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ABSTRACT

Characteristics of a good institutional child care environment are briefly described. Discussion contrasts institutional and home environments. Topics addressed include safety, cleanliness, order, size and age appropriateness of equipment, and softness of surfaces. Also included are suggestions for using color schemes that create a sense of unity, uniformity, and calmness, and for facilitating communication with parents, children, and staff. Concluding remarks center on reducing classroom clutter and providing adequate storage. The discussion emphasizes the importance of the use of objective evaluation to obtain a clear idea of the environment's condition. (RH)

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Ideas For Infant & Toddler Environments

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TO THE EDUCATIONAL RESOURCES
INFORMATION CENTER (ERIC)."

by
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I. Institutional v Home Environment

Most professionals who work with young children and parents outside of the home setting try to make the institutional setting as "home-like" as possible. We assume this will help the parents and children feel more comfortable, at ease, and secure. This assumption is not necessarily valid. What we should be doing is providing the best possible environment for children, parents and staff. All should feel secure, important and cared for. A good child care environment is designed and maintained to meet the needs of all who use it. Here are some concepts a good institutional child care environment should reflect:

Safety. Providing a safe environment is a central duty of anyone who works with young children. The safe environment should reduce or eliminate the potential of accident or injury to a child, should minimize the need for adult supervision (this does not mean adults should not direct/monitor specific activities at specific times), should maximize child movement, choice and independent exploration, and should communicate safety concepts that can be adopted in the home.

Cleanliness. Again this is a critical concern for anyone entrusted with children. This involves how easy the environment is to keep clean, how easy is it to clean, how easy it is to sterilize, and cleanliness concepts parents

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can transfer to their homes. How easy is it for children and parents to help keep the room clean? Are there areas that collect dirt, food, etc.? Are there areas of draft, areas that are always too hot, areas where babies always seem to end up under adults' feet? When introducing anything into this environment - plants, sand, food for adults, pets, etc., one consideration must always be: how easy is this to keep clean?

Order. Order is a difficult thing to judge. It does not mean sterility, uniformity, adult structure and inflexibility. It does mean three general things: children can tell what's expected of them, what areas in the classroom are for what specific activities, and where things can be found; parents can easily see how the room is supposed to work, both for their activities, and for the children's activities; and the room is designed to make it easy for staff to function effectively.

These three 'orders' are created by many areas addressed later in this document (color, clutter, communication, etc.). To a degree order required in a child care setting is the opposite of order that occurs at home: a home is ordered according to the personality and uniqueness of the owner - often to the total confusion of everyone else. It is an extension of the owner's uniqueness and personality: it only has to work for the owner. A child care setting cannot be an extension of the teacher -

it must be orderly to the parents, children, other staff and users of the room.

One of the major considerations for order are things in the room that contradict the order you are trying to create. Is the children's water fountain in the parents' area? Are there toys in the quiet area that encourage noise? Does the music from the tape-recorder go into all areas of the room, negating your attempt to divide the room into distinct zones? Do children and/or adults have to walk through the quiet area to get to another zone? Are the toys in the block area either too high to reach, or stored in another area? Are children painting in the carpeted area?

Size and Age Appropriate. Most homes contain primarily adult size furniture, etc.: bath tubs, toilets, chairs, tables, doors, couches, etc. Obviously a good child care setting for children and parents must have furniture and other design features that match the childrens' and parents' size and developmental level.

This is critical both because inappropriately-sized equipment is dangerous and inconvenient, and because children need a world built to their own scale to feel secure, comfortable, and in control. Children who continually have to stretch, climb up steps to drink, and be told "be careful or you might fall" learn they don't belong; that the world is designed for others. We must teach children they do belong; we must also teach parents

how to change their homes to meet the physical and developmental needs of their children.

The child must know his world is responsive to his needs: not just designed to meet the needs of staff and parents.

Soft Environment. Children fall, trip, are risk-takers, and are often oblivious of their immediate environment. A good environment for children recognizes this fact, and is designed accordingly. Avoid sharp edges and corners (a rubberized material - like base - board - is available to glue into corners of the room that project - they are called corner moldings) plastic is kinder than wood; wood softer than metal. Cushions, foam rubber, padding, mattresses, a good base under the carpet, etc., all soften a fall.

