

Martha Jane Buell  
and Tara M. Sutton

# Weaving a Web with **Children** at the Center

## A New Approach to Emergent Curriculum Planning for Young Preschoolers

IN THE TODDLERS, 2s, AND 3s CLASSROOM in our University of Delaware laboratory preschool, we initiated a successful curriculum development approach—using child-centered webbing. This approach helps us keep the child as the center of our emergent curriculum and in turn helps preservice students in the classroom keep children's interests and needs as the focus of their planning.

### **First, our survey of curriculum planning**

Considering the child's interests and needs in planning curriculum is a mainstay of early care and education. Early on last century, Maria Montessori articulated this idea in her approach to curriculum development. Even before

**Martha Jane Buell**, PhD, is a professor in the Department of Human Development and Family Studies at the University of Delaware in Newark. Her research addresses factors that influence the quality of early care and education of all children, especially for infants and toddlers and children at educational risk.

**Tara M. Sutton**, MS, is a kindergarten teacher in Wilmington, Delaware. Previously, as a master teacher at the University of Delaware Laboratory Preschool, Tara developed a curriculum for children to best match each child's needs and interests.

her, the eighteenth-century philosopher Jean-Jacques Rousseau and others advocated awareness of the child.

At our university preschool, we embraced this child-centered approach to curriculum. We eagerly read and applied Jones and Nimmo's (1994) ideas on the emergent approach to curriculum along with the works of other educators using emergent curriculum in their work with young children. We were inspired by projects mirroring the approaches used in the preschools in Reggio Emilia, Italy, like those described by Wien and colleagues (2002), for example. Likewise, the project approach detailed by Katz and Chard (2000) strongly influenced our direction.

Emergent curriculum builds on the interests of children, is often spontaneous and responsive to the immediate interests of a group of children, and is driven by children's ideas, excitement, information, and questions. The project approach is a structured but flexible framework that includes a set of teaching strategies for guiding children through in-depth studies of real-world topics.

After implementing an emergent curriculum approach in our program, we observed that learning opportunities were indeed richer. They exceeded previous enrichment levels, when our programming had followed a teacher-planned and -directed thematic approach.

### **Next, using thematic and curricular webbing**

Webbing enables teachers to brainstorm and record ideas in an organized way. It is an aspect of the emergent curriculum/project approach we wanted to embrace as we planned our lab preschool curriculum (Katz & Chard 2000).

In thematic webbing, teachers research and record topic areas; in curriculum webbing, they use the thematic web as a reference when developing activities related to a theme. In the past, our teaching staff constructed thematic webs by selecting a topic of interest to children as the center of the web. For example, for two days we had observed the children talking about and pretending to drive fire trucks on the playground. From this topic—fire trucks—we generated related ideas, grouped them around the core topic, and then used them to plan and organize activities. We felt that these ancillary ideas

**Webbing enables teachers to brainstorm and record ideas in an organized way.**

and the activities they generated expanded the learning opportunities for children.

Other times, we generated webs based on areas of the curriculum, such as manipulatives, art, outdoor time, and dramatic play. With this approach, we took the core idea, in this case fire trucks, and generated activities for each curriculum area that would support learning around the theme.

