

Natural Learning Opportunities

for Infants, Toddlers, and Preschoolers

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Promoting and enhancing child behavior and development are primary goals of early intervention and preschool program practices (Dunst, 1996). Theory and research indicate that children's

development occurs when they experience learning opportunities having development-enhancing qualities (Bronfenbrenner, 1992). Many of these opportunities occur as part of daily living, child and family routines, family rituals, and family and community celebrations and traditions (Göncü, 1999). The everyday life experiences of a developing child can either be planned or can happen serendipitously. Formally planned learning opportunities have been the foundation of

early intervention and early childhood special education (e.g., Guralnick, 1997). Recent legislation and research suggest an expanded perspective on natural learning environments that uses everyday family and community life as sources of children's learning opportunities. *Natural learning environments* are the everyday experiences, events, and places that are sources of children's learning opportunities, promoting and enhancing behavioral and developmental competencies (Dunst & Bruder, 1999a).

The material and methods described in this article come from "lessons learned" by the Increasing Children's Learning Opportunities Through Families and Communities Early Childhood Research Institute (Dunst & Bruder, 1999b). Institute staff have been identifying and cataloging naturally occurring learning opportunities experienced by



children from birth to six years of age who have identified disabilities and delays or conditions placing them at risk for developmental delays, as well as children who are typically developing. Institute staff are also engaging children in learning opportunities in natural environments and both identifying and evaluating the development-enhancing qualities and consequences of these kinds of experiences. This article provides practitioners a framework for using everyday family and community learning activities as a way of increasing learning opportunities for infants, toddlers, and preschoolers.

This article is divided into four steps. Step 1 describes a simple procedure for identifying the many sources of children's learning opportunities occurring as part of family and community life. Step 2 illustrates how a family and practitioner can work together to choose natural learning environments as sources of learning opportunities. Step 3 explains how to use children's interests for involving them in everyday learning opportunities. Step 4 describes how an intervention plan is developed for increasing children's learning opportunities in the context of everyday family and community life.

Children's Everyday Learning Opportunities

Children's everyday lives include many different kinds of learning

experiences and opportunities. Figure 1 shows one way of thinking about learning opportunities occurring in a child's family, community, and early childhood program(s). The family context includes a mix of people and places that provide many different kinds of child learning opportunities such as eating during meal times, splashing water during bath time, listening to stories, and learning greeting skills at family gatherings. Similar kinds of opportunities occur in the community context, and include experiences such as greeting a friend on a neighborhood walk, playing in a sandbox at a park, face painting at a festival, and petting and feeding animals at a nature center. The early childhood context includes the learning experiences provided in childcare programs, early intervention and preschool programs, and other early childhood programs. The overlapping parts of the circles indicate that similar kinds of learning experiences occur in different contexts. Our

Institute is focusing on family and community life as sources of young children's learning opportunities to highlight an expanded perspective of early childhood intervention practices.

Research and practice (Dunst, in press; Göncü, 1999; Trivette, Dunst, & Deal, 1997; Umstead, Boyd, & Dunst, 1995) indicate that young children with and without disabilities and delays participate in many different kinds of natural *social* and *nonsocial* learning environments daily, on certain days of the week, at different times of the year, and as part of different kinds of family and community celebrations and traditions (see www.puckett.org/childlearn). Research and practice also tell us that natural learning environments are the everyday activities children experience that help them learn cultural roles, expectations, and desired behaviors (Göncü, 1999).

The learning activities that occur in natural environments can be either preplanned (with specific

