

Learning Lab:

Explore • Create • Build COMMUNITY HELPERS

A practical participant guide for exploring the people, places and jobs in our community

CORE IDEA Community Helpers is not a list of occupations to teach. It is an invitation to explore contribution, belonging, relationships and the ways people work together.

Prepared for educators and childcare leaders
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How to Use This Guide

Turn the Learning Lab framework into intentional, age-appropriate classroom invitations.

This guide supports three connected learning invitations. Begin with one invitation, watch how children respond, and adjust the environment over several days. You do not need to set up every material or every community role at once.

EXPLORE	CREATE	BUILD
Notice, touch, name, match and connect.	Choose, make, pretend, communicate and help.	Plan, arrange, connect, test and explain.

Four principles to carry through the month

- Start with children's real experiences. A delivery driver, grocery clerk, educator or sanitation worker may be more meaningful than a traditional theme-week occupation.
- Use real photographs, familiar objects and open-ended materials whenever possible.
- Offer fewer materials to younger children; offer older children more opportunity to plan, choose, revise and solve problems.
- Observe before explaining. Children's theories, connections and invented uses are part of the learning.

REMEMBER The developmental purpose changes by age. A younger child does not need an "easier version" of an older child's craft.

EXPLORE | Community Helper Discovery

Children investigate familiar people, tools, vehicles, places and routines in their community. The goal is to notice, investigate, connect, communicate and wonder - not to memorize occupations.

Start with a simple discovery area

- A floor basket, low shelf or investigation table
- Books and photographs of real people and local places
- A small selection of safe tools and familiar objects
- Toy vehicles and people figures
- Enough open space for children to approach and revisit independently

Invite curiosity

- Begin with "What do you notice?"
- Allow time to touch, look, move and test before naming or explaining.
- Follow the child's experience. "My grandma uses that" is a meaningful connection.
- Introduce vocabulary naturally during shared attention and play.

AVOID Turning the invitation into a guessing game where the educator holds the correct answer.

Possible discovery objects

- Stethoscope or doctor's bag
- Hard hat or safety vest
- Measuring tape or clean paintbrush
- Clipboard, notebook or calculator
- Envelope, reusable bag or grocery basket
- Toy bus, truck or community-helper figures

EXPLORE | 12-18 MONTHS

Infants and young toddlers explore familiar community objects through touch, movement, sound and repetition.

Set up the invitation

- Place one small basket on the floor beside a soft mat.
- Offer only 3-4 large, safe objects at one time.
- Add one board book and 2-3 laminated photographs.
- Try a soft safety vest, large clean brush, toy bus and soft hat.

The educator's role

- Sit nearby and allow the child to lead.
- Name what the child is touching or doing.
- Use single words, short phrases and plenty of wait time.
- Rotate one or two items every few days instead of adding more.

WHAT TO NOTICE

- Grasping and transferring
- Looking between object and educator
- Repeating actions
- Pointing, vocalizing and responding to words
- Cause and effect

LANGUAGE TO TRY

- "Bus."
- "Soft hat."
- "Brush."
- "Go!"
- "You found it."

EDUCATOR TIP Do not ask abstract questions such as "Who uses this?" Focus on sensory exploration, shared attention and connection.

EXPLORE | 19-36 MONTHS

Toddlers explore familiar community roles by naming objects, matching tools and copying actions they have seen.

Set up the invitation

- Create a low shelf or table with two small baskets.
- Combine toy vehicles, people figures, safe real-life props and board books.
- Try one basket for “Getting Around” and one for “Tools People Use.”
- Keep laminated photographs close to related objects without requiring a match.

The educator’s role

- Invite children to handle, sort, move and pretend.
- Follow their home and community connections.
- Add words to what they are already doing.
- Let play move between objects rather than assigning one object to one occupation.

WHAT TO NOTICE

- Naming and matching
- Imitating familiar actions
- Emerging pretend play
- Turn-taking
- Connections to home and community

LANGUAGE TO TRY

- “What do you notice?”
- “What does it do?”
- “Where does the truck go?”
- “Who have you seen use this?”
- “Can you show me?”

EDUCATOR TIP Do not label baskets by occupation. A clipboard, bag or measuring tape can support many different ideas.

EXPLORE | 3-4 Years

Preschoolers investigate tools, photographs, books and real-world questions while sharing what they already know.

