



THE BEGINNER'S GUIDE TO

# The Play by Play Child-led Post-Plan

By Denita Dinger, Founder of Listen to the Children



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# A message from Denita, before you read this guide:

## **The Joy Factor**

First of all, on behalf of the children you work with: thank you. You see, I know, first hand, the JOY that is about to come to your work. When the adults who work with children are joy-filled, the children are the beneficiaries. **When we stop planning what WILL happen, and start embracing what DOES happen, the joy factor is unstoppable.**

## **What do I hope you gain from the photos?**

This guide is LOADED with photos of children OWNING their play. Those photos are all from my school, and are placed intentionally throughout this guide.

1. I want you to take in the details of those photos and really look at what a child's body is doing. And begin sharpening your skills of dissecting play. SEEING the value, the benefits of child-led play.
2. It is so very important that you understand that NONE of these photos are of "activities". There are absolutely NO ACTIVITIES in my child-led school. What you see in the photos is children using their environment in their own way. They provide the ideas of what to do. I have nothing to do with that part.
3. **SO... please take the MATERIAL IDEAS from the photos, but do not take what the children are doing.** Please give the children you work with the same freedom my students have. When you set the same materials out in your environment, what happens should not look anything like what happened in my photos. Please gift the children with autonomy!

## **Lastly, what do I hope you take away from this guide?**

I hope you STOP taking away from children and go back with a GIVE mindset:

- Give children a chance.
- Give them trust.
- Give them ample time to play (THEIR play, not directed by you)
- Give them freedom of choice.
- Give them autonomy.
- Give them empowerment.

# If this is you:

*“I want to be child-led, but I have a lesson plan requirement to meet.”*

Then...

**Slap a cape on this guide and call it SUPER MAN, because it is coming to the rescue!**

The “Play-by-Play Child-led Post-Plan” is specifically designed to help early childhood professionals who have lesson-plan requirements maintain a developmentally appropriate approach. It was designed to help those professionals be able to embrace a child-led philosophy while also meeting expectations.

I spent over four years creating it, using it, tweaking it, repeat, aiming at a user-friendly format. BONUS! It also provides the MUCH NEEDED modeling-of-organic-writing that children NEED! It is intentionally LOW-TECH for that reason!

Much love, care and PASSION went into this project, and I hope it truly RESCUES YOUR children from the restrictions of adult-expectations.

### **Goals of this guide and “lesson plan” format:**

- To provide a way for early childhood professionals to meet regulations while also listening to the children.
- To reduce stress and tension for both adults and children
- To spread awareness of what a truly child-led philosophy entails.
- To open eyes to the powerful benefits of child-led play.
- To help administration and others manage accountability.
- To empower adults to, in turn, empower children.
- To foster JOY. Letting it replace stress and tension.
- To help YOU look forward to Monday mornings.



## Why a “post-plan”?

A post-plan is the only way a “PLAN” works in a truly child-led environment.

**There is no place in a child-led program for an adult-driven lesson plan with adult-controlled expectations. The two simply do not go together.** (read that again...and perhaps again if need be)

You see, the adult in a truly child-led program does not know WHAT WILL HAPPEN. **That part belongs to the children.**

The parts of a child-led program that belong to the adult are:

- setting the environment
- observing (quietly, your commentary is not needed in most situations)
- stepping in ONLY when invited
- listening to the children
- understanding how the environment will meet the current needs of the children

**The adult (YOU) do not need to know what is going to happen in order for what happens to be valuable.** For many, this is the hardest part to wrap their brains around.

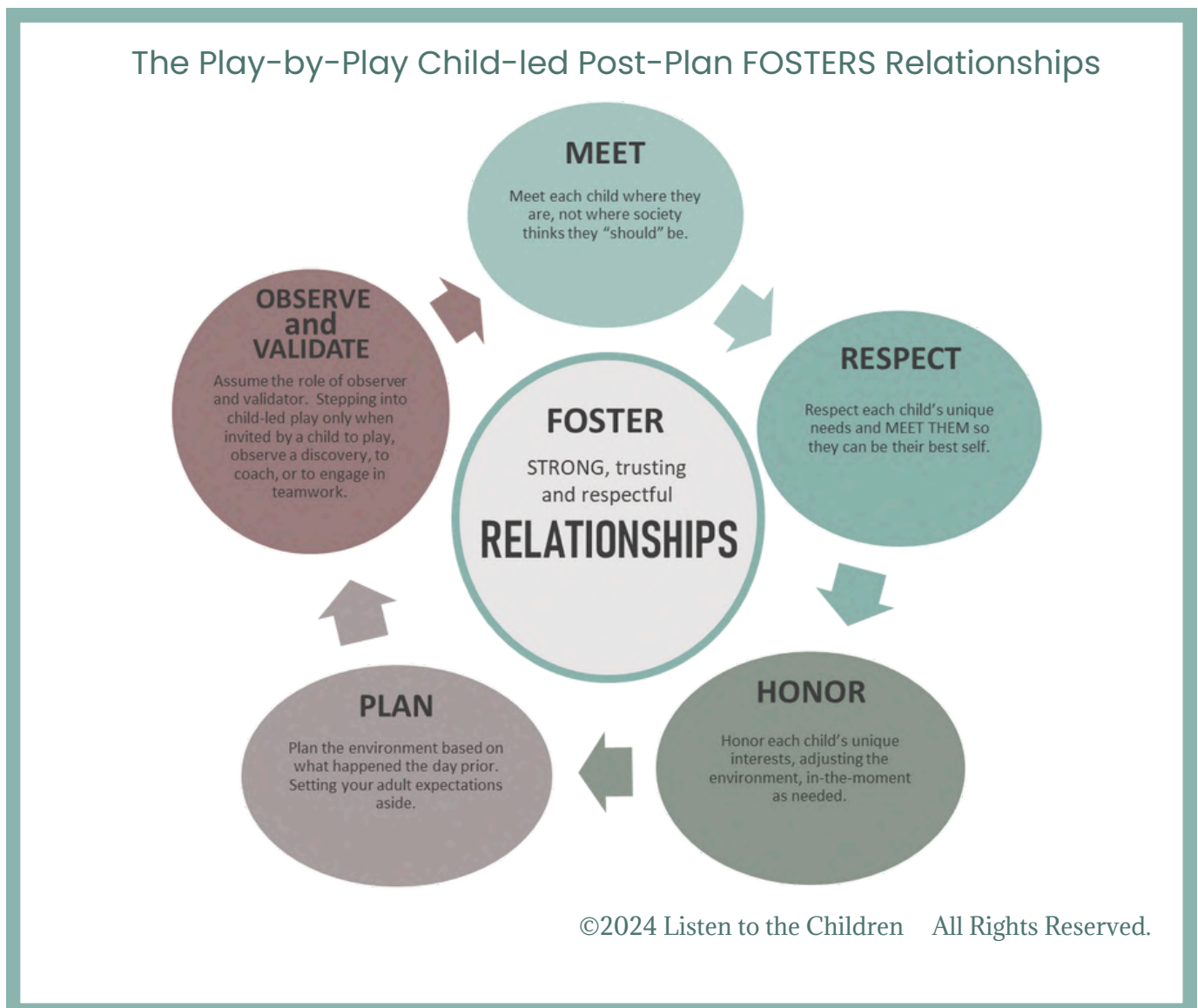
It's fair to say that, via relationships, you will have a good idea of what MIGHT happen... but these are children! They are unpredictable and have the BEST Ideas that often times surpass the ideas of a fenced-in adult.

