

Living in the Real World

by Jim Greenman

“Learning Environments for the 1990’s—Part Two”

Teaching environments depend on skilled teachers to daily design and implement activities and experiences that work for each child. Teachers “teach” and most or all of the planning goes into the teaching time, usually small and large group times. Curriculum depends on the teacher’s presence.

In a **learning environment**, teachers plan for children to explore independently, to discover, and to learn through developmentally appropriate play. A playground, a museum, a Montessori or open classroom, or a park are learning environments where adults are facilitators, not instructors.

Good learning environments are individualized because they are rich with experiences children can access that fit their interests and developmental needs. How can you tell a good learning environment? Walk into the setting when teachers are **not** present and you should see learning built in or easily accessible to the children.

A good learning environment **empowers** children to become confident learners. The fundamental premise is that children are **active learners** who learn best from activities **they** plan and carry out themselves. Children are recognized as little scientists and builders, acrobats and artisans, who need active experience with the world of people and things, who need opportunities to plan and set goals and take responsibility.

Throughout much of the day, children make choices about which aspects of the learning environment to focus on; they participate in small groups and **short** times with the whole group. A typical day for a preschooler might include time at the listening center or reading books with a teacher, investigating the world of bugs outside, acting as an architect and builder with blocks or crates and wheelbarrows,

group singing, making cookies for snack, digging and measuring and pouring indoors or out, and creating various costumed social worlds of home or business with friends.

The Role of Teachers

Teachers have two key roles in the learning environment:

1. With support staff, teachers prepare and maintain the environment for free and structured choice play, providing the necessary range of choices in activities and experiences.
2. Teachers facilitate the child’s exploration of the environment to maximize her learning. The most important teaching happens when adults play and work alongside the children, not simply manage and teach. Good teachers are with the children—on the floor, on the grass, at the child’s level participating alongside, listening, conversing, touching, observing, and paying attention when to engage the child and when to simply watch. At the same time, good teachers are keeping the flow of interest alive, recognizing efforts, finding the novel experience, asking questions, and thinking ahead to the next transition. Good planning of the environment makes this possible.

Planning the Learning Environment

There are five parts to planning a learning environment:

1. Knowing and understanding the body of developmentally appropriate content:

- What developmentally important experiences are necessary for maximizing individual development?

- What experiences are necessary for each child to experience relaxed, happy days?

2. Planning the environment on a monthly basis:

- What interest areas are available?
- What props or loose parts are regularly available?
- What learning is built into the setting or routines?

3. Planning daily experiences and activities:

- What experiences are offered through rotation of materials in the learning centers?
- What activities are planned by teachers?

4. Monthly experience review:

- Are the experiences developmentally appropriate for the entire range of children?
- Are the experiences offered in the right balance? Curriculum area (motor, art, dramatic, construction, etc.)

Individual and group
New challenge and practice/mastery

- Are the experiences multicultural, actively non-sexist?

5. Planning for individual children:

- Is the primary teacher/caregiver aware of the child's current interest, needs, and strengths?
- Does the teacher have a list of goals and desirable experiences based on the child's experiences in the group?

Building In Learning

The advantage of attaching things either permanently (with screws or bolts) or temporarily (with duct tape) is, of course, that they will stay put. This reduces the number of things that have to be reassembled or put back. Learning materials can be attached to almost any surface: walls, floors, benches, tables, backs of storage units, doors, fences, rugs, ceilings, windows, the inside of cabinets, and pillars.

Some of the many things that can be attached:

- toy steering wheels, other wheels
- beads on wire or string
- pounding benches or mallets
- doors with latches, locks, hinges, etc.
- fabric with zipper, velcro
- cardboard or plastic tubes to look through, make noises with, put things in
- metal surface for magnets
- easel, linoleum for markers, with markers or crayons on strings
- real or play telephones
- mirrors; polished, smoked, or colored plexiglass; prisms; cellophane
- clear, wire, opaque, woven containers for drop boxes and collection points
- pulleys and levers

Learning Centers and Learning Stations

Many good learning environments organize the classrooms into these areas: construction/blocks, dramatic play, small motor, science, language, reading, water/sand, large motor, and sensory. But many others are possible, often taking up very little space.

Some examples:

Infant reaching/grasping/kicking area: Various materials attached on rope or fabric to hang.

Infant peek-a-boo/object permanence: Divider with holes in it, curtained area. Objects on a string that swing in and out of sight.

Infant walking/pulling up: Hand rails attached to the wall.

Communication center: Bulletin or marker boards, magnetic letters, tape recorders, newsprint, typewriter, a self-service writing station.

Electronics: Speak and Spells, computer, electronic games.

Playpit, plastic wading pool: A programmed, protected, contained space in which a child chooses to play.

Vehicles: Trucks, cars, trains, etc.; props like Fisher-Price people, houses, trees, small rocks and wood, blocks, ramps.

Hauling/transporting: (Contents to be used throughout the room with collection points) wagons, shopping carts, baskets, bins, buckets, cardboard boxes, toy boxes, mail slots, tubes.

Stuffed animal center: All sorts of stuffed animals.

Action center: Switches, zippers, velcro, locks and latches, doors, pounding benches, ramps, tubes, containers to drop or roll materials into, things to take apart.

Sound area: Chimes, whistles, instruments, strings to pluck and plunk, shakers, record player or tapes.

Animal area: Rubber or wooden animals, pictures, animal masks or noses, puppets, places for animals to live, props to fence, posters.

Cozy areas, places to pause (note plural areas): All sorts of pillows—couch, bed, throw, bean bag; inner tubers, throw rugs, bolsters, futons, blankets, parachutes, sheets, canopies, boxes, plastic wading pools.

Tiny areas: Spaces to squeeze into.

Body-image space: An area that responds to the child's whole body movement—a space filled with beach balls, paper, hanging fabric, etc.

Surprise area: A place where surprises or new experiences occur.

Please touch area: Different textures, coldness, hardness (smooth metal, rough bark, sand paper, velvet, corrugated materials), different forms.

Please look area: Mirrors, kaleidoscopes, colored plastic, smoked plexiglass, paintings, videos, wave tubes, fish tanks.

Outdoor areas: Hills, paths, boulders, stumps, shrub mazes, sidewalks, shade umbrellas.

Some Learning Environment Resources

Curriculum

The Creative Curriculum by Diane Dodge (Gryphon House) is probably the best resource for helping you move from a teaching environment to a learning environment. The basic book is clearly written, supported by a video, a supervisor's manual, and

training around the country by Teaching Strategies (202-362-7543).

The High Scope Curriculum detailed in **Young Children in Action** (1979) by Hohman, Banet, and Weikart (High Scope Foundation, 313-485-2000). This work is supported by other books, pamphlets, films, and numerous training opportunities provided by High Scope. Highly regarded and more complex and requiring more highly trained staff than the Creative Curriculum, the High Scope learning environment can be adapted to any program.

Books

Greenman, Jim. **Caring Spaces, Learning Places: Children's Environments That Work.** Redmond, WA: Exchange Press, 1988.

Discusses the relationship between children and the environment, offers practical information on developing learning environments, and directs readers to other helpful resources.

Houle, Georgia Bradley. **Learning Centers for Young Children.** Tot-lot Child Care Products.

Detailed illustrations and descriptions of the traditional early childhood learning centers. Includes dimensions, materials, and vignettes about classroom life.

Loughlin, C., and J. Suina. **The Learning Environment: An Instructional Strategy.** New York: Teachers College Press, 1982.

Practical information on establishing a learning environment.

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