



Children Come First: Creating High Quality Learning Environments

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It has been said that the learning environment serves as another teacher within an early childhood classroom. In fact, the way in which an environment is designed reflects the teacher’s philosophy and priorities within the space for young children. Everything from the types and sizes of the furniture and their physical arrangement to the types of equipment and materials, speak volumes about who this space belongs to and how they are expected to interact while they are there. The relationships that exist within this environment set the tone for the types of learning experiences that will occur. The spaces within the walls of the classroom, as well as the outdoor classroom, reflect who belongs there. The well-designed environment is the “backdrop” to learning that supplies “the content, the context, and meaning” (Bullard, 2017, p. 4).

As the title of this brief suggests, what is known about young children and how they develop, grow, and learn provides the foundation for creating engaging and appropriate spaces for learning that meet the needs of each child who walks through the doors. The foundational values of child development bolstered by current brain science is essential knowledge in the field of early education. Understanding the unique needs, interests, and developmental levels of the children who will be a part of the learning community is the key to

The backgrounds and knowledge children bring to school, combined with their natural curiosity and sense of wonder, are the foundation for learning in the [early] years. Our task, as early childhood professionals, is to make the most of each day they spend in our care. To do that, we need to come to know each child as a unique individual. We must create meaningful opportunities that help all of them grow and develop to their full potential, building on individual differences rather than stressing conformity.

NC Department of Public
Instruction 2009, p. 11

creating high-quality environments. What is known about these young children must always be at the forefront of decision making.

It is well known and documented that young children learn best through active and interactive engagement with their world and the people within it. They learn best when they are moving, talking, and asking questions. As they grow and mature, young children need opportunities to take risks, make mistakes, and practice the many new concepts and skills they are learning with clear expectations and boundaries within safe and meaningful surroundings.



KEY UNDERSTANDINGS OF CHILD DEVELOPMENT AND LEARNING

- ◇ Each child is unique and develops at his or her own pace.
- ◇ Families are children’s first teachers.
- ◇ Learning and development are influenced by culture and supported by the family.
- ◇ Children’s learning is “dynamic and results from the interaction between inborn capacity and experience” (Ostroff, 2012, p 8).
- ◇ Brains are built over time (Center for the Developing Child, 2007).
- ◇ Young children’s brains are rapidly developing.
- ◇ Young children are active and interactive learners.
- ◇ “Young children have an inclination to play as a means of exploring and being inventive, creative, and curious” (Ostroff, 2012, p. 26).
- ◇ Young children are naturally curious.
- ◇ Experiences are most meaningful when concepts are authentically integrated across all domains of development and content areas.
- ◇ Learning is deeper when children have real-life experiences with which to connect new understandings.
- ◇ Young children are social beings that learn from and teach each other (NAEYC, 2022; Bullard, 2017; Kostelnik, et al., 2012; Ostroff, 2012; Brazelton and Greenspan, 2000; Pica, 2015; NCDPI, 2009).

The learning environment can support or hinder these child development understandings, therefore creating a high-quality environment for young children takes time, intentionality, and careful consideration. The learning environment, especially for young children, is more than just the arrangement of the physical classroom. It also includes the emotional and social characteristics of the environment embedded within a climate of positive relationships. Young children need and deserve to spend time in an inclusive environment that meets their unique needs physically and is emotionally and socially supportive and equitable. When these components are thoughtfully and purposefully designed around the needs of young children, engaging and meaningful learning can take place.

Children Thrive Within an Environment of Relationships

Children and adults need to feel connected to others. First and foremost, building a caring community of learners where all children feel seen and valued as important members of the community is essential. When teachers “support the joy of social belonging and positive relationships,” (Savina 2021) young children thrive. Effective teachers focus on building, strengthening, and maintaining strong, positive relationships with and between children and their families in order to provide the support, security and compassion each child needs to be successful. Children, teachers, administrators, and families need to experience positive, caring relationships each and every day with the children and adults in their classroom and school.

How Children Spend Their Days Matters

High quality early learning environments are a result of teachers who also consider the most effective ways in which to provide enough space, materials, and time for children to become deeply engaged in learning. Daily schedules should be consistent with established routines, yet flexible where children have multiple opportunities to construct their knowledge through first-hand experiences and through meaningful interactions with peers and teachers. Effective teachers ensure that time is devoted to all content areas, and that adequate time is provided daily for children to learn curriculum content in

“If I can offer my kindergarten children experiences in a learning environment where they can play and make choices, as opposed to classrooms where children are expected to sit at tables and do worksheets, and my children do as well as—or better—then why wouldn’t I?”

*~ Marylee Sease,
retired kindergarten teacher*

a variety of settings. A balance of content and settings reflect recognition of the important of the development of the whole child. Although research indicates that all domains of development and learning are important and interrelated, data reveal that classrooms continue an over-emphasis on literacy and math, to the

detriment of children’s exposure to a rich and varied curriculum. (For more information, [visit First School web page at the Frank Porter Gram Child Development Institute.](#))

“Learning is social. It works best when children work together, help each other, and remain reflective about what they are doing. It is about knowing and connecting with their people, spending time together, and finding others to admire and emulate. Learning is also guided by emotions, a state of being that has to do with the child’s overall feelings of wellness and support. The best learning involves self-expression, creativity, and effective communication. Most of all, learning is about being playful. Children need to be invigorated and experimental, to take risks and explore, to generate movement physically and mentally, and to enjoy themselves within the intellectual playgrounds of their lives, including the classroom.”

