

# PRESCHOOL PLANNING GUIDE

Building a Foundation for Development of  
Language and Literacy in the Early Years



The University of the State of New York  
The State Education Department  
Albany, New York 12234  
[www.nysed.gov](http://www.nysed.gov)

1998



**THE UNIVERSITY OF THE STATE OF NEW YORK**  
**Regents of The University**

|   |              |
|---|--------------|
| CARL T. HAYDEN, <i>Chancellor</i> , A.B., J.D. ....                       | Elmira       |
| DIANE O'NEILL MCGIVERN, <i>Vice Chancellor</i> , B.S.N., M.A., Ph.D. .... | Bayside      |
| J. EDWARD MEYER, B.A., LL.B. ....   | Chappaqua    |
| R. CARLOS CARBALLADA, <i>Chancellor Emeritus</i> , B.S. ....              | Rochester    |
| ADELAIDE L. SANFORD, B.A., M.A., P.D. ....                                | Hollis       |
| SAUL B. COHEN, B.A., M.A., Ph.D. ....                                     | New Rochelle |
| JAMES C. DAWSON, A.A., B.A., M.S., Ph.D. ....                             | Peru         |
| ROBERT M. BENNETT, B.A., M.S. ....  | Tonawanda    |
| ROBERT M. JOHNSON, B.S., J.D. ....  | Lloyd Harbor |
| PETER M. PRYOR, B.A., LL.B., J.D., LL.D. ....                             | Albany       |
| ANTHONY S. BOTTAR, B.A., J.D. ....  | Syracuse     |
| MERRYL H. TISCH, B.A., M.A. ....  | New York     |
| HAROLD O. LEVY, B.S., M.A. (Oxon.), J.D. ....                             | New York     |
| ENA L. FARLEY, B.A., M.A., Ph.D. ....                                     | Brockport    |
| GERALDINE D. CHAPEY, B.A., M.A., Ed.D. ....                               | Belle Harbor |
| RICARDO E. OQUENDO, B.A., J.D. ....                                       | Bronx        |

**President of The University and Commissioner of Education**

RICHARD P. MILLS

**Chief Operating Officer**

RICHARD H. CATE

**Deputy Commissioner for Elementary, Middle, Secondary, and Continuing  
Education**

JAMES A. KADAMUS

**Coordinator of Curriculum and Instruction**

ROSEANNE DEFABIO

The State Education Department does not discriminate on the basis of age, color, religion, creed, disability, marital status, veteran status, national origin, race, gender, genetic predisposition or carrier status, or sexual orientation in its educational programs, services and activities. Portions of this publication can be made available in a variety of formats, including braille, large print or audio tape, upon request. Inquiries concerning this policy of nondiscrimination should be directed to the Department's Office for Diversity, Ethics, and Access, Room 152, Education Building, Albany, NY 12234. **Requests for additional copies of this publication may be made by contacting the Publications Sales Desk, Room 309, Education Building, Albany, NY 12234.**

# CONTENTS

---

|   |     |
|---|-----|
| Acknowledgments . . . . .   | .iv |
| Foreword/Statement of Purpose . . . . .                             | .v  |
| Introduction . . . . .  | .1  |
| Essential Elements of a Quality Preschool Program . . . . .         | .3  |
| Children As Learners . . . . .                                      | .5  |
| Characteristics of Young Learners . . . . .                         | .6  |
| Principles of Child Development . . . . .                           | .7  |
| Play is Active Learning . . . . .                                   | .9  |
| What Young Learners Do—What Teachers of Young Learners Do . . . . . | .10 |
| The Learner-Centered Environment . . . . .                          | .11 |
| Designing the Learner-Centered Environment . . . . .                | .12 |
| Messages Children Receive from the Environment . . . . .            | .18 |
| Assessing a Classroom Environment . . . . .                         | .20 |
| Enriching Dramatic Play to Support Language and Literacy . . . . .  | .22 |
| Curriculum and Instruction . . . . .                                | .24 |
| Best Practice: What Research Tells Us . . . . .                     | .25 |
| Language and Literacy . . . . .                                     | .27 |
| Social Studies . . . . .  | .29 |
| Mathematical Awareness . . . . .                                    | .31 |
| Science . . . . .   | .34 |
| Sample Learning Experiences . . . . .                               | .36 |
| Eric Carle Author Study . . . . .                                   | .38 |
| Me Museum . . . . .   | .40 |
| Trip to the Bakery . . . . .  | .42 |
| KWL Chart on Water . . . . .  | .44 |
| Instruction in Preschool Programs . . . . .                         | .46 |
| Routines and Transitions . . . . .                                  | .49 |
| Considerations for Planning . . . . .                               | .51 |
| Dimensions of Assessment . . . . .                                  | .53 |
| Keeping Track of Children’s Growth . . . . .                        | .55 |
| Professional Development . . . . .                                  | .57 |
| Bibliography . . . . .  | .61 |
| Appendix . . . . .  | .63 |

# ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

---

The principal writers of the *Preschool Planning Guide*, Doris Hill-Wyley and Sue Updike-Porter would like to thank Roseanne DeFabio, Coordinator of the Curriculum and Instruction Team, for her leadership and guidance throughout this project and Dick Jones, Team Leader of the Regional School Services Team, for his support.

We would also like to thank the following individuals for their feedback on drafts of the document as well as their encouragement:

|                   |                                 |
|-------------------|---------------------------------|
| Jenny Birckmayer  | Cooperative Extension           |
| Susan Daurio      | PreK Teacher, Liberty           |
| Delores Ellsworth | PreK Administrator, Kingston    |
| Doreen Gordon     | PreK Teacher, Lackawanna        |
| Jean Healy        | PreK Teacher, Rome              |
| Susan Hicks       | Cornell University              |
| Barbara Nielsen   | Broome County Community College |
| Dawn Pimentel     | PreK Teacher, New York City     |
| Arlene Ransom     | PreK Teacher, Newfane           |
| Mary Ellen Shevat | PreK Teacher, Rome              |
| Ann Stafford      | PreK Teacher, Troy              |
| Constance Valk    | PreK Administrator, Rochester   |
| Chris Vogelsang   | PreK Administrator, Syracuse    |

Appreciation is extended to the following colleagues at the Education Department for their input and support:

Gloria Casar  
Patricia Chmielewski  
Dee Dwyer  
Cindy Gallagher  
Judi Golombiski  
Sharon Holder  
Ann Mattei  
William Peruzzi  
Michael Plotzker  
Carolyn Richbart  
Ruth Singer  
Edith Toohey  
Laurie Wellman  
Fran Wilson

Special recognition is also due to Vera Jones, Peggy Hasselwander, and Jan Christman for their technical expertise and commitment to the project. Photographs are by Ellen B. Senisi, author/illustrator.

