

The Digital Camera:

A Tool for Creative Teaching

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Maria looks unsure as she enters the classroom for her second day at preschool. The teacher helps Maria find her cubby and explains that it is labeled with her name and photo. Maria touches the picture of her family taped inside, then hangs up her sweatshirt before joining a group at the puzzle table.

Dominick is reading a teacher-made book illustrated with photos of his favorite stuffed monkey. He delights in naming the monkey's positions—on, above, and under a table. Later that morning, he shares his special book with a friend who is feeling sad.

Ms. Jayne kneels down in the block area to be at the children's level, close to the action, where there is good lighting. She takes a digital photo of the children building an elaborate farm. Later, Li dictates a story about the farm to Ms. Jayne. Ms. Jayne displays the photo and story in the block area.



Like the teachers in these classrooms, you can use photos to organize the program, support curriculum goals, document children's learning, support children who are English-language learners or those with disabilities, and partner with families. Capture what is meaningful about what children are doing. Take photos when they are talking and playing with others. Children might be figuring out how much water a cup holds versus a pitcher. Or perhaps they are solving a problem—how to get a ball out from under a bush. While photos can help document individual growth, they can also provide a window into the daily life of the community and deepen understanding of what takes place.

Try out one of the following ideas, or develop your own. (Remember, children can be photographers too; but that's another story . . .)

Organize the program

Use photos to show children that they belong and to show them what to expect. Photos help them become comfortable and competent members of the classroom learning community.

Create daily schedules. Photograph children during routines and activities. Post the images in sequence on a piece of poster board. Label each part of the day—arrival, snack, group time, outdoor play, and so on.

Take a photo of each child. Use the photos on attendance and job charts, sign-up boards for learning centers, and graphing activities (*I like apples vs. I like oranges*).

Make labels. Include photos *and* print to define activity areas and to show where things go on shelves. For example, add photos of children building together to the sign that reads Blocks in that activity area.

Support curriculum goals

When children see photos of themselves taking part in activities, they feel valued and proud of what they can do. Photos can help engage them in achieving new learning goals, such as expressing themselves, participating in conversations, making meaning from print, and recognizing and identifying letters in familiar names and other words.

Make sets of photos. Feature photos that match frequently used words, such as the names of children in the class or words related to a class project. Print out several photos to a page and several sets for use in a variety of activities like lotto games.

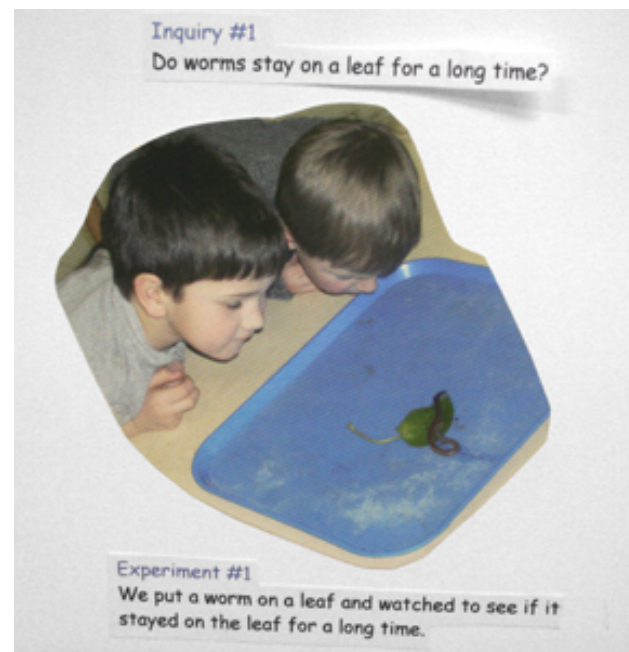
Take photos on field trips. Talk about the images with children to help them remember what they saw, heard, did, and learned. Use the photos in a display or a book about the trip.

Publish books. Write about people, objects, and events. Have children dictate the text and use photos to illustrate their stories.

Make visual aids for songs and finger plays. Print photos on specialty papers like magnetic paper (found in office supply stores).

Create class cookbooks. Take photos of children cooking and include these on recipe cards.

Illustrate the steps for doing a job. Use photos to show how to feed a class pet or complete a project.



Document children's learning

Photos can offer information to use in your planning and help make a child's learning come alive for families.

Watch a child at work and play.

Record what you see using both words and images. Include these in each child's portfolio. Use the "movie mode," available on many digital cameras, to record children's language use and conversations with each other and to document and assess learning in all areas.

Display photos of children's projects.

Next to the photos, be sure to write the children's questions, theories, what they did to find answers, how they worked together, and what they learned. Such displays help explain the learning process to families and children.



