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Giving Your Building a Second Chance

by Francis Wardle

More and more young children are attending child care programs. At the same time, the issue of quality in these programs is being examined and emphasized. While there are many factors that contribute to quality care, such as teacher-child ratios and appropriate materials, an appropriate facility for young children to grow, develop, and be protected is also essential. Historically, facilities for child care programs have been new buildings designed specially for this age child, and a collection of basements, community agencies, and church facilities. Now a third option is beginning to be explored: remodeling existing buildings to specifically meet the needs of young children and their families (Sussman, 1998; Wardle, 1988). This is because some existing buildings are structurally sound, meet the unique developmental needs of young children, and cost less to remodel than building from scratch.

Who Should Remodel?

Clearly, remodeling is not for everyone. Remodeling should be viewed as an option that fits certain unique situations. These include a program that wishes to expand an existing facility, a program that has access to an inexpensive or free building to remodel, and a program where remodeling is financially and practically the best option. Any program considering remodeling must have access to people with a variety of expertise to assist: architect, early childhood specialist, playground designer, general contractor, fund raiser, and builder. These people are available from a program's board, sponsoring agency, or parent company. And, finally, it makes no sense to remodel a building the program (or its sponsor) does not own, or for which the program does not have a long-term lease (Sussman, 1998).

Possible Buildings to Remodel

Careful assessment of potential buildings to remodel must be conducted before a decision is made to commit to the project. There are a variety of factors that must be objectively considered. These should include:

- Can the building be remodeled to be appropriate for the age children you serve (Sussman, 1998; Wardle, 1988)? Even elementary school buildings need major alterations to meet the needs of young children.

- Is there adequate space for staff and parent parking, kitchen food delivery, bus pick up (if you use transportation), and a playground? Is the space for the playground away from traffic and noise pollution, yet easily accessible to classrooms? Is the area where children

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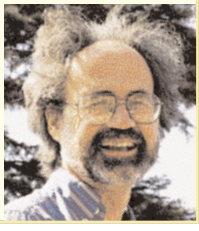

will be dropped off close to the building, so they won't have to cross busy areas?

- Is the space to be used for classrooms and other children's areas on the ground floor, and are other public access areas easily accessible for people with disabilities? Is there easy access for fire emergencies?

- How many changes have to be made to high-cost items? These include sewage and water lines, heating, fire-code requirements (sprinkler system and exits), and basic structural integrity?

- If the program will be sharing space with other programs in the same building, are these programs compatible with children's programs? Is there enough capacity for phones, heating, water, etc.? Will there be conflicts regarding parking, noise, traffic, etc.?

- Does the current zoning of the building allow for child care services? What about the neighborhood: will it support you or make life difficult (objecting to traffic, vandalism, etc.)?

- Is it feasible — and cost effective — to meet all the rules and regulations you must meet: fire, building code, health and safety, state licensing, ADA, regulations of your funding source (Head Start, etc.), NAEYC accreditation criteria, etc.?

- Will the resulting building reflect your basic program philosophy? For example, Head Start programs use many support professionals, and mandate parent involvement. Is there enough space for these activities? Many programs espouse teacher empowerment. Is there space for training rooms, a lounge? A building must support the program's philosophy (Wiles and Bondi, 1998).

- Is the building close to the population the program serves: on bus lines, near roads?

- Are there problems with the building that would require expensive clean up? Asbestos removal and toxic waste issues come to mind. Remember that once you remodel a building, all regulation exceptions that may have been grandfathered in must now be addressed. This includes ADA requirements.

Helpful Documents

There are several documents that can be used to help your assessment. These include your state-specific licensing regulations; ADA regulations; Head Start Facilities Manual (1995), an excellent document for all programs, with specific checklists; NAEYC Accreditation Criteria; and Caring Space, Learning Places, by Jim Greenman (1988).

A Remodeling Team

A core committee should be created to shepherd the remodeling effort, from the original evaluation of potential buildings to the finished center. This group should be kept small to enhance effectiveness. Other people should be consulted as needed for specific steps in the process. For example, when evaluating a potential building, a structural engineer, an expert on asbestos, an electrician, and a plumber should also be consulted. The small core group should include the program director, the architect, an early childhood specialist, and a general contractor (or person acting as the general). The program director should be in charge of the process; the general contractor should be responsible for all building-related operations — bids, building regulations, and alterations. An early childhood specialist (who might be the director) is essential to provide a perspective of child development, child care regulations, safety, and supervision.