## FOREWORD/STATEMENT OF PURPOSE

---

**N**ow, at the end of the twentieth century, there is a renewed interest in early childhood education. The United States Congress and New York State Legislature have determined that safe, nurturing programs for young children are an essential element of welfare reform. Concurrently, the impact of early experiences on a child's brain development and future ability to learn is being reexamined by both researchers and practitioners.

The purpose of this document is to provide guidance to those responsible for planning and implementing programs for young children including those funded under the universal prekindergarten legislation of 1997. It suggests that quality preschool programs can meet the expectations of the Regents as expressed in their 1992 Early Childhood Policy Statement and at the same time provide the experiences children need if they are to successfully meet State standards in fourth grade.

The Regents policy on early childhood, defined as the prenatal period to age nine, reaffirms the belief that every child can learn and should have access to an environment which:

**P**rovides for comprehensive, developmentally appropriate early childhood services and educational programs through a collaborative approach with other local, State, and federal agencies, and with children and their families;

**E**nsures an integrated and interdisciplinary approach to learning and the development of the whole child;

**A**ddresses the need for health, nutrition, and parenting skills, and education with particular attention to the issue of teenage pregnancy;

**P**rovides equity for all children and the opportunity to eliminate the effects of poverty, racism, and other conditions and forms of discrimination that place children at risk; and

**B**uilds a foundation for lifelong learning and successful transitions from early childhood settings to the middle and high school levels of education, as well as to higher education, work, citizenship, and adulthood.

The *Preschool Planning Guide* reflects the commitment of the New York State Education Department to continue to work toward increasing the availability of quality preschool programs. It provides a framework for teachers and others who work with young children to create environments and develop curriculum, instruction, and assessment strategies that support children as learners. It is based on the recognition that teachers need many and varied opportunities to nurture and refine their craft in order to respond effectively to the diverse needs of the children with whom they will interact during their teaching careers.



# INTRODUCTION

---

**A** series of events has increased awareness of the need for quality preschool programs in New York State, including:

**E**stablishment of national education goals, the first of which speaks to the need for all children to come to school ready to learn;

**I**mplementation of welfare reform that expands the availability of child care for working mothers;

**D**evelopment of more rigorous learning standards for all students; and

**R**ecommitment of the Legislature, the Board of Regents, and the New York State Education Department to ensure that all children learn to read by third grade.

The *Preschool Planning Guide* is designed to inform and support the work of teachers, administrators, and program developers who are responsible for assuring that children enter public and nonpublic kindergartens ready to learn. It outlines the characteristics and expectations of a quality preschool program and suggests that children's success in achieving the State's more rigorous learning standards begins at the preschool level.

The *Preschool Planning Guide* serves as a companion document to other curriculum and assessment materials developed by the Department including the *Early Elementary Resource Guide to Integrated Learning*, and the *Elementary Literacy Profile*, as well as the resource guides with core curriculum for the content areas. The Guide may be used for many purposes; it may serve as a hands-on resource for preschool teachers, as a self-assessment checklist for administrators, and as a planning tool for staff developers.

The Guide was created with the assistance of several preschool teachers, administrators, early childhood teacher educators, members of professional associations, and New York State Education Department staff who share the following beliefs:

**A**ll preschool children can learn and need to enter kindergarten ready to **continue to** learn;

**A**ll learning is interrelated and young children need many opportunities to build a knowledge base and develop more precise language to communicate their understanding of what they know;

**L**anguage and literacy development at the preschool level builds the foundation for learning across the content areas;

**T**he arrangement of the learning environment strongly influences what is learned and how it is learned; and

**T**eaching is enhanced when time is allocated for planning, collaboration, and reflection among peers and others interested in the teaching and learning process.

This Guide has been organized to help the reader think through the stages of conceptualizing, planning, implementing, and evaluating a quality preschool program. A description of each section of the Guide follows:

**E***ssential Elements of a Quality Preschool Program* outlines critical components of effective programs.

**C***hildren As Learners* provides an overview of children as learners and outlines strategies teachers may use to plan and respond to children on the basis of their knowledge of how young children develop and learn.

**T***he Learner-Centered Environment* describes classroom and outdoor spaces that are cognitively, physically, socially, and emotionally supportive of young children.

**C***urriculum and Instruction* emphasizes the role of language and literacy development across content areas and provides sample learning experiences.

**D***imensions of Assessment* provides guidelines for appropriate assessment of young children and describes how student work samples and teacher observations may be used to keep track of children's growth and learning.

**P***rofessional Development* suggests ways to provide ongoing opportunities for teachers to extend their knowledge, reflect on their work, and fine-tune their practice.

**B***ibliography* includes resources, arranged according to sections in the Guide, that provide more in-depth information concerning topics included in this document.

This document contains information, ideas, and strategies that may be useful to both new and experienced teachers, as well as policy makers and others with a vested interest in developing quality programs for young children. Teachers may use it creatively as a guide to establishing a climate that supports the development of language and literacy and builds a foundation for achievement of the New York State learning standards.

# ESSENTIAL ELEMENTS OF A QUALITY PRESCHOOL PROGRAM

Attending a preschool program that meets certain standards of quality can have a positive impact on a child's future as a learner. Standards of quality emanate from beliefs about the nature of the young child as a growing, developing person and as a learner (see **Children As Learners**), and knowledge of how young children learn in group settings. The goals and expectations for children who participate in standards-based, quality programs are derived from these shared beliefs. Successful programs are those that establish a process for ongoing program evaluation and self-study to document movement toward achievement of the goals and objectives of the program.

Programs for preschool children provide a foundation for achievement of the New York State learning standards when they meet recognized program standards. Specific standards of quality are articulated by a program's funding source, accreditation requirements, or regulations, including those governing programs for children who have handicapping conditions or who speak a language other than English. Programs for young children need to incorporate the following universally recognized standards in their design:

## Facilities

Indoor and outdoor spaces protect the safety, health, and well-being of children and adults. Classroom and outdoor spaces allow appropriate organization, movement, and interaction among the children and the adults. Bathrooms, with child-sized utilities, are available in or adjacent to the classroom to accommodate toileting, handwashing, and toothbrushing. A sink is available in each classroom to support children's frequent need to use water, for example, after using materials such as paint, paste, glue, play dough, etc. Classrooms and playgrounds are carefully planned in response to who children are and how they learn. The equipment and materials that support learning are easily adapted to the diverse interests, needs, and abilities of the children. Children and adults with special needs have easy access to the indoor and outdoor spaces and the materials they provide.

## Staff

The critical relationship between the experience and training of staff and the quality of a program is well-documented. Preschool teachers, teacher assistants, and other staff have an in-depth knowledge of child development and how young children learn. They have access to ongoing opportunities to increase their understanding of children and the New York State learning standards and to improve practice. Teachers in public school programs are required to be certified; an early childhood annotation is recommended. In many areas of the State, proficiency in a language other than English is desirable. Teachers in other programs meet the qualifications of the licensing, regulating, and/or funding agency. Program administrators have administrative training as well as experience working with young children. Provisions are made for all staff to receive ongoing support and supervision through a dynamic process of professional development and performance evaluation.