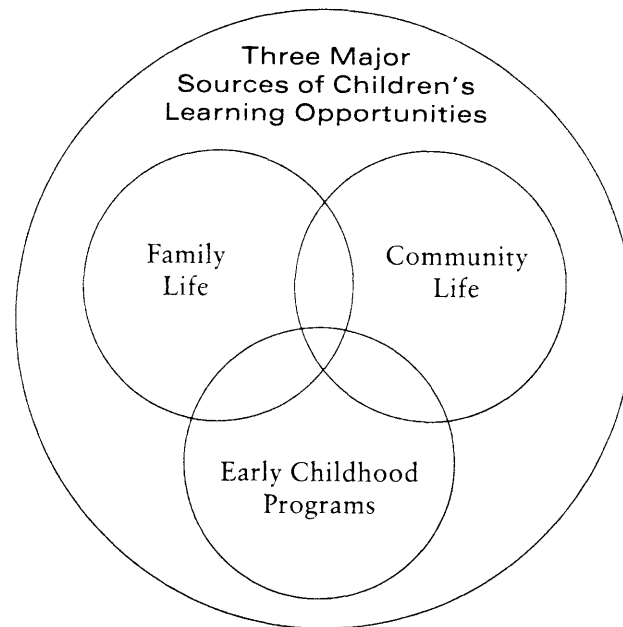


Figure 1

goals and purposes) or can include opportunities and experiences that do not have predetermined goals and purposes. Library story times, baby exercise classes, and swimming lessons are examples of planned learning activities. Serendipitous learning activities often occur by being in the “right place at the right time.” These include such activities as getting to play with stones by going along to a baseball game with an older sibling, helping put food in a shopping cart during a visit to the supermarket, and playing on a piano keyboard while visiting a family friend’s house. Both kinds of learning opportunities are likely to include experiences that have development-enhancing qualities and effects.

Sources of Children’s Learning Opportunities

We conducted two surveys—one on family life and the other on community life—to identify and categorize sources of everyday activities providing young children learning opportunities (Dunst & Hamby, 1999a, 1999b; Dunst, Hamby, Trivette, Raab, & Bruder, in press). Each survey included 50 different kinds of activity settings and sources of learning opportunities. The items were identified from an extensive literature review with an emphasis on activity settings occurring in families and in communities representing the many different racial, ethnic, and cultural backgrounds of families in the United States and its

jurisdictions. Survey participants (N=3200+) were from 48 states, Puerto Rico, and Yap in Micronesia; their children’s ages ranged from birth to six years; and the children were equally divided in terms of having an identifiable disability/delay or being at risk for poor developmental outcomes. (The reader is referred to Dunst et al. [in press] for a more complete description of the sample and survey procedures.)

Step 1: Identifying Sources of Learning Opportunities

Findings from the surveys indicated that family and community life were sources of 22 kinds of natural learning environments. Table 1 lists these sources of family and community learning environments, and includes a few examples of activities in each category. The Table is useful as a framework for making lists of everyday activities occurring as part of family and community life. Developing a *profile* of an individual child and family’s natural learning environments is accomplished by:

- Asking a family to list different activities that happen in each category for their family,
- Identifying the activities in which the child is typically a participant, and
- Identifying activities that could provide the child with new learning opportunities.

Most families find this process especially helpful for identifying activities that already provide or

could provide their children learning opportunities. Don’t worry if an activity relates to more than one category. Making a child and family’s list as complete as possible is more important than struggling with the categories. Parents who have done this exercise are often surprised at the richness of their lives.

Everyday Natural Learning Opportunities

Other research we have conducted has focused on detailed descriptions of the natural learning environments and learning opportunities among children of families from diverse backgrounds. More than 200 families in eight states were visited for four to six months in order to identify the make-up of individual children’s learning opportunities and experiences (Dunst, Bruder, Trivette, Raab, & McLean, 1998). The families were carefully recruited to be sure they had diverse cultural, ethnic, and social economic backgrounds; and varied according to parent and child ages (birth to six), child diagnosis and severity of disability, and place of residence.

A useful finding from these studies was the relationship between physical locations, sources of learning activities (natural learning environments), and learning opportunities. Simply stated, different places are sources of multiple kinds of natural learning environments, and any one natural learning environment is the source of many different kinds of learning opportunities. For

Table 1: Family (Home) and Community Natural Learning Environments and Sources of Children's Learning Opportunities

Family Settings (Examples)	Community Settings (Examples)
<i>Family Routines</i> (cooking, food shopping, animal care)	<i>Family Excursions</i> (running errands, car or bus rides, weekend chores)
<i>Parenting Routines</i> (child's bedtime and bath time)	<i>Family Outings</i> (shopping, eating out, visiting friends)
<i>Child Routines</i> (brushing teeth, dressing, eating)	<i>Play Activities</i> (outdoor playgrounds, indoor playlands)
<i>Literacy Activities</i> (looking at books, listening to stories, reading)	<i>Community Activities</i> (libraries, children's fairs, festivals)
<i>Play Activities</i> (drawing, lap games, playing with toys)	<i>Recreation Activities</i> (horseback riding, swimming, sledding)
<i>Physical Play</i> (roughhousing, ball games, swimming)	<i>Children's Attractions</i> (petting zoos, nature centers, pet stores)
<i>Entertainment Activities</i> (dancing, singing, watching TV)	<i>Art/Entertainment Activities</i> (children's theater, storytellers, music activities)
<i>Family Rituals</i> (family talks, spiritual readings, saying grace at meals)	<i>Church/Religious Activities</i> (Sunday school, church services)

