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A Question of Privacy: Places to Pause and Child Caves

by Gary T. Moore, Ph.D.

I've been asked on a number of occasions about privacy, and about how to provide private areas in group child care facilities. One correspondent said, "As adults, we have the option and opportunities to get away for a few minutes — in a staff lounge, in the restroom, or even just going outside for a few minutes on our break. Children do not have this option."

In a child care center I visited recently, a three year old girl was sitting quietly on the edge of her cubby, away from the action. I walked quietly around her, and in the next moment was astonished to see one of the staff members shoo her into the main room. I didn't see and don't know the full context, but it sure didn't ***feel*** *like respect for what might have been the child's need for privacy.*

The Importance of Privacy

It can be stressful for a child to be in a group with other children who are equally bright, inventive, sometimes mischievous, demanding, and socially immature. Stress takes its toll. At home, children as young as three will ask to go to their rooms and play alone for awhile.

We hear them, we know if the Duplo set has crashed down around their ears, and whether they need some help; but we allow them to play alone — we allow them their privacy.

A number of researchers have noted that "privacy as achieved through some degree of control over the physical environment is absolutely essential to healthy psychological development" (Proshansky and Fabian, p. 28).

The United Nations' *Convention on the Rights of the Child* recognizes the child's *right* to privacy: "No child shall be subjected to arbitrary or unlawful interference with his or her privacy" (Art. 15, para. 1). This is a strong provision. But a softer corollary, as stated in the NAEYC accreditation criteria, is that "Private areas [should be] available indoors and outdoors for children to have solitude" (Crit. G-6).

Social interaction is often recognized as a basic human need and drive. More recently, the need to *limit*

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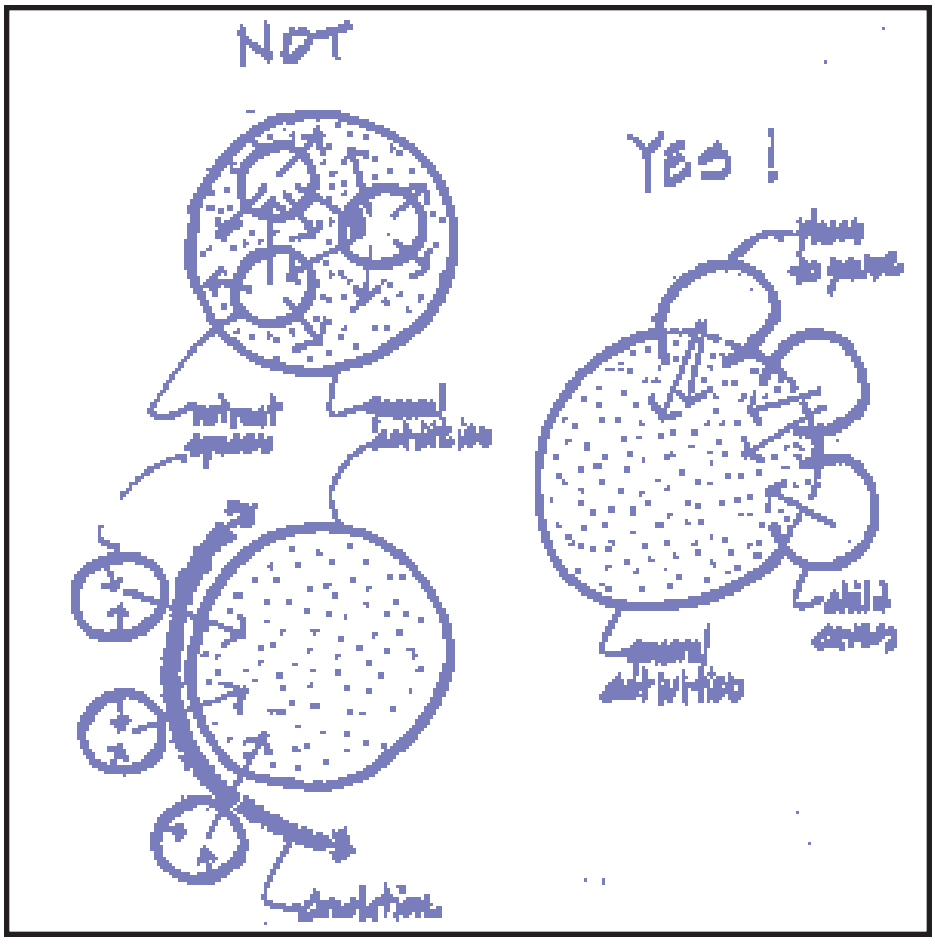

Figure 1. The general pattern — several different retreat and observation places around the periphery of major activity spaces.

social interaction has also been recognized. Maxine Wolfe and Leanne Rivlin, based on a series of studies conducted over many years in and around New York City, contend that a lack of privacy is one of the defining characteristics of contemporary institutions. Surely we don't want our child care centers perceived of as "institutions."