### Problems that arose

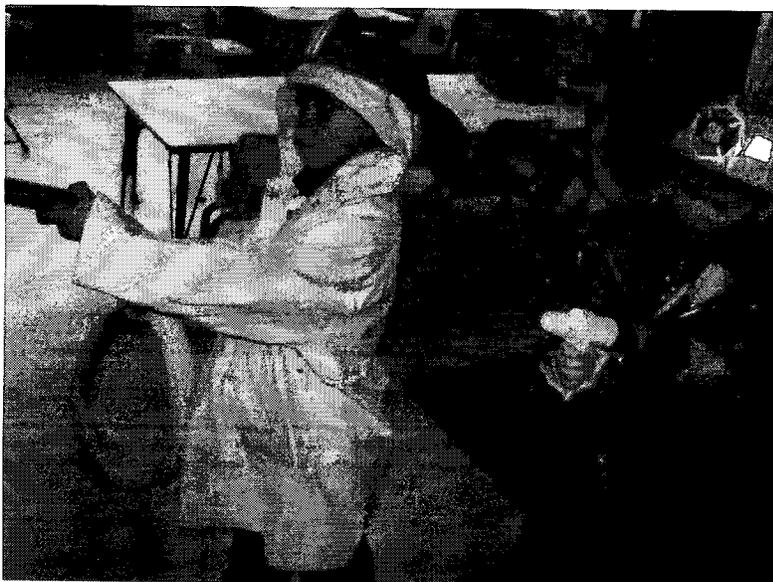
At our university laboratory preschool we teach pre- and in-service early childhood educators how to plan curriculum. When using the webbing approaches described above, we found that student teachers often got too caught up in the content and theme of the web and lost some of the focus on children. For example, after noting the children's

interest in fire trucks, the students spent considerable time wrestling with details, such as where to find firefighter clothing or how children could handle the hoses. These were not bad plans or ideas, but they may not have targeted what initially interested the children and sparked their discussion.

In addition, when some of the children showed interest in another topic, the students tended to ignore it. Ideas that did not "go with the theme" were not considered. For example, while several children were interested in fire trucks, one or two children showed considerable interest in household pets. The student teachers noted this

interest but put the topic on hold until they could plan a pet unit.

The two-fold consequence of this theme-based approach became clear. The children interested in pets might not be as engaged in the fire truck exploration as those who had shown interest in the topic and might not benefit as much from the planned activities. Additionally, due to the lag time between the children's demonstrated interest in pets and the implementation of the pet unit, the initial enthusiasm for the topic might wane. Another obstacle we faced involved



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teaching the students to develop a learning standards-based goal for each activity listed on their web. Incorporating learning standards into their planning was an important but difficult step for many preservice and new teachers. At first, student teachers tended to plan an activity because "it's fun" or "the children will like it." Although pleasure and engagement are important, they are not sufficient reasons to offer an activity. An appropriate activity is one that children find engaging and that also builds skills in important domains, such as language and literacy, social-emotional, cognitive, and motor skills.

We liked the brainstorming aspect of webbing, but something was still missing—the child.

### Goals and the child focus

In student teachers' curriculum plans, we require an established developmental outcome in the rationale for each activity. For instance, toddlers and 2s like to blow and chase bubbles, and they think this is fun. But this activity also develops gross motor skills (chasing) and fine motor skills (dipping and holding the wand, catching the bubbles); builds vocabulary (using words like *blow*, *float*, *pop*, *up*, *down*); and encourages development of peer-to-peer awareness and interaction skills ("It's time to let Wei have a turn with the wand" or

"That bubble is on Yelena's arm. She wants to pop it").

As important as it is to help students identify developmental goals for an activity, we still found that in all this planning, we were losing the focus on the child. The children had provided the impetus for the core topic at the center of the web, but the webbing process and ideas for planned activities were teacher-driven. Our emergent approach was producing the same pitfall we encountered with a planned thematic unit. We liked the brainstorming aspect of webbing, but something was still missing—the child.

## Finally, applying a new kind of webbing

In response to our concern about losing the focus on the child, Tara developed a new approach to webbing in the toddler, 2s, and 3s classroom. This approach uses traditional mapping but places the child at the center of the web rather than a thematic topic. Each child's web focuses on that child's interests and opportunities for growth. We review the individualized webs, note overlapping interests and needs, and, where it makes sense, weave them together to develop activities to offer all the children in the class. The steps in Tara's approach, child-centered webbing, include the following:

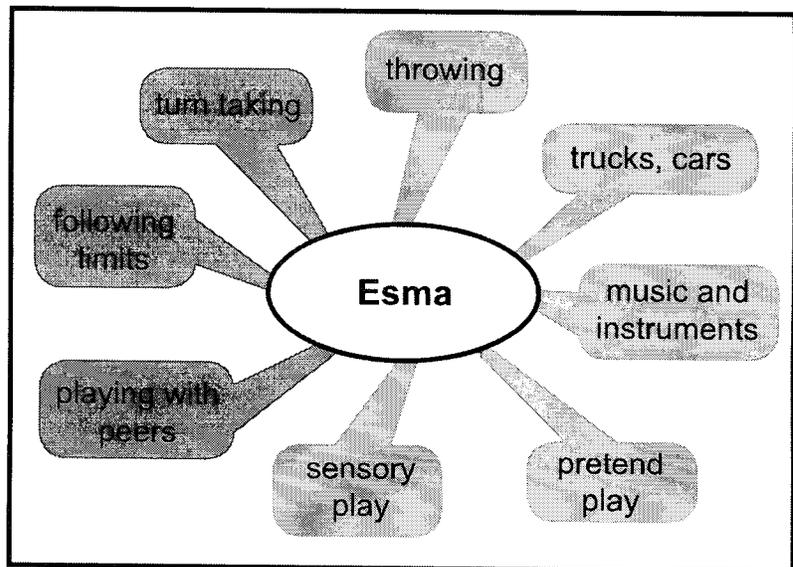
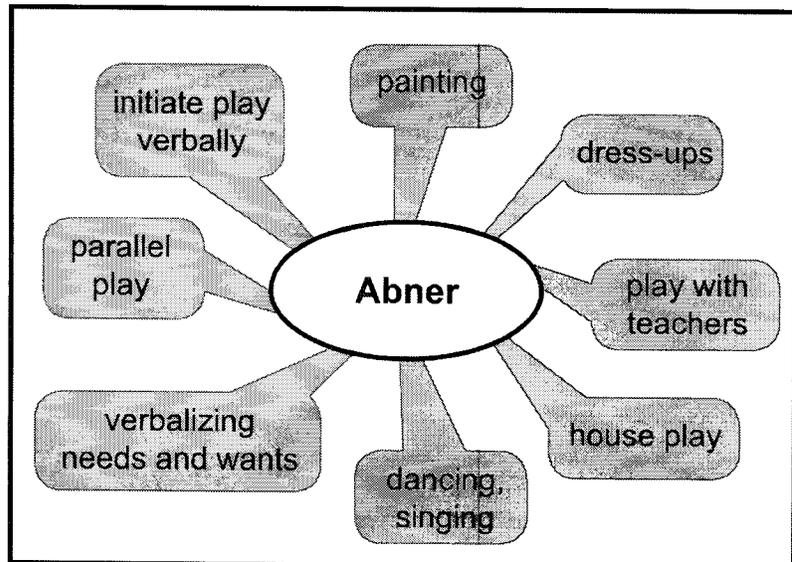
1. Write the child's name in the web's center.
2. Record the child's current interests in outer circles on the right.
3. Note in additional outer circles on the left the child's needs—the developmental areas in which the child needs support and encouragement.
4. Work in teacher teams to develop activities that support the child's interests and needs.

Four examples (see "Individualized Children's Webs") show how this process works for different children. Ideas in circles to the right of the center indicate the child's current interests, and those to the left indicate areas of potential growth needs. As the webs indicate, Abner shows an interest in dramatic play, particularly pretending to prepare lunch, and he also likes dancing and singing and other dress-up activities. Abner needs support in participating in parallel play (he frequently plays alone) and in initiating play with his peers. Jin shows an interest in fire trucks, cars, trucks, and pretend play and needs teacher help to learn to take turns and use words to solve problems.