example, a kitchen table is a place that can provide a child opportunities such as listening to others talk, "asking" for a drink, learning to eat with a spoon, playing with toys on the floor or table, and "drawing" with crayons. Likewise, a playground is a place that can provide a child opportunities such as playing in a sandbox, climbing on a jungle gym, letting stones roll down a slide, digging in dirt, and dropping bread crumbs into a duck pond.

Figure 2 (see page 22) shows the relationship between community locations, natural community learning environments, and learning opportunities for a two-year-old boy with cerebral palsy living in Hawaii. The child was functioning at about a six- to eight-month developmental level at the time we began working with the family. The triangular representation of

this child's everyday community activity nicely illustrates how locations are sources of natural learning environments, and how natural learning environments are sources of learning opportunities. This kind of everyday life mapping is easily done for family or community life or a combination of both (see Dunst, in press).

Step 2: Identifying Natural Learning Opportunities

Step 1 will likely produce a picture of sources of children's learning opportunities that is a mix of places, settings, activities, and experiences. Almost without exception, parents have found everyday activity mapping an enjoyable and useful process because it emphasizes the positive aspects of family and community life. A lesson learned from our

research and practice is that increasing learning opportunities is best accomplished by promoting child participation in family and community activities (natural learning environments) that afford children many different kinds of learning opportunities. The natural learning environments used for increasing a child's learning opportunities is accomplished by taking the information obtained in Step 1 and:

- Identifying the natural learning environments that occur or could occur often in different settings, and
- Selecting the natural learning environments that provide or could provide lots of learning opportunities.