# The Purpose of the Play-by-Play Post Plan

The post-plan can serve many purposes, but the grandest is its affect on relationships, and empowering children. While an adult-directed plan takes the power away from children, a child-led post plan **EMPOWERS** children by putting them in the lead.

The Play-by-Play fosters relationships through **meeting** each child exactly where they are, **respecting** their needs, **honoring** their interests, then **planning** the opportunities in the environment based on those three things.

Finally, instead of telling children what to do, the Play-by-Play simply allows the adult to take the role of **observer** and **validator**. The information gathered from this final step begins the process all over again.



# What if I WANT to lead with an adult-driven plan?

If you desire an adult-directed plan that is fine, just please do not call your program “Child-led” if it is actually led by YOUR adult-driven lesson plan complete with adult expectations.

**I feel it’s here that I should make sure you know there is no judgement, only clarification.**

I have written a blog post on this very topic. It is all about how I misinterpreted what “child-led” and “play-based” meant for many years. So, please know I totally understand if you, too, are in the state of misinterpretation.

You can find that post here :

<https://playcountsdenitadinger.blogspot.com/2015/01/confessions-of-stubborn-close-minded.html>

Stick around, however, and finish reading this guide. You may find there is much to be learned here, even if you are not utilizing a completely child-led approach at the moment.

# SO.... What on earth does the adult “plan” for a truly child-led approach?

## The adult plans the ENVIRONMENT.... that is it.

In simplest form: you plan the environment for tomorrow based on what you observe the children doing TODAY. (OR....you adjust the environment IN-THE-MOMENT, but for the purpose of this guide, let’s stick to post-planning)

Ownership of the “what to do” part belongs to the CHILDREN.







# Putting the Play-by-Play into Action

Putting the Play-by-Play Post-plan Model into action begins with a solid understanding of the four “Power Pillars” necessary for empowering children (per the Art of Empowering Children Certification, available at the Listen to the Children Academy)

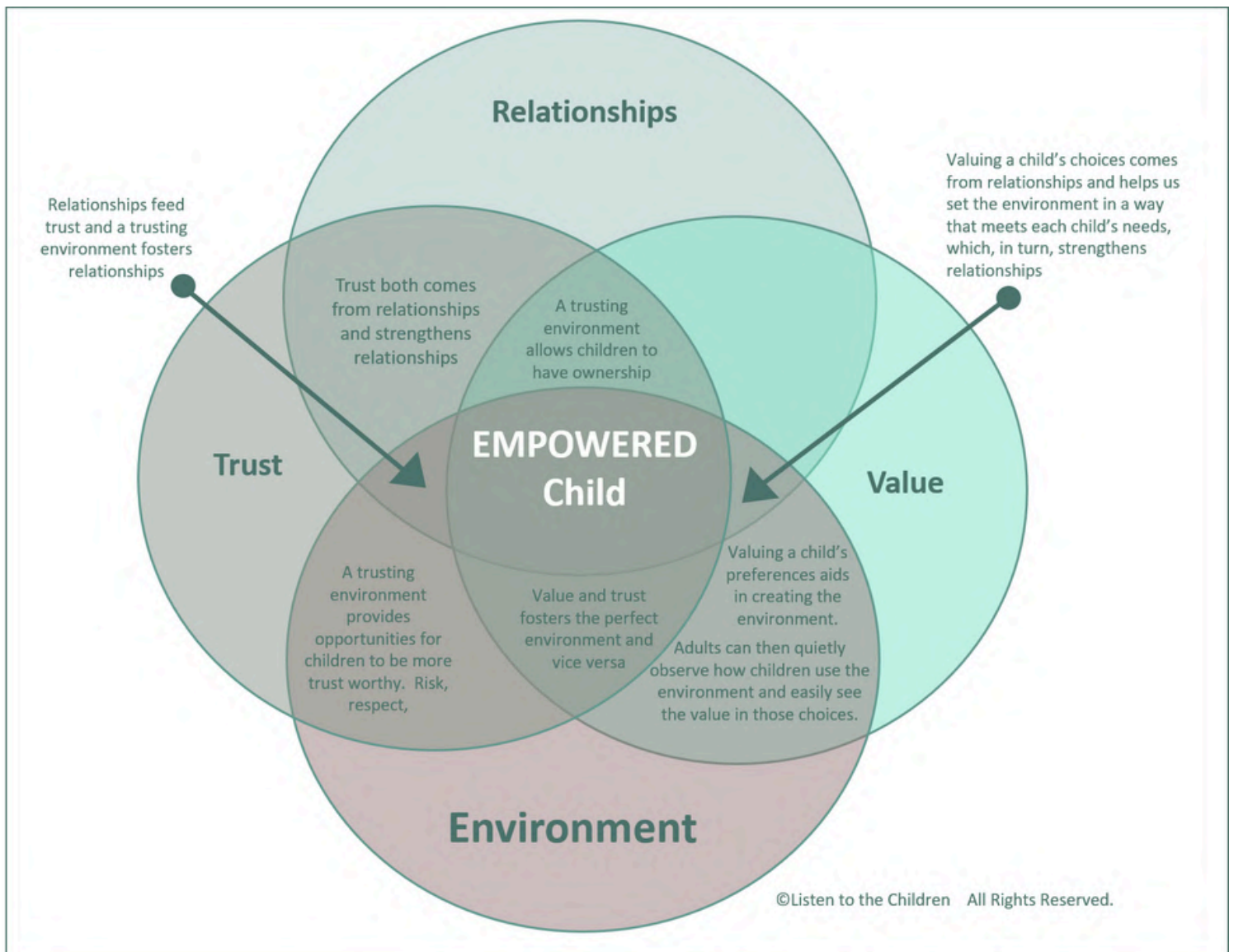
**It is important to not only understand what the Power Pillars are, but also how they all work together to honor the child. At the core of a child-led post-plan is creating an environment that honors each unique child.**

**The four Power Pillars are:**

- 1) Relationships
- 2) Trust
- 3) Value
- 4) Environment

# The four “Power Pillars” work together to empower each child.

As this model shows, the four pillars depend on each other in order to empower a child. **It all begins with relationships.** This is where important information about a child is gained. **That information is used to create an environment that will meet all the unique needs children have,** and, in turn, that environment and how children choose to use it, strengthens what you know about a child and your relationship with them.





