

Your Physical Environment: Issuing an Invitation to Learn

From the Teaching Strategies online course *The First Six Weeks of Preschool: Places*

The wise use and organization of the space in your classroom and outdoors is an important part of an effective learning environment. The physical arrangement of a classroom has a profound effect on children's development and learning.

Read about preschool teacher Penny as she thinks about her classroom environment before the start of the school year and again two weeks after the children arrive. Think about the ways that she is attempting to intentionally support engagement, curiosity, and safety and consider the changes she makes once she observes how the children respond to the environment she has created.

You will be asked to consider your thoughts on the choices that the teacher makes, both before school begins and later, after she and the children have gotten a chance to interact with each other and with the classroom's physical environment.

CASE STUDY

The school year is about to start, and Penny takes a good look around her classroom. Although she is working in the same school as last year, she has moved to a different part of the building. She knows she can draw on the lessons she has already learned about the importance of establishing a classroom environment that invites learning, promotes positive behavior choices, and inspires both collaboration and independence. Since this room set-up is a bit different, however, she will have to think carefully about ways to incorporate those lessons into this new space.

Penny quickly runs through her list of tips and reminders and scans her classroom to judge how well she thinks she has addressed each of them.

Inventory the room's advantages and challenges.

Penny feels certain that she has taken into account the size of the room; the floor coverings in different parts of the room (some areas have carpeting installed, others are tile); and the placement of doorways, windows, electrical outlets, running water, heating and air units, and built-in cabinets. While she cannot alter these fixed elements, she can look for ways to make the most of them.

This classroom space is smaller than last year's, but it has some advantages the other did not. It has a second exit, built-in cabinets at both ends of the room, and several bulletin boards. She has just enough tables and chairs to seat the fourteen children currently on her class list. She makes a note to speak to the school custodian about securing another table and a few more chairs so that she and her assistant teacher or any visiting family members can sit and join the children for lunch. She has more shelving units but they include colored bins rather than the clear ones she was used to.

Establish safe and effective traffic patterns.

Penny notes that she has used two portable cubby units to establish a boundary alongside of which the children can line up at the classroom's main door. The units are more than four feet long each, so by situating them end-to-end near the classroom's front door, she has created a nine-foot-long physical guide to help the children to know where to line up. She has also set up a clear path to the classroom's other exit, which opens to the center's paved outdoor play area.

Use walls and built-in furniture to help define interest areas.

Penny has used a low bookcase to separate the Discovery area from the Library area, and another on the other side of the room to separate the Block area from the Dramatic Play area. A low, built-in cabinet in the rear of the room underneath several windows will provide a convenient place to set out natural materials that the children can explore, so she has established the Discovery area there. Inside the cabinet, she has stored the materials that she will introduce later in the year.

Separate quiet and noisy interest areas as much as possible.

While Penny realizes that the size of her classroom limits her ability to physically separate interest areas, she can make certain that at least one other interest area is located between the Block area and the Library area, which she knows are usually the noisiest and quietest areas of the classroom. She has also tried to separate the noisy Dramatic Play and Sand and Water areas from the quieter Technology and Art areas.

Decide which interest areas need tables and chairs.

Penny examines the rectangular tables and chairs that she has placed in the Toys and Games, Art, and Discovery areas to make certain that they are all free of what she calls "the wobbles." She also checks the smaller, two-person table where they keep the two computer tablets that the children use. She examines the padded chairs she has put in the Library area to make sure they are clean and in good repair. At the last minute, she secures another table and four small chairs from the school's custodian and adds them to the room's Dramatic Play area. She smiles as she imagines some of the many ways that children might enjoy using the table and chairs in their pretend play.

Check floor coverings.

Since the floors in Penny's new classroom include a mix of carpeting and tile, she has already thought about making sure the interest areas most likely to be messy—such as the Art, Sand and Water, and Cooking areas—are located in parts of the room with tile. She has set up the areas where children are most likely to sit on the floor—such as the Block area and Library area—in the carpeted section of the room.

Place interest areas near needed resources.

Art and Cooking areas near the sink? ✓

Technology area near some electrical and cable outlets? ✓

Discovery area near natural light? ✓

Messy areas on tile flooring? ✓

Library and Block areas on carpeting? ✓

Make wise use of natural light.

Penny wants the children to be able to take advantage of natural light when using materials like magnifying glasses, mirrors, and magnets, so her first priority for proximity to a window is the Discovery area.