You want to identify natural learning environments (sources of

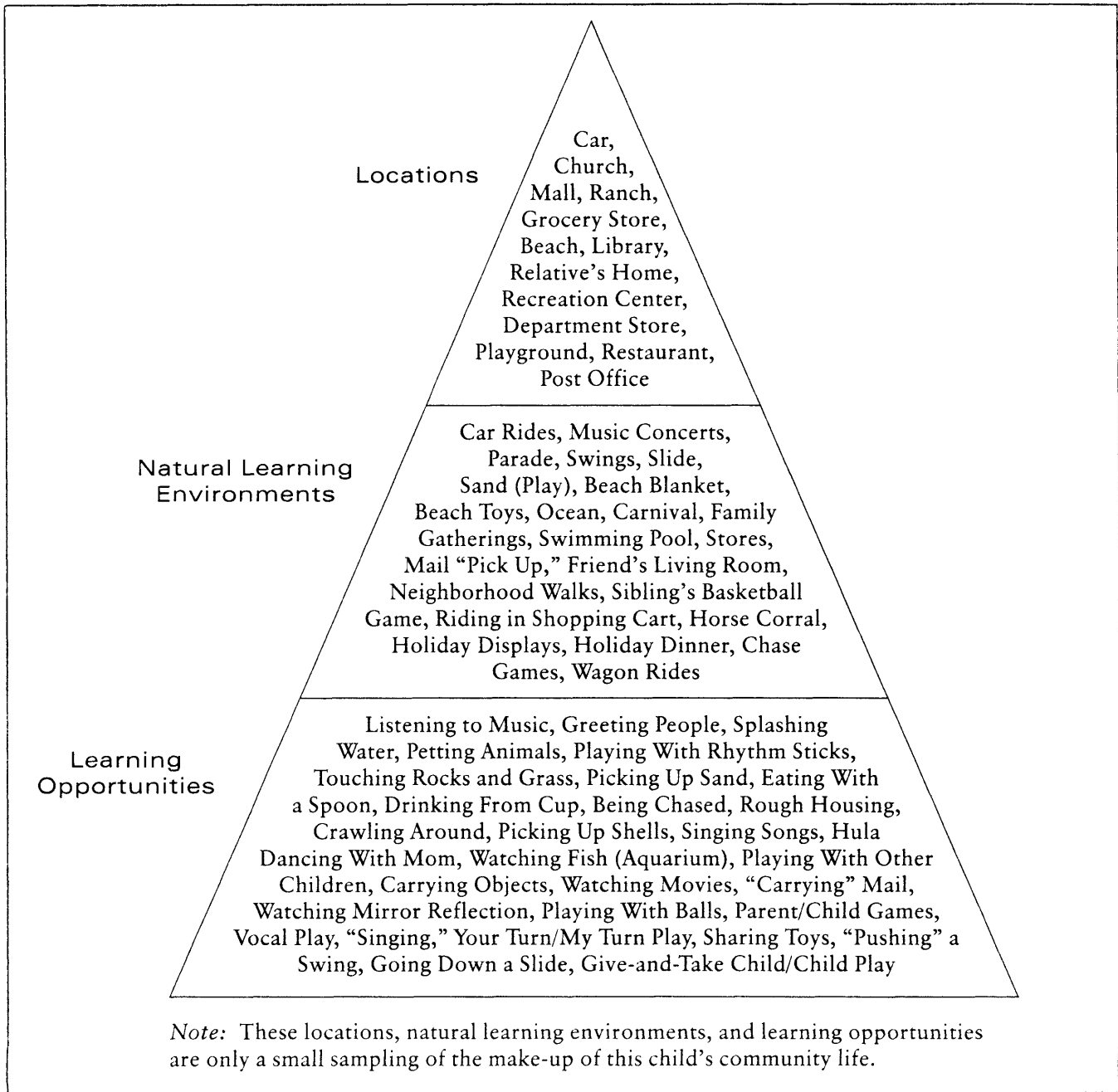


Figure 2: Locations as Sources of Natural Learning Environments and Natural Learning Environments as Sources of Children's Learning Opportunities

learning opportunities) and not specific learning opportunities. This may seem odd at first, but it will become second nature as children's participation in natural learning environments provides them multiple kinds of learning opportunities.

Development-Enhancing Learning Opportunities

Everyday natural learning opportunities having development-instigating and development-enhancing qualities are ones characterized by the "flow of influences" shown in Figure 3. Learning activities that are development-instigating are both *interesting* and *engaging* to a child. Activities that are development-enhancing both strengthen and promote child *competence* and a *sense of mastery* (motivation). Involving children in natural learning environments that are interesting provides opportunities to express competence, which sets in motion a cycle of mutually reinforcing effects that make learning enjoyable and which makes child-initiated learning possible (Wolery & Sainato, 1996). Research has found that learning opportunities that have the four qualities shown in Figure 3 are associated with different kinds of child benefits (see Dunst, in press).

Step 3: Interest-Based Children's Learning

A lesson learned from research and practice using natural learning environments as sources of learning opportunities is that interest-based learning has especially positive benefits. Children's interests are often overlooked as a factor contributing to children's learning (Guberman, 1999; Nelson, 1999). As practitioners well know, not all learning activities are interesting to children. Involving children in natural learning environments that are interesting almost guarantees that children will benefit from the learning opportunities. Of all the natural learning environments identified in Step 2, the ones that are most interesting to the child are used as the primary sources of learning opportunities. You can identify

these by asking a child's parent(s) the following kinds of questions:

- What gets the child excited?
- What makes the child laugh and smile?
- What does the child especially work hard at doing?
- What activities does the child enjoy doing?
- What gets and keeps the child's attention?

Learning opportunities that are engaging and exciting should be a focus for selecting natural learning environments. You may need to have a child participate in some natural learning environments to determine if the activities afforded are interesting to the child. Experimenting is a good way of determining which natural learning environments are likely to be the best sources of learning opportunities.

