

Core Content Areas

1. Literacy

Literacy is one of the determining factors in children's success in school and in life. Thus, it is critical to begin early to lay a solid foundation of literacy skills. In a YMCA early childhood classroom, literacy includes seven components: increased vocabulary and knowledge; phonological awareness; knowledge of print, letters, and words; comprehension; understanding of books and other texts; and literacy as a sense of enjoyment. In a Y program, you'll find staff reading to children, children leafing through books, and adults and children talking about what they are reading.

2. Mathematics

Preschool children are fascinated by numbers and measurements, comparisons and logic. There are multiple opportunities in a day for children to build their competence in mathematics. Math includes numbers concepts; patterns and relationships; geometry and spatial sense; measurement; and data collection, organization, and representation. In a YMCA early childhood program, you'll find children using a variety of math-related toys, tools, and games. You'll hear children counting, and observe them manipulating measurements and sorting and classifying collections.

3. Science

Young children love science and learning about the world around them. In an early childhood program, science generally falls into three categories: 1) physical science: physical properties such as weight, shape, size, color and temperature; 2) life science: living things such as plants and animals; and 3) earth science: the natural world, sky and weather. In a YMCA early childhood program, you'll find a place of discovery where children can experiment and explore. You'll see staff talking about the world around them, introducing scientific ideas to children, and responding to and expanding upon children's observations.

4. Social Studies

Children are social beings and engage with their families, communities and the world around them everyday. In an early childhood program, social studies is the study of people and how they relate to spaces and geography, how they live, the environment around them and past events. In a YMCA early childhood program, you'll find staff introducing social-related concepts to children in large and small groups. You'll find children trying on different roles in the dramatic play corner, and you'll find children and adults taking responsibility for their environment by recycling, for example. We also engage in monthly community service activities to raise awareness of their community and the ways they can give back.

5. Arts

Art is designing, creating and exploring. Through art, children learn to express themselves and find meaning in the world around them. Art in early childhood programs includes dance, music, theater and visual arts. In a YMCA, you'll find children and adults listening to, moving to and making music. You're likely to see a variety of art materials including paints, markers, crayons,

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clay, paper and glue. You might even find young children participating in puppet shows or performing skits or stories they've read. A YMCA arts specialist may be working with the youth to take their art skills to a higher level.

6. Technology

The more children interact with their environment, the more they'll likely encounter technology. Technology is the study of tools, machines, materials, techniques and sources of power that make work easier and solve problems. In a YMCA early childhood, you'll find children using a variety of tools, both for play and for real. It's not uncommon to see children as young as 3 and 4 using a computer. In the dramatic play corner, you're likely to see children using cell phones to communicate cameras to capture people and events, radios and music players to listen to their favorite tunes or PDAs to schedule their weekly appointments.

7. Healthy Habits

Given increased concerns about the health of Americans, it's critical to help young children develop (and feel passionate about) lifelong healthy habits. Cultivating healthy habits in early childhood falls into three key areas: nutritional choices, physical activity, and physical and personal safety. Most important is the healthy environment that adults design and organize for children. In a YMCA early childhood program, you'll find staff modeling healthy eating and activity habits. You're likely to see children enjoying a variety of healthy foods, asking for water as their preferred beverage and discussing the impact of healthy foods on their growing bodies. You will find children engaged in the fun, safe and rigorous activities in the gym and pool, on the playground and in the classroom.

8. Social, Moral and Spiritual Development

The latest research in early brain development highlights the importance of developing connectedness with others. It's through these connections that children develop a foundation for spiritual and moral growth and social skills. In a YMCA early childhood program, you'll find staff demonstrating, teaching and celebrating the YMCA character development values of caring, honesty, respect and responsibility. You'll find children playing and talking with friends and developing a foundation for positive relationships. It is also common to see children creating a card for a classmate or relative, singing holiday songs to adults in a nursing home, or cleaning up a nearby park and planting flowers.

Second only to human relationships, a well-planned curriculum helps define a child's experience in a YMCA program. Curriculum affects all aspects of a program: overall quality, parents' perceptions, and the outcomes and benefits of the program for individual children. To ensure that YMCA early childhood programs deliver high-quality activities and interactions, YMCAs have embraced *The Creative Curriculum for Preschool*, developed by Teaching Strategies, Inc. Based in Washington, D.C., Teaching Strategies is committed to improving the quality of early childhood programs by producing curriculum and training materials.

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The Creative Curriculum includes six components:

- The learning environment in which children learn
- Specific needs and interests of children
- Talents, abilities and teaching skills of staff
- Unique needs of a particular YMCA community
- Resources within a YMCA and its surrounding community
- The latest research on how children learn best

Children experience the core components of the preschool curriculum through books, dramatic play, toys and games, art, library, discovery, sand and water, music and movement, cooking, computers, and through activities outdoors and in YMCA pools and gyms.

The specific activities for the core areas of the curriculum take place in one or several of the following contexts, each of which is balanced throughout the day or week:

- **Arrival and Departure Times:** Arrival and departure times are opportunities for staff to engage in meaningful conversation with children and families. Staff greets the family, inquires about the child's life and shares information about the child with parents or guardians
- **Large Group Time:** Activities are designed for large group participation under the leadership of staff. Group times help children experience a sense of belonging and may be used to engage children in discussion, read a story or welcome a visitor.
- **Small Group Time:** Small group activities are designed to teach children about a new topic or skill, and they typically occur in the interest areas. Staff members also use this time to focus their observations on a particular group of children and to document children's learning.
- **Choice Time:** Children have the option of choosing from several activities or interests; choices can range from relatively unstructured activities to staff-designed learning centers (based on children's interests)
- **Transition Times:** These brief periods between activities can provide staff and children with opportunities to reinforce new concepts and skills (e.g., taking direction, assuming responsibility, listening).
- **Outdoors, Gym or Pool:** Children need physical activity and fresh air each day. In YMCA gyms, pools and playgrounds, children are engaged in physical activities and introduced to lifelong sports and exercise such as swimming and running.
- **Meal Times:** Trained staff can turn meal times into learning times by engaging in conversations, introducing topics, and responding to children's inquires and ideas. It is also an opportunity to encourage healthy food choices and teach responsibility through meal preparation and cleanup.