



Photograph by Nancy Leigh Davis

Getting to the Heart of the Matter

by
Rochelle Bunnett and
Nancy Leigh Davis



Rochelle Bunnett, M.Ed., is an author and consultant, and has worked in a variety of early childhood programs for the last 20 years. She is the author of the books **Friends in the Park** and **Friends at School** and a poster series "Friends Together: More Alike Than Different" (Checkerboard Press and Start Bright Books). (e-mail address: RocBunn@aol.com)

"The purpose of teaching is to provide for your students an experience of their own greatness." — Eric Jensen

Imagine entering a classroom for young children where you immediately sense you are in a special place. There is a sense of wonder and excitement as you move about. The possibilities seem endless for making new discoveries, inventing, and creating. *It invites children to just be.*

The art center is well stocked with clay, paint, chalk, glue, "found" collage items, and tools. The large easel made from donated vinyl floor tile and handmade "gutter" paint trays is mounted on the wall and allows children to move their bodies in different ways, as well as share a picture painting experience with a friend. The art area has an "OPEN" sign on it, and is always a choice.

The home center enclosed by four walls (one formed by what can become a puppet theater at another time, another a storefront) is equipped with a doorbell, mailbox, and plexiglass windows that go up and down. The small lamp on the dresser inside the house allows

Nancy Leigh Davis, MS, is an early childhood specialist, consultant, and trainer, who is currently teaching a JAM 3 (collaborative Joint Agency Model with Edmonds School District, Snohomish County Head Start, and LifeNet Mental Health) preschool class in Washington. She has presented workshops on Love and Logic (developed by Jim Fay and Foster Cline, Love and Logic Institute, Golden, Colorado), inclusion, and other topics. (e-mail address: nanleigh@gte.net)



children to brighten or quiet the space. The pots, pans, utensils, cloth napkins and pot holders are real, “found” treasures from the secondhand store. The “soup pot” is on the stove.

The cozy and comfortable feel of home extends throughout the classroom. The book area houses different sized baskets filled with not only a wide variety of books but also stuffed animals, fabric, and pillows. The live animals who take up residency here move about the classroom as they are invited to different centers. Artwork, photographs, and stories written by both the children and adults are artistically displayed throughout the classroom.

The block area feels and looks more like a construction site in progress than a daily play area. Children are encouraged to continue projects, it appears, from the “Children at Work” and “Construction in Process” signs in the area. There are loose parts such as blocks, tape, cardboard and plastic cylinders available in different kinds of containers, encouraging ongoing projects.

The outdoor play yard has as many interesting areas to explore as indoors. There are plenty of hoses, buckets, and tools to dig with and just mess about. There is a gas station (always open) to replenish fuel in vehicles and to offer a friendly stop for all.

The children who attend this school come from many cultural backgrounds and socioeconomic levels and portray a wide range of diverse abilities. Some children already have an IFSP (Individual Family Service Plan) or an IEP (Individualized Education Program) in place. For some families, the process of planning for and receiving special help is just beginning.

Before we could envision all the wonderful possibilities (many of which are now realities in our classrooms), we first had to ask ourselves these questions:

1. What did we want our environment to look like? To *feel* like? What would be the initial impression of those coming in for the first time? What were the qualities we valued the most?
2. Would we design our environment any differently knowing that the children we served had special needs? If so, why?
3. How does our environment support and nurture the development of friendships and enhance the building of a classroom community?

As we pondered these questions, we realized that much of our inspiration for the design of our class-

rooms comes from our fondest memories as children — our memories of soft places, high places, quiet places, and private places. These memories always seem to be reflected in some way in our classrooms.

Our premise is that our environments should be designed based on what we know children love, and what we loved as children. It should be a joyful place where the needs and desires of both the children and the adults are supported and realized. We believe that the environment should look no different for one group than for another. The difference will be found in how the different team members and families weave their “stories” together. The environment *must* be inviting, encouraging, participatory, and respectful for each person.

Our image of the child with special needs has changed over the years, from one of “needing to be fixed” (focusing on skill drill development, often in stark environments) to one of “competent” with potential for learning. The process of letting go of the “preconceived” image of the child with special needs (whether our images come from a poster child or a child described in a case study) takes time.