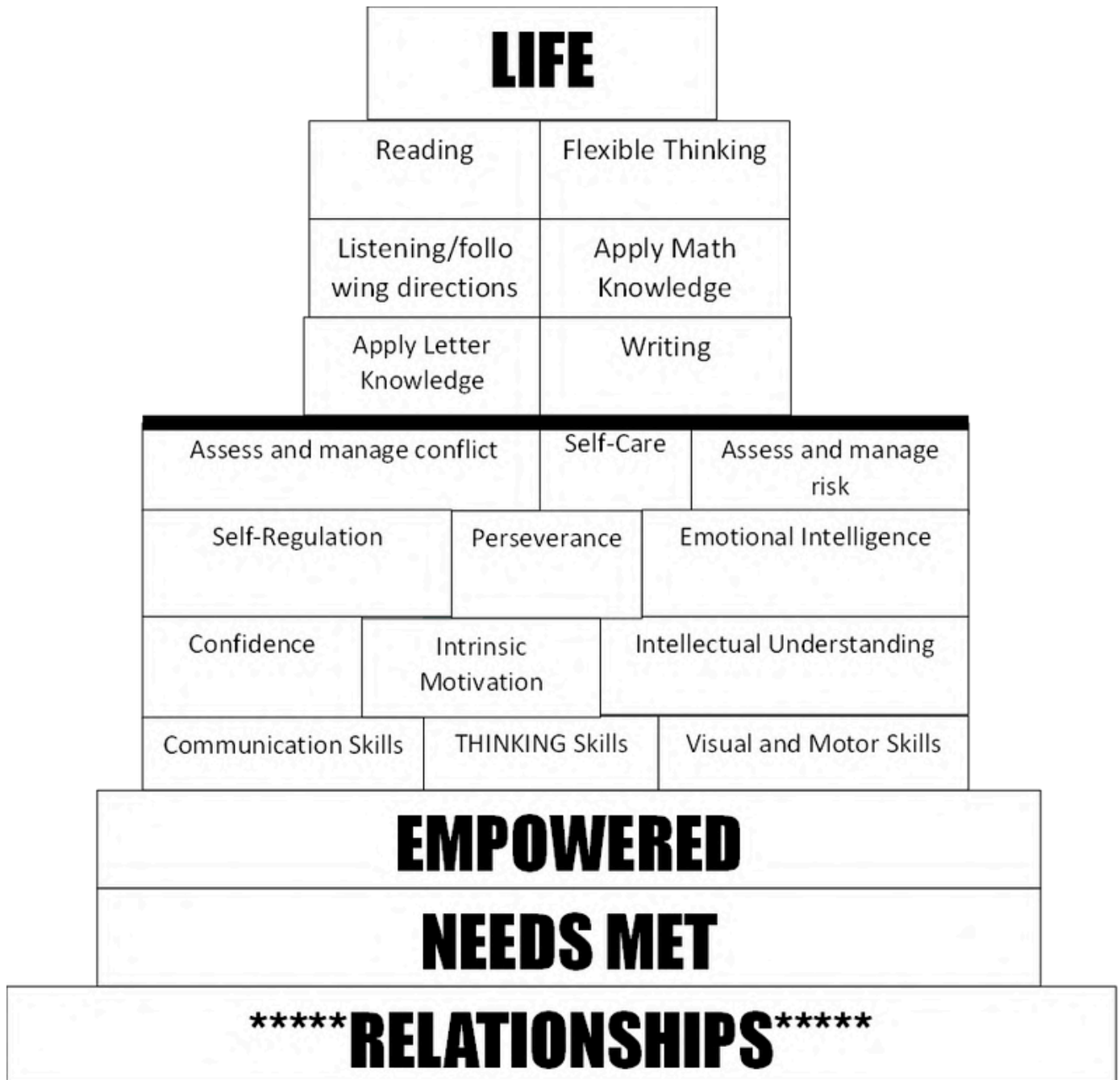
## Relationships

When determining the post plan, you will, first and foremost, consider **WHAT YOU KNOW** about each child

That information comes from the respectful fostering of relationships. The observations necessary to implement the Play-by-Play will greatly strengthen those relationships.



Relationships are the foundation of a child-led program, as well as preparing a child for LIFE.



# Trust

The TRUST pillar comes into play from two angles:

- 1) you must trust children and
- 2) the children must trust you, themselves and the environment.

**The children need to trust** that you will **meet their needs** and **keep them safe**, that you will **value** what they are doing and that their ideas are **respected**. Using a post plan that is driven by the power pillars demonstrates your trust in the children, and strengthens their trust in the respect you have for their ideas.

**As for trusting themselves: children NEED to be empowered with “I CAN” confidence in order to trust themselves.**





# Value

**The CORE of a child-led approach is honoring the child as capable.** In other words, one of the adult roles in a child-led environment is VALLIDATOR.

**The Play-by-Play requires that you trust there is VALUE in everything a child chooses to do.** The simple process of the plan helps you label the value and understand how it will benefit the child in the future.

No surprise, valuing a child's work BEGINS with relationships and what you know about each unique child. Only then can you truly understand the value, for that child, in their self-chosen play.

Feeling valued strengthens trust and relationships.

# Let's take a closer look at the Value Pillar

The **VALUE POWER PILLAR** is built from a whole bunch of “tions”:

- **Observation:**

Being in-the-moment and **NOTICING** all the various play happening all around you.

- **Validation:**

**Viewing child-led play as VALUABLE.** Again, relationships are the key to seeing the value in what children choose to do. Knowing exactly where a child is in their development, understanding what challenges them etc. helps us see the value in the seemingly smallest of moments.

- **Articulation:**

**expressing fluently and competently to other adults what is happening for the child, and how doing that NOW will support them LATER.** This skill is extremely vital. Need more support with this? Take my course, “The Art of Patiently Waiting; Developing all that Must come Before”.

- **Documentation:**

**documenting what you observe, and the value of what you observe** with the goal of **proving that child-led play is, indeed, the very best and most beneficial way for a young child to LEARN.** (I wish this piece was not necessary... but, sadly, until we foster a trust in the value of play, document we will)

