

Social Studies in Action

Preschoolers study babies

Melissa Scholl, teacher of three-year-olds and young fours

This year my co-teacher was pregnant, and two families had babies. These events prompted the children's interest in a group study of babies.

We started by asking the children "What do you know about babies?" to determine their knowledge and interests. Many children wanted to know how to take care of babies. Others wanted to know what they had been like when they were babies. We asked the children to bring in their own baby pictures, which we displayed on the wall. We stacked our shelves with fiction and nonfiction books about babies. We put baby dolls, bathtubs, and washcloths in the water table and added baby strollers for taking the dolls out to the playground.

To involve families, we designed a take-home project. Each night two children would take home a stroller, a baby carrier, and a classroom doll to care for. Using a Polaroid camera and a baby journal, with their parents' help the children recorded their "babysitting" experiences. Although the



baby dolls had been in the room all year, they were suddenly the most desirable playthings because they could go home!

Several "experts" came to class to talk about babies. Before each visit we discussed the questions we wanted to ask. The teacher across the hall brought her two-month-old. Two parents each brought their 11-month-old babies to visit on the same day. The children could see the difference in

Social studies permeate all aspects of the curriculum at the Center for Young Children on the University of Maryland campus in College Park. Here the staff embrace the philosophies and ideas of the late Carol Seefeldt, professor of human development and a teacher and mentor to many of them (see In Memoriam, *Young Children* March 2005, 62). As an advocate of using real experiences to make social studies come alive for children, Seefeldt urged early childhood education students to take advantage of the learning opportunities that come up each and every day in children's lives.

Nothing sparks children's desire to learn more than investigating things they already know and care about—the construction site they pass every day, a living creature they find in their school yard. In this piece we highlight four in-depth studies children carried out during the 2004–2005 school year at the Center for Young Children. The photographs and the teachers' narratives show how these explorations were inspired by the children's natural interest in and curiosity about the world around them and how teachers used community resources as teaching tools.

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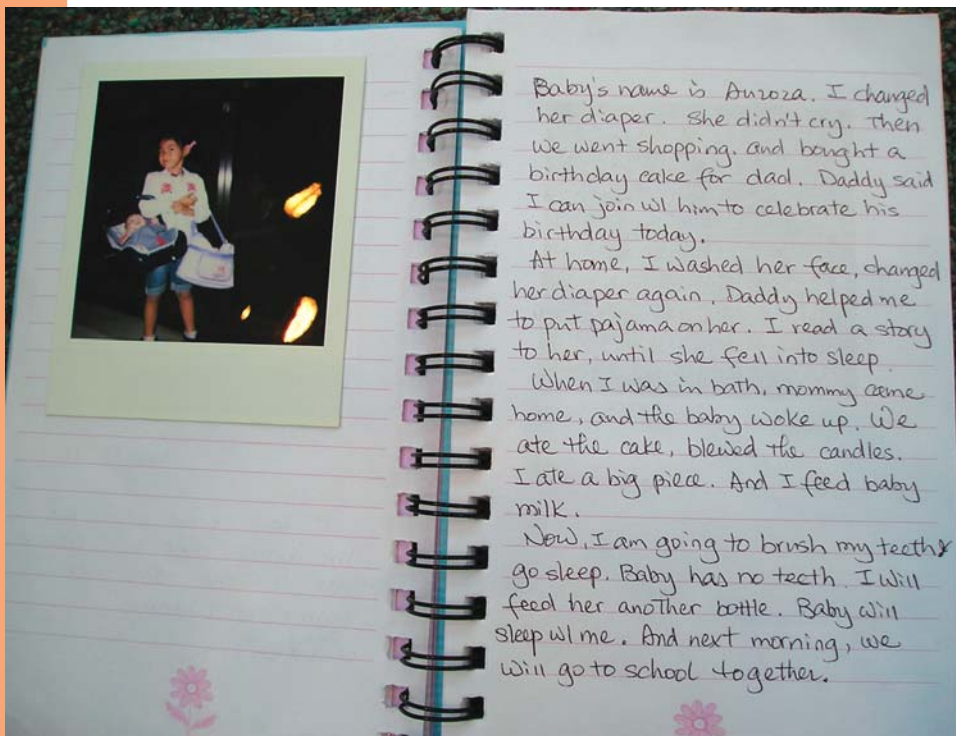
Photos courtesy of University of Maryland Center for Young Children.



mobility between the infant and the older babies. The children asked to see some specific activities—a baby being bathed, a diaper change, and a feeding.

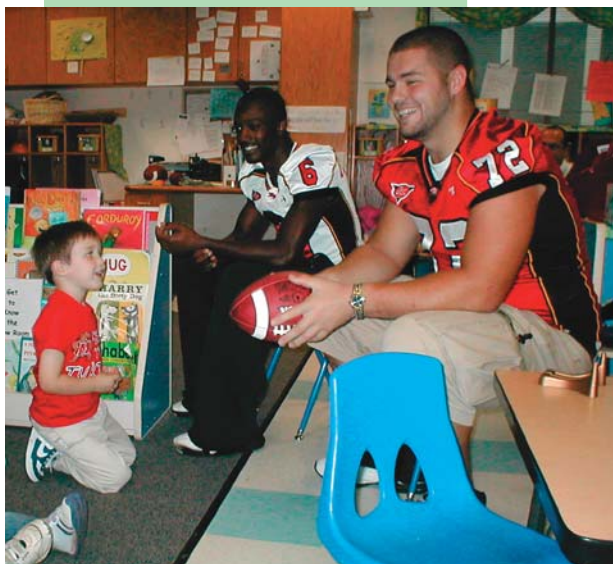
Some of the children created their first clay representations during this study—pacifiers for the doll babies, and doll babies with and without pacifiers. At the end of the year the children each used their own baby pictures to make a diagram comparing and contrasting what they could do as a baby with what they could do now. They used information they had gathered from their parents' answers to these questions: "How long was I?" "How much did I weigh?" "Did I breast-feed or bottle-feed?"