In psychiatric wards, patients in large, multi-person rooms often withdraw as a way of escaping unwanted social interaction. Isolated passive behavior is more often observed in large, multi-person bedrooms than in smaller, two- or three-person rooms. Examples like this underscore the need to address the question of how design can aid in achieving privacy.

Children's Privacy Preferences

When children are given the chance, they seek out and create private places in the midst of busy days. They learn to modulate social interaction with private time. On British playgrounds, Vera Hole found that the number of children observing other children was often equal to the number of children actively playing.

The famous Swedish planner and playground designer, Arvid Bengtsson, said of many current outdoor spaces for children:

"We are too concerned that every corner should be in full view, and this can make children go and play somewhere else. . . . Must we really know everything and control everything in a child's life? Nobody imposes anything like the same interference on the country child. They have haystacks, barns, woodlands, and so on, and no one sees anything dangerous to society in that." (p. 154)

Outdoors, there are legions of places for children to get away. Indoors, their favorite place is their own room, though most homes provide many other semi-private places. But how many privacy places do we provide in group child care settings?

How the Design and Layout of Child Care Centers Can Support Privacy

Children learn through doing, but also through observing other children doing. When a child is over-

Figure 2. A two-story children's loft play area with windows back on to the major activity space. Sinikello Paivakoti, Kuopio University Central Hospital, Kuopio, Finland; Kari Virta, Architect. All photographs by the author. Lab work and enlargements by Paul Olsen, UWM School of Architecture and Urban Planning.

whelmed, tired, or just needing some privacy, he or she may need to retreat from doing and simply observe other children, or even retreat further and take a break. For years, I have been convinced that opportunities for observational learning and for taking a break are important factors for overall development. But I am equally convinced we do not provide adequate spaces for observational learning and for privacy in our child care centers.

Figure 3. A cubby cluster — sometimes used for individual privacy, sometimes used for small group storytelling. Skollebaken Barnehage, Oppegard, Oslo, Norway.

Homes have many, many places for privacy, or, as one of my former professors, Fred Osmon, called them, "places to pause" — beds and tables to be under, closets to be in, couches to be behind, small pantries turned into a private art room, bay windows to sit in, plants to hide behind, and lots of windows and doors to look out on the action. Children are forever making special *cozy places* for themselves and their friends. What child at home has not made dozens of tents and houses out of sofa cushions, blankets, and pillows? These special places often take the form of child-sized *caves*, which, because of their size, exclude them from adult use or interference. How can we provide such spaces in our child care settings?

I think a general principle, or pattern, can be stated: *(1) Provide protected, private places where small groups of children and where the single child can observe other children. Make some of these places overlook an activity (a "crow's nest") and some look horizontally on activities ("windows on the activity"). Also (2) provide private, breakaway points where a child can withdraw gracefully from activities (a "place to pause," a "retreat" area). Provide both private retreats and breakaway points on the periphery of activities, adjoining them, opening up, and looking into them. The image of "child caves" comes to mind, little spaces around the periphery, protected from but looking back into the clearing.*

Places to pause and child caves can be created in a variety of ways. Here are some ways:

Architectural ideas. *Lofts* slightly set apart from, but looking down on major activity spaces, are the first and most common way of providing private spaces in group care settings. Hiding places can be located in other high places, too, with steps leading up to nooks at safe heights surrounded with protective edges and openings for the child to peer out. In one center in Kansas City, we designed three-story playhouses, the top level of which is often used as a private place, with the shuttered windows opened or closed as the children wish.

A *cluster of cubbies*, with sitting benches as part of each cubby, can also provide a wonderful, secluded, and personal place for retreat. If the cubbies are not too tall, say no more than 5 feet, teachers can hear what's going on and can look in if need be. If they are only 4 feet tall, teachers and parents can casually lean an elbow on them and chat at the beginning or end of the day. We refer to this as being a "cubby cluster." Wonderful examples populate Scandinavian child care centers. One cluster in Kuopio, Finland, has a specially designed high-back ottoman in the center to which children can retreat. Another in Oslo, Norway, has a small area rug in the center where one or two students often congregate. When I've returned to the St. Joseph Child Development Center in Kansas City, I always see children sitting quietly, perhaps reading by themselves, at their cubby.