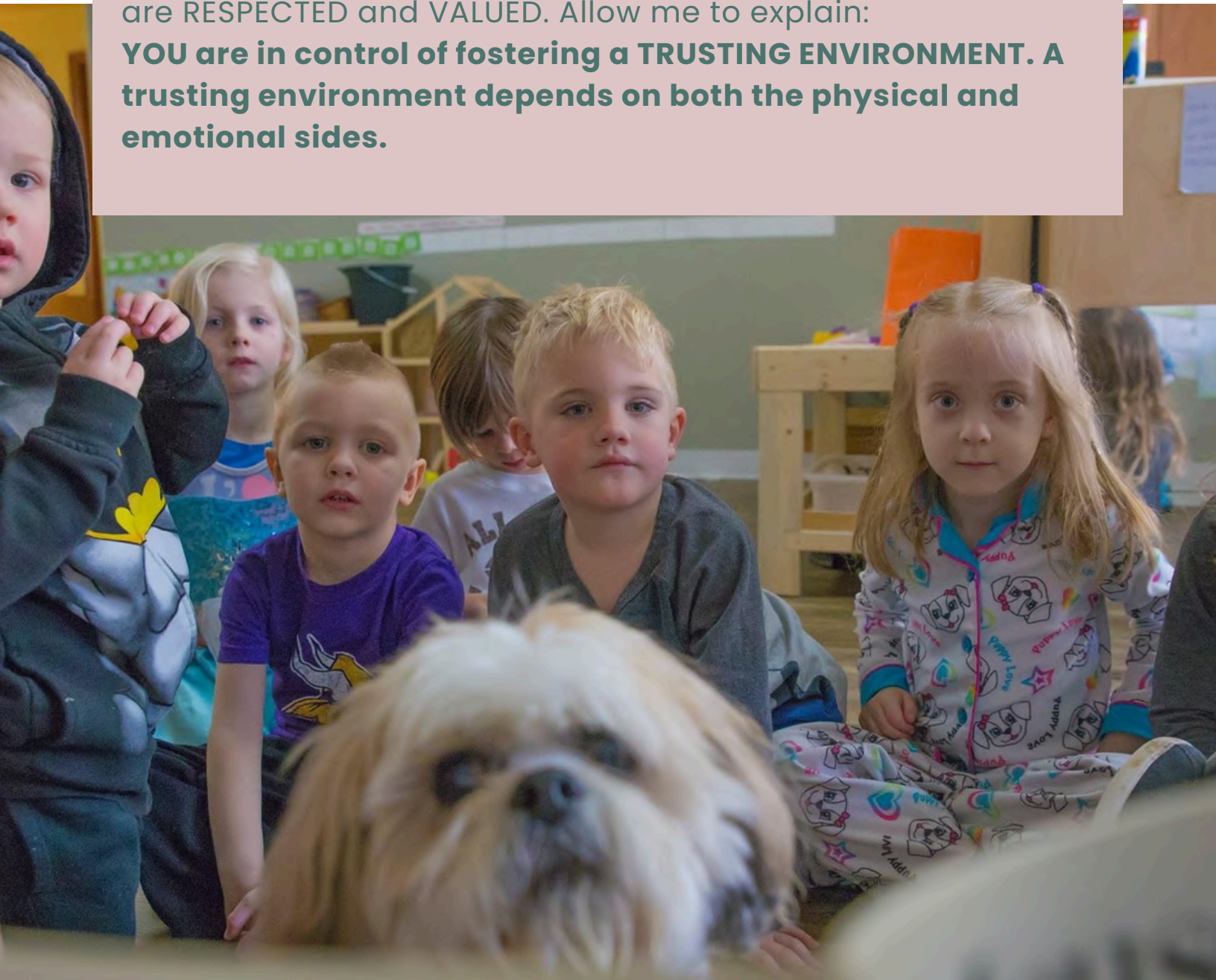
- **Mindful Consideration:**

**being mindful, and putting much consideration** (but fast consideration in some circumstances) **into the decision to step into a child's self-chosen play or task.** ALSO: Being considerate of a child's **RIGHT** to ask for help when and if they need it, instead of barging in **ASSUMING** they want you to.

# Environment

The environment plays a vital role in your ability to trust children to explore freely, to assess and manage risk, to handle conflict etc. It also plays a vital role in the ability for the CHILDREN to trust that they may TRULY explore freely, that they may TRULY assess and manage risk and that their ideas are RESPECTED and VALUED. Allow me to explain:

**YOU are in control of fostering a TRUSTING ENVIRONMENT. A trusting environment depends on both the physical and emotional sides.**





# The Emotion of the Environment

It is YOUR purpose to foster an emotionally healthy environment.

## An environment where:

- **each child feels safe**
- **all emotions are welcome**
- **children have the right to work through problems** confidently, trusting you are there when challenges go beyond their abilities (social challenges, physical challenges, emotional challenges etc)
- **children trust their thoughts and ideas are valued**
- **children trust they are free to try, fail, tweak, perhaps fail again, tweak, ask for help**
- **children know, and can count on, the boundaries**





# Physical Environment

## Opportunities:

Children need to trust that, unless told differently, **the opportunities in the environment are waiting for THEIR ideas.**

### **The opportunities need to meet needs.**

The majority of the opportunities should be intentional, based on what you know about each child and where they uniquely are and what their needs are. **Children can become quickly overwhelmed by too many options in an environment.** This is why you want to be intentional with what is in the space. **An educator in a child-led environment should be able to articulate the “why” for almost everything available in the environment.**

## Boundaries:

**Children need to trust that you will keep them safe,** and allow for truly FREE exploration.

Solid and consistent boundaries are a key component to a child-led approach.

**Well-established boundaries sets the stage for safe, free-exploration**

It is only when children TRULY TRUST YOU AND THE ENVIRONMENT that they can be EMPOWERED. A child-led program should aim for EMPOWERING children.

*-Denita Dinger*

# The Play-by-Play Child-led Post Plan

And now, let's take a closer look at the actual Play by Play Child-led Post Plan. There are three parts, and each of those parts have several components as well.

## Part One: "The Plan"

**The "plan" is STRICTLY referring to how you are going to adjust the environment. It has absolutely NOTHING to do with what the children WILL do.**

In a post-plan, the plan for tomorrow is based on what the children did today. You simply ask yourself, or discuss with co-workers: based on what happened today, are there any opportunities that need to be added, or areas that need rearranging in order to meet the children where they led you today?

## Part Two: "The Play by Play"

**"The "Play by Play" is simply your observations.** You are going to jot down (using a clipboard for the form, and pen or pencil of your choice in order to MODEL WRITING ORGANICALLY) what the children are doing. THEN... you are going to **dig deeper into what they are doing and identify the skills that are being developed and/or used...** OR the skills that would be helpful in that scenario, but the child does not yet have those skills. **It is THIS INFORMATION that you will use to determine the "plan" for the next day.**

## Part Three: Reflection

**The awareness that you are ALWAYS learning and growing is absolutely VITAL in the field of early childhood education. NEVER** have we "arrived". There is always going to be room for improvement. There is always going to be new lessons children teach us. The reflection part of the plan highlights this fact, and allows you the space to jot those valuable lessons and awareness down.

# Part One: The Plan

**The Play by Play**  
Post or In-the Moment Planning

Date:  
Absent:

## Part 1: The Plan (based on what the children did yesterday)

<b>Plop</b> Any combination of materials intentionally placed in the environment with zero adult expectation. Children are gifted with the freedom of time, task, technique and trust.	<b>Intention/Motivation</b> -Are you following the lead of children? (meeting needs, following interests, responding to behaviors)? -Are you just simply wondering what the children might do with these materials? -Are you hoping for a certain skill to emerge?	<b>Additions</b> (Things I have ready, but they are not placed in the environment. I want to give the children the opportunity to ask for what they need.)
<h1>SAMPLE</h1>		

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# The Plan has Three Parts

## 1. The Plop (aka: opportunity)

**“The Plop” part of the plan is simply a plan of how you are going to prepare the environment.** You typically have your staples that are always there, the plops are something special, or a certain combination of materials placed near each other, or a “what if...” perfectly placed, or a book. They are something that is not ALWAYS there.

