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Enhancing the Environment for ALL Children

by Victoria Youcha and Karren Wood

When we plan and construct environments for young children, we think about the physical environment, about how the children know what to do in the space, how they will move through that space, and about what activities and materials they will use. The environment should say "YES" to each child. It should invite all children to touch, explore, climb, and get involved.

Children with disabilities need the same things in their classroom environment as other children. They need an environment that is safe, secure, and provides activities and materials for their development. When a child with disabilities has different developmental needs than other children of the same age, adaptations must be made. These may require either adding something to the environment that is not already there or using something in the environment in a different way.

Before you make any adaptations, talk to the parents. They are your best source of information about the child, the special need, and modifications or special

Victoria Youcha, Ed.D., is assistant professor of special education at The George Washington University. She is the director of the Alexandria Early Childhood Special Education Masters Degree Program. Prior to joining the special education faculty, Dr. Youcha taught preschool special education, administered early intervention programs, and worked as a child development specialist. She is the co-author with Karren Wood of ***Child Care and the ADA: A Handbook for Inclusive Programs*** *(Paul H. Brookes Publishing Company). Her research interests include inclusion of children with disabilities in regular education settings.*

Karren Wood, Ed.S., OTR, is the project director of the Community Connections Project. This project supports the efforts of child care personnel to include children with disabilities in community programs. Background for this article was drawn from a personal interest in the Americans with Disabilities Act and her efforts on two federally funded projects, Bridging the GHap (HO2244B90032) and The Community Connections Project (HO29K20048).

equipment. Find out about techniques they use at home. If the child receives special education services, ask if you may observe in that setting.

As you begin to adapt the classroom for children with disabilities, remember three key concepts: **access**, **usability**, and **maximizing learning**.

- Can the child get where she needs to be in the classroom to learn something?

- Once the child is in that location, can she use the materials and participate in the activity as independently as possible to learn something?

- Are the learning activities arranged and scheduled to meet the individual learning needs of the children, including the child with disabilities?

Universal Access and the Americans with Disabilities Act (ADA)

The ADA requires that programs for young children be as physically accessible as possible to ensure that discrimination does not occur against people with disabilities. Programs are expected to make readily achievable physical changes to accommodate those with disabilities.

The law requires that people with disabilities be able to access entrances, restrooms, classrooms, play spaces, and playgrounds in order to receive full benefit from the services offered by the early childhood program.

The Architectural and Transportation Barriers Compliance Board (Access Board) has suggested accessibility guidelines for children's facilities. These guidelines can be obtained by calling (202) 272-5434 or (800) 872-2253; or, if using a TTY, (202) 272-5449 or (800) 993-2822. Request publication S25.

After reading through these guidelines, make a modified checklist for your own program, inserting the recommended measurements as they apply to children in your program. Organize your checklist by specific topics, such as doorways, entrances, and hallways; bathrooms; parking lots and sidewalks. This kind of checklist will make it easier for you to do a simple survey. Next, measure and mark commonly used distances with masking tape or an indelible marker on a tape measure. For example, you can mark and compare the required table heights, chair heights, sink heights, toilet heights, and doorway openings with what is in your program currently.

As you look at your environment, think about each area from the perspectives of a child with limited mobility, a child who is deaf or hearing impaired, and a child who is blind or visually impaired.

For children with limited mobility, ask the following questions:

- Can the child enter the building, get to the classroom, use the bathroom and the water fountain, and enjoy outdoor activities?

- Are the doorways, walkways, and paths wide enough for a child using a wheelchair?

- Are sinks, water fountains, and table surfaces low enough to be within reach?

For children with sensory impairments, consider the following:

- If a child is deaf or has a hearing impairment, are there visual labels to indicate clearly activities and appropriate uses? In case of emergency is there a blinking light in addition to the auditory fire alarm?

- If a child has a visual impairment, are there tactile and auditory cues he can use to find his way around the classroom and the building? Could you add increased visual contrasts or larger signs to help him move through the environment?

- The simplest solutions may be the best. It may not be necessary to reconstruct a sidewalk if a small amount of asphalt can be added against the curb to create a slope up to the sidewalk.

If you cannot make all the necessary changes you have identified, make sure you document what changes are needed, how you plan to correct your deficiencies, and a target date for completion. You will then be prepared to implement your solutions should a child with a disability enter your program tomorrow.

