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“Space speaks to children!” That idea was hammered home all during my graduate studies. Putting a fine point on it, my professor required us to read the little gem of a book titled *Planning Environments for Young Children: Physical Space* (Kritchevsky, Prescott, & Walling, 1969).

The power of space speaking to children has been affirmed throughout my career. Thoughtfully designed environments can welcome, embrace, support, and nurture children to complement and support staff’s professional practices. On the flipside, poorly planned environments negate teachers’ good intentions and undermine goals for children’s development.

Extroversion

Although the importance of environment has been explored for decades, it still seems that many early childhood programs’ space — inside and outside — speak and respond primarily to children of extroverted nature. That’s an estimated 70% of children. (The percentage varies across cultures although 70% seems to generally represent the United States.)

So, there’s good news for children of extroverted nature who:

- tend to be more outgoing.
- enjoy lots of spontaneous, noisy socializing. The more the merrier — as long as there are enough toys to go around.
- adapt well to change at a moment’s notice.
- jump right into the thick of things.
- revel in sensory stimulation of all kinds, such as new sights, sounds, tastes, and textures.
- can juggle their attention pretty easily from one activity to another. Variety and novelty is their spice in life.
- don’t tend to require a lot of ‘private’ time — though they can enjoy it.
- speak their mind quite easily and don’t hold back.
- are known to enjoy being the center of attention and don’t hide from the spotlight.
- are motivated and energized when in a group of people. For them, relieving stress is best done actively in busy activity. For this group, a slow-pace quickly leads to boredom.

Frankly, for the 70% of children with an extroverted nature, being enrolled in an early childhood program sounds like a dream come true. By its very nature, such settings offer lots of active peer interaction, plenty of stimulation to spark ideas and communication, and mega-doses of variety. But, in my book,

Bitty Spaces for One or Two

Designing Environments for Children of Introverted Nature

by Karen Stephens

a program responding only to 70% of children’s temperament isn’t what I call successful.

Introversion

What about the other 30% of children who were born with an innate tendency toward introversion? What are their interaction preferences? The temperament trait of extroversion-introversion isn’t an ‘all or nothing’ proposition. It’s more of a continuum. But there are some differences in approach. More introverted children:

- prefer quieter play and interaction.
- need more warning about upcoming changes and function best when transitions are kept to a minimum.
- require more time for reflection and pondering.
- bloom best when long periods of self-directed play periods allow them to focus and concentrate on their own interests and activity.



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- are generally good listeners, but like to take time to consider things before making a quick response, decision, or choice.
- relax best when conditions allow for calm solitary play or engagement with just one friend.
- balance gregarious activities like social interactions and vigorous physical play with time to themselves to re-energize. Quiet time replenishes their emotional reserves spent during social play.
- can be highly sensitive to public criticism; they become embarrassed more easily when singled out than extroverted children.
- use privacy to regain equilibrium when they are stressed.
- prefer less sensory stimulation and variety. Too much chaos, clutter, and random, repetitive or loud noise overwhelms them more easily.
- gravitate toward smaller groups and thrive best in orga-

nized schedules that flow in a very predictable routine.

- require more time to warm up in new social settings and to new people.

Gaining Perspective: Is Your Space Welcoming to Introverts?

Because I think programs should respond to 100% of children, not just 70%, I use multiple perspectives for observing space. By asking purposeful questions, I try to assess how successfully a setting responds to children with introverted as well as extroverted tendencies. When I do that, needed improvements in space design are easier to identify. For the purposes of this article, I'm sharing questions that gauge whether a space responds to and supports children with an introverted nature.