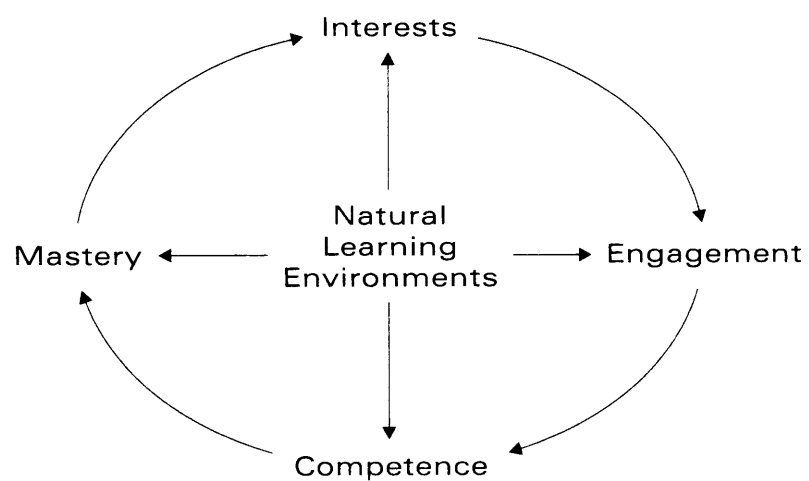


Figure 3: Natural Learning Environments as a Context of Children's Expressions of Interest, Engagement, Competence, and Mastery

Activity Setting Intervention Plan

A lesson learned from an intervention study promoting child participation in natural learning environments was that a simple reminder was sufficient for increasing children’s learning opportunities in natural learning environments. Figure 4 shows parts of a completed plan that can be used for pulling together all the information from Steps 1, 2, and 3.

Step 4: Increasing Learning Opportunities

Parents and other caregivers report that the kind of plan shown in Figure 4 is useful for increasing interest-based children’s learning opportunities. They also have said this kind of *intervention plan* helps them remember to engage their children in different kinds of learning opportunities. The plan is kept purposively simple so it can be used as a way of increasing a child’s natural learning opportuni-

ties matching his or her interests. A parent and practitioner generally develop the plan by recording:

- Location of natural learning environments,
- Natural learning environments,
- Days the child will participate in the natural learning environments,
- Learning opportunities afforded by the natural learning environments, and
- Child interests promoting child learning and development.

Figure 4

Natural Learning Environments Intervention Plan				
Parent’s Name _____		Child’s Name _____		
Interventionist _____		Date _____		
Location	Natural Learning Environment	Day(s)	Learning Opportunity	Child Interest
Backyard	Swimming pool	(M) (T) (W) (T) (F) (S) (S)	Use arms to splash	Likes water
Park	Going on swing	(M) T W T (F) (S) S	Making sounds	Movement excites child
Beach	Playing in sand	M T W T F (S) (S)	Moving arms	Likes feel of sand
Car	Car rides	(M) (T) (W) (T) (F) (S) (S)	Making sounds to music	Likes music
Church	Play group	M T (W) T F S (S)	Taking turns playing with toys	Excited by other children
Driveway	Riding in wagon	(M) (T) (W) (T) (F) (S) (S)	Vocalizing for a push	Likes being part of social play
Ranch	Horse corral	M T W T F (S) S	Petting horses	Likes animals
Restaurant	Eating food	(M) T (W) T (F) S S	Drinking from cup	Tries as hard as he can to take a drink
Grocery store	Shopping cart	M (T) W (T) F (S) S	Picking things from shelf	Likes “helping” mom

Note: The learning opportunity afforded by each natural learning environment is but a single example of a much larger number of opportunities.

Our research and practice tells us that this kind of plan serves as a reminder of what to do, when to do it, and which child interests are likely to promote child participation in the natural learning environments.

Conclusion

Our understanding of the kinds of natural learning environments that occur as part of family and community life provides a basis for broadening the meaning of early intervention and early childhood education. Research we as well as others have conducted (see Dunst, in press; Göncü, 1999) indicates that different kinds of child abilities are associated with participation in different kinds of natural learning environments. Yet to be published findings from our Institute illustrate how natural learning environments and child interests combine to strengthen and promote child competence.

Two main things can be said about learning in natural environments. First, when a child's participation in natural environments provides learning opportunities having development-enhancing consequences, the learning opportunities can be said to have functioned as early intervention and early childhood education. Second, learning in the

context of natural environments ought to be a practice of choice in those instances where the development-enhancing qualities of natural learning environments are known and therefore can be used as a basis for optimizing child benefits. What is especially appealing about using natural learning environments for promoting and enhancing child competence is that these sources of children's learning opportunities are literally everywhere in a child's family and community.

Notes

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