

Child Care plus+

+ One Child At A Time

As an early childhood professional, you already know that young children are eager, active learners who come to your program ready to play. For some children, however, there may be obstacles in your environment that get in the way of playing. These obstacles may include physical barriers such as stairs, uneven surfaces, or narrow walkways. More often, children's full participation is limited by more subtle obstacles. Coat hooks may be placed too high. There may be too few toys and materials or toys and materials are hidden in cupboards or boxes. Some programs have poorly defined play spaces with too little room to maneuver. Others offer toys that are hard to grasp, give too little time to accomplish a task, or have paper towels that are too hard to pull out!

To truly individualize for young children, the early childhood setting should not only be barrier-free but child-centered. Child-centered environments enable children to meaningfully and playfully explore their surroundings. In many ways, an environment individualized for each child serves as an private invitation—a personal message that says, "This space is just for you."

You can extend this invitation, allow children to become fully engaged in play, and help them overcome obstacles related to play materials and room arrangement by looking at the environment from their perspective. Try to visualize how your program environment and your play materials look to each child currently enrolled. This approach works whether you have a single room or several, a large playground or small grassy yard, new toys or old favorites, established learning centers or shelves in a basement play room of your home.

While it is possible that many areas of your program already accommodate a particular child's needs, perhaps you are wondering what to do and where to go when you see the need for change. After all, simply recognizing a need is the

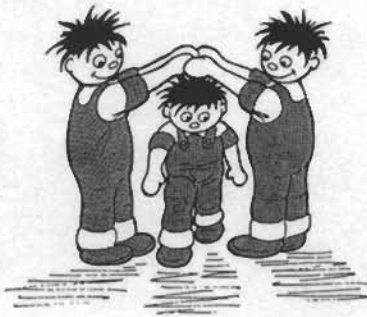
first step in the process of improving your situation. Some solutions become obvious as you focus your attention on a specific issue. You are likely to get the best solutions from

watching the child! If you know a child's abilities, interests, and preferences you can invite him into play by using that information.

When you find solutions, how do you implement them? You will need to make notes of your observations, identify strategies that might work, and formulate a plan. For example, "Summer has her own cubby, but the coat hook needs to be lowered so she can hang up her own coat." Some ideas for changes may

pose particular challenges. Children can only participate when you look beyond limitations and allow them the same experiences as their peers.

There are no right or wrong answers and no ready formulas. Your task is to find individual solutions to help each child participate in typical routines and activities. Solutions may be as simple as placing toys on lower shelves or adapting a toy to make it appropriate for a child's developmental needs. Talk with the child's family, therapists, and other early childhood professionals for additional suggestions. Your goal is to create an environment in which the child has access to your play areas and play materials. Be flexible enough to try several different ideas, watching carefully to see which ones help the child play in each area. Let the child show you what works and what does not. + CC+



+ In This Issue

- | | |
|----------------------------|----------------------------|
| + In Focus | + Putting It Into Practice |
| + Try It Out | + Question |
| + Connecting With Families | + Resource Review |

+ IN FOCUS

Think about the children in your program or group. Look around at the features of each space or activity area in your program through the eyes of one child at a time. With one particular child in mind, physically walk through each area. Look at the area from the level that the child looks at it. It can be especially helpful to sit on the floor or lay on your stomach. Be especially sensitive to what the child can see, reach, and explore from the child's usual play position. It helps to know the child's favorite toy or activity before you look at your environment in this way. There are probably areas in your program that are already suitable for this child, and other areas may need rearrangement or added materials.

