“Good room arrangement is essential; one cannot have a viable early childhood program without it. Yet time and again, administrators, caregivers, and teachers fail to see its singular importance to young children.

The room and its furnishings should be a quiet background for child activities, a simple, reliable ground of support for child learning initiative.”

— Sally Cartwright
Tenants Harbor, Maine
Creating Environments That Intrigue and Delight Children and Adults

by Wendy Shepherd and Jennifer Eaton

Wendy Shepherd is director/lecturer at Mia-Mia Child and Family Study Centre, Institute of Early Childhood, at Macquarie University in Sydney, Australia. She has had experience working with children and families in elementary school, preschool, and long day care settings. She has also worked as an adviser in children’s services. The dual role of directing and lecturing is to date the most challenging. Directing the demonstration center for the Institute of Early Childhood has provided an opportunity for putting into practice the long held belief that environments support the learning process. Working with students is an opportunity to share experiences from the field.

Jennifer Eaton is assistant director/lecturer at Mia-Mia Child and Family Study Centre. She has had experience in both preschool and long day care settings. She also works with the Institute students in the academic program, and her particular interests in early childhood education are relaxation, movement, and play. Lecturing in the academic program has provided an opportunity to link practice to theory, and this is an aspect that the students find most valuable.

Attention to the design, organization, presentation, and atmosphere of the learning environment is crucial. Creating an enriched environment that is a space for wonder and delight, a place for the stimulation and exchange of ideas, is an essential component of an early childhood program. The arrangement of the physical space should invite children to explore, inquire, hypothesize, solve problems, and to marvel at the wonders of nature. Children should have the opportunity to make choices, to play or work with others or alone, to be quiet or busy, or to settle into cozy spaces which they have constructed or imagined.

Greenman synthesizes and validates the teacher’s intuitive knowledge. He affirms the effect of the environment in shaping children’s behavior. He inspires reflection on the organization of the learning environment within early childhood settings when he states, “An environment is a living, changing system. More than physical space, it includes the way time is structured and the roles we are expected to play. It conditions how we feel, think, and behave; and it
dramatically affects the quality of our lives.” (Greenman, 1988, p. 5)

Through reflection, the environment can be viewed as a dynamic and key element of teaching and learning. The principles of enriching an environment to promote wonder and delight should underpin each statement within the center philosophy. This requires a shift away from traditional and non-specific terms such as caring and nurturing to statements which reflect a more complex understanding of the integral role of the environment in the learning process. Reflecting on and evaluating the environment enables an understanding of the environment as “the third teacher” to emerge. The family is the child’s primary teacher, ideally the early childhood professional shares this responsibility in a mutually respectful partnership. The environment is the third teacher.

The center culture or climate conveys messages to children and adults. Elements such as time, space, and resources affect the quality of the interactions between staff and children and families. Thus the center culture and climate must respect, honor, and value children, families, and staff.

In preparation, therefore, the process requires:

- Reflection, discussion, and collaboration on philosophy and practice.
- Observing, collecting, and recalling insights into what intrigues children and adults.
- Respecting, valuing, and including cultural diversity within the program and the environment.
- Organizing time so that routines do not dominate the program and allowing for large blocks of time for children and adults to be involved in observation, exploration, investigations, and engaging interactions.
- Valuing rather than diminishing children’s imagination and creativity by avoiding furnishings and displays which promote a commercial image of childhood.
- Respecting and valuing children’s thinking and doing regardless of learning style and preferences.

Begin by:

- Planning environments to “afford” the preferred activities of children.
- De-cluttering the environment (this requires great strength as most early childhood people are bower birds or are acquisitive!).
- De-institutionalizing the environment.
- Taking stock of equipment and resources — if adults think equipment and resources are shabby, what is the message conveyed to children?
- Organizing fundraising events to replace old shabby items, or simply going without — chances are, the items or equipment are well past their use by date, although it is hard parting with “old” favorites.
- Maintaining resources, equipment, and the environment is an ongoing task requiring diligence and hard work by everyone.
- Considering the presentation of the environment, learning centers, and activities — giving attention to color, design, shape, form, and function.
- Using cultural objects and containers — for example, wall hangings and fabrics, cushions, rugs, baskets, masks.
- Arranging items, objects, and resources in an enticing, thought-provoking, inviting, special, or imaginative way.

**Places of Wonder and Delight**

Aesthetically pleasing objects, arrangements, and displays are often undervalued or overlooked in early childhood settings. “Aesthetics is a worthy but often unconsidered goal when designing a visual environment for infants and toddlers (and preschoolers). Children are more likely to grow up with an eye for beauty if the adults around them demonstrate that they value aesthetics.” (Gonzalez-Mena and Eyer, 1997, p. 94)

The arrangement of the environment, or objects in it, should move children to a higher, more complex order of thinking, to make links and connections. In other words, making “ordinary things look extraordinary” (Kolbe, 1994, p. 11).