After completing an individual web for each child, teachers use them to generate ideas for activities and materials. "Reviewing Individualized

## Individualized Children's Webs .....

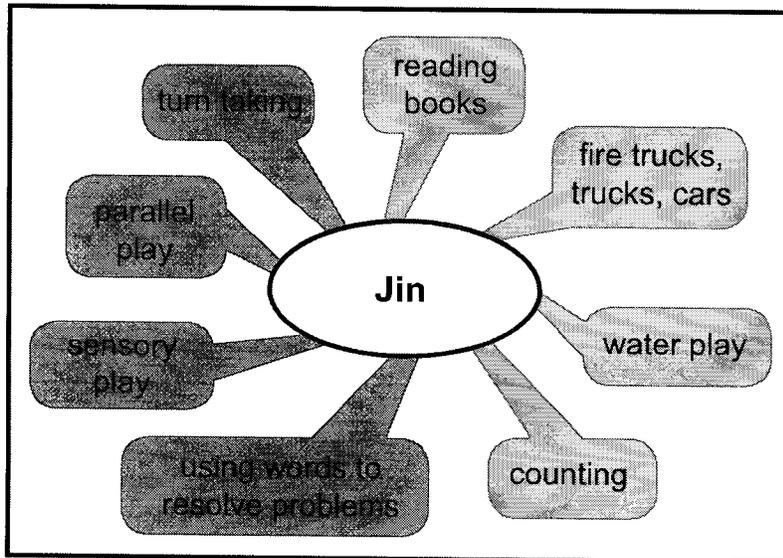
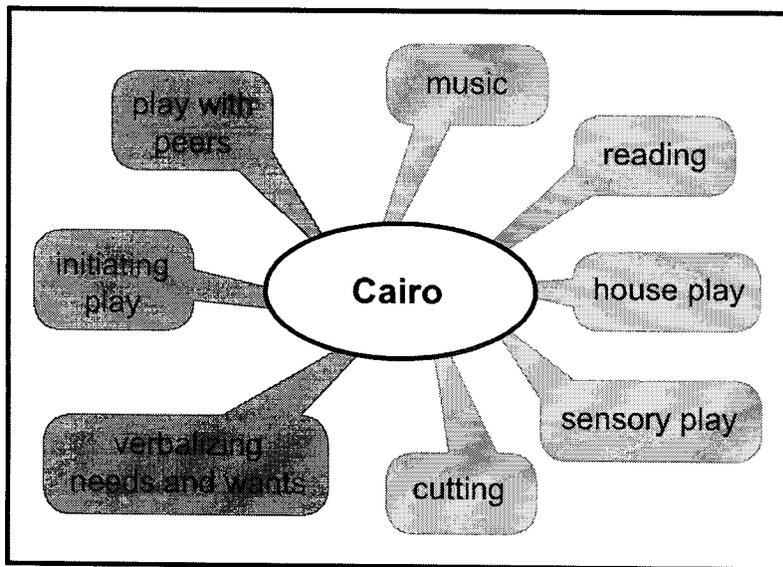
Note: The child is at the center, with individual developmental needs on the left and interests to the right.



Children's Webs to Plan Activities for the Group" (p. 104) details this process. The teacher thinks placing fire trucks in the block area and hats and hoses in the dramatic play area will entice Jin to play with other children and to use language to resolve conflicts. Based on Esma's interest in cars, trucks, and sensory activities and her need to practice following limits and playing with peers, her teacher adds

paint for truck painting to the list of new materials. For Cairo, the teacher offers musical triangles, which could be used in the music area and as an alarm in fire truck dramatic play.

The process continues as the teachers add activities and materials based on each child's web. Not every interest is included in each case, nor does every activity address each need. However, this process allows teach-



ers to plan activities to encourage children's developing skills and to specifically target their interests.

**Using child-centered webbing to plan activities**

Although teachers create an individualized web for each child, they review all webs as a team and note overlaps in needs and interests to

plan classroom activities. The planning is iterative—that is, ideas can change as new ideas emerge. It is not until examining the webs for the fourth or fifth child that it becomes clear where there are shared interests and needs. Using this approach leads to variety and expands children's opportunities to engage in activities and explore concepts. As a result, our approach to webbing and planning

offers many of the same benefits as do other emergent approaches.