While it is possible that the individual child you chose may have a disability or delay, there are other children who also have needs which you may be able to respond to by examining your program's environment. A child may be new in your classroom or child care program, may have unique and specific interests, may act younger or older than the other children, may have particularly challenging behavior, or may be causing you concern for any number of reasons. To individualize your program for any child—to offer a place that invites him or her to play and actively participate, you must take time to look at the world from his or her perspective. + CC+

+ TRY IT OUT

When you identify a barrier to a child's participation in a routine or activity area, you may need help to come up with a ready solution to address the special interests and needs of the child. You can get help with ideas by:

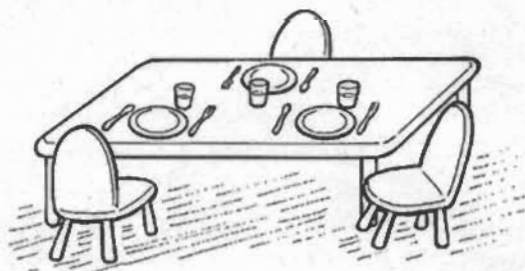
- ▶ problem-solving with the child's parents, early intervention or special education specialists, and therapists.
- ▶ searching written and Internet resources for ideas or strategies.
- ▶ brainstorming with colleagues and staff members.

When you expand your resources and get input from others, you may come up with surprising and creative solutions, for example: plant hanger extensions to lower coat hooks, a multipocket shoe storage hanger on the back of the door for cubbies, symbols instead of name tags, name tags above as well as below the cubby or coat hook, enlarged letters. . . .

Individualizing for each child adds a singularly exciting and creative element to early childhood teaching. Seeing children's increased exploration and engagement is highly reinforcing and very rewarding! + CC+



+ CONNECTING WITH FAMILIES



One parent told the provider that his son would soon be getting his first wheelchair. The provider looked around her program and asked herself, "What changes do I need to make to prepare for this milestone?"

One needed change was immediately identified as she considered her program from this child's new perspective. She had observed that Justin loved to socialize with the other children at lunch and table activities. The new lunch table she was planning to order was a picnic-style table with attached benches along each side. That type of table arrangement would put Justin's wheelchair always on an end!

Unlike the other children in the program, he would no longer have any choice about where he sat and who he sat next to. Since that could limit Justin's access to his friends and naturally occurring social experiences, the child care provider changed her plans. She bought a table that would allow Justin to roll right up at any place he chose—just like the rest of the children. + CC+

+ PUTTING IT INTO PRACTICE

Most early childhood professionals make an effort to meet the needs of the children in their care. They warm the bottle for the infant, use booster seats for the toddlers, and buy scented markers to keep active three-year-olds engaged in drawing a bit longer. The Americans with Disabilities Act (ADA) requires reasonable accommodations to address the needs of children with disabilities as well. Reasonable accommodations are those you can make—without fundamentally altering your program—to meet children's physical and developmental needs and allow them to participate in regular daily routines and activities. Accommodations may include: learning the signs a child uses to communicate, attending therapy sessions to understand how to handle and position the child, meeting with parents to learn the proper way to feed a child, or incorporating a piece of adaptive equipment into your program. As you can see, many accommodations are more than structural.

Accommodations should also be readily achievable in an existing program. Readily achievable means "able to be accomplished easily and without much difficulty or expense" or undue burden. Imagination, a positive attitude, and the child-centered approach found in most early childhood programs produce creative and readily achievable accommodations time after time.

While major structural changes definitely add to the overall accessibility of a program, it takes more than wide doors and ramps to individualize your play spaces for young children. At the most basic level, young children need an environment that includes toys, equipment, activities, and routines that are a) individually appropriate, b) child-sized, and c) accessible with minimal, if any, adult assistance needed to participate.

INDIVIDUALLY APPROPRIATE Activities, materials, or toys should be appropriate for the individual child's developmental level as well as appropriate for his or her age. Child care providers who are looking at the individual child need to reach a delicate balance between the child's age and what is developmentally appropriate for that child's needs. For instance, a four-year-old with cerebral palsy might be at the same developmental level in his motor skills as a two-year-old without cerebral palsy. Materials which are designed for two-year-olds might seem at first to be appropriate developmentally for

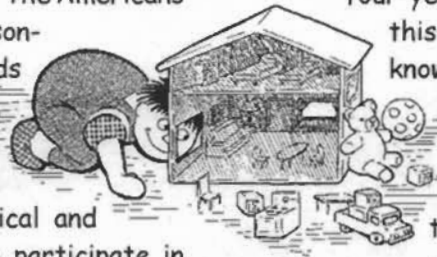
this child. The question then arises: are toddler toys age-appropriate? If playing with a particular kind of toy might set this child apart from his peers, you should look for ways he could practice the same skills with typical four-year-old toys. Of course, you need to know this child's intellectual abilities before you know exactly which of the four-year-olds' toys are individually appropriate.

