

Module 4: Education Programs and Classroom Environment

Section A: Classroom Learning Environment

Introduction

Developing a classroom environment that provides young children with age-appropriate and developmentally appropriate learning and play experiences is an important responsibility for early childhood educators. A great majority of the teaching you do will rest solely with creating an environment that fosters learning. By adding materials and activities to your environment, you will direct the learning in your classroom. Children learn through opportunities to choose between a variety of active hands-on learning experiences that will encourage them to question and problem solve about the world around them. This section will provide you with basic information on developing a challenging and fun classroom environment for young children that will support growth in all the developmental domains.

Learning Objectives

After completing this section you will be able to:

- Explain the importance of the classroom environment on the learning process.
- Explain how the classroom environment provides experiences in all of the developmental areas (cognitive, language, social-emotional, large and small muscle).
- List three learning centers that are appropriate for different age groups.

Guiding Your Learning

As you work through this section reflect on your classroom. How can you provide an active, safe, and healthy classroom environment? How do you determine if materials are appropriate for the children in your classroom? How does the classroom environment create learning in all developmental areas: cognitive, language, social/emotional, and physical/motor development?

NOTE: The information contained in these sections are partial summaries of the DHS Child Care Licensing Regulations, are not intended to replace or provide an official interpretation of the Arizona Administrative Code and Arizona Revised Statutes for Child Care Facilities.

Summary of Key Arizona Child Care Licensing Regulations

Article 5 Facility Program and Equipment

R9-5-501 General Child Care Program, Equipment, and Health and Safety Standards

Classrooms are required to be furnished with age-appropriate and developmentally appropriate furnishings, equipment, learning materials and decorations. Learning materials, toys, and outdoor play materials need to be stored so they are accessible to children.

Article 5: Facility Program and Equipment

R9-5-501 General Child Care Program, Equipment, and Health and Safety Standards

Each classroom must have a variety of age appropriate activities that include individual, small group, and large group activities in each of the developmental domains, (cognitive, language, physical, and social/emotional) that influence the child's growth and development.

R9-5-502 Supplemental Standards for Infants

A. Infant programs must have a separate classroom space that provides enough space for outdoor and indoor areas for large muscle development. Toys and other materials need to be monitored for safety. Space, materials, and equipment are provided for infants to engage in large motor play, visual development, language, and cognitive development. The schedule for infants needs to include age-appropriate quiet and active activities, and tummy time. Caregivers need to follow the infant's schedule and pattern of sleeping and awake times.

B. Regulations require that infants who are awake spend less than 30 minutes in a crib, swing, high chair, infant seat, or other confining equipment. Infant walkers are not allowed in child care programs. Regulations prohibit screen time for infants and toddlers.

R9-5-504: Supplemental Standards for 1-year-old and 2-year-old Children

1-year-old or 2-year-old children who are awake may not spend more than 30 consecutive minutes in a crib, high chair or the confinement area. One and two year old children are required to have access to a sufficient amount of age appropriate toys, materials, and equipment. Materials must be of the size that cannot be swallowed. Toys must not have sharp edges or points. Materials should include items for indoor and outdoor play and learning that promote language, literacy, social/emotional, physical, and cognitive development.

R9-5-505: Supplemental Standards for 3-year-old, 4-year-old, and 5-year-old Children

Requires that classrooms for three, four, and five year old children contain a sufficient quantity and variety of materials such as art supplies, blocks, books, dress –up clothing, science materials, and musical instruments.

R9-5-506: Supplemental Standards for School-age Children

Programs for school age children must provide age appropriate equipment, toys, and materials including a quiet homework space and appropriate outdoor play equipment. Provide age-appropriate toys, materials, and equipment accessible to enrolled children in each activity area in a quantity sufficient to meet the needs of the enrolled children in attendance including:

- a. Arts and crafts
- b. Games
- c. Puzzles and toys to enhance manipulative skills
- d. Books
- e. Science materials
- f. Sports equipment
- g. Outdoor play equipment
- h. Provide enrolled school-age children with a quiet study area.

R9-5-507: Supplemental Standards for Children with Special Needs

Children with special needs are required to have access to developmentally appropriate toys, learning materials and equipment. Staff members should assist the child in participating in the daily schedule of activities.

Classroom Environment

The child care classroom environment provides the foundation for children's growth, development, learning, and the formation of relationships between children, parents, and teachers. For young children in early learning and care programs, the center and classroom become a second home. Like a home, child care programs are places where children and teachers live. Children and teachers participate in daily routines including snacks, meals, diapering, toileting, resting, playing, and interacting between teachers, parents, and children. As in a home, early learning centers require space, furniture, and equipment to create a warm and nurturing environment to conduct daily activities. The design of the classroom provides the structure and resources for language, cognitive, physical, and social/emotional development of young children.