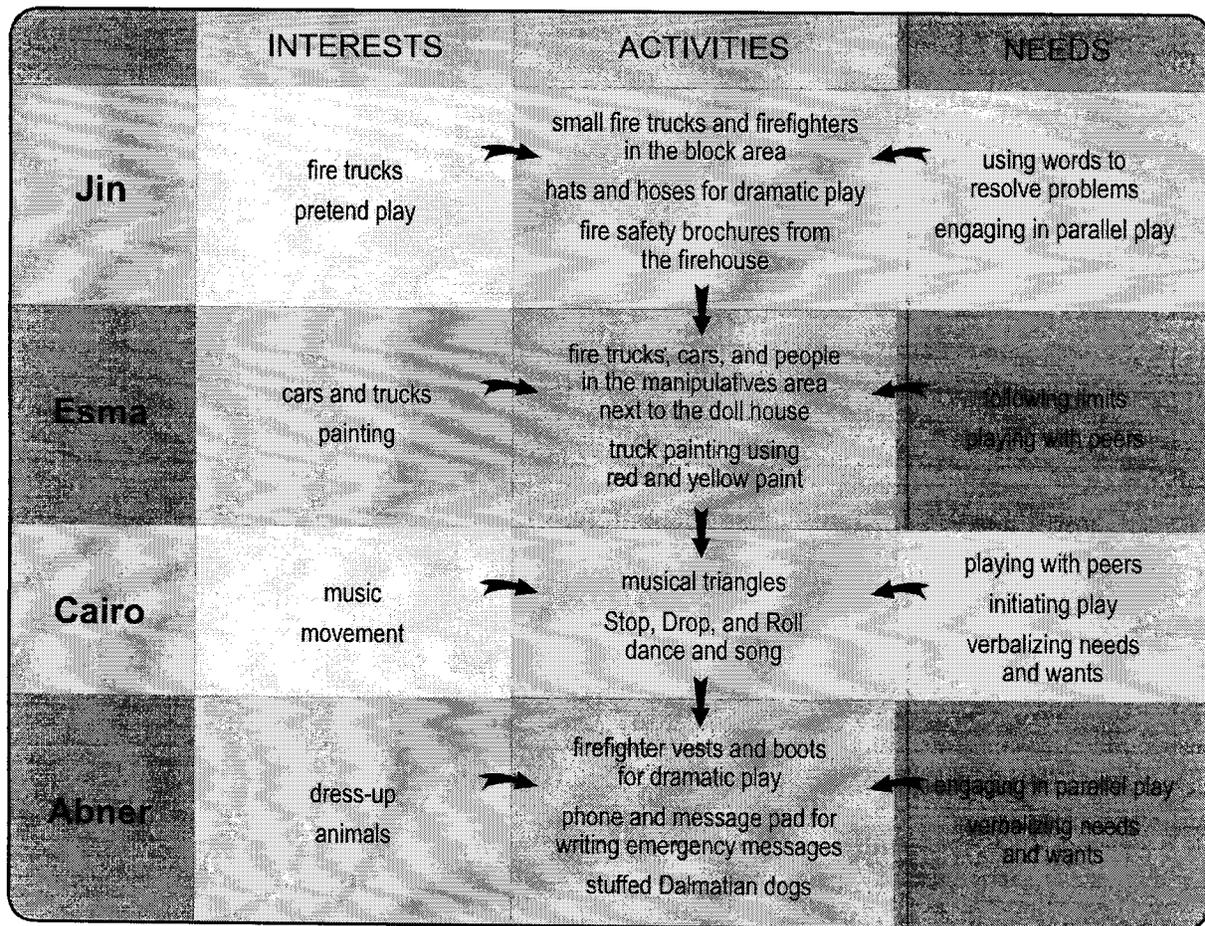
A strength of the project approach is providing opportunities for deeper learning, understanding, and application as children conduct an in-depth study of a topic over time. In child-centered webbing, because we base our plans on the interests of children, they can explore the same topic over the course of several weeks but in different ways that build on their evolving interests. For example, the fire truck exploration carried on for more than a month as the children learned about the various kinds of trucks and as firefighting equipment and clothing grew and overtook the dramatic play area. During that time, the triangles sparked an interest in learning about other musical instruments. Although the triangles remained available for the children's use, after a few weeks, drums and a keyboard attracted more of their attention.

