COACH'S CORNER

Coach's Corner is a DIEEC blog dedicated to providing fresh ideas for all early childhood education professionals.



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From Storytime to Playtime: Creating Open-Ended Book Extensions

Every November, DIEEC celebrates **Children's Book Week** (CBW)! Our staff members visit early childhood education programs throughout the state to deliver books and read to the children. Our CBW committee spends countless hours reading and researching to ensure that we choose books that are truly engaging. One key thing our committee considers when evaluating books is the potential for extending the story through hands-on activities.



Photo credit: DIEEC

Research shows that children learn best through hands-on activities that support active learning, and book-related activities are a great way to support children's interest as well as comprehension. Educators can use children's books as the basis for creating activities for many different interest areas in the early childhood setting.

To help illustrate what we mean by "extending" a story, let's look at one of the books DIEEC selected for our 2026 Children's Book Week celebration. I Am a Bunny, written by Ole Risom and illustrated by Richard Scarry, is a short, simple, and sweet story that follows Nicholas the bunny through the four seasons. Connecting the activities directly to specific moments from the book makes the learning experience richer and more meaningful.

In the next sections are some open-ended activity ideas to go along with the story! **Keep in mind that you do not need to have an activity for every area of the classroom, and that these activities can be set out as choices during free play time rather than being whole-group activities**.

A Prop Box or Bag for Shared Reading

This is a **small collection of items related to the story that can be used by the reader, and also set out for children to explore independently**. For I Am a Bunny, your prop box would start with a copy of the book (of course!). Then you could add stuffed or plastic animals (a bunny, butterfly, bird, and frog), fabric leaves and flowers, and laminated (text-free) photos of scenes from the four seasons.

Math and Science

Loose parts and leaf play. In the story, Nicholas the bunny watches the autumn leaves fall from the trees. Provide a bin of real or fabric leaves, twigs, acorns, pinecones, and seedpods along with magnifying glasses, trays, and small buckets or bowls to invite sorting and exploration.

Sensory Play and Fine Motor Skills

Seasonal tactile bin. Fill a sensory table with items from Nicholas's journey (a toy bunny, dried leaves, twigs, river rocks, bark, plastic butterflies, birds and frogs, real or silk flowers, and fabric pieces). You can add shredded paper or other loose, child-safe filler material as well. Add open-ended tools like scooping cups, tweezers, bowls, and tongs. Children direct their own sensory play- whether they choose to sort, bury items, construct habitats, or simply explore textures.

Dramatic Play

There are so many possibilities! Here are just a few:

Set up a woodland creature veterinary care clinic inspired by Nicholas's animal friends in the woods. Provide soft plush forest creatures, band-aids, fabric wraps/wraps for bandages, toy stethoscopes, magnifying glasses, small blankets for the "patients," clipboard paper, and writing tools.

Create a flower market in the dramatic play area. Add plenty of silk flowers like the ones Nicholas sees in springtime, plastic vases for creating arrangements, paper/pencils to write down orders, and play money.

Seasonal weather dress-up. Nicholas experiences sun, rain, and snow throughout the seasons. Provide weather-themed dress-up accessories (rain boots, sun hats, raincoats, scarves, mittens, light jackets)- and perhaps bunny ears too!

Music/Movement

In the story, Nicholas chases butterflies. Let the children wear **butterfly wings or use ribbon wands to dance/move to music** while pretending to be butterflies.

Infants and Toddlers

Nicholas encounters birds, butterflies, frogs, squirrels, and raccoons. Add stuffed bunnies and other animals from the book to a large basket. **As infants and toddlers explore, name the animals and talk about how they move and the sounds they make**.

Bonus Activity

Cozy Den Building. Plan a "hibernation party." At the end of the story, Nicholas goes to sleep in his cozy hollow tree. Invite children to wear their pajamas to school and bring their favorite stuffed animal. Offer large cardboard boxes, fabric sheets, blankets, cushions, clips, and flashlights. **Children can create their own "hollow tree" dens or hibernating spaces for themselves and their plush companions**.

Supporting Open-Ended Play and Story Connections

When children explore the open-ended materials, you can honor their play choices while weaving in story themes:

- **Observe First**: Watch what draws their interest before stepping in.
- **Ask Open-Ended Questions**: Prompt reflection ("What are you noticing about how those leaves feel?" or "What are you building here?").
- **Naturally Weave In Connections**: Connect their actions to the narrative in real time ("That cozy spot reminds me of Nicholas finding a warm hollow tree for winter").



Resources

- Read Together to Support Early Literacy- NAEYC
- Playing with Stories: Using Books to Inspire Play-NAEYC
- How to Introduce Toddlers and Babies to Books- Zero to Three
- Using Prop Boxes to Get Excited About Reading! – Iowa Reading Association
- Playful Storytelling – Using a Story Bag, Basket, or Prop Box- The Empowered Educator
  (Note: the inclusion of this blog post does not constitute an endorsement by DIEEC of all content on the blog.)

Professional Learning Experiences

- Early Literacy: Boosting Background Knowledge (Hybrid- Zoom & coaching)- DIEEC
- Early Literacy: Let's Read! Developing Book Skills (Virtual Live)- DIEEC