

Child Care Information Exchange

Guide to Purchasing Classroom Furniture

Furniture purchases are important decisions for child care centers. Good choices will reward you, and mistakes may haunt you for years to come. To help improve your decision making, we have compiled the following checklist of questions to pursue in evaluating any furniture purchase. These questions were formulated based on the input of the furniture manufacturers and dealers listed below. In researching these questions, it may be helpful to secure the advice and support of parents or friends who are carpenters or engineers, as well as other center directors who can offer feedback on their experiences with various vendors and types of furniture.

Center Needs

- Do you have an overall plan for furnishing each classroom?
- Does the furniture you are now considering fit into this plan?
- What is your purchasing strategy? Do you purchase low cost items with short life expectancies, or do you invest more up front for quality items that last longer?
- Do you have an aesthetic concept? Do you want the furniture to foster a certain look or image? Do you have a color scheme for each classroom?
- What materials do you want your furniture constructed from? [Quality hard woods (birch, maple, oak) are durable, long lasting, and aesthetically pleasing. Softer woods (pine and low quality plywoods) are less expensive, but much less durable. Hardwoods with quality laminates are highly durable and easy to maintain. Metal is the sturdiest material, but needs suitable plating or painting to prevent rust. Hard plastic is colorful, lightweight, and, in some cases, easy to maintain.]

Health and Safety

- Does the furniture meet or exceed state licensing requirements?
- Does the product meet Consumer Product Safety Commission standards?
- Does it present any barriers for use by children with special needs?
- Can it tip over easily?
- Does it have sharp edges or rough surfaces?
- Are there nails, splinters, or staples in exposed areas?
- Are screws inset and out of harms way?
- Will it splinter or crack?
- Were environment-friendly materials used in furniture manufacture?
- Can children find ways to use the furniture that may be perilous? [Toddlers, for example, will hang onto anything within reach while toddling about.]
- Does it have ornaments or knobs that are dangerous or flimsy?
- Are the doors and hinges safe for children's fingers?
- Can children's feet be caught underneath the furniture?
- How difficult will it be to keep sanitary?
- Can it be cleaned and sanitized easily?

Child Appropriateness

- Is the furniture appropriate for the age of children who will be using it?
- Is it the right size for children? [For example, when a child uses a chair, her feet should rest squarely on the floor, and the table should be waist high to a standing child.]
- Can it be used appropriately by children of different ages?
- Is it designed for children, or is it simply scaled down adult furniture?
- Do chairs promote good posture?
- Can children move it themselves easily?
- Is its intended use clear to children?
- Does it support child centered learning?
- Does it promote the discovery of independence and motor development?
- Will the children find it comfortable?
- Does it provide a variety of textures for children to experience?

Construction and Design

- How solidly is the furniture constructed?
- If assembly is required, are all the required tools and parts included?
- Are the joints well engineered and secure? [For wood furniture, the least stable joint construction is side to end construction, and the most preferred are: (1) peg, glue, and screw; (2) dado and screw; and (3) glue and screw.]
- Is the furniture flexible — can it perform more than one function?
- Can it be purchased in modular units that build on one another?
- Can it easily be moved for different room arrangements?
- Can it easily and compactly be stored?
- Will it maintain its look and feel under frequent cleaning?
- How do the materials in the furniture contribute to the overall acoustical environment?

Vendor Reliability and Support

- Do the salespersons from the vendor really understand early childhood environments?
- Can they help evaluate your needs and explore alternatives?
- Do they understand furniture manufacture so they can answer questions about safety and durability?
- Can the vendor make modifications to the furniture to meet your needs?
- Is the furniture in stock — can the vendor guarantee delivery dates?
- Does the company have a reputation for timely deliveries and solid follow-up support?
- Who will the contact person be after the sale — a local representative or a toll free service?
- How long a warranty is available on the furniture? [Warranty periods vary widely — from one year to lifetime — with five years an average length. Higher quality materials and construction methods generally yield longer warranty periods.]
- Are there any exceptions or limitations on the warranty?
- When defective items or items damaged in shipping need to be returned, will the customer be responsible for shipping or restocking fees? [The answer should be “no.”]
- Does the vendor have a reputation for standing behind its warranty? [The answer should be “yes.”]

Contributors

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