

Trick of the Trade: Toy Rotation

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Whenever I am asked to step in and help a teacher or caregiver who is having difficulty “controlling” his/her classroom, the first thing I look at are the toys and learning centers available to the children. What I usually find are unorganized toy shelves full of mixed up toys and manipulatives, and way too many toys. Basically, I feel like I am in a classroom that is sucking the life out of me and I do not want to be there. Hint: If it makes me feel this way, it makes the children feel this way and it’s no wonder they are misbehaving! You must provide an environment in your classroom that stimulates the life force, sparks imagination and fosters enthusiasm for learning.



One of the secrets used by experienced child care teachers is Toy Rotation. Toy rotation promotes higher-level thinking during play, stimulates the brain, and leads to enriched development. It also results in children playing for increased increments of time without misbehaving. Winner, winner, chicken dinner! And it works for all ages from tiny infants to afterschoolers.

Establishing a toy rotation system prevents boredom because it makes toys seem new to the children and re-ignites enthusiasm! The same is true for center props. The key is to put the toys or props away before the children become *too* bored with them. While a *little* boredom can promote creative and self-directed play, too much boredom in young children can cause unnecessary negative behavior.

Hopefully you already have your classroom set up in different play centers, or for very young children, center bins that you bring out at different times during the day. Toy Rotation means that you periodically pack away certain toys from each center and replace them with “new” ones - that is, with toys you packed away previously. For example, if you have seven different manipulatives in a center, you would only have four available at a time and the other three would be packed away. Then each week or two, you swap out two of them. The same would be true for your puzzle center, math and science center, etc. You get the idea.

Prop Rotation is the same as Toy Rotation. It means that while the basic toys in a center play area remain the same, the *props* change every week or two. For example, in the Home Living area the focus may switch from feeding the baby dolls (bibs, blankets and bottles) to washing the baby dolls (washcloths, plastic rather than cloth dolls, dishpans with an inch of water in them) or from cooking to baking or from home play to a pizzeria or McDonalds! In the Dramatic Play Area the props can change from puppets & theater to camping gear to a veterinarian’s office to a fire station and then to a beauty salon! In the large building block area the props change from dinosaurs and small twigs to farm animals and hay to small cars and trucks with masking tape roads to toy fire engines and some blocks with “fire” painted on them (or pictures of fire wrapped onto the blocks with clear contact paper.) In the Free Art Center you swap out fat or thin paintbrushes, different types of paper, fat crayons and skinny crayons, assorted kinds of tape and glues (plain, glitter and colored) and staplers and twistable crayons and glitter crayons and odds & ends such as leftover craft supplies and empty tp and paper towel rolls as well as empty cereal boxes. *(Remember Free Art is the art center where you provide the supplies but do not even suggest what the children use them for. This center is in addition to the art or craft project on your lesson plan for the weekly theme.)*

In your Library or Reading Center you swap out small teddy bear reading buddies with giant stuffed animals and then swap to empty eyeglass frames or a couple of CD players with headphones and read-along books. Even colorful character beach towels to stretch out on while reading offer a fun twist to reignite enthusiasm in this center. In the Sensory Tub you swap out not only the basic contents (water, dry beans, colored dry rice, damp sand, homemade moon sand, ice, etc.) but also the props that go with them, e.g. pouring and measuring props, small plastic aquatic animals, plastic snakes & insects, assorted sizes of spoons, etc.

Swap out the toys and props at a time when the children are not in the classroom. This eases the stress of those who do not handle change well. Also, swapping out toys while the children are present just slows down the whole process. It’s much easier, and more exciting for the children, for them to simply arrive and discover the new changes each Monday or every other Monday. An even better idea is to swap them out on Thursday evening. This makes Fridays fly by and gets the children excited and talking about “school” to their parents over the weekend making your light shine a little brighter!