

Chapter 1

Collecting, Discovering, and Organizing Materials



Over the last few years, we have encouraged the teachers and parents in our school to collect interesting materials, and find effective ways of using them. As materials come into the classroom, simple bottle caps, broken jewelry, extruded objects, and scraps of paper and cardboard are transformed into treasures. In studying how materials can fuel ideas and thinking, we realize that it is the noticing and gathering of the materials that initially sparks our interest, enthusiasm, and awareness. We decide it is crucial to involve children and parents in the process of collecting.

Getting Started

To begin this investigation, we need to prepare parents for their children's requests for materials. Together, we write the following letter:



Rita and Lella share their thoughts and ideas, and plan for the first meeting with children. Cathy takes these photographs to record the beginning of this adventure.



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Dear Parents,

We would like to investigate what it means to children when they have sought out, discovered, and collected materials themselves. Does this affect the way they use and care for those materials? Are they more thoughtful, focused, and pleased with their efforts when they have been engaged in the process right from the beginning?

Today you will get a letter from your child asking you to help him or her look for potentially useful materials to bring to school to enrich the studio area in our classroom. We hope you will like scouting out the treasures that you have around your house. We are very interested in any perceptions that you or your child has about this process. Any interesting dialogue or quotes about materials that you can record would be helpful, too. Please let us know your thoughts.

*Sincerely,
Group A Teachers*

P.S. Please make sure that materials are clean!

Teachers begin collecting clear and white containers for sorting and distributing materials. Clear or white containers showcase materials and enable children and adults to “read” what’s inside.



Beginning the Journey with Children

At a morning meeting with the whole class, we ask, “Have you noticed some of the materials that have been coming into the classroom lately? We’ve found objects and materials that look interesting and fun to use, and we thought that maybe you and your parents would like to join us on this treasure hunt to find materials for our studio area.”

We also decide that we need to send something tangible and practical home with the children for collecting. We prepare a bag for each child with Rita Harris’ poem (see p. 2) stapled to it. We include a list of materials to give parents a few ideas about materials.

Dear Parents,

Kids from Group A want to collect! Would you help us?

When you are looking in drawers, you might find some things that we could use for projects. When you are putting out your “recycle stuff” or are outside walking, you might find some small things. We want to collect! We are going to bring bags home to collect our stuff. Please help us find things like broken jewelry, ribbons, feathers, metal and plastic things, clear or white containers—many things could do! The list that we are bringing home has more ideas.

*Love,
Kids from Group A*

Materials to Collect

wire	shells
feathers	sponges
beads and buttons	small seed pods
costume jewelry	wood scraps
broken jewelry	containers: preferably white or transparent
tape	baskets
string	cardboard pieces: all kinds and shapes, but not with writing or print
ribbon and yarn	paper of different weights, textures, and colors
old keys	nails
small machines that don't work (i.e., watches and clocks)	screws and bolts
corks and bottle caps	small mirrors
leather remnants	extruded objects
plastic sock holders	
razor blade holders and other	

Safety Note

Please use great care and good judgment when collecting and using materials with young children. Parents should carefully determine that materials are clean and not sharp, toxic, or potentially harmful before allowing young children to use them. 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.

“Where do you think this golden circle came from?”



The teacher offers an invitation to students: “If you would like to help write a letter to parents, you can stay on the rug after the meeting is over.”



Creating Anticipation

Bags begin to collect in a special area in the classroom. We place a sign to make the area noticeable.

In response to the poem on the bags and the excitement of the children and parents, the table fills up. Both children and parents are eager to show their treasures. We didn't realize that parents would become so involved, but they seem as interested as the children. They want to see what other families have discovered.



Clipping the bags shut is a good way to keep the contents together. To maintain a sense of expectation, we wait until most of the bags are back before opening them.

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Annie and her Mom arrive early one morning. Annie's Mom says, "I think that this is one of the most fun projects we have done. It made Annie look at things differently—as potential materials. It was exciting. She had some seam binding with tiny violets embroidered on it that was very special to her. Since she had two pieces, she decided to put one of them in her bag to share, and keep the other one at home in her collage box."

"Wait till you see what's in my bag! You can look in the little hole and see what's in it. Maybe you can have a little peek. Look, it came from my own sparkle wand—look, twist paper."



A Grand Opening

The day before our grand opening, we have a meeting with the teachers to plan the opening of the bags. We gather our containers and our own bags of found materials. We decide who is going to lead the discussion, who is going to observe and take notes, and who will take photos. We buy more film and blank tapes for the tape recorder. We even find a video camera. We don't want to let significant moments of discovery vanish without a record. Images and recordings help us gather memories to refer to in the future.

We really don't know what to expect, but we are prepared to be flexible. We are all interested and excited to find out what will happen.

Teacher: "Group A, I took one of these bags home, just like you did, and I looked, and I searched, and I hoped to see something that appealed to me...I found some interesting shapes and colors, and I put them in my bag and brought them to school. In just a few minutes we are going to get our bags and empty them in a big pile."

Matty: "They'll get all mixed up."

Hannah: "I know. We'll put out our mats and we'll put them far away from each other and we'll get our bags and empty them in front of us and look at what appeals to each of us!"

Teacher: "What do you think of mixing them all up in one big pile so we can all see what appeals to each and all of us?"

Children: "Yeah! Yeah!"

Teacher: "Before we begin, does anyone have a story about special or interesting things that happened while collecting?"

Emma: "I found some of my old toys that I broke a while ago and I put them in my bag."

Annie: "I found some candy wrappers and ribbon and some papers."

Teachers invite children to empty their bags one at a time.



Hannah: “The clock wasn’t working at my house. We took the batteries out and I put it in my bag.”

Matty: “We could open up the clock and see the little parts of the machine and how it works.”

Caitlin: “We couldn’t take any of my sister’s stuff.”

Jeremy: “I found some Styrofoam that you can press down and make stars with. I found some pressing things that were sitting outside.”

Teacher: “We are getting lots of good ideas and we haven’t even seen what’s in our bags. Now, if you didn’t bring a bag, that’s ok. We can all share.”



Children eagerly watch the pile grow.