## Group Size

The ratio of children to adults may vary slightly depending upon the funding and/or regulatory source. All center-based programs require at least two adults for each group of children. Teachers are aware of the critical impact of group size, safety, and supervision on the daily schedule, arrangement of the learning environment, availability of materials and equipment, instructional strategies, and assessment techniques.

## Curriculum and Instruction

Curriculum and instruction during the preschool years are informed by an understanding of general developmental patterns; knowledge of children's individual characteristics; awareness of the cultural, linguistic, and social contexts which shape the child's experience; learning standards which outline expectations for what children should know and be able to do; and the scope and sequence of each content area. Curriculum content may evolve from the learning standards, observations of children's interests, questions children ask, or shared experiences within the natural environment. Learning experiences for preschool children include a variety of concrete activities presented in meaningful contexts. These experiences are integrated across content and developmental areas and augmented with a variety of multicultural and nonsexist activities and materials that may be adapted to meet the special needs of individual children.

## Assessment

Assessment occurs within the context of children's everyday experience as they interact with the people and materials in the learning environment. Beginning with the information and observations shared by family members as the child moves from home to the preschool, assessment continues as teachers and other classroom staff devise a plan for keeping track of children's progress. This includes ongoing communication with the family and other professionals who work with the child (see **Dimensions of Assessment**).

## Family Involvement

Family members play a critical role in supporting the growth and development of their children. In early childhood programs families are viewed as partners in the planning, implementation, and evaluation of the program. Opportunities are available for parents and relatives to participate actively in the education of their children, in the decision making related to the program, and in other activities that address their role(s) as parent, worker, and citizen. Where space permits, an area may be designated for parent meetings, training sessions, and informal gatherings. Schools create environments conducive to active involvement of families by planning ways to establish rapport, by responding to opportunities to connect families with needed services, and by providing a variety of options for families to become partners with schools. All efforts are made to communicate with parents in their primary language.



# CHILDREN AS LEARNERS

**D**evelopment is a combination of maturation and learning. Substantial research and reflection on good practice suggests that development in young children:

- occurs simultaneously in all areas of the child's development—social, emotional, intellectual, and physical;
- is interdependent—each area of development affects the others;
- occurs in sequential stages;
- progresses from simple to complex;
- occurs at different rates for different children; and
- is critically impacted by a child's environment and experience.

It is crucial that teachers of preschool children understand these aspects of development and their implications for teaching and learning. Teachers need to know what to do and how and when to do it. It is equally important that they be able to articulate why they have made a particular decision or employed a specific strategy. The initial step in this process is for teachers to have firsthand knowledge of the normative and predictable aspects of child development as well as behavioral characteristics that are observable during the early years. This knowledge guides teachers as they undertake the second step in the process, to get to know each child as an individual through ongoing interaction and assessment techniques such as those described in **Dimensions of Assessment**.

The purpose of **Children As Learners** is to provide those who plan, implement, and administer programs for preschool children with information to help them understand the uniquenesses of young children. This section includes the characteristics of young learners, principles of child development, a description of play as active learning, and some typical behaviors of young learners and their teachers.



## Characteristics of Young Learners

Researchers have identified specific characteristics, developed in the first three years of life, that serve as strong indicators of the ability to learn. The challenge for preschool teachers is to find the balance between supporting autonomy and encouraging initiative while at the same time providing a gentle introduction to the responsibilities and pleasures of being a member of a group.

The teacher must gather information about each child in the group. Home visits, conversations with families, information from other caregivers and providers of special services, and observation during the first weeks of school provide valuable knowledge of individual children. Teachers use this information to develop a balanced curriculum which builds upon children's understanding and provides opportunities for them to develop new concepts and skills.

Young children who are ready to respond to the challenges and experiences of learning when they arrive at a preschool program exhibit a variety of characteristics. Specifically, they may demonstrate:

|                         |   |  |
|-------------------------|---|--|
| Confidence              | → | A sense of control and mastery of one's body and behavior, and a sense of self as a competent learner.   |
| Curiosity               | → | The sense that finding out about things is positive and leads to pleasure.   |
| Intentionality          | → | The wish and capacity to have an impact, and to act upon that wish with persistence. This characteristic is clearly related to a sense of competence, of being effective.                        |
| Self-control            | → | The ability to modulate and control one's own actions in age-appropriate ways; a sense of inner control.   |
| Relatedness             | → | The ability to engage with others, based on the sense of being understood by and understanding others.   |
| Capacity to Communicate | → | The wish and ability to exchange ideas, feelings, and concepts with others. This characteristic is related to a sense of trust in others and pleasure in engaging with others, including adults. |
| Cooperativeness         | → | The ability to balance one's own needs with those of others in a group activity.   |

*Adapted from: Head Start: The Emotional Foundations of School Readiness by Dr. Abbey Griffin*

# Principles of Child Development

In classrooms for young children knowledge of how children develop and learn is used to inform practice. Teachers' decisions about how best to support growth and learning during the early years are guided by principles of child development derived from the predictable sequence of human development. These principles reflect what is known about the strengths, interests, and linguistic and cultural backgrounds of young children. Included with each principle are specific strategies for providing meaningful learning experiences for young children.

## Child Development Principles

**T**he physical, social, emotional, and cognitive domains of child development are interrelated. Development in one domain influences and is influenced by development in other domains.

**D**evelopment occurs in a relatively orderly sequence, with later abilities, skills, and knowledge building on those already acquired.

**T**here are variations in the sequence of development from child to child; individual children may develop more rapidly in one area than in another.

**O**ptimal periods exist for certain types of development and learning. The prime time for the acquisition of language and literacy development is during the early years.

**D**evelopment proceeds in predictable directions toward greater complexity, organization, and internalization.

## Implications for Teaching

**P**lan learning experiences which help students make connections across domains (i.e., language development has an impact on social interaction; physical ability affects cognitive development).

**O**rganize the learning environment in accordance with knowledge of child development. Provide materials that children can use alone (puzzles, beads), alongside others (clay, paint at an easel) or as part of a group (dramatic play, puppets). Provide materials with varying degree of difficulty such as simple and complex puzzles, and manipulatives that are both easy and difficult to assemble.

**I**ndividualize the curriculum to reflect the varied strengths, needs, interests, temperaments, and learning styles of each child. Allow children to work at their own pace and provide multiple points of entry into projects and activities.

**P**rovide opportunities for children to talk with one another as they work at activities they have chosen, converse with adults individually, participate in small and large group conversations, listen to stories read aloud, and learn about the sounds of language as they sing songs or recite rhymes together.

**P**lan activities that allow children to run, jump, hop, and skip prior to activities that require more coordination, such as walking on a balance beam or riding a two- or three-wheel bike. Classrooms should be equipped with materials at varying skill levels.

## Child Development Principles

**D**evelopment and learning occur in and are influenced by multiple social and cultural contexts.

**C**hildren are active learners, drawing on direct physical and social experience as well as culturally transmitted knowledge to construct their own understanding of the world around them.