A toddler was observed playing with a “family” of cone shaped mother of pearl spiral shells in the block corner and had returned them to their cardboard square on top of a shelving unit. The shells were not replaced in order of size and on seeing this another...
toddler very deliberately organized them from small to big, lining them up in a neat row. And in another group, an infant/toddler at the lunch table had a daily ritual of picking up the bud vase and smelling the flowers and carefully replacing it. These observations are the rewards for staff who take the time and effort in enhancing children’s experiences.

Enriching environments is not costly. In fact, it makes for more thoughtful decisions about equipment purchases in the light of tight budgets. Found objects or “gifts” from families add intriguing qualities to room arrangements. Home like furnishings and furniture add an unexpected and comfortable dimension so that both adults and children feel at home and valued.

Research indicates children prefer enclosed spaces and may often modify open arrangements to create “refuges” for their play (Kirby, 1989). Therefore, to delight children and to extend their play, arrange each play space into a designated play enclosure. Low shelving units are useful as dividers and have the utilitarian facility of providing storage as well as a surface for display.

Once the room is organized into designated play spaces, adding the wonder and delight is the next step. It is important to consider that children should be trusted to value the special and interesting additions to their classroom. The following is an example of adults doubting children’s ability to do so:

The teacher wanted to place five specimen vases on the writing table to contain a variety of unusual spring flowers. The teaching team brainstormed ways of securing the vases — ranging from making a wooden plinth, blue tac, masking tape, and plaster. It was decided that all of the ideas would be ugly and defeating the purpose of creating a beautiful display. It was cautiously decided to just place them on the table. They are still there to this day!

Some ideas to think about:

- Mirrors: on walls, in front of work stations, in learning centers, inside alcoves, in home corner, and in the outdoor environment. Mirrors to reflect light, to place behind objects, to provide another perspective.

- Lighting: soft lighting from lamps, directed/spot lighting to focus on objects or children’s work, light tables, lava lamps, torches and shadow play, fairy lights with festoons of muslin or in branches of twisted willow or accenting displays or children’s constructions.

- Natural elements: flowers, foliage, sturdy vegetables, seed pods, shells, birds’ nests, feathers — displayed in real vases or arranged in shadow boxes or baskets of all shapes, sizes, and types.

- Clear containers or spaghetti jars filled with water and lemons or leaves or shells. The water magnifies and intensifies color, texture, pattern, and shape.

- Snails, worms, ants, tadpoles, fish, hermit crabs, milkweed, caterpillars housed in containers simulating their habitat.

- “Families” of pumpkins, or leaves, or pine cones to display in size order from large to small (manufactured items such as teddy bears, shapes are more usual but still fascinating for children).

Made objects:

- Gallery prints.
- Sculptures.
- Pottery.
- Interesting and precious ornaments (children can learn to be so careful when handling precious items).

- Clothing, costumes, soft furnishings, masks, wall hangings which represent the diversity of cultures represented in the center and others in the wider community.

- Multicultural cooking implements in home corner, the center kitchen, and for use by children at meal times.

The resources:

- Colored paper arranged in rainbow order on shelves.

- Collage materials which reflect a common attribute — e.g., paper, fabric, yarn, or cardboard in different shades of a color or type or transparent.

- Writing implements stored in small baskets or beautiful boxes.

The lists above only offer a few suggestions. The materials or objects themselves often suggest the method and context for their display. Through taking care of the environment and thoughtfully planning the room arrangement as a team, the people who work and play in the room gain a sense of community and a sense of belonging.
Ssense of Belonging

By weaving in resources donated by families, the families will gain a sense of belonging and ownership. Photographs also communicate messages of valuing and membership within a group. Photographs of children and staff and families can be grouped together, displayed on a low shelf or in frames on the wall which are at child height.

Photographs can be used in documentation to capture moments in time that highlight the processes of learning. The notion that the process is important is imparted to children and their families. Children can refer to the documentation to reflect on their past work and progress forward.

Photographs used in cubbies or lockers instead of symbols provide each child with a sense of ownership or place. The use of video cameras and other technological devices will no doubt be the tools of the future to reproduce images of children and adults within a setting.

Designated Play Spaces

Children in early childhood settings need familiarity and stability in their environment. They need the comfort and certainty of knowing where to find materials and resources and to know that they can return each day to an environment in which they feel valued and respected. Young children also need a sense of order. Gonzalez-Mena and Eyer (1997) state, “Room arrangement should contribute to the sense of order” (p. 202). Indeed, what messages do we send to children when their play environment is constantly rearranged, altered, or packed away?