Cost

Cost of remodeling depends on the extent to which the original building must be modified (Sussman, 1998; Wardle, 1988) and the purchase or rental cost of the building. Often existing buildings can be purchased or rented for a minimal amount; or they can be loaned from the program's sponsor, grantee, or government agency.

Major cost items for remodeling include: bathrooms, kitchen, sprinkler system, heating system, ample windows, meeting fire exit requirements, handicapped accessibility (especially if the existing building had been grandfathered in to the new ADA regulation), and asbestos removal. Good playgrounds that are developmentally appropriate and safe can also be expensive.

Determine if a sprinkler system is needed, also whether you need a kitchen or can provide food through a different method. Can you locate new bathrooms, kitchen, and water faucets and sinks near existing sewage, water, and electrical lines? Also, if you are going to have a kitchen, is there a place close to an outside exit and truck-loading area to make deliveries easy?

Funding

Funding for remodeling efforts can come from three general sources: direct, indirect (in kind), and loans.

Direct contributions. A not-for-profit child care program has access to a variety of funding sources, including foundations and local, state, and federal funds (Wardle, 1990). The Association for Children and Families has funds for Head Start and block grant child care

programs; CDBG (Community Development Block Grant) monies are also available through local counties, and states provide funds for specific state-sponsored efforts. HUD also provides money for specific projects.

To find out about available funds in your community, contact the United Way, local foundation representatives, and — most importantly — the county agency responsible for procuring and distributing government grants. This agency can also help you write grant applications.

The other direct form of funds is obviously a contribution from a program's parent company, church, or local grantee.

Indirect contributions. Indirect support can be solicited from a variety of community agencies. It is easier to get this support if the center is not for profit; but there is support available for all child care programs. For a project I was involved in, a local juvenile diversion program run by the sheriff's department helped build the playground and laid all the asphalt tile for classrooms, passageways, and bathrooms. A local nursery provided trees for the playground, and our sponsor (the county) contributed culverts, lumber, sod, and sand (left over from a Budweiser volleyball publicity activity) for the playground. The county also provided technical assistance for the remodeling, and someone to act as a general contractor.

Any child care program with an active board, or attached to another organization (parent company, school district, county, etc.), has access to a variety of skilled people who can substantially reduce remodeling costs.

Loans. A sponsoring agency can loan a center some remodeling money, which can be repaid in rent. There are a variety of developmental lending institutions scattered throughout the country that offer loans for not for profits, including child care projects. And there are local organizations that lend specifically to child care programs (for profit and not for profit) in an effort to increase the supply of quality child care in the nation (see Investing in the Future).

Photographs provided by the author

Overall Design Consideration

Once a decision has been made to remodel a building, there are several overall design considerations that need to be addressed in designing the remodeled facility. Many have already been covered in the assessment section: regulations, structural and functional considerations, supporting the philosophy of the program, and the need for playground and parking space. Once these are addressed in the new design, specifics regarding the details must be considered.

What's Good for Children

It is essential that the designer of the remodeled facility ask the question, "What will it take to make this building a good place for children?" The new brain research, other research that shows how a child's total environment directly impacts their cognitive and emotional development, and the extended length of time children stay in our programs place a great emphasis on the physical environment.

There is a wealth of information about the developmental needs of young children (Greenman, 1988, 1998; Prescott, 1994; Gallahue, 1995; Bredekamp & Copple, 1997). The documents already mentioned are also helpful tools in remodel building to match the unique needs of children. General environmental concepts for young children in full day care include:

- Lots of soft, responsive, comfortable materials and equipment that the child can mold to her needs (Prescott, 1994).

- Opportunities — inside and out — for lots of developmentally appropriate physical activities.

- Environments that match children's specific needs as they develop through distinctive stages.

- Change and variety. The longer children spend in child care programs, the more we need to provide for their innate need for variety and stimulation: change in scenery, textures, colors, social groups, activities, and environments. Boredom kills brain development!

- Natural lighting.

- Appropriate temperature: not too hot; not too cold.

- Opportunities for all children to spend part of the day outside, on a well-designed and equipped playground.

- Interactions with the natural environment. Young children need to develop an emotional connection with the natural world (Greenman, 1988; Rivkin, 1995). Is there a garden, old stumps, opportunities for field trips in the neighborhood, animals, birds, sand, grass, sticks, and water?

- Images of children. Does the facility appear as an adult building designed for children, or a child-centered facility (Prescott, 1994)? Are there pictures throughout the building (not just in the classrooms) celebrating the world's children? Is there children's work everywhere?

