Beyond the Simple Model of Child Care Facilities: Support Spaces for Quality

by Jim Greenman

The age of child care building on a wide scale really began in the 1970s. Before that, there had been a history of day nurseries going back to the turn of the century and Lanham Act centers during World War II to provide care for "Rosie the Riveter" mothers in the work force. And a few architect-designed nursery and preschool buildings in the US and Europe, often lab schools, offered a model for part-day early education environments. But this history had little influence during the explosion of child care and the first generation of child care design that began to replace the typical subterranean standard of church basements and found spaces.

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Child care as a place: The simple model

The first wave of child care building exemplified the simple model of child care held by most (actually, almost all):

Good people (AKA nice women)
\+ sufficient toys
\+ a space that did not harm (above ground was nice, but optional)
= good enough child care.

Child care professionals expanded the definition of "good people" to include those who should be well trained and in good staff:child ratios and small groups, and a more thoughtful and detailed view of what equipment and space should be; but the facility was still viewed in pretty simple terms — remember, this was a time when children didn't even have to be above ground. Basically, the "purpose built" child care center was an economical box with almost every square foot space licensed for child use, often 35 s.f. (square feet) per child and sometimes less, designed for open classrooms with almost no circulation. There was a tiny or nonexistent lobby, tiny one-person director's office, minimum storage, and almost no other support space. Total space: 50 - 60 s.f. per child.

Active intelligence?

The inherent assumption: child care is just about "doing" and "being" — not planning, conferring, reflecting, or communicating. What was missing was any sense that child care centers are complex organizations and that they engender complex relationships that the environment either supports or hinders the inhabitants, young and old, trying to accomplish complex, demanding, and important tasks. There was no recognition that the facility needs places that support active *intelligence*, teamwork, and community. The idea that child care could be done well with around 50 - 60 s.f. per child for the facility came about because of the absence of offices, staff workrooms and lounges, a reception area, circulation space for conferences and meetings, and places for storage and display.

A place for childhood?

At the same time, there was no distinction in conceptual thinking or licensing practice (then and now) between environments for children to spend three or four hours a day for two-thirds of the year (that is, nursery or preschools) for 500 to 1,000 hours of their childhood, and all-day, all-year-round child care environments where children entering

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as infants would spend up to 12,000 hours of their childhood (as much time as they would spend in K-12 education). The typical 35 s.f. per child of classroom space required was modest, and there was no requirement for other play and living space to extend the child's world and make the staff's job easier.

A place for parents?

There were inherent assumptions about the parent's relationship to the program reflected in the space as well. It was clearly not their place, beginning even before they entered the building. Limited drop off space was not unusual, reinforcing the concept that parents should not linger while dropping off and picking up their child. The lack of space for parents or prospective parents to wait to see the director or a teacher, or space for confidential discussion to discuss the often sensitive issues that pop up during conferences, or adequate classroom space for adults to visit and not feel that they are large intruders in Lilliputian space, all gave off a message to parents that this was a place to drop and pick up your child and hope for the best.

During the child care explosion, child care not only transformed the landscape of childhood, but the landscape of families as well. Increasing numbers of children were beginning to be reared from birth by the partnership, or lack of partnership, between a family and the child care provider the family had selected. Actually, given the increasing number of children living in two households, in many instances it's often the partnership between a child's *families* and the provider. In actual practice, the parent-child care relationship is often not an easy one, sometimes unfortunately made workable mostly by limiting communication and constricting the partnership, reinforcing an all too common assumption in early care and education that children are sent to us for education and care on our terms. In not a small number of programs across the country, parents are not infrequently considered a burden or necessary evil, a holdover from traditional school attitudes favoring sharp home/school boundaries. If parents and teachers are not working together, the quality of care, education, and family life is diminished.

As places and as institutions, early care and education programs are often one of the first sites that families encounter in "the village" that helps to raise their children. They help to shape future visions of what society is and should be. If they are designed as constrained places without support for active intelligence, it is hard to believe that quality care and education is likely. If families are, for the most part, left at the door, it is likely that family bonds may weaken. It is sad if only some children and adults feel they belong, are competent in the setting, or have a sense of the program as a community within a community. All of these things ought to be considered when issues of facility space allocation, program structures, square footage, windows, sinks, and furniture (and of course, staff salaries and staffing) are considered.

What support spaces do early care and education centers really need?

Unfortunately, the legacy of the simple model still haunts us, at least to the extent that every square foot beyond licensed child space is still hard won. It is not uncommon to still fight assumptions that 60 total s.f. per child is adequate for an average size center. Instead, 85 - 100 s.f. is more accurate as an adequate (not great) amount, and even more in smaller programs because the need for most support space (e.g., a director's office, mechanical space, staff room) is the same, regardless of small variations in the number of children. The simple model guided the past conceptualization of facilities. The future should be guided by establishing what will need to take place in the building to achieve quality.

