the block structures.

## Building with Blocks

Recommended Shapes, Types, and Number of Blocks

Babies -- Blockbusters as planned

Toddlers to Twos -- 12 Blockbusters

Threes -- 60 to 70 unit blocks using 7 to 12 shapes

Fours & Fives -- 100 to 150 unit blocks using 19 to 27 shapes

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### Through Books, a child . . .

- Learns to problem solve.
- Develops an understanding of how to live and work with others.
- Understands, identifies, and responds to emotional situations.
- Learns listening skills.
- Develops language and vocabulary.

### Tips for Using Books

1. Sit on the floor.
2. Hold book so child can see it as you read.
3. Encourage preschooler to talk about book.
4. Allow preschooler to turn pages.
5. Substitute child's name in story as appropriate.
6. Respect the child who chooses to look at books alone.
7. Provide time to let preschooler ask questions about book, look at pictures, or respond to something in the book.
8. Books used in group time should be large enough for everyone to see.
9. Encourage preschoolers to play out the story in the homeliving area.
10. Allow a younger preschooler to skip around in the book if he or she wants.

### Characteristics of Good Books

- A simple, well-written story line
- Rhyming words and rhythm
- A word or phrase is repeated throughout the story
- Gives children opportunities to name objects, answer a question, or repeat phrases
- Real photographs and illustrations are true to life
- Short enough for children's attention span
- Realistic stories of real-life situations
- Books teaching a value or Bible truth

### When to Use Books

- One-on-one to comfort a child
- In a Bible-learning center to reinforce a Bible-teaching aim
- In a large group to reinforce the Bible teaching truth or Bible story
- At the door as you greet children

### Choose Books that...

- Can be read in 5 or fewer minutes.
- Are written in simple language.
- Are durable with hard covers, cardboard or laminate.
- Have colorful pictures that are realistic and simple.
- Create happy, secure feeling.
- Contain repetitive words or phrases.
- Do not use fantasy characters or talking animals.

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Through Homeliving experiences, a child . . .

- Pretends to cook and practices thanking God for food.
- Pretends to be a family member and practices for a life of being part of a family.
- Pretends to doctor a doll and practices doing what the Bible talks about.
- Pretends to play various roles with friends and practices for a lifetime of relationships.

## Values of Homeliving

### *Mental*

- Allows children to engage in problem solving and decision making
- Enriches the child's verbal and nonverbal communication skills
- Helps children construct their own understanding of how the world works
- Lays a foundation for symbolic thinking

### *Social/Emotional*

- Gives children opportunities to cooperate, take turns, and share roles
- Allows children to "try on" roles of people in their lives
- Develops skills in conflict resolution
- Enhances relationship with peers
- Develops the ability to express feelings appropriately
- Allows children to practice negotiation skills
- Helps children feel in control by making things happen
- Promotes feelings of security with the use of familiar materials

### *Spiritual*

- Provides opportunities for children to hear Bible phrases and have conversation about Bible stories and Bible people
- Allows children time to process, internalize, and express Biblical truths such as: "We can be kind to one another," or "People at church work together."
- Introduces Biblical concepts such as, "God planned for families."

### *Physical*

- Develops large and small muscles
- Develops eye-hand coordination
- Provides opportunities to use the five senses
- Allows preschoolers time to relax and release energy
- Helps preschoolers become aware of their physical bodies
- Practice skills like pouring and stirring

## Some Homeliving Tips

- Keep a Bible nearby.
- Locate the homeliving center in a corner clearly visible from the door.
- Post allergy notices when tasting foods.
- Collect props or accessories to enhance learning opportunities.
- Try a recipe first before using it with the children.
- Listen much.
- Avoid unsafe foods (choking hazards) such as: popcorn, whole grapes (unless quartered), hot dogs, whole nuts, raw carrots or celery, unpeeled fruit (apples, pears, peaches), marshmallows, peanut butter

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### Vo-'kab-ye-,ler-e

Stir-Mix	Hot-Cold
Whole-Piece	Sweet-Sour
Heavy-Light	Meat-Vegetable
Cut-Peel-Slice	Solid-Liquid
Pour-Sprinkle	Freeze-Thaw
Clean-Dirty	Thick-Thin
Wipe-Brush	Wet-Dry
Dice-Chop	

### What Do We Need?

**Infants** – a clean, washable doll and a safe, non-breakable mirror

**Ones** – add a doll bed, child-sized rocking chair, and a blanket for the doll

**Twos** – add a child-sized stove, sink, table (about 2' by 3') and chairs

**Threes through Pre-K's** – add a child-sized chest of drawers (four and older)  
and doll clothes with self-adhering fasteners

**Kindergarteners** – add more detailed props (dress-up tools, packages with printing, writing materials) to encourage increased role play

### But, we don't have the budget!

- Use a permanent marker to transform a sturdy cardboard box to a sink, stove, or doll bed.
- Turn a box on its side and cover with a towel (for a table). Children may sit on the floor.
- Bring a pan and wooden spoon from home.
- Make bowls from margarine tubs and plates from their lids.
- Collect some empty food boxes.

