

Free Play, Free Choice: Keep Every Center Open

Why opening every interest area matters for materials access and behavior



All four centers open at once — block area, dramatic play, reading nook, and art table — so children spread out instead of clustering. (AI-generated illustrative photo)

During free choice time, children pick their own activities, materials, and playmates while teachers observe and respond to what they need. When every interest area is open at once, children naturally spread out — and decades of classroom-design research show that keeping the number of children per activity area low is one of the simplest ways to boost engaged, constructive play and head off challenging behavior.



Fewer children per area means more turns, more talk, and less waiting.

Why Keep Every Area Open

- More open areas mean fewer children sharing each space — and a lower child-per-area ratio is linked to more constructive play and less off-task, wandering behavior.
- Closing centers funnels the whole class onto a handful of toys, one of the most common triggers for grabbing, hovering, and conflict.
- Classic crowding research found that as density rises, so does aggressive behavior among preschoolers.
- Quality-rated classrooms pair well-defined activity areas with enough of them open at once to keep density low in each one.

What Counts as Free Choice?

Children choose where to play, what to use, and who to play with, while adults respond to their needs rather than assigning centers or pre-selecting materials. ECERS-3 only credits free choice when enough areas are open that no child has trouble reaching materials that interest them — in practice, that means opening as many centers as your space and staffing allow, every time.

Try This This Week

- Open every labeled center before free-choice time begins — no area stays “closed.”
- If one area gets crowded, add matching materials nearby or invite children to an equally engaging open space.
- Rotate or refresh 1–2 quieter areas weekly so children don’t funnel into just one or two popular zones.
- Use picture labels and clear pathways so every choice is visible and easy to reach.