Set up the invitation

- Create a Community Investigation Table.
- Add local photographs, maps, books, tools, clipboards, paper and crayons.
- Include images of the local library, grocery store, childcare centre, clinic, bus and recycling truck.
- Pose one question: "What helps a community work?"

The educator's role

- Listen for theories rather than one correct answer.
- Record children's questions and revisit them.
- Invite children to draw, map, sort or compare what they notice.
- Add new materials in response to children's ideas.

WHAT TO NOTICE

- Theory building and prediction
- Vocabulary and recall
- Questioning and classification
- Community awareness
- Communication

LANGUAGE TO TRY

- "What do you think this is used for?"
- "What makes you think that?"
- "Where have you seen one?"
- "Who might need this?"
- "What would happen without this service?"

EDUCATOR TIP Use real images from the children's own community whenever possible. They create stronger connections than generic cartoon cards.

CREATE | Community Helper Role-Play Studio

Children use open-ended materials to create props, signs and tools for their own community play. The learning is in choosing, planning, making, communicating and using the creation - not in producing a realistic finished craft.

Connect making to play

- Place the maker space beside the dramatic-play area.
- Offer cardboard, paper, fabric, tape, markers, stickers, recycled containers, bags and envelopes.
- Let children decide what their play needs.
- Return creations to the dramatic-play area immediately.

Invitations that keep ownership with the child

- What do you need for your job?
- What could we make?
- How could people know where to go?
- What does your community need?

AVOID Pre-making identical examples or asking every child to produce the same firefighter hat, postal bag or badge.

Possible child-created props

- Delivery bag, package or envelope
- Bus ticket, map or stop sign
- Doctor's bag or appointment card
- Grocery list, menu, receipt or money
- Badge, ID card, label or community sign
- An entirely new object invented by the child

CREATE | 12-18 MONTHS

For infants and young toddlers, CREATE is sensory mark-making, choice and participation - not a craft.

Set up the invitation

- Use a small table or protected floor area.
- Offer large paper, chunky crayons, large stickers and 2-3 fabric or cardboard choices.
- Add a safe mirror or cardboard steering wheel nearby.
- The educator may prepare a simple base, such as a large cardboard bus.

The educator's role

- Let the child choose, grasp, stick, scribble, press and reach.
- Describe actions and choices without evaluating the result.
- Offer one material at a time when needed.
- Stop when the child signals they are finished.

WHAT TO NOTICE

- Grasp and release
- Mark-making
- Choice and cause/effect
- Reaching and bilateral coordination
- Early communication

LANGUAGE TO TRY

- "You chose blue."
- "You put it here."
- "Round and round."
- "You made a mark."
- "More?"

EDUCATOR TIP The finished product does not need to resemble a community vehicle, tool or person. Participation is the learning.

CREATE | 19-36 MONTHS

Toddlers create simple props that can immediately become part of their dramatic play.

Set up the invitation

- Set up paper bags, cardboard, tape, stickers, crayons, fabric, envelopes and recycled containers.
- Keep the table close to a simple dramatic-play space.
- Offer only enough choice to support independence without overwhelming the area.
- Leave room for unfinished creations to be revisited.

The educator's role

- Ask what the child is making rather than naming it for them.
- Help with difficult joins or tape only as needed.
- Invite the child to carry the prop into play.
- Accept invented meanings and uses.

WHAT TO NOTICE

- Choice-making and fine motor control
- Vocabulary and pretend play
- Persistence
- Self-expression
- Using one object to represent another

LANGUAGE TO TRY

- "What are you making?"
- "What do you need?"
- "Where will it go?"
- "How will you use it?"
- "Would anything else help?"

EDUCATOR TIP If two pieces of cardboard become a "truck phone," then it is a truck phone. Follow the child's meaning.

CREATE | 3-4 Years

Preschoolers plan and create props, signs and tools that support a role or community problem they want to explore.

Set up the invitation

- Create an accessible maker studio with cardboard, paper, markers, scissors, tape, fabric, string, boxes and clipboards.
- Connect materials to an emerging play area or construction project.
- Offer a real problem: "Our clinic needs signs. What should we make?"
- Keep literacy materials available for labels, lists, tickets, maps and appointments.

The educator's role

- Help children identify what the play needs.
- Encourage planning without requiring a drawn plan.
- Support problem-solving when materials do not work as expected.
- Invite children to explain, test and revise their creation.