Support spaces for quality

What support spaces beyond the classroom may be desirable, recognizing that the real world of budget constraints often requires combining functions?

Administrative

Vestibule/Lobby/Reception: The Lobby/Reception area should be a welcoming entry to the program. It also serves as a security checkpoint, sign-in and sign-out for parents, a comfortable waiting area, and a communications area for information on the program, parent materials, and children's display. The lobby is a key communication area, although it does not replace communication in the classroom. A variety of communication methods are typically used, including counter top displays, visitor books, posters, and bulletin boards. Some centers have video message monitors, which can be recessed in the wall.

Reception Desk/Administration Area: A reception desk's duties typically allows visually observing all entry to the building. In addition, the desk is often a computer work station site for clerical work, including filing. The occupant may also function as switchboard operator receiving as many as 20 - 30 plus calls an hour during busy times. A general reception office area might include file/storage, storage cabinets, copier, and fax machine off the desk.

Director's Office: The director's office includes desk and private conference/meeting area, usually preferably located close to the entry, giving parents and visitors easy access and allowing the director to be aware of anyone entering

the center. Large windows on the exterior walls and to the hallway allow this visibility (and window treatments also allow for privacy when necessary).

Assistant Director/Program Coordinator/ Lead Teacher Office: This office serves as a workspace for the administrative team.

Sick Bay/Isolation Area: A sick bay or isolation area is a place to isolate and care for a child who becomes ill during the day to wait for parent pick-up. It is often a nook or alcove, preferably visible from both the director's and administrative office. The isolation space must afford *easy, constant supervision.* An adjacent or nearby toilet and sink is desirable. This may be incorporated into a *nurse's* office when a nurse is present.

Miscellaneous

Corridor/Galleries: Corridor circulation with lighting and wall coverings can be designed to serve as a gallery for children's art and documentation.

Multipurpose Common Area/Play Plaza: These are expanded corridor areas (increasing the corridor width from 4′ - 6′ to 10′ - 18′) contiguous to classroom units that can function as an indoor street for play: serving the circulation function and an area for large muscle areas and gatherings of children and/or adults. Ideally this space would be linked to an outdoor common area into which activities could expand in good weather.

PHOTOGRAPH BY JIM GREENMAN

A *Lactation/Nursing Mothers Station* is a site for mothers who require a lactation station or a private place to nurse. It can double as a small conferencing location.

Staff spaces

Staff Lounge: The staff lounge is for teachers to take breaks and requires comfortable seating for adult socialization and relaxation and a kitchenette for staff food preparation. Preferably the staff lounge should be located out of the traffic flow of children and parents to allow staff to be away from their job demands during their breaks. The staff lounge and work/resource room can be in the same room, provided the room is designed so that both functions can occur simultaneously.

Teacher Work/Resource Room: The teacher work/resource room is the place where teachers plan, prepare documentation, have small group meetings, review resources, and make materials for the classrooms. The room is also used for employee training.

Storage

General Storage: One or more large storage rooms are needed with open adjustable shelving for the storage of play materials, large cartons of materials for children's art projects, paper products bought in bulk, and consumable teaching supplies. It is difficult to have too much storage space.

Storage for Emergencies: Where required, storage needs to be provided for 24 hours' worth of supplies (diapers, food, water, toys, blankets, etc.). Storage for earthquake or other disaster supplies needs to be placed adjacent to the identified evacuation area for staff and children.

Car Seat Storage: A storage area located near the infant area or entry area, serves the purpose of day storage of parents' car seats and strollers (hooks for strollers if parents travel long distances from parking or transit stops to the center).

Buggy Storage: This area is for placement of 4- and 6-seater buggies, buggy canopies, and strollers, and should be located near the infant rooms. Allow for maneuverability (buggies are 60″l x 28″w).

Support

Kitchen/Pantry: A full service kitchen typically has commercial cooking equipment with a fire suppression system, and ample counter space and storage space. Warm-up kitchens vary from residential scale and non-commercial equipment at small centers to almost the full service kitchen, minus the fire suppression system and the larger pantry. Kitchen space usually requires room for food distribution carts for delivery to each classroom. As in many homes, the kitchen might become a social room, a second staff room. Increasing the size of the kitchen or locating the staff room off the kitchen could accommodate this. A viewing area that allows for children to see into the kitchen and interact is desirable.

Laundry Room: The laundry function primarily serves the infant areas and should be located in that area of the facility. Sheets, blankets, soiled clothes, and toys are washed daily.

Janitor Closet(s):
The closet with mop sink supports building maintenance and provides storage for cleaning equipment and supplies, including vacuum cleaners, mops, brooms, and cleaning supplies, etc. Based on building layout, more than one room may be required.

Final thought

Economics drives most of our choices in designing and building child care facilities. But behind those choices should be a firm sense of what is necessary to create places for childhoods. Without a respect for the child care program as a place for adults, thinking, planning, and working together in partnership with families, children's lives and futures are diminished.