

Treasure Basket Explorations

Heuristic Learning
for Infants and Toddlers



Laura Wilhelm, EdD

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Dedication

Dedicated to the babies and toddlers who patiently teach us—and to all the grown-ups who listen.

Acknowledgments

Special thanks to Carolyn Lamiell and her enthusiastic team at Southern Hills Child Development Center, as well as to Dianna Ross, Margaret Napier, and the rest of the wonderfully helpful people at the Cleo L. Craig Child Development Laboratory at Oklahoma State University. This book is possible because you welcomed us into your world!

An enormous thank you to all the beautiful children who appear in this book (and to those who don't) for sharing a glimpse into the serious business of learning.

And thank you to the wonderful folks behind the cameras: Hope Wiggs, Kathryn Riley, Stacey Hines, Bree Hines, Goldie Thompson, and Ginger Welch.

Introduction

Treasure baskets and heuristic play were conceived by Elinor Goldschmied, a pioneer of early care and education in the United Kingdom, Italy, and Spain.

In her 1994 book, *People under Three*, she and coauthor Sonia

Jackson assert that babies and toddlers deserve as much respect as adults give one another. They knew, as many parents and grandparents

know, that babies often prefer to play with

ordinary objects such as kitchen utensils and even the box a toy came in rather than the commercially made toy itself. A treasure basket filled with ordinary items can be endlessly fascinating to a young child.

Goldschmied envisioned treasure baskets as a special activity reserved for children during that short period of life when they are able to sit comfortably but are not yet mobile. For children who are walking through age three, she adapted to their newfound mobility and drive to explore by developing a related approach: heuristic play. The term *heuristic* refers to discovery by a trial-and-error method. Because a child who has learned to walk will rarely be content to remain seated at a basket, heuristic-play sessions begin with the family member or teacher



setting up small collections of interesting materials around a room. The children then have time and freedom to explore the new treasures.

Goldschmied believed that the youngest children, once thought of as helpless creatures, are actually amazingly capable people. For anyone who takes the time to watch, her approach showcases a child's capabilities. Observing treasure baskets and heuristic play gives adults opportunities to see children use trial and error, which makes their thinking visible. Rather than defining infant and toddler classrooms in terms of things the babies can't do—play on the preschool playground, paint in the art room, or eat lunch with the other classes—we can see what these people, so new to the planet, have already figured out and are in the process of determining. Use this book to inspire incorporation of open-ended explorations into your infant and toddler program. The children will benefit, and so will you!







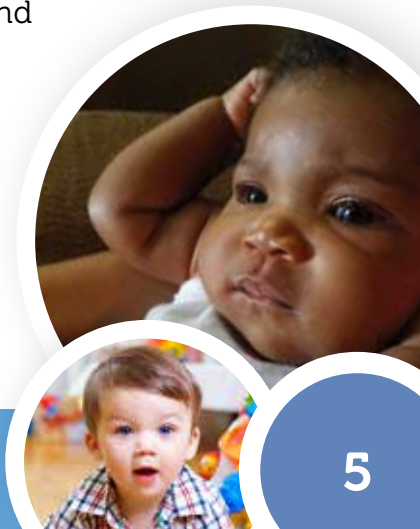
Creating a Space for Exploration



All beautiful things encourage a child's sense of wonder, and everything that encourages a child's sense of wonder is beautiful.

—Mitsumasa Anno, Japanese illustrator and children's author

Babies joyfully move their own bodies and interact with adults during the first few months of life. This is all the entertainment they need. Then, around three months of age, babies' hands become their first toys. Accidentally at first, then intentionally, they are able to swipe, grasp, and move objects by themselves. A new sense of wonder and





excitement about the big wide world frames their first big question: “What is this?” To find an answer, babies explore in every way they can: looking, moving the thing with their arms, hands, or feet, and ultimately bringing it to their mouths to be gnawed on. Gumming gives the baby more information about the object—how it tastes, how it smells, and how it reacts to the pressure of being gummed. It may also bring relief to tender gums about to sprout new teeth. This stage of new discovery is the perfect time to introduce treasure baskets.

Infant-toddler classrooms are often arranged for adult convenience and to comply with safety regulations. Even homes tend to fill up with “things to put babies in,” including cradles, carriers, bouncers, swings, high chairs, play seats, propping pillows, and strollers. A baby who is strapped in is not free to move his body and explore his surroundings.

Providing a treasure basket and the time to explore it will create opportunities to capture a baby’s

interest when he is calm but also actively engaged and curious.

