

# Wonderful Walls

by Jim Greenman

Walls (and ceilings and floors) — shield us, contain us, bring us together, and divide us. Walls become the galleries that allow us to narrate our present and past and predict our future, express ourselves, and relay news and events.

Children's programs need *working* walls (and ceilings and floors) which can be put to use for communication, display, storage, and activity space. The furnishings also work, or don't work, for the program in another sense: in aggregate, they serve as sight and sound conditioners. When effective, they modulate and direct sensory stimulation in service of program goals.

The aesthetic quality of a room for children is important. If the basic furnishings look good, there is plenty of room for the creative use of *stuff* and natural materials to develop a high quality learning and caring environment. Amidst tasteful walls and carpets, an eclectic use in play of natural materials,

cardboard boxes, and various salvage will often be recognized as creative. The same materials in a drab room with threadbare carpet and peeling paint makes the whole place look junky (and parents may evaluate the program accordingly). Money spent *classing up* the basic furnishings is well spent. Some tips:

■ Consider children's programs as places of art and as art galleries, and use color sparingly. In early childhood settings there is an inherent abundance of color: children's clothes, toys, artwork, furniture, pillows, and book covers. Designers, often unable to visualize the setting in action, tend to use far too much color and graphics for walls and flooring. Once in action, there is a kaleidoscopic atmosphere that cheers for a short time, wears on the individual for the other five to seven hours of the day, leaving little room for the inhabitants to express themselves.

■ In a high quality program, every inch of wall space has potential use as window space, storage, display, communication, or activities. Murals and permanent graphics in classroom or corridors are more often than not superfluous, adding unnecessary color and visual clutter, and limiting working wall space — better to have open gallery spaces that are filled with children's art. The exception is in very dark or drab multipurpose spaces.

■ For walls to *work*, they have to be made from materials that allow cleaning and the attaching of shelving, cabinets, and displays. In classrooms, there is an endless need/desire to tack or tape materials to the walls. Bulletin boards, map rails,

chalkboards, and erasable marker boards will partially satisfy (but probably not quell) a good teacher's primal need to tape or tack (and tacks or push pins of any kind don't belong in places where children are under age four).

■ Painted walls are the least expensive and the most flexible: they can be changed; and eggshell, semi-gloss, and gloss finishes are washable. Vinyl wallpaper is more costly upfront; but it is washable, looks great, and wears somewhat better than paint. However it is not easily repairable. Semi-gloss paint for walls and trim is desirable in high use areas; flat and matte finishes reduce brightness and glare in areas not subject to messy hands. Areas subject to hard use and likely to be chipped or marred are best off with wood, heavy-duty fabric, or brick. Combining the use of wallpaper and paint and using paneling in areas subject to hard use (where chairs are stacked or wooden blocks are used, for example) works well.

■ Remember, for children walls are tactile as well as visual. Textured walls add to the richness and warmth of a setting. Texture can be a key feature in orienting children with visual impairments.

Walls have a huge impact on our lives inside: they affect how we feel and our competence. How and whether we communicate, express ourselves, and relate to the outside world are driven by our walls. When we get our walls (floors and ceilings) right, we have a good start toward being a good place for a childhood.

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