■ In many centers, it is common practice to pack away large areas of the room. This places an unnecessary physical burden and time constraint on staff. It can also prove very unsettling for children as they watch this take place around them.

■ Children’s interests are likely to be sustained when they are able to return to a play space or learning center regularly, assured that the equipment they need or wish to use is available and accessible.

■ Children are far less likely to invest their time and effort in a project if they know it has to be packed away at the end of a play session or the end of a day. For example: Enable children who are building with blocks, especially on a large scale, to keep their structures intact, ready to be extended upon over days and even weeks (let the cleaners vacuum around it!).

It has been fascinating to observe children, as young as two and three years of age, decorating their elaborate

block structures with found objects from the room resources, some of which have remained standing for more than three weeks. It can provide a wonderful opportunity for enriched play, encouraging collaborative work amongst peers, challenge and extension of their problem solving skills, and more complex use of materials.

■ Children are likely to become more self-directed rather than teacher directed if they can make choices and decisions about materials to use. Open shelving and open storage spaces filled with a range, for example, of art media or construction toys or games, and puzzles, can be empowering for a child, rather than waiting for a teacher to make their choice about what resources will be provided on any given day. When children are given real choices, they are more likely to remain at an experience or a task for an extended period of time.

■ A playroom with open shelving and designated spaces allows children to take some responsibility for maintaining the environment as they quickly become familiar with where items belong and how they are to be arranged. Children tend to take a lot more care of the materials and objects on display if they are given some responsibility for this.

■ In a stable and orderly environment, children are secure in their knowledge of where things are and aimless wandering is therefore reduced.

■ When there is a sense of order about an environment, it helps to organize and support children’s rituals. This can be especially important for infants in their attempts to navigate their way around a room. One example of this was observed when a 12 month old infant, on arrival each morning, would toddle over to the cozy book area, select a book from the shelf, and plunk himself down on the cushions to “read.”

The Teacher’s Role

The teacher plays a crucial role in designing and maintaining an enriched environment with thoughtful consideration given to room arrangements and the aesthetic presentation of equipment, documentation, children’s artwork, and objects of interest. There is an assumption that the organization of space, time, and resources requires more staff; but, in reality, through the processes put in place by effective organization and simple yet enticing room arrangements, staff have more time and energy to give to meaningful interactions with children and colleagues. The following is a list of other considerations for the teacher:

■ Creating an environment that supports peer collaboration. In the orga-
nization of the environment, we need to ensure the establishment of spaces where children can work together in collaboration. Such opportunities for children to work in pairs and shared small group experiences enhance their social construction of knowledge. Staff should assess their playroom and surrounding areas for spaces in which children can work in an uninterrupted and relaxed mode that is conducive to observation, discussion, active participation, and reflection.

Meanwhile, staff need to recognize that some children will want to observe others from a distance until they feel confident to become involved, and this space or area should be factored into the organization of the learning environment. As Katz (1991) advocates, “Data from child development research suggests that, in principle, an appropriate pedagogy for young children is one that provides ample opportunity for them to be engaged in activities in which cooperation and coordination of effort are functional and consequential” (p. 63).

- **Providing long, uninterrupted periods of time.** Too often, we timetable in constant changes to the daily schedule which prevent children from becoming engaged for extended periods of time. Instead, children should be able to work with the understanding that they are not going to be required to finish a game, project, construction, or painting within a 30 minute time frame. We need to ensure, then, that spaces are available for children to continue uninterrupted. It is also important that routines do not rule the program, but rather they should be part of the rhythm of the day.

- **The rhythm of the day should be unhurried.** This is more likely to occur when staff are not engaged in unnecessary packing away and resetting of play areas. They, therefore, have more time to establish calm and enjoyable routines for meals, sleep, and toileting.

### In Summary

It is so satisfying to observe children, families, and staff communicating meaningfully and working purposefully. When children respond to the environment and investigate, invent, ask questions, collaborate with their peers, learn from one another, stay on task, choose, decide, negotiate, and demonstrate their care for the environment, the role of the teacher has been exemplified as facilitator and guide.

Adding elements to promote wonder and delight is only a part of the process. All aspects of the program must be considered to ensure that what has been added is not simply “window dressing.” There is a need to re-look at the daily practice of the teacher, the environment, and how to organize it to support peer collaboration. The planning

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**De-institutionalizing the Environment**

**Why is this important?**

- Children can spend up to 12,500 hours within a long day care setting, more hours than the child will spend at school — an institution (Wangmann, 1995).
- Most institutions require conformity and compliance.
- The trappings of an institution act as barriers to the development of warm, trusting relationships, a sense of community, and feelings of ownership and belonging.