**D**evelopment and learning result from interaction of biological maturation and the environment, which includes both the physical and social worlds in which children live.

**P**lay is an important medium for children's social, emotional, and cognitive development, as well as a reflection of their development.

**D**evelopment advances when children have opportunities to practice newly acquired skills as well as when they experience a challenge just beyond the level of their present mastery.

**C**hildren demonstrate different modes of knowing and learning and different ways of representing what they know.

**C**hildren develop and learn best in the context of a community in which they are safe and valued, their physical needs are met, and they feel psychologically secure.

## Implications for Teaching

**I**nvoke family members, including those whose native language is other than English, to participate in multicultural and cooperative learning activities such as preparing and cooking ethnic foods.

**P**lan curriculum which provides firsthand experiences and opportunities for social interaction, physical manipulation, observation, questioning, reflecting, and drawing conclusions.

**S**tructure flexible learning experiences which respond to ongoing changes in the environment and children's growing ability to work cooperatively within the group.

**P**rovide access to a variety of learning centers and projects to build a context for children to extend their learning, investigate the environment, and express their ideas.

**P**rovide the supportive environment children need to transfer existing knowledge (including the use of primary languages), practice new skills, and try out more complex experiences. Include a variety of books: wordless picture books, repetitive stories, and predictable texts.

**I**dentify children's strengths, interests, and learning styles, and plan a variety of experiences to help them use their preferred modes of learning and represent what they know and are able to do as they paint, draw, build structures, engage in role play, or respond to music. Use a variety of media provided in the classroom or outdoor play area.

**E**stablish a community of learning and support within the classroom which accepts individual needs and respects the importance of building relationships.

Source: NAEYC/DAP in Early Childhood Programs

## Play is Active Learning

Play is a critical part of the growth and development of young children. Children are learning when they explore, discover, investigate, role play, and use tools and materials in creative ways. Play is closely linked to cognitive, social, emotional, and physical development. It is the chief vehicle children use to express themselves verbally and nonverbally, to draw on past experience, and to use their perceptual-motor abilities. Young children's play may be characterized in many different ways. In the chart below, play is described from a social interaction point of view. This framework reflects young children's ability to engage in more than one kind of play activity as they move freely from one activity to the next. At any given time, a group of four-year-old children may be observed engaged in any of the behaviors described below. It is important to recognize that children in any group will be at various stages in play and social development. Some children will show characteristics of different stages, depending on the context of their play and their cultural background. A child may be observed with two or three peers, building an elaborate block apartment building and playing out the arrival of firefighters and the rescue of victims. The same child may later watch from the sidelines as others climb on the jungle gym on the playground. It is expected that children in a preschool will be encouraged to move toward more frequent engagement in cooperative or socio-dramatic play.

Stages of play are often described by observable behaviors such as those listed below:

| <i>Play behavior</i>      | <i>Description</i>  |
|---------------------------|---|
| Onlooker behavior         | Playing by watching or conversing with other children engaged in play activities.   |
| Solitary independent play | Playing by oneself.   |
| Parallel play             | Playing, even in the middle of a group, while remaining engrossed in one's own activity. Children playing parallel to each other sometimes use each other's toys, but always maintain their independence. |
| Associative play          | Sharing materials and talking to each other, but not coordinating play objectives or interests.   |
| Cooperative play          | Organizing themselves into roles with specific goals in mind (e.g., assigning the roles of doctor, nurse, and patient when playing hospital).   |

Adapted from: *Back-to-Basics: Play in Early Childhood* by Jill Englebright Fox Ph.D.

## ***What Young Learners Do***

---

**I**nitiate activities that grow from personal interests and intentions;  
**C**hoose materials and decide how to use them;  
**E**xplore materials with all their senses;  
**D**iscover relationships through firsthand experience with objects and people;  
**C**ombine and transform materials;  
**U**se age-appropriate tools and equipment;  
**U**se their large muscles to develop balance and coordination;  
**T**alk about their experiences with peers and adults;  
**A**sk many, many questions;  
**U**se their own words to describe what they are doing;  
**D**raw on early experiences to make sense of new situations; and  
**I**nvestigate and invent ways of using materials and tools.

## ***What Teachers of Young Learners Do***

---

**C**reate and maintain a literacy-rich environment;  
**P**rovide space, time and support for children to use materials;  
**S**eek out children's strengths, needs, interests, and intentions;  
**L**isten for and encourage children's thinking;  
**E**ncourage children to do things for themselves;  
**E**ncourage children to express their feelings;  
**R**edirect and extend children's learning;  
**P**rovide the positive reinforcement children need to develop confidence and competence;  
**H**elp children plan, carry out, and reflect on their learning experiences;  
**M**odel and reinforce appropriate social skills such as listening when others are speaking and respecting other's personal belongings; and  
**E**ncourage the development of the children's native language and culture; facilitates the transition to English.

Adapted from: High/Scope Curriculum

# THE LEARNER-CENTERED ENVIRONMENT

**T**he preschool classroom is a place where children are actively engaged in making meaning. The room itself and the spaces or learning centers in the room invite children to explore, converse, inquire, build, and create individually and as part of the classroom community. Teachers design the classroom so that it serves as an extension of their responsibility to shape and foster learning.

Even before they enter preschool, children have learned that different environments require different behaviors. A four-year-old knows that a ride in the car requires climbing into a car seat and buckling up. A visit to grandparents may mean acting differently from the way the child behaves at home. At home it may be all right to open the refrigerator and take a snack from a special shelf; at grandma's the child may need to ask permission before going to the kitchen. Preschool teachers build upon such prior learnings when they arrange their classrooms and equip learning centers. They design the environment so that the arrangement of centers in the room and the array of materials and supplies help children to understand the kinds of behaviors and interactions expected in each area. In setting up a classroom and provisioning the centers, teachers need to consider questions such as those listed below.

**H**ow do various centers invite or shape particular behaviors?

**H**ow does the environment convey the message that this classroom is a safe, child-friendly place?

**W**hat is the role of adults in clarifying expectations, providing new materials, extending opportunities for oral language, and supporting beginning reading and writing?

**H**ow might adults assess the extent to which the environment supports children's language and literacy learning, including the use of primary languages other than English and the transfer to English?



## Designing the Learner-Centered Environment

The physical and emotional climate created within the classroom environment is an extension of the adult in conveying expectations and fostering learning. The environment is planned to be inviting and friendly to children; it may be changed in response to individual or group interests and needs. Adults in the classroom share responsibility for the initial design of the environment and the introduction of changes such as adding new materials or props or expanding or reducing the space for a center.

Part of the instructional task of the preschool teacher is that of manager and decision maker. Among the most important decisions the teaching team makes are those having to do with designing the environment. In the role of designer of the environment the teaching team:

- S**ends specific, concrete messages to children about what is expected and valued;
- I**nfluences learning by the inclusion of specific materials and equipment;
- S**upports and extends curriculum and instruction;
- B**uilds a sense of community;
- C**reates an aesthetically pleasing climate; and
- A**ttempts to the health and safety of children in the group.

