

Hilltop Children's Center
Building on the wonders of childhood

How We Grow Curriculum at Hilltop

Our unique approach to planning for and extending children's learning is a hallmark of our program, setting us apart from many other child care centers. This approach to curriculum, called "pedagogical documentation," invites teachers to be researchers, actively engaged in a process of observation, analysis, and planning.

What is "pedagogical documentation?"

Pedagogical documentation stands in contrast to traditional curriculum planning, in which teachers make curriculum plans weeks or even months in advance. With this traditional approach, teachers often base their curriculum plans on themes such as transportation or dinosaurs, then schedule lots of games, stories, songs, and crafts related to the weekly or monthly theme. Typically, teachers cycle through these themes year after year; they are general plans, not designed for any particular group of children or any particular moment in time.

Our intention at Hilltop is to grow curriculum that honors the particular undertakings of particular children. In our approach, called "emergent" or "Reggio-influenced" curriculum or "pedagogical documentation," teachers build curriculum around children's pursuits, developmental themes, and questions. We pay close attention to children's play, taking notes and photographs and making audio or video recordings of what we observe and hear. We study our notes, photos, and recordings during our weekly teaching team meetings and during our individual planning time to learn about the developmental themes embedded in the children's play. Then, we extend children's exploration of these developmental themes by inviting them into carefully-planned experiences and by adding materials to the classroom that deepen or challenge their thinking. Our curriculum planning grows from the questions, "What is important to these particular children right now? What do they need from us to dig more deeply into their questions or pursuits?"

In our planning, we aim to uncover the questions and developmental themes that lie underneath children's play. We're less interested in teaching children information and facts than we are in facilitating their exploration of the powerful themes of childhood: what it means to be a friend, for example, or how rule-making and rule-following happen. We also are committed to cultivating in children the dispositions of life-long learners: curiosity and perseverance, for example, and eagerness to collaborate, to challenge and to be challenged. In our planning, we especially prioritize the four goals of anti-bias education:

- Nurture a healthy self-concept and group identity for each child;

- Support each child’s comfortable, empathic interaction with others, and ease with the ways in which people are similar and different;
- Encourage children’s critical thinking about bias and injustice;
- Facilitate action by the children to address unfairness.

The practice of pedagogical documentation is invigorating work for teachers, and calls us to be critical and creative thinkers. Pedagogical documentation invites us to engage deeply with the children as we observe, take notes, think with co-teachers and with families about the underlying developmental themes, and then offer the children invitations to go deeper with their pursuits.

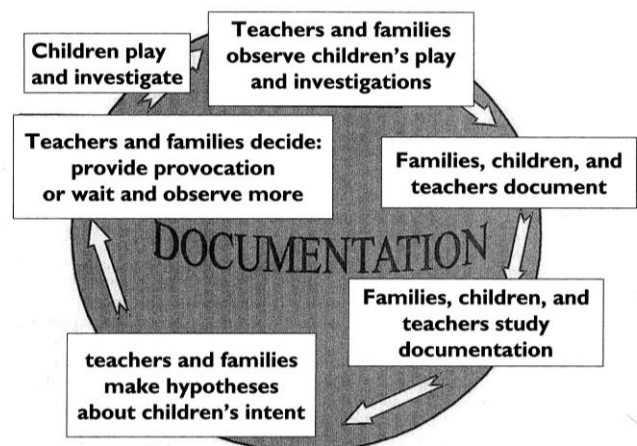
One misunderstanding about an emergent approach to curriculum is that teachers spend their days just “hanging out” with the children while they play. Our work as teachers is quite active: we build and play alongside the children, watching for moments when they need our help with a conflict or a problem. We look for opportunities to extend the children’s play by offering materials or by asking a question. We take photos and notes to share with co-teachers, with families, and, importantly, with the children.

How does curriculum planning happen?

We cycle through several steps as we plan curriculum based on our observations, reflections, and hypotheses.

- We observe the children’s play and listen to their conversations carefully. We take notes and photos, make sketches and flow charts, and make audio and video recordings.
- We use our weekly team meetings to discuss our observations of children’s play and to hypothesize about the themes and questions underneath their play. And we talk with and write to families to share our observations and to invite them to engage with us in our meaning-making about the children’s play.
- We plan next steps aimed at extending and sustaining the children’s pursuits. Teachers and families consider what materials we could add to the classroom, how we might participate in the children’s play to deepen their exploration, what art media we might offer to invite the children to take new perspectives or to revise their thinking, and how we can use our notes and photos to help the children revisit and extend their play.
- We offer our planned next steps and then watch and listen to the children as they engage with those materials and experiences. We make notes about our observations and take our observations back to our co-teachers and to the children’s families for another cycle of reflection, analysis, and planning.

This planning process becomes a spiral that carries teachers and children more and more deeply into investigation, collaboration, and relationship. This sketch captures the cycle of pedagogical documentation; it is adapted from Pam Oken-Wright and Marty Gravett, in *Teaching and Learning: Collaborative Exploration of the Reggio Emilia Approach*, edited by Victoria R. Fu, Andrew J. Stremmel, and Lynn T. Hill.



Deb Curtis and Margie Carter call us to take up this work with passion and joy:

“Children can awaken in us an understanding of what it means to be inventive, engaged, delighted, and determined to rearrange the world. If we listen to and watch them closely, they will teach us to be more observant, inquisitive, and responsive in our work and in our lives.

“It isn’t easy to pay attention to children in this way. So much conspires to take us in other directions . . . The daily crush of tasks and pleas for attention is enormous. Our requirements and paperwork systems, our schedules and meetings and learning goals, can easily push childhood out of the picture . . .

“If we begin to value who children are, not just what we want them to be, a shift happens in the way we think about learning and teaching. Our jobs become more engaging and fulfilling. We also begin to envision a larger purpose for our profession—making childhood visible and valued for the ways in which it can enrich our humanity and contribute to our collective identity.”

The Art of Awareness: How Observation Can Transform Your Teaching; Redleaf Press, 2000.