



Environments for Infants and Toddlers

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The physical environment has a powerful impact on children's learning and development. Well-designed environments support exploration, give young children a sense of control, and enable children to engage in focused, self-directed play. The physical environment also affects relationships. Well-designed spaces evoke a sense of security by offering intimate play areas within the larger environment that allow children to explore and reflect while still being connected to their caregiver and the rest of the group. This sense of security is a prerequisite in the formation of a healthy sense of self, or identity. In appropriately designed classrooms, children are given an opportunity to play independently and in small groups as they choose, and teachers are supported in their role as observers and facilitators of children's learning and development.

Developing a Vision: Creating a Master Plan

Whether developing a new child care facility, remodeling an existing center, or attempting a makeover of a classroom or family child care home, planning is the key to a successful design. A well-thought-out plan will help to avoid wasting time and money on short-term, temporary fixes that may need to be addressed later. It is wiser to make changes in stages than to compromise quality by trying to take on too much at once. Start by identifying the improvements desired.

If major changes are planned, enlist a design professional to help optimize use of space and budget and insure that the renovation complies with all code requirements. Identify all resources, not only available funds. Parents or other family members may be able to assist in carpentry, plumbing, and landscaping. They may also be able to help in soliciting donations from businesses. Stores in the local community may be able to donate lumber and carpeting.

Key Criteria for Creating Quality Environments

While environments for care differ widely, there are certain elements that

contribute to a quality experience for infants and toddlers.

Group Size. The number of children cared for in one classroom affects infants' health and well-being. With larger groups there is an increase in upper respiratory illnesses and ear infections (Bartlett and others, 1986; Bell and others, 1989). In crowded spaces there is more conflict, aggressiveness, and unfocused play (Ruopp and others, 1979). Infants should be cared for in groups of no more than six to eight children; toddlers, in groups of no more than eight to twelve children.

Room Size. The size of each classroom must be large enough to meet individual children's needs and the group's needs. Provide a *minimum* of 50 square feet of usable space per child. If, however, the current setting provides a smaller classroom with a larger group size, it is critical to view everything that is available as a potential learning environment. For example, a teacher might take three or four young toddlers into the hallway with push and pull toys, balls, or ride-on toys. Or, teachers can organize daily schedules in a way that allows for smaller groups to use the same space at different times

during the day. For instance, one teacher might be outside with a few children while another teacher is inside with the other children.

Sinks and Toilets. The right number of appropriately placed plumbing fixtures is a necessary requirement of a well-designed classroom. Food preparation and diapering areas should be separate and allow for full supervision of the room. Child-sized hand-washing sinks should be located in every classroom at the right height for the age group served, as should appropriately sized toilets when serving older toddlers.

Sculpting the Environment. An infant and toddler environment must accommodate a variety of activity areas, such as eating, messy play, reading, manipulative play, and symbolic play, as well as diapering and napping. The classroom must also be flexible enough to support children's varying developmental abilities, including children's special needs.

Through the use of items such as platforms, lofts, recessed areas, low walls, fabric canopies, risers, wall storage, and toy shelves placed along the periphery of the classroom, the room can be sculpted

to provide a variety of age-appropriate activities. Couches, chairs, and tables can be used (particularly in family child care homes) to assist in defining the play space. Placing activity areas along the walls of the room will help to create boundaries that support individual and small-group play as well as provide teachers with the ability to closely supervise the entire group.

The placement of each activity area is as important as the specific furnishings and materials in those areas. A well-thought-out space plan can actually make a classroom or home feel and function as one 25 to 30 percent larger than one with a poorly laid-out plan. The importance of an optimal space plan becomes even more compelling when working in a smaller room or one with a larger group size.

Classroom Furnishings. To complement furnishings such as high-quality wooden commercial furniture, infant and toddler programs should also turn to home and import stores to "cozy up" the room. Some examples of good items to consider are washable quilts and pillow shams, upholstered chairs (with washable slipcovers), cloth hammocks, gliders, armoires for additional storage, fabric

to create canopied areas, and woven baskets to display balls, dolls, and other play items. A track light or wall-mounted lamp can help to distinguish the reading area from other activity spaces. Plants and a fish tank can help bring nature indoors. Of course, children's health and safety must always be considered first when choosing materials and equipment. Keep in mind that all materials and surfaces must be washable, lighting cords must be out of children's reach, and plants must be nontoxic.

Outdoor Play Area. Whenever possible, every classroom and family child care home should provide direct access

to the outside play space. The outside play area should be an extension of the classroom. An appropriately designed outdoor play area should include many natural elements, such as grass, gentle hills, sand, dirt, tree stumps, shade trees, and water sources. It should feel more like a park than a playground. Benches, trellises, planter boxes, hammocks, and wind chimes are some of the possibilities. With a thoughtful design, the natural landscape will itself provide opportunities for gross motor play. Every indoor activity has the potential of having an outdoor counterpart. Outdoor counterparts can also help to compensate for indoor environments with less-than-optimal square footage.