



Best Practices

An effective learning environment supports children's social, emotional, cognitive, physical, and language development. Educators can create an environment in which young children thrive by offering purposeful areas and materials, incorporating daily routines, and providing opportunities for exploration.

Plan and Organize the Space

Young children need different types of spaces to promote physical, social, emotional, cognitive, and language development. Every area in the learning environment should be designed to offer activities and materials that prompt children to explore, experiment, and interact in different ways.

How can the learning environment be set up to support children's development?

- **Children need different types of spaces** to promote social, emotional, physical, cognitive, and language growth. All areas in the learning environment work together to nurture a young child's development.
 - **Open spaces** encourage music, movement, and freedom of expression. They also offer children "breathing room" away from others as well as opportunities for collaboration and interaction. For example, the music and movement area is large enough for children to move around freely; it is filled with props that stimulate different types of movement (such as hula-hoops and a parachute); and it has music that prompts children to be creative and interpretive in their physical movements.
 - **Circles** gather children together in large or small groups where they are given opportunities to listen to others, express themselves, and be respectful of physical space.
 - **Quiet spaces** allow children to self-regulate and pull back from the environment if they need to refocus or regroup.
 - **Cubbies** support a developing sense of identity, independence, and responsibility. They give each child a place to call his or her own, keep things of personal value, and feel pride of ownership.
 - **Learning centers**, such as the Art, Block, ABC, and Technology Centers, are small-group environments that are designed to support observation and exploration. They provide cozy spaces where children interact with others.

How can purposeful activities and materials help children get the most out of each learning center?

- **Activities and materials can prompt children** to explore, experiment, talk, and interact in different ways. For example,
 - At the Science and Math Center, activities and materials encourage children to explore and solve problems. For example, weighing items on a scale prompts children to notice the causes and effects of adding or taking away items.
 - At the Sensory Table Center, children have opportunities to explore textures and surfaces, such as the slipperiness of beans in water, the scratchiness of dry sand, and the heaviness of wet sand.
 - At the Pretend and Play Center, dress-up and make-believe activities allow children to imagine themselves in the real world, with specific roles and responsibilities (such as housekeeping, grocery store, and doctor's office)—a fundamental step in developing a positive self-identity. The materials also allow children to interact with one another and engage in conversations and negotiations of roles and activities.

Establish Routines

Young children thrive in an environment built around predictable routines.

- **Communicating with families** at morning drop-off and afternoon pick-up gives children a sense of collaboration, partnership, and trust between parents/guardians and educators.
- **Posting and following a daily schedule** helps children feel safe and in control, and helps them develop independence as they use it to prepare for what's ahead.
- **Announcing events before they happen** promotes mental preparedness and self-control. Children know what to expect of the group and can transition from one activity to the next more easily.
- **Having consistent rules and routines** helps children develop self-regulation and independence. When the same rules apply inside or outside, from center to center, and from educator to educator, children learn about boundaries and how to meet expectations.

Why are routines and procedures beneficial to young children?

- **Children need routines, procedures, rules, and transitions** that are thoughtful and consistent. When children follow a schedule, they know what to expect from their day and can better self-regulate.

How can educators help children understand routines and procedures?

- **Create and post a schedule that stays the same** from day to day. A posted schedule with pictures helps foster independence. Children can look to the schedule on their own to find out what is coming up.
- **Teach procedures for daily events.** Knowing and following the procedures for events that happen each day; i.e., drop-off, snack time, nap time, pick-up, etc., helps children develop independence and self-control. They can feel pride when they hang up their backpacks, check their cubbies, or choose a place for resting—all on their own. Independence, self-control, and a sense of pride are all building blocks for developing social competency.

How can educators use rules to support routines?

- **Establish consistent rules.** Rules help children develop social boundaries. When the same rules apply to all children, inside or outside, from learning center to learning center and from educator to educator, children learn what to expect from a group of children, a peer, a teacher, and themselves.
- **Communicate about rules with families.** Daily communication with parents/guardians creates a sense of family partnership, collaboration, and trust—especially when positive behaviors and attitudes shown by children are communicated.

How can educators support children with transitions that occur throughout the day?

- **Help children understand transitions.** Announce and prepare children for events before they happen. This helps children to mentally prepare to finish the current activity and move on to the next one.

Foster Exploration

Once the learning space is organized and predictable routines are in place, the joy of exploration can begin. Exploration fosters development across all areas—socially, physically, cognitively, linguistically, and emotionally. When children explore, they use all their senses to

take in and ask questions about the things they are exploring. The learning environment can foster this exploration.

- **Stimulating indoor and outdoor environments** offer activities and materials that promote questioning, predicting, and experimentation.
- **Explanatory language** allows children to hear vocabulary and use it to engage in conversations and to describe and interact with the world.
- **Activities that allow children to work alongside each other** build skills in communication and collaboration.

How can the learning environment be set up to encourage exploration?

- **Allow children time, space, and materials** with which to explore and experiment.
- **Use activities to promote peer interaction.** When children have opportunities to explore alongside other children, they learn how to get along and work together, improve language and communication skills, and solve problems.

What types of materials can educators provide to prompt children to explore ideas in multiple ways?

- **Provide stimulating, interesting, and engaging materials.** Different types of materials encourage different types of exploration. For example, sand, water, plastic cups, blocks, and frozen paint sticks invite children to investigate in different ways. (They can experiment with mixing sand and water; building towers with plastic cups; naming and sorting blocks by shape or color; painting with frozen paint, etc.)

What language strategies can educators use to support children's exploration?

- **Ask open-ended questions.** Open-ended questions prompt children to think deeply and critically. They begin with words like *what* and *how* and generally cannot be answered with a simple "yes" or "no."
 - What do the beans feel like?
 - How can you get the ice to melt?
 - How could you make your cup tower taller?
 - What do you think will happen if...?

- **Use language that defines and explains.** Guide conversations with children and use them as an opportunity to teach. For example, at the Block Center a teacher can use words such as *big*, *bigger*, *biggest* or *small*, *smaller*, *smallest*. This introduces children to ideas, concepts, and words that help them learn.

Glossary

cognitive development: the process of knowing, thinking, reasoning, and remembering

emotional development: the ability to recognize, identify, produce, and respond to emotions in yourself or others

language/linguistic development: the process of developing language skills to understand when others speak and to speak and engage in conversation

physical development: the ability to perform physical activities that require motor skills like running, jumping, and climbing

self-regulation: regulating or controlling one's emotions, thinking, and behavior

social competencies: the skills needed for successful social interaction; in young children these include making simple decisions, interacting with others in productive ways, and being able to resolve conflicts in appropriate ways

social development: the ability to use appropriate social skills to communicate and interact with others

View the self-paced video workshop at <http://resourcesforearlylearning.org/educators>.