

The 'third teacher' – creating child friendly learning spaces

by Anne Stonehouse

Physical environments affect everyone's behaviour. The notion of the environment as the 'third teacher' (along with children and adults) comes from recognising that there are many ways that the physical environment in child care services, both indoor and outdoor, can either enhance or interfere with children's learning and independence. The way the environment is set up and maintained contributes to the overall atmosphere of the setting, which affects children, families and educators.

Child care services operate from a range of settings including old and new premises, family homes, purpose-built or converted buildings/spaces and multi-purpose spaces. These factors, along with the ages of children, type of service, community context and other factors have implications for the physical environments provided for children and they can present both challenges and opportunities.

Providing child-friendly learning environments in even the most ideal circumstances requires critical reflection with colleagues, children and families and complex judgment and decision making. Some educators face additional challenges, for example, not having dedicated space and therefore having to set up and pack away environments on a regular basis. They may also have to cater for a wide age range, need to include children with additional needs or create learning environments in the family home which

This article relates to:

FDCQA Principles: 2.1, 2.2, 3.1, 3.4-3.7, 4.1 and 4.3

OSHCQA Principles: 1.1, 1.2, 2.2, 3.3, 3.2, 4.2, 4.3, 5.1-5.4, 6.3 and 7.2

QIAS Principles: 1.4, 2.2, 3.3, 4.1-4.6 and 5.1-5.4

have to meet the needs of the educator's family as well as be a good learning environment for children.

This article will provide practical tips for setting up child-friendly learning environments that maximise children's opportunities for learning and that also promote the idea of children as partners and collaborators with educators in their own learning.

Children's agency is a central concept of *Belonging, Being and Becoming – The Early Years Framework for Australia* (DEEWR, 2009). Whatever the skills and abilities of the child and the type of child care service, the environment should promote each child's sense of agency as an active contributor to their own experience.

What follows is a brief discussion of the important and overlapping elements of good learning environments for children, why they are important, some of the tensions and challenges inherent in providing them, and suggestions for everyday practice.

Healthy and safe

A fundamental requirement is that learning environments are healthy and safe. Children need to be able to explore, experiment, play, use their abilities and develop new skills and knowledge without fear of hurting themselves or others. Unsafe equipment, spaces that are difficult to supervise and dangerous materials being accessible to children result in educators being supervisors and being preoccupied with monitoring children's behaviour and movements. This preoccupation can interfere with educators interacting with children in ways that support learning.



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Keeping spaces hygienically clean and clear of clutter supports children's learning. Enlisting children's help in maintaining safe and healthy environments (for example, asking them to look for unsafe equipment, help wipe up spills and pack away toys) helps build a sense of shared responsibility and belonging.

There can be tensions between providing challenges and encouraging exploration and experimentation on the one hand and keeping children safe on the other. Educators have to make considered judgments throughout the day about maintaining a reasonable balance.

Engaging

Learning environments need to be attractive in a literal sense – that is, they need to attract children and encourage them to be actively involved. The physical environment is not a backdrop to the curriculum but rather is part of the curriculum. This contribution is achieved in a number of ways. Some characteristics of attractive environments include that they:

- Are full of interesting things to see, touch and otherwise engage with without being a riot of colour and pattern, or an overwhelming mass of sights and sounds. Avoid too many bright primary colours, which can be overwhelming, especially for very young children
- Contain lots of open-ended materials that invite a variety of uses. This is especially important when a wide age range of children are present, but even if there is not a wide age range it is important because all children's interests and abilities differ
- Balance orderliness, so that children's play and engagement are constructive, with the normal messiness of children exploring, experimenting and combining materials and equipment in ways educators may not have thought of. Setting up areas for particular kinds of experiences (for example, art and craft, books and literacy, blocks) can help children's engagement as long as educators are flexible about what happens where
- Are not overloaded with tables. Tables take up a lot of space and a lot of learning takes place other than at tables!
- Offer choices through making a variety of materials and equipment accessible.

An interesting question to ask is: 'What learning opportunities are there if all the toys are taken away?' In other words, 'To what extent is learning



built into the environment?' A rich learning environment with built-in learning opportunities frees educators to interact with children.

Empowering and respectful

Respect for children as collaborators and partners with educators in their learning is central to the *Early Years Learning Framework* (EYLF). Environments that are respectful of children's emerging skills and competencies provide many opportunities for them to make their own decisions and to act independently of adults. Such environments:

- Encourage children to make choices, including about whether to be with others or to be on their own. Big open spaces that force children to be together in large (or even small) groups most of the time may interfere with positive interactions. Arranging furniture to create areas and using stable screens can encourage children to disperse and to be together by choice
- Help children to concentrate by creating areas for learning experiences and are not overly noisy or busy
- Help children feel secure and to do things for themselves as they are interested. Chairs that allow feet to touch the floor, sinks that are child height (or stable stools that allow children to safely reach the sink or get on the toilet themselves), tables and chairs that support backs while sitting, lockers with hooks that are accessible all encourage children to exercise agency
- Have displays of children's work that are uncluttered and involve children in making decisions about whose work is displayed and how these are changed. Acknowledge and honour the efforts of all children
- Are flexible and responsive. Think carefully about how much fixed equipment is necessary indoors and outdoors. Make changes as children's needs and interests change

- Where possible allow for children's works in progress to be preserved over days or even weeks.

Welcoming and comfortable

The concept of belonging in the EYLF links closely with Outcome 1: Children have a strong sense of identity. Physical environments in child care services play a major role in contributing to both identity and belonging. Child-friendly learning environments:

- Reflect the lives of children outside the service in respectful ways, through materials, equipment, decorations and pictures. The aim is that children and families see something of themselves – their communities and cultures – in the physical environment. Displays of photos, equipment in the home corner, books and posters can help to achieve this
- Balance sameness and change, the familiar and the novel – children need both. Keep in mind that little changes can be enough, especially for very young children, and too much change can cause stress and feelings of insecurity. For example, moving one piece of furniture or equipment may be better than removing and replacing several things at once. As with many elements of practice, talk with children about possible changes to get their ideas
- Have a comfortable 'lived-in' feeling. This often means having a mix of purchased equipment and materials and found objects. Some old, obviously used objects, and some new ones, some furniture and equipment designed especially for children and other furniture and equipment that is comfortable for educators and helps them in their role. Seating that is comfortable for an adult – both educators and family members – also encourages good quality interactions with children

- Contain beauty and attention to aesthetics. Natural objects in the environment help children learn to value nature and appreciate its beauty. The EYLF reminds us about the value of plants, trees, edible gardens, sand, rocks, mud, water and other elements from nature (p.160). Using flowers, shells, stones, fabric, baskets, art prints and other materials in the curriculum helps children to learn to appreciate beauty. Avoiding loud and colourful floor coverings, curtains and kaleidoscopes of primary colours in favour of more neutral colours create a more peaceful setting for learning.

Encourage collaboration

Children learn from interacting with other children as well as with educators. Environments that encourage constructive collaboration:

- Invite conversations by including interesting pictures and objects in the setting
- Suggest possibilities for collaboration through the ways in which materials and equipment are displayed
- Offer children choices about collaborating rather than pressuring them to work and play together.

Conclusion

Of course, environments must also work for families and for educators if they are to support children's learning. Invite children's, families' and colleagues' input into discussions about how to achieve excellent learning environments. When children, families and all professionals involved in the service care about, are invested in and have pride in the environment, a sense of belonging and community is strengthened ■

This article relates to EYLF Learning:

- Outcome 4: Children are confident and involved learners

References and further reading

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