

ENVIRONMENTS

Children spend a lot of time with you and in your program’s environment. This environment becomes their home away from home. Creating an environment that is inviting, predictable and organized helps children feel safe and secure, which empowers them to learn through play and thrive in their development.

When setting up your environment—inside or outside—consider these questions:

- How does your environment promote children’s social and emotional development?
- How does the environment reflect families’ cultures?
- Is your schedule and routine predictable and flexible for children?
- Is your learning environment organized in a way that empowers children to explore on their own?
- Are the interest areas and materials appropriate, engaging and plentiful for all children?
- Have you considered all safety issues relating to the learning environment?

By taking the time to consider all aspects of your environment and how it reflects the children in your care, you are ensuring that all children will thrive. Continue to be curious about why you set up your environment the way you have and remind yourself constantly that children’s interests and abilities are constantly changing and growing.

Also, remember that as you begin to look at your environment in new ways small changes over time reflect monumental growth and development. Don’t feel obligated to change everything at once—take small steps and enjoy the rewards!



As changes occur with the children in your program (new children arrive, children leave, and children advance developmentally) be sure to “check-in” with your environment to make sure you are meeting the needs of all children. You can find additional guidance for conducting an environmental check-in at the end of this section.

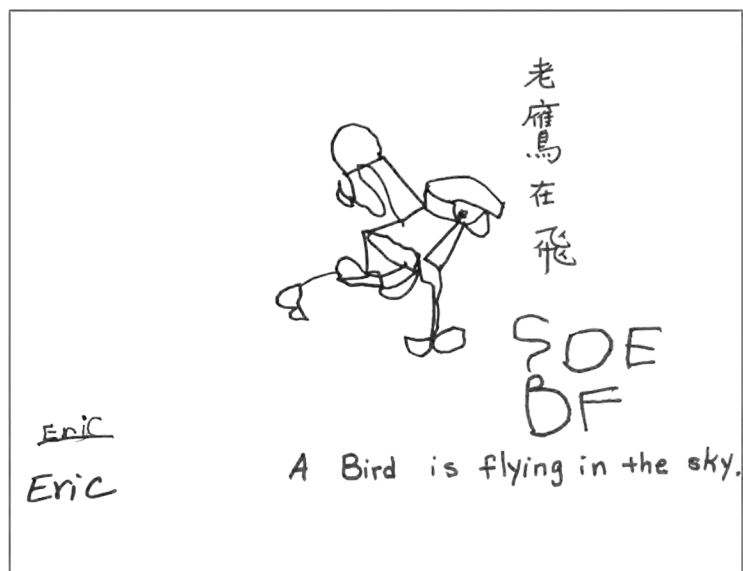
★ At the end of this section you will find a “check-in” to help you reflect on the activities and materials you have planned.

Promoting Children's Social and Emotional Development

Creating an environment that includes **elements of home** will help children feel secure and provides a sense of comfort. Some touches of home may include plants, soft surfaces, pillows, tablecloths and curtains.



Adding photos of the children and their families is a great way to help create a sense of community. The benefits include being able to see different types of families, stimulate conversations, promote social connections between peers and adults and allowing them to reflect on past experiences.



Having materials and activities **within a child's reach** will encourage learning and send the message that this space was created for children. Placing pictures, their artwork and other images **at the child's eye level** is a great way to help them build a sense of ownership of the space.



Schedules and Routines

Schedules and routines are important because they help children understand and predict the **pattern of daily activities** within their environment. Routines typically include arrival and departure, mealtimes, diapering and toileting and sleep time.

One way to help children prepare for their day is to post a schedule using pictures with words in an area that is easily visible.



Transition methods help children anticipate change. Using a consistent routine and effective transition tools promotes a calm and organized flow to the children's day.

Examples of transition tools are:

- Talking about why a change is going to occur
- Verbal cues such as giving a '5 minute' reminder
- Fingerplays and songs
- Using visual cues

★ For more information on transitions, see the Transitions section beginning on page 34.

Establishing Learning Areas

Creating learning areas for each age group is essential to organizing your environment.

Learning areas for each age group have different materials **based on individual needs, family culture, children's interests, and developmental abilities**. Intentionally organizing your environment based on the needs and abilities of children allows children access to personal and community materials.

