

All About HighScope

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Active Participatory Learning

Practical summaries of HighScope's history, educational approach, and curriculum

What is active participatory learning?

Active participatory learning — direct, hands-on experiences with people, objects, events, and ideas — is the cornerstone of the HighScope approach to educating children. Children in active learning settings “construct” their own knowledge through their interactions with the world and the people around them. They take the first step in the learning process by making choices and following through on their own plans and decisions. Teachers and parents offer physical, emotional, and intellectual support. They also extend and expand children’s learning by providing interesting materials and thoughtful, warm interactions.

What are the ingredients of active learning?

HighScope identifies five ingredients of active learning:

- Abundant **materials** are provided.
- Opportunities are provided for the **manipulation** (handling) of these materials.
- Children have a **choice** of what materials they will use, how they will use them, and with whom.
- **Children use language and thought** to describe what they are doing and to reflect on their actions.
- Teachers, parents, and other adults **scaffold** children’s development and learning — they support children’s current level of thinking and challenge them to advance to the next stage.

What do children do in an active learning setting?

- **Children engage in activities that grow from their own choices and plans (intentions).** Active learners are busy, talkative, and truly involved in learning when allowed to focus on their

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own actions and thoughts. Adults entering an active learning setting may initially feel that it’s disorganized and noisy, but they soon realize that the children are very purposeful and self-directed in their activities. This hustle and bustle is a sure sign that children are learning!

- **Children choose materials and decide what to do with them.** In active learning settings, children make choices about what materials to use, how to use them, and who to use them with. This is a key feature of active learning. Because many materials are new to children, they may decide to use them in inventive rather than traditional ways. The freedom to make these choices and decisions is a very important part of fostering their interest and excitement about learning.
- **Children explore materials with all their senses.** As children experiment, they learn about how objects look, sound, feel, smell, and taste. Through this exploration, children answer their own questions and satisfy their own curiosity. Even if we give information to children, they may not learn or understand it unless it’s confirmed by their own observations and discoveries.
- **Children learn with their entire bodies.** We recognize that children like to explore and test their physical abilities — *How high can I jump? How far can I throw? How fast can I spin?* Asking children to sit still and wait goes against their natural instincts and needs. Active learning settings provide time and space for children to use all their muscles as they develop their motor skills

and learn about their bodies and the world around them.

- **Children transform and combine materials.** Children learn about objects by experimenting with their size, shape, color, and location. They may take objects apart and put them back together in new ways. As children investigate these materials, they learn important lessons about cause-and-effect relationships, quantity, balance, and the properties of objects. In active learning settings, we resist the temptation to show children how to do something the “right” way, knowing they will learn these lessons better if they discover them on their own.
- **Children use age-appropriate tools and equipment.** Children enjoy working with tools and equipment designed especially for them, such as wheeled toys and swings. They also enjoy using adult tools, such as staplers, egg beaters, or hammers. How a tool works sometimes interests them more than its purpose. For example, steering the vacuum cleaner around furniture may interest them more than using it to clean the rug. Working with tools and equipment offers children opportunities to solve problems and build confidence. In addition, the actions involved help them develop large-motor skills and hand-eye coordination.
- **Children talk about their experiences.** In active learning settings, children talk throughout the day about what they are doing. They share what is meaningful and important to them. Children’s ideas may surprise us, but by using their own words children tell us what they are thinking and build a foundation for understanding and organizing ideas. Adults who really listen to children will be able to expand and extend their learning with experiences they will enjoy and understand.

What do teachers and other adults do in an active learning setting?

- **We use the HighScope key developmental indicators to support children's development.** HighScope has identified 58 key developmental indicators (KDIs), which are behaviors that define the important learning areas for young children. We use these KDIs to set up the learning environment, conduct small- and large-group activities, and interact with children in ways that address every area of their development.
- **We provide a variety of materials for children to work with.** These materials may be safe and practical everyday objects, natural materials, tools, easy-to-handle materials, heavy materials that challenge their strength, messy materials that allow them to explore with their senses, or equipment they can use to exercise large and small muscles.
- **We provide space and time for children to use materials.** As teachers and caregivers, we are responsible for organizing the learning environment into distinct interest areas, providing equipment, and labeling each area and object with easily recognized symbols. Our second responsibility is to plan a daily routine (a consistent schedule so that children will know what to expect). At HighScope, the daily routine includes time for children to make plans, carry them out, and reflect on their experiences. Opportunities are provided for children to interact in small and large groups, as well as to exercise large muscles and experience nature outdoors.
- **We find out what children want to do and learn.** As teachers, we carefully watch what children do and act as partners in their play. In this way, we strengthen chil-

dren's sense of initiative and control. We are also careful to expand children's learning without telling them how to use certain materials. HighScope has found that if adults *direct* the action, children may lose interest, but if they *show interest* in children's ideas, play and learning continue.

- **We listen for and encourage children's thinking.** By listening to children's spontaneous comments, we can understand how children think about their activities. Adults in HighScope settings converse naturally with children as they work and play, focusing on their actions, making comments about what the children are doing and acknowledging their efforts, and encouraging them to elaborate on their thoughts. We avoid asking children too many questions, knowing that such interference can make children stop talking. Rather than asking questions that require a specific answer, we ask questions that may draw any number of responses. Instead of asking "How many wheels do you have on your car?" we might ask, "How did you make the wheels stay on your car?" HighScope adults accept what children say and provide experiences that help them expand and modify their own thinking through self-discovery and reflection.
- **We encourage children to do things for themselves.** Children learn more by solving problems on their own than by having adults do things for

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them. Although we are on hand if children become too frustrated or if situations become unsafe, at most other times we stand back patiently while children try different solutions. In active learning settings, adults understand that children will make mistakes, and they encourage children to help one another solve problems whenever possible.

How can a home become a place for active learning?

Everything that children and adults do in an active learning program can be done at home. Whenever possible, we encourage parents to

Children talk throughout the day and share what is meaningful and important to them.

give their children choices about what to wear, which toys to put away first, or what books to read at bedtime. Families can take notice of what their children find interesting and try to provide materials that allow them to

pursue these interests. We suggest that parents let their children do things for themselves, even if it takes a little longer or is not done perfectly, and to have conversations with them as they do things together. Parents are sure to be surprised to discover how actively their children are thinking about the world! Encouraging children to tell others about it in their own words is a key to their intellectual development.

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