

Building a Classroom Environment That Stimulates Early Learning

The first few years of a child's formal education are critical, as they help shape his or her ability to learn and succeed in school and beyond. And while there are many factors that define the effectiveness of early learning programs, the physical environment plays a key role.

This guide is intended to help educators and administrators design highly effective early learning environments that optimize a student's chances of success.

HOW SMART CLASSROOM DESIGN CAN FACILITATE EARLY LEARNING

For many children, attending preschool or kindergarten is their first real exposure to a formal learning environment. They might be transitioning from home for the very first time, and as you can imagine, they might be overwhelmed when they first walk into a classroom.

This is why the design of the learning space is very important. The right kind of physical environment can help children transition into learning at the start of the day. Release from the caregiver into the care of another adult is significant. Children often have separation anxiety, and the learning environment can support this transition in a healthy way.

For instance, the learning space should be warm and inviting, with soothing colors and comfortable furnishings.

Years ago, you would often see bold shades of red, yellow, blue, green, and orange in early learning spaces; today, it's much more common to see softer, more muted tones, such as lighter blues, grays, and browns. Purple colors tend to be lavender or lilac instead of royal purple. These softer colors are more calming for children, helping to ease their transition from home to school.

Color isn't the only design element that can help



make early learning environments more welcoming for young children. The use of naturalistic objects and authentic materials can help children transition from home to school more successfully as well.

Instead of plastic objects and furniture, we are seeing a trend toward the use of furnishings and supplies made out of natural-looking materials — such as wood tables and stainless steel mixing bowls like children might see in their own home.



TRANSITIONING FROM ONE ACTIVITY TO ANOTHER

The physical environment not only plays a role in helping children feel calm and safe and successfully transition from home to school; it also should help them transition from one learning activity to another. Typically, this is done by creating separate, clearly defined spaces for each type of skill or activity.

Aside from being functional, having clearly defined areas for each type of skill or activity helps students learn how to stop one activity and start another, which is an important aspect of self-regulation. Self-regulation is the key to formal learning, especially when it comes to literacy. For example, it's critical for reading comprehension: Children must be able to stop and start reading, knowing where they left off and what they understand of the text so far.

Early learning environments can help children transition effectively from one activity to another by providing clear physical and visual boundaries differentiating one activity from another. Each activity area can be defined by separate furnishings and floor coverings that give children visual clues that a new activity is about to begin, as well as materials that lend themselves to the intended purpose.

For instance, a block area might be set off from other learning spaces by mobile shelving, and it might have carpeting or foam flooring to muffle the sound of blocks falling on the floor. A reading or story center might contain soft, comfortable seating (such as beanbag chairs) for children to sit on as they listen to or look at books.

FOUR KEY FEATURES OF EARLY LEARNING ENVIRONMENTS

Besides making children feel welcome and helping to ease transitions from home to school and from one activity to another, here are four additional characteristics that should describe every early learning environment.

Safe and secure

The safety of children is paramount, and the design of the learning space should reflect this priority.

Furniture should have rounded corners, with no sharp edges or exposed hardware that children could catch their fingers or clothing on. Chairs should be sturdy, so children don't tip over. Cabinets that contain cleaning supplies or other dangerous materials should be locked or placed at higher elevations, so children can't get into them. There should be clear sight lines throughout the space so that all children are visible to adults — and adults are visible to children.

Developmentally appropriate

Every piece of furniture needs to be geared toward children. For instance, chairs should be the right height. There should be a six- to eight-inch space between the table top and the tops of children's knees when they're sitting down, so their elbows can rest comfortably. Tables can't be too big, so children can reach across and get materials.



Easily accessible

Early learning environments should contain shelving units where children can place materials directly on shelves or in bins by themselves, without a teacher's help. Everything should be clearly labeled with both words and symbols, so that it's easily accessible. When it's time to clean up, all materials have a well-defined place, so children can put things back where they belong. This helps foster independence and self-confidence, allowing children to develop behavior management and self-regulation skills. When children accomplish a task and help clean up, it makes them feel good about themselves.