1. Does the entryway ease children's transition from home without being too busy, messy, distracting, or chaotic? Do children encounter obstacles right away in terms of blocked movement or vision?
 2. Is the overall space too bright or too dark for those sensitive to lighting? Is it too loud or cramped?
 3. Does the square footage allow adequate personal space for children? Does it give the sense of a packed warehouse or cramped department store?
 4. Are some spaces built to accommodate just one or two children at play?
5. Can introverted children find defined spaces for focused play away from others' noisy, active play?
 6. Does the space include any private, comfortable, and cozy nooks for relaxation, reflection, and taking a deep breath?
 7. Are there respectful spots introverted children can retreat to — alone or with a teacher — as they learn to self-regulate and maintain composure in the face of overwhelming emotions? Is the spot non-punitive and does it convey support rather than isolation or being ostracized?
 8. In addition to adequate wide open play spaces, are there well-defined learning spaces that give children some privacy while also allowing for subtle, adequate teacher supervision?
 9. Are cubbies large enough to give each child adequate personal space? Is there space for keepsakes from home that give comfort?
 10. Is the classroom arranged so children have some sense of teachers' trust? Do they feel under constant surveillance? Would children feel like others are always looming over their shoulder or 'snooping' on them?
 11. Is there a core group of stable learning centers maintained to promote a sense of continuity, predictability, and security — as opposed to frequent, unpredictable changes in the physical space?
 12. Is there adequate space for cots so napping children aren't crowded?
 13. Does space for meal service allow for small group seating arrangements?
 14. Do areas, such as toileting and 'ill child' recuperation spaces, offer reasonable privacy?



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BACKYARD OF SUE STROYAN, BLOOMINGTON, ILLINOIS, UNITED STATES

Space Solutions for Introverted Natures

Observing your space and answering the specific questions above will help you determine if your space needs to be more 'introvert-friendly.' Luckily, if you need improvements, there are many simple ways to create some smaller, more private spaces for children. Just a few examples include:

- Provide a single paint easel out under a shady tree.
- Hang a bamboo or sheer curtain from the ceiling to add privacy to a reading spot.
- Plant a climbing vine, such as morning glory, on an arbor.
- Put pillows inside of an appliance box for solitary respite.
- Set up a pup tent or tipi that's just right for one or two.
- Place potted floor plants into a circle to create a bit of private space.
- Hang mosquito netting over a play space to create a sense of enclosure.
- Hang wind chimes from a branch with a child-sized chair or two underneath.



- Install a loft to offer cozy play space above and below.
- Set up a display of bottles full of colored water on a windowsill for solitary gazing. A selection of fossils, mineral gems, or transparent colored plastic containers can also offer quiet engagement.
- Plant airy, ornamental grasses around a sandbox for private play.
- Offer individual sensory tubs (kitchen sink-size or larger) for independent play.
- Place a floor lamp by a rocker or beanbag chair to create a sense of intimacy.
- Include love seats inside.
- Outside, place a family-style porch swing from an overhang or A-frame.
- String a hammock between two trees, under a deck, or on a raised loft.
- Place a small circular rug near table toys or loose-parts play areas to define space for a bit of solitary play.

Conclusion

Including some of the ideas above is a good beginning, but I encourage you to take a deeper look at your classroom from the perspective of an introverted child. It should yell out: "You fit in here!" If your space fails to do that, the photos in this article can provide design inspiration. The resource list can also help you brainstorm solutions. But don't stop there! Online resources, such as Pinterest, have lots of fodder to trigger your imagination, too.

To be a successful teacher, being mindful and sensitive to a child's temperament is a fundamental responsibility, not just an opportunity to enjoy differences in students' personalities. Planning in response to temperament is the most concrete way teachers can demonstrate respect for children. When we nurture and teach in harmony with children's inborn nature, we respect

each unique identity and encourage children's sense of competence, confidence, and self-worth. This results in children enjoying greater self-esteem, as well as acceptance, within their social group. Have fun creating the environment that will set the stage for it all to happen!

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PLATFORM WITH COLOR: CHILDSPACE EARLY LEARNING CENTRE, WELLINGTON, NEW ZEALAND



PHOTOGRAPH BY KAREN STEPHENS
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Facebook: Open Groups to Explore

- Childcare Design
- Childspace Workshop
- Early Childhood Education Outdoor Environments
- EarthPlay Network
- Inspiring Spaces
- Let the Children Play
- Nature Explore
- World Forum Foundation: Global Collaborative On Design for Children Working Group



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