While implementing an activity, teachers can observe the children to determine if the activity is leading to the anticipated goals for growth and engagement. Seeing that an activity does not meet expectations or fails to capture children's interest can be as informative as observing one that meets all anticipated goals. By adding these observations to the web, teachers gain greater insight into each child's needs and interests, subsequently discovering new ways to modify activities and materials or to develop new ones.

Our lab school teaching staff review the children's individualized webs daily and update and expand them as needed—which makes the process less time consuming. Evidence for the updates and suggested new interests and areas of need come from teachers' daily observations and anecdotal notes.

Teachers update classroom activities and materials once a week, usually adding six or seven new activities at a time. Some activities and materials meet the needs of several children at

## Reviewing Individualized Children's Webs to Plan Activities for the Group



once; however, we are committed to making sure every child has at least two or three activities or materials that respond to his or her individual web.

### The benefits of this child-centered approach

We have found that the child-centered webbing approach to planning and documentation

**The children find the materials and activities planned with them in mind highly compelling.**

helps early childhood education students focus on both the developmental needs and the interests of the child. Through teacher observations of the children's reactions to and use of materials, this approach supports authentic assessment. The children find the materials and activities planned with them in mind highly compelling. Because the activities and materials are appealing and engaging, the children work at tasks longer and try harder than they might with materials or activities they find less interesting. We believe this approach provides a highly accurate picture of the children's developing and emerging skills.

Our student teachers see great value in child-centered webbing because it provides a concise way to

support each child's development. Their written reflections on the children and their development are much richer and more detailed now than they were when we used our previous planning approaches. Because the planned activities resulting from this approach are authentic learning opportunities, we no longer offer activities or materials just because "they go with a theme."

Child-centered webbing also helps student teachers make better use of planning time. In the past they spent much time and energy developing activities based on the thematic or curricular webs they had produced. This method posed potential problems. If the children didn't embrace the planned activities, the student teachers had no time to prepare something new.

Now, instead of researching activity ideas to fit emergent themes, students devote more attention to the children.

At first, families reacted to our curriculum approach with mixed feelings because for many it was different from that which they were used to or expected. For example, with the child-centered web approach, we no longer provide a "What's Coming Next in Our Classroom" segment in the parent newsletter. Over time, however, families reported how much more their children were talking about the activities they were doing in school. In addition, the teacher-parent conferences were much richer and more detailed, and they used the individualized webs as a focal point of discussion. By the end of the school year, the parents were universally pleased with the child-centered approach to planning and with their children's learning progress. Families appreciated the focus on their child.

Our program is inclusive, and this approach to planning works very well in meeting Individualized Education Plan (IEP) and Individualized Family Services Plan (IFSP) goals. With children who have an IEP/IFSP, we include their goals as part of their individualized web, making clear how the goals and a child's interests can be matched. Therapists see real value in teaming with the teachers who



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are using the child-centered webbing approach in achieving IEP/IFSP goals. They embrace the approach as a means of authentic assessment of children's performance ability.

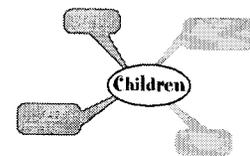
### Conclusion

Child-centered webbing is grounded in the emergent curriculum approach that we believe supports rich learning

for young preschoolers. The approach builds on the expertise of those who have shown that webbing is a powerful tool supporting curriculum development. Our child-centered approach to webbing brings planning back to the individual child. In so doing, we find children are not lost in the webs teachers weave, but instead are at the center!

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### Emergent Child-Centered Webbing

#### To begin

- Write each child's name in the center of a separate sheet of paper.
- Circle each child's name.
- Observe each child during play.
- Record interests observed on the right side of each child's web.
- Record developmental needs observed on the left side of each child's web.

#### To plan

- Review each child's web and select a need/goal to focus on.
- Review the interests of each child.
- Create activities for the children that focus on the identified needs/goals, keeping in mind children's interests