WHAT TO NOTICE

- Planning and problem-solving
- Fine motor development
- Symbolic representation
- Emergent literacy and numeracy
- Creativity and collaboration

LANGUAGE TO TRY

- "What does your community need?"
- "What could you make?"
- "How will people know where to go?"
- "How could your helper solve the problem?"
- "What would you change?"

EDUCATOR TIP The important learning is in planning, decision-making and play - not how realistic the final prop looks.

BUILD | Build Our Community Challenge

Children use blocks, loose parts, vehicles, signs and people figures to design the places and connections that make a community work. BUILD strengthens planning, spatial awareness, collaboration, communication and problem-solving.

Prepare an open-ended construction area

- Provide generous floor space and room for more than one child.
- Use blocks, boxes, tubes, fabric, loose parts, vehicles and people figures.
- Place paper, markers and clipboards nearby for signs, labels, maps and plans.
- Leave structures available long enough for children to revisit and revise.

Invite design thinking

- What does our community need?
- Where will people live, work or get help?
- How will they get there?
- What problem do you notice?
- What could we change or add?

EDUCATOR STANCE Do not build the town for the children. Watch how they plan, negotiate space, solve construction problems, assign roles and revise their ideas.

BUILD | 12-18 MONTHS

Infants and young toddlers explore community environments through stacking, carrying, pushing, placing and moving.

Set up the invitation

- Provide 5-8 soft blocks, 1-2 large vehicles, people figures, small boxes, scarves and baskets.
- Use open floor space with clear movement paths.
- A simple tape road is optional; the movement matters more than the representation.
- Keep the environment stable enough for repeated action.

The educator's role

- Notice and name movement.
- Allow filling, dumping, stacking and knocking down.
- Join briefly without directing.
- Repeat spatial words during the child's actions.

WHAT TO NOTICE

- Cause and effect
- Spatial awareness
- Gross and fine motor control
- Persistence
- Object permanence and early language

LANGUAGE TO TRY

- "Up."
- "Down."
- "Go."
- "Stop."
- "In. Out."
- "You pushed it."

EDUCATOR TIP Do not expect infants to build a city. Their BUILD experience is movement, repetition, space and cause and effect.

BUILD | 19-36 MONTHS

Toddlers build simple community places and act out familiar routines with blocks, vehicles and people figures.

Set up the invitation

- Offer blocks, cardboard boxes, vehicles, people, animals, fabric, tubes and a few simple signs.
- Begin with materials, not a finished model.
- Ask, "We have people and vehicles. What could we make?"
- Allow enough space for children to move between individual and shared construction.

The educator's role

- Support cooperation without requiring a group product.
- Add problem-solving language when structures fall or space becomes crowded.
- Follow recognizable places the children introduce.
- Let roads, garages, stores, bus stops and homes emerge through play.

WHAT TO NOTICE

- Pretend play and vocabulary
- Spatial relationships
- Trial and error
- Emerging collaboration
- Flexible thinking

LANGUAGE TO TRY

- "Where should this go?"
- "Who is driving?"
- "Where are they going?"
- "We need more room. What could we do?"
- "It fell down. What should we try?"

EDUCATOR TIP Toddlers may move rapidly between building, transporting and pretend play. All three are part of the learning.

BUILD | 3-4 Years

Preschoolers plan and build a shared community, connecting places, transportation, people and services.

Set up the invitation

- Provide blocks, cardboard, tubes, boxes, loose parts, vehicles, figures, signs, paper, markers and clipboards.
- Begin with "Let's build a community. What does it need?"
- Record children's ideas without creating an adult checklist.
- Leave the project available for several days so it can evolve.

The educator's role

- Help children identify and solve design problems.
- Support negotiation of space, materials and roles.
- Invite maps, signs and labels when they have a purpose in the project.
- Photograph and record children's explanations.

WHAT TO NOTICE

- Planning and collaboration
- Spatial awareness
- Problem-solving and revision
- Communication
- Emergent literacy and numeracy

LANGUAGE TO TRY

- "What should we build first?"
- "How will people get there?"
- "What does our community still need?"
- "Who could help solve that problem?"
- "How could we test it?"

EDUCATOR TIP Children's suggestions may include daycare, Costco, grandma's house, a hockey rink or a bus stop. Their community knowledge is the starting point.

What Should My Room Actually Look Like?

