

“This is Not a Behavior Problem ... It’s a Design Problem”

by John Rosenow

A couple of years ago, on a single day in Los Angeles, I had two experiences that powerfully brought home the importance for children and educators of quality, thoughtful design.

I was in LA to participate in a dedication ceremony for a Certified Nature Explore Classroom. We spent hours at the school, watching the children play in the carefully and collaboratively designed outdoor classroom. While there were dozens of adults there for the ceremony, the children mostly politely ignored us, engrossed in tending the gardens that they had helped design, playing the marimba, building with blocks and other three-dimensional materials they had helped choose, creating art, exploring soil and sand, walking on the balance beam. They were calm, cooperative, and creative.

The teachers had big smiles on their faces, many sharing their stories of how the natural outdoor classroom has done so much for the children. One said — perhaps an overstatement, perhaps not, based on what we saw: “We no longer have behavior problems.”

The teachers also said family involvement in the school had blossomed with the creation of the outdoor classroom. In fact, several parents had taken time off work to help out at the dedication ceremony. After all, families had worked collaboratively with teachers at the school and with designers to help choose many of the features in the space. It was their celebration, too.

That afternoon we visited a second school, also in South Central LA; similar student demographic, similar mix of hard-working and caring teachers. But this school had not yet created their natural outdoor space. Their existing playground lacked plants and trees and contained hard rubber surfacing, a traditional metal climbing structure, and was surrounded by a chain-link fence.

What a difference in the children’s behavior! And what a difference in the role of the teachers. At the second school the teachers were the playground police — trying valiantly to calmly break up fights, head off bullying, resolve disputes, and comfort crying children. But the space itself just invited conflicts. The teachers never had the chance to really engage deeply with children or support their learning. They weren’t the playground police because they wanted to be; that role was thrust upon them by the playground design.

The experience of the children and teachers at the second school could not have been more different from what I had just experienced at the dedication — in a similar school in the same neighborhood. You couldn’t miss it. I thought, “This is not a behavior problem... it’s a design problem.” (The good news is that soon a natural outdoor classroom will be coming to the second school.)

I have since paid close attention to children’s behaviors in different indoor environments as well. Of course it’s the same story: Well-organized indoor spaces, free of clutter and full of possibilities for interesting, engaging experiences support calm and creative behavior. Teachers spend more time supporting children’s learning, and less time dealing with disruptive behaviors.

We Can All Be Advocates

Careful, thoughtful, appropriate design for children doesn’t just happen. It happens when caring people advocate for it. In my experience, a champion for thoughtful design can come from anywhere. The champion can be an educator, a parent, an administrator, a maintenance or physical plant professional, or a neighborhood organizer.

I invite you to be the champion of appropriate design for children’s indoor and outdoor spaces, wherever you can have an influence. Your advocacy can make all the difference for children.

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