Being appropriate to children's developmental abilities implies that the activities or materials you provide give children opportunities to practice the skills they already have as well as opportunities to build on existing or emerging skills. In this way, you provide both success and challenge for children regardless of their differing developmental levels.

CHILD-SIZED Obviously, young children are various heights and weights according to their age and physical development. Their legs and arms get longer as they grow; their hands and fingers are capable of grasping larger objects. Play materials (like crayons and puzzles), toys and equipment (like tricycles and swings), and day-to-day materials (like spoons, cups, chairs, and diapers) of varying but appropriate sizes reflect recognition of—and respect for—children's differing needs according to their differing sizes.

ADULT ASSISTANCE "Adult assistance" refers to the help children need to eat, get a toy, get into a chair, use the toilet, or go to another area. Adult assistance is often used to save time or because of the inaccessible arrangement of the environment, not because a child is incapable of accomplishing the task. Child care providers need to look for options; instead of lifting a child onto the toilet, for instance, you might provide a step stool or low potty chair.

Whenever you make changes in the physical arrangement of your environment to invite children to play and participate, you must also make sure it is possible for them to accept the invitation. This may necessitate providing additional play cues or props. It is important that you help children learn to act on the environment independently, a lifelong skill that every child in your program should have opportunities to practice. + CC+



+ QUESTION

QUESTION: *In my preschool, I used to teach kids as a group doing different crafts, finger plays, and projects. Now I've made changes in the schedule and environment to offer longer play time. The kids seem busy and productive, but I feel like I'm not really teaching anymore. What am I supposed to do while the kids play?*

ANSWER: By extending 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 in your program. Feeling uncomfortable with your new role is a natural part of taking this risk and making a change.

It may help you to fully understand what it means to be a *facilitator* of play—a role that may clash with past expectations of what "good" teachers should be doing. As a facilitator, your role is to evaluate the effectiveness of the play environment, assess each child's engagement and learning, provide support, and make changes as needed. To facilitate children's play, you:

- ▶ observe how children interact with toys and each other
- ▶ document children's social, emotional, physical, and cognitive growth
- ▶ encourage children's play with attention and thoughtful comments to guide and expand their thinking
- ▶ supply additional props based on children's emerging ideas, interests, and needs
- ▶ introduce new concepts or vocabulary relevant to the play, either immediately or during a later opportunity
- ▶ play briefly to demonstrate a novel use of materials
- ▶ assume a temporary role in small group play to redirect or help an uncertain child join a group

- ▶ ensure that the play environment is engaging and meeting the needs of each child
- ▶ keep notes about what is seen and use the information to frequently adapt materials, expand the play environment, and develop related activities

As you become familiar with implementing these practices, facilitating is likely to become just as rewarding as more direct teaching methods. In the process, you will provide a well designed environment that allows each child to be self-directed in meaningful play. + CC+

+ RESOURCE REVIEW

The *Child-Ready Checklist* helps you look at the early childhood environment through the eyes of a child. Completing the Checklist can help you make play activities and routines accessible to each child enrolled in your program, particularly helpful when a child has disabilities or other challenges that limit his or her ability to fully participate. The Child-Ready Checklist is available for \$4 from Child Care plus+ at the address in the box below. For more information, call 1-800-235-4122. +

CHILD CARE plus+ is designed to support inclusion of children with disabilities in early childhood settings by supporting child care providers, parents, and community service providers including social workers, therapists, physicians, teachers, and administrators. *CHILD CARE plus+* is published quarterly. Subscription price is \$10 per year (four issues). Contents may be reproduced without permission; please include reference.

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