
The physical environment

Rand (2011) states that “I just finished teaching a graduate course in which the students each visited six different early childhood classrooms. When they gave reports to the class about what was interesting and what they learned from each of the classrooms, the physical environment was the most frequently mentioned – in both positive and negative ways. The physical environment is quite a challenge because there is only so much that a teacher can change, yet it has an enormous effect on children’s behavior. In my own observations of classrooms, I’ve noticed that one of the big problems is the group meeting area. Here are some of my suggestions for preventing behavior problems during group time, and helping children stay engaged:

1. **Enough Space.** Don’t let a small rug determine the size of your meeting space! I’ve seen third graders sitting so close they couldn’t help touching each other. I’ve seen wriggling preschoolers continually bump into each other because the rug was too small. Determine how big a circle you need so that all your children can sit without touching each other and still see you. Then get a rug, or carpet squares, or two rugs, or be creative in delineating the space you need. I strongly prefer children sitting around the edge of the space rather than in rows.
2. **Personal Space.** Make sure each child can determine where their personal space is. Either use carpet squares, use patterns embedded in the carpet, make lines with tape, or systematically teach children how to sit so they have personal space. This would need to be done repeatedly with frequent modeling and reinforcement.
3. **Teacher Materials.** Have a place to store or put your own materials that you’ll need for activities: white board, audio player, books, charts, etc. Make it clear what is your space and remind children of your own personal boundaries.
4. **Consistent Procedures.** If you let a couple of children sit on chairs one day, then the next day other children will want to! There may be good reasons to allow a child to sit on a chair rather than the rug, but think this through ahead of time, explain it to the children, and be consistent. You may want to have all children sitting on the rug, no matter what. Again, the important issue is preventing your group time from being derailed by children moving around, asking for chairs, getting up, etc.”

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