Stop and Reflect

Think about your home. How do you feel when you are home? What are the activities you like to pursue? What different types of furniture are in your home? How is your home decorated? Think about your classroom. Are there ways that you can make your classroom environment more home-like?

To acclimate yourself to your new classroom take a visual scan of the room's physical arrangement and design.

- How is the room designed to manage for the daily routines such as snacks and meals, hand washing, diapering or toileting, naptime, and transitions between activities?
- Where are learning materials and activities stored?
- What types of learning materials are in the classroom? Are there art supplies, books, blocks, water play, dramatic play, and math materials?
- Where are the teaching materials stored?
- How is the classroom space divided?
- Does the classroom have larger areas for group activities and smaller areas for individual or small groups?

- Are there areas for quiet and active activities?
- Is there an area for children to practice their large muscle skills in the classroom?
- How are children's personal items including, coats, backpacks, diapers and extra clothing stored?

Classroom environments need to strike a balance between providing opportunities for concrete environmental exploration that promote learning and a safe, warm, nurturing, and comfortable atmosphere. Classroom room arrangement, furnishings, decoration, and organization of materials help to create the classroom atmosphere. Teachers who create a pleasant classroom space that minimizes noise levels, is visually appealing, and divided into organized areas create a positive and calm classroom atmosphere.

In your first weeks of working in a new classroom, take time to observe the children during activities and routines to determine the effectiveness of the classroom environment. If you decide that changes would improve opportunities for interactions, development and learning opportunities, talk to your Center Director about your ideas for changing the classroom environment.

The Basic Room

Typically classroom furnishings are made of materials that can be easily cleaned and sanitized. Hard floor surfaces including vinyl or laminate floor are easily cleaned and can be softened with area rugs or larger areas of carpeting.

- Basic classroom furnishings include: tables, chairs, shelves, area carpets, soft furniture for seating, quiet areas, dramatic play furniture, and sleeping mats.
- Basic furniture in infant and toddler classrooms includes: cribs, feeding tables or chairs, diaper changing stations, carpet area or area rugs, and adult size chairs.
- Adding elements such as soft furniture and pillows creates a softer atmosphere and encourages children and teachers to engage in relaxed and calm activities after active play periods.

Dividing the Classroom

Activity areas, learning centers, or interest centers are interchangeable names for the smaller area divisions in a classroom where individual or small groups of children can select or engage in a specific type of activity. In this manual the term learning centers will be used to refer to classroom areas. Early care and education teachers use learning centers as a central part of lesson planning that encourages children to self-select activities. Centers provide structure to the experiences of young children by providing a planned environment that encourages children to independently explore learning materials.

Characteristics of Learning Centers

- Teachers may initially plan the content of a learning center based on the developmental level and interests of the children. Older children can contribute to planning the content of learning centers based on their emerging interests.
- A learning center has boundaries that help to define the number of children and the activities for the area. For example: A toddler room may have a quiet small space next to a wall with an activity box and a pillow, a perfect place for a single child to rest. The four year old classroom may have a large dramatic play and dress-up area that encourages children to engage in collaborative and cooperative play experiences. The key is to plan the size and boundaries of the learning center based on the age of the children and the purpose of the learning experience.
- A learning center contains the furniture and equipment required for the activity and guides the child in selecting activities. Examples: A reading area will need to include storage for books, such as a basket or a book shelf, and soft elements, such as a pillow or chair that allows children to sit down and read. A writing center includes a table, chairs, and shelf with writing materials such as paper, pencils, crayons, and stencils that can be used in writing and drawing.
- A learning center includes the materials required for the center activities and facilitates developmental play and learning experiences. The block center would include the shelf unit for storage of the blocks, wooden unit blocks, plastic blocks, props such as cars, people, or animals, car mat, and pictures of buildings, race tracks, and other topics of interest.

Learning/Interest Centers

The following is a list of learning/interest centers that you may find in a child care center classroom. The type and number of learning/interest centers in a classroom is dependent on the ages and developmental stage of the children. The type and number of learning centers in an infant classroom may be more limited than the types and number of learning centers in a pre-kindergarten classroom. Learning Center activities, materials, and equipment should reflect the ages and developmental stages of the children in the classroom. Below are examples of learning centers and the materials that could be included:

- **Creative/Art Center** : clay, playdough, or building materials
- **Sensory/Science Center**: water, sand, and props such as materials for pouring, shifting, floating, or hiding
- **Reading/Literacy Center**: books, puppets, flannel board and felt shapes or letters, carpet, a chair or large pillows for sitting.
- **Block Center** : large wooden blocks, Duplos, wooden trucks, people, animals
- **Small Motor Center**: puzzles, small building blocks, smaller manipulatives
- **Writing Center**: paper, pencils, marker, crayons
- **Math Center**: numbers, counting, colors, matching, and sequencing materials
- **Dramatic Play Center**: housekeeping furniture, dolls, dress up clothes, purses, plastic dishes
- **Music Center**: instruments
- **Quiet area**: chairs, rugs, pillows, and stuffed toys

- **Circle Time area:** For preschoolers to do large group activity which should be a very small portion of the day.
- **Large/Gross Motor area:** a place for children to use their large muscles inside the facility.