At the University of Idaho campus child care center, cubbies provide a private place for children despite facing the main activity space. Though the children are in full view of everyone, each cubby offers personal space for things and for a child to sit on the bottom step of the cubby. There they can observe the whole room. Janice Fletcher reports that it is well accepted by teachers and children that when children choose to sit in their cubbies, privacy is respected. She also observes that when "alums" return to visit when they are 13 or 14 years old, they almost always are nostalgic about their cubbies.

In addition, natural, left-over space under stairs, places so loved by Lady Allen of Hurtwood in her book, *Planning for Play*, should be preserved exclusively for children's use.

Furniture arrangement. Another common way to create semi-private space is by *clustering furniture* in such a way as to make some small, intimate spaces — a small nook

where one or two children can sit comfortably and read or play away from the hubbub of other children. A small area rug, and cushions on the floor or that can be taken to the floor, will enhance such an area.

Found objects. *Found objects* can also be used to create places to pause, to hide, to regroup. Child caves can be constructed by children and staff from crates, boxes, and tables, with canvas, blankets, or tablecloths for cover. At the University of Wisconsin-Milwaukee child care center, which my son attends, a pickle barrel has a large oval cut out of one side, and a pillow on the floor so one child at a time can crawl in and watch what's happening outside from this safe, little "house." Kelton took me around the "Blue Room" and pointed out not only the barrel but another four places where he can go to "be alone" if he wishes (all within about 1,000 square feet — not a bad ratio that we could use for planning other child care spaces — *one private place for every 200 square feet*).

The pyramidal wooden structure so common in pictures of the Diana School in Reggio Emilia, Italy, is another example of something that can be built inexpensively to provide a private space. The Diana pyramid is painted light blue on the outside, and lined on the inside with mirrors. It is large enough for one or two preschool-age children to sit or lie down, where they can also see their reflection from several directions.

Julie DiPietrantonio at the University of Maine has made *houses* from large, cardboard appliance boxes by cutting windows, making curtains, even a cardboard roof and chimney. Pillows are provided inside. The door opens and can be closed. The house is placed in a quiet corner, and the children know it is a place for one child only. Children take a book or a stuffed animal and sit inside for a few minutes of quiet and solitude.

Janice Fletcher at the University of Idaho constructed *privacy tunnels* from refrigerator boxes with her teachers in cooperation with their five year olds. They laid the boxes on their sides, then drew and cut out triangles, circles, and stars on the three exposed sides. The cutouts provide the teachers a view into the boxes, but still maintain private space for children. Pillows add softness inside. The privacy tunnels are wildly popular with very social children who enter the tunnels together, as well as for individual children who need a break from the group.

Figure 4. A child cave under a stairway/ramp to a roof play garden. Kindertagheim, Luginsland/Unterturkheim, Stuttgart, Germany. Gunter Behnisch & Partner, Architects.

Other examples could include a space behind a puppet theater, with pillows, books, puppets, and dolls. Cheri Gioe, in her Reggio-inspired class, does what she calls "writing boxes," shoe boxes filled with materials that the children can take into a private corner and use at their leisure.

Location and noise. Retreat and observation places should be located in quiet areas. They should be away from major circulation routes between and within rooms. They can be acoustically enhanced with acoustic tiles on their ceilings, and with drapes, rugs, cushions, and other soft elements, so as to muffle sounds from within and to keep out noises from outside.

Supervision. Adults should be able, of course, to reach these hiding places to intervene if necessary. But otherwise these places should be clearly within the realm of the child. To accomplish this, Mary Hanrahan at Northern Virginia Community College converted a large cardboard carton into a three-sided screen, without a top. This provides the child with a sense of privacy, but it is easily seen over by the adult. Behind this "screen," she provides a puppet, a soft pillow, a book or two — comfort items. She even covers the outside with contact paper and labels it "Private."

Our child care and other early childhood education centers can have adequate provision for privacy. The environment can provide different opportunities and places to break away — architecturally, through furniture placement, and with found objects — so if the activity becomes too strenuous or demanding, or if the child, for whatever reason, wishes privacy, there are a variety of places to pause and a number of child caves available.

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Figure 5. Retreat and observation places can be created just as well outdoors, too. The author's son and friends at the Children's Center, University of Wisconsin-Milwaukee. Gary T. Moore & Assoc., Designers.

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