

Successes and Failures in Developing a Child Care Center Design

Design Collaborations

by Felice L. Silverman and Diane Driscoll

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The influence of the environment for staff and children in early childhood programs is powerful. Thoughtful design of the facility enhances safety, effectiveness, and high quality programming and helps reduce annual maintenance to high use areas. Over the past five years, Mulberry Child Care has opened over 30 new centers. These center openings are the result of new building developments or significant renovation to the interior of existing sites. In each of these new centers, Mulberry has collaborated with the Boston architectural firm of Silverman Trykowski Associates (STA) to create an environment that is effective, efficient, and affordable. Features and designs are developed to meet two goals. The first is to develop an environment that offers the staff and children a pleasant, safe, and efficient space. The second is a design and finish that considers durability yet can be installed and maintained at reasonable expense.

Our design process has been an evolutionary one, with continual refinement to plans as problems are identified and solutions are tested. With ongoing input from management, staff, and parents, our design elements are modified. The following are solutions we have worked

on in the areas of maintenance, safety, program, and image.

Maintenance

Improving the long-term maintenance characteristics of a child care center is a

critical design factor, and one which we are always modifying. We make periodic visits to both existing and newly opened centers to assess how well the centers are maintained in terms of ease and economy.

The most common maintenance issues involve wall covering. Paint or crayon markings and tape, staples, chips, or gouges result from everyday activities in a center. Consequently, the areas that the children can reach — particularly areas less than three feet high — are those that are most affected. The challenge in this case is to find a suitable

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wall surface that looks good, lasts, and is easy to maintain. Together, Mulberry and STA have developed a design that allows for a variety of surfaces to be used in varying quantities in accordance to location. Moreover, the use of different surfaces enables our centers to feature a unique design image through multiple coating materials.

While paint is certainly the most cost-effective solution for wall covering, it is also the coating that will chip most easily and require the most care (i.e., yearly touchups). Other more durable products (vinyl wall covering, fabric wall covering, rigid vinyl surface, fabric, carpet, or sprayed particle paint), while more costly, will offer better long-term performance.

Another alternate surface material we have used in our centers is sprayed particle paint. While the texture, look, and durability of the product is excellent (crayon marks can be washed off with ease), we have encountered some frustration with touchups when the surface is nicked.

For these reasons, all corridors in a Mulberry center are designed with a series of wood trim accents — both horizontal and vertical, applied at various angles — thereby creating an opportunity for a variety of both color and texture. The theory is that the created “panels” can be painted above the 3 foot height — providing a cost-effective solution, while below this level the panels are in-filled, using a more durable finish. Since this non-paint material is used in a limited fashion, it is relatively economical. By using this split panel design, the area can be touched up without having to repaint the entire wall, since the abuse that the upper panels take is limited.

In many cases, we have incorporated a colored corkboard material into the upper panels, allowing staff to decorate

corridors with artwork and parents to view prominently displayed notices. The collage effect of the walls allows us to create an energetic and fun environment — incorporating the image of the company through both color and design, while simultaneously providing the basis for an effective maintenance program. We will continue to evaluate the advantages and disadvantages of all wall-covering options in light of each product’s long-term cost and durability.

Safety

A common safety concern of child care staff is the ability to view the entire classroom at once. This is of particular importance with regard to diapering. In our earlier center design, the diapering area was a counter facing a wall; here the advantages are that storage for diapers and supplies can be easily located above the counter, there is little danger of the child falling off, and minimal space in the room is consumed. The disadvantage, however, is that the staff has his/her back to the room and therefore cannot keep an eye on the rest of the children.

