

# Arranging the Active Learning Environment

## SETTING UP THE PRESCHOOL CLASSROOM

by Nancy Vogel

**A** well-designed and well-organized learning environment that is inviting to children, full of interesting materials, and set up to accommodate a range of activities and play, supports children's growth in all areas of development. Any developmentally appropriate program — whether it's a half-day program located in an elementary school setting, a full-day program in a child care setting, a small space located in a church basement, or a newly built, state-of-the-art center with spacious and well-equipped rooms — can follow some basic guidelines to arrange a learning space for young children that will encourage their exploration, creativity, and active learning.

### Setting Up Interest Areas

Children who participate in developmentally based preschool programs naturally engage in a variety of types of play and learning. They enjoy building, pretending, creating, reading, moving, writing, drawing, and making music. In order to encourage the various types of



*A well-equipped learning space supports children's exploration and active learning.*

play and learning that naturally occur, interest areas should be designed to support children's interests and activities. For example, a sand and water area encourages sensory exploration, a spacious block area encourages children's desires to build and construct things, or a reading and writing area supports preschoolers' discoveries of books and their early writing development.

It's important to choose names for the interest areas that make sense to children and are easy for them to identify. For example, choose to name the area of the classroom with small manipulative materials and toys the *toy area*, rather than the *manipulative area* — likewise, *house area*, instead of *dramatic play*

*area*. Use large area signs to label each area, and refer to areas by name when talking with children.

The interest areas should also be clearly defined by equipment, such as low shelving units or dividers. In addition, the equipment that serves as the actual focal point of the interest area, such as a water table in the sand and water area, or a workbench in the wood-working area, can also clearly define a space. Other visual boundaries include area rugs or a change in the surface of the floor, boxes or crates used for storing materials, large hollow blocks, easels, or tables. In home preschools or day care settings, interest areas may be located in separate rooms, for example, the art area and sand area in the home's kitchen or the toy and reading and writing areas in the family room.

In developing a floor plan for your learning environment, consider the fixed elements of the physical setting (such as sinks, toilets, floor surfaces, doors, natural and artificial lighting, and electrical outlets), as well as the traffic flow within and between the

interest areas. Adults should consider the activities that occur in each area and the physical features needed for those activities. For example, locate the art area near a sink or other water source and on a tile floor, or a reading and writing area near a window in order to take advantage of the natural sunlight. Consider also how children's activities in one area may affect those in nearby areas. For example, house area play often spills into the block area, so locate these areas next to each other. Similarly, locate areas for louder play, such as the woodworking, music and movement, and block areas, within close proximity of one another and away from areas where quieter activities occur, such as the reading and writing area.

**To nurture children's independence, adults can identify materials with labels children can "read" on their own.**

Although there is no set rule for the number of interest areas, there are at certain basic interest areas that all classrooms should have; these include art, block, house, reading and writing, and toy areas. If space allows, additional interest areas might include computer, music and movement, sand and water, and woodworking areas. As a general rule, it is better to have a few spacious, well-stocked interest areas than to have many small areas stocked with a few materials. It is also possible to locate some interest areas, such as the sand and water area, outdoors.

In order to make good choices about where to go and what to do in the classroom, children should be able to see all areas of the room easily, without large pieces of furniture or equipment blocking their views. This arrangement also allows adults to see and monitor what is happening in all areas of the room at all times.

## Making the Space Inviting to Children

We want children to feel comfortable, safe, and free to explore, discover, and learn when they enter into their learning environment. In order to create an inviting space for children there are several factors to consider.

**Add softness.** First, try to incorporate softness into your space. Items such as carpeting, area rugs, curtains, beanbag chairs, pillows, sleeping bags, stuffed animals, wall hangings, or quilts will create a sense of warmth and safety in your environment. Additionally, these soft items will help to absorb the loud sounds that come from different areas and activities in the room, such as hammers pounding or blocks falling down.

**Choose colors and textures carefully.** If possible, choose simple and subdued or neutral colors for walls, floor coverings (including large-group-time rugs), and equipment. It is best to start the program year with fewer colors, patterns, textures, and other visually stimulating items, adding more as the program year progresses, depending on the individual needs and personalities in your class. Too many colors or patterns can be overwhelming, and can be distracting to children who easily become overstimulated and excited.

