Philosophy of Informal Education

The philosophy of The Learning Tree is simple: Learning is effective when each child works on his success level in an atmosphere which encourages learning without the pressure that can lead to frustration.

With the great individual differences in children two to six years of age, provisions for diversity are imperative and can be achieved most effectively by utilizing an open classroom environment. This means that many levels of learning are happening at the same time, the teachers' plans can be flexible to capitalize on the children's interests and questions, and the atmosphere is informal, with activity occurring in all or most of the Learning Centers. These centers are supplied with equipment and materials which have inherent learning possibilities. There is a minimum of appropriate rules if necessary to set boundaries for the activities and behavior of the children.

The important factors in The Learning Tree's concept of informal learning are individualization, independent learning, and the arrangement of the environment into Learning Centers. To be effective, this concept must be supported by the parents' and teachers' understanding of the developmental processes of young children.

Child Development

An informal program requires that learning experiences be based on the developmental characteristics of children. The program at The Learning Tree is based on characteristics of children two through six.

A basic principle of child development is that each child is a unique human being. He grows and learns at his own rate and own level of functioning, as well as his own set of interests. The program must be flexible enough to help each child be a successful learning, allowing for a wide range of learning levels and rates.

Creativity

Children create in many ways. They dictate or print their own stories, plays and poems. They make their own books. They invent their own dances, games and songs, as well as pictures, masks, and other crafts. One goal of The Learning Tree is to provide opportunities for the children to find outlets for expressing their feelings and fantasies creatively. A variety of materials are supplied with which children are encouraged to experiment and create. Large blocks of time allow opportunities to work out an idea. And whether the final product is complicated or simple it is accepted. Importance is placed on the process the child uses in

thinking, planning, experimenting and finally in creating something to his or her own satisfaction. This encouragement of creativity helps improve the child's self expression, interaction and learning ability.

Cultural Awareness

We believe that in order to promote intercultural understanding, a deliberate attempt should be made to help children develop positive feelings and attitudes toward one another. Our goal at The Learning Tree is that children learn to accept all people. This results from their daily experiences with children and families from a number of different ethnic and cultural backgrounds.

The cultural studies presented throughout the year are the beginning of a lifetime of awareness of the richness other cultures add to our society. The lifestyles, folk tales, art, music, foods and customs of each culture are explored. The school environment has artifacts, pictures and many other items to create an atmosphere representing these cultures. Children role-play the folk tales, customs and games they learn. The costumes and cultural items they make are worn in the dramatic activities, which add reality to the role-playing. The dramatizing of roles is one way to begin to understand a culture. Through these experiences, children begin to appreciate the rich diversity of all people. They add to this understanding year by year.

Independent Learning

As a child begins school, he or she is very dependent on adults. As routines and basic skills are learned, the child becomes more independent. A young child's learning is a continuous process of receiving help from adults as needed so that he or she can develop into an independent child.

Independence also means being able to solve one's own problems, knowing that adult help is always available. Problem-solving involves settling disagreements with others, deciding which materials to use for a project, and sharing equipment with other children. To solve a problem, alternative solutions are considered and a choice is made. The results often prove unworkable and another solution must be tried. The more problem-solving experiences children have, the better the judgments they learn to make. The creative activities and the opportunity to make choices at The Learning Tree give the children practice in learning to solve problems and make decisions.

Individualization

The concept of recognizing individual differences is basic to an individual program. Each child begins at his or her own developmental level, learns at his or her own rate, and remains with one activity for as long as he or she can benefit from it. No two children are alike in their levels, their rates, or the amount of time they spend on an activity.

An individualized approach means that each child is working on his or her level of success. A child who is working at his or her level is successful and generally motivated to try new activities. Success indicates to a child that learning is a satisfying activity and that he has the ability to learn. The one-to-one relationship between the child and the adult provides the emotional support and security each child needs at this age. The adult responds to the level of each child, to that child's style of learning and to his or her interests.

The open educational setting makes one-to-one relationships possible. In the open classrooms, teachers facilitate and direct, but not in an obvious manner. The teacher is a skilled observer and listener and is continually making decisions concerning what activities are appropriate.

Discovery Learning

Each center is planned with specific developmental concepts in mind. The environment needs to be structured to allow opportunities for a child to exercise his or her own powers of investigation—seeing, hearing, smelling, touching and manipulating—and in turn to lead the child to the next stage of development. Although the teacher suggests, prods, challenges, stimulates and demands through the planned environment, each child is free to make discoveries, explore skills, initiate ideas, and test his or her abilities. This experience approach promotes individuality and allows the child to gain confidence. Children are never compared with other children and the concept of failure has no place in a discovery learning experience.

Parent Participation

Important parts of a program for young children are open communication and close relationships with parents. Parents must be a part of the experiences of their child in school. Parents' participation in the classroom and on field trips, and in sharing their talents, hobbies and interests helps build a close relationship. An active but informal parents group is a tremendous asset to The Learning Tree's program. Monthly meetings, where parents feel comfortable and free to express themselves, and where they are kept informed of school activities, are social as well as educational. Informal gatherings meet parents' needs by giving them opportunities to discuss problems and topics of interest and to share ideas with other parents and adults. Periodic parent-teacher conferences on the development of a child help parents understand the growth of their child. Parents and teachers can work as partners through participation, meeting and conferences.

Learning Centers

The environment is arranged in Learning Centers. Each center organizes the equipment and materials that relate to one area of interest. The adults help children learn how to use the equipment, how to take care of it and put it away.

Family Living

Home is the world of the young child. Family living centers provide tools for helping children:

- Dramatize life situations
- Play out and try on family roles
- Reveal thoughts and feelings
- Verbalize emotions
- Test and practice relationships with peers

Manipulatives and Games

These help children:

- Fine tune motor development
- Problem solve
- Learn Math concepts
- Learn color recognition
- Learn to sort and match

Nature and Science

Activities that allow children to experiment and discover the world around them help them:

- Discover their relationship to the world
- Become aware of what goes on in the world of nature
- Discover how and why things happen
- Develop an appreciation of their environment

Blocks

These help children:

- Learn shapes, sizes and balance
- Enjoy conversation with others
- Recognize the rights of others
- Exchange ideas
- Share and work with others
- Play imaginatively

Music and Dance

Through music the child:

- Expresses joy, a sense of well-being and thanks
- Finds emotional and physical release
- Is encouraged to express himself
- Develops imagination
- Improves in self-confidence
- Grows in his ability to become a member of a group
- Develops a sense of appreciation for the efforts of others

Art Expression

Creative art work:

- Allows the child to learn who he is and what he can do by putting something of his own thought, imagination and ideas into what he is making
- Extends learning through expression
- Develops imagination and organizational skills
- Is the child's own
- Cannot, by definition, have "mistakes"

Books and Pictures

These provide opportunities for the child to:

- Explore the world of ideas
- Identify with other people
- Enjoy new ideas and interests
- Develop listening skills
- Increase attention span
- Expand vocabulary

Language Development

These activities:

- Promote growth and communication skills
- Develop listening
- Develop visual discrimination
- Provide opportunities to express ideas and thoughts
- Help build a desire and foundation for reading
- Expand learning experiences through good literature

Woodworking

This center:

- Develops large and small muscles
- Improves hand-eye coordination
- Releases tension (hammering and sawing)
- Gives children a feeling of accomplishment