She would also like to have the Art area near a window, since a view of the outdoors can serve as great inspiration. Since the only windows are in a carpeted part of the room, however, and across the room from the classroom sink, Penny chooses to prioritize the tile floor and sink for her Art area. She makes a note to remind herself to collect photographic images of nature to post in the Art area for children's inspiration.

Maintain visibility throughout all areas of the classroom.

This last item on her checklist often presents Penny with the most difficulties. Because she is an adult of average height, Penny herself has little difficulty seeing all around the room, with its child-sized tables and chairs and low, open shelves and cubbies. When she actually sits in those chairs, however, she realizes she cannot always see past some of the furniture and other classroom materials, such as the makeshift closet and coatrack she had set up in the Dramatic Play area. And the problem is made even greater when she sits on the floor in the Block and Library areas.

Penny worries that the young children in her classroom—particularly those who haven't been to school before or who are naturally anxious when a trusted adult is not within their sight—might be reluctant to play in an area of the classroom if they can't always see her or the teaching assistant. She makes a note to track the children's choices every day for the first two weeks of school, to see where each child was playing.

Finally, Penny checks to make sure her classroom arrangement is compliant with all necessary safety guidelines and fire regulations, including keeping the tops and sides of HVAC units unobstructed, stocking the Dramatic Play area with flame-retardant clothing, and not overloading electrical outlets.

REFLECT

Take a moment to think about the following topics. You will then be asked to consider related questions.

Penny's classroom environment checklist

Top tips to keep in mind for your own classroom environment

Any additional considerations for your own classroom

CONSIDER

What do you think of the checklist that Penny compiled and the way she thought about each of those issues?

CONSIDER

How might you use her checklist to evaluate your own classroom environment?

What will you do if two or more checklist items are in opposition to each other, such as when Penny wished she could set up the Art area near a window but also wanted to keep it near the sink?

CONSIDER

What additional concerns do you think you may need to address in your own classroom environment that were not covered in Penny's list?

CONCLUSION

One afternoon near the end of the second week of school, Penny again looks around her classroom.

In the past two weeks, she had worked each day to build relationships with each of the children in her class as well as with their families and her teaching assistant, Lina.

Penny and Lina worked together to keep a record of the interest area selections the children made during choice time each day over the past two weeks. She asked Lina to sit with her and review both this record and the list of considerations she created before school started, to make sure that the classroom environment is supporting development and learning in the ways that she thought that it would.

The women agree that the clear pathways to the classrooms two exits were working well although when any more than two-thirds of the children are lined up at the front exit, they block one of the cubby shelves. Lina and Penny move the unit to the side in case someone needs to access a cubby when the children are in line.

They then evaluate the Block and Dramatic Play areas, which are next to each other. Both areas have been popular during choice time, attracting many children and causing congestion in that part of the room. Since they can't think of any way to enlarge either area without sacrificing space in the other, they decide to remove two of the chairs at the Dramatic Play area table. They consider asking the children for suggestions on what else to do to solve the choice time traffic problem there.

They then turn to the Toys and Games area, wondering why it hasn't yet attracted much interest. They theorize that if more children naturally gravitate to the Toys and Games area, the overcrowding issues in other parts of the room would start to take care of themselves. They decide to remove some of the materials the children haven't yet played with and make sure that the remaining toys and games are all on the lowest shelves where all children can easily reach them. They add photos of each toy to the written labels on the front of each organizer bin since the bins are not see-through. They also decide to each spend time in that interest area during the next week's choice time, knowing that sometimes the presence of an adult attracts children to a new part of the classroom.

They then consider the Library area. They had started the year with book covers facing outward, as opposed to showing only their spines. But each day at the end of choice time, they noticed that the children had returned the books to the shelves with their spines facing out. Penny makes a note to teach the children how to display the books so that they are easier to see. She takes a few of the books off the shelves and places them in two baskets for the children to flip through. She also makes a note to see if she could get a bookcase designed specifically to have books displayed facing out.

CONSIDER

What do you think of the changes Penny and Lina made after the first two weeks of school? How might their plan help you create one of your own?

RESOURCES

You can access some helpful information for preparing for the first days of school—including checklists for arranging your classroom's physical environment and planning a structure for the learning day—in the Planning Your Day section of the Ready. Set. Go! Teacher Toolkit.