

LEARNING CENTERS

Learning centers can be an exciting addition to a classroom. They make it possible to offer a variety of activities that can be completed by students in teams or individually. Some planning and modeling in advance will help ensure successful learning centers.

The Basics:

Each learning center needs to be set up so that the students have all the materials and direction they need. This could include:

- a sign or label for the center – *Math Center, Simple Machines: Lever*
- clear directions or a stated goal for the center project
- all the materials needed in order to complete the activity

The current classroom lessons or themes will determine the type of learning centers you choose. There are several ways to organize learning centers. It isn't necessary to organize all the centers in the same way. It is often useful to adapt several different approaches to fit the needs of the students. Organizational approaches include:

- By theme: Coral Reef, Simple Machines, Plants, etc.
- By learning styles: auditory, tactile, visual, etc.
- By subject: math, spelling, language, science, social studies, and computer skills.

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Preparation:

Take time to present each center.

- Explain the purpose of each center.
- Show the materials the students will be using.
- Go over the directions; show them where the directions will be posted.
- Review any reporting system or checklists that should be completed.
- Show where materials are stored between sessions (this could be folders, baskets, computer files...).
- Schedule help for younger students. Recruit students from upper grades, parents, seniors, high school co-op students, and so on for help.

Take time to present the rules.

- Present the behavior expectations for each center.
- Demonstrate the expected behavior, and have students practice modeling the behavior. Examples of this might be:
 - practicing voice levels;
 - practicing walking from center to center;
 - practicing the appropriate handling of materials.
- Announce a planned phrase that you will use to get the attention of your entire class. The point is to have a phrase the students recognize. Tell them that by the time you finish the phrase they should all be still, quiet, and ready to listen. Practice this prior to using the learning centers. The phrase can vary by age group. Here are some suggestions:
 - For primary: *1, 2, 3, all eyes on me!*
 - For elementary: *May I please have your attention.*
- Discuss the importance of respecting each team member's materials and ideas, and of listening to one another. Appoint group leaders when necessary.

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Setting up the classroom:

The way you set up learning centers in the classroom will depend on your class space and the method you use for learning centers. Center groups should generally not exceed five students. There are some basic set-ups that work well with any size class.

- Center areas can be placed around the room, including rug areas, reading nooks, and space outside the classroom. This is a good set-up if you will be teaching lessons and students will be using the centers at different times throughout the day.
- Centers can be organized in baskets that are put on tables or groups of desks during a designated center time. Students are then assigned to each center and rotate as scheduled or organized by you.
- Center folders can be assigned to groups. Each group of students working together can carry their materials with them to designated areas in the room.
- Computer activities will depend on your access to computers.

Records and Assessments:

How you assess the students will naturally vary with your teaching methods and types of learning centers you choose. I have found that even young students can self-assess and keep track of their work with help. Here are some ideas:

- checklists: Provide checklists for students to self-check the activities completed.
- Goal Sheets/Portfolio Assessments
 - How did I do today?
 - What would I like to do tomorrow?
- Final Assessments: Generally, the completion of the learning center task is assessed on the basis of pre-established criteria. Students can:
 - present their projects to the class
 - turn in projects for teacher evaluation
 - self-evaluate
 - have group/peer evaluations

Time for clean up:

- Allow plenty of time for orderly cleaning of each center. (about 5-10 minutes)
- Students should put the center materials back in place for the next group.
- Students should have a place to put their finished and unfinished work.