Materials that Promote Creativity

According to leading play researchers, basic is best when it comes to toys and materials (Trawick-Smith, 2013). Each year, the TIMPANI (Toys that Inspire Mindful Play and Nurture Imagination) toy study examines how young children engage with toys. The researchers work to identify toys that “best engage children in intellectual, creative, and social interactions in preschool classrooms.” Each year, researchers identify a toy that scores highly with young children. Watch the video provided in the Apply section of Lesson 3 within the Family Child Care track Creative Expression course to learn more about the TIMPANI study and what the researchers have found. In addition, read the list of highest scoring toys from the past several years listed within this section.

As you review the toys listed on the website, think about your program toys and materials.

What do the toys listed above have in common? They are open-ended and allow for imaginative play. The toys can become “anything” the children want them to become!

As you read the information below, think about some of the materials you currently use in your classroom.

- **Dress-up clothes and materials.** Children should have access to age-appropriate, safe materials for dress-up. These might be adult clothes or child-sized clothes. Children should be able to use the materials to take on different imaginative roles (parent, firefighter, doctor, puppy, etc.)

- **Figurines, toy trains, toy cars, railroad tracks.** Children should have the chance to build an imaginary world with mini-people figurines, cars, and other items. This allows children to take on different roles and collaborate with others.

- **Arts and crafts materials.** Children should have access to art materials like crayons, markers, paint, and clay every day. This allows children to express themselves in different ways.

- **Blocks and other building materials.** Unit blocks, interlocking blocks (e.g., Legos or Duplos), and other safe building materials can help children build imagination and spatial awareness.

- **Puzzles.** Although puzzles have a defined product, they help children learn problem-solving skills and mental flexibility. Puzzles help the children look at objects in different and creative ways.

- **Balls and active toys.** Simple toys like balls, hoops and jump ropes can become props in imaginative play. They also help children explore how the world around them works and cause and effect.
- **Dolls and puppets.** In their early years, nearly all children show an interest in dolls and caring for other babies. They can explore family roles and responsibilities.

- **Recycled or found materials.** Creativity can be sparked when objects are used for new or interesting purposes. See what children can do with PVC pipe, laundry detergent lids, cardboard boxes, leaves, or recycled plastic.

- **Music and dance materials.** A variety of materials like traditional musical instruments (e.g., drums, bells, maracas), and “non-traditional” or recycled materials (e.g., tissue boxes, rubber bands, plastic tubes) can be used to encourage children to create their own music, songs, and dances. Other materials like scarves, bean bags, balls, or recording devices can also promote creative experiences.