The watchful adult following the baby’s interests can help him form secure attachments.



Psychologist George Forman, coeditor of *The Hundred Languages of Children*, believes in the power of ordinary moments in infant and toddler classrooms. He asks teachers to wear small video cameras to capture everyday interactions, which he then uses to illustrate important concepts of child development. Treasure baskets and heuristic play can help us notice the same powerful moments.

For children who are not yet walking, arrange items attractively into baskets that the children can sit beside and explore at their own pace. For toddlers, create islands of discovery by putting out piles of the items, as well as purses, cardboard boxes, and cracker or cookie tins that the children can put the objects in, take them out of, and create their own games with. Think of these activities as another way to have center time or free play.

Babies are amazing. Researchers once thought they were helpless creatures with undeveloped senses and even debated their ability to feel pain. Now we know that newborns not only feel pain, but they can also recognize their own mother's milk by smell and can recognize their parent's voices from their first day! Spending time in the company of babies presents opportunities to get to know each child's personality. The items selected for the treasure basket can add to meaningful





curriculum and can be tailored to meet the goals of any program, classroom, and school. Teachers and family members can brainstorm together, sharing observations about innovative ways that the items are being used by children and the wonderful ideas that children are testing.

Child care providers have tremendous potential to strengthen families. Teachers who communicate stories of what a child does in class each day can paint family members a picture of the child's achievements and emerging personality during the hours that family members miss. As pediatrician and author T. Berry Brazelton has shown us through his book and video series *Touchpoints*, newborns can track a red ball with their eyes, imitate tongue thrusts, and turn their heads toward familiar voices on the day they are born. Each subsequent day of life, infants are building and strengthening concepts of their world by experiencing ordinary moments of exploration.



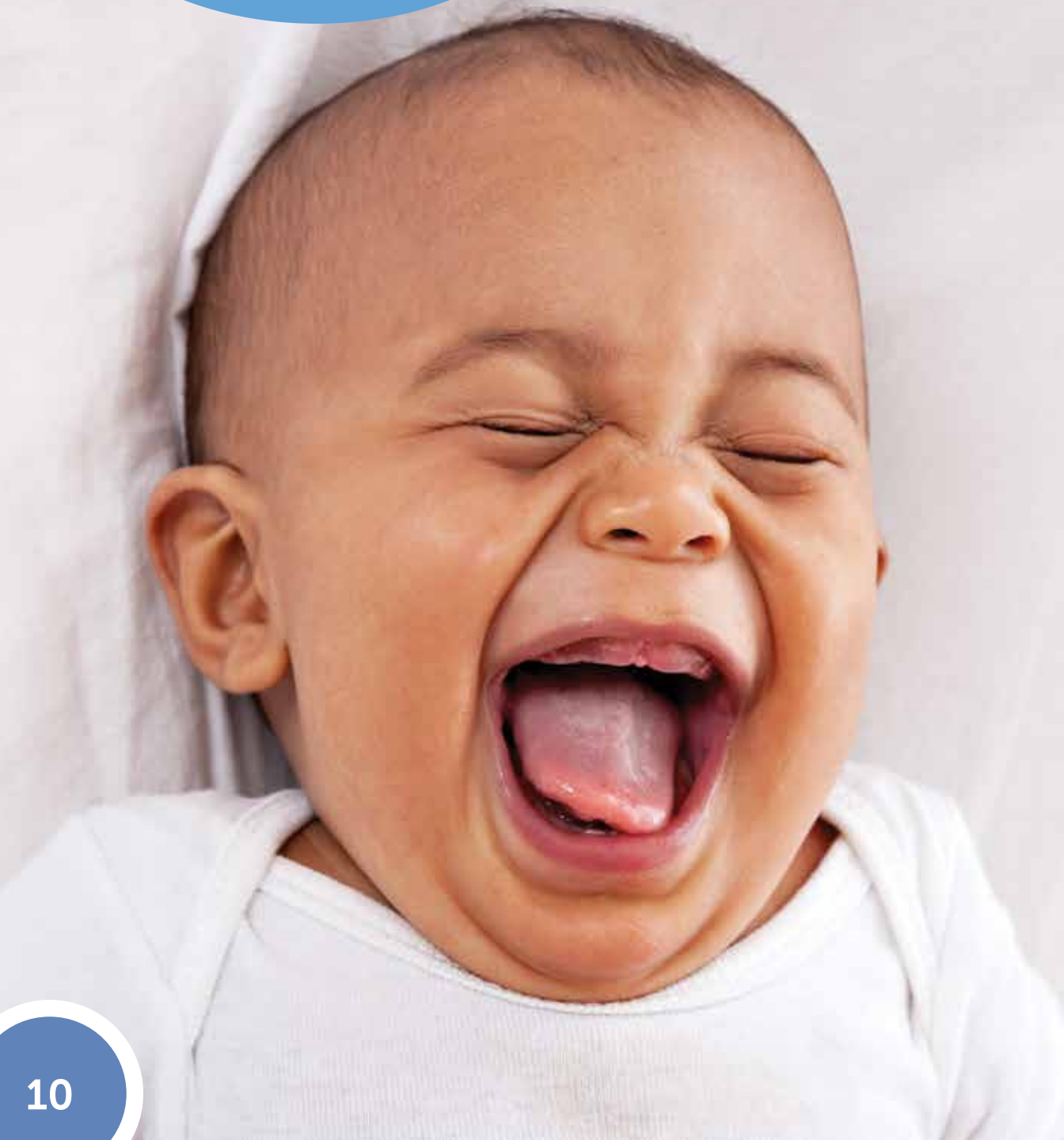
What Is a Treasure Basket?

