**How Do Children Understand their Environment?** Young children strive to make sense of their world. They organize the visual images and concrete objects in their environment into meaningful systems. Children want to determine the way the space works and what can happen in this place. They come to understand how their world works through the unique experiences that occur, as they interact within the environment.

**An Environment that Matches Young Children** The first step in creating an appropriate environment for infants, toddlers, preschoolers, and primary age children is to examine how young children learn and develop. Each age has unique characteristics that relate to their stage of development.

**Young Children’s Way of Knowing** Young children are active learners continuing to examine materials, while beginning to use objects in combinations that are more complex. They are developing symbolic representation, as they take on roles and participate in socio-dramatic play. Their language will explode during this period, as they try to find “labels” for all the objects and people in their world. Language gives young children new power to question and find answers. These labels and symbols provide a basis for language and literacy development. Their abilities emerge, as they become interested in books, print, and “writing.”

Young children move into cooperative play, as they adjust roles and include sequence in their activities. In centers and play areas, materials are housed to support these developing abilities. Traditional centers, as well as unique centers, encourage language interactions, socio-dramatic play, and constructing experiences based on their level of understanding.

**Aspects of the Environment to Consider**

**Building a Sense of Community** Young children need to live in an environment that is supportive of them-- emotional as well as intellectually. In this place children can feel that they are accepted and valued. They also can learn that they are a member of a community were children and adults work together and respect each other. As a contributing member of this community they build, their feelings of self-worth and confidence in their abilities.

* Pictures displayed of members of the class.

**Needs**

* Responsibilities in the class.
* Group times for sharing, talking, and expressing.
* Display of work and projects that respect all children

**Aesthetics** Children who live in a beautiful environment begin to appreciate the world around them. A teacher who includes things of beauty in the classroom communicates to young children that the arts are valued in this place. Children deserve to have beautiful items in their space.

* Beautiful items in the classroom

**Needs**

* Artwork, cultural objects, and nature items
* Variety of color, texture, and design to capture interest
* Attractive display of children’s work

**Visual Environment** During the first eight years of children’s lives, they are developing their visual acuity. Their perception of objects, movement, and print are expanded, as they have opportunities for experiencing interesting visual images. Changes and variations of design intrigue children and prompt them to visually attend to the unusual. The young children’s environment that includes interesting visual stimulation draws them to examine a painting on the wall or recognize a drawing that they have completed. Displays and panels provide visually interesting content to examine as children move about in the classroom space. In the past, many early childhood classrooms were so filled with decorations, materials, and “stuff” that young children were visually overwhelmed. Today, we are working to have less clutter and more organized displays of materials and work, so young children can visually attend and enjoy the important features.

* Attractive displays of work, projects, and materials

**Needs**

* De-clutter the environment.
* Variety of levels used: children’s eye level, adult level, and ceiling.
* Labels and materials clearly grouped

**Auditory Environment** Music and sound patterns stimulate several portions of the brain in young children, as they listen to the auditory environment. A variety of music and instruments can expand the sound world of young children, while developing musical enjoyment. Music is very important in an early childhood environment and should be included throughout the day. Singing in circle time and during transitions encourages children to begin to discriminate sounds and identify familiar patterns. Making music with simple rhythm instruments provides opportunities for children to connect an object with the sound it produces. Recordings of vocals, instrumentals, and folk instruments provide more listening experiences that expand the auditory environment for young children. Providing a special area for group participation, as well as a center where sounds can be explored individually, can add to the auditory possibilities.

* A music area

**Needs**

* Materials to absorb sound
* Opportunities to sing, move, and listen to sounds
* Collaborating on music compositions and playing

**Emotional Environment** It has been suggested that the emotions of children are strongly influenced by the responsiveness of the caregiver during the early years. If the caregiver reflects the child’s joy and the emotion are reciprocated, the child’s security is strengthened. If the child’s emotion is interpreted as annoying by the caregiver, circuits become confused. A caring and responsive caregiver can provide a positive climate for young children that will impact not only emotional security, but aspects of their cognitive development as well. Children who feel secure and supported will experiment, try new things, and express their ideas.

* Emotional support

**Needs**

* Place for personal belongings
* Display of children’s pictures and work
* Opportunities for personal choices

**Behaviors of Children** The young child’s environment tells them how to act and respond. Large open classroom spaces invite them to run across the area. If few materials are available, children will originate interesting happenings. With inconsistent learning center procedures, children wander through the areas with little involvement in play.

