

Child Care plus ✱

+ 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.

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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.

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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, or pegboards? Compare that with children's exploration of water in a trough, a collection of keys, blankets, or other materials that offer endless play opportunities. While both types of play are important, most programs benefit from adding 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 toilet paper rolls, a bale of hay, giant cardboard boxes, seed collections, or yards of fabric!

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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. + SAM

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+ SPOTLIGHT: A Closer Look At Your Environment

You may be thinking that these ideas for giving children environmental cues or messages make sense, but be feeling unsure how to begin. It is likely that you already do something to provide or promote these messages, such as providing a cubby for each child's personal belongings. You may not, however, have thought of these messages as part of your early childhood curriculum—that is, part of daily learning activities for the children in your program.

The following worksheet can help you look closely at your environment for cues you already provide and cues you may want to add. Describe examples of cues already at work in your environment in the left hand column. In the right hand column, list several ways you plan to enhance your environment's ability to provide cues for young children. +

X DOES MY PROGRAM PROVIDE CUES THAT FOSTER A SENSE OF ORDER?	
Description:	I plan to add:

X DOES MY PROGRAM PROVIDE CUES THAT INVITE EXPLORATION?	
Description:	I plan to add:

X DOES MY PROGRAM PROVIDE CUES THAT CREATE OWNERSHIP (FOR THE CHILDREN)?	
Description:	I plan to add:

+ FROM THE SOURCE

Asking for Help

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, and 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 and 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 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. + SAM

MAKING IT WORK

Using Photographs

The availability of disposable, digital, instant picture cameras, and inexpensive processing has opened up a whole new world for using these tools with children.

Using Pictures to Foster a Sense of Order: Pictures can be used to help children see the schedule for the day, understand what will happen next, and provide cues about how to play in a certain area. Photographs can be enlarged, laminated, and hung at children's eye-level wherever children usually play.

Pictures of toys/materials can be used on toy shelves and in storage areas. Children's individual photographs can be used to identify their cubbies or coat hook.

Using Pictures to Create Ownership: You can take pictures of each child in routine activities such as brushing teeth and putting on coats or sweaters. You can take pictures of children playing outside, inside, on field trips, and working on projects. Pictures of themselves on the walls and in hand-made books help children feel like they belong in your environment.

You can also take pictures of children's family members and create booklets or use them individually to help children who miss their mommies and daddies. Building family relationships helps to foster the partnership with parents and families. Comparing pictures can also help children see their learning or progress over time as they grow taller or learn new skills. + SLM

+ NOTES FROM HOME

The Message Goes Home

I didn't know much about child care until Kenta was two years old. That was when I went back to school, and so did he! The community college child care program he attends is a laboratory site where soon-to-be teachers and student parents come and go all day long. It is convenient for me, and his caregiver makes Kenta's medical needs just part of the daily routine.

The program is built around giving children environmental messages. The newsletters they send home often include ideas for parents to use at home to give children the same types of messages. The first idea I tried was to put a basket of quiet toys by the telephone. When I'm on the telephone, I give Kenta a toy or two from the basket. He's happy, and I'm off the telephone in half the time. I really think he is learning to occupy himself when I'm unable to give him my full attention.

I like the newsletters for a couple of reasons. The articles give me practical ideas about how I can arrange the toys I have at home to help Kenta develop. I also learn about the ways Kenta's teachers use the environment to teach the children. This gives me a better idea of what Kenta is doing all day and why the teachers do things in certain ways at school. +

+ What do I do when . . . ?

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 for program materials would probably be supplies, not toys. Many teachers make the mistake of being pressured by glossy catalogs and impressive labels and think that toys are what is needed to make 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 we've presented in this newsletter (order, exploration, and independence), perhaps you might look for fun containers to store your dress-up clothes in, a few special props like a postage scale to add a science element to your Lego collection, add hooks so that children can get their own bibs before lunch, or purchase film to make labels that the children can understand.

The final answer to your question comes from the children themselves. What addition would support the play behaviors you already see and help to develop play themes that come from the children's 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 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 to get you started

- + contact a local quilting group to see if they will share scraps of fabric.

- + ask an appliance dealer for 3 or 4 large boxes.
- + save toilet paper 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 shoehorns for a week.
- + call a local hospital and ask for disposable medical supplies: gowns, caps, gloves, and other fun stuff.
- + call a fast food restaurant and ask for food containers, napkins, hats, and other supplies. + SAM

+ RESOURCE REVIEW

The Early Childhood Environment Rating Scale - Revised Edition (Teachers College Press, 1998) by Thelma Harms, Richard M. Clifford, and Debby Cryer is an easy-to-use evaluation instrument that answers questions about the adequacy of early childhood environments. The rating scales cover issues such as space, care routines, language, reasoning skills, social development, and adult needs. May be used as either a self-assessment or for evaluation by an outside observer. Distributed by Redleaf Press (1-800-423-8309) for \$11.95. +

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