

The importance of physical environment in child care

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By Karen Harkness

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The physical environment has a strong impact on both young children's learning and development. Environments that are well-designed will allow children to explore, give them a sense of control and will allow the children to engage in focused, self-directed play.

If the environment is well-designed, it will allow the children to build strong relationships. When designed right, the child will build a sense of security, exploring in play areas that allow the children to play both independently and with others as they choose.

Caring for infants and toddlers can be challenging for even the most seasoned parents and caregivers.

The environment in which the child is cared for, whether it is at home or at a childcare program can make a significant difference in the experience of the child and parent or caregiver. It is very important that the environment you provide, or choose for your child, supports the growing child's physical, emotional, social, and cognitive development.

There are nine key concepts to consider for caregiving environments: safety; health; comfort; convenience; child-sized; flexibility; encouraging movement, allows for choice and ensures accessibility.

Below are some questions to ask your-self when assessing a child's space.

Safety — Are all the electrical outlets covered? Is there adequate padding under climbing equipment in case my child falls? Are the walkways clear and unobstructed? Is the play area fenced in? Are there first aid supplies available?

Health — Is the diapering area kept separate from the food preparation and feeding areas? Are the food preparation, feeding, and toileting areas cleaned and sanitized daily and after each use. Do the children get fresh air every day? Do the caregivers teach good health habits such as washing hands and brushing teeth?

Comfort — Is there soft furniture accessible to the children? Do infants have safe, comfortable, adequate sleeping arrangements?

Convenience — Is there easy access to sinks for adults and children? Are the materials and supplies stored near routines and activities? Are the toys and materials at child's eye-level?

Child-Sized — Is there furniture that is both child-sized and adult sized in the rooms? Can toddlers sit and stand as they choose? Can mobile infants and toddlers reach toys and materials independently?

Flexible — Does the home or program seem flexible with routines to meet the needs of all the children? Do all the infants have individualized, personal schedules? Are they allowed to eat as they get hungry and sleep as they get tired?

Encourages Movement — Will my child have enough space to crawl, roll, pull up, walk, climb, run, jump and explore when both indoors and outdoors?

Allows for Choice -Are the toddlers offered choices at meal times and during activities?

Ensures accessibility — Are the toys out at the children's level? Are there spaces for both quiet and active play? Are there toys to represent imaginative play, constructive play, sensory play and literacy? Are the children allowed to play with sand, water, dress up cloths, etc.?

Other important safety factors to consider are the group size and adequate supervision of the children.

In New York State child care centers the maximum group size for infants is eight and for toddlers, 12. There should be at least one caregiver per four infants up to 18-months and one caregiver per five toddlers up to 3-years-old.

Regulations for family based child care differ slightly from this. Check NYS Office of Children and Family Services for regulations: <http://www.ocfs.state.ny.us/main/childcare/default.asp>

Karen Harkness, author is a Child Care Resource and Referral Project Associate at the Early Care & Learning Council. Harkness works with 39 Child Care Resource and Referral agencies throughout the state working towards a NACCRRRA Quality Assurance Certification. She has over 28 years experience in the early care and learning field. She is currently in the process of becoming certified in the Program for Infant/Toddler Care. For more information visit us at www.earlycareandlearning.org