## 2. The Motivation

**“The Motivation” part of the plan is the WHY, the REASON you are adding or taking away from the environment.** This part adds intentionality to the environment and provides an opportunity for the adult to stop and recognize WHY. The WHY typically also clearly points to the value of play

## 3. Additions

**This is a place to add a list of materials you will have “ready”, BUT NOT VISIBLE.** These materials are your assumptions of what the children will do with the plop, but their presence will close up the beautiful open-ended potential. Leave your assumptions (additions) OUT, in order to respect the children’s right to own what they decide to do, but have them ready.

# The Plop

The “plop” evolved in 2010, a time in my career when I was having all sorts of “aha” moments in my work with children as I slowly transitioned from teacher-controlled, to child-led.

**One such moment involved setting materials out WITHOUT directing the children as to what it was for, how to use it, how long etc.** NOT directing children was so completely foreign to me, that doing so was quite literally life-changing.

**It was such a pivotal moment for my work with children. The lack of stress I felt when I no longer had to police who was not doing what I clearly directed them to do was palpable. I felt a huge release of tension for both myself AND the children.**

I was fine with whatever the children chose to do with the materials I had set out, as long as they didn't hurt each other or the things in our environment.



# What was this new-to-me technique?

## I HAD to name it!

The feeling I got reminded me of “plopping on the couch” (**for those not from the US, “plopping” is sitting... I realize it means other things one should NOT do on a couch in other Countries :D**).

In my childhood, plopping meant: just drop into the couch, with no plan. Sometimes a deep sigh of relief accompanies the moment you plop down. You don't know how long you may be there, but you are relaxed and in-the-moment. It's a sense of soothing “ahhhhh...”. It feels RIGHT.

So then, the definition of a plop emerged in my trainings in 2010:

**Plop: ANYTHING (books, music, objects, “I wonder” statements etc.) that is placed in a child’s environment with zero adult direction, demonstration or outward expectation. The child is given the freedom of time, technique, task and trust. The adult quietly observes and gives opportunities for children to try, fail, succeed, explore and ask for what they need, stepping in only when invited.**

\*\*\* Please use common sense. If there are true hazards (risks children cannot see) with an opportunity you are going to plop, then by all means, point those things out to the children.



**This is an example of how a plop evolves. This baking soda ice ramp and colored vinegar plop (opportunity) began as the plopping of baking soda ice cubes. Every day, I slightly changed the plop. ALL of the “what happened” part belongs to children. I simply set out the materials and got out of the way.**

# Motivation

## Why are you changing their environment?

First of all, **RELATIONSHIPS** will be your guiding light as far as knowing whether the children need something in the environment to change.

Specifically, here are my most common reasons to adjust our environment, but you will find many more I am sure:

- **Behaviors** (are all needs met the way the environment is currently set, OR do you need to make changes?)
- **Interests** (does the current environment meet evolving interests?)
- **Discoveries** (is the environment prepared for discoveries to grow and evolve from one thing into another?)
- **Challenges** (does the environment empower children to continue reaching for new self-driven goals?)







# What if there is no reason to make changes?

## Then leave it alone!

There are many days where there are absolutely no changes necessary, then there are days where lots of changes need to happen to the environment.

**Some of the changes can (and should) happen in-the-moment...while others need to wait for the next day. This really depends on availability of the materials needed, as well as consideration for other things happening in the environment.**



For example: let's say a child has led you to adding something quite large to the environment. BUT, looking around, all the other children are in the midst of their play, and there is absolutely no place to put said large object. That will have to wait until the next day. This gives you time to reconfigure things without interrupting play.



# Additions

**Less is more. When I set new opportunities in the environment, I like to leave the open-endedness TRULY open-ended!** I do not like to put out too obvious of a combination of materials that the children are unable to make it their own.

SO... I write down what additions I will have ready to roll “just in case” the children take these materials in this direction.

**For example:** I set out a plastic rain gutter bridging the table, with spray bottles of colored water. **I did NOT want to add anymore because I wanted to see what the children would choose to do.** I assumed the children would spray the colored water in the rain gutter. I then assumed they would realize new colors were emerging. I also assumed they would want “air squirters” to further move the water around. BUT, I did not set my assumptions out, I just had them ready, out of sight.

I’m so glad I didn’t let my assumptions be a part of this opportunity. What the children did completely blew me away! They FIRST added sheets of foam and cut rafts to fit in the rain gutter....THEN they added passengers (mini erasers). THEN the requested the air squirters to move the rafts!!! (note: “air squirters” are really water squirters.. BUT...they also squirt a strong puff of air PERFECT for fostering curiosity in child-led play.)



# How do You Start?

Begin with what you know.

**The first day of post-planning, you create the environment the very best you can, taking into consideration the various things you already know about the children from whatever registration process you have.** My families get a very thorough questionnaire that assists me with that first day's environment. From then on, my plan for tomorrow is based on what the children did TODAY.

At my child-led school in South Dakota, we are completely outside for at least the first six weeks of a new school year.

I find the needs of children I don't yet know to be extremely easy to learn and meet in an outdoor environment.

I find the boundaries can be larger, to give brand new children an opportunity to get very comfortable in this space, with me, and with each other. This more open space is fabulous for the development of basic social skills before we move indoors where more awareness of others is necessary due to the closer vicinity to others.



# Part Two: The Play-by-Play

(aka: your observations)

## Part 2: The "Play by Play" (observations and skill dissection of what the children chose to

Life Skills (social/emotional)				PRE-Reading				PRE-writing			Imagination/ Creativity		Science			Math																									
Demonstrated patience	Assessed and managed social	Assessed and managed risk	Demonstrated social awareness/ consideration of others	Asked for what they needed	Collaborated with others	Expressed emotions in a developmentally appropriate way	Articulated their ideas to others/	Thought Independently/intrinsically	Solved Problems/ Persevered	Demonstrated Self Help Skills	Enjoyed a book	Brought reading into their play.	Tracked items visually	Showed an interest in letters	Showed an interest in letter sounds	Rhymed	Showed an interest in words	Created their own story line	Expressed themselves with words	Engaged their core (balanced)	Used hands to accomplish a task	Used upper back muscles and	Used mountain writing	Had their OWN reason to write	Created something	Tried a new idea / used materials in a new way	Dictated stories	Enjoyed some dramatic play	Asked "what if..."	Tested theories	Used tools	Caused an effect/Observed effect	Experimented	Owned a discovery	Counted	Brought one-to-one correspondence into their play	Put Numbers in Order/identified	Built a Pattern in their play	Added/Subtracted in their play	Compared and sorted in their play	Used words like more or less in their play
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# The Play-by-Play has Two Parts

The “play-by-play” part of this whole process is my favorite part. **It’s the part that helps you get really good at articulating the value in play!**

Recall the four Power Pillars? Relationship, Value, Trust and Environment? Well, value is up to bat! It is time for that baby to shine! **Child-led play IS valuable, and this form is going to prove it!**

There are two parts to this form:

1. **Their Play**
2. **Dissecting Play** (digging out the skills that are being developed (X) during their play OR the skills that would have been beneficial, but you did not observe (G) for goal)



# Their Play

It's time to get really good at observing, and quickly jotting down enough of what you see/hear for a memory. You will develop your own shorthand in order to do this. Also, if you document well with photos, you can always add "see photos" to your notes as well. I encourage you to NOT use any sort of electronic device to do this on. **Please print out the forms for every single day, and put them in your clipboard.** At the end of the week, three hole punch them and add them to your binder, beneath last week's forms. It doesn't take long for this method to read like a traditional lesson plan, with the plan for the environment FIRST, then what happened next, followed by your reflections. THEN...take the form for the NEXT DAY and jot in the plan, based on TODAY'S PLAY.

