

Using Hart's Ladder – Ages 3 to 6

Children at this age are beginning to express ideas, ask questions, and engage in discussions. They are developing more independence and like to be provided with choices. Often they have developed likes and dislikes and are able to express them. Verbal and fine motor skills continue to develop and children are increasingly able to express ideas verbally and through drawings.

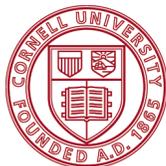
What kinds of decision-making and planning can children ages 3-6 dig in to? Three to six year olds may not be ready for allocating project funds. However, they do know what they like (e.g. red flowers, carrots, butterflies, blueberries, worms) and what they like to do (e.g. run, play, hide)! They are often open to change and eager to try new things (choices about growing really giant plants or tiny ones, raising “strange” vegetables like blue potatoes and round carrots). Start small and provide choices. Be willing to embrace inefficiency and accept a garden that takes shape slowly and is a little messy.

Planning the Garden

- Be sure that children know what you mean by “garden.”
- Read stories about gardens. Talk about the story: what the gardens look like, what’s growing in them, and what the people and animals do in the gardens.
- Visit nearby gardens and or look at pictures of gardens. Be sure these are similar in size and scope to your project.
- Visit the area you are planning on creating the garden or the garden you are planning on revitalizing.
- Ask children what they envision themselves doing in the garden. You’ll find out what they think will be fun about the garden and what they see themselves doing there. Knowing what they would like to do in the garden can help design things like paths, hiding places, and benches.
- Engage children in deciding what plants will grow in the garden: What types of plants would you like to have in the garden: trees, flowers, vegetables, fruits, shrubs, vines? What color flowers would you like to have in the garden? What types of vegetables do you want to grow? Provide pictures of what these plants look like. It’s okay to narrow plants down to what works for your site. Provide children with reasonable choices (tomatoes vs. pineapple) and let them decide from there.

In the Garden

- Don’t hesitate to let children help prepare the garden. If you have to move soil or woodchips ask for their ideas on how to do that.
 - At Keuka Lake School, children moved an eight-yard soil delivery to their garden by moving the soil with buckets while they were outdoors playing. It took three weeks to complete but was worth the extra time.
 - At the Dryden Elementary school, a similar task was completed on a Saturday with children, youth, families and community members, and took a little more than an hour with a “bucket brigade.”



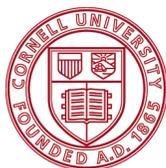
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- Assess how important it is for your garden to have straight rows or flowers separate from vegetables and allow children to make decisions regarding where plants and seeds will be planted. Allow for experimentation. Picking a green tomato is not the end of the world. Making decisions on what to harvest when can lead to fun discoveries.

Possible Activities

- Tell a story about a new garden that children wanted to grow at their school, park, or backyard. If you already have a location in mind, describe it in the story (the garden was to be a big rectangle near the playground). In the story have all the people involved – the teachers, the children, the parents, the squirrels, the classroom hamster – and they are asked what they would like the garden to be like. What colors will you see there? Who will visit the garden? What will people do there? What type of plants will be there? Don't give any answers or overly "prompt," just tell that each of these people/creatures was asked. At the end of the story, ask the children how they would answer the questions.
- If you have a list of possible plants for the garden, make them into large flashcards with color pictures showing the character of the plant (tall vs. short; flowers vs. fruit or vegetable). Allow children to spend time looking and playing with them. Ask them to share with you the plants they like the best. The flashcard activity can also be done with types of plants: trees, shrubs, flowers, herbs, vegetables, and fruits as well as non-plant elements: paths, benches, water, tunnels, and curbs. To narrow down plant choices even further, tape the flashcards to the wall. Allow children a certain number of stickers and ask them to stick the stickers to the plants they want to have in their garden.
- Spend a lot of time asking children what they would like to do in the garden. They might not be able to equate read stories with providing a shady seating area but their answers can help guide you. For instance, if most children talk about eating vegetables or fruits, planting a flower garden might not be the best choice. If children talk a lot about seeing butterflies or catching ladybugs, choose plants that will attract them.
- If you need to move soil or wood chips to the garden plot, invest in child-size wheelbarrows and shovels or provide buckets or leftover plastic pots for scooping, carrying, dumping.
- Children's technique may not be perfect or their rows straight but show children how to plant a transplant or seeds and then let them try themselves. Use hula-hoops or large twigs to outline certain areas. Tomatoes go in the pink circle. Marigolds go in the yellow circle. Make sure you have a few more plants than you need. If plants are crowded after a few weeks, children can dig them out and plant them in another spot. Make sure to have enough tools for everyone.



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