Basic considerations for developing classroom learning centers include:

- Accessible storage of learning center materials. Rotate the materials on the learning center shelves on a regular basis to maintain the children's interest. Too many materials on the shelves can become chaotic while not enough materials or the same materials may not provide sufficient opportunities for exploration and learning.
- Materials should be accessible to children without the assistance of a teacher.
- Learning or interest centers may be labeled with the name of the area and a picture that represents the learning activities.
- Shelves, clear plastic containers, and baskets may be labeled with the pictures of the materials in the container.
- Create easier clean up by designing the classroom space so that the art area, water play, and other messy areas are close to a water source and on a hard floor surface instead of carpet.
- Manage the noise level in the classroom by placing loud activities in one area and quiet activities in another area. For example block building might be on a carpeted space next to the dramatic play area. The reading area should be grouped in an area that includes quieter activities such as the writing area or quiet area.
- Dividers help to define the specific spaces for classroom activities. A divider is anything that defines a space including a shelf, a couch, fabric hung from the ceiling, or display boards. Dividers provide the children with specific visible areas to conduct their activities. One example is the block area may be defined by shelves on two sides, a wall, and a small carpet that indicates how far the block building can extend into the classroom.

The specific design of each classroom is typically guided by the age and developmental stage of children and the program philosophy. Ages and developmental stages guide the classroom equipment, arrangement, furniture and equipment based on the daily routines, learning activities, and interactions between children and early childhood teachers. Thinking about the major developmental goals for the children and what you and the children do each day is a good way to develop a classroom environment that is effective and efficient.

Reflection

Refer to the major developmental milestones for the children in your age group in Module 3. What types of learning centers, equipment, furniture might be required for the children?

Infant Classrooms:

Provide spaces for daily care-giving routines and concrete exploration. Include soft spaces and areas to encourage attachment between early childhood teacher and children. Provide equipment and materials to encourage the physical, language, cognitive, and social-emotional development. Infants are developing their physical skills: learning to roll over, sit up, crawl, and walk. Older infants are beginning to vocalize and to develop language skills. A consistent environment provides infant with a sense of security and trust that is essential in developing attachments. You may need to separate the classroom so the young infants are safe while the mobile infants can explore.

Toddler Classrooms:

Toddlers are walking, running, and beginning to express themselves. Toddlers are active explorers and investigators as they learn about their world through sensory and hands-on experiences. As active explorers, toddlers have a tendency to move at a rapid pace in areas that are open. Providing smaller classroom learning centers with defined boundaries is one way to reduce the tendency of running. Smaller areas help in preventing behavior issues that may occur if there too many toddlers crowded in the same area.

Toddlers enjoy different sensory activities including Playdough or water play. Toddlers require short open shelving units with accessible materials in open bins. Although toddlers like to dump materials they are learning about cause and effect and dumping out can be followed up with pick it up. Since dumping is one of the toddler's favorite activities, do not overload the baskets and containers with materials. A little goes a long way. Toddlers enjoy dramatic play with hats, purses, or shoes. Soft or cardboard blocks provide toddlers with opportunities to safely build a tower. Cars, trucks, baby dolls, and stuffed animals are additional learning materials to include in a toddler classroom. Books and a quiet area should also be available in your toddler classroom. Since toddlers are developing their large motor skills, you need to have a place in your classroom where it is safe for them to climb and explore.

DHS requires that Toddler classrooms ensure that each activity area has a supply of age-appropriate toys, materials, and equipment that are too large for a child to swallow and free from sharp edges and points, in a quantity sufficient to meet the needs of the enrolled children in attendance including:

- Art supplies
- Books
- Rubber or soft plastic balls
- Puzzles and toys to enhance manipulative skills
- Soft Blocks
- Washable soft toys and dolls
- Musical instruments
- Indoor and outdoor equipment to enhance large muscle development

Preschool and Pre-Kindergarten Classrooms:

In the preschool and pre-kindergarten classrooms children are continuing to explore their environment through exploration and interaction with others. Preschool and pre-kindergarten children have developed communication skills, enjoy playing with other children, engage in active play that challenges physical abilities, enjoy make-believe and dramatic play situations, are becoming interested in words and numbers, know colors, and are developing small muscle skills required for cutting and writing.