Wanting to maintain appropriate supervision, we tried a variety of designs. The solution the staff most liked was to incorporate an L-shaped counter that extended into the room. In this new design, the diapering surface faces into the room and is edged by a partial height wall so that the staff can view the entire room while diapering. The counters are located on the other leg of the L in the corner of the room, along a full height wall. Additionally, storage for diaper supplies is located above this



View showing typical entry to center, with welcoming, child-friendly graphics and color.

counter, but not above the diapering area, within arm’s reach of the staff, and a sink and in-counter trash disposal unit is located at the corner of the counters. So diapering, supervision, and hygiene are accomplished in an efficient manner. Another area of concern in the center is the safety of gate and door hinges. It is very easy, particularly with internal classroom gates, for children to pinch their fingers in a standard door hinge. For this reason, we are now utilizing a gate with a pivot hinge, which is offset so that children can never catch their fingers. The gate is a lightweight maple frame with a lexan lite insert. The lexan insert is clear if the gate is dividing a room into areas; it is opaque if the gate is the door to a toilet room, allowing for privacy.

Program and Image

Design decisions are always closely tied to the operation and function of the center. This is particularly true with respect to furniture, learning center layouts, and flooring. The flooring in the centers is comprised primarily of carpet and vinyl composition tile. Determining the amount of each that is used, as well as its configuration in the classroom, is critical to the layout of the room. Art, science, and eating areas tend to require more cleanup, and should therefore be located on tiled areas; on the other hand, areas for reading, blocks, and dramatic play should be located on softer, cozier flooring such as carpet.

Working together as a team early in the design process, the architect and center director lay out all of the furniture on an architectural drawing. First, learning centers are identified, and then the

flooring pattern is applied with a full understanding of where each piece of furniture will be located. Because the director is fully involved in the design process, the final room layout is one that works from both a design and an operational perspective. Electrical outlets, shelving, and wall cabinets are strategically placed according to the learning center's layout.

We have also made an effort to incorporate gross motor areas into the center design. Having an indoor gross motor area is a wonderful option when the weather is too extreme for children to be outdoors. Open gym areas that double as circulation space have been successful in that they create a large open area to provide relief from the classrooms without taking much space away from them, while also forming a welcoming focal point for the center. In most cases, the open gym is visible from the entry and is circular in shape, with brightly colored murals on the walls.

View (below) showing typical preschool classroom — shows use of internal windows for visibility, also shows fixed low partitions used more in earlier designs. Current designs favor a more open plan.



Photographs (previous and above) by L. Barry Hetherington

However, there have been both acoustic and security challenges with this design. The concern that the reception area would be too noisy given its proximity to this space has been addressed through a modified design that uses a wall to separate the gym from the reception area, but one with large glass panels that retain the open feeling. In this way, the welcoming image and visibility are maintained, the acoustics are greatly improved, and the security level is enhanced.

Other program developments have occurred as we continue to build centers. We now incorporate a staff/parent resource room. A small, quiet room with a meeting table, work counter, and resource materials was added to address a common concern was that there was no quiet space to prepare curriculum or to meet with parents. In the past, the traditional staff room in the center had often turned into a casual break room not always available for planning or meetings.

Another improvement is that today classrooms are equipped with an additional storage closet to address the ongoing challenge of classroom storage and to minimize the need for staff to leave the room. In our new centers, closets are designed with adjustable shelving to accommodate the appropriate number of sleeping mats, as well as the personal items, supplies, and toys that are found in every classroom. Cabinets have also been provided above the cubby areas and given doors, ensuring that classrooms remain neat and uncluttered. Finally, improvements in lighting have greatly enhanced the feel of



View showing typical toddler classroom — shows shared open toilet areas and pantry area, typical gate, storage above cubbies, pendant uplighting, combination of VCT and carpet flooring.

Photograph by Tom Bernard

our centers. Upgrading from the standard recessed, lensed, or parabolic fixtures to an indirect fixture has created a warm, friendly, and less institutional feel. If children are sleeping (particularly babies on their backs in cribs) while the lights are on, they are not subjected to the glare and bright reflection of a direct light. The linear pendant fixtures create an additional ceiling element, which adds an interesting design feature. Also, staff in their work environment appreciates the softer light that projects a more natural effect.

The collaboration between architect and provider has proven to be a rewarding experience. The quality of care for children and the work environment for staff are important factors that Mulberry Child Care Centers and STA work diligently to improve with every new center design.