

Preface

After many requests from educators, we prepared this guide to help teachers and parents foster meaningful experiences between young children and materials. Many of the ways of working and the beliefs discussed in this book have been inspired by educators from Reggio Emilia, Italy, and by the exhibition, “The Hundred Languages of Children.” Principles of the Reggio Emilia approach include:

- a deep respect for the ideas of children and teachers.
- a belief that knowledge is constructed through social exchange.
- the value of using materials and media to express and communicate feelings, thoughts, and understandings.
- the desire to document children’s and teachers’ processes to preserve memories and sustain in-depth work.
- the joy and growth that comes from collaborating with other teachers and with children in the search for knowledge and understanding of relationships.

Our journey with materials took place with a number of teachers from the Fort Hill Preschool and two kindergarten classrooms. Cathy Topal spends two mornings a week in the preschool and kindergarten as a visual arts teacher. Lella Gandini consults with teachers about aspects of the Reggio Emilia approach. Most of the experiences presented here took place with four-year-old children, their parents, and teachers in the classroom of Rita Harris and Debbie Grubbs. We worked with teachers who had the desire to experiment and discover with us. This helped us learn a great deal about

A child uses her self-portrait as a blueprint for representing herself with materials.



daily occurrences, strategies, and ways of setting up and organizing situations for learning.

Rather than focusing on the creation of products, this book is based on observation and recording of children's and teachers' processes. As you turn the pages, you will become a participant in our journey while you construct a way of working with materials that you find appropriate for your situation. We offer you ideas and suggestions that come from real-life experiences in a school.

You will also encounter our moments of doubt. Having doubts, we feel, is part of growing as educators. We know that there are many materials to explore, but we chose to focus on found and recyclable materials because they surround us in the environment. The shapes, colors, and textures in these often-discarded objects can create a bridge to visual and active learning. We watched this process unfold while we worked on this book.



The participation of parents is as fundamental to gathering materials and generating strong interest as it is to the life of the school.

Safety First

Potential Choking Hazard

Please use great care and good judgment when collecting and using materials with young children. Teachers, parents, and other adults should carefully determine that the materials they are using are clean and not sharp, toxic, or potentially harmful before allowing young children to use them. These activities, as do all activities that involve young children, require close and uninterrupted adult supervision. The activities in this book are appropriate for children who are four years of age and older. Be sure to keep small items away from very young children. Children under the age of three or four often put small objects in their mouths, creating a potential choking hazard.

The authors and publisher cannot be held responsible for any misuses of materials by children or adults.

Introduction



Children explore materials by first noticing, then touching them.

To a young child, the world is full of materials to touch, discover, and explore. To find, collect, sort, and use materials is to embark on a special kind of adventure. For adults, gathering materials means rediscovering the richness and beauty in natural, unexpected, and recyclable objects that are all around us, but not often noticed.

One way to rediscover our own creative impulses is to see possibilities in materials. Children possess a natural openness to the potential of materials. When adults become aware of this process, they find ways to watch and listen to children. Children and adults become collaborators as they discover, collect, sort, arrange, experiment, create, construct, and think with materials. The goal is to allow children to become fluent with materials—as if materials were a language.