- Private spaces. A central challenge for child care is to respond to the individual needs of children within a collective environment. Decisions about ease of cleaning, maintenance, supervision, cost, and adult aesthetics should not prevent us from providing spaces that children feel were designed for them: small private areas, individual cubbies, lofts, and odd-shaped areas.

- Child size. This is a central concern when remodeling, since most of the buildings considered won't have been used by small children before. Are toilets, sinks, windows, faucets, drinking fountains, mirrors, towel racks, toothbrush containers, and bulletin boards at the child's level? Young children also need functional areas close together: bathrooms, eating area, playground, gross motor room, etc. to encourage self-help skills, integrate learning, and provide a home-like atmosphere. Many buildings have bathrooms miles from classrooms, playgrounds at the opposite side of the building, and eating areas a long way from the classroom.

- Challenge. Richard Dattner (1974) talks about graduated challenge; Elizabeth Prescott about super complex units (1994). What both emphasize is the critical notion that children who spend most of the day in a center must have more than their basic needs met. A child who visits a playground for a few hours a week has different needs from children who spend up to 50 hours a week in a center. We must allow for multiple use, extended activity, and progressive challenge.

There is a tendency for architects to use child care facilities as a canvas to create their masterpiece. Unfortunately, based on a variety of "masterpieces" I have seen throughout the country, these centers often project more of a cutesy adult concept of childhood than providing a facility that supports and nurtures individual children's development in a safe, clean environment that is easy to supervise.

Be careful of this tendency; always defer to the people on your team who both understand the developmental needs of children and who have actually run early childhood programs. Remember, good environments for children encourage flexibility and allow teachers and children to continually change, adapt, improve, and alter the environment.

Indoor Environment

I have already discussed the need for things to be child sized; the proximity of bathrooms, classroom, and playgrounds; and the issues of light and heat. Two other critical issues for the indoors are storage and a place for teachers and parents to feel comfortable.

Every child care center I have been in does not have adequate storage! This is probably a function of the fact that designers of these centers don't understand the need and the penchant of early childhood educators to collect lots of stuff! Make sure lots of storage is designed into the remodeled center and that the storage is very close to where it is needed (see sections on Individual Classrooms and Playground, below). This includes food and supplies storage near to or in the kitchen.

Individual Classrooms

An ideal early childhood classroom is 50% tile and 50% carpet (with a pad!). The tile portion should be close to areas that will generate the most dirt — classroom exit, bathroom entrance (if in classroom), and sinks and water access (where you will place the art areas and sand and water table). Carpet, of course, is for areas where children will sit, and where you need to reduce noise (block area).

An ideal classroom will have direct access to the playground, and lots of storage right in the classroom. One method that works well is to have wall-to-ceiling storage, with seven foot sliding doors. Any storage that allows teachers to stay in the classroom is an asset.

Lots of window area is great; also the classroom needs lots of bulletin board space at the child's level. There is a new drywall finish that acts as a bulletin board surface for the entire piece of drywall. This drywall retains its finished look even after pictures and other items are removed.

Teachers and parents need to feel comfortable in the center. If they are relegated to tiny cubby holes in basements and closets, they will not feel a sense of empowerment.

Playground

Playground design depends a great deal on available space and needs of the program. Some general recommendations include (Wardle, 1997):

- Try to provide direct access from the building to the playground.
- Include a large toy and equipment shed on the playground to facilitate storage and use of trikes, balls, ropes, wagons, and lots of loose parts.
- Have three types of surface — soft fall zone materials under equipment; hard surfaces for balls, bikes, and trikes; and grass to play on, sit on, and have picnics.
- Have a garden!
- Provide a water source in the playground for the garden, painting activities, sand and water play, and water activities on hot days.
- Provide lots of opportunities for playing and learning that do not include climbing equipment. Research shows that children in full-day programs spend most of their playground time in activities that do not include climbing equipment (Ihn, 1998).
- Change materials and activities in the playground as you do in the classroom.
- Use a playground consultant on this part of the project.

Working With Regulators

A critical task in remodeling a building for a child care facility is to carefully and deliberately work with all the regulatory officials who will ultimately determine whether or not you can open your center. Have frequent meetings, get all decisions in writing, and bring regula-tors together if there is a disagreement between them (which there invariably is). Time spent with regulators throughout the process always pays off later.

Conclusion

In seeking quality child-sized facilities for children's programs, remodeling an existing building is a viable option to consider. Careful analysis of the potential building must be made before a decision to remodel is determined. Grants, lending institutions, and in-kind contributions can help fund the project. Then a careful team approach — with constant consultation with regulator agencies, child care professionals, contractors, architects, playground designers, and funders — will ensure the project's success.

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