**Remember:** To pretend, a preschooler needs to add little to his God-given creativity.

### What ages enjoy learning in homeliving?

**Infants** enjoy simply touching a doll.

**Ones** can delight in putting a doll "to bed."

**Twos** rock and hug the doll.

**Threes** can dress and undress the doll and pretend to care for it.

**Fours and Pre-K's** role play many scenarios with the doll.

**Kindergarteners** develop more "in depth" experiences with the doll, maybe even make a baby nursery in a hospital.

### Select a doll which:

- Is durable
- Is washable
- Has molded and painted hair
- Has painted eyes (child can't poke the eyes out)
- Has few, if any, movable parts

### What does homeliving offer for boys?

- Boys need places to freely move (vs. extended sitting) and use their developing large muscle skills.
- Boys need to engage in conversation with others.
- Boys need to pretend caring for others to learn about being a father.
- Boys need to role play situations to encourage expressing their feelings in words (rather than physically).
- Boys need good homeliving experiences because families need the balance of both male and female members.

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### Through Music, a child . . .

- Forms concepts related to Bible truths.
- Hears song as he is involved in a variety of activities.
- Gains an awareness of the beauty of music.
- Learns listening and singing skills.
- Feels good about herself as she sings.

### Tips for Using Music

1. Use quiet music to create a pleasant atmosphere for young preschoolers.
2. Change words of songs to fit the activity.
3. Refrain from using motions with songs that have spiritual context.
4. Allow children to touch or play instruments such as an Autoharp® or guitar.
5. Provide a variety of rhythm instruments.
6. Respect the child who chooses to sing a song a different way.
7. Sing songs that are easy for preschoolers to learn.
8. Encourage children to move to the music.
9. Sing songs that use words and concepts that preschoolers can understand.
10. Sing and sing often, even if you are off-key.

### When Teachers and Preschoolers Sing, You Will Notice:

- Preschoolers listen to musical games and take part in activities.
- Teachers are free to sing about activities in which preschoolers are involved.
- Songs will be used in planned activities.
- Preschoolers sing about things they are doing and tap out rhythms of recorded music.
- Preschoolers can look for musical sounds all around them.

### When to Use Music

- As a child arrives
- As a child is involved in a Bible-learning activity
- As a child moves from one activity to another
- As a child is involved in group learning
- As a child needs quiet time
- As a child prepares to leave

### Music ideas for the NON-MUSICIANS

- Make up a song to familiar tunes such as “Row, Row, Row Your Boat” or “The Farmer in the Dell.”
- Make simple instruments out of oatmeal containers, wooden spoons, film canisters, or jingle bells sewn on elastic loops.
- Use a cassette or CD to learn the song and to use in class.
- Standardize the code for your step bells. Consider these:

Red – middle C	Yellow – E
Blue – G	Brown – B
Orange – D	Green – F
Purple – A	Pink – high C

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### Through Nature & Science, a child...

- Can make a connection between his world and the God who created it.

### Guidelines for Using Science Experiences with Preschoolers

- Use activities that allow the children to succeed.
- Try activities before using them with children.
- Encourage children to observe and ask questions.
- Place all materials and tools for the activity in the center.
- Allow children plenty of time to observe, explore, and discover.
- Use books and pictures to give information about science and nature activities.
- Ask open-ended questions to encourage preschoolers to think.
- Include resources (pencils, crayons, paper) for children to record their observations.

### Guiding Nature/Science Experiences

- Allow preschoolers time to interact with the nature materials. Children need to explore, experiment, examine, and experience the wonder of God's creation.
- Provide activities and experiences that do not require much teacher guidance; children should be able to do the activities themselves.
- Provide a balance of individual and group activities.
- Permit children to get their hands dirty.
- Go outside whenever possible to experience God's world. When circumstances prevent walking outside, bring nature items inside.
- Encourage responsibility by letting older preschoolers care for plants and small animals (fish).
- Allow children to discover a nature item before showing it to them. Discovery encourages the physical, logical, and natural learners.
- Give simple answers to preschoolers' questions about nature. The child will ask for more information when he needs it. If you give too much information initially, you may discourage children's questions and curiosity.
- Avoid using the word "magic" when referring to natural processes.  
Explain that God planned for seeds to grow or for water to freeze and make ice.