**What are the trappings of an institution?**

- Notice boards bristling with notices for everyone and no one in particular which are never noticed, never culled or tidied.
- Colored footprints or fluorescent arrows leading to notices are condescending and demeaning, and are not usually removed at the end of the event.
- Anonymous “washing lines” of children’s paintings strung across classrooms or hallways.
- Cubbies with locker symbols that remind the current “key” holder that when they move on, the symbol remains.
- Boxes overflowing with lost property that no one appears to have lost.
- Forlorn, weary, worn equipment which is shunted around in haphazard room arrangements which indicates the adults hold the power.
- Displays of commercial images from books and cartoon characters, posters and charts, birthday, alphabet, number, color, shape posters, and charts displayed in layers on every spare inch of wall space adding to the visual chaos.
- Bright fluorescent tube lighting.
- Utilitarian institution furniture and soft furnishings.

*continued . . .*
of the day should support children’s need to dream and think and play and to grow and learn in an environment that nurtures all of the senses.

“The years between two and seven seem to be crucial in how children deal with mysteries. Within these years, they form beliefs, biases, artistry, curiosity, and a sense of self that carries them forward into adulthood. If allowed and encouraged, all children can remain active and curious philosophers and scientists throughout their lives.” (Latham, 1997, p. 12)

References

Good room arrangement supports the purposes and needs of its inhabitants. Since purposes and needs shift as people change and develop and since both staff and children move out of the setting over time, it is essential that a supportive environment be flexible to respond to all these changes. Three aspects of room arrangement that can support or undermine flexibility are money, storage, and regular attention to how well the environment is working.

**On Spending Money**

Money can do wonders for a room, both positive and negative. If you have the good fortune to remodel or build, be careful that you spend money on creating a basic shell that will respond to many uses. A simple rectangular room with carefully placed doors, good access to the outside play area, and a roomy bathroom is much more important than the expensive design features that the architect may favor. It is important to remember that you know more about how your program actually works than is possible for someone trained in a very different discipline. For example, in designing an infant-toddler room, the architect proposes an elaborate built-in diapering area. It would be

*Elizabeth Prescott is Professor Emeritus of Pacific Oaks College, Pasadena, California. She has had a series of research grants from DHEW to study child care environments.*
As I see it, there are two solutions to the purchasing dilemma. One is to purchase cautiously, asking staff and colleagues about their experience, and to think carefully not only about the positives, but also about the negatives. The other solution is to make good storage a top priority.

On the Joys of Good Storage

There are many types of storage, and each has its uses in supporting the flexibility of rooms. One is the large area, perhaps in the basement or storage shed, where all staff can put those large items that they are not using, like round tables, the indoor gym, or the water and sand tables. These items may well fit the plans of another staff member. This then becomes the place where staff can go and find things they need for their own curriculum ideas. Often just going and looking around will generate ideas and enthusiasm.

Cupboards or closets for the staff who use the room are another important form of storage. Some may use it to store things that need adult supervision or have loose parts that could easily be lost. Others like to have special activities put away for a series of rainy days or the occasional “difficult” day.

Money can also buy long lasting expensive items such as indoor gyms, tables and chairs, and fancy curriculum materials. You look at the catalog and decide to buy round tables for the children. One staff member claims that there will be fewer arguments about who sits where and you think that roundness is somehow aesthetically more pleasing. When the tables arrive, you are surprised by the amount of space they occupy. It is hard to keep good pathways, especially since enthusiastic block builders need some of the space now occupied by tables.

Moreover, the next year, the new head teacher likes to do large group activities like dancing and musical games. She complains that if she only had rectangular tables the children could move them to create open space. She also likes to keep the children together for lunch and snack because she feels that this gives them a sense of group membership. Again she fusses that you cannot create one table with rounds, but it is no problem with rectangles.

It is inevitable that not every purchase will be popular with everyone at all times. The indoor gym that seemed essential the year of the terrible winter now sits unused and in the way. The water and sand tables that were so popular with last year’s staff are now used as an over-flow storage area because this year’s very active children could not resist using the sand and water for more exciting purposes in other areas of the room.
good reasons to withdraw curriculum choices. You might decide that certain table games would work better after the holidays or that certain activities were being chosen because children were a bit afraid to try others.

Open, well organized storage can suggest ideas and themes for play; and as items are added or removed, the staff have opportunities to observe how children respond to the changes. For example, in the block corner, moving the triangles and half round blocks that have been largely ignored to a spot next to the most popular ones can often lead to entirely new uses. Or withdrawing the planes and trucks to another part of the room and replacing them with animals and dolls will often draw in children who may not have previously used the block area.