Partner with families

Families love to see photos you take of their children. There's no better conversation starter or way to strengthen your partnership. Be prepared: have extra take-home copies available.

Create computer slide shows. Use individual and family photos. Show one in the morning to welcome children and parents, one at pickup time, and one at family meetings and events. Be sure to include all children and to obtain the appropriate consent forms.

Create class books. Photo-illustrated books can become part of a family lending library.

Illustrate classroom newsletters. Include photos in print or electronic formats.

Invite families to share photos. Post photos from home throughout the room (not just in individual cubbies).

Explain children's learning. Show how children's play, projects, and activities are linked to early learning standards.

Keep up to date on technology. Tools such as e-mail, Web sites, online photo sharing, and online portfolios can give you more ways to connect with families.



Conclusion

Your digital camera is a valuable tool. So if you aren't sure about how to use it or aren't using it to the fullest, get out the user's guide and study up. Or ask someone to show you. Try it out! The possibilities for using photos in your classroom are endless!

Using Your Digital Camera in the Classroom

Learn about your camera. Read the manual to learn how to focus, zoom, use the flash, adjust camera settings, review and delete photos, and use movie mode (there may be different or additional features on your camera). Then practice until you feel comfortable using your camera. Taking time to learn how to use the camera and related software first can save a lot of frustration later and help you take full advantage of the various things it can do.

Be prepared. Digital cameras need batteries to provide power and use memory cards to store images. Make sure you regularly charge the batteries and download the images from the memory card to your computer hard drive. Have extra memory cards and rechargeable, long-lasting batteries on hand in case you need them.

Organize your photos. Photo management programs save you time and let you review, organize, use, and print your photos. Some computers come with a program, like iPhoto (Mac) or Microsoft Picture Manager, and cameras may come with their own photo management and editing programs. Otherwise, you can buy software or download a free program like Google's Picasa.

Back up your images. If your computer crashes, you may lose many wonderful photos of the children in your class. Copy digital photos to a CD, DVD, memory stick, or external hard drive on a regular basis—before your computer crashes! Using other means to store image files also saves space on your computer hard drive.

Ask questions! Consult camera or software manuals, photo tip books, magazines, Web sites, online software tutorials, and online communities like the NAEYC Technology and Young Children Interest Forum (www.techandyoungchildren.org/educators.html). Another strategy is to find a "tech mentor"—a teen, adult, or child in your child care setting, local library, school, or community who can answer your questions and help you learn new techniques.

Show the learning in action. Try to take photos where the background is not crowded with many objects and different colors. With digital cameras, you can take *lots* of photos, so don't be afraid to shoot from different angles, zoom in to capture details of a scene or an expression, or zoom out to show interactions between children or provide more visual information about what is taking place. Plan to review and compare the series of photos of an activity, select the best images, and add comments to help people better understand what children are learning.

Get written permission. Ask parents or guardians to complete written consent forms that give you permission to take and use photo images of children and their work. Consent forms should explain how children's images will be used. Be sure to collect and store a consent form for every child in the class.

So Many Digital Cameras. How Do I Choose?

Think about how you will use your camera. Then, research which model has the features you will need. If you plan to carry your camera constantly and take simple snapshots, you may want a small, lightweight camera. If you want higher quality images, a larger camera with more features could be a better choice.

Learn more about different camera features. There are many features to consider when purchasing a camera:

- camera size and type (ranging from small ultra-compact to larger, heavier “point and shoot” or single-lens reflex cameras)
- image quality/resolution
- battery type
- zoom range
- shutter speed
- movie mode
- LCD screen size
- flash
- connectivity (how the camera connects to other devices, such as printers and computers)

Find explanations for these terms in books or magazines on digital photography and on the Internet, or ask your tech mentor to explain them.

Compare camera options. Read recent reviews of models that have been tested and rated for quality and ease of use. Reviews typically appear in consumer magazines or on online digital camera review sites. Online reviews by camera users can also be useful.

Visit an electronics store. Examine and hold different digital cameras. A knowledgeable salesperson can explain different features and options and help you to select a model that will meet your budgetary and photographic needs.

Resources for photo tips, activities, and ideas

Adobe Digital Kids Club—

www.adobe.com/education/digkids/index.html

Kodak Photo Tips Page—

www.kodak.com/eknec/PageQuerier.jhtml?pq-path=39&pq-locale=en_US

NAEYC Technology and Young Children Interest Forum

(scroll down to the Digital Photography and Video area)—

www.techandyoungchildren.org/educators.html

Photographs: Creative Uses in Family Child Care—

www.betterkidcare.psu.edu/Angel

Units/OneHour/Photos/PhotoLessonA.html

Picture Science: Using Digital Photography to Teach Young Children, by C. Neumann-Hinds. 2007. St. Paul, MN: Redleaf.

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