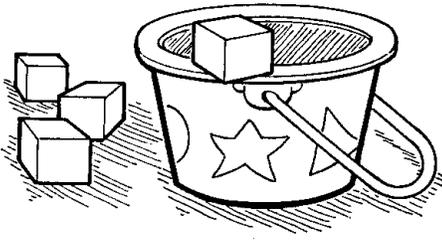


The Environment: Your Teaching Partner



The physical arrangement of your program is your teaching partner—communicating expectations and providing cues that support children's development. The messages children receive from the environment strongly impact their interactions with each other and with materials. When the environment is working, children receive cues that actually promote their sense of order, exploration, and ownership.

★ **FOSTER A SENSE OF ORDER** – Materials can be arranged to help children understand where they are stored and which ones go together. What happens when art materials are stuffed into a large box with a lid? Children open the lid to find a confusing mess, making it nearly impossible to initiate play or organize their thoughts around a play theme. When those same art materials are grouped by function—paper is stacked by color, a small box contains different kinds of glue—and in clearly visible, easily accessible containers, children receive unspoken cues about how to play. Their play becomes more engaging and complex, and they learn something about organization in the process.

Children may not be naturally tidy, but they thrive in an environment that makes it easy and satisfying to put toys away—especially when putting materials away is as fun as playing with them. Matching materials to pictures or words on the shelves, refilling intriguing storage containers, or sorting colored paper into same-color boxes is an engaging learning activity. Everyone benefits when your “teaching partner” cues children to take the lead in keeping play materials organized.

★ **INVITE EXPLORATION** – Interesting, open-ended materials and play opportunities invite children to pursue their natural interest in exploring the world around them. Children are invited to explore when you combine materials that have different play themes—large sheets of paper and pencils in the block area—or add new open-ended materials and collections to your environment. Open-ended materials require imagination, have no “rules,” and can be played with in many different ways. They heighten children's willingness and ability to explore in early childhood settings that are often quite structured.

What kind of play do you see with materials that imply only one use—puzzles, shape-sorters, and pegboards? Compare that with children's play with water in a trough, a collection of keys, blankets, and other materials that offer seemingly endless play possibilities. While both types of play are important, most programs benefit from offering more opportunities for exploration.

You can provide more cues that say “exploration is allowed here” by combining old materials and gathering new, open-ended materials. If you really want to see learning in action, watch children respond to the invitation to explore when they are provided with paper towel rolls, a bale of hay, giant cardboard boxes, seed collections, or yards of fabric!

★ **CREATE OWNERSHIP** – You can also provide cues to children about their level of ownership and belonging in your program. When children are acknowledged as important members of the program community, their level of independence is enhanced and meaningful engagement with one another and play materials is more likely to occur. Make sure children can reach materials independently. Get them involved in designing the play space, making decisions about play themes for dramatic play, and deciding how to feature their art work and other creations.

Next time you walk into your program, get down on the children's level and consider the messages they might be receiving from the environment. Then, go a step further, and look closely at the way children are currently playing in your program. Combine this information to help you find fun ways to use your environment to communicate to children, making it your partner in teaching.

Try It Out

You may encounter children for whom a subtle message in the environment is simply not enough. Young children with sensory impairments, for example, may need very specific cues from the environment. It is often helpful to use the expertise of the child's parents and other team members to identify creative ways to let your environment "speak" to a child who has a hearing or vision impairment.

The first step, of course, is to clearly communicate your goals. Many parents and specialists may not realize you are trying to create a space that gives children specific messages about order, exploration, and ownership.

Next, be sure you understand the child's strengths and abilities; ask specific questions. If the child is blind, how have other team members tried to provide specific environmental cues? If the child has a difficult time focusing on verbal directions, has anyone tried using picture cues? Knowing what the child can already do and what works in other settings will give you good ideas about strategies you can use in your own environment.

Finally, find a way to show the child's parents and other team members how you use the environment to send messages to children. Learning from environmental cues is a typical way for young children to gain new information. Share your successes. When a child has a disability, it is important that all team members work together to take advantage of this powerful learning tool.

A Child Care Provider's Question

QUESTION: *Our program has a limited toy and material budget. In fact, by the time we purchase consumable supplies like paint and paper, there is hardly anything left. If you had only \$50 to spend, what toys/materials would you purchase?*

ANSWER: Given \$50 or \$500, the first choice should probably be play materials and supplies, not toys. Many teachers make the mistake of being pressured by glossy catalogs and impressive labels into thinking that toys are what makes a good early childhood program.

In fact, given \$50, you might be better off if you used the money to arrange the materials you already have to get the most use out of them. Using the ideas described in this tip sheet (order, exploration, and independence), you might look for fun containers to store your dress-up clothes, add a science element to your Lego collection by acquiring a postage scale, put up hooks so that children can get their own bibs for lunch, or purchase film to make picture labels the children can understand.

The best answer to your question can be found by observing the children themselves. What addition would support the play behaviors you already see? What would help to develop play themes that reflect children's current interests? Remember that the imagination of a young child seldom requires fancy materials. Your budget will go far if you build it around no-cost or low-cost raw materials that

are chosen and arranged especially for the children currently enrolled in your program.

Before you spend a penny, make a list of playthings that you, the children, and their families can gather for free. Here are a few ideas to get you started:

- ★ Contact a quilting group for scraps of fabric.
- ★ Ask an appliance dealer for 3 or 4 large empty boxes.
- ★ Save cardboard paper towel rolls.
- ★ Ask each family to bring in one article of clothing for your dress-up clothes.
- ★ Contact a shoe store and borrow a shoe sizer and shoe-horns for a week.
- ★ Call a local hospital and ask for unused, disposable medical supplies: gowns, caps, gloves, and other fun stuff.
- ★ Go to a fast food restaurant and ask for unused food containers, napkins, hats, and other supplies.

