

*The following excerpts are from pages 67-72 of*

# The Creative Curriculum® for Preschool, Fifth Edition

## Volume 1: The Foundation

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## Evaluating the Effectiveness of the Physical Environment

You will know that your classroom environment is well organized if children are able to act in these ways:

- **select activities and make other choices** on their own
- **use materials appropriately** and creatively once they enter an interest area
- **stay involved** with an activity for a sustained period of time
- **learn in meaningful ways** when they play
- **help care** for materials

Take time to evaluate the physical environment. Does it convey the messages you intend? Is it efficient? Is it interesting for the children? Are you experiencing any problems that might be addressed by changing the environment?

### Conveying Positive Messages

Teachers who are aware of the power of the environment arrange their space purposefully to convey the messages they want children to receive. Use the following messages and strategies for sending them as a guide to assessing how well your room arrangement is working.

#### “This is a good place to be.”

Furniture is clean and well maintained.

Wall decorations consist mostly of children’s art, which is displayed attractively at their eye level and with large spaces of blank wall so as not to be overwhelming.

The room includes decorative touches, such as plants, displays of collections (e.g., shells, leaves, and stones), tablecloths or fabric-covered pillows, baskets, interesting artifacts, and framed artwork.

Bright colors are used selectively on neutrally colored walls to highlight interest areas or mark storage areas.

#### “You belong here.”

Each child has a cubby or basket (marked with his or her name and picture) for keeping personal items.

Furniture is child-sized and in good condition.

Pictures on the walls, in books, and in other learning materials include people of different ethnic backgrounds and economic means, people with disabilities, nontraditional families, and women and men in a variety of jobs.

Each child’s work is displayed and protected.

Materials, equipment, and furniture enable all children to be involved in all areas of the classroom.

Materials reflect the children's home lives and cultures.

Pictures of the children with their families are displayed.

**“This is a place you can trust.”**

Equipment and materials are arranged consistently so children know where to find the things they need.

Shelves are neat and uncluttered, and materials are labeled so children can make choices easily.

A well-defined, illustrated schedule is prominently displayed so children learn the order of daily events and know what to expect.

Routines, such as eating, resting, and toileting, are consistent, and transitions are smooth.

**“There are places where you can be by yourself when you want.”**

Small, quiet areas of the room accommodate one or two children.

A large pillow or stuffed chair in a quiet corner with minimal displays invites children to enjoy being quiet and alone.

Headphones for a CD player, tape recorder, and/or computer enable children to listen individually.

**“You can do many things on your own here.”**

Materials are stored on low shelves so children can reach them without help.

Materials are located in the areas where they are to be used, and they are organized logically (e.g., drawing paper is near the markers and crayons, and pegs are near the pegboards).

Shelves are labeled with pictures and words that show children where toys and materials belong.

Labels and printed materials are in the home languages of the children as well as in English, if possible.

An illustrated job chart (for older preschoolers) shows that everyone in the classroom has a job every day.

Photographs of children doing interesting things in the classroom are on display.

**“This is a safe place to explore and try your ideas.”**

Protected and defined quiet areas encourage small-group activities (e.g., a table with 3–4 chairs located in an area enclosed by low shelves containing toys and games).

Smocks are available for art activities and water play so children can explore them without worrying about getting dirty or wet.

Protected floor space for building with blocks is clearly defined and out of the way of traffic.

The outdoor area is fenced and protected.

Materials are displayed attractively, inviting children to use them.

Toys that have not been used for a long time are rotated frequently, and new things are added to keep children’s interest.

Children who find changes unsettling are assisted when changes are introduced.

### **How Is It Working?**

In addition to considering the messages your classroom conveys, take time each day to assess how well the physical setting is working for the children and you. Observe children systematically during transitions, during group times, and when they select their own activities during choice time. Your observations will tell you what materials children typically select, how they use these materials, what they are learning, and how they relate to their peers while working. With this information, you can make the appropriate changes to the physical environment. Here are some examples of questions that will help you focus your observations:

#### **How do children select interest areas and materials?**

Which interest areas and materials are most popular? Which are rarely used?

Do any children need help in making choices?

Does anyone need a more clearly defined work space?

Do the traffic patterns permit children to move easily about the room, play safely, and build without interference?

Are children able to find and return materials independently?

Do children show gender-related preferences for materials or toys?

#### **How do children use materials?**

Do children have the skills to use materials successfully?

Do children use materials appropriately and creatively?

Which types of materials seem to stimulate dramatic play? Other social play?

Which materials hold children's interest the longest?

Are there enough materials to keep children involved in meaningful play?

Is sharing a problem?

Are the materials reflective of children's backgrounds and home life?