**On Paying Attention**

Flexibility, in and of itself, does not guarantee that a room will serve its users. It is only a tool that makes it possible to adjust the setting as needed. Just because things can be changed does not mean that they should be. An important part of the social development of young children is learning how various settings work. For example, story time requires quite different behavior than working puzzles or dramatic play. There are all sorts of social subtleties to be mastered and the stability of spatial configurations plays an important part in the first steps of mastery. For this reason, I urge that flexibility be used thoughtfully to facilitate and expand a child’s confidence that the rules of a setting have been mastered.

How can you tell if a room is working as you would wish? One easy and effective way is to ask yourself at the end of each day what went well and what did not satisfy you. If you repeatedly have the same complaints, the space is probably not supporting your intentions. It may be that, as the year has progressed, the setting has been getting more complex with added props and expanded play. As a result, the pathways may have shifted or almost disappeared. The storage areas may now make it hard for children to find what they want and to clean up because no one is sure where things belong.

If you keep paying attention to the supports that the environment must give to each activity, you will quickly see when a setting needs some adjusting. For example, group story time is a setting that requires that a child not yield to the temptation to touch a neighboring child or materials on nearby shelves. Some children find this very difficult but can be helped by cues like a lap, chair, or carpet square that help them remember boundaries. In like manner, many table activities require sitting still, completing an activity according to the rules, and not making it a major social event. This combination of constraints often defeats certain children who may need some privacy and freedom to move about while working.

When staff can view the physical space as an active part of the program to be persistently observed as used by each child, these observations open the door to wonderful conversations about the work. There is no need to blame anyone; there is only the need to keep looking and to formulate and reformulate hunches about what might happen. More and more conversations among staff begin with sentences like “Did you notice . . .” or “What if we rearranged . . . .” Knowing that you have the flexibility to make changes provides a powerful incentive to observe and to communicate. And when this is happening, everyone in the setting can thrive.
Being forced to maintain the same level of alertness and concentration all day undoubtedly places internal stress on children’s bodies, even if this is not perceptible to the adult eye.

A variety of moods — providing options for different levels of engagement — helps people to feel comfortable and remain alert in the same environment over long periods of time. Many centers suffer from either blandness or overstimulation with insufficient variety of mood within each group room.

The mood for each function should match the level of activity and physical energy children expend in performing it. Tranquil activities occur best in warm, soft, textured spaces. Expansive activities require spaces that are cooler, harder, and more vibrant in tone. The ultimate goal is a room with several activity areas, each of which has a unique spirit of place. Then, as children go from place to place within the room’s four walls, they can experience spaces that are soft and hard, dark and light, cold and warm, colorful and bland, large and small, noisy and quiet.

Differentiation in the physical space can be provided by varying:

- floor height (raised or lowered levels, platforms, lofts, pits)
- ceiling height (canopies, eaves, trellises, skylights)

Anita Rui Olds, Ph.D., has pioneered the innovative design of environmental facilities for children, both nationally and internationally, for over 25 years. She is principal of her own design and consulting firm, Anita Olds and Associates (Woodacre, California), and director of The Child Care Design Institute, an annual training program for child care professionals and designers, jointly sponsored by Harvard University’s Graduate School of Design and Tufts University.
boundary height (walls, half-height dividers, low shelves)
lighting (natural, fluorescent, incandescent, local, indirect)

Mood setting also results from decorative techniques that make a space sensorially rich and varied — plants, pillows, colors, textures, fabric, knick-knacks, etc. Anything that moves, grows, or changes shape (mobiles, wind chimes, fish, animals, plants), or that reflects movement (mirrors) will add visual interest and excitement. Tablecloths, flowers, subdued lighting, and candles in nonbreakable jars at meal times create delightful atmospheres that are part of the good life children are entitled to share.

Sensory variety can be provided by varying:

visual interest (wall murals, classical art, children’s paintings, views to trees and sky)

auditory interest (mechanical gadgets, music, voices humming, gerbils scratching, children laughing)

olfactory interest (cookies baking, fresh flowers, plants in the earth)

textural interest (wood, fabric, fur, carpet, plastic, laminate, glass)

kinesthetic interest (things to touch with different body parts; things to crawl in, under, and upon; opportunities to see the environment from different vantage points)

The skin — the largest organ of the body — is a vital source of stimulation for the arousal system. Most authorities agree (Montagu, 1971) that touch is the most critical sense for children under three and for those with special needs. Ayres (1973) suggests that increased tactile and somatosensory stimulation may improve the form and space perception of children with learning disorders. Moreover, in their national study, Prescott and David (1976) found that “softness” was the primary predictor of the quality of care. Thus, turbulent decorative elements (pillows, cozy furniture, wall hangings, carpets), and malleable and messy play materials (water, clay, paint, and sand) should be plentiful. Rather than luxuries, these are essentials for promoting children’s well-being and softening institutional blandness.

