

The Project Approach: Phase 1—Choosing a Topic to Investigate



*Teachers can use the Project Approach to meet most of the Illinois Early Learning and Development Benchmarks. Projects are like good stories. They have three parts: a beginning, middle, and end. The first phase begins with choosing what to investigate, and usually lasts about two weeks. Here are some tips to help teachers make the final decision about what a project topic will be. (See also *The Project Approach: Phase 1—Getting Started*.)*

Consider what makes a good project topic.

- Children can safely study the topic firsthand.
- The class has easy access to local resources about the topic. “Animals in the Park” is better suited to Illinois preschoolers than is “The Rain Forest.”
- Experts are available to talk with the class about the topic.
- The topic is sensitive to local culture but general enough to be culturally appropriate (“Holiday Meals of Our Families” rather than “Our Christmas Dinner”).
- The project will encourage children to develop an interest worthy of their time and energy.
- The topic is the right size. “The Insects in Our Garden” is a more suitable topic for preschoolers than “Monarch Butterflies” or “Insects of the World.”

Use children’s interests as a source of project topics.

- The number of interests among a group of preschoolers can be very large! Look for topics that have wide appeal among the children. It helps to keep a list of things that the children talk about with each other.
- Keep in mind that not all of children’s interests are equally worth following up. For example, a study of cartoon characters will not be a worthwhile project.
- You can help the children to develop new interests. You might share things that seem likely to appeal to them: “Look at this huge bug on the swing!” Or ask them to think about ordinary things in new ways: “What kinds of things go on in the supermarket?”

Make good use of school time.

- State or local curriculum standards can give you some good ideas for project topics.
- Focus on topics that the children may not be able to study outside of the school day, such as insects or the school bus.
- Choose topics at the beginning of the year that are familiar to most of the children in the group (“The Shoes We Wear” or “Our Bags and Backpacks”).
- As children become familiar with project work, they can study topics that reflect and support the diversity of their backgrounds and experiences (“The Breads We Eat”).

Any opinions, findings, conclusions, or recommendations expressed in this tip sheet are those of the author(s) and do not necessarily reflect the views of the Illinois State Board of Education.



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