



# Learning Environments

*The Child Care Regulation Team*



Envision for a moment the following: working at an office desk, being stuck on a crowded elevator on a hot summer day or experiencing the sights and sounds of nature in a shady park at the start of spring. If asked to choose a preferred setting, it's not hard to imagine what most would choose. As creatures of comfort most of us would prefer the open-ended possibilities of the park during the spring. The park provides natural lighting with shady spaces, comfortable temperature, and room to explore your surroundings while choosing to engage with objects and materials that naturally capture your interest. As an Early Childhood Educator, I'm sure you've caught on by now. Environment plays a critical role in the early years. As adults who care for young children, we have to be mindful to observe and evaluate our spaces from the lens of a child. Similar to adults, a child's affect, level of motivation, and ability to construct meaning, directly correlates to how well they relate to their environment and increases their level of productivity and overall capacity for learning. When children are provided with a space that makes them happy, provides choices, and uses open ended materials to engage in meaningful activities; they are better equipped for learning. Listed below are a few tips to keep in mind when assessing your spaces for Infants, Toddlers, and Preschoolers.

## Infants

- Provide an inviting and comfortable space for families and staff with clear lines of visibility.
- Reduce overstimulation by using softer lighting, and ensuring walls and flooring provide a neutral backdrop against bright materials.
- Promote safety and independence by ensuring materials are appropriate and accessible. Place a few baskets throughout the room with soft books, toys, balls, rattles for variety and choice. Each child can have their own basket to reduce sharing and mouthing.
- Use hammocks for staff to hold and rock infants, and carpeted or foam matting areas for tummy time and free exploration.
- Mount plexi-glass mirrors at Infant eye level for self-exploration.
- Hang photos of faces to highlight family, and reflect diversity in culture, gender, age and ability.



## Toddlers

- Ensure materials are attractively arranged, and are accessible to encourage independent clean up.
- Reduce noise with area rugs, as well as soft and comfy seating options for staff and children.
- Define spaces with low shelving, lofts, and child sized furniture.
- Include labels on shelves using pictures to promote visual discrimination and early literacy skills.
- Include opportunities for toddlers to safely explore using low risers to build motor skills.
- Spaces can also mimic the comforting elements of the home environment with natural materials and neutral tones.

## Preschoolers

- Provide clearly defined, and well stocked learning Centres such as Art, Dramatic Play, Blocks, Manipulatives, Sand/Water etc.
- Include labels on shelving and supplementary materials to extend and support children's learning in each Centre.
- Use strategically placed child sized furnishings to increase positive choices and decrease unwanted behaviours.
- Provide a variety of open-ended materials, with at least 3 options per child, and avoid overcrowding.
- Offer a balance of large open areas for cooperative groupings to build reasoning and problem solving skills, as well as smaller more intimate areas.

Be mindful that all spaces can be divided into 4 zones which includes the entry area, messy area, active, and quiet areas. The entry serves as a transitional space with children's cubbies, and parent sign in book. It also serves as a space for notices and brief parent communication. The messy areas may include feeding, diapering, painting, art, water/sand play, and should be on tiled surfaces closer to the kitchen or bathroom respectively for easy clean up and disposal. Active areas should be furthest away from the quiet zone as they tend to be noisy and can consist of ramps, balls, tunnels for infants, and dramatic play, music, and blocks for older toddlers and preschoolers. The quiet zone may be a cozy space with softer lighting for children needing a quiet space to regulate their emotions or a quiet reading corner. All spaces should be well lit and ventilated.

<https://www.communityplaythings.com/-/media/files/cpus/library/training-resources/booklets/it-spaces.pdf>



In order for children to demonstrate increased levels of involvement, build capacity, and maximize learning, their environment needs to be safe, comfortable, convenient, offer choice, and allow for flexibility.

In each classroom we challenge you to be creative and commit to making a few positive changes that are developmentally appropriate, meets the minimum standards outlined in the Regulations and Child Care Standards, and is within your budget. Then take one more look through the lens of a child for that final seal of approval. Together we can raise the bar for every child in our care by creating positive child centered environments.

For further reading on setting up your facility, classroom, or home nursery please visit

<https://www.spacesforchildren.com/wp-content/uploads/2018/11/EarlyHeadStart.pdf>

<https://www.spacesforchildren.com/wp-content/uploads/2018/11/landc2.pdf>

