

Ethnographic literature indicates that in many cultural communities around the world, children have extensive opportunities to learn through observing and participating in their community's work and other mature activities. We argue that in communities in which children are often segregated from adult work (as in middle-class European American communities), young children instead are often involved in specialised child-focused activities such as lessons, adult-child play (and scholastic play), and conversation with adults on child-related topics. We examine this argument with systematic time-sampled observations of the extent of 2- to 3-yearold children's access to adult work compared to their involvement in specialised child-focused activities. Observations focused on 12 children in each of four communities: two middle-class European American communities (West Newton, Massachusetts and Sugarhouse, Utah), Efe foragers of the Democratic Republic of Congo, and indigenous Maya of San Pedro, Guatemala. West Newton and Sugarhouse children had less frequent access to work and were involved more often in specialised child-focused activities than Efe and San Pedro children. The results support the idea that the middle-class European American children's frequent involvement in specialised child-focused activities may relate to their more limited opportunities to learn through observing work activities of their communities. It may be less necessary for the Efe and San Pedro children to be involved in specialised child-focused activities to prepare them for involvement in mature community practices, because they are already a regular part of them.