A treasure basket is a sturdy, open basket piled with a variety of everyday objects. Placed where babies can reach it, the basket allows babies to choose what they want to explore. A treasure basket should include a variety of textures, such as loofah sponges, wooden spoons, and shiny tin boxes. It should include objects that a child can place inside another object and then dump out again. The collected materials should appeal to a child's senses. Some good options could be made of metal; be organic, such as pinecones or seashells; or be made of fabric, such as wide lengths of ribbon or fuzzy or coarse material. Such objects provide an opportunity to create different sounds by dropping or banging them together.

Treasure baskets can be introduced as soon as a child can sit up on his own, usually at about five or six months. Use the baskets as long as



His caregiver observed a four-month-old lifting, shaking, and dropping a cotton handkerchief and gazing at its interesting pattern as the baby lay on a blanket spread on the floor. The child's exploration of the handkerchief lasted for sixteen minutes.



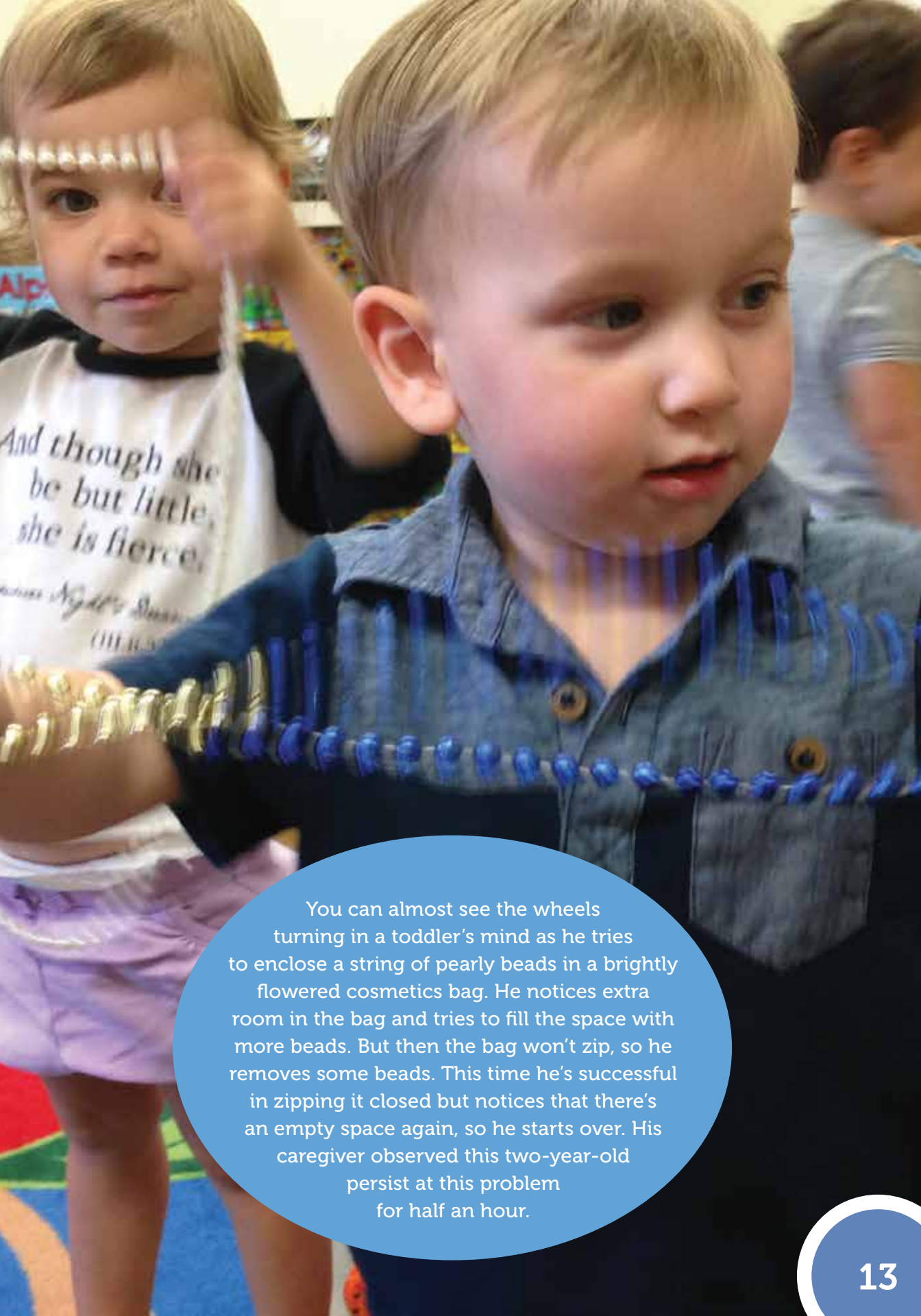
In the first years of life, four compelling questions guide children's learning:

- What is this?
- What can I do with it?
- What else can this do?
- What can this become?

Between three and six months of age, children notice objects in their immediate surroundings. The first big question, "What is this?" drives children to gaze, vocalize, and move their hands or arms toward faces, pets, and objects in an attempt to learn more about them. From about five to twelve months, children are able to grasp, manipulate, and mouth objects. They are able to take in information through their five senses to learn more about the thing, which leads them to the second big question: "What can I do with it?"



As children begin to master their world by crawling and walking where they want to go, they gain access to much more of the environment. Between twelve and twenty-four months, their new skills lead to the third big question: "What else can this do?" As toddlers enter their third year of life, between twenty-



You can almost see the wheels turning in a toddler's mind as he tries to enclose a string of pearly beads in a brightly flowered cosmetics bag. He notices extra room in the bag and tries to fill the space with more beads. But then the bag won't zip, so he removes some beads. This time he's successful in zipping it closed but notices that there's an empty space again, so he starts over. His caregiver observed this two-year-old persist at this problem for half an hour.

four and thirty-six months, they start to incorporate more language into their play. The fourth big question, “What can this become?” ushers in a new era of pretending. Small toys become play food as children imitate adults cooking. Baby dolls are cared for, and anything from a shoe to a block becomes a car.

Before children can sit up, they may enjoy grasping items. From three months of age, children may enjoy having two or three interesting objects to look at and grasp. Cotton handkerchiefs with an interesting pattern or a lace edge are easy for the baby to move and won't smack him in the head the way a rattle can. As babies begin to master the movements of their fingers, they may like exploring items that can be easily grasped, such as silicone kitchen tools, wicker balls, and rolled-up socks.



Sitting up gives a six-month-old child an entirely new view of the world. He can now sit well enough not to rely on his arms for balance. This gives him the freedom to grasp objects he sees and bring them to his mouth. From the time a baby can sit comfortably without needing his hands for support, he is ready for a treasure basket.

The basket should have sides sturdy enough to help support him. It should not have a handle to get in his way as he selects items to grasp, mouth, gnaw, and drop. Provide a treasure basket that is low enough so that the child can easily reach in to retrieve objects and sturdy enough not to flip if the baby leans an elbow on the rim. Some people will even spread a white sheet under a basket to reduce the distraction of brightly colored carpets and make it easier for a baby to spot and retrieve dropped items.



When a child begins walking, heuristic play through islands of discovery is designed to capture both the child's interest and to honor his need to move around the room. Setting up the classroom with small islands of intriguing objects invites the child to move around the room to explore, but giving a classroom full of toddlers the freedom to explore piles of new things might be a frightening proposition. Children actually become calmer and more focused during heuristic play. Some schools around the United States and internationally have even decided to use only heuristic materials and to get rid of plastic toys altogether.