AGE	EXPLORE	CREATE	BUILD
12-18 months	Floor basket with 3-4 sensory objects	Simple mark-making with 2-3 choices	Open floor space, soft blocks and a vehicle
19-36 months	Low shelf with tools, vehicles and photos	Small maker table beside dramatic play	Blocks, vehicles, figures and loose parts
3-4 years	Investigation table with photos, tools, books and clipboards	Accessible maker studio connected to role play	Large collaborative community construction area

The developmental shift

YOUNGER CHILDREN Need fewer materials, more repetition, sensory access, shared attention and simple language.

TODDLERS Need familiar objects, emerging representation, independent access and room to move between types of play.

PRESCHOOLERS Need more opportunities to plan, choose, represent ideas, collaborate, solve problems and revise.

Before children arrive

- Is the invitation physically accessible and uncluttered?
- Are all materials safe, clean and appropriate for the age group?
- Can children make meaningful choices without being overwhelmed?
- Is there space to revisit or extend the play?
- Do the photographs and roles reflect diverse people and real community life?

PRINTABLE CHECKLIST

Community Helpers Prop & Loose Parts List

You do not need commercial costumes. Familiar, flexible materials support richer ideas.

EVERYDAY ITEMS

- ☐ Clipboards and notebooks
- ☐ Envelopes, paper and reusable bags
- ☐ Small boxes and baskets
- ☐ Measuring tapes and clean brushes
- ☐ Calculators and keyboards
- ☐ Phones with batteries removed
- ☐ Buckets and containers

DRESS-UP ITEMS

- ☐ Aprons and simple jackets
- ☐ Hats and scarves
- ☐ Safety vests
- ☐ Reusable bags
- ☐ Lanyards
- ☐ Fabric pieces

BUILDING MATERIALS

- ☐ Cardboard boxes and tubes
- ☐ Blocks and wooden loose parts
- ☐ Fabric and containers
- ☐ Small signs
- ☐ Vehicles and people figures

LITERACY MATERIALS

- ☐ Appointment cards and calendars
- ☐ Menus, flyers and receipts
- ☐ Maps and tickets
- ☐ Grocery lists and labels
- ☐ Signs and envelopes

Choose community visuals intentionally

- Use real photographs rather than relying only on cartoon occupation cards.
- Include people of different genders, cultures and abilities.
- Show traditional and non-traditional roles.
- Include the people and places children actually see: educators, caregivers, maintenance workers, transit drivers, postal carriers, grocery workers and others.

ONE FLEXIBLE PROP A safety vest and clipboard can become twenty different occupations. Open-ended materials keep the role-play open-ended too.

Educator Language That Opens Up Thinking

INSTEAD OF	TRY
"What is this?"	"What do you notice?"
"That's what a doctor uses."	"Who have you seen use something like this?"
"Build a hospital."	"What does our community need?"
"The truck needs to go here."	"Where could it go?"
"No, that's not what it is for."	"Tell me about what you're doing."
"Everyone is making a postal bag."	"What could you make for your play?"

Observation focus

- Language and vocabulary
- Social connection and empathy
- Problem-solving and flexible thinking
- Dramatic and symbolic play
- Collaboration and negotiation
- Planning and revision
- Community awareness and belonging

DOCUMENT THE LEARNING Record what the child did or said, the skill you observed and the developmental connection. Focus on the learning process, not whether the child completed an adult-defined product.

PROJECT EXTENSION

One Invitation Can Become a Week of Curriculum

DAY 1	Plan and begin Ask what the community needs. Record children's ideas and begin building.
DAY 2	Notice a problem Invite children to identify a challenge: "The ambulance cannot reach the clinic. What could we change?"
DAY 3	Add meaning Introduce signs, maps, labels, lists or tickets because the play now needs them.
DAY 4	Deepen the role-play Add selected props, clothing or tools based on the roles children have introduced.
DAY 5	Revisit and document Photograph the community and record children's explanations, theories and new questions.

Final reflection

- What did children notice or connect to their own lives?
- Which materials led to the deepest play?
- How did the invitation change across the week?
- What new vocabulary, theories or problems emerged?
- What could you remove, add or reposition next time?

THE LEARNING LAB APPROACH "Who helps us?" → "What do you notice?" → "What tools do people use?" → "What does our community need?" → "How can we create, build and play with that idea?"

Supporting children's curiosity through intentional environments and meaningful play.