**Are you going to be able to write down EVERYTHING? Of course not. I make sure to mention every child (that is present) every day. But you ARE going to miss stuff because you ARE human.**

The next page has some examples from one of our mornings together. I try to write down enough to spark a memory. These notes are for my benefit, and to share with parents on occasion.



# “Their Play” Examples

There is no right or wrong way to jot down your observations. Here are a few examples from my work with children:

- Freya was playing with the puzzle pendulum. She was saying outloud what she was doing, which is always fascinating to me. “WHOA! Too many on that side, I need more over here.” “WHOOOPS! Too MUCH! Denita! Look! I almost have it balanced.” “Look! Two on this side, and two on that side makes it balance”
- Beckett reconfigured the crazy tube on the skadis wall in order to create his ice cream machine. He had to be cautious removing the bungees, solve quite a few problems, and ask for some teamwork. In the end he discovered a new way to place the tube that created a ski-jump of sorts.
- Koko and Cora set up a Birthday party, making sure every plate at the table had the same items on them. There was so much debate between the two of them as far as what each plate should have on it.
- Wesley, Oliver and Elizabeth were playing with the magnetic people in the raingutter with paint, and the story they were creating, while it didn’t necessarily make sense to me, CLEARLY it made sense to them. The magnet people don’t work the best in this way, they tip over quite a bit, so there was plenty of problems to solve and patience was definitely challenged
- Wilder jumped and jumped and jumped today. First he jumped off the pile of floor tiles, then the nugget cushion, then the chairs. Then he explored landing on different things. He jumped from the chair onto the floor tiles, he jumped from the chair onto the nugget cushion. This play continued for about 45 minutes!

# Dissecting “THEIR Play”

Now comes the fun part... dissecting play and revealing the skills that are being developed during THEIR play.

Honestly, I wish we did not need to do this part. I wish the ludicrous pressures from “above”, would realize that CHILD-LED PLAY IS ENOUGH.

**BUT, until we get there, proving play is valuable is a MUST.** In order to do that you need to have a BEFORE mindset.

**Unfortunately, inappropriate pressures on children and therefore early childhood programs have almost erased the “BEFORE” mindset.**

“PRE” has become a meaningless prefix when talking about the early years.

**For example: in far too many early childhood settings, “PRE”writing has somehow become “Sit at the table and write your name”, followed by “if your hand can’t, I will take your autonomy away and make your hand move.”**

**There is NOTHING “PRE” about that.** That is writing (albeit forced) and THAT is NOT an acceptable, nor developmentally appropriate expectation of a young child.





# PRE = BEFORE

A LOT of development must happen for a child, BEFORE...

There is SO MUCH development that must come BEFORE reading, writing and life in general that absolutely need to be developed during the early years.

**All of these skills can be organically developed through child-led play. Sadly, this is not commonly recognized, trusted nor respected knowledge.**

Instead of honoring a child's right to own all the powerful benefits that live in TRUE, child-led play, adults have increasingly replaced it with adult-controlled activities motivated by an "earlier is better" mindset.

**The "earlier is better" mindset actually robs vital opportunities for development from children. In our quest for "EARLIER", we are actually doing a disservice to children in the long run.**

Children require AMPLE time to own THEIR play in order for their bodies and brains to develop all that MUST come BEFORE.



# Dissecting Play Requires Honoring what **MUST** come **BEFORE**

**A general knowledge of the skills that are needed in a child's developmental foundation is important to possess when it comes to dissecting a child's play and valuing the benefits.**

The "Play by Play Child-led Post Plan" will help you a lot with that knowledge. I have supplied you with a decent selection of the many foundation skills for:

- Life/Social-Emotional Skills
- Reading
- Writing
- Imagination/Creativity (why is this a category? Imagination and creativity are part of the core for solving problems)
- Math
- Science

The more you use the "Play by Play" to document child-led play, the better you will become at recognizing, valuing and articulating what is REALLY going on for each child in "just" play.

**Is it a perfect list? No, of course not. That is impossible:** 1) there is limited space 2) the possibilities are truly endless 3) I am extremely indecisive, so this list literally took a gazillion and one edits. If it doesn't meet your needs, please feel free to create your own.



# What MUST come BEFORE Writing?

Writing requires the WHOLE BODY, not just hands and fingers.



For the purpose of this guide, I am just going to highlight where writing begins:

## The Development of Core Strength

This information shocks a whole lot of early childhood professionals. **Writing BEGINS WITH THE CORE, not the fingers and hands as commonly believed.** Your core consists of the muscles that wrap around your trunk (midsection): abdominals, obliques, diaphragm, pelvic floor and trunk extensors.

### Please Note:

*I am absolutely NOT an expert on body mechanics. However, I spent 20 years as a certified group fitness instructor with certifications that tested my knowledge of how the human body works together. I have also had a plethora of injuries that required either PT or OT (the best way to learn is by experiences!)*

*I LOVE learning how the body works together and applying that knowledge to my work with children and adults alike. It is from that pool of knowledge that I help others understand how MOVEMENT of the WHOLE BODY is what PRE-writing truly is.*

# When Does a Child Engage Their Core?

## Children engage their core for various needs from infancy:

- The moment a baby kicks it's legs BOOM! The core is engaged.
- Rolling over.. BOOM! Engaged core!
- Getting up onto all fours: BOOM! Core strength!
- Crawling: BOOM! Core!

## ALL of these movements require the core to engage. Therefore, this is what PRE-writing looks like:

- Walking
- Running
- Standing
- Crawling
- Rolling
- Dancing
- Jumping
- Balancing
- Standing on the swings
- Climbing up the slide

## ALL of these movements provide opportunities for the body and brain to get ready for **WRITING** (and, of course, lots of other things)

Sadly, very few early childhood professionals are aware of all that must be strengthened AND coordinated BEFORE reading and writing, specifically.

