

CHILD CARE

plus +

WINTER 1997

Supporting Inclusion in Early Childhood Settings

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+ Environments can send messages . . .

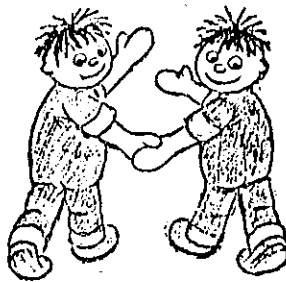
The play environment can be one of the most effective teaching tools available to the early childhood professional. The trick is to design an environment that gives messages which help children engage more readily in play and creates opportunities for them to learn directly from play materials. When 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. Taking time to arrange 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. + SMG

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+ FROM THE SOURCE

Advantage - - - Child

Working with young children with disabilities can be challenging; questions may arise that no one person alone can answer. That is one reason why professionals working together are more likely to create intervention that truly helps a child grow and develop. The early childhood professional who knows how to arrange the early childhood environment to help children learn has a great deal to offer as a member of the early intervention or special education team.

For example, one of Joseph's IFSP goals is to learn the concept of "in." When the early intervention team talked together about how to implement this goal, the child care provider identified a number of ways she could arrange her environment to provide opportunities for Joseph to practice putting things "in": placing a variety of containers/spoons in the bean table, attaching a low basketball hoop in the gross motor area, offering a small pitcher for him to pour milk into his cup at snack, and creating a child's "mail center" with slots for the "mail" in the greeting area. She described that she was fairly certain that Joseph would engage in these activities because he often chose the bean table at play time, had been throwing and bouncing balls in the gross motor area, was eager to "do it by himself" at snack, and had been "writing" letters at the art table to send to his big brother who was at college.

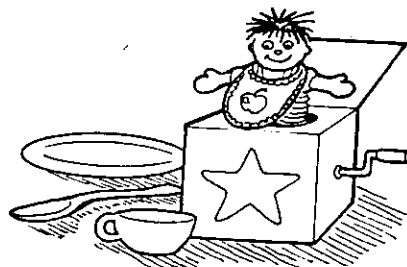
The child care provider has the advantage of working with a variety of young children in groups, a knowledge of typical child development, and a stimulating, fun learning environment. The early intervention specialist has the advantage of specialized training, education related to the specific needs of children with particular disabilities, and experience identifying developmental goals for children who have disabilities. By working together, it is the **child** who has all the advantages! + KMG

+ 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. And, after all, if the shoe "fits" . . . + KMG

+ NOTES FROM HOME

From Preschool to Home

I am a preschool teacher and a single parent. I supported inclusion long before I had my son. But teaching young children with disabilities was much easier for me than parenting my own child who needs behavior guidance and support. I was nagging and getting frustrated, while making limited progress toward encouraging self-direction. Although environmental arrangement was part of my everyday life as a teacher, I had not used this strategy at home. Because my child is easily overwhelmed by a "busy" environment, I started in his cluttered room. My goal is to have my son follow one-step directions like "please get your pajamas." In the past, his response went something like this: he'd go to the dresser, start sorting through a drawer, become distracted by a belt, and end up sitting on the floor fascinated by the holes in the belt. He got his pajamas only after many reminders and the loss of my patience! I began by sorting/labeling the dresser drawers with pictures/words (shirts, pajamas, pants). Now, when I ask him to get PJ's, the environment tells him exactly where to look instead of me, and he is not distracted by the lengthy search.

His toys were next. I selected six different sets of toys and put them in see-through containers. I used colored tape to divide his shelf into sections and put one set of toys in each section. All other toys were sorted into clear plastic boxes and stored. Saturdays are "trading days"; he and I have a wonderful time deciding what stays on the shelf and what is traded. He can clearly see the toys that are available, make a selection, and begin playing on his own. He spends more time playing productively because he doesn't have to face the frustration of being unable to locate what he wants and he is not overwhelmed by too many choices.

While these changes may seem simple, the impact on me, on my son, and on our relationship has been very positive. This has inspired me to continue to look for ways to use our home environment as a teaching and learning tool. +

+ SPOTLIGHT: Gloria Dei Early Learning Center

Gloria Dei Early Learning Center is a preschool sponsored, as a community service, by Gloria Dei Lutheran Church in Butte, Montana. Cathy Nickisch is the teacher/director for the program. She and parent helpers provide activities for 53 preschool children in two sessions (one for 3-year-olds and one for 4 and 5 year olds) which meet twice a week, and one session (4 and 5 year olds) which meets three times a week. Cathy has a degree in elementary education and will graduate in May with an associate degree in early childhood education. She is also completing a self-study course on inclusion, a two-semester, four-credit course offered by *Child Care plus+* out of the University of Montana.

