

Creating Indoor Environments That Decrease Sensory Overload

by Cynthia Saarela

Spaces and places evoke strong emotional responses. When an environment is pleasing, welcoming, and functional it promotes a sense of well being. Familiar spaces with personal touches create a feeling of belonging and connection. The art of feng shui has become popular as many turn to design elements and room arrangements as a source of peace and serenity. In the same sense, poorly designed environments can be unsettling. It is difficult to feel comfortable in a space with uninviting, sterile, or unorganized furnishings. Space needs to make sense. Environmental elements and design clearly have an impact on children as well as adults. The Reggio Emilia philosophy of early childhood education embraces the environment as “the third teacher.”

A child’s environment is often overlooked as a factor in his/her emotional state and well being.

We generally agree that it is not healthy for children to have too much unstructured time, too many privileges, or too much freedom; but we don’t always agree on how much is too much when it comes to children’s environments. We often create spaces for children that overflow, filled with too much visual stimulation, too many colors, and too much clutter. Parents are encouraged to decorate bedrooms and playrooms with a profusion of multi-colored plastic furniture and themed accessories. Restaurants, stores, and entertainment venues have become places packed with sensory experiences. Each birthday, holiday, or special event adds more toys or stuffed animals to the collection. At home and in the community children are often overwhelmed by overabundance. It seems that as life becomes more complex and fragmented, that complexity is reflected in our environments.

We crave serenity, balance, and calm; and so do our children. Caution about “too much” needs to apply to the spaces in which children play and learn. In a world of too much, the senses get overworked. In the book *Last Child in the Woods: Saving Our Children From Nature-Deficit Disorder* by Richard Louv (2005), a child makes this comment about being in a natural setting, away from the urban environment of everyday life. “Here you hear things; in the city you can’t hear anything because you can hear everything.” In over-stuffed spaces it is much the same; children can’t see anything because they see everything.

Children live in a world full of sensory overload. It is our job as educators to ensure that the classroom is not one more place where children are bombarded. In an attempt to provide an environment that is rich and stimulating, teachers often over stimulate. We are concerned that parents may think we aren’t providing enough experiences or that the room may seem bare. Early childhood teachers, used to working with tight budgets and limited resources, become experts at re-using materials in creative ways. This ability to recycle seemingly unusable trash may also lead to a tendency to save and collect, creating an ever increasing amount of “stuff.”

Our culture is awash in the philosophy that more is better, but in environments for young children more is definitely **not** better. A classroom that is fuller is not necessarily richer, particularly for a child who struggles to make sense of sensory input. For this child a classroom environment free of sensory “noise” is essential. Children with special needs are often particularly sensitive to visual overload. Clutter creates confusion and makes it difficult for them to

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focus and process incoming information. What we sometimes lose sight of is that this is true for all children whether diagnosed with special needs or not.

Children's classrooms often take on the cookie cutter look of the latest mainstream school supply catalogue, filled with primary colors and plastic toys and furniture. With the advent of online catalogues, early childhood programs have ready access to a large number of vendors. Yet finding unique furnishings with an eye to good design and natural materials is daunting.

There is a deficit of objects chosen purely for their beauty. Beautiful materials in simple, uncluttered settings are calming and inspirational for children as well as adults. Color can also be soothing when selected with that end in mind. Patricia Tarr writes ". . . color is too often used for its own sake rather than deliberately chosen to enhance a particular area or to create a sense of unity throughout the room. Walls painted in neutral colors create a sense of calmness and allow other features in the room to stand out." (2004). Choosing furnishings and materials for design value as well as function is more time consuming but worth the extra effort.

Creating inviting, uncluttered, and beautiful classroom spaces requires teachers, parents, and administrators to commit to shared goals over a period of time. Below are some thoughts and suggestions to consider in the process.

■ **Set the vision.**

Set aside time to analyze and plan changes in your space. Consider established long-term goals for your program and prioritize changes: What changes can be made immediately? In six months? In a year?

■ **Break de-cluttering down into small manageable goals.**

Concentrate on one area at a time and set achievable goals. Begin with something noticeable such as the tops of cabinets or shelving units. Think about teacher workspaces and storage areas when creating a de-cluttering strategy. Consider working in teams of two or three to establish goals for each room and to implement changes.

■ **Consider bringing in a "consultant" from outside the program.**

Classrooms are very personal and are often seen as a reflection of individual teachers. Classroom design is a sensitive issue and advice from an outsider may be better received than from a peer or supervisor. Plan a workday for all teachers to work on room arrangement and design in order to avoid singling out any one staff member.

■ **Build time into the weekly schedule to manage clutter.**

It is easy to let the clutter collect over time. Adequate, accessible storage is the best defense. If possible, enlist paraprofessional staff or parent volunteers to keep materials organized and stowed away correctly.

■ **Will there be enough?**

Early childhood teachers are often wary about not having enough when simplifying classroom environments — enough materials, enough activities, enough challenge for children. Teachers may be concerned that if the classroom has fewer materials it will translate to fewer experiences. Remember that uncluttered does not equate to scarcity. In fact, de-cluttering often sparks richer and more sustained play. Materials can always be added if needed.

■ **Include natural materials.**

Natural materials are an integral element in well-designed children's environments. They can be used throughout the room for function, such as storage or display of materials, and they add a beauty that is not found in artificial materials. Natural materials provide countless soothing sensory experiences. The appeal of items from nature cuts across gender and cultural boundaries, making them an ideal addition to any classroom.

■ **Be mindful of what is on the walls.**

Classroom walls are a blank canvas, the backdrop to a child's creativity. It is difficult to be creative when the canvas is already full. Choose items to place on the walls that promote and inspire creativity rather than confuse the senses with too much input. Be careful that walls are not laden with information that lacks aesthetic value. Display children's art in a thoughtful and respectful

manner. Simple frames or backgrounds will set off art without distraction.

■ **Capture children’s attention with change.**

Offer new or different materials frequently. Materials that stay on the shelf from September through May become part of the scenery and are often ignored completely. Offer fewer materials at any one time and rotate them regularly to keep them new and engaging.

■ **Present familiar materials in new and unexpected ways.**

Use last week’s sensory material as part of this week’s collage project. Place floor toys such as blocks or a dollhouse on a table and add an underlay of interesting fabric. Move a painting project from the easel to the floor. Incorporate similar items into beautiful tabletop displays; include a related book or art print.

■ **Remember that change is a process over time.**

Recognize the small steps. Change comes slowly and requires patience and encouragement. Keep classroom environment goals on the front burner and revisit the discussion regularly. This is an on-going, long-term program goal.

Tackling classroom environments in a meaningful way can prove to be both challenging and rewarding. There are few things more important to a teacher than the environment they create for the children

who they teach. Classroom spaces are personal, a reflection of each teacher, which means that changing them is also personal. Yet change can be positive and energizing. The process of simplifying environments allows us to think about elements of design and what inspires us. Most importantly it allows us to consider what is best for all children in our programs and make positive changes toward that end.

References

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Make sense?: Does your indoor environment “make sense”? Send teachers to their classrooms to assess if the way their rooms are arranged and how materials and supplies are presented make sense. Then, try to fix the problems teachers observed during this reflective experience.

Just do it!: Saarela provides a pathway to creating inviting, uncluttered, and beautiful classroom space. Take the first step of setting the vision and then move on!

Using Beginnings Workshop to Train Teachers
by Kay Albrecht