Arrangement and materials in the environment determines areas where children focus their work. It also influences the conflicts that occur and the way the group works together. If materials are hard plastic, children are invited to be rough with the objects; having little concern for their treatment. If a beautiful arrangement is on the table, they will visually examine the flowers and gently handle the delicate blooms. Children learn to work respectfully with their environment, if given opportunities to care for beautiful objects and materials.

* Defined boundaries for learning areas

**Needs**

* Soft items and surfaces
* Place for privacy
* Interesting opportunities that help children focus
* Sufficient and interesting materials

**Independent Learners** An independent learner is able to make personal choices and carry through with an appropriate plan of action. Beginning in infancy and toddlerhood, there is a growing need to become an independent person. Children want to do things for themselves and in their own way. Preschoolers become increasingly competent in making choices, creating a plan, and following through with a project or experience. If children’s ideas are valued and their interests followed, they will work on projects for a long time. This process is supported by the children revisiting and reflecting on the plan, while using their knowledge in meaningful ways.

An effective environment is designed so even the youngest child can be independent. There are many opportunities for them to be successful, as they work to do things for themselves. They do not depend on the teacher and constantly ask for every material they need. An orderly display of accessible options helps children understand they are capable of making decisions.

* Opportunity to make choices and follow interest

**Needs**

* Organized and labeled materials
* Responsibility for the classroom and environment
* Items for care of environment: sponges, dust-buster, mop, etc.
* Time for reflecting and discussing ideas, projects, and possibilities

**Traditional and Unique Learning Centers:** What are the benefits of learning centers with young children?

* Traditional centers that work over time: housekeeping, blocks, Science/nature, and art.
* The critical library center: an exciting literacy place.
* Changing socio-dramatic centers: These are designed to match the interest of the children, thematic units that are being studied, or projects that are developing.
* Literacy connections in all centers: Increasing the possibilities for literacy in each center provides another meaningful opportunity to use reading, writing, and communicating.
* Observing and evaluating: seeing what is being learned and documenting the process.
* Traditional centers with appropriate props and materials

**Needs**

* Library area
* Socio dramatic center
* Plan for center choices and reflections
* Demonstrating what was done or learned in the centers
* New and creative addition added to environment

**Explore Three Extreme Makeovers – Shared in Kaplan Booth at NAEYC 2013**

**Group/Community Meeting Space**

**Library Center/Literacy Area**

**Music Center**

**Additional Ideas for Extreme Makeovers:**

* De-clutter your space: Begin with three piles: 1. Keep, 2. Give away, 3.Throw out.
* Take pictures of your classroom and see how it “really” looks.
* How can you make the classroom more inviting and warmer?
* Arrange the space and materials to nurture the learning you want to take place in this place.
* If the room is too much to change – decide on one area or a small place and work on that first.
* Add some soft lighting – library area or special quiet area.
* Make storage areas work better: place materials in clear containers and label for easy finding.
* Place the materials close to where they will be used. Art materials close to sink or studio Center.
* Redo the library area: determine a good number of books, audio books, soft places to read, child-made books, a classroom book with children’s pictures in activities, and add circle-time books read.
* Include some aesthetically pleasing items to the space.
* Display pictures of all the children in your classroom – and be sure to include one of yourself. This will help build a sense of community and belonging.
* Rugs and pillows add softness and absorb sound, too.
* Use music throughout the day and at special time
* Try to look at the classroom, space, arrangement, and materials from the young child’s perspective! Start small and watch the amazing results of these changes.

**Conclusion** Young children respond differently, based on the design of the environment and their experiences. An effectively designed classroom has the potential for positively influencing all areas of children’s development: physical, social/emotional, and cognitive. The environment can support the development of behaviors that are valued in our society, such as social skills, cooperation, and persistence. An aesthetically pleasing space can help a child develop an appreciation for the beautiful world around them. A quality environment can provide a home-like setting that “feels” like a good place to be. A carefully designed space can encourage learning and using knowledge in meaningful activities. The environment in which they work also influences teachers. Making the space personal and appropriate for young children’s unique needs and interests will support the teacher’s goal of creating a supportive learning environment for all.

**References for Presentation:**

Isbell, R. (2012). *Real Classroom Makeovers.* Beltsville, MD: Gryphon House.

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