



LISA BURMAN

10 TIPS TO DE-INSTITUTIONALISE YOUR LEARNING ENVIRONMENT

“When we institutionalise childhood, as we have certainly done, we risk doing what institutions nearly always do – diminish the poetry of everyday life. We eliminate the highs and lows and wash out individual difference; trading predictability and security for the messy idiosyncrasies of individual lives. Is that what we want for the one childhood allocated to our children?”

Jim Greenman “Places for Childhoods” Child Care Information Exchange, 1992

These tips work whether your learning environment is for three month olds, three year olds or thirteen year olds!

1. De-clutter. De-clutter. De-clutter. Can't say this enough. Clutter clogs up energy for learning and doesn't demonstrate a respect for learning materials.
2. Clutter can also be in the form of visual noise. Choose what you place on walls or hang from ceilings very, very carefully.
3. Ask yourself, “Would I have this in my home?” If the answer is no, reconsider having it in your learning space.
4. Colours can also create visual noise. A helpful guide from the world of design is the “60-30-10 rule”. 60% base or dominant hue, 30% secondary colour and 10% of an accent colour to ‘pop’!
5. Create a base that is neutral. Think of an art gallery – we want the children and their learning to provide the colour and not be competing with the background for our attention.
6. Bring in natural elements such as plants, whicker, cane, river stones and natural textures to soften a hard, institutional space.
7. Use non-‘school-issue’ furniture – replace some school-issue furniture with coffee tables, dressers that you can pick up from the roadside or second-hand stores (or maybe hidden away in your shed!).
8. Bring in ‘home-like’ elements such as lamps, photo frames, flowers, sofas and coffee tables.
9. Provide at least 2 different levels for children to learn at – a high bench to stand at, coffee table to sit around, cushions to lie on the floor, tables to sit around. (Sub-tip: you don't need as many big tables as you think! Removing some school-issue tables will open up your space for many more possibilities.)
10. Remove commercially produced teaching charts. Create your own ‘bespoke’ charts with your children so they reflect the identity, thinking & values of your group, not a hypothetical group of kids. Bonus: learners are more likely to use the charts they have been part of creating.

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