In fall of 1996, a parent of one of the preschoolers asked her if she would be interested in enrolling a child with Down syndrome. She said yes without hesitation because, after all, she had "just started a class on inclusion." Because of the course, her philosophy of inclusion is better defined, and she has a lot more to say when someone asks why she accepted four-year-old Alex: "I really wanted to include this child, but do you realize that there's a law which says that preschools and day cares are public accommodations? Therefore, even if I didn't want a child with disabilities [in my preschool], the law called the ADA protects him and allows him access to my preschool. If you had a child with disabilities, this law would protect you as well."

Alex's mother invited Cathy and his Head Start teacher to an IEP (Individualized Education Program) meeting. Cathy learned that his developmental goals include: functional sign language, attending (paying attention) during group activities, and social interaction. Cathy took these goals and began to build them into the preschool environment.

First, she observed that Alex played alone most of the time. She looked for ways to arrange the environment to encourage the next step, parallel play. In one instance, she commented, "I noticed a little parallel play if he felt there was some physical space between himself and the child involved. (He was on one side of the block cupboard and a boy was on the other, [and] they were using the doll house cooperatively.)" On another occasion, Cathy observed that Alex was playing with table blocks; she asked two children if they wanted to play with table blocks, too. Alex continued to play at the same table as the other children for about 5 more minutes.

After three months in the preschool, Alex was engaging in more and more parallel play. Cathy tells about Alex observing two other children cutting; he got a pair of scissors and spent about 5 minutes cutting paper, too. She comments, "I can really see first-hand how much he learns from what is modeled from his peers."

When he was enrolled, Cathy wrote in her learning journal, "Alex frequently initiates painting and sticks with the activity by painting 2 or 3 pictures with more than half of the paper filled. I leave him alone at the easel and only come over to remind him to keep the paint on the paper (and not on the wall, floor, etc.) I let him initiate any activity he wants during "work" time. He likes dramatic play, the sand/water table, art, and occasionally, table blocks." In December, she wrote, "Today, Alex was busy with art. He painted two pictures, drew on two different pieces of paper, and scribbled with a pen on two sheets of paper on the clipboard. He was very intent on his work and made

humming noises as he worked. I enjoy watching him."

Cathy is learning basic sign language to help Alex meet his IEP goal of learning 20 signs during the year, including *red, blue, yellow, green, potty, I want, eat, please, work time, more, play*. Cathy made up a song about Alex's colors to the tune of *Twinkle, Twinkle Little Star* and all the children sing the song and are learning how to make the signs. Alex's special education teachers use the sign for *work* to signify that he needs to pay attention; Cathy uses the same sign at morning meeting, circle times, and stories.



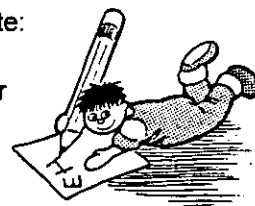
Alex (center) playing with table blocks.

Cathy has modified her routine for the present to include sitting down activities that take ten minutes or less to accommodate Alex's growing attention span. After initially needing to be held in her lap to pay attention, he now sits in the circle for these activities. She is careful to intersperse quiet activities with more lively ones.

As challenges arise, Cathy uses problem-solving. One day Alex kept throwing toys and throwing sand out of the sand table, even after she had him help pick up what he had thrown. Besides being more conscientious about positive guidance, she created a gross motor skills center (throwing space) so that when Alex wanted to throw, she could redirect him to a center with various sizes of baskets, balls, a basketball hoop, bean bags, and ping-pong balls. She explained her strategy to his mother and sent home a bean bag. In Cathy's words, "I was impressed by how successful it was. Alex threw one toy. I redirected him to the center and said, *blocks are for building—please come here to throw balls and bean bags*. It was a wonderful day." And a wonderful place for Alex! + SLM

For more information, call or write:

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(406) 723-9182



+ WHAT DO I DO WHEN

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 demonstrate 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. + SHW

Child Care plus+ staff are available to answer questions, brainstorm, problem-solve, and provide resources and training about accessibility and other inclusion issues.

Call 1-800-235-4122

+ RESOURCE REVIEW

The *Child-Ready Checklist* helps you look at accessibility in 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 which is particularly helpful when a child has disabilities or other challenges that limit his or her ability to fully participate.

To receive a copy, send \$4 to *Child-Ready Checklist* - Child Care plus+, MUARID, The University of Montana, Corbin Hall, Missoula, MT 59812. 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.

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