The environment can be designed to send specific, concrete messages about how materials are to be used, how children are expected to interact with one another, and what behaviors are valued. Messages are conveyed by:

**Size and location:** The classroom is accessible to children and family members. Classrooms for preschool children are usually on the first floor with easy access to an outdoor play area. Rooms are large enough to accommodate active learning and exploration.

**Flexibility:** Furniture in learning centers is chosen to provide flexibility so that the size of a center can be reduced or expanded, depending upon children's interests. Easy-to-clean tables can be washed after being used for an outside activity and readied for children to sit at during snack time. Furniture is easy to move. A carpeted area of the room often serves as a space for the large group meeting, or, at another time, a place to do puzzles or look at books.

**Arrangement of learning centers:** The learning centers are clearly defined. When arranging centers, adults consider the amount of space needed for each area, the relationship of one area to another, traffic patterns, and the visual boundaries that separate one center from another. The materials in each center are carefully organized and arranged so that they are accessible to children. Visual cues such as picture labels, clear plastic boxes for storage of puzzles and manipulatives, and shelves at children's height encourage them to put away materials for use the next day. Charts and pictures are displayed at the child's eye level so children can look at them and talk about them.

**Adults responsible for designing environments express what is valued by making decisions to:**

---

- Provide adequate space for active learning and minimize space required for tables and adult furniture.
- Mount children's work or reproductions of paintings and display them attractively.
- Collect children's work in a folder and share it with families during conference;
- Encourage children to care for their environment by locating centers for water or painting near a sink, by providing child-sized mops and brooms, and by placing waste receptacles in key areas of the room to encourage proper disposal of tissues or paper towels.
- Provide and read aloud beautifully illustrated books.
- Include opportunities for listening to all kinds of music as well as singing and moving to music.
- Avoid interrupting a child who is involved in a self-selected task.
- Provide opportunities for the children to share their observations with others during a small or large group time are guided by an adult who may serve as a scribe and write down what children say.

**Adults influence learning by the way they furnish the classroom and by the materials with which the various centers are equipped. For example:**

---

- ◆ Materials in each classroom area are presented in an organized, accessible, and inviting way. For example, a bookshelf that displays the covers of picture books invites children to make selections. Arranging unit blocks by shape and size so that the length of the blocks is visible helps children select the size of block needed for a building. Such an arrangement facilitates clean up as well.
- ◆ Materials are selected to provide varied opportunities for use. Several common manipulatives may be used for building. They may also be sorted by color, shape, size, or some other attribute.
- ◆ Centers include clusters of things that go together, and time is provided for children to talk about what the common element is and what else might be added. A display of soft and fuzzy objects might begin with finding a woolly caterpillar on the playground. Children might add a baby blanket, a stuffed toy, or a winter cap to the collection.
- ◆ Flowers, dried plants, seed pods, or other objects are available for children to arrange in a pleasing pattern or display.
- ◆ Materials are changed depending upon children's interests, the time of year, and ongoing themes or projects. For example, the October display of autumn leaves arranged by color or size and matched to cutouts of leaves from common trees is replaced by pictures and charts showing children's likenesses and similarities in food preferences, hair color, shoe size, or other attributes.
- ◆ Displays and materials are designed to invite children with varying interests and skills to participate. The water table is equipped with pint and quart measures and funnels as well as small, narrow-necked bottles which require precise, fine-motor control to be filled.

**The adult designers of the environment support and extend curriculum and instruction in purposeful ways to aid use of language and move toward reading and writing when they:**

---

- ▲ Incorporate opportunities to use books as sources of information in the various areas of the classroom. Books about buildings and machines may be displayed in the block area. Books about the care and feeding of gerbils are placed near the gerbil habitat. A guidebook about trees of the area is included near a tray of autumn leaves in the science area.
- ▲ Increase opportunities for children to write by including pencils and paper in several centers in the room. For example, in dramatic play there is paper for making grocery lists or taking messages. In the block area, paper and markers are available for making signs and tracing blocks.
- ▲ Use print and picture labels to visually organize the classroom. Common examples include labels on block shelves to show where various sizes and shapes are located, or pictures of various manipulatives attached to their containers, and replicas of highway or street signs to aid the flow of traffic in the playground area used for bike riding.
- ▲ Establish parent and child mail and message boxes in which notes for home, completed work, newsletters, or announcements can be placed.
- ▲ Provide notebooks that go back and forth from home to school for each child once a week to convey highlights of the child's experience. An alternative writing experience may be a notebook that accompanies a stuffed toy or live pet taken home for the weekend. Parents and children write to the class or share drawings that describe what happened during the visit.
- ▼ For other suggestions see **Enriching Dramatic Play to Support Language and Literacy**.

**The adult designers of the learning environment help build a sense of community in the classroom when they:**

---

- ▼ Assure that each child is greeted individually each day.
- ▼ Plan activities designed to help children learn one another's names.
- ▼ Create a space for each child such as a cubbie, locker, and/or message box clearly labeled with the child's name and photograph.
- ▼ Provide an area where children can place something they have constructed or painted to be shared at group time.
- ▼ Provide signs requesting that a project such as a block building be left standing until the next day.
- ▼ Take pictures of children as they are working.
- ▼ Provide adequate materials, such as clay or paper, so that all children have a chance to try new techniques as well as to practice already acquired skills.
- ▼ Provide adequate time for children to work in areas they select.
- ▼ Keep special projects available for several days so that children can practice new techniques such as folding or printing.
- ▼ Provide visual signs to suggest the number of children a learning center can accommodate (e.g., footprints around the water table, or tags to wear in the dramatic play area, or a specific number of chairs at a table).
- ▼ Develop a job chart and help children choose among jobs such as setting the table, feeding the pet, or watering the plants.

**An aesthetically pleasing climate is established when the adult designers of the environment attend to:**

---

- The amount of light in the room.
- The use of color and texture to balance the bright, hard surfaces of some of the classroom equipment. Examples include bright cushions in the library center; soft-bodied dolls and puppets, doll blankets, and a tablecloth in the dramatic play area; and placemats for meals and snack times.
- The need for ceremonies and celebrations including, but not limited to, birthdays and holidays. An example might be turning out the lights and playing special music occasionally, placing artificial candles on the tables at lunch time once a month, or setting up a special table where a volunteer or parent can have lunch with his or her child and a special friend.
- The need for natural materials to observe and explore including leaves, plants, rocks, shells, and flowers.
- The arrangement of materials for creative arts activities. For collage, a container with several separate compartments can be stocked with beads, feathers, bits of tissue paper, large sequins, plastic peanuts, etc., each in a separate compartment.
- The care with which children's work and photos of children are displayed.
- The provision of a small area for beautiful things which may include things children bring from home such as a piece of cloth or embroidery or a teacher display of a bouquet of flowers, paintings, photographs, or sculpture.