With increased abilities and many interests the preschool and pre-k teacher, the classroom environment presents an opportunity for early childhood teachers to engage preschool and pre-k children by offering learning centers, activities, and materials that build on new interests and growing abilities. The learning centers in a preschool and pre-k classroom may include art, reading, writing, science, math, creative, dramatic play, housekeeping, or other centers developed around the interests of the children. Keeping the learning centers relevant and exciting for the children may require changes of materials on a regular basis. For example: one week the children may be intrigued with the trucks building a new road outside the center. The block center is a perfect place to build on this interest by including trucks, cars, pictures of the roads, road maps, and using the blocks to build the roads or bridges. The next week, another interest may emerge that can be applied to a different area of the classroom. If your program uses themes as part of the curriculum, you should add materials to each center that enhance the theme. For example, if your theme is pets, your dramatic play area could be a veterinary office, books in the library should be about pets, and your art area might encourage children to make pictures about pets.

DHS regulations require age-appropriate toys, materials, and equipment accessible to enrolled children in each activity area in a quantity sufficient to meet the needs of the enrolled children in attendance including:

- Art supplies
- Blocks
- Books and posters
- Toys and dress-up clothes
- Indoor and outdoor equipment to enhance large muscle development
- Puzzles and toys to enhance manipulative and categorization skills
- Science materials
- Musical instruments

Although DHS give us some basic requirements, below are some more suggestions for materials for your learning centers:

- Construction toys and props for the block area such as cars and animals
- Pattern-making materials including beads, color cubes, teddy bear counters
- Matching games and materials
- Sequencing stories and activities
- Sewing activity cards
- Measuring equipment

- Number/math activities
- Writing materials (pencils, paper, markers, crayons)
- Alphabet and phonics activities
- Listening station
- Dramatic play equipment such as a kitchen set
- Sensory table or tubs

Learning materials should be stored on low shelves that are accessible to the children without adult assistance and labeled in such a manner that children can put the materials back on the shelf.

School Age/Before and After School Programs:

Many child care centers provide programs for children who attend elementary school. During the school year the children are at the child care center before and after school, on half days, and during school breaks. Although before and after school programs may encourage continued academic learning, the children have been in school all day and after school programs need to be less structured while continuing to reinforce academic skills. School age children require a different type of classroom environment that includes a snack and meal area, reading, homework, arts and crafts, games, building with blocks or legos, computer area, and an area for socialization with friends. The playground provides opportunities for the school age child to practice physical and sports skills.

Before school programs may include breakfast and free choice of areas. After school times may include a substantial snack, long-term projects, homework, outdoor play, games, and computer time. As children become older, staff can encourage the development of independence by increasing expectations of behavior and the level of responsibility in working with the staff to plan classroom activities, themes, and events.

Classroom furnishings may include larger tables, chairs, softer chairs, a couch, large pillows, computer station, age appropriate video games, shelf units for equipment, books, CD player, musical instruments such as a keyboard and rhythm instruments, and a karaoke machine.

During the school year, homework is a concern for parents and school-age children. It is important to have a quiet area that is specifically designated for homework. Make sure the children have items such as paper, markers pencils, rulers, tape, scissors, staplers, etc to complete their work.

DHS regulations require materials and equipment be accessible to enrolled children in each activity area in a quantity sufficient to meet the needs of the enrolled children in attendance including:

- Arts and crafts
- Games
- Puzzles and toys to enhance manipulative skills
- Books
- Science materials

- Sports equipment
- Outdoor play equipment
- Provide enrolled school-age children with a quiet study area

Technology in the Classroom

Computers and computer programs may be one of the learning centers in the classroom. Computers will be part of the future for all of the children in today's early childhood programs. The application of technology to daily life and to child care is a growing influence for teachers, parents, and children. From digital cameras, to smart phones, to I-Pads, and computers, the preschool children are familiar with the uses of technology in their lives. Educators state that much of computer learning for preschool children involves the interactions between the teacher and the child. Three year old children can begin to use computer and discovery-based software in a meaningful way with adult assistance and facilitation. It is important to keep in mind that time at a computer is referred to as "screen time" and needs to be limited during the early years.

Talk to your Center Director regarding the amount of screen time that is allowed for the children in your classroom.

A Classroom to Enhance Learning: Example

Ms. Coleman is unhappy with her classroom layout. In her classroom, furniture is lined up along the walls. One big open space is in the middle of the room. Ms. Coleman's children spend a lot of time in that open space. They sometimes make a lot of noise that is hard for her to control. She wants her classroom to better support the learning of the children. Instead of one big space, she wants to establish a number of smaller, quiet areas where children can go to examine books, write and draw, engage in social play, and work with puzzles and other games. Ms. Coleman transformed her classroom to enhance her students' learning opportunities. Today:

- She uses cupboards, screens, and tables to divide her classroom into children's work areas. She does this to better define the activities that will take place in