II. Uniformity of Color Schemes.

It is not practical for most programs to have an entire building conform to a color scheme; however, a single color scheme for each room provides a sense of unity, uniformity, and calmness. Ideally everything in the room would be consistent with this scheme: carpet, tile, walls, curtains, equipment, etc. In most cases this is impractical. But usually enough of one color can give the room a sense of uniqueness and uniformity.

In most rooms carpet and tile colors are already determined. If you have a choice (have to replace them anyway) the carpet needs to be fairly dark (to resist dirt),

the tile light - to offset the carpet (I believe all rooms that serve young children must have tile and carpet). Good carpet colors are a dark grey (goes with any color), dark brown, or dark color to go with your color scheme (we have blue and russet red). Do not use carpets with lots of colors in them; tile should also be a single color - usually white. It can be marbled.

The colors picked for your color scheme depend on personal preference, lighting in the room, and existing carpet and tile colors. I suggest you select a single color, paint the walls with a very light shade of the color, then paint wood trim, built structures, and maybe doors with a darker version of the same color. We have done this with blues, and blue purples. Yellows don't seem to work for us.

Light colors - with lots of white in them - give the rooms lots of light - which is needed.

Use a paint that washes easily. Acrylic latex gloss paint works well (I hate oil paints). In areas that get lots of abuse - the block area, behind the water fountain or trash container - we attach a 1/8" piece of plexiglass to the wall (It comes in 4" x 8" sheets, but can be purchased in almost any size) This is very easy to wash, and protects the walls and the paint.

Of course everything within the room won't fit the color scheme. Just keep it in mind when you paint an old piece of equipment, purchase something that is already painted, or replace carpet or tile. Varnished and lacquered

furniture and classroom equipment fit in with any color scheme.

III. Communication.

Professionals working with children and parents desire to communicate a great deal of information: child development ideas, good parenting practices, safety tips, etc. Much of this communication is deliberate and direct: posters, articles, paintings on the wall, bulletin boards, etc. Other communication, however, is less direct - and often more powerful: how the room is set up, whether the room is clean, whether it is inviting to children and parents, whether it is well lit, and whether it reflects a sense of responsibility, care, and commitment.

In each room we are generally communicating to three distinct groups: parents, children, and staff. Small chairs and tables communicate to children we care that the environment meets their needs. It also communicates to parents that children have needs distinctly different from adults.

For each classroom evaluate what is being communicated, and to whom. Then determine whether the communication to one group distracts from what you are communicating to another group. For example, do lots of articles posted on the bulletin board for staff information actually intimidate parents, making them feel inadequate?

Remember, also, that children and staff are in the room for long periods of time. They get used to what is

being communicated - screening out anything irrelevant or unintelligible to them. Parents who come into a room only occasionally will often be overwhelmed and confused by all the information, variety, stimulation and apparent disorganization.

Specific Communication Ideas. Young children tend to see things up to a four feet from the floor. Adults on the other hand view most things from about four feet to eight feet - especially communication on walls and bulletin boards. Thus if you want to direct communication to children - patterns, pictures, symbols, etc., it should be done on the first four feet of the walls. Adult information - messages, articles, etc., above four feet.

Try to keep communication to each group separately. This provides a comfort zone for them in the room, it gives each group a sense of belonging, it avoids confusion and provides a certain order.

In the areas designated for parent communication, keep it simple and change it often. Probably address two or three general information topics at one time. Highlight the topic area - say bottle mouth - and post some basic, clear information on it. Then say where additional information can be found: in a file cabinet, on a shelf in the parent corner, to be distributed at the next parent meeting or class. Don't put entire articles on a board. Also leave large empty spaces - they often attract more than the material. Less is more, so to speak!

For children, add children's art work, cutouts and posters low down on the walls. Change these often. I don't like permanent paintings on walls; I also discourage 'cute' pictures. Remember here you are communicating to the child, not the parent or staff. If you want parents to enjoy their children's art work, place it in their bulletin board area.

