Today’s teachers create lesson plans and curricula designed to help children meet standards and learning goals set by the school or the state. Sometimes, though, a child shows interest or asks questions about another subject. While teachers cannot abandon the curriculum to pursue a child’s questions, sometimes they can seize the moment and watch the child make a connection and learn something new. In this unit, you will learn how to recognize and utilize these “teachable moments.”

Objective:

Describe a teachable moment.

Key Terms:

dual-learning experiences
emergent curriculum
meaningful experience
observation
teachable moment

Being Receptive to Learning

Children learn best when they are interested in the topic or when it relates in some way to their own lives. A teachable moment is a time when children are especially receptive to learning something new. Sometimes a child’s natural curiosity leads the teacher away from the planned lesson for a short time. If the teacher follows the student’s lead, it is possible to guide the child into a learning experience.

CRITERIA

There are four criteria for a teachable moment. The moment is spontaneous, immediate, meaningful, and student-initiated.
Spontaneous

A teachable moment is spontaneous. The moment is sparked when a child asks a question or shows interest in a subject. The moment may lead the teacher temporarily away from the day’s lesson plan. However, the teachable moment may be lost if the teacher is unwilling or unable to deviate from the plan. Answering questions or pursuing an activity to satisfy a child’s natural curiosity can create a learning experience.

Immediate

A teachable moment should be seized by the teacher right away. To take advantage of a teachable moment, the teacher may have to put the planned lesson on hold to answer unrelated questions. The teacher should then give the children the opportunity to ask follow-up questions.

Sometimes it is not possible for the teacher to stop a lesson with 16 students to pursue the questions of one child. In those cases, the teacher should take note of the child’s interest and approach the subject at another time. Because this approach is not immediate, there is a chance that the child will no longer be receptive to the learning situation.

Meaningful

A meaningful experience is a time when a child learns something that is relevant to his or her own life. These experiences allow children to build upon their existing knowledge. Children learn best when they can relate new facts to something they already know. Because children will find different things meaningful, teachers may have to take several approaches to reach all the students.

Student-Initiated

The teachable moment is initiated by a child’s question or play, in a whole-group setting or in a one-on-one interaction with the teacher. For the student to be
fully receptive to learning, the moment must be about something of interest. Teachers cannot manufacture teachable moments, but they can introduce children to new experiences that may trigger interest. For example, a teacher can put an aquarium with a goldfish in the classroom. The aquarium may inspire some children to ask questions about fish food, the aquarium, or even the ocean. But a genuine teachable moment comes from the questions asked by the students, not from information introduced by the teacher.

**OBSERVATION**

Teachers can recognize teachable moments by observing their students. **Observation** is the process in which a teacher watches and listens to children as they play, giving teachers a chance to identify student interests. Because children process new knowledge and recreate it through play, observation allows teachers to determine if students fully understand a concept or if they need further guidance.

Teachers should ask open-ended questions. For instance, if a teacher asks a student, “Do you like butterflies?” the student will likely respond with a “yes” or “no.” However, “What do you like about butterflies?” is an open-ended question. Students may like butterflies because they changed from caterpillars, because they can fly, or because they are pretty colors. Open-ended questions give teachers insight into the student’s existing knowledge and interests.

Teachable moments can be a **dual-learning experience**—a time when both teacher and student learn something. The student learns facts or skills from the teacher, and the teacher learns something about the student’s interest or knowledge.

An **emergent curriculum** is an evolving plan driven by the interests of the children and the interests and goals of the teachers. It requires teachers to observe the students closely. Teachers must listen and ask questions, responding to the students’ ideas. It may be difficult to integrate state standards and predefined curriculum goals into an emergent curriculum. Such standards are necessary and remove some teacher flexibility when it comes to lesson plans. But if teachers are creative and able to think fast, they can use an emergent curriculum to support many teachable moments.

**FURTHER EXPLORATION...**

**ONLINE CONNECTION: Recognizing Teachable Moments**

Visit the Web site listed below to see 100 examples of learning opportunities that could lead to teachable moments. Pick three of the scenarios, and describe (for each) one way to seize the moment and guide an interested student to a learning experience.

http://www.before5.org/tm_120.shtml (100 Teachable Moments)
USING A TEACHABLE MOMENT

Teachers can use a teachable moment to provide a learning opportunity for students. Teachers can help students gain knowledge or facts about a subject that is of particular interest. For example, if a student plays with dinosaurs every day, the teacher can share a book about dinosaurs or explain which dinosaurs are herbivores and which are carnivores. If a child is struggling to learn shapes, the teacher can turn a block building session into a teachable moment by pointing out all the squares in the tower.

Teachers can help students acquire new skills. For instance, if a child shows interest in tying his or her own shoes, the teacher can offer tips or a rhyme about how to do it. If students are taking turns walking on a low balance beam, the teacher can explain how extending their arms at their sides can help them remain balanced.

Teachers can help students express emotions in appropriate ways. For example, if a child yells or hits another child in anger, the teacher can step in and use the teachable moment. The teacher can ask the child how he or she thinks the other child feels after being yelled at or hit. The teacher can then ask the child to think of other ways to express anger or frustration (e.g., punching a pillow, taking a deep breath, or counting to ten).

Teachers can help children solve problems and become more independent. Children can work out conflicts, as long as there is no threat of danger (i.e., a child hitting another child). Teachers can step in and ask the children to talk about how they feel or how they think the other child feels in the situation. Then the children and teacher can brainstorm together to think of ways to resolve the problem (e.g., take turns with a toy).

Teachers can encourage independence or peer-assistance. Children can put on their own smocks at art time, for example, or ask their friends for help instead of going to the teacher every time. By encouraging children to work together, the teacher helps the children learn how to give and receive help, which increases cooperation and a sense of accomplishment.

Teachers can use mistakes and accidents as teachable moments as well. If a child spills juice, the teacher can ask how the mess can be cleaned and then provide a towel. This promotes responsibility. Teachers can also help children learn from their mistakes. If a child prints the letter “S” backwards, the teacher can ask the child to look around the room for an “S” printed on a sign, book, or bulletin board. Then the teacher can ask the child to make his or her “S” match the printed one. The child can refer to the sign each time he or she has trouble printing an “S.” Using the teachable moment to help a child correct himself or herself can be more valuable than simply correcting the student’s mistake on paper.

FIGURE 3. Asking a student to clean up a spill that he or she caused can teach responsibility.
Summary:

Children learn best when they are interested in the topic or when it relates in some way to their own lives. A teachable moment is a time when children are especially receptive to learning something new.

There are four criteria for a teachable moment; it must be spontaneous, immediate, meaningful, and student-initiated. Teachers can recognize teachable moments through observation, which helps teachers identify students’ specific interests and needs. By using teachable moments, educators help children build their own knowledge, gain skills, express emotions, and work together.

Checking Your Knowledge:

1. What is a teachable moment?
2. What are the four criteria of a teachable moment?
3. What is a meaningful experience?
4. Why should a teacher observe students?
5. What kind of questions should a teacher ask a student?

Expanding Your Knowledge:

Visit a childcare or preschool classroom to observe the students, watching for signs of a teachable moment. Ask the teacher to share specific examples of teachable moments that have been used recently. Have any moments turned into a longer lesson for the entire class?

Web Links:

All Children Considered
http://www.canr.uconn.edu/ces/acc/PDF/all%20children%20vol404.pdf

A Place of Our Own: Teachable Moments
http://www.aplaceofourown.org/question_detail.php?id=101

Parents: Teachable Moments
http://www.parents.com/preschoolers/learning/intellectual/teachable-moments/