Why Are Children Playing?
For young children, play and work involve the same actions: interacting with people, manipulating objects, and making discoveries that help make sense of the world. Learning happens naturally through play. Play is the work of children. For school success, children must develop physically, mentally, emotionally, socially, and creatively. Play is a crucial part of this development of the whole child.

What Is the Housekeeping Center?
The housekeeping center is an area of the classroom with an array of props designed to be like home. Because family and home are the largest part of what children know of their world, they spend much time imitating the things they see there. Providing realistic play props of familiar objects encourages play that helps children progress from solitary role playing to sharing, and eventually to understanding the benefits of working together. The housekeeping center includes items such as play furniture, dishes, pretend food, mirrors, dress-up clothes, telephones, toy appliances, and career props.

What Are Children Learning?
The housekeeping center provides an ideal setting for social and emotional development. In this favorite area of the classroom, children learn valuable skills such as taking turns, playing cooperatively with others, and expressing appropriate emotions. Children gain important interpersonal skills as they observe relationships and acquire an understanding of the feelings of others. Children learn caring as they tend to baby dolls. They learn to negotiate with others when they choose who will be the mom, the child, or the storekeeper as they set up play. They come to understand and respect others as they play with props from diverse cultures.

Because of the social nature of “playing house,” this center encourages the development of language and communication skills. Children can practice both receptive skills (the listening and observing needed to take in and understand information) and expressive skills (the speech and expressions needed to give information). As they pretend talk on telephones, set up play scenarios, or describe symptoms to the “doctor,” they are learning many different and subtle forms of oral communication.

Play in the housekeeping center provides practice with print skills as well. Young children are taking in printed information as they “read” labels on pretend food or numbers on play phones. When children make collage menus or scribble-write shopping lists, they are learning to give information in printed form.
As they play in the housekeeping center, children are refining everyday life skills. When wearing dress-ups, they may practice snapping, zipping, buttoning, and putting on and removing clothes. When preparing meals for pretend families, they are using the same table-setting skills that are used in preparing the table for real meals.

Through play with career props, children learn to recognize and become familiar with real-life roles of the adults in their world. As they play daddy, police officer, or veterinarian, they are trying on the lives of familiar people – their clothes, their work, their feelings, their words. In imitating what they see around them – the people and the situations – children are busy building knowledge of themselves and others as they also build confidence and self-esteem.

The housekeeping center helps young children solve problems and develop creative-thinking skills while also strengthening their self-image. Opportunities to solve problems independently are naturally presented as children decide what to include in a pretend store, how many to set the table for, or which pot to cook “peas” in. Children are thinking creatively as they turn scarves into princess dresses or use the space under a table as a tent or a dog house. The housekeeping center is a fun, safe place in which to problem-solve without fear of making mistakes.

What Can You Do to Encourage Children’s Learning?

• Set up a housekeeping center that includes at minimum some kitchen equipment, a table with chairs, play food and dishes, dolls that represent the ethnic diversity of the children, some clothes and accessories for the dolls, child-sized dress-ups, and play phones. Make available an adequate amount of play props to avoid conflict and to support imaginative role playing.

• Encourage successful play by selecting sturdy equipment. Kitchen units should be safely constructed to avoid tip or pinch hazards. They should be appropriately sized for the children. Realistic features like knobs that really turn add to the fun and playability and provide opportunities to explore language and basic concepts. “The soup’s too cold. Turn up the heat.” “You forgot to turn the water off!” “Is the oven door open?”

• Select materials that encourage successful experiences and feelings of competency. Make sure doll clothes and dress-ups are easy for children to manipulate independently. Fabric dolls, doll clothes, dress-ups, and fabric play hats should all be machine washable and dryable.

• Add soft, home-like elements such as carpets, cushions and pillows, tablecloths or place mats, plastic vases, or other decorative objects. Be sure to include items that reflect the children’s home cultures.

• Have props available that can be rotated in and out as the role of the housekeeping center changes. Play materials such as a pretend cash register and shopping baskets, a doctor’s kit, or a toy tool box can expand the play opportunities as children’s interests evolve and change.
• Always include props that support literacy. Bring in old magazines and telephone books. Set out a variety of papers and writing implements to encourage writing lists, menus, or letters. Store signs, restaurant checks, and write-on/wipe-off boards with markers help set the stage for literacy activities through role play.

• Join in the play. Interact with the children as they role play. Order from their restaurant or shop at their store. Let the children take the lead role. The adult’s place is to play a supporting role. If play starts to drop off, a well-timed open-ended question may get it started again. “What would happen if you took your baby on a trip?” “I want to celebrate at your restaurant. What can you make for me that is special?”

• Learning in all curriculum areas is possible in the housekeeping center when children are given the right equipment and materials and are allowed the time and freedom to interact and discover as they play.

A Publication of the Environments Professional Group
The Environments Professional Group is a team of educators and designers who come together to make the connection between the needs of early childhood programs and the developmentally appropriate products that meet these needs.

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