Be sure that materials selected are in accordance with local fire and building safety standards. However, code requirements should not become an excuse for eliminating textural variety from a room. An increasing number of attractive fabrics and finishes — in a variety of colors, textures, and patterns — are available commercially. Originally designed for health care settings, these items are washable, germ-free, and meet class A ratings for smoke and flammability. Consult local architectural or interior design firms for commercial grade sources.

Mood setting also involves providing a space with aesthetically pleasing objects, finishes, textures, and works of art. “Beauty is as beauty does” in designed and constructed environments as well as the social world. The need for beauty is particularly important for differently-able children, so that associations with a dingy place are not transferred to seeing the children as ugly. Most importantly, a harmonious space transmits psychic wholeness and tranquility. Beautiful spaces visibly relate all the people and parts, acting as a mirror of the well-being desired for all children and caregivers.

SUMMARY

Within each room, areas with different moods — soft, hard, dark, light, cold, warm, colorful, bland, etc. — are required in order for children to maintain their energy and attentiveness over the course of a long day.

Research indicates that the degree of “softness” in a room is predictive of the quality of care. The primacy of touch for young children, coupled with the fact that the skin is the largest organ of the body, make the presence of a variety of touchable textures critical to children’s psychological and physiological well-being. Pillows, cozy furniture, wall hangings, carpets, and malleable and messy play materials such as water, clay, paint, and sand are critical for softening institutional blandness and promoting children’s well-being.

The mood of an activity area is created by personalized decorative techniques (pillows, color, textures, fabrics, knick-knacks, and furniture design); by varying the physical parameters of space (floor height, ceiling height, boundary height, and lighting); and by varying the visual, auditory, olfactory, textural, and kinesthetic qualities of a space.

Quiet, tranquil activities call for warm, soft, textured spaces. Expansive activities call for spaces that are cooler, harder, more vibrant in tone.

A harmonious space transmits psychic wholeness and tranquility, offering a mirror of well-being all children and caregivers deserve.

Special thanks for helping to shape this Beginnings Workshop: Paula Jorde Bloom, Sally Cartwright, Jennifer Eaton, Lisa Grimes, Gary Moore, Anita Olds, Elizabeth Prescott, Pam Schiller, Karen Scovill, and Wendy Shepherd.
Meeting Adult Needs within the Classroom

by Eileen Eisenberg

Quality early childhood classrooms ideally resemble the most comforting aspects of home. For children, they are places to play, explore, create, and discover, to be nourished and comforted and to spend the day with friends and caring adults. In the best environments, children are free to be happy, silly, noisy, sad, angry, cranky, hungry, and tired. We set up the environment to promote optimal development in young children.

What about the teachers who spend the day with children? And what about the parents who daily bring their children to the center or choose to stay and volunteer? How is the classroom environment arranged to meet their needs? How can we integrate adult needs into what is traditionally considered children’s space?

This article will address the adult needs specifically within the classroom space. We recognize that adults enter into all other spaces within the child care center: the entryway, hallways, washrooms, kitchen, administrative offices, and parent room. Extending adult considerations throughout the center is an essential element of creating a quality program.

Eileen Eisenberg is a faculty member in the Department of Early Childhood at National-Louis University where she serves as the field supervisor for the McCormick Fellows Focus on Quality Accreditation Initiative. She also serves as the training coordinator for the Taking Charge of Change Early Childhood Leadership Training Program and accreditation facilitator for an AT&T/Lucent Technology project.
For teachers, the classroom is a place to work: to meet the challenging demands of many children for long hours; to form partnership with parents; and to have opportunities to grow professionally. For parents, the classroom must reflect a safe, welcoming, and caring environment. The environment should send the nonverbal message that parents are welcome to drop in and become part of the activity.

Categories of Adult Space

Adult space for teachers and parents in the classroom falls into four general categories: space for personal belongings; planning and storage space for the successful management of classroom materials; an area for administrative paperwork and resource material; and areas for communication with other adults. Thoughtful attention to the careful arrangement of these spaces will promote a healthy and pleasant environment for adults.

A peek into two classrooms can help us begin to define these adult spaces. In the first classroom, we see one corner that has been claimed as the teacher’s private space. It has a file cabinet, desk, and a shelf for storage. Cardboard boxes, a broken tricycle, and plastic garbage bags clutter the passageway to that precious space.

In the second classroom, piled on a countertop is the teacher’s jacket, two half-empty Coke cans, a large opened purse with its contents spilling out, dried-up easel paintings, a stack of long-forgotten office memos, a new supply of construction paper, and the empty fish tank that needs scrubbing. A further glance into the cabinet shows a disarray of supplies, storybooks without covers, empty containers of straws and glitter, and a spray bottle of bleach water.