Infants

The environment for Infants will look and feel quite different from Toddler, Preschool and School-age environments. Infant spaces should feel more integrated. In particular, non-mobile infants require different accommodations than older infants.

Examples of Infant Materials:

Nesting cups	Mirrors
Rattles	Pop beads
Shape sorters	Baby dolls & stuffed animals
Filling & dumping	Touch & feel materials
Climbing & push toys	Art & sensory experiences

Learning areas for Infants

Soft toy area	Action area
Cozy area & places to pause	Reaching, grasping, kicking area
Body-image space	Tiny space
Climbing space	Please look/ touch area
Costume area	Treasure baskets

Toddlers, Preschool and School-age

Now let's take a look at environments that meet the developmental needs of Toddlers, Preschool and School-age.

Learning areas for Toddlers/Preschool/School-age

Blocks/Transportation	Science
Writing	Puzzles
Music	Sensory/Water
Dramatic Play	Gross Motor
Library	Space for One
Art	Manipulatives
Math	Outdoors



Blocks/Transportation & Dramatic Play

The largest areas in an environment are typically Blocks/Transportation and Dramatic Play. These areas give abundant opportunities for relationship building and space to be creative and move about freely.



Sensory and Art

These areas are great opportunities that provide experiences to freely explore materials, study cause and effect and strengthen social skills.

Since these areas can be messy, placing them near a water source, providing smocks and locating them in a non-carpeted area is beneficial.



Science

Providing an area for science exploration offers children a specific space to explore their natural world and make predictions about the scientific process.

Open-ended materials for children gives them space to build curiosity and ask questions.



Library Area and Space for One (Alone Space)

These should be separate areas in the environment.

- The library area is a place for children to independently explore books and other literacy activities.
- The alone space gives a child time and space to understand their big feelings and gives them a place for relaxation. This area should never be used for punishment.



Defining Spaces Within the Environment

Using area rugs and/or shelves can help establish boundaries and expectations for children. Decreasing distractions between quiet and loud areas encourages learning through play.

To accommodate non-mobile infants, best practice is to offer a variety of materials that are easy for a child care professional to reach when providing care.



Classroom Management Practices

Strong classroom management practices can also assist in organization. This includes limiting the number of items available to the children, defining the number of children allowed in the area and labeling shelves to encourage organization. These types of practices empower children to learn skills such as taking turns, spatial awareness, communicating their needs and problem solving.

Limiting the Number of Items

Limiting the number of items in an area (such as providing three chairs or three sets of materials) sends a clear message to children that there is only room for three in that space.



Labeling Shelves

Offering children visual cues (photos) to know where materials belong aids in building confidence and self-help skills. Additionally, participating and modeling during clean-up time encourages children to take pride in their surroundings, as well as builds teamwork skills and a sense of community.



Adding Developmentally Appropriate Materials

- Keep children engaged by choosing materials that children find interesting and that are appropriate for their skill levels.
- Providing duplicates of high interest materials will help with unwanted behaviors and promote parallel play.
- Develop an intentional rotation of materials so that children have the opportunity to be exposed to a few select materials at a time and also benefit from having the opportunity to explore new materials as you rotate them in and out of the learning areas.
- Keep intentional teaching in mind when you are planning the environment.
- Ask yourself, “What is the purpose of this material and what skills do I want children to strengthen?”

Environmental Check-in

Once you have completed your environmental set up, conduct a check-in to make sure you have covered the best practice topics outlined below. While sitting at the child's level, answer the following questions through the eyes of the child.

Questions	Material/Area Examples	Teacher Notes (Changes to make)
Do I feel welcome and safe?		
Do I feel comfortable taking risks and are my efforts valued?		
Are there photos of my home, family and cultural traditions in the room? Are there photos of my peers in the room?		
Is there somewhere for me to relax or help me calm myself?		
Is my environment and schedule reliable and flexible so I know what to expect on a daily basis?		
Are there materials on shelves within my reach and are they of interest to me?		
Is the space clean and organized? Am I able to find what I need/want?		
Are there enough materials and experiences provided to keep me engaged?		