**Use natural building materials and natural light sources.** Whenever budget allows, choose shelving units, cubbies, tables, and outdoor climbing structures that are made from wood, rather than from plastic and other artificial materials. If you do have natural light sources available (for example, windows and skylights), take advantage of them, rather than only relying on artificial light. If possible, turn off overhead florescent lights. The flickering nature of the lights and the humming sound are thought to adversely affect some children. Secured floor lamps or table lamps offer a lighting alternative and provide a warmer feel to the room.

**Provide for coziness.** Finally, even very active children need a little time to retreat and rest or snuggle up with a familiar adult and a favorite book. Cozy



*In developing a floor plan, consider the physical features needed for activities. For example, locate the art area near a sink or other water source.*

places indoors can include lofts, canopies, or netting that's been hung from the ceiling, reading areas, and window seats, while outdoor cozy places can be found in tree houses, playhouses, or by positioning a bench under a shady tree or near a flower garden.

## Accommodating Storage Needs

Aside from the essential materials that remain available to children all the time (such as unit blocks in the block area or baby dolls in the house area), some materials will not always be in use (e.g., props for dramatic play, large balls that are occasionally taken outside) and should be stored in another location, such as a storage closet, or on shelves that are not within reach or the immediate view of children. Too many visible materials can become overwhelming for children, making it difficult for them to make plans or to focus on their activities.

Space to store children's personal belongings is also essential. Individual storage areas for children should be easy for them to reach: cubbies, lockers, tubs, baskets, or boxes, and low hooks or shelves. Items that can be stored in those spaces include outerwear (jackets, mittens, etc.); notes to parents and classroom newsletters; children's artwork, writing, and other creations they want to take home; and other personal belongings, such as clothing that gets wet at the water table and needs to be sent home. These personal storage areas should be

clearly labeled with a nametag and a letter-linked picture of the child who uses that space. [HighScope's letter links name-learning system pairs a child's printed name with a letter-linked picture of an object that starts with the same letter and sound. More information about letter links and detailed examples of nametags can be found in the book *Letter Links: Alphabet Learning With Children's Names*, available through [www.highscope.org](http://www.highscope.org). Also available through HighScope is *Letter Links Online*, a Web-based program that allows teachers to create and print out links quickly and automatically on their computers.]

To nurture children's independence, adults can identify materials with labels children can "read" on their own — for instance, pieces of the material itself, tracings, drawings, catalog pictures, box tops, photographs, photocopies, or any of these types of labels with the word for the item accompanying it. This supports children's efforts to find materials and return them to their storage space when they have finished using them. Children can also be involved in deciding where to put materials and in making their own labels.

Storage containers should be easy to see into and easy for children to handle. Containers of various sizes can be used many different storage needs: kitchen-sized garbage cans can hold dowel rods in the woodworking area; egg cartons with lids removed can hold small beads in the art area. Keeping the lids off of containers make materials visible and easily accessible to children. (It may be necessary to keep certain small objects, which could pose a choking risk for some children, stored in a container with a lid attached.)

### Choosing Appropriate Equipment and Materials

The materials placed in a developmentally based early childhood program should be chosen carefully by adults who understand and want to support young children's interests, cultural backgrounds, and their developmental stages and abilities. Materials should be open-ended, meaning they should be materials that can be used in a variety of different ways. The examples of open-ended materials that can be added to a classroom are as limitless as the ways in which they can be used! Some examples include clay, paint, blocks, baby dolls,

dishes, beads, puppets, scarves, paper and markers, and musical instruments. Other types of open-ended materials include those that are found and recycled: buttons, pieces of scrap wood, empty plastic containers or food cartons, or large appliance boxes. Finally, natural materials, such as seashells, rocks, nuts, seed pods, sand, water, leaves and twigs, or living plants, offer opportunities for open-ended play and discovery, and offer a nice contrast to the many plastic materials that are available and present in preschools today.

