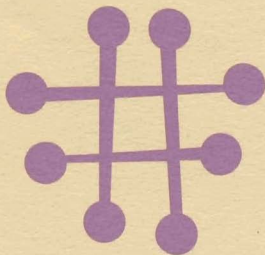


Children's Environments Series



The Physical
Environment
of a Child
Care Center
What Parents
Should Know



A Cornell Cooperative Extension Publication

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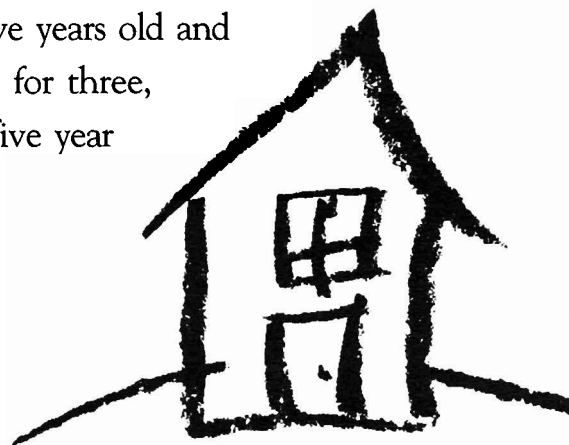
You can use this brochure as a checklist to evaluate the quality of a child care center's physical environment — the building, the classroom, the outdoor area, and how it supports the program.

A quality child care center has a program that provides for the social, emotional, physical, and intellectual development of the child; caregivers who are well trained, caring, and supportive of children's and parents' needs; and a physical environment that is safe, warm, and supportive of the program and the children's needs. These characteristics are important individually and in relationship to each other.

The environment in which your child may spend up to ten hours a day is a very important place. The caregivers help make it a special place, but the physical characteristics also play a major role. When selecting a child care center, parents should consider aspects of the center's and classroom's **physical environment**.

This brochure provides information about the quality of a child care center's physical environment—the building, the classroom, the outdoor area, and how it supports the program. You can use it as a checklist when looking at centers for your child. A center that does not have the characteristics mentioned here, however, is not necessarily a poor one. You should note those deficiencies, and if you have any questions, ask the center staff. At minimum, the center and classroom should meet all health and safety requirements.

The following information applies to child care centers serving ages birth to five years old and classrooms for three, four, and five year olds.



The Building

The building that houses the child care center is as important as the individual classrooms.

Some centers are in buildings designed specifically for their use, while others are in a space that was not originally designed as a child care center, such as a church, school, or community center.

Nevertheless, good centers have certain common characteristics. If you are not able to judge the adequacy of some of these characteristics, ask the center staff or contact your local department of health or social services.

- If meals are prepared or warmed on-site, the kitchen or food preparation area is clean and easily cleanable.
- If the center serves infants and toddlers, laundry facilities are on-site.
- Toilets for adults are separate from those intended for children's use.
- A place is provided if a child becomes ill. (It should be isolated from other children but monitored by staff members until a parent or other designated person can pick up the child.)

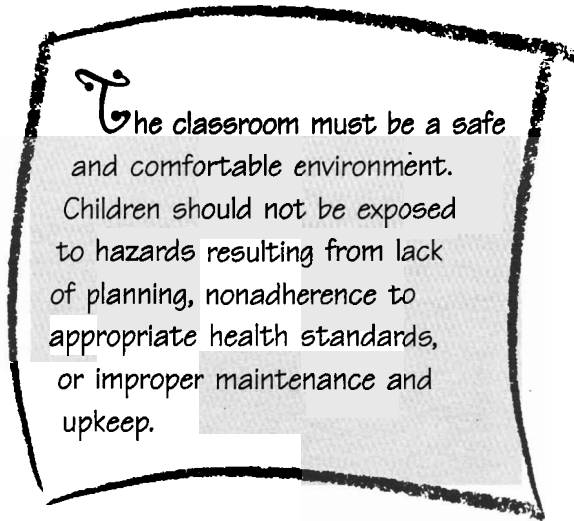
General

- The size of the center (total number of children served) permits the director and caregivers to be flexible in meeting individual children's needs.
- The entryway is welcoming to parents and children.
- The entry is monitored so that staff members are aware of everyone entering or leaving the building.
- The administrative offices are easily located by parents and visitors.
- A storage area for strollers or car seats is provided near the entry. (Requirements will vary depending on how families arrive at the center.)
- The center has an area where parents can talk with each other, use books and other resources, get information about the center and community events, and rest.
- The center has a place where caregivers can meet privately with parents.
- The center has an indoor space available to all children for large-muscle, active play like running, riding tricycles, and climbing.
- The center has a space for group meetings or where several classes can get together for joint activities.

Health and Safety

- The center meets all building, fire, safety, and licensing regulations. (Ask about fire drills; look for exit signs and an adequate number of doors from classrooms to corridors and to the outside.)
- The center is adequately lighted, heated, and ventilated. (Notice if spaces seem too hot and if odors are present.)
- The center has an adequate, safe water supply.
- Lead-free materials are used throughout the building.
- The building exterior is well maintained.
- The entryway is handicapped accessible.

The Classroom



General Condition

- The classroom is large enough to accommodate all the children.
- The group size is appropriate for this age group (between 14 and 20 children in a class).
- The floors and walls are clean and well maintained; both are in neutral colors.
- The ceilings are well maintained and have no missing tiles or falling paint chips.
- The eating area is clean and easily cleanable.
- Drinking water is available to children without adult assistance.

