How does one follow the lead of the child?

By respecting that young children need to explore, discover, and construct their own learning and understanding, and by allowing them opportunities to do so.

Although “following the lead of the child” focuses on child-initiated learning, this approach does not rely on chance. Adults must still “set the stage” with stimulating environments enriched with materials that are both developmentally and individually appropriate. Adults need to serve as guides, facilitators, and scaffolds. Just remember that it is very important that many activities should follow the lead of the child rather than the lead of the adult. In other words, many of the activities that children engage in should be child-initiated rather than teacher-directed.

It’s about children’s choices: Creating a physical learning environment that is appropriate to the needs and abilities of young children enables them to...

- follow through on their own interests,
- try out their ideas, and
- seek answers to their questions.

Child-sized furnishings, storage and display arranged in developmentally appropriate learning/play centers, and safe, authentic educational materials give children the means to make selections and to follow their interests independently.

It’s about adults’ observations: Tuning in to the choices children make, listening to their comments, and watching the way they interact with their world give adults clues about what catches the children’s interests. Planning activities around topics that children find intriguing increases their engagement and strengthens the learning that takes place.

It’s about everyone’s involvement: Interacting with children, being an active participant in their learning, and taking part in their play help the adult be an informed decision maker. It is much easier to get a sense of what is really happening when the adult is engaged with the children and sharing their experiences instead of acting as an on-looker or an instructor.

It’s about conversation: In language and conversation, adults can also follow the lead of the child. Early infant/toddler vocalization elicits adult response in a “game of language” which builds interconnections between spoken and receptive language. This two-way communication helps children understand the meaning and usefulness of words and consequently builds early literacy skills. It also mirrors a positive reaction to children’s attempts to communicate and establishes secure and pleasant relationships in their lives. Children feel listened to, and they gain a foundation of confidence which supports success in further communication. They feel more free to express opinions and ask questions. And they are more likely to listen to others.
Important guidelines to remember

- When selecting topics and themes for integrated learning, choose those that match the children’s interests.
- Ask the children what they would like to find out about the topic, and use this information to tailor a theme to their interests.
- Provide a choice of materials and the freedom to adapt activities to allow children mastery over their own learning.
- Be prepared to stop or to follow a new path as children’s interest in an activity or topic changes.
- Make certain that the focus is always on children’s involvement and their learning – not on the activity itself.
- Allow for individual variations among children in their attention spans and levels of curiosity.
- Ask open-ended questions that encourage children to think and to respond with their own creative answers.
- Provide sufficient time for “free play” to give children opportunities to choose and explore activities of particular significance to them.
- **When you allow them to take the lead...**
  - children learn to value their own interests.
  - children learn to make informed choices.
  - children learn to trust their instincts.
  - children learn respect for themselves!