

Environments Can Send A Message



The play environment can be one of the most effective teaching tools available to the early childhood professional. The trick is to design an environment that gives messages which help children engage more readily in play and creates opportunities for them to learn directly from play materials. When the environment speaks to the child, your role as teacher changes dramatically. The cues and directions that children need come from the way you have chosen and arranged the materials in your environment, not from you.

Children with disabilities often do not learn from the environment in the same ways that other young children do. They may wait for adult direction ("here's something you can play with") or miss subtle cues. For example, most young children would know that the housekeeping area is a place to engage in pretend cooking and cleaning activities. But the arrangement of a child-sized refrigerator, stove, and table may not offer enough information for some children. A child with a disability or a newly enrolled child may not choose to play in this area simply because they are unsure of what to do there. Environmental arrangement can invite children into a play area, provide needed play information, opportunities for participation in appropriate and playful activities.

First, every child in the program needs to be able to move freely throughout the play areas. Any barriers that make it difficult for a child to actively use play materials should be removed. If the child uses a walker or wheelchair, more room is required in the play areas, and toys need to be arranged so they can be easily reached. Physical accessibility sends an immediate and positive message. When physical barriers exist, the child's ability to learn independently may be compromised.

Second, play materials and equipment must be carefully selected to match the varying interests and ability levels of the children, even when they are all the same age. A book corner, for example, should have books that challenge the child who is practicing counting as well as books that challenge the child who is practicing turning pages.

It is important to choose materials that are appropriate for the child's age as well as developmental abilities when selecting materials for young children with disabilities. A child with a significant disability, for example, should not be expected to play with a baby's rattle simply because her developmental skills are limited. There are many toys that interest four-year-olds, which can also be held, shook, and mouthed, such as real keys or measuring spoons. In group settings, this is especially important because young children form opinions about their peers based on what they do and what they play with. By giving infant toys to an older child, you may be unwittingly telling other children that this child is a "baby" and not their peer.

Finally—and perhaps most importantly—toys, play materials, and equipment must be arranged in a way that explicitly tells the child what can be done with materials. A child who enters the block area and finds blocks arranged to form a corral around some farm animals gets a clear idea about what to do with these toys. You can give explicit cues by:

- ❖ *combining toys that might not typically be played with together.* For example, put spoons in the block area.
- ❖ *arranging play materials as if someone had just been playing with them.* Arrange blocks and spoons so that some of the blocks represent plates, others food, with the spoons strategically placed to suggest eating.
- ❖ *setting up enticing play scenes throughout the program.* This exposes the child to a variety of play materials and playmates and encourages play in all activity areas.
- ❖ *providing enough of the same materials so that children can play together.* Sometimes a child with a disability will observe another child and be interested in playing with the same toy. Including four or five spoons allows 3 or 4 children who may want to play together to have the tools they need.

Environmental arrangement is a simple—and powerful—teaching strategy. Arranging your play space—at the beginning of the day or during an afternoon break—can add a valuable dimension to children's play. For young children with disabilities in particular, this approach can help them learn to respond to cues throughout their environment, increase chances for success, build self-esteem, and teach lifelong skills that no other strategy can begin to match.

Making It Work

Sending An Invitation

What can early childhood providers do to get their own environments to send an "invitation" to play? The key is how to provide the extra information a child needs to know what to do, where to go, and how to succeed. One useful way to provide this information is the arrangement of "props."

Props are accessories that give toys or materials a "just-played-with" look. For example, let's say that you are a three-year-old. You walk into the room and see a doll that interests you. Once you have your doll, what do you do with it? Some children may come up with a play idea right away and start to play. Others may take most of the available play time to figure out what to do with the doll besides holding. Something important happens when there are doll-sized blankets, bottles, empty baby food jars, small spoons, bibs, and a doll bed in the same area with the dolls. The addition of these "props" gives the child a stronger message—a clearer invitation. Props literally tell children "this is where you go from here." Each prop is one more piece of information in the "how-to's" of play.

The next time you see a child wandering around a play area, holding a toy, ask yourself, "What could I add that would give her the information she needs to really *play* with that toy?" Your answer might be as close as the blocks in the next play area, empty food boxes, or your old shoes.

A Child Care Provider's Question

QUESTION: *I made changes in my preschool schedule and play environment this year to promote more opportunities for kids to learn. (I used to teach the kids as a group doing different crafts, finger plays, and projects.) The kids seem busy and productive during our longer play time, but I don't feel like I'm really teaching anymore. What am I supposed to do with all of my time while they play?*

ANSWER: By extending your child-directed play time and working to use your environment to invite children to play, you have taken an incredible step toward creating a more developmentally appropriate experience for children with and without disabilities in your program. Feeling uncomfortable with these changes is a natural part of your learning journey.

You seem to be struggling with becoming a *facilitator* during play time—a role that can appear to clash with past expectations that "good" teachers stand in front of the children and tell them what they need to know and do. As facilitator, you work as a partner with the children during play time. You assess their learning and the effectiveness of the play environment, provide support, and make changes in the environment when necessary.

Once you understand your role, it can become just as rewarding as more direct teaching methods. Here is a quick list of what a facilitator does:

- ✓ observes how children interact with toys and each other
- ✓ keeps notes about what is seen
- ✓ asks questions about children's play to guide and

expand their thinking

- ✓ provides props based on children's ideas and needs
- ✓ introduces new concepts or vocabulary relevant to the play
- ✓ plays briefly to model a novel use for a material
- ✓ assumes a temporary role in small group play to show a child how to join a group
- ✓ documents children's social, emotional, physical, and cognitive growth
- ✓ asks if the play environment is meeting the needs of all children
- ✓ uses all of the information gathered to frequently adapt and expand the play environment

Your goal is to provide each child with a well designed environment that allows him or her to be self-directed in meaningful play. Your role at a given time is determined by children's needs. Allow yourself time to explore and change as you continue the process of lifelong learning.

