

iv. The Learning Environment: Physical Arrangements, Activities, and Social Relationships

There is strong consensus in the field of early childhood development that it is important to consider the mutuality of influences between children and their environment—the people they interact with and the characteristics of the activities and physical space they share with others.

High quality prekindergarten settings include positive characteristics of adult-child interactions such as sensitivity, stimulation, self regulation, responsiveness to the children's needs and signals, positive affect, and frequent verbal and social interaction. Factors important for a child's school readiness also include the amount of time he is read to, small group and one-to-one teaching interactions, engagement with functional and environmental print, exposure to well-planned lessons, and play experiences that promote literacy, math, and science. In addition, other significant factors described as key for an effective learning environment include the physical setup and richness of a child's classroom and home care environment.

Physical Arrangement of Spaces: Promoting Positive Early Childhood Outcomes

Effective classroom management can set the stage for exciting possibilities for children's learning. This includes attention to the organization of the space and furnishings, predictable daily routines, and responsive interactions between teachers and children. While these factors often are described as distinct, their interconnection is critical for promoting effective teaching and learning.

Successful teachers know that the arrangement and management of the early childhood classroom have direct effects on the kinds of behaviors children exhibit as they live and work together. The difference between chaos and an orderly atmosphere that facilitates learning depends in great part on how the teacher prepares the environment. That preparation involves what happens before school begins, when children arrive and depart, when schedule transitions occur, when children interact freely with equipment and materials, and when conflicts arise.

At the beginning of each school year before the children enter the classroom, the successful teacher must set up the environment properly. A well-planned physical room arrangement rich with environmental print impacts language development and the interactions among the children. Children enjoy small, cozy spaces with easily accessible materials and books. Much more talking and many fewer accidents can occur with this arrangement than with any other.

Components of such an environment include the following:

- Protecting children's health and safety
- Supporting children's physiological needs for activity, sensory stimulation, outdoor experiences, rest, and nourishment
- Providing a balance of rest and active movement throughout the day
- Providing materials that reflect the children's culture and background
- Protecting children's psychological safety (e.g., children feel secure, relaxed, and comfortable rather than disengaged, frightened, worried, or stressed)

Setting Up the Physical Space

Teachers must consider a number of factors and components of the physical space when setting up the classroom. The strong consensus regarding these factors is highlighted in the 2000 report *Eager to Learn: Educating our Preschoolers*.

- **Traffic Patterns:** Furniture and play center arrangement should be based on which areas children use most often and which play centers or areas should logically be located close to the door, to the sink, to the teacher's desk, etc.
- **Materials Placed at the Children's Level:** Things the children use should be put where they can reach them. When the children can access needed materials without having to ask the teacher to get them, they become more independent and activities proceed more quickly and smoothly.
- **Organized Storage:** The old adage "A place for everything and everything in its place" strictly applies in the early childhood classroom if the teacher hopes to avoid chaos, confusion, and a messy room. Children need the security that organization provides. All materials should be labeled to assist with organization and to reinforce literacy skills. When children help to organize their world, they learn classification skills and a sense of satisfaction from being independent and self-sufficient.
- **Adequate Equipment and Supplies:** Centers should have certain basic equipment and an ever-changing variety of materials to intrigue the children.
- **Clearly Delineated Areas:** Each area should have low and well-defined boundaries. Low boundaries allow the teacher an unobstructed view of the children at all times and give the room an open, interactive feel.
- **Coordinated Placement of Centers:** Teachers should separate noisy areas from quiet areas and place interlinked centers, such as the dress-up and kitchen areas, near each other to encourage creative interaction.
- **Small-Group and Independent Work Areas:** Separate learning areas are important for facilitating self-directed but teacher-guided hands-on activities on a variety of subjects and skill levels. In small groups, a child has the additional benefit of interacting with other children on a personal and rotating basis.
- **Large-Group Areas:** Early education classrooms need an open area large enough to accommodate all the children at one time for whole-group interactions. Specific considerations for this space include whether the children can sit comfortably or perform large muscle movements without feeling crowded and making the area free from distractions so that the children will focus on the large-group activity.

Classroom furniture should be child-sized, and labels and objects placed strategically where children can read them. The classroom should be clean, well maintained, interesting, and attractive. The classroom should be colorful and well lit and be decorated primarily with examples of children's and teacher's work displayed at the child's eye level and, when possible, supplemented with culturally and linguistically diverse posters, pictures, and books, depicting real people of differing abilities.

Using Physical Space to Promote Language and Literacy

Creating a classroom community that promotes children's language and literacy development requires that language and literacy materials, such as books, writing utensils, and printed material, are located throughout the classroom. The environment and teaching materials should be reflective of the children's needs, culture, and language of instruction. Techniques common to the prekindergarten classroom, such as thematic units and dramatic play activities, can promote literacy development when integrated across classroom activities. A high quality oral language and literature-rich environment addresses a few key research-based findings.