Select material for children based on their interest and events in their life. Again large blank spaces are effective. Material directed at children placed over four-five feet above the ground not only intrudes on the area for parents, but makes the child feel small and insignificant in a huge, high ceilinged, adult-dominated room.

Decorations, symbols and art that is developmentally inappropriate obviously should not be in the rooms, - especially if directed to children. They also communicate the wrong thing to parents: that their children should be learning skills, symbols and behaviors they are not ready to learn. Since many of the parents we work with have inappropriate expectations of their children's behavior and academic progress already, this is a dangerous thing to do.

Staff Information.

Information directed to staff should be in a small, designated area, away from children and parents. Don't confuse parent information with staff information; don't expect staff to pick-up critical information from the parent area - for example child development ideas, etc. If you need to communicate or train staff in those areas, do it

directly - through handouts, trainings and staff bulletin boards.

IV. Clutter and Storage.

Multiple use classrooms tend to get very cluttered and messy. Staff need to work constantly to assure the rooms have a sense of purpose and a feeling that someone cares. However, an environment should assist you in achieving your basic tasks; it should not become that basic task. If staff are spending a great amount of time cleaning, ordering, and putting things back, something is wrong. Here are some ideas to assist in keeping the rooms the way you want them.

Outside Evaluation. Have an outsider - someone who is not in the classroom often - come by periodically and evaluate the space from the perspective of a person who sees it for the first time. As pointed out earlier, someone who is constantly in an environment will order that environment in his/her mind, and therefore not view it objectively.

Don't ask this evaluator for specific solutions - ask rather for general feedback: "Does it make you feel comfortable?" "Is it overwhelming?" "Is it too sterile?" "Does it look safe?" "Does it seem over planned?" "Thrown together?" "Scattered, etc.?"

Evaluate Materials - Don't Just Collect. Evaluate all materials, furniture and equipment in each room: plants, chairs, boxes, child size furniture, blocks, easels, etc. - and ask yourself these questions of each material: What is the purpose of it? Does it fulfill that purpose? How often

is it used? Who uses it (parents, staff or children)? Is the purpose for the material, and the way it is used, consistent with our philosophy? Does it distract or compete with other materials? Does it duplicate other materials with no real additional benefit? Is storage of the material accessible to those who use it? Does the storage take away important space from activities? Also, is the material easy to keep clean, easy to maintain, safe for those who use it, and functional? For example, is the time needed to care for plants worth the results?

Based on your responses to these questions, make changes to meet your needs. A material that is almost never used should probably be removed; a material for adults that is unsafe to use by children needs to be located away from children; material used only at specific times probably should be stored when not in use.

Storage. Storage can make or break a child care environment. Adequate storage space is needed, ease of storage is required, and storage that is behind doors reduces the need to clean items, and reduces clutter. Generally there are three kinds of storage solutions: open shelves accessible to the users of the material (this necessitates adult materials being out of the reach of children, and some kind of discrimination between staff and parent materials); closed shelves inside the room (the most effective are floor to ceiling space with large doors: built-in closet space), and storage outside the room.

The important issue is whether storage available is being used effectively. Once safety issues are resolved - cleaning fluids, etc. - assess use and storage of all materials. Usage determines where things are stored. Something used three times a year obviously is stored outside the room; something used everyday should be stored in the room - unless it's something - like brooms, etc., that can be picked up and returned after children leave.

Effective use of high closets within the room also requires the less - often used materials to be higher up in the closet. Materials that must be accessible while children or parents are in the room must be stored within the room - to avoid lapses in supervision.

Materials that are accessible to children and parents directly from shelves, open cupboards, etc., are also visually accessible. This means they communicate accessibility, use, and availability to anyone who enters the room. This is great if this is your intent; if there are materials that should only be accessible to specific groups, at specific times, then maybe sliding doors, curtains, etc., are needed. Remember open and accessible means open and accessible at all times.

Every item - except basic furniture - in the room should have a storage "home". Evaluate each room to see whether you have this space. Sometimes additional storage space is needed - and often the best solution is outside the classroom. Storage space is a little like blank spaces on

walls and bulletin boards - the more you have, the more effective the materials and equipment that remain in the room and on the truly accessible shelves.