

Unexpected Treasure

How Real and Recycled Objects Inspire Thinking and Learning

To a young child, the world is full of materials to touch, discover, and explore. To find, collect, sort, and use materials is to embark on a special kind of adventure. For adults, gathering materials means rediscovering the richness and beauty in natural, unexpected, and recyclable objects that are all around us, but not often noticed.

—Cathy Weisman Topal and Lella Gandini,
Beautiful Stuff! Learning with Found Materials

One of my favorite things to do is grab a coffee and spend an hour wandering the aisles of a thrift store, appreciating the beauty that lies within. There are so many interesting things to discover, and it's fun to imagine the stories the objects might tell if they could.

During one thrift store visit, my daughter and I came across a bag of delightful decorative spoons. As we examined them, we realized that someone had carefully curated the spoons from many different places, including the coasts of Canada, the southern United States, and even Europe! It was clear that it was once an important collection for someone. My daughter was enamored with the spoons, and she clutched them tightly to her chest. “Momma, these are so beautiful. It’s so sad that these were so special to someone, and now they’ve ended up here!” She was bursting with questions and ideas about them: Who had the spoons belonged to? How long had he collected them? Did he travel to get each one?

One Person’s “Trash” . . .

Young children find beauty and wonder in the most ordinary of objects. They love coming up with stories about, discovering new uses for, and experimenting with interesting combinations of all kinds of materials. After my daughter spent time exploring the spoons—researching the places they came from, using them in a tea party with her friends, and keeping a few special ones for herself—she passed them on for others to enjoy.

In the program where I teach, found objects, recycled items, and natural loose parts are incorporated into all learning areas, and children are free to tinker and play with these materials however they wish to support their imaginative stories. There are very few commercial toys in our classroom. Instead, to reflect the heart, spirit, and diversity of both the children and the wider community, many of the materials are collected or purchased from interesting places like donations



from families, yard sales, and secondhand stores. Because of this, I realized there was no one better to appreciate the rich intricacies of the spoons (the carefully carved pictures, the dangling charms, the looping handles) than my inquisitive group of students.

A few days later, I brought the spoon collection in for the children. I offered them the opportunity to explore the spoons on a table and then use them around the room. At first, most children were excited to hold each one, often noticing things that I hadn't: the gentle way a handle twisted, the funny flamingo on the Florida spoon, and how one even appeared to have a gem encased within it. As I carefully listened to and observed the children, I noticed that these treasures offered so much rich literacy potential. I heard the children read aloud the locations engraved on some spoons and use complex vocabulary to describe what they saw. I witnessed many of them become inspired to sketch the spoons in their journals or ask for books about the plants and birds featured on them so they could research them further. The children engaged in rich conversations with each other and suggested spoons for others in the class ("Elina would like the Kentucky one. It has a little horsey on the end and she loves horses!").

Over the next few days, the children incorporated the spoons into other centers, and I observed math learning explorations emerging in their work. Some children sorted the spoons based on characteristics like those with or without animals. Others lined up the spoons by length or created simple patterns with them. As they used the spoons at the sensory tables, I overheard children counting as they measured sand into bowls or reciting recipes being stirred in the big pot. It was amazing to see just how diverse and rich the experiences that incorporated the spoons were.



Soon, children began sharing their own treasures from home. One child brought in pictures of his uncle's stamp collection. This sparked an interest in how the mail system in our local community works, during which we also explored the numbers printed on stamps and how they correlated to postage costs. Another child spoke about her grandfather's coins, inspiring the children to research currency from around the world. Families also took an interest and shared even more treasures, supporting the children's explorations together at school.

Bringing Treasures into the Classroom

As you integrate found and recycled materials into your own learning space, here are some tips to keep in mind.

Introduce Open-Ended Materials

Unlike many commercial toys that have limited options for play or promote gender stereotypes, open-ended materials (like playdough, blocks, seashells, buttons, spools, and scarves, just to name a few!)

are multifaceted and can be incorporated in a variety of learning centers. The opportunities for play with open-ended materials are as boundless as children's energy and imaginations. Children are active seekers and producers of knowledge, and found and recycled materials offer endless opportunities for them to invent different uses for the same materials over and over, extending their interest and evolving the nature of play over time. Whether new or familiar, children can infuse the open-ended materials with their own ideas, thoughts, and feelings as they become props in their learning and play—a crocheted doily can be a dress for a doll one morning, a flower in a bouquet the next afternoon, and a lily pad for hopping frogs to rest upon the week after that!

Provide Real Objects

Real objects (teacups in the dramatic play area, cooking utensils in the mud kitchen, safety goggles and wrenches in the science area), whether incorporated in intentionally planned provocations or spontaneous exploration and play, invite wonder and discovery. Learners who are encouraged to use objects that they see adults use at home and in the community not only feel empowered, they recognize that their learning is valued and celebrated. As a result, their confidence as capable learners is bolstered while exploring, problem solving, investigating, testing out their theories, and co-constructing knowledge with their peers.

Encourage Reusing and Upcycling

Being environmentally conscious and embracing sustainable living is more important than ever. By reusing found materials or *upcycling*—that is, creatively reusing or repurposing materials to make something new—you can inspire authentic, robust explorations that support the learning and development of the whole child *and* plant the seed for environmentally conscious behaviors and thinking in children and their families. Inspire children to find new and innovative uses for materials in order to stretch their use in the classroom. Families can also be encouraged to engage in similar actions at home and donate materials they no longer need for classroom use.

Reflect Diverse Cultures and Traditions

As an educator, you recognize and value that each child brings her own unique culture, background, and experiences to the classroom. How can you tap into these funds of knowledge to enrich children’s collaborative explorations and learning? How can you have an inclusive classroom that celebrates and reflects the individuality of each child? Found, natural, and recycled objects can inspire children’s creativity as they explore social, family, and cultural practices and traditions together in play situations. For example, in a community where food preparation is important, perhaps cooking utensils and recipe books might be added to the dramatic play center for children to incorporate in their pretend play. Through these interactions, children are supported as they explore and share their own culture and customs and have opportunities to be introduced to customs, languages, and values that might be unfamiliar to them. So that families are represented, you might encourage them to contribute materials for children to play with and explore in the classroom. This will help children see themselves represented in the space and encourage their acceptance of new ideas and ways of looking at the world. Children’s self-confidence will grow as they feel included and recognized for the contributions they can make to the play environment, creating a safe and supportive space for all.