Teacher often complain that there is no place to put things. Perhaps a reorganization of existing space will solve this dilemma. Separating the first category of space for personal belongings from the second category of space for classroom materials is a good beginning into organizing adult space.

Personal Belongings

Appropriate practice tells us that children need a personal space to store their belongings. Cubbies — or at least a coat hook and a shoe box — solve this problem. Teachers and volunteer parents need that space, too! A small, locked closet with space to hang a jacket or smock with a shelf to store a change of shoes, an umbrella, a coffee mug, and a purse will solve these requirements.

Planning and Storage Space

Teachers need a planning or prep area with storage that will allow them to easily access materials and resources. Overhead and floor cabinets with a counter-top can provide for that need.

A countertop should not become a clutterspace! It is the perfect spot to hold things that are part of the current day’s activity: one child’s homemade birthday treats to share at snack time; a bag of potting soil and packages of flower seeds to use during free play; a library book about scary monsters for story time. A storage container on that counter can hold things that need immediate attention: a puzzle with missing pieces, a jammed toy cash register, a gummed-up glue bottle.

Cabinets should be arranged by use, and items should be stored in clearly marked containers. After all, don’t we label the shelves that hold the children’s toys? Don’t we spend each clean-up time helping the children return their materials to the right place? Adult materials should be similarly organized. Think how easy it will be for a volunteer parent, substitute, or new staff member to quickly and easily find what they need.

Cabinets can hold paper products for food service including napkins, cereal bowls, plates, towels, cups, plastic silverware, birthday candles; extra art and craft materials to replenish the classroom shelves including paint, brushes, construction paper, glitter, yarn, glue, straws, buttons; office supplies — duplicates of what is in the children’s literacy area — but just for teachers: a stapler, tape, scissors, hole punch, pencils and pens; first aid supplies and disposable gloves; music (tapes and records); and one locked cabinet for cleaning supplies. Don’t use precious storage space for items that you can easily collect (e.g., egg cartons, milk cartons, empty baby food jars).

Hooks on the wall next to the cabinets will hold a mop, broom, and dustpan.

Prop boxes and out-of-season resource materials can be placed in storage containers on top of the overhead cabinets or in a closet elsewhere in the center.

Paperwork and Resource Materials

The third category for adult space is an area designated for administrative paperwork and resource materials.

Children’s files, emergency cards, memo pads, permission slips, and lesson plans are just some of the things that teachers need to keep accessible for their
use. Although the director may want to keep separate files for each child, the teacher should also have her own files that hold anecdotal observations, individual education plans, and parents’ notes.

- A bookcase for curriculum and how-to books, professional journals, and other resource materials should be evident in the classroom. A teacher might want to share an idea with parents (perhaps a current article on thumb sucking or bed wetting) or exchange recipes for making play dough with a co-worker. These references need to be close by to be useful. It is also important for the children to see their teachers and parents looking at books and magazines for information. Literacy in the classroom is not limited to story time.

**Written Communication with Other Adults**

The fourth category is an area designed for two purposes — written communication between staff members and communication between staff and parents.

- Class rosters for parents’ daily sign-in and sign-out signatures should be placed in a strategically significant spot but not immediately at the entrance. Many times, the clipboard holding the rosters is placed on top of a cubbie or the first available shelving unit near the classroom entrance. This placement unconsciously says to parents, “Stop. This is as far as you need to go.” Instead, we want to encourage parents to come in, help the children with their coats, and say hello to the teacher (and give the teacher an opportunity to greet the parent).

  Consider putting the sign-in sheet on a table with a small plant. You may also put one special news item such as an announcement for school picture day, a parent meeting day, or upcoming event at the local library or park district. This is also the perfect place to put a doll holding unclaimed barrettes or a thank you to a parent who volunteered yesterday in the classroom.

Bulletin boards are effective ways to communicate with parents! But bulletin boards must be kept attractive, uncluttered, and current. Most governmental licensing requires that meal plans, lesson plans, mandated reporter laws, emergency telephone numbers, and numerous other health and safety regulations be posted for parents. However, these items can be posted on a bulletin board that is separate and apart from information that you really want the parents to read more frequently. All too often, teachers complain that parents don’t read the newsletters or memos. Parents, at the same time, complain they don’t get any notice about “things.” Remember — Avoid posting changing information alongside of regulation center policy and procedures.

At one child care center, large plastic garbage cans used to sit in the doorway of the classrooms. Adults had to walk sideways to enter the rooms to avoid bumping into the waste containers. Teachers would complain that parents dropped off their children in the hallway and rarely entered the classrooms. The teachers were so used to walking around the garbage cans that they did not see the relationship between the garbage can “barrier” and what they considered parents’ hasty drop-off. The message sent to everyone had not been a pleasing or inviting one. A simple move of the cans opened up the doorways and made the adults less resistant to enter the rooms.

