



Designing a Classroom for Learning

The design of a classroom conveys a message to all who use it. What does your classroom say? Many typical classroom behaviors such as, running in the room, children's inability to make choices, fighting over toys, and inappropriate use of materials can be traced to how a classroom is arranged. By making a concerned effort in designing the classroom environment, teachers can create an environment that encourages learning and at the same time makes their job easier and rewarding.

A well-designed classroom should convey six positive messages for pre-school children according to Diane Dodge and Bonnie Kittredge, authors of the video; Room Arrangement as a Teaching Strategy: (1) this is a good place to be; (2) you belong here as a valued member of the community; (3) this is a place you can trust; (4) there are places you can be by yourself when

you want to be; (5) you can do many things on your own; and (6) this is a safe place to explore and try new ideas. How can you design your classroom to send these positive messages?

Some things to keep in mind when designing a classroom are remembering that children ages three – five years old enjoy having choices and exploring and doing things on their own. Pre-school children like working in small groups in areas that are well defined. Centers in the classroom should define the kinds of activities that children are expected to use in it. The furnishings should be child-sized and in good condition. Walls should display children's work at their eye level and not so much that it is overwhelming. Adding decorative touches to each center such as plants and soft furnishings give the room a feeling of home.

The second message the classroom design should

send is “you are a valued member of this classroom community”. To convey this message, provide each child with a space to keep personal items. Display pictures of the children in the class so they can see that their culture is valued, respected, and a part of daily classroom life. Materials such as books, pictures, and different learning materials should include people of different ethnic backgrounds, abilities, and non-traditional families. Dramatic play areas should reflect diverse cultures by providing a variety of foods, different types of cooking utensils, and cultural clothes to dress up in. When designing a classroom, make sure you are providing materials and furnishings to enable all children to fully participate in all areas of the classroom.

The third message a classroom should convey: “this is a place you can trust”. Materials should be in the same place so that children can find the materials when they need them. Shelves should be uncluttered and labeled, making a

child’s choice easy. Arrange center areas so that play is not in traffic areas and children are able to play without fear of having a creation destroyed by another child. A classroom schedule should be well defined with a substantial portion of the day used for children to have access to materials, as well as, providing consistent routines each day.

“There are places you can be by yourself when you want to be”, is the fourth message that a good classroom design should convey. This can be accomplished by providing small quiet areas for one or two children. A child-sized rocker with a basket of books or assorted soft or quiet items, mats, bean bag chairs, and washable pillows, transform an area into a welcoming cozy space for children.

“You can do many things on your own here” is the powerful message conveyed when independence is valued. Teachers promote this message when they store materials on low, open shelves. These materials need to be located in areas that are accessible

to children when they need them. Job charts tell children you respect them enough to let them help. Use labels and pictures with words to promote self-help skills. Musical instruments and CD players should also be available as a choice so children can make and listen to a variety of music.

Once you know that your environment is one where children feel that they belong, can trust others, and where they can be alone at times while functioning with independence, you want to assure the environment is stimulating and safe. This is the sixth positive message that a well-designed classroom will convey: “A safe place to explore and try out your ideas”. Think of the classroom as activities for a course. Fill it with materials that children will want to explore and try out their ideas. They will learn content and develop skills as they play. Provide props in individual areas: block area, dramatic play, science, and math. Display these materials in interesting ways to attract the children’s attention.

One last thought to share. Your outdoor area also conveys messages about your program. Think about the message your outdoor space is sending, and apply the same six positive messages as you reconstruct this space. Remember children need age-appropriate and developmentally-appropriate environments that support and promote child-directed and child-initiated play and learning. Teachers and children will reap the rewards of a well-organized physical environment. Combining these strategies with an effective daily schedule will send positive messages to children and families.

Resources

Cryer, D., Harms, T., and Riley, C. (2003). *All About the ECERS-R*. PACT House Publishing

Curtis, D. and Carter, M. (2003). *Designs for Living and Learning Transforming Early Childhood Environments*. Redleaf Press

Dodge, D. and Kittredge, B. (2003). *Room Arrangement as a Teaching Strategy*. Teaching Strategies Inc.

Greenman, J. (2005). *Caring Spaces, Learning Places: Children's Environments that Work*. Exchange Press, Inc.