Getting to the heart of the matter . . . young children are young children. Our experience tells us that children with special needs vary as much in their abilities, interest, and skills as other children who are typically developing. It is more important to focus our attention on getting to know the child in front of us, to learn what his/her interests, passions, and strengths are, so that we may facilitate entrance into the classroom community of learners as a participating, contributing, and valued member.

In shifting from a “deficit model” to a “competent model,” we have been able to expand our roles as facilitators and observers, giving us a new perspective on the significant *role* of the environment. *The children have been our best teachers.* By posing interesting and challenging questions based on the needs and desires of the children, we design and arrange our classrooms so that learning can occur all the time. For example, we have enlarged the home center to accommodate more children. Embedded in the design of the house (as described earlier), we added different sized knobs and attachments to open and close doors, windows, and cupboards. In this way, a child’s fine motor skills, problem solving abilities, and creativity are all supported. We have utilized our walls by adding interactive plan panels (peek a boo for the infants and toddlers and memory panels for the older children). This not only added a new work place but allows more opportunities for those children



to work with their hands, standing or supported by a walker. It also allows them to play in close proximity to their friends in the dramatic play center.

We discovered that by enlarging the pathways throughout the room to accommodate a child using a wheelchair or walker we made it possible for the children to move small pieces of furniture and rearrange the space as needed for play. We discovered that it is not only important for children to be able to physically get into the space with equipment but to be able to move about freely and with easy access *within* each center.

We discovered that children need more than one “cozy nest,” and designed several soft and quiet places. Over the years, we have used mattresses, bean chairs, hammocks, and rag pillows, to name a few. We found that with additional quiet spaces children can do their work with fewer disruptions, feel less fatigued, and can retreat to a quiet place without negative connotations.

We most recently have learned how important it is to have flexible lighting. We rarely have the banks of overhead fluorescent lights on, and instead have specific areas “spotlighted” or warmed by lamps (table, floor, and clip on). If more light is needed, we turn one bank of lights on instead of all three.

Rich sensory experiences have always been present in our offerings, such as in the sand/water/texture table, but we also gave more attention to adding beauty to our space overall. We added more plants, fresh flowers, lunch table centerpieces, battery operated candles, and scented potpourri, to name just a few.

We have learned that even with a well designed space, if our daily schedule is too rigid or controlling, all the messages we want to convey are compromised. We have learned to follow the children’s lead and to examine our training and experience regarding schedules and transitions. Flexibility is a key to cooperative learning and working together, with the ultimate goal being one of ebb and flow, give and take, and getting into the rhythm of classroom life. Sometimes children need longer than the allotted time for an activity; sometimes they need less. Often transitions are not given enough time in the “schedule.” Waiting can be difficult.

If children seem to need more time to play and complete projects, we can honor that need by allowing a place to “save” a block vehicle or a partially completed puzzle. We can set aside the old notion of needing to have everything “cleaned up” during clean up time.

shared about their positive reactions to our classroom environments, and their visions of the possibilities for their children in the classroom.

In small but significant ways, the environment and the rich experiences that have emerged have restored a sense of “childhood,” often shortened and disrupted for children with special needs by long hospital stays, frequent visits to doctors and specialists, and the need for isolation because of their medical “at risk” status.

In other words, we design our environment not based on the needs of a few children but instead on a vision of what is “wonderful” and “possible” for all children. We modify, change, and adapt the environment (the fewer adaptations the better) as needed. Sometimes we have to reduce the quantity of the materials offered, but never at the expense of compromising quality.

It is our belief that our environments must support, nurture, connect, and sustain friendships. We cannot ask children to give us their best if they do not feel safe, secure, and loved in the place where they work and play. In turn, we cannot give our best as teachers if we do not feel at “home” in our workplace.

In summary, we believe that the process of envisioning and designing an environment that acknowledges competence and supports a community of learners is much more complex than following a list of “guidelines.” It requires us to look more deeply into our own beliefs and value systems, to draw from our childhood memories, and to collaborate with others. It also requires us to take insightful, educated looks at our learning goals for children, and to ask ourselves, “Does our environment support what we believe is *best* for children and families?” And, most importantly, we must trust that by listening, watching, and waiting, children will teach *us* what we need to know.

A special thanks to those who have inspired us in our work:

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Time and time again we have been moved by the stories parents have

