

## Points to ponder in purchasing furniture

# Buyer's Guide to Classroom Furniture

by Roger Neugebauer

*Furniture purchases are important decisions. Good choices will reward you, and mistakes will haunt you for years to come. In putting together this buyer's guide, we asked furniture manufacturers and dealers for their purchasing advice to directors. Based on their responses, the questions below summarize the key factors you need to weigh in making these decisions.*

If you are making major purchases, you may also want to seek out some expert help. In evaluating the durability and safety of furniture, it may be helpful to recruit the help of a parent or friend who is a carpenter, engineer, or designer. In addition, you should check out the credibility of the company you are buying from just as carefully as they will be checking your credit. Ask for references from their customers in your area, and call these references to check out the reliability of the company and its products.

To further assist your decision making, we have reprinted Ross Sackett's "Tips on Successful Buying from Early Childhood Catalogs" in this guide. In addition, we have included a directory of classroom furniture suppliers.

### Questions to Ask

- Do we have an overall plan for each classroom? Does each piece of equipment we buy fit into this plan?

- How long do we intend to use the furniture? Do we want to buy inexpensive furniture for the short haul, or do we want to invest more in furniture we can use for many years?

- Is the furniture attractive? Do we want the furniture to create a certain look? Will the appearance of all our furniture be well coordinated, or will it look like a college student's dorm room? Do we want furniture with an institutional or a home-like look?

- Does the furniture meet state licensing requirements? Does it in any way present obstacles for children with special needs?

- Is the furniture safe? Can it tip over easily? Does it have sharp edges or rough surfaces? Will it splinter or crack? Does it have ornaments or knobs that are dangerous or flimsy? Are doors and hinges safe for children's fingers? Can children's feet be caught underneath?

- Is the furniture appropriate for the age of children who will be using it? Is it the right size? Can children move it themselves easily? Is its intended use clear to children? Does it support child-centered learning? Will the children find it comfortable? Does it provide a variety of textures for children to experience?

- How solidly is the furniture constructed? Are joints well engineered and secure or are they simply stapled together?

- Is the furniture flexible? Can it perform more than one function? Can it be purchased in modular units that build on one another?

- How bulky is the furniture? Can it be easily be moved for different room arrangements? Can it be easily and compactly stored?

- Is the furniture noisy, or have steps been taken to minimize annoying sounds when furniture is moved? How do the materials in the furniture contribute to the overall acoustical environment of the classroom?

- How difficult will it be to keep the equipment safe and sanitary?

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Can it be cleaned easily? Will it maintain its look and feel under frequent cleaning?

- Do the salespeople from the company really understand early childhood environments? Are they able to help us evaluate our needs and explore alternatives, or are they simply trying to push their products? Do they understand furniture manufacturing so they can answer our questions about safety and durability?
- If the furniture for sale doesn't quite meet our needs, is the company willing to make modifications for us? How costly will these changes be?
- Is the furniture we want to buy currently in stock? Will the company guarantee a delivery date?
- Does the company have a reputation for timely deliveries? When

problems or questions arise, has the company been efficient in providing follow-up service? Has the company been reliable in honoring its warranty? Who will be our contact person after the sale — a local representative or a toll free number?

- When is payment expected? Do we have to pay before the furniture arrives? Can regular credit terms be established if we become a regular customer?
- How long a warranty is available on the furniture? How easy is it to enforce the warranty? Are certain items or functions not covered by the warranty? When defective items must be returned, who pays the shipping?

## Contributing Experts

The following individuals and firms contributed expert advice to this guide:

- Ray Kelly, Angeles Group
- Bear Blocks Ltd.
- Richard W. Prater, The Carpenter for Kids
- T. L. Clark
- C. Anthony Potts, Community Playthings
- Cozie Cover, Inc.
- Betty Jo Marshall, Environments, Inc.
- Flagship Carpets, Inc.
- Jonti-Craft, Inc.
- Lakeshore Learning Materials
- Moyers
- Skools, Inc.
- Teachers' School Supply
- Torelli/Durrett

## Tips on Successful Buying from Early Childhood Catalogs

by Ross Sackett

1. Be sure you are ordering from the most recent catalog. About 30% of all catalog orders are made from outdated information. When you order from an old catalog, you will not be using current prices or be aware of new or discontinued products. Before you place your order, verify with your local sales representative or with the catalog's 800 number that you have the current catalog and a current price list.
2. Find out if you can qualify for a quantity discount. Discounts on large orders are not always published in catalogs, even though they are frequently available. Be sure to ask about discount policies before placing your order.
3. In comparing prices, the bottom line is the total delivered cost. There is more confusion and frustration about freight costs than anything else when it comes to catalog buying. Differences in prices for products in catalogs are often offset by differences in freight charges.
4. If your order is too small to qualify for quantity discounts, you may want to consider joining or organizing a buying coop or consortium. These efforts can be difficult to administer and frequently collapse. However, anytime you can put together an order for \$1000 or more, your savings on discounts and freight charges may be significant.
5. If your order is over \$1000, you should get competitive bids. Be sure to ask for quotes in writing so that you can be sure that bids are for exactly the same products, with freight included.
6. Protect your good credit. Pay your bills on time. Whenever you will be unable to pay on time, give your dealer advance warning rather than waiting for them to come to you. Frequently a new account has to establish credit by paying all or half of the first order in advance. Then a dealer will convert you to a standard 30 day billing cycle. If you abuse this credit period, you may well be required to prepay on all future orders.
7. It is a good idea to have more than one source for ordering. But it is also a good idea to demonstrate loyalty towards a dealer who gives you fair prices and good service.
8. Service is as important as low prices. Some dealers provide poor or inconsistent service, while others are consistently dependable. Check around with other owners and directors for their recommendations and reservations. Then when you place an order, be sure to reach an understanding with the dealer on the delivery date.
9. Catalog companies serving the early childhood community cannot maintain complete inventories of all items they carry. So if there are specific items in your order that you need on a timely basis, be sure to inquire about their availability.
10. The best time to place orders and receive fast service is early in the year, especially February and March. The worst time to order is between July 1 and September 15.

*Ross Sackett is the publisher/editor of **Six Months to Six Years** (PO Box 448, Eureka Springs, AR 72632), a newsletter for those selling products or services in the early childhood market.*

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