**Far too many are under the assumption that getting ready to write involves fingers and hands. When in reality: it involves THE WHOLE BODY and lots of the BRAIN.**



# What Else **MUST** come **BEFORE**?



**The development of core strength is just ONE of a long list of what must come BEFORE.** I cannot emphasize enough the fact that this list of skills/development live in child-led play. **There is NO need for adult-directed learning activities. In fact, an adult overly directing children is a disservice to developing bodies and brains.**

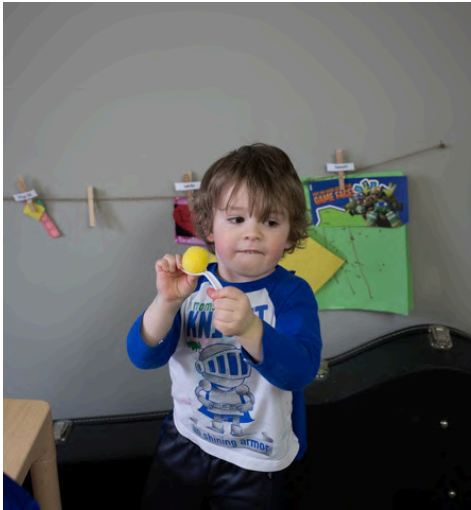
This is a time for adults to practice patience by allowing ample time for these skills to develop BEFORE. **The forcing of a child to write with a body and brain that is absolutely NOT ready is far too common. Yes, “the forcing of a child to write” sounds so harsh, I understand that... but when writing is not allowed to organically emerge from a child whose body and brain are READY, the only other word for it is “forced”.**

The following page gives you an itty-bitty sampling of what I share in my in-depth course: “The Art of Patience: Respecting a Child’s Right to Develop all that MUST come BEFORE”.

**I highly recommend contacting me to find out how I can bring this extremely beneficial course to your area. I promise you will not regret it.**

Email me for more info: [listen-to-the-children.denita@gmail.com](mailto:listen-to-the-children.denita@gmail.com)

# This is a small sample of what true PRE-writing looks like



Plastic spoon catapulting is FANTASTIC for eye-hand coordination, visual tracking and connecting brain and body



**Sand play is loaded with opportunities for bodies and brains to PREpare for writing.** Moving sand is HARD work, not to mention the perseverance needed.



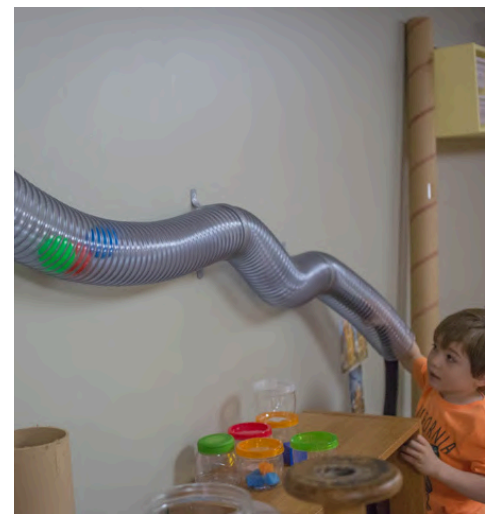
**Carrying anything utilizes the muscles needed for writing,** let alone this 12 lb basket of rocks!



**Pendulum play of any sort is fantastic for building visual tracking skills.** Shower puffs attached to fire-proof rope is all it takes to provide this beneficial opportunity.



Pumping this quick stir pitcher to make thick soap suds for play requires muscles, from the core to the fingers to work together and communicate with the brain. The exact same thing that needs to happen when writing.



Clear hoses and tubes that woodworkers use for dust collection provide a fantastic opportunity for motor development as well as visual tracking. Add in a shop-vac on blow for even more fun!

# RANDOM THOUGHTS

It is AMAZING when one stops and really thinks about **all that is being developed WITHOUT an adult leading the way!** Children's bodies and brains are WIRED to develop. You simply cannot stop them.

A child-led approach embraces that natural drive and works in reverse from a teacher-led approach.

**INSTEAD of choosing skills and then expecting children to develop them via an adult's insistent direction, a child-led approach honors the skills developing organically through a child's self chosen play.**

**INSTEAD of telling children what they will be learning,** the adult honors the fact that each child's play dictates that. Their play is motivated by life experiences, interests (which are typically derived from life experiences), needs (sensory and others), intrinsic motivation etc.

**Each child has different experiences, interests, needs and motivation which brings different themes into their play, therefore introducing other children to new topics.**

It is the responsibility of the adult in a child-led program to document their play, then use the information learned from that process to set the environment in a way that meets all the children in all the unique places they are.

# Dissecting THEIR Play

Let's take a look at one of the "Their Play" examples again, and this time, see what BEFORE skills I observed this child demonstrating.

Freya was playing with the puzzle pendulum. She was saying outloud what she was doing, which is always fascinating to me. "WHOA! Too many on that side, I need more over here." "WHOOOPS! Too MUCH!Denita! Look! I almost have it balanced." "Look! Two on this side, and two on that side makes it balance"

## Here's the deeper picture of what I saw in Freya's play:

### **Life Skills/Social-Emotional :**

- Demonstrated Patience
- Expressed emotions in a developmentally appropriate way
- Thought Independently/  
Intrinsically motivated
- Solved Problems/Persevered

### **PRE-Writing;**

- Engaged their core
- Used hands to accomplish a task
- Used upper back and shoulder muscles

### **PRE-Reading:**

- Tracked items visually
- Expressed themselves with words

### **Imagination/Creativity:**

- Created something
- Tried something new/used materials in a different way

### **Science:**

- Tested theories
- Caused an effect/Observed effect
- Experimented

### **Math:**

- Counted
- Compared
- Used words like "more" or "less"



# The “Play by Play” Sample

This is what the form looks like when you have filled in “Their Play” and dissected it. Thoughtfully selecting those “skills” you observed during that play. Note: I put a “G” when there is a skill that would have served them well in that moment, but they did not display it.