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## Reasons to Use a Nature/Science Learning Center

1. Provides a natural venue for teachers to use Bible verses, Bible stories, songs, and books.
2. Provides opportunities to learn about God by experiencing His creation.
3. Teaches respect for living things.
4. Encourages preschoolers to worship as they experience the wonder of God's world.
5. Provides a vehicle for preschoolers to learn as they play and explore.
6. Sharpens children's senses and contributes to their total development, including language, motor skills, social interaction, intellectual skills, and emotional development.
7. Provides a meaningful web for integrating math and reading.
8. Provides preschoolers insights into understanding their world and themselves.
9. Develops lifelong skills of observing, problem solving, questioning, experimenting and exploring.

## Safety Tips

- Always wash hands after handling nature items.
- Be aware of preschoolers' allergies. Ask parents to complete a health form that includes information about food, animals, or scent allergies.
- Read ingredients of prepackaged foods before using with preschoolers.
- 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.
- Place leaves and flowers in a clear container or plastic bag for younger preschoolers.

## Setting up a Nature/Science Center

- Choose an area close to a window or in a quiet area of the room.
- Set up the area near a water source so water is readily available when needed.
- For kindergartners, consider adding a table.
- Encourage grandparents and parents who travel to be on the lookout for unusual items.
- Place a Bible opened to an appropriate verse.
- Place a tool caddy in the corner for rulers, magnifying glasses, and other items; add pencils or crayons and paper so children may note their observations.
- Collect these items for the nature center: small rocks, dried flowers, textured fabric, cork, rulers, shells, seed packets, sand, nature pictures, scales, hay, clear containers, magnifying glass, magnets, and watering can.

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### Through Puzzles, a child...

- Develops fine motor skills and eye-hand coordination.
- Develops thinking, matching, and recognition skills.
- Develops problem-solving skills.
- Learns to associate, match, classify, and sequence.
- May be encouraged to work with others and make choices.
- May develop feelings of satisfaction and competence.
- May hear Bible story conversation, verses, and songs.

### Setting Up the Puzzle/Manipulatives Center

1. Place puzzles in a quiet area of the room, out of the main traffic area.
2. Offer two or three puzzles per session. Enhance the puzzle center by placing each puzzle on a sheet of construction paper, place mat, or carpet square.
3. Store manipulatives such as beads and put-together blocks in their own dishpan/ plastic container. For kindergartners, place a picture or word label on the container.
4. Provide more than one set of the most popular manipulatives.
5. Use puzzles and manipulatives in other learning centers when appropriate.
6. Check to be sure wooden puzzles are free of splinters, sharp edges, toxic paint, and small pieces that could be swallowed.
7. Print a word or number on the back of each puzzle piece that matches a word or number on the back of the corresponding puzzle board. Stray or mixed-up pieces may then be easily returned to the correct board.
8. Use puzzles that depict realistic objects, animals, and people instead of fantasy figures. Realistic pictures help reinforce Bible truths.
9. Store puzzles in large zip-lock bags to keep the pieces together.

### Guidance 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.
- Make puzzles and manipulatives available for children of differing abilities.
- Use Bible story conversation, Bible phrases and verses, and songs in the center.
- Remind preschoolers to complete the puzzle or put manipulatives back in their containers before moving to another activity.
- Help or encourage preschooler to give assistance to a child who becomes frustrated with a puzzle.
- Change the puzzles and manipulatives often.
- Help children work puzzles with questions such as:  
“What is missing?” and “Where does the largest piece go?”

(Blocks continued on next page)

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### Types of Puzzles and Manipulatives to consider:

- Pull apart, put together, reactive manipulatives.
- Fill-and-dump, nesting, shape sorting.
- Matching pictures (memory), sequencing.
- Floor puzzles.
- Pattern cards, stringing.
- Wooden inlay puzzles.
- Homemade puzzles:
  - cardboard puzzle pieces with magnetic strips on a cookie sheet
  - puzzles made out of photos
  - matching nuts and bolts
  - colored cotton ball sorting
  - listening games (sounds in film canisters)
  - card/envelope matching
  - cube matching
  - toothbrush holders in a pencil box

### When Choosing Wooden Inlay Puzzles Keep these Criteria in Mind:

#### *Age of the Child*

Ones – Twos

Older Twos – Threes

Older Threes, Fours, Pre-K's

Kindergartners

#### *Number of Pieces*

2-6 pieces

2-11 pieces

10-24 pieces

11-30 pieces

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For more information contact Diane Smith, Children's Ministry Strategist, Emerging Leaders Team  
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