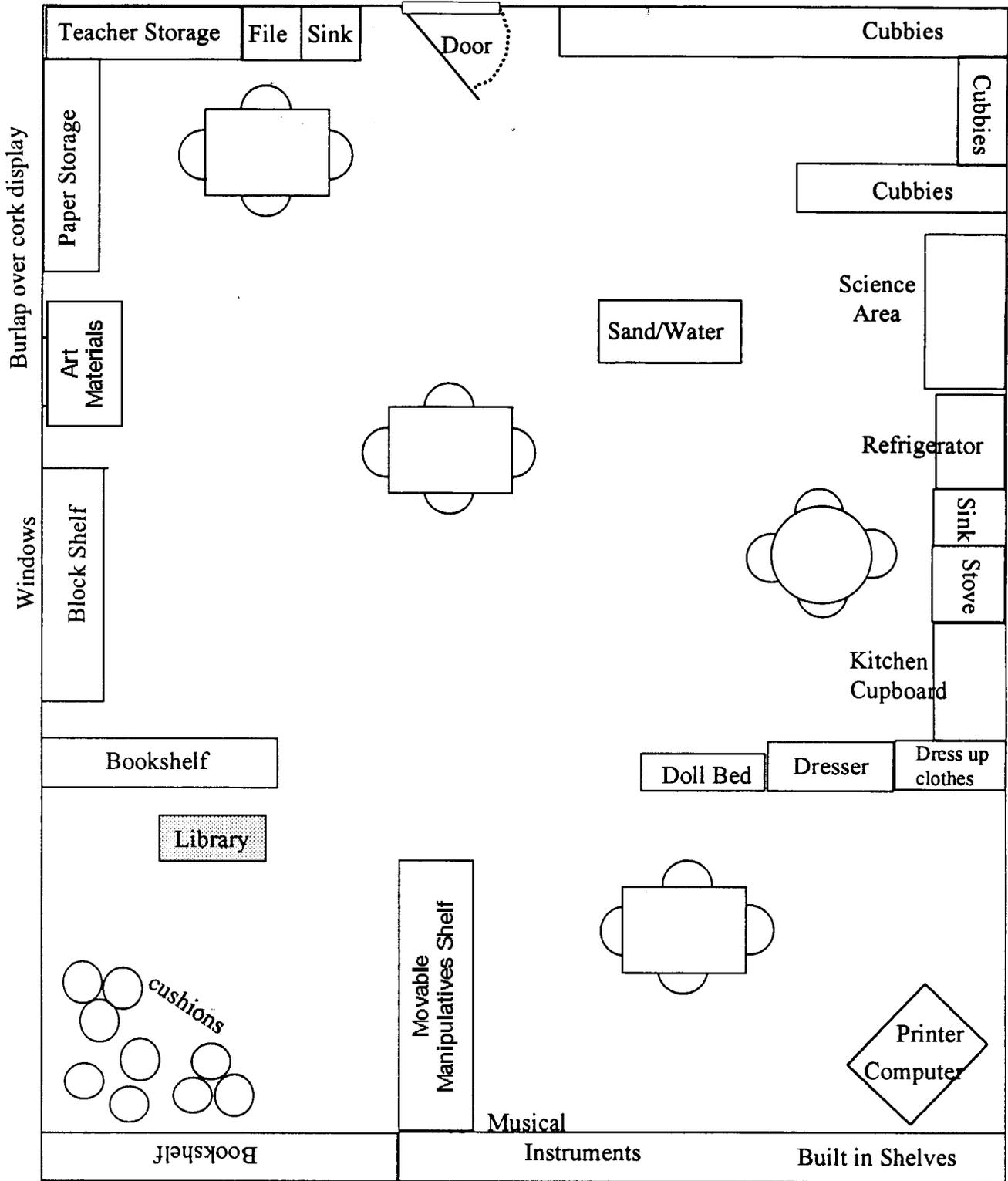
**Finally, the adult designers of the environment are responsible for the health and safety of the children. In addition to assuring compliance with program standards and/or licensing requirements, teachers design the environment to:**

---

- ❑ Maintain a safe flow of traffic in the classroom and on the playground to avoid accidents.
- ❑ Protect quiet work areas.
- ❑ Foster good hygiene by establishing routines and expectations for toileting, handwashing, toothbrushing, rest, and meals.
- ❑ Support children's involvement in self-care by placing products such as paper towels or tissues near a wastebasket, providing sponges or paper towels for cleaning up spills, and providing a child-sized broom and dust pan for cleaning up sand around the sand table.
- ❑ Assure that all materials, including cleaning materials, are nontoxic and safe.
- ❑ Design all areas of the classroom and playground so that children are always visible to adults.

The floor plans that appear on the next two pages represent classrooms designed before and after the teaching team had an opportunity to consider the various aspects of their role as designers of the learning environment. In the after design, the learning centers are more clearly defined. There is attention to the inclusion of spaces for parents and children to send and receive mail and environmental print to assist children with developing more precise language. Books and other materials that support the development of reading, writing, listening, and speaking are incorporated in several areas of the classroom. A workbench has been added and the block area has been enlarged to help children develop fine motor skills and strengthen the small muscles needed to draw and write.

