

Childhood interests follow as many pathways as a growing mind allows.

- A ballet bar for a budding dancer.
- A canvas stage for a young puppeteer.
- A wood bin for an aspiring carpenter.
- A personal home computer for a deaf boy.

Learning centers stimulate young minds. These areas foster interest in preferred pastimes and channel childhood curiosity in a new direction.

Helping young ones to develop by permitting specialized work stations within their reach is an excellent way to encourage new discoveries. The tools to make these interest areas come alive need not be costly. Often, your search can begin and end in the Great Outdoors. Nature objects like rocks and shells, leaves and nests may offer just as much intrigue as fancy equipment from specialty stores.

Another often overlooked resource for learning center materials is the household cupboard stocked with materials fascinating to young minds. Empty milk cartons, clothespins and aluminum foil are just a few "finds" that children consider appealing enough to incorporate in their every day play world.

A Place for Learning

"A discovery, to be real, must contain something new. This element of novelty is an open door to those who have the courage to go through."

—*Dr. Maria Montessori, The Formation of Man*

Although the ones spending time at these special work and play stations should cast the deciding vote about their makeup, there are some pointers to consider when creating them.

Creating centers in a child's room that foster learning takes more than time and energy. To ensure success, it also takes careful thought, planning and guidance.

Communication is the key to this entire concept. Whether it's a playroom or a personal bedroom, let a child tell you how he or she envisions that space.

Before taking any steps, consider the following:

- Narrow the number of learning centers to a child's most important interests, paying attention to the ones carried back and forth to school.
- Never force an activity on a child that he or she isn't yet interested in pursuing.
- Keep an open mind about the number of activities that may interest a child. One or two learning centers supplying hours of entertainment and discovery are better than a half dozen stifling creativity and generating wasted time.
- Not every childhood interest belongs indoors.

Kickball is a good example of a pastime that has no place in some confined areas.

- Safety first is a good rule to follow before devoting space to certain leisure activities. Pastimes potentially dangerous, like bows and arrows or darts, might not belong in a setting a young one will occupy.

What follows is a list of exciting childhood interests and pertinent information about them. Meant to serve as a guide, they are just a sampling of what could rate learning center status in your child's room.