- Use the wall outside the classroom door as an extension of your classroom. A bulletin board displaying “Yesterday, Today, Tomorrow” will help promote the link between school and parents. Two or three simple sentences relating something special that happened during the course of the day can be written with the children’s help after nap time (it’s great for recall). For example: “We blew bubbles outside today. At lunch time, we tasted pineapple and it was sweet! Tomorrow, Jamie’s new baby brother, Eric, will be visiting our classroom.” Because the message changes daily, it will catch parents’ interest.

- A framed photograph of the classroom teacher should be hung near the classroom door. Three or four sentences about the teacher will introduce her to parents and visitors.

- Children’s work displayed on bulletin boards also becomes adult space when we “title” the work. For example, “We mixed red and blue today — just look at our purple pictures!” or “Painting with sponges” or “On our walk to the park today, we saw a bird, a car, a baby in a stroller, and five ants.” Putting words to children’s work helps parents initiate meaningful conversations about the day’s activities.

- Post teacher communication on the overhead supply cabinet. Current lesson plans, meal plans, a list of children’s allergies, medical emergency procedures, and building evacuation routes are essential for staff. Also post special reminders such as a note permitting Susie to go home with Jacob’s mom or a memo to ask Latasha’s mom about the rash on her arm.
Two Other Considerations

Space Should Promote Wellness

Careful additions to classrooms will help reduce the stress and fatigue associated with working long hours with young children.

- Carpeted floors, window curtains, and quilted wall hangings add softness and warmth to a classroom. Soft space also helps quiet the noise level in the classroom.
- An adult-sized comfortable chair next to the manipulative area, a rocking chair in the book corner, a padded welcome bench near the front door are important furnishings in the classroom.
- Sunlight, an occasional table lamp, and incandescent lighting are healthy alternatives to fluorescent lights.
- Muted color tones on the walls and floors ease an already stimulating environment. Simplicity in the color of furnishings will allow children’s work and play to become the central focus of attention.

The arrangement of space should accommodate adults as well as children.

- Grown-ups require open spaces within the room to comfortably move about. Keep clutter off the floor to prevent tripping and falling. How many times during the day do teachers bump into the four-foot wooden refrigerator when entering the housekeeping corner, or brush up against the easel while monitoring an activity at the nearby water table? Opening up our learning centers can provide teachers with more room to be comfortable. For some teachers, easier entry into activity centers will encourage their active participation into children’s play.

Spaces Should Reflect Your Personality

Classrooms should be personal reflections of the adult personalities that work and “live” in that room. Individualizing space requires an investment of oneself. It means adding special touches, often personal possessions, that reflect individuality.

The results are comforting and compelling.

Recently, I asked a teacher to describe her favorite room in her home: “It’s my kitchen,” she said. “Everything is yellow — it makes me feel sunny! The checked curtains, pale yellow walls, sunflower design cushions on the chairs, and even my dishes are yellow.”

“Tell me more about this kitchen,” I coaxed.

“I love to cook native Mexican foods with lots of spices, chilies, cilantro, tomatoes, and green peppers. My mom comes over and we make tortillas! We turn on the radio and listen to music — we can cook and talk for hours!”

We walked into her classroom and I asked: “Is there anything in here that is yellow? When did you last cook with the children? Does the housekeeping corner have (pretend) bottles of spices? Do you sometimes play the kind of music you like to hear?”

- Favorite knickknacks, family photos, certificates of training, and a blooming plant will give the room a personality.

- Items that reflect the cultures of the families in the classroom are important. For example, in the housekeeping corner, food containers, cooking equipment, and eating utensils should be similar to what the children see at home. At holiday times, stories of family traditions, ceremonial objects, and festive foods should be shared.

These mini-spaces can open channels of communication between children and teachers, between parents and staff. A teacher who displays a picture of her family will allow the parents to see her as a person outside the classroom. The parent who shares pine cones gathered from a weekend walk in the park brings part of her family life into the classroom. Conversations can be built around the simplest of commonalities as a beginning step to enhancing and ensuring future communication.

In Conclusion

For teachers and parents to work in harmony with children, classrooms must meet their needs. Adults require a place to put their personal belongings, classroom supplies, administrative paperwork, and resource materials. Areas should be provided to ensure proper communication with parents and staff. Careful consideration to soft surfaces, adult-size furniture, lighting, color tones, and open spaces help promote wellness within the classroom.

Lastly, a classroom that reflects the personality and culture of the teachers and parents will satisfy their need to claim the classroom as their very own.