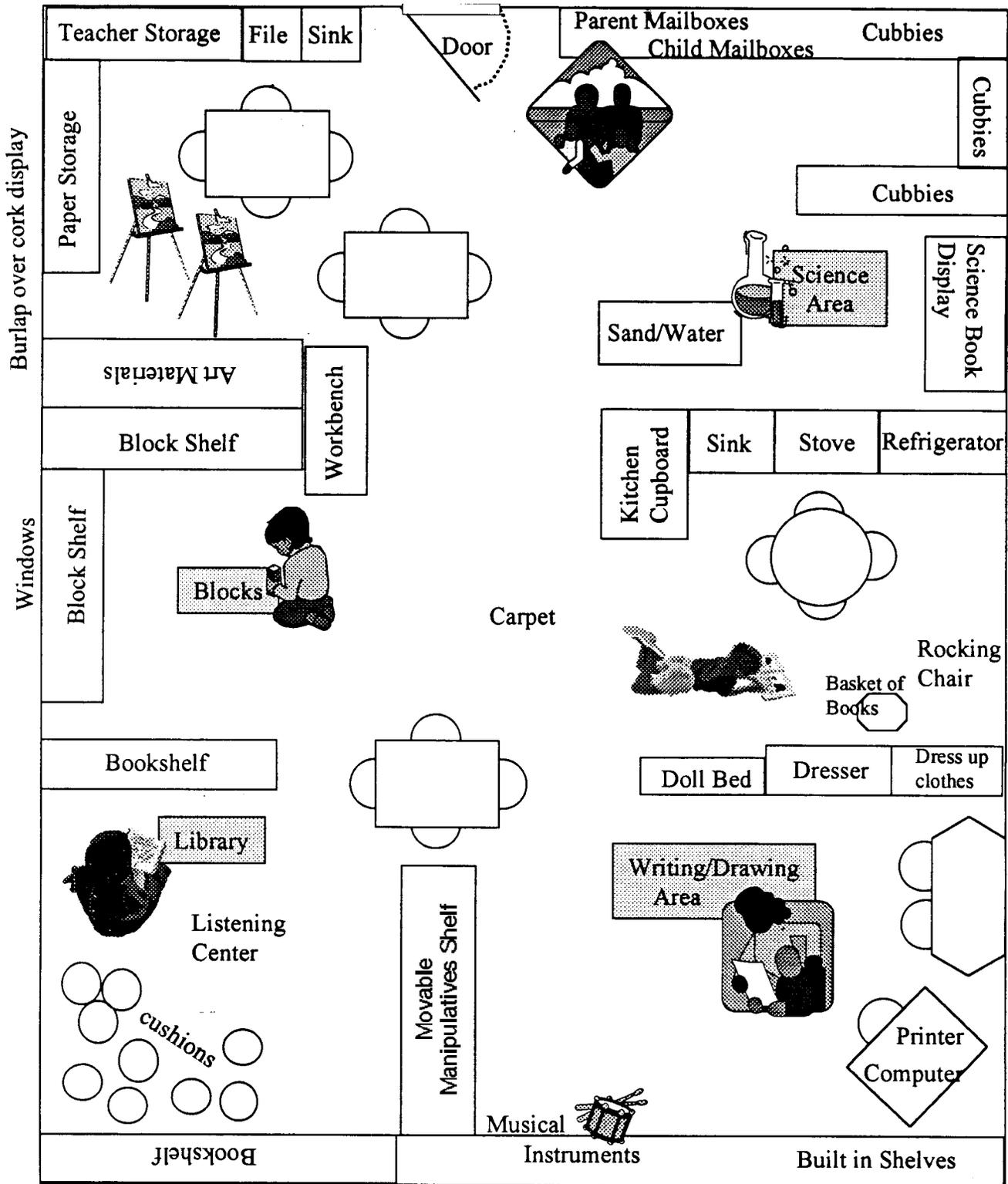
Corridor



Cork strips for displaying children's work

**BEFORE**

Corridor



Cork strips for displaying children's work

AFTER

# Messages Children Receive from the Environment

## Positive Messages    How the Environment Conveys These Messages

### ***This is a safe and comfortable place.***

- \* Room dividers and shelves are at children's eye level.
- \* There are properly sized tables and chairs, rugs, and comfortable furnishings for relaxing.
- \* There is space to move around; indoor and outdoor traffic ways are clear.
- \* There is a safe place for each child's personal belongings.
- \* Children can see the teacher at all times, and the teacher can see the children.
- \* The classroom furniture and outdoor equipment are solid, clean, and well-maintained. The room has a clean, neat appearance.

### ***I belong here and I am valued.***

- \* Pictures and materials in the room reflect the children's families, languages, cultures, and communities and are at children's eye/hand level.
- \* The environment has been adapted for children with disabilities.
- \* There are display areas reserved for children's work.
- \* Children can find their names and their work posted in several places in the classroom.

### ***I can make friends and share.***

- \* Areas of the room are set up for small groups of children to work together.
- \* There is a rug in a meeting area large enough to accommodate the whole class.
- \* Materials are grouped for shared use (e.g., baskets of pencils, markers, and crayons for writing) and there are sufficient quantities.
- \* There are mailboxes or a message board where children can leave messages for each other and the teacher.
- \* Outdoor equipment which encourages children to play cooperatively is available.

### ***I know what I'm expected to do.***

- \* Everything is neat and labeled so children can find things easily.
- \* Materials are within reach.
- \* There is a chart listing job responsibilities for the upkeep of the room.
- \* The weekly and daily schedules are posted at children's eye level.
- \* Child-sized brooms, dustpans, and sponges facilitate cleanup.
- \* Space is arranged to communicate how children should use materials and interact with their peers.

### ***I can do interesting work here.***

- \* The room and materials are organized in attractive, inviting ways.
- \* There are sufficient quantities of books, objects, games, and collections for children to explore and investigate—enough to go around, but not so much that it is over-stimulating.
- \* There are writing tools, blocks, art, and construction materials to encourage children to build, draw, write, and paint about what they are learning.
- \* There are math and science tools, nonstandard and standard measuring devices, and magnifying lenses for investigations.
- \* The materials and displays change on a regular basis.

## Positive Messages    How the Environment Conveys These Messages

***I can find what I need and put things back where they belong.***

- \* Materials are logically organized and labeled.
- \* Games with small pieces and manipulatives are in labeled (word and picture/symbol) containers.
- \* Shelves are labeled to show where materials belong.
- \* Waste containers are close to a sink.

***I can make choices.***

- \* Materials are placed on shelves where children can reach them.
- \* There is access to all learning centers on a daily basis.
- \* A large block of time is available each day to use materials in the learning centers and to work on projects.
- \* There is a choice board; times are provided for children to choose their own activities, tasks, or jobs.
- \* The outdoor play area is designed to provide additional choices and complement what happens in the classroom.

***I am challenged to try new things.***

- \* Opportunities are available to interact with different individuals or groups of children and adults in the learning environment.
- \* Opportunities are provided to learn different ways to use familiar equipment and materials.
- \* Books and pictures introduce new and unfamiliar people, places, and events.



Adapted from: *Constructing Curriculum in the Primary Grades* (Dodge, Jablon, Bickart)

# Assessing a Classroom Environment

Checklists for assessing the classroom environment are available in a variety of publications (see **Bibliography**) and from the Internet. Other resources provide extensive lists to guide those responsible for arranging and equipping a classroom (see **Appendix**). A checklist may be useful to assess the extent to which the classroom environment contributes to overall program goals. Those who plan full-day programs, for example, might need to take a close look at what occurs during routines such as meals and rest.

The questions below are intended to guide teachers, administrators, and program planners as they develop strategies to assess classroom environments.

## Organization

- Are clearly defined areas available for some combination of: creative art, writing/drawing, computer, language and literacy, music, blocks, manipulatives/math, dramatic play, science discovery, sand/water, large muscle, and woodworking?
- Does the arrangement of centers and materials suggest the behavior expected of the children?
- Is each center large enough to encourage cooperation among children?
- Does each child have a clearly labeled place to keep his or her personal belongings?
- Are there clearly labeled places to store children's completed work and work in progress?
- Are learning centers rich with print (e.g., menus, recipes, wall charts, and posters)?
- Is there a comfortable library center?
- Are book covers visible?
- Is there a space where an adult can work with a small group of children?
- Is there space to display individual children's work?
- Are books displayed in several learning centers?
- Are adult spaces, such as a cabinet or file cabinet, clearly defined?
- Is there a cozy getaway space where a child can work alone?
- Are chairs and tables the appropriate height for children?
- Is there a carpeted area where children can sit on the floor to read, use manipulatives, or participate in meetings?
- Are shelves, containers, and boxes containing materials clearly labeled with pictures, symbols, and/or print?
- Are blocks stored so that the length of each block is visible?
- Are symbols and pictures used to organize the placement of materials in the dramatic play area?