## Part 2: The “Play by Play” (observations and skill dissection of what the children chose to do)

Life Skills (social/emotional)										PRE-Reading					PRE-writing				Imagination/Creativity		Science			Math																				
Demonstrated patience	Assessed and managed social conflict	Assessed and managed risk	Demonstrated social awareness/consideration of others	Asked for what they needed	Collaborated with others	Expressed emotions in a developmentally appropriate way	Articulated their ideas to others/motivated	Thought Independently/intrinsically motivated	Solved Problems/ Persevered	Demonstrated Self Help Skills	Enjoyed a book	Brought reading into their play.	Tracked items visually	Showed an interest in letters	Showed an interest in letter sounds	Rhymed	Showed an interest in words	Created their own story line	Expressed themselves with words	Engaged their core (balanced)	Used hands to accomplish a task	Used upper back muscles and shoulders	Used mountain writing	Had their OWN reason to write	Created something	Tried a new idea / used materials in a new way	Dictated stories	Enjoyed some dramatic play	Asked “ what if...”	Tested theories	Used tools	Caused an effect/Observed effect	Experimented	Owned a discovery	Counted	Brought one-to-one correspondence into their play	Put Numbers in Order/Identified	Built a Pattern in their play	Added/Subtracted in their play	Compared and sorted in their play	Used words like more or less in their play			
X						X		X	X			X						X	X	X	X			X	X				X		X	X	X	X					X			X	X	
<p><i>Their Play:</i>                      Freya was playing with the puzzle pendulum. She was saying outloud what she was doing, which is always fascinating to me. “WHOA! Too many on that side, I need more over here.” “WHOOOPS! Too MUCH! Denita! Look! I almost have it balanced.” “Look! Two on this side, and two on that side makes it balance”</p>																																												
X				X	X			X	X	X			X					X	X	X	X			X	X			X	X	X	X	X	X	X										
<p><i>Their play:</i>                      Beckett reconfigured the crazy tube on the skadis wall in order to create his ice cream machine. He had to be cautious removing the bungees, solve quite a few problems, and ask for some teamwork. In the end he discovered a new way to place the tube that created a ski-jump of sorts.</p>																																												
X	X		X		X			X	X									X	X	X				X	X		X									X	X							
<p><i>Their Play:</i>                      Koko and Cora set up a Birthday party, making sure every plate at the table had the same items on them. There was so much debate between the two of them as far as what each plate should have on it.</p>																																												
X			X		X	X		X	X			X						X	X	X	X			X	X	X	X		X	X	X	X												
<p><i>Their Play:</i>                      Wesley, Oliver and Elizabeth were playing with the magnetic people in the raingutter with paint, and the story they were creating, while it didn’t necessarily make sense to me, CLEARLY it made sense to them. The magnet people don’t work the best in this way, they tip over quite a bit, so there was plenty of problems to solve and patience was definitely challenged</p>																																												
		X	X				X		X									X	X										X		X	X												
<p><i>Their Play:</i>                      Wilder jumped and jumped and jumped today. First he jumped off the pile of floor tiles, then the nugget cushion, then the chairs. Then he explored landing on different things. He jumped from the chair onto the floor tiles, he jumped from the chair onto the nugget cushion. This play continued for about 45 minutes!</p>																																												

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# Part Three: Personal Reflection

**Part 3: My Reflections** (an important attribute of an early childhood professional is a desire for continued learning and growth, daily reflections are a huge part of that.)

- What I learned from children shared with parents  
Topic:

Concerns/Skills the children need opportunities to practice:

Something I was able to do today that benefited the children,  
AND impressed me:

Today, the children taught me:

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# In this work we are privileged to do, reflection goes a long way in personal growth.

**If you haven't already realized it, this plan is for EVERY SINGLE DAY. All of three steps, every.single.day.**

Think of how much you will fine-tune your practice with children when you get into the habit of recognizing something you did, that benefited the children... AND impressed yourself, **every day**.

Perhaps you bit your tongue and resisted solving a problem for a child that they are capable of doing.

Perhaps you NAILED articulating the value of play to a parent. Whatever it is, acknowledge it. Write it down.

Add to that, keeping track of all the lessons children teach you. **Trust me, when you are in-the-moment, truly "listening" to the children, you are going to learn a LOT.**

I share those nuggets of knowledge with parents under the title: "What I learned from your children today". The topic is always organically dictated by the children, and whatever lesson they taught me. I like to keep track of that. I don't write to my families every single day -- just as the spirit moves me to do so. I find deadlines to be stressful and would rather choose joy and write from my heart.

You can easily make your own reflection page (heck, you can make your own plan, if my version doesn't work for you) and personalize it to you and goals you specifically have.

# The Play-by-Play

## Step-by-step Directions

1. The Play by Play Child-led Post-Plan file is meant to be printed out for every single day children are present. So everyday uses 3 sheets printed front and back. I find it handy to have the whole week's worth of forms on my clipboard. WHY? I can add to tomorrow's plan "in -the-moment" so I don't forget.. especially specific requests from children that you are unable to meet right now. **\*\*\*\*\*when printing, make sure to check the "long side flip" option so it is easier to read in a binder. When you turn the page, the writing will all continue to face the same direction.\*\*\*\*\***
2. Place all of the sheets in a clipboard.
3. The top page is "the plan". Begin there. Jot down a few, non-staple, items that will be in the environment. These are things that tend to come and go.
4. When the children arrive, put the top page behind so you are ready to write down the various scenarios of their play on the following 4 pages.
5. While the children are present, and/or after they leave, jot down your reflections.
6. Take the forms for the FOLLOWING DAY, and fill in the "plan" page based on what the children did that day. If you are leaving things alone, jot that down as well and why.
7. Finish you reflections.
8. Add today's forms in your binder, placing them behind yesterdays forms.
9. Enjoy seeing the flow and beauty of a child-led program quickly take form!



## About Denita

Denita Dinger began her journey as a defender of childhood with her consulting business, Play Counts, back in 2009. She had been operating her family childcare business in her home since 1998 and simply shared her personal stories, which make her presentations to this day, relatable

She proudly shares her journey from a stubborn, adult-controlling early childhood educator to what she is today, an honored follower of child-led play..

Ever since 2009, she has traveled the globe both speaking at events for educators and parents., and providing one on one coaching for the same clientele.

From 2010-2014 she co-authored three books: "Let them Play: An Early Childhood UNcurriculum", "Let them Play" and "Let's All Play" through Redleaf Press.

2014 was a pivotal year in Denita's life, and led to the closing of her family childcare business of 16 years and the opening of Kaleidoscope Play School and Camp Empower.

In 2021, she realized the word "play" was so grossly misinterpreted and desired a clearer name for her consulting business and so.... Listen to the Children was born.

Through all of her work, Denita passionately shares what she has learned from children over her 25 year career. She boldly declares "we are doing it wrong", and children desperately need adults to use their voices TOGETHER to make change happen.

# References

Truly, the majority of the knowledge I used to create the “Play by Play Child-led Post Plan” came from the children who have attended my programming over the years:

Giggles and Grins Family Child Care (1998-2014)  
Kaleidoscope Play School (2014 - present)  
Camp Empower (2015-2023)

Without them, I wouldn't know half of what I know today. I truly practice what I so passionately preach: LISTEN TO THE CHILDREN

I am a reader of posts and blogs, my work is definitely influenced and validated by the following voices for children in absolutely no particular order of importance (aside from Bev, whose matter-of-fact manner opened my eyes and was the catalyst of TRUE change of my views of children and how capable they are):

Bev Bos  
Peter Gray  
Janet Lansbury  
Teacher Tom  
Beth Wolff  
Sally Haughey  
Sally Wright  
Kelsie (The Occuplaytional Therapist on FB)  
Greg Santucci  
John Holt  
Piaget  
Freud

## Do You Desire More?

Contact me for more info on how to bring the **“Post Planning 101: Children are Worthy of Leading”** training (among others) your way!!

**Email: [listen-to-the-children.denita@gmail.com](mailto:listen-to-the-children.denita@gmail.com)**