Lighting

- Classrooms have adequate natural light. (If the building was built as a child care center, classroom windows should be child height so that children can look out.)
- Window coverings allow for light to be regulated.
- Windows are safe so that children cannot fall out.
- If windows are operable, they are safe for children to open and close.

Toileting and Personal Hygiene

- Children's toilets are child height and easily accessible, preferably adjacent to the classroom so that children do not have to go out to the corridor.
- Caregivers can easily monitor toilets, but children have privacy.
- Children's toilets are handicapped accessible.
- Hand-washing sinks are available to children in the toilet area, classroom, or both.
- If there is a diaper-changing area, a hand-washing sink that is not also used in connection with food preparation is directly available to caregivers.
- The diaper-changing area provides privacy for the child, and young toddlers (early threes) can climb up to the area on their own.

Potential Hazards

- If animals are kept in the classroom, they are appropriately housed for their safety and the children's safety.
- Storage areas for hazardous or harmful materials are accessible only to staff members.
- Electrical outlets not in use are covered and tamper-proof.

The Program

A quality program is essential to providing your child with the opportunity to explore, learn, and develop a sense of mastery and self-esteem. It is especially important that the program reflect children's individual needs and differences as well as appreciation for all children's skills. The physical environment can either support a quality program or hinder its operation.

Children's Individual Needs

- Each child has his or her own place to keep personal belongings, such as a coat, boots, a blanket, extra clothes, a cuddly animal, and items to be taken home.
- Each child can personalize the place for his or her belongings.
- An area is provided where a child can be alone or quiet for a while; the area allows the child to observe what others are doing without having to participate, and it allows the caregivers to observe the child.
- Children can lie down and rest or take a nap; each child has his or her own mat or cot appropriate for the child's age.

Activities

- An adequate amount of developmentally and age-appropriate materials and toys are available for all children.
- The classroom offers children a variety of things to do, such as art and creative activities, construction activities, quiet activities, dramatic-play activities, manipulative activities (puzzles), observational and care activities (plants, animals), large-muscle activities, and group activities (singing, dancing, storytelling).
- Children can independently choose to work with open-ended, flexible materials, such as paint, clay, crayons, and paper.
- Children have opportunities to use materials with different textures, such as water, sand, clay, finger-paint, and dough.
- Children's books in the classroom are attractively displayed, easily accessible, and represent a diversity of people and topics.
- Activity areas are distinguished from each other so that children can tell where a specific activity is to be done; for example, a child can tell you, "Here's where we build blocks, here's where we paint and do clay, here's where we play house, here's where we play with sand. . . ."
- Each activity area has space for two to five children, adequate materials, a surface to use the materials, such as a table or floor, and storage.
- Storage areas are organized so that children can pick out things they want to play with and put them away when they're finished.
- Various areas and items are identified at children's eye level using words and symbols; for example, a shelf is labeled "trucks" and the toilet area is labeled "bathroom."
- Activity areas are logically located; for example, the water table is near a source of water and on a floor surface that is easily cleanable, and the reading area is not near the block area or dramatic play area.

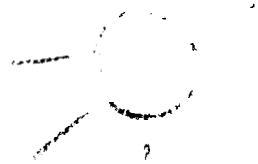
Classroom Decorations

- Children can easily identify the door or entry to their classroom.
- Children's work is displayed on walls and other places in the classroom at children's eye level; the displays change periodically.
- Children's work is done by the children and reflects the diversity of abilities and skills. (If all the shapes are cut out perfectly, chances are the children did not do the cutting; displayed artwork may range from scribbles to well-drawn pictures.)
- Standardized or purchased decorations are balanced with children's work and teacher-generated work.
- Displays are sometimes personalized, featuring, for example, pictures of children's pets or families. (Children's full names with phone numbers and addresses should not be displayed.)

Physical Variety

- The floor surfaces vary, such as carpeted and noncarpeted or elevated and sunken areas.
- Places to sit vary, such as chairs, floor, and soft furniture.
- Some space in the classroom is designated for large-muscle activities, such as play with large balls, balance beam exercises, and bowling.

The Outdoor Environment



The outdoor environment should be an integral part of a center's program. Almost any activity that takes place indoors can be done outdoors, such as arts and crafts, dramatic play, construction, and group activities. The outdoors, however, also provides a unique opportunity for exploring and large-muscle activities.

Safety and General Condition

- A safe, outdoor play space is nearby; preferably children do not have to cross a street or road.
- The outdoor play space has both shady areas and areas that receive sun.
- A fence or enclosure around the play space protects children from cars and intruders and the area from vandalism.
- The play space is large enough to accommodate all the children.
- The ground surface is free from broken glass, animal droppings, and other hazardous or inappropriate materials.
- The play space has a secure storage area for play equipment.

Active Play

- The play space has a variety of surfaces, such as grass, sand, and hard surface.
- The play equipment is safe, age-appropriate, and well maintained.
- The play space offers children a variety of things to do, such as pretend play, sensory play (water, sand, dirt), and play involving large-motor skills (slides, wagons, climbing structures, swings, tricycles).
- The play space has areas for active play and quiet play.
- The play space has an area for outdoor gardening.
- The play space has an outdoor water source.
- The play space permits handicapped children to participate in outdoor activities.



Other Resources

This brochure does not address all the things you should look for in a child care center. The appropriateness of the center for your child also will depend on the caregivers and the program. To assist you in your search, other resources may be helpful:

- Your local day care or child care council
- Your local county extension office or health department
- Your state Department of Social Services (in New York, 1-800-345-KIDS)
- The book *Daycare* by Alison Clarke-Stewart, Harvard University Press (1993)

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