Intellectually stimulating

Early learning is about learning through play and communication. That's how children make sense of the world, by exploring and talking with each other. The furnishings and materials in the learning space should facilitate this.

The environment should be equipped with elements that invite learning and exploration both individually and in collaboration with others,

such as open-ended materials that don't have a concrete purpose in mind but instead encourage imagination. For example: building blocks and manipulatives that allow for linking or constructing; objects that let children experiment through trial and error; dual-sided art easels; sand and water tables filled with sensory items.

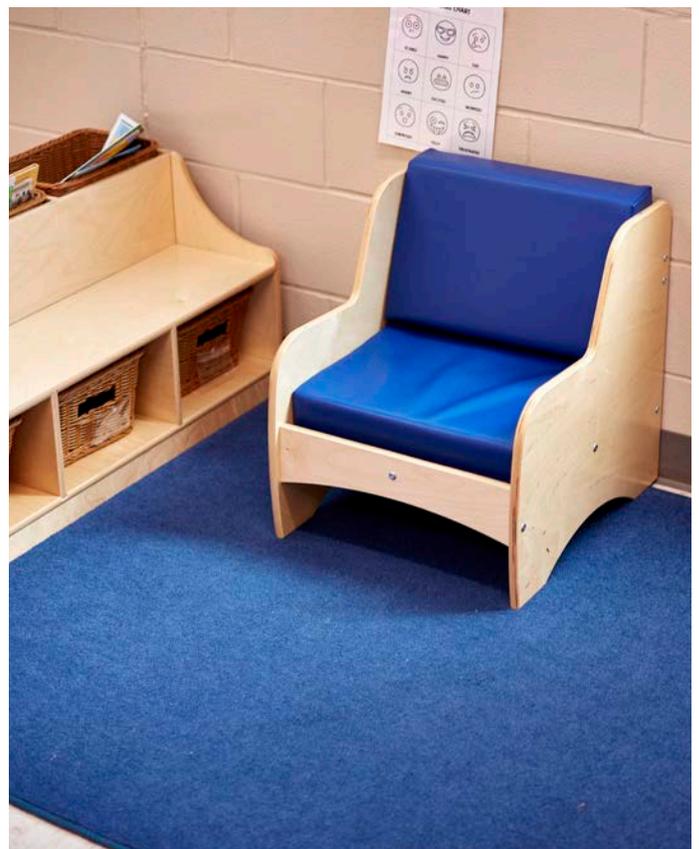
It used to be common to see food used in these tables, like rice or macaroni. But now we're seeing a trend away from the use of food as an instructional tool, out of sensitivity toward food insecurity. To play with food is disrespectful for children who don't get enough to eat at home.

SIX TIPS FOR CREATING EFFECTIVE EARLY LEARNING CLASSROOMS

Your early learning spaces create a warm and welcoming environment for children. You've created distinct areas (centers) to help children transition from one activity to another, and the spaces are safe and developmentally appropriate, with easily accessible and intellectually stimulating learning materials.

Here are six additional suggestions for creating successful early learning environments.

- Take a minimalistic approach, so that you avoid sensory overload. Children learn best when their attention is focused on one activity at a time. Put out materials as they are needed, and put them away when they're not in use. Give children a choice of three things to play with, not 10.
- Carefully consider the placement of activity centers. Those with high-energy activities (such as block centers, dramatic play areas, music centers) shouldn't be located right next to centers with quieter activities (like listening or reading centers).
- Make sure the materials in your early learning spaces reflect a variety of children's interests and ability levels.
- Create comfortable, private spaces where children can safely retreat to rest, observe, and recharge emotionally throughout the day.
- Switch new resources in and out on a regular basis as appropriate, to promote children's interest and keep the materials fresh.
- Place heavier items on lower shelves, so that children don't get hurt when they take out these materials.



RESOURCES:

IRIS Center, Peabody College at Vanderbilt University. "What can teachers do to make the classroom environment more conducive to children's learning and development?"

Retrieved from <https://iris.peabody.vanderbilt.edu/module/env/cresource/q1/p02/#content>.