All of the children wanted extra turns to babysit the baby dolls at home. This project was especially effective for the boys, some of whom may have been discouraged from playing with dolls at home. From their explorations about babies, the children showed empathy and caring toward the young babies who visited the class. They were able to experience being the "big" kids in a natural way. They didn't have to say "I'm a big kid!": they just compared themselves to the babies.



Prekindergartners look at football

Michela Denaro, teacher of four- and five-year-olds



Because many of their parents work for the University of Maryland, the children at our center are familiar with campus activities. One day, in dramatic play, a group of children built a minivan out of the hollow blocks. While one child pretended to play football, the others watched. When the children talked about what they were doing, it turned out that some had attended a tailgate party at a University of Maryland football game with their parents.

When we voted on which topic to study in depth, many children suggested football. We began our investigation with a visit to the stadium where the children saw the players doing warm-up exercises and watched an impromptu practice. Later in class, the children tried some of the exercises themselves. Using a team nickname, they made Go Terps! signs to bring to the next practice.

Over a period of a few weeks we invited a number of football experts to our class. The football trainers who visited our classroom demonstrated how they bandage players who are hurt and left some bandages for the children to use in their dramatic play. The trainers also brought some equipment for the children to try on. The marching band visited and left a CD of its music for the classroom library. The large University of Maryland football mascot—a terrapin named Testudo—also came to the classroom. The children had many questions and Testudo, true to form, didn't speak but answered yes-or-no questions with a nod or shake of the head.

During class time the children reenacted many of the things they had learned about football. Outside in the grass they painted a field; some practiced kicking and throwing while others formed a marching band. Some children were interested in making a scoreboard. The children painted their own football jerseys, made a clay model of the mascot, and created University of Maryland flags. The children were excited, involved, and curious. Every day they asked, "Who is coming to visit today?"



Kindergartners examine toads



Stefanie Adamson, teacher

The first week of school, some children in our class discovered a toad on the playground. As it hopped off, the whole group ran after it. My co-teacher caught it, and we put it in an aquarium with a wire mesh cover. That day the children began to research how they could create an appropriate habitat for the toad.

As the children observed the toad, they asked a lot of questions: “Why does its chin bump when it breathes?” “Do toads have ears?” “Why is it just sitting there?” To find answers, we researched in a number of ways. Some children did research at home with their parents and brought in answers to share with the class. We read books about toads and looked for information on the Internet.

The toad, nicknamed Toadie, really inspired the children’s writing. They learned how to spell the words *toad* and *frog* and made up stories about Toadie: “This is where Toadie used to live” and “This is what Toadie did last year.”

When the children posed questions for which they couldn’t find answers, we invited a university biologist who studies local amphibians to visit our class. He explained the toad’s different body parts, answered many of the children’s questions, and showed us that Toadie was a female. He talked a bit about his work as a biologist; some of the children were excited to

learn that studying different animals is real job.

The children learned from the biologist that toads hibernate. It was October and starting to get cold. We discussed how Toadie couldn’t hibernate in the tank, and since it was getting colder, we had to let her go free so she could live. We released Toadie by a pond near our school.

It’s important to be open to children’s questions and follow up on their natural interests. We hadn’t planned to study toads, but if half of the class is running across the playground to catch a toad, it’s a pretty good bet that they are interested in learning more.



Kindergartners explore airplanes

Stefanie Adamson, teacher

A group of children in our class really enjoyed building rockets and airplanes. They made paper rockets at the art table and then went outdoors to race them. One child brought in a book showing how to make paper airplanes. After discussing it with the class, the teachers decided to build on the children's interest by planning an airplane study.

We are lucky to be located near an airplane museum—the College Park Aviation Museum—so we planned a visit. We talked with the children about their experiences related to airplanes—where they had flown to, what the airplane was like. One child was going on a long airplane journey to New Zealand and Australia. When she arrived in Australia, the children connected with her online and asked numerous questions about the airplane and her flight.

In dramatic play, the children built airplanes and a control tower using hollow blocks. They dressed up and flew on business trips and vacations. We took a field trip to Baltimore-Washington International Airport to see what a control tower looked like. We visited the observation deck and the baggage area, but due to security concerns we could view the control tower only from a distance. Back in the classroom, we read a book to learn more about control towers—how they look up close, and how they work.

We teachers asked around and identified a commercial pilot who was willing to come in and talk with the children. He answered questions about the difference between a pilot and a copilot and shared a model of a cockpit.

To tie together all these experiences, we decided to build an entire airport using blocks and other materials. Working as a group, the children used fabric to recreate the baggage conveyer belt. They built an airplane and many of the vehicles they had seen in use at the airport. The airport remained up for about a week. It was an incredible project.



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