

Create a Learning Environment



An accessible digital version of this this document is available. Open by scanning the QR code with your smart phone, or visit the web site at:

https://scholarworks.umt.edu/ruralinst_early_childhood

A child's environment communicates expectations and supports their development. The space around children impacts their sense of order, invites play, and promotes feelings of ownership.

Sense of Order

Children receive play cues when materials are organized (paper is stacked by color, glue is in a small box, etc.). Their play becomes more engaging and complex. Children thrive when they can organize and put toys away. Children can:

- Match materials to pictures or words on the shelves
- Refill storage containers
- Sort items into boxes

Invite Play

Interesting materials invite children to explore the world around them. Open-ended materials need imagination and have no "rules." They heighten children's willingness and ability to explore.

Consider mixing up materials. For example, place large sheets of paper and pencils in a block area. Offer cardboard boxes and tubes, bird seed, or yards of fabric to kids to play time and see what happens!

Another strategy to invite play is to add "props." Empty baby food jars, small spoons, bibs, and a doll bed with blanket gives the child a clear invitation to play.

Create Ownership

Children are more likely to play with toys and each another when they feel part of the community. You can arrange the space to provide children a feeling of ownership and belonging. For example, make sure children can reach art materials and toys on their own. Ask children to arrange the play space and decide how to display their creations.

Arrange Space to Support Learning

Children with disabilities may not learn from the environment the same ways other children do. They may wait for adult direction or miss subtle cues. For example, the arrangement of a play kitchen may not offer enough information for some children, and they may not play in this area because they are unsure what to do there.

Look at the space from a child's perspective and think about the messages they receive from the environment. Things to keep in mind:

Every child needs to be able to move freely. If a child uses a walker or wheelchair, more room is required in the play areas, and toys should be within reach. Physical accessibility sends an immediate and positive message, and allows children to learn with their peers.

Play materials must match the children’s interests and ability levels. For example, a reading area should have books for a child learning numbers and books to practice turning pages.

Consider the messages you send with the toys. A baby’s rattle should not be offered to a child with a disability. There are other interesting toys to hold and shake, such as keys or measuring spoons. Children form opinions about their peers based on what they do and what they play with. Giving infant toys to an older child tells children that this child is not their peer.

Arrange toys and materials in a way that suggests how to play with them. A child who finds blocks forming a pen around farm animals gets a clear idea about what to do with these toys. You can give explicit cues by:

- Combining toys that may not go together. For example, put spoons in the block area.
- Arranging items as if someone had played with them. Place blocks to represent plates and food, and place spoons to suggest eating.
- Setting up enticing play scenes. This exposes the child to a variety of toys and playmates, and encourages play in all activity areas.
- Providing enough of the same materials so that children can play together. Supplying four or five spoons allows cooperative play.

Environmental arrangement is a simple and powerful strategy. Thoughtfully arranging your space adds learning opportunities to children’s play.



The Child Care Plus Center was based at the Rural Institute from 1987 to 2012. The nationally-focused Center supported and promoted inclusive early childhood environments.

Child Care Plus is no longer an active project. However, the materials are still relevant. To address the needs of a broad audience, Rural Institute staff updated several Child Care Plus resources in 2021.

The updated views expressed in this document may not reflect the original Child Care Plus purpose, or the official position of the Rural Institute for Inclusive Communities or University of Montana.

Rural Institute




<http://ruralinstitute.org>



 <http://ri.umt.edu/ccplus>

 rural@mso.umt.edu

 (406) 243-5467