

Learning from and Reinventing the Physical Environment: Lessons from an in-home preschool program

Ellen Cerniglia, Ed.D.

Why are you here?

- Take a few minutes and share with your table why you came today to this workshop.
- Share?

The Physical Environment: Importance

- Rating scales, measures of quality include aspects of the physical environment
- Research suggests the younger the child, the more susceptible s/he is to the environment (Maxwell, 2007).
- Berris & Miller (2011) share three aspects of the environment that research suggests are most influential and lead to the goals we have for the children we serve:
 - “space fostering exploration, independence and development (a child’s sense of self and willingness to play)
 - spatial quality (through space, colour, light, noise and materials)
 - integration of outdoors and the indoor environment.”

Learning or Behavior Issues in your classroom?

- Write down 1 issue you are currently having in your classroom/program that you think may be related to the physical environment.
- Write down 3 things that you have observed about this issue.

Overview of Program

- Licensed GFDC in Brooklyn, NY
- Running as a part-time preschool for 2 and 3 year olds
- In the downstairs of a 2-story home utilizing the living/dining area, bathroom, kitchen, and sunroom area as well as outdoor area

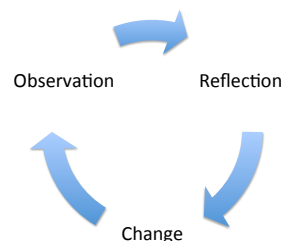
Home to Preschool

- Cookie Cutter rooms: “most early childhood programs have a school or institutional feel to them, filled with look-alike supplies in primary colors, plastic, and prefabricated games and materials” (Curtis and Carter, 2005).
- In order to make my home into an early childhood setting:
 - Furniture was used to separate the different traditional centers including a block/building center, dramatic play area, kitchen center, art area and library/rug area
 - Some centers such as a train table, dollhouse and sensory table were moved to the sunroom space.
 - Flexible materials were purchased to be configured as needed such as simple light-weight tables and chairs and materials included those that could be found in any child’s home to those obtained from preschool supply stores.

Setting children up for Success

- At times children materials or centers would feel stagnant with the same repetitive activity happening day after day without growth.
- In other cases, we would see behavior issues occur in certain parts of the learning space.
- Sometimes we had to reflect on whether we were asking too much of the children and if so, how we could change the routine to set them up for success

Cycle



Issue: Children were distracted in the morning by the materials in the main area making it hard to get to the sink first to wash their hands.

- **Observation:** Children wanted to come into the room and immediately play with toys, but they needed to first wash hands with their parents.
- **Reflection:** What could we change? We needed to find a way to send the message that the first thing we do is wash hands
- **Change:** sending a signal that the first thing we do is wash our hands.
 - Tables and chairs up
 - Lights off
 - Materials away

Issue: We had a number of physical altercations during center time in the toddler class in one area

- **Observe:** over 2 weeks, we witnessed 6 instances of one child hurting another over sharing materials.
- **Reflection:** Were there too few materials or too little space? Were children lacking the ability to share space and materials generally? Who owned the problem?
- **Change:**
 - Opened up the sunroom during center time allowing roughly one-third to half of the children to go into the that space leaving more room and space and materials in both spaces for children
 - Moved the block/building area altogether to the opposite side of the room.
 - Moved the table out from the kitchen area giving children more room to maneuver.

Issue: Difficulty with outside time bunching up in one area, having trouble sharing and not engaging in productive activities.

- **Observation:** Children began playing less productively outside. They loved going outside and playing, but their play did not seem to be progressing and they were starting to fixate on certain materials like the ride-on toys and securing one as theirs.
- **Reflection:** We realized we needed to make a change and that rearranging the materials might make a difference. We saw that there was competition in terms of who played with what materials.
- **Change:**
 - Moved ride-on toys, wagon, and sports equipment to the far end of the yard
 - Cleared the concrete area and brought out large trucks and cars for children to run along it
 - Changed up the outdoor sensory table more frequently
 - Limited the materials so it wasn't overwhelming
 - Modeled how to use building materials

Other Examples

- Snack time – lighting and snack helper
- Circle time
- Space in the morning

Overarching Lessons Learned

- Flexible Space
- Lighting
- Tables/Furniture
- Outside Time
- Materials: Changing, moving them, bridging home and school

Flexible Space

- Nontraditional space allowed for a space that is flexible – all furniture is easily movable which allowed for tailoring to the needs of the children and responsive teaching
- Found ways to close the space (top on the sensory table, chairs up on the table) to signal to children where we were working and where we were not.
- “If we initially designed early childhood spaces with more flexibility and complexity in mind, perhaps we could fully accommodate children's need for a range of activities and not try to keep children from rearranging things to suit their needs and ideas” (Curtis & Carter, 2005).

Lighting

- When the space didn't allow for the separation or wasn't as clearly defined as a traditional preschool classroom, we used lighting to signal children.
 - Children had a hard time being in only part of the space, we reflected on the lights and how they could help signal to children where they should be.
 - This seemed to help more than simply using our words to tell them.
 - As we get toward the end of the year, most children now just understand the process.

Tables/Furniture

- Choosing lightweight, easy to move tables
 - able to Velcro them together
- Can alter the layout of the room to meet the needs of the children on any given day.
- Choosing widely-available small appropriate shelves with bins for children at their height level making them accessible

Outside Time

- Taking a non-traditional “playground” and working to maximize the space
- Needed room for children to run and move, but also room for those to build if they wanted and play different outdoor sports and games.
- Ride-on toy placement was explored, what type of building toys, sensory table and what was in it, and large cars and tools.

Changing materials

- Through responsive and reflective practice, we work to notice how children engage with the materials we put out and use their signals to help us figure out how to help meet the needs of the children.
 - Legos/blocks in train table
 - Changing art implements such as Q-tips or cotton balls
 - Changing the dress up center by adding costume pieces

Moving materials to promote growth

- Train table had to be moved out of the main room to offer some children a chance to play with something else.
- Gave children an opportunity to explore new materials that they were unable to if the train table was there.
- Closing the kitchen center for the children to build blocks and pretend with play dough

Bridging Home and School

- Choosing a variety of materials and furniture– ones found in many children's home and others typically found only in preschool or daycare environments.
- Familiarity that children find in some items and furniture helps them feel comfortable in a new setting while the materials specifically made for preschool settings enhances their learning in different ways
- Feel there is a benefit to taking a traditional item and coupling it with unexpected materials such as building materials on the train table rather than trains
- Freedom in a program such as this

How can you use this information?

- Take a look back at the issue you wrote in the beginning of the workshop – did you get any ideas for it? Who owns that problem? What strategies might work? Fill out the reflection part.
- When you are done, share with your table.

Applications Beyond...think about:

- What in our environment can be changed and what cannot?
- When there is an issue with productive learning/playing, who owns this problem?
 - Are we expecting something that is too hard for children?
 - Are we listening/observing behavior to see what children need?

Materials and Contact

- Email: drc@doctorcerniglia.com
- Website: <http://doctorcerniglia.com>