

TIP SHEET

Creating A Positive Environment



We are all affected by our environment. Our physical surroundings affect how we feel, how comfortable we are, how we relate to others, and how successfully we accomplish our goals.

For a young child, the environment is particularly important. For example, the size of the classroom and outdoor play areas, the colours of the walls, the type of furniture and flooring, the amount of light, and the number of windows all influence how children learn. Although these are factors teachers have limited control over, there are many things, that can be done to create a supportive and interesting environment for young children. Thoughtful arrangement of the indoor and outdoor environments can support and include all children.

Physical Space

Every child in a program needs to be able to move freely throughout the play areas. The classroom should have clearly defined activity areas that have been arranged to promote independence, foster decision-making, and encourage involvement.

1. Define activity areas by using shelves, area rugs, tables, or low dividers. The physical layout of the playroom will identify the purpose of each space and provide children with easily-marked boundaries.
2. Try to group quiet activities together in one area of the room (e.g., reading centre and circle area) while leaving the more active centres (like blocks and sensory) in another area.
3. Each play space should allow for two to three children to move about freely without bumping into each other or play materials.
4. More room may be required in the individual play areas to accommodate children who use wheelchairs or walkers.

Accessibility

The location of materials in the classroom can encourage a child to independently select toys they may want for play. Simply put, accessibility means

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that the children are able to play with all the toys that are available in the classroom.

Here are some tips on how to arrange materials:

1. Store materials and toys on low shelves, thus encouraging children to select and use them on their own.
2. Categorize toys or materials and place them in bins. This can help children learn to sort similar items (e.g., blocks, farm animals, crayons) and help make clean up time easier.
3. Keep materials in areas where they are to be used (e.g., glue sticks, crayons, and markers in the craft area).
4. Limit the number of toys in each bin to make it easier and lighter for a child to carry. Place heavier toys on the bottom shelves.
5. Consider the height of tables and chairs. Children need to be comfortably seated on chairs that allow their feet to touch the ground. If the chair is too big, they will be unable to reach for items.
6. Use stepping stools or blocks for children to step or stand on. These items are portable and can be used at the washroom sink, water table, cubby area, or while sitting on a chair to support their feet.

TIP: Walk around the classroom on your knees, look around, and reach. Is everything accessible?

Visibility

Young children respond to the use of pictures and/or drawings in the classroom. These types of visual supports can be used to teach children a variety of skills such as developing independence. The use of pictures and/or drawings in the classroom allows you to define play spaces and label materials.

1. Place a photo or tape a piece of the toy on the front of the bin. This will identify the contents of the bin.
2. Label your shelves with pictures or a toy piece. This will show children where toys are to be returned.
3. Define play areas with signs or photos. Attach a

photo or sign that represents the play area at the entrance where the children can see it.

4. Set up some play spaces to allow two or three children to play at a time. You can indicate this by using a photo or card system of your choice. Some examples are: cut-outs of a child's silhouette to correspond to the number of children who can play at one time, printed number of children with corresponding number of dots underneath (e.g., number 3 with three dots underneath), or space for a specific number of children to place their name/picture card.

Sensory Factors

A sensory-rich classroom provides children with an opportunity to explore their environment through touch, sight, sound, smell, and taste. Although it is important to provide sensory experiences in your daily routine, remember that some factors in the environment may have the opposite effect on children.

Adding Sensory Stimulation:

1. Add texture to toys, tabletops, shelving, and cubby areas. Children with visual impairments relate best to auditory and tactile stimulation. Materials should be brightly coloured, and whenever possible, have large, distinct features. Some examples are bubble wrap and corrugated cardboard.
2. Attach items that create an auditory effect. Things such as bells on the side of toys, shaker water bottles in the drama centre, and squeaky toys in the water table can help some children better attend to activities.
3. The room should be well lit preferably with the use of natural light from windows.

Reducing Sensory Stimulation:

1. Reduce the noise level in your classroom. Use large area rugs, acoustic tiles on the floors and ceilings, and fabric or art work on the walls.
2. Place tennis balls on the legs of chairs to reduce noise. Simply cut a hole that is slightly larger

- than the diameter of the chair leg and insert it into the ball.
3. Create a quiet area. Some children with special needs have a low threshold for noise and may benefit from having a quiet area to relax and get away from the loud and busy classroom.

Selection of Play Materials

The types of materials in a classroom and the way in which they are organized convey important messages to children. When the room is attractive, cheerful, orderly, and filled with interesting objects, you are providing an environment that children will naturally want to explore. The selection of play materials within the classroom and play areas will determine how children use and manipulate these items.

1. Select materials that address the differences in children's skill levels. For example, some children may be able to complete a ten-piece puzzle, while others can complete a three-piece puzzle.
2. Provide materials that encourage children to think and problem solve. Some play activities such as magnets and weights teach children to explore how the materials interact with each other.
3. Offer unusual play materials that are not provided on a daily basis (e.g., natural materials such as a bird's nest, leaves, pinecones, rocks, shells, or decorating supplies such as wallpaper sample books and fabric swatch books) and allow children to use them in a creative manner.
4. Materials should be related to the achievement of curriculum goals. Are the materials lending themselves to the development of social, cognitive, fine motor, and communication skills?

5. Use the "TRUE" approach in your classroom:
T- Twin play materials for certain activities. While you are always striving to promote interactions between children, there are times when it is necessary to give each child the same toy or play item. For example, provide duplicates of pouring and scooping toys at the sand or water table.

R- Replace or rotate play materials as necessary.

Sometimes a simple re-arrangement of how play materials are displayed will re-stimulate interest in a play centre.

U- Uncluttered toy shelves and floor space create harmony in the classroom. You want children to have access to play items. However, not all toys need to be available to them all the time.

E- Eliminate extra pieces of toys in bins. Bins should hold toys and not be used solely for storage. Lego pieces can be limited to a reasonable amount, which will allow children to use them in a creative manner. Too many pieces of toys at tidy-up time can be an overwhelming task for children.

Remember that room arrangement, individual play areas, and materials are key components in establishing a positive learning environment for young children.

For more information:

- Take a look at our [CLASSROOM LAYOUT](#) for more ideas on adapting learning centres in your classroom.
- Learn more about [Using Visuals](#) in your classroom.
- Create and print your own visuals like Daily schedules, Classroom Labels, and First/Then boards by visiting the [VISUALS ENGINE](#).