

Minimize physical strain whenever possible. Place resilient cushioned mats in front of the diapering table and other places where adults stand a great deal. A small armrest pillow reduces strain when bottle-feeding infants. When working with mobile infants, low carpeted risers and cubes for adult seating help you observe, join floor play, and stand up easily. Steps for children to climb to the diapering table limit your need to lift them. Toddlers and twos can push low chairs to the table, assist with wiping tables with soapy water after meals, and pick up some toys. Keep a small dustpan and broom nearby so you can pick up toys from the floor without bending. Provide several kinds of comfortable adult seating as well.

Well-organized storage areas help you find things easily and enable you to remain attentive to the children. Adults also need places to store their personal belongings out of children's reach. Purses, bags, and coat pockets are filled with fascinating things that are sometimes dangerous for young children. You need spaces to store extra children's clothing, medications if they are stored in the room, and materials that are not currently in use.

Sending Positive Messages

Have you ever watched children and their family members when they first visit your room? They look around to decide what kind of place it is. They may be wondering:

- Do I belong here?
- Do these people know who I am? Do they like me?
- Is this a place I can trust?
- Will I be safe here?
- Will I be comfortable here?
- Can I move around and explore?
- Is this a calm and interesting place to be?
- Can I count on these people to take care of me?

Because you are the most important part of the learning environment, your daily interactions with infants, toddlers, and twos are the most important way to answer these concerns. Your arrangement of the physical environment also sends powerful messages to children and their families. Think about whether it conveys the messages you intend.

Chapter 2: Creating a Responsive Environment

You belong here. We like you.

- At children's eye levels, display photos of the children at play and with their families. Change them occasionally. Laminate them or use a Plexiglas® cover so children can touch them without tearing them. Put photos in unbreakable cube frames that children may carry around.
- Provide places for each child to store belongings from home.
- Make sure that pictures and materials honor the ethnic and individual characteristics of the children and families.
- Change the environment on the basis of your observations of children. For example, when children begin to climb on the bookshelf, add large cushions or plastic boxes that children may climb on instead.
- Encourage family members to bring interesting materials for children to explore, such as colorful bandanas, stackable bottle caps, or a guitar.

This is a place you can trust. You will be safe here.

- Arrange the furniture with safety in mind. Cushion surfaces where children are learning to move on their own, making sure that the cushioning does not interfere with balance.
- Store items near the places where they will be used. Label containers, cupboards, and shelves so that substitute teachers, adult visitors, and family members can find things easily.
- Limit environmental changes to help cautious children know that they can depend on the room arrangement.

This is a comfortable place to be.

- Include homelike touches and familiar household objects in the environment, such as curtains, large floor cushions, nontoxic plants, and even plastic tumblers to stack.
- Make sure that children's comfort items are available to them.
- Provide soft furniture, such as stuffed chairs and couches.
- Have enough space for teachers and family members to join children in their play.
- Place reading materials in many places around the room so children and adults may sit and enjoy them.
- Use soft textures and furnishings to help moderate noisy sounds. Soft colors, lights, and sounds foster a peaceful atmosphere.

You can move freely and explore on your own.

- Set aside sufficient space so that children can turn over, crawl, creep, pull up, stand, cruise, and walk around as they grow and change. Borrow this space from other areas when necessary. For instance, you can push cribs closer together temporarily, to leave more floor space when children are not napping.
- Block off areas that are unsafe for children.
- Store a variety of materials on shelves that are low enough for children to reach.
- Make sure that all of the materials stored or set out on low shelves are intended for children's use.
- Label shelves and containers with pictures and words so children know where to find and return materials.
- Display toys, books, and other materials in consistent places so children know where to find them.
- Designate areas for experiences as children's strengths, needs, and interests change.

We will take care of you.

- Set up areas for routines.
- Designate a crib, cot, or mat for each child.
- Provide a comfortable, supervised place where sick children may rest until their parents come.

Scan your room regularly to look for ways the environment can be enhanced to convey these positive messages. Small, special touches make the environment warm and welcoming to everyone: children, families, and you.

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