~ (Ostroff, 2012, p. 167)

The Physical Space and the Materials Within It Are Child-Centered

Furniture, materials, and equipment are arranged with children in mind. An appropriate and engaging space for young children allows for and encourages active, and collaborative learning experiences, as opposed to a space in which the teacher does all the talking and the children passively listen from their seats. The indoor classroom is organized in a variety of ways, including a large group area, small group areas, activity centers and individual spaces. Tables and chairs are found throughout the different areas of the room and children use them for a variety of purposes. The space provides opportunities for active play as well as spaces where children can go to be alone or rest when needed. The outdoor classroom is accessible, seen as an extension of indoor learning, and includes settings where natural areas, interesting materials, and equipment support learning across all developmental domains. The opportunity to be outdoors, interact with nature, move around, and breathe in fresh air is important for young children, particularly those who are unable to experience safe outdoor environments at home.

Teachers embed young children’s “home languages, cultures, and experiences into the environment” through the materials and the variety of learning opportunities they provide, including “music, visual arts, dance, literature, and storytelling” (NAEYC 2022, p. 126). Materials should be interesting, spark a child’s curiosity, be appropriate for various developmental levels, be easily accessible to support the development of independence, and reflect the diversity within and outside of the community.

Learning Environments Are Responsive to the Needs of Young Children

The learning environment speaks to individual children’s strengths and identities (NAEYC, 2022). These environments should be designed to meet each child’s developmental levels, cultural backgrounds, and specific needs. Adults who are responsive to these needs are critical. When children are deeply engaged in an environment where the arrangement of the classroom and the relationships within it are responsive to their needs and support the development of their self-regulation skills, development and learning will flourish and many behavioral challenges can be avoided.

“Learning is social [and] it works best when children work together, help each other and remain reflective about what they are doing” (Ostroff, 2012, p. 167); therefore, it is imperative that the environments for young children are designed to provide those types of experiences. A learning environment dedicated to how young children learn best is essential for successful experiences for all young children during the early years.

“A culturally responsive approach to supporting self-regulation includes engaging in a strengths-based view, which sees all children as capable and adaptive, and understanding that culture and context matter.”

~ (NAEYC, 2022, p.117)

VIEWING THE ENVIRONMENT FROM A CHILD'S PERSPECTIVE

- ◇ *I can see who I am and what I like to do here.*
- ◇ *I can see things that represent my family and our culture on the walls and on the shelves.*
- ◇ *I see people that look like me in toys and books here.*
- ◇ *This table and chair are just the right size for me.*
- ◇ *I can get the materials that I need by myself here.*
- ◇ *I can see my name and creations proudly displayed around the room.*
- ◇ *The natural world can be found here (such as objects from nature, animals, or living specimens).*
- ◇ *There is something sparkly, shadowy, wondrous, and magical here that makes me curious.*
- ◇ *Special objects are left here every day so I can use them many times and try to figure out more about their properties and how they work.*
- ◇ *There are materials here that I can use to make representations of what I understand or imagine.*
- ◇ *I can feel powerful and be physically active here.*
- ◇ *I can be creative here.*
- ◇ *I can learn to see things from different perspectives here.*
- ◇ *I can make choices about what I want to do and who I want to be with.*
- ◇ *There is a cozy place here where I can get away from the group and be by myself.*
- ◇ *I get to know the adults here - what they like, how they spend their time away from this space, and which people and things are special to them (adapted from NCDPI, 2009).*

“Language, knowledge, traditions, and family expectations are the primary influences on children’s development. Their growth and learning are greatly impacted by the physical environment, relationships with family members and others, and the community and culture in which they live. These factors differ from child to child and shape their view of the world and how they develop. Learning is enriched and strengthened by stable, nurturing relationships within the family and community.”

(NC Department of Public Instruction, 2009, p. 13)



INQUIRING INTO POLICIES, PRACTICES, AND STRATEGIES

Inquiring into Policies, Practices, and Strategies

As you consider the learning environments in which your students spend their time, it is essential to ask and answer the right questions to identify areas of strengths and those that may need improvement. How do the following ideals of creating effective and engaging learning environments for all young children apply to your setting?

Does your learning environment:

- ✓ reflect early learning philosophy and current brain research?
- ✓ respect the diversity of children’s needs including attention span, varying levels of development and different interests and abilities?
- ✓ reflect the diversity found within your classroom, school, and the surrounding community?
- ✓ provide a balance of teacher-directed, teacher-guided, and child-initiated learning opportunities?
- ✓ provide a consistent, yet flexible daily schedule that reflects a young child’s need for movement, collaboration, conversations, increased independence, choice, routine, and play?
- ✓ allow for flexibility in which to capitalize on unexpected teachable moments and other special activities?
- ✓ provide a safe space in which young children can make and learn from their mistakes?
- ✓ allow children enough time to practice newly learned concepts and skills in meaningful, playful ways?
- ✓ include a variety of materials that spark a young child’s interest and curiosity?
- ✓ include a variety of learning spaces within the classroom including a whole group space, small group spaces, learning centers and spaces where children can be alone?
- ✓ include the outdoors as part of the learning environment?
- ✓ allow adequate time for daily routines and transitions from one activity to the next?
- ✓ provide large, uninterrupted blocks of time for children to become deeply engaged in learning experiences?

Read our white paper, [Children Come First: Ensuring School Policies, Practices, and Strategies Lead to Positive 3rd Grade Outcomes](#). Greensboro, NC: SERVE Center at UNC Greensboro.

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