## Overall Climate

- Is the atmosphere free from pressure?
- Do adults respond to children in positive and supportive ways?
- Do adults respond to one another courteously and respectfully?
- Do children interact and converse with other children and adults?
- Do adults listen to children attentively and encourage children to listen to others?
- Are parents invited and welcomed to participate when visiting the classroom?
- Does the classroom appear to be neat and orderly?
- Are floors, walls, and furniture clean?
- Has attention been given to providing varied textures, colors, and surfaces throughout the room? Examples may include cushions in the library center, carefully mounted reproductions of paintings displayed at children's eye level in the dramatic play area, or brightly colored placemats to identify each child's place at meals.

## Awareness of Print

- Is print visible on charts and bulletin boards around the room?
- Are children's names printed on their cubbies, placemats, paintings and other items?
- Do children write their own names, or letters from their names, on their paintings, and drawings?
- Is clear, easy-to-read print displayed at children's eye level?
- Does the displayed print represent words familiar to children from daily contact in the environment including words related to special experiences and words from languages other than English?
- Have adults provided carefully printed cards bearing children's names and other carefully printed words for children to copy or "read?"
- Are mailboxes available for each child/family to encourage the sharing of messages between home and school?
- Is a newsletter describing children's activities sent home regularly?
- Are notices conveyed to families in languages they understand?
- Is print incorporated in each area of the classroom?



## Materials

- Are materials easily accessible to and usable by children?
- Are sufficient quantities of materials available in each center?
- Are easels placed side by side to encourage interactive painting and writing?
- Are pocket charts or other methods displayed to detail activities such as daily or weekly jobs or choice of learning center?
- Are books changed frequently depending on children's interests and classroom themes?
- Do books include a mixture of fiction, nonfiction, and poetry; wordless books and those with varying amounts of print; and books in the native languages spoken by children and their families?
- Does the library center include books made by children?
- Does the listening center contain earphones, tapes, and accompanying print books for children to use independently?
- Are tapes in languages other than English included?
- Is the meeting area equipped with an easel or chart stand so the teacher can capture children's words, display the words of a favorite song, or review a recipe with a small or large group?
- Is the writing center equipped with pencils, markers, crayons, and paper of many sizes, shapes, and colors?
- Is the computer equipped with interactive software to encourage children to draw, follow directions, and use books available on CD-ROM?
- Is a printer available for children to use?

## Enriching Dramatic Play to Support Language and Literacy

**D**ramatic play is an everyday occurrence in the preschool classroom as children pretend to cook the dinner, feed the baby, go shopping, or move to a new home. In addition to conversation, a few carefully selected props can suggest to children ways to play out adult uses of reading and writing in their daily lives. A notepad and pencil near the telephone, a basket of books and magazines near a child-sized chair, or supermarket fliers and coupons are a few ways to extend language play to include taking a message, reading a bedtime story to a doll, or making a grocery list.

As the year progresses, home play can be extended as the area expands to include a supermarket, doctor's office or health clinic, office, barber shop, beauty parlor, bakery, pizza restaurant, or other locations familiar to children. Teachers may introduce materials to develop a theme, augment a field trip, or build on a child's interest or experience.

Many teachers collect objects associated with various kinds of community sites and store them until they are needed. Parents often are willing to help gather objects. Listed below are some ideas for props which may be added to the dramatic play or language arts learning centers to provide opportunities for conversation and encourage reading and writing behavior.

### **Post Office**

- Envelopes of various sizes
- Stationery/postcards
- Pens, pencils, markers
- Stickers, stamps, stamp pads
- Post office mailbox
- A tote bag for mail
- Computer/address labels
- Tape
- Calendars
- Small drawer trays
- Posters/signs about mailing
- Mail deliverer cap
- Advertisements from drug, department, furniture stores
- Mailboxes for each child and adult
- Stapler
- Signs reflecting different cultures

### **Office**

- Appointment book
- Message pads
- Stapler
- File folders
- Racks for filing papers
- In/out trays
- Index cards
- Business cards
- Assorted forms
- Desk and wall calendars
- Computer and printer
- Clipboards
- Post-its/address labels
- Note cards
- Paper clips of various sizes
- Pens, pencils, markers
- Trays for holding items
- Folders, pamphlets
- Signs reflecting different cultures

### **Blocks—Construction Company**

|   |  |
|---|--|
| Order forms, pencils  | Books showing the stages of constructing a building                                  |
| Construction helmets  | Markers and cardboard for making signs   |
| Tool kits   | Additional flat boards, arches, wedges, cylinders, etc.                              |
| Canvas aprons for carrying tools  | Trucks and machines used in construction: delivery truck, dump truck, backhoe, crane |
| Mobile phones   | Books showing uses of various tools and vehicles                                     |
| Catalogs or advertisements from hardware and home supply stores                                   | Signs reflecting different cultures  |
| Photos, postcards, drawings, and pictures of completed buildings and buildings under construction |  |

### **Pizza Restaurant**

Cash register  
Play money  
Small-sized pizza boxes  
Round pizza tin  
Pizza cutter  
Wooden paddle  
Twelve-inch cardboard circle to serve as a pattern  
Red, green, brown, and tan construction paper for making pizzas  
Order pads, receipt book  
Pencils, pens  
Menus with 5-10 items and prices  
Telephone  
Soda cups  
Blackboard and chalk for specials  
Apron or shirt and cap  
Red-and-white-checked tablecloth  
Signs reflecting different cultures

### **Supermarket**

Cash register with tape  
Play money  
Grocery advertisement fliers  
Plastic food items or cutouts mounted on board and covered with clear contact paper  
Empty containers—cereal boxes, egg cartons, milk containers, plastic juice bottles, etc.  
Stick-on price tags  
Plastic and paper bags  
Child-sized shopping cart and basket  
Signs collected from stores  
Crayons and markers for making signs  
Paper, scissors, and tape  
Aprons, jackets

### **Library**

Library book return cards  
Stamps for marking books  
A wide variety of children's books  
Bookmarks  
Pens, pencils, markers  
Paper of assorted sizes  
A sign-in/sign-out sheet  
Stickers  
ABC index cards  
Telephone  
Telephone books  
Calendars of various types  
Posters of children's books  
File folders  
Signs reflecting different cultures

### **Bookstore**

Cash register  
Stick-on price labels  
Pens, pencils, and markers  
Posters, book jackets from children's books  
Shelf or table for arranging books for sale by author or by genre (stories, real things, poetry, music, etc.)  
Order pad, receipt book  
Computer keyboard  
Tape recorder and books on tape  
Earphones  
Bags for purchases  
Signs reflecting different cultures