It is also important for adults to choose materials that reflect the children's interests. For example, for children who are fascinated by the road construction that's occurring in front of the school building, adults will place books about construction equipment in the reading and writing area; bulldozers, excavators, cement mixers, and road graders in the block area; and smaller construction equipment in the sand table. Or, to support an increasing interest in restaurant play after a visit to a local pizza place, adults might add props such as menus, empty pizza boxes, play dough, pizza cutters, pads of paper, and pencils to the house area.

Great care should also be taken to ensure that the materials you place in your learning environment reflect the family backgrounds, cultures, and ethnicities of the children in your program. In addition, materials and equipment should be nonbiased and nondiscriminatory. For example, include books that portray children with disabilities or older adults in positive ways; photographs of all kinds of families; dolls with appropriate skin color, hair textures and styles, and facial features; and food containers that are labeled in children's languages.

### Considerations for Supporting Children With Special Needs

Safety and accessibility is a concern in any early childhood setting. However, when adults are working with children who have special needs, safety and accessibility become an even greater concern. Adults who have children with special needs in their classrooms may

*It is better to have a few spacious, well-stocked interest areas rather than many small areas with a few materials.*



have to take into consideration the safety of children who tend to put objects in their mouths or children who frequently wander away from the group. Adults will need to take extra precautions for children who are unsteady on their feet or use assistive devices such as wheelchairs or walkers, for example, protecting or covering corners on furniture and making sure all floor coverings are securely fastened to the floor. In addition, the arrangement of the learning space may need to be modified to make it easier for children with physical disabilities to move from one area to the next. For example, some adults who work with children who have special mobility needs find it necessary to design the interest areas of their classrooms with more than one way in and out to prevent traffic jams.

**The arrangement of the learning space may need to be modified so that children with physical disabilities can move around more easily.**

A physical learning space that is inviting to children is perhaps even more essential for children who have unique and special needs. For example, children who become nervous and agitated in environments with excess noise or visual stimulation will benefit greatly from a classroom that provides natural or soft lighting and a place to safely retreat with a cozy blanket or an item of security.

Most children with special needs will function well in a classroom that is well designed and well organized. However, if it appears that some children have difficulty coping with the wide array of materials, adults may choose to limit the amount of materials on display, especially at the beginning of the program year. For example, the toy area in a typical

classroom might overwhelm some children. Instead of having multiple collections of small manipulative materials out on shelves, adults may want to begin the program year with a small variety of interesting and appropriate materials and gradually add to those materials as children become more familiar with the daily routine, the learning environment, and the process of find-use-return; and as they progress from exploring by dumping materials onto the floor to more purposeful play. In terms of hanging materials on the walls, it may be appropriate to stick with the essentials: interest-area signs, daily routine signs, children's symbols, and children's artwork, all hung at the children's level. This practice benefits all children, and will be especially helpful for children who become over stimulated easily.

Many of the modifications adults make for the children they serve are based on their knowledge of fundamental child development principles, as well as on their understanding of how active learning and appropriate materials support children in all developmental stages. For example, children with visual impairments or children who are in the sensory-motor stage of development might find materials that offer tactile, visual, or auditory stimulation more interesting to explore than their peers with normal vision or higher cognitive

levels. A toy area in a typical preschool program might offer manipulative materials to take apart and fit together, items for pretending and role play, or small collections to count and sort. In a program with children who are functioning at lower cognitive levels, teachers might instead provide sensory toys, which are covered in brightly colored fabrics and textures and have jingling bells, soft crinkles, or rattling beads inside. They might also offer switch or pop-up toys, which give children experiences with cause and effect, and which prove to be more interesting and stimulating for their stage of development.

For programs where children with special needs are working alongside their normally developing peers, adults will want to provide a variety of materials appropriate and interesting to children functioning at all developmental levels. Start with the recommended practices for all children, and make modifications as needed. In making any adaptations, keep in mind the principle of "best practices first," and create an environment in which all children can experience meaningful learning. ■

**Nancy Vogel has been a HighScope trainer and consultant. This article is excerpted from her book *Setting Up the Preschool Classroom*, in the HighScope Essentials book series.**

*Even very active children need time to rest or read a favorite book in a cozy setting.*

