

Environment and Curriculum: Reflections for Safety and Learning

- **Air quality and temperature.** Research has shown that when the temperature is between 68 and 72 degrees, children learn better. Air circulation is also very important to consider. Open windows to increase airflow when seasonally appropriate. Using a fan for air circulation is also helpful.
- **Lighting:** Lighting can affect both mood and behavior of adults and children. Natural lighting is preferable to provide warmth and help regulate children's emotions. Examine the lighting in your environment. Is your lighting warm and inviting? Make sure lights don't flicker or hum. How can you use natural light?
- **Noise:** Noise level and poor acoustics negatively affect children's mood and ability to learn. When the environment noise level is high, skills such as speech, memory, and reading are impacted. Children and adults have trouble concentrating and problem-solving in noisy environments. A high noise level also leads to frustration, overstimulation, and over activity which impacts children's energy level and emotional regulation.
 - Use a calm, soft voice to communicate with children, rather than trying to speak over the noise.
 - Use calming music and dim the lights to signify rest times.
 - Place rugs or carpet in the room.
 - Turn off noisy equipment when it is not in use.
 - Help children to use their "inside voice" when indoors to ensure that they can hear each other and the educator.
- **Color** can also impact children's energy level and mood. Focus on colors that are commonly found in nature – tones of greens, blues, soft yellow, beige, gray that are found in water, rocks, sand, sky, trees, sun.
 - Red and Orange - Signify alertness and may increase creativity and excitement.
 - Yellow – Increases attention and creativity, as well as encourage positive thinking.
 - Green: Helps children feel calmer and more peaceful.
 - Blue: Feels calming and soothing, promotes relaxation and sleep.
 - Purple: Feels calming and peaceful.
 - Beige/brown: Helps children to feel safe and relaxed.
 - Off-white: promotes focus, leads to positive thoughts.

Complexity: Re-evaluate environment.

- Less is more. Thoughtfully chosen materials that meet children's current interests are more satisfying and impact learning more than all of the choices all of the time.
- How does the number of items in the environment affect your stress and ability to focus as an educator? Is your space too busy with colors, patterns, and too many choices? Is the environment overstimulating or does it evoke a sense of calm?
- Is the environment too simplistic? What interests and materials do you need to introduce to meet the children's needs?

Multi-age early childhood environments work best with:

- Areas designed for all ages.
 - Infant/toddler area and preschool/school age area. Children will travel in and out of areas, but infant and toddlers must be supervised when playing in areas where toys beyond their developmental level are stored, and toys meant for older children must not be brought into the infant/toddler area.
 - Use different levels of play for different activities and ages (floor for infant and toddler age activities, toy shelf for small world play for young preschoolers, preschool table for art and drawing, kitchen table for school aged cutting and gluing).
- Consistent designated spaces for older children to use small items. Place gates between spaces to keep infants and toddlers from crawling under tables and finding choking hazards like small loose parts and Legos.
- Choking Hazards – be aware of the age indicated on the toy's packaging, but don't count on its reliability. Many items found online come from other regions with different packaging and age indicators. Do your own test using a toilet paper tube for small items.
- Select materials that support all children's interests – children who are cognitively engaged experience fewer behavioral challenges, thus promoting individual and group safety.
- Teach children the safe and appropriate use of materials.
- Consider stocking your environment with loose parts that are safe and fun for all ages.

The following are discussion questions in the course. Use this sheet to jot down your own ideas or the ideas shared by your colleagues:

Make a list of loose parts to use in multi-age environments:

What are your current classrooms safety rules?

What is currently working in your routine? What times of the day are chaotic and need help?

Play-based learning in multi-age early childhood programs based on knowing the children's interests, behaviors, routine and safety needs. Reflect on the children in your child care. What interests to they have? What needs to they have? How can you support their individual needs as a part of your curriculum prep and planning? If it helps to visualize, write down each child's name and age as you answer the questions.

Favorite transition ideas:

Evaluate the Environment and Routine – how is it helping or hurting you? Where are your loose parts? Where are your infant toys? There is a time for everything and everything in its place.

Evaluate your selfcare: How is your emotional health and well-being? What do you need to do to care for you as you care for others?