Do children know how to care for materials?

### **How do children interact with others?**

Are children able to play successfully near and with each other?

Are any children isolated from and rejected by their peers?

Which children play together most often?

Are children talking together about what they are doing?

How do children ask for help from adults? From peers?

Which play experiences foster social play? Individual play?

### **What Problems Might Be Related to the Physical Setting?**

Even if you have organized the classroom and outdoor areas carefully, things don't always go according to plan. Children may fight over toys, wander about, become easily distracted, or use materials inappropriately. Although such behaviors can have several causes, the room arrangement may be a contributing factor.

If children's behavior is challenging, a few changes in your room arrangement can make a dramatic difference. You also can involve children in finding solutions to problems. For example, during a discussion at group time you might prompt, "I notice that block buildings are being knocked down as people walk by. I wonder how we can fix that problem." Children will probably be more cooperative if you involve them in coming up with a solution instead of choosing a solution, yourself. Involving children also conveys the message that they are competent to solve problems, that you expect them to take responsibility for doing so, and that the classroom belongs to everyone.

The following chart presents possible reasons for restless or disruptive behavior related to the environment and identifies strategies for rearranging the space to correct and prevent recurrences of the problem.

Challenging Behaviors	Possible Causes	Changes to the Environment
Running in the classroom	Too much space is open; the room is not divided into small enough areas; activity areas are not well defined.	Use shelves and furniture to divide the space. Avoid open spaces that encourage children to run.
Fighting over toys	Too many popular toys are one-of-a-kind; children are asked to share too often.	Provide duplicates of toys. Show children when it will be their turns (e.g., use a sand timer or help children create a waiting list for turns).
Wandering around; inability to choose activities	The room is too cluttered; choices are not clear; there is not enough to do.	Get rid of clutter. Simplify the layout of the room and materials. Add more activity choices.
Becoming easily distracted; trouble staying with a task and completing it	Areas are undefined and open; children can see everything going on in the room; materials are too difficult or children are bored with them.	Use shelves to define areas. Separate noisy and quiet areas. Assess children's skills and select materials they can use in interesting ways.
Continually intruding on others' work spaces	Space is limited; poor traffic patterns prevent children from spreading out.	Define work areas for children (e.g., use masking tape or sections of cardboard for block building, and provide trays or place mats for toys). Limit the number of areas open at one time to allow more space for each.
Misusing materials and resisting cleanup	Children do not know how to use materials appropriately; materials on shelves are messy; the displays are disorderly.	Make a place for everything. Use picture and word labels to show where materials go. Provide consistent guidance on how to clean up.

Children's behavior is a good indication of how well the physical environment of your classroom is arranged. Once you set up the classroom effectively, you can turn your attention to establishing the daily routines and schedule.

## Establishing a Structure for Each Day

The second aspect of building an effective learning environment is establishing a structure for each day (a predictable sequence of events). When time is blocked out in an orderly and consistent fashion, children tend to feel secure and become increasingly independent. When children do not know when things will happen, classroom life can seem chaotic.

In defining a structure for the day, think about the different events that take place every day at a fairly consistent time. Organize these events as a daily schedule in which there is a good balance of active and quiet times as well as a range of child-initiated experiences and teacher-planned activities. You also need to develop plans for each week. You may use the *The Creative Curriculum* teaching guides for various studies or record your own plans on a “Weekly Planning Form.” Because the first 6 weeks of school are such an important time to help children learn to function well in a group setting, a good resource is *The Creative Curriculum® for Preschool Teaching Guide: Beginning the Year*.

## Daily Events

Daily activities and routines in preschool programs typically include taking attendance, periods when you meet with all of the children in a large group or with a few children in a small group, choice times when children are free to interest areas and to use whatever materials they wish, read-alouds, outdoor time, mealtimes, and rest times. These periods of the day are described below. Note that reading aloud and outdoor play are not described here because they are covered in detail in *Volume 2: Interest Areas* and *Volume 3: Literacy*.

### Taking Attendance

Keeping track of attendance is a program requirement. It can also be an opportunity for children to learn to read and write their own names and to recognize the names of their classmates. Here are two approaches to taking attendance that also support literacy and mathematics learning:

- **Keep an attendance chart in the meeting area.** Divide the chart into two sections: one that is headed “Home” and one that is headed “School.” Make a card with each child's name. In the beginning of the year you may want to include the child's photo. Glue Velcro® on the back of each card and on both sections of the chart. Show children how to move their cards from one section at the beginning of the day to the other section at the end. During the morning meeting, you can talk with the children about who is at school and help them count those children. The cards for any children who are absent will still be displayed, a visual reminder that they are part of the classroom community.

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