Good Environments for Infants, Toddlers, and Preschoolers

Infants need safe, secure environments that encourage them to use their senses and explore. One of the most important factors in an infant environment is a consistent caregiver. Toddlers need a balance of security and independence. They still rely on their senses for most of their learning, but they are driven to move and the environment has to provide opportunities for them to use their bodies in a variety of ways. At the same time, caregivers need to be able to see all areas of the room at once because toddlers can move so quickly. Preschoolers need well organized, clearly defined spaces with areas that promote independence, foster decision making, and encourage initiative and involvement. These

areas should be attractive and inviting and should encourage small groups of children to play together.

Quiet Spaces

All children need a quiet comfortable space they can go to when they are become agitated or upset. This well-defined area is for use alone or with the adult of their choice to soothe, comfort, and regroup. It should "feel good." It can be a lap, a rocking chair, a swing or a special place in the room. Children need this part of the environment to help calm themselves. They are not always developmentally able to tell the caregiver what they need or what is bothering them. A teacher might expect a three or four year old who is verbally adept to "talk" his problems out. However, a child who has language difficulties and cannot talk about being upset also needs a secure place in the classroom to be alone or with the person of his choice in order to calm down. Many preschool classrooms have quiet corners that usually house books or tape recorders with head phones. This space can be adapted by developing a "reservation system" that allows the area to be used for one child at a time if someone needs a quiet area to calm down and get over being upset.

When the Environment is NOT Working

You will know when the environment is not working by the behavior of the children. Infants become fussy and restless if they are in one place too long and away from toys or interesting things to watch and touch. Toddlers may fight over toys, run around the room aimlessly, and begin clamoring for the caregiver's attention all at once. Preschoolers may seem bored and unengaged. They may wander around looking for something to do, or wait for adults to tell them what to do.

As children come into your room they will let you know by their actions and, sometimes their words, what equipment and materials should be added or changed. Toddlers don't share toys well. If they always seem to be quarreling over a favorite toy, you need to add several more of the same toy. When older children begin to build more sophisticated constructions with the blocks and run out of blocks before they are finished, see if you can add another set. To act out a story that you have read, change the "dress up" clothes to match the story.

Choosing Equipment and Materials

Equipment and materials in the environment should be flexible enough to be used by children with a wide range of abilities. For any age child, the equipment and materials should foster independence. Blocks and sand and water tables can suit children of many developmental levels. For toddlers, equipment also needs to support motor development. Preschoolers need materials invitingly displayed with visual cues about how and where to use them. For example, areas defined by tape on the floor and pictures of block constructions show where and how to build with the blocks. Of course all equipment and materials should support the development of new concepts and skills in children with diverse developmental levels.

Adaptations for children with physical disabilities

The addition of a child with physical disabilities to your group may require some special equipment. Such equipment might include:

- Chairs to help a child sit better (e.g., a corner chair or a bolster chair with head and back support;
- A standing apparatus for a child who cannot stand alone (e.g., a prone stander);
- Wheelchairs and walkers;
- Body, hand, or leg braces that keep the trunk, arms, and legs in good positions or help make the limbs more functional.

Often the largest items in the classroom are the furnishings. One of the most important things you can do for a child with physical disabilities is to make sure that he has enough room to maneuver around the furniture in the room.

Ask the child's parents for an explanation of the equipment he needs. Learn when and how it is used. The parents can demonstrate what needs to be done and you can try it yourself while the parents are observing. Check to see if the child's physical or occupational therapist can consult with you about use of the equipment. If you are uncomfortable using the equipment, keep working with the parents, ask for clarification, and try different alternatives until the best situation for you and the child is found. Write the procedures down if equipment and use are complicated.

Adaptations for children with hearing or language disabilities

Children with hearing or language impairments may also need special devices. Some children may need hearing aids or amplifiers. Language boards and augmentative communication devices can help other children communicate

about what they want and help them initiate and sustain conversations.

For children with hearing impairments, the environment needs to include additional clear and noticeable visual cues to help them function independently and understand what is happening in the classroom. For example, you can flick the lights to signal an activity change, rather than ringing a bell. Use manual signs as you sing the song for clean up time. Make sure you face the child and that the child can see you when you give instructions.

Again, ask the parents to explain and demonstrate the techniques they use. Also ask for guidance from the child's speech therapist or audiologist.

Adaptations for children with visual impairments

For a child who is visually impaired, you need to keep large furniture in the same place. Prepare all the children for room changes or include them in the planning of the changes. If the furniture or room arrangement is going to change, make sure that the child who is visually impaired gets to explore and learn the new arrangement.

Tactile cues help children who are visually impaired locate equipment and materials independently. The name on the child's cubby can be marked with a textured sign that the child can feel. Small objects or toys can be taped on the outside of bins to help the child identify where each piece of equipment belongs.

Modifying the schedule

As you adjust your routines to include children with disabilities, think about the events in your daily schedule in terms of the following characteristics: structure; grouping; activity level; time; purpose; and the role of the teacher. You can then make adjustments based on each child's needs and level of development.

As you begin to adapt your schedule for children with disabilities, ask yourself these general questions:

- Is there a schedule which is predictable for the children and reflects little "down" or waiting time?

- Is the classroom schedule flexible enough to accommodate programming changes?

- Are the blocks of time in the classroom schedule developmentally appropriate for the group?

- How and when do children move from one activity to the next? Is there a clear signal or do they have to wait any length of time to begin the next activity?

- How will you provide access to special program events, such as field trips?

For each child with a disability, consider whether she does well in child-initiated activities or could benefit from more teacher direction. Can the child work in large groups or does she need more individualized attention? What is the child's activity level tolerance? And, finally, what level of independence does the child show during transitions and waiting times? Does the child understand the cues for activity changes?

Sometimes adaptations require several adjustments. For example, Justin is a very active, visually impaired child who attends his neighborhood preschool. At first his teacher was concerned because she had never worked with a child like him before. She talked to his mother and did some reading. She set up the classroom and had his mother help introduce him to the areas of the room. She used very bright tape to mark different areas. She also added a fuzzy sticker to Justin's cubby, carpet square, and chair so he could find them. Yet, even after two weeks, Justin was having frequent outbursts during transitions between activities. The other children knew when it was time to change activities and what would happen next. Justin just didn't seem to understand.

What made the difference were a few simple adjustments. These included a schedule board with tactile cues so that Justin could make a plan for his one long play time and could refer back to it on his own, keeping Justin with the same small group of children for two weeks, and giving him his own timer so that he would have a few minutes of extra warning before it was time to change activities.

Well planned and balanced schedules give children the security and predictability to function independently.

Individualizing Activities for Each Child

The same activity may be used with a group of children and can be adapted if all of the children have similar learning needs or if some children have different learning needs. First determine the learning goal and purpose of the activity and then ask:

- Does the curriculum allow for individualized teaching with flexibility to meet a variety of learning needs?

- Do the materials need to be changed? Do you need right handed and left handed, squeeze scissors, blunt

or pointed? Do you need simple shapes or complex shapes? Stiff paper or thin paper?

• How much time will the activity take? Can some do it fast and some do it slowly?

• Does everyone have to do the activity? Does everyone have to do it at the same time?

• If the activity has many steps, how should it be broken down for teaching? Can the children do the whole activity independently? How much help will they need? How can it be simplified?

• For children with visual and auditory impairments, can the directions be both demonstrated and verbal?

Because the activities and the children are all different, you will have to be flexible. Some adaptations can be made on the spot. Others take careful planning and preparation. Enlist parents, your colleagues, and the children to help you with the task.

Before making activity adaptations for children with disabilities:

• Give yourself and the child time to adjust.

• Assume the child is able to participate in all activities.

• Watch the child during activities. See what she can do and what areas may need adaptation.

• Make adaptations after you have met and gotten to know the child. Ask for parents' suggestions for adaptations.

• During the first week or so, try to arrange some back-up support for activities that need a lot of teacher direction.

Well conceived activities are:

• flexible enough to meet a variety of developmental learning needs for individualization;

• can meet multiple learning objectives;

• are motivating and interesting to the children.

Environments for all children, including those with special needs, should provide many opportunities for them to be the best that they can be. Simple adaptations and sensitivity to individual needs can make all the difference.

Resources

Access Board, Office of Technical and Information Services
Architectural and Transportation Barriers Compliance Board
1331 F Street NW, Suite 1000
Washington, DC 20004-1111
(202) 272-5434, ext. 21
(800) 872-2253 or (800) 514-0383 (TTY)

Technical Assistance Centers

The National Institute for Disability and Rehabilitation Research (NIDRR) has funded ten regional centers for five years to provide information, training, and technical assistance related to implementation of the ADA. To be connected directly to the regional center serving your state, call (800) 949-4232 (voice and TDD).

Other Publications

Adaptive Environments Center. *The Americans with Disabilities Act Checklist for Readily Achievable Barrier Removal*. Boston, Massachusetts, 1995. (617) 695-1225 V/TDD.

Adaptive Environments Center. *Readily Achievable Checklist: A Survey for Accessibility*. Boston, Massachusetts, 1993. (617) 695-1225 V/TDD.

The Center for Accessible Housing. *Accessibility Standards for Children's Environments*. Raleigh, North Carolina, 1992. (919) 515-3082.

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King, S. *Equal Access, Equal Play*. Based on text written for National Playground Safety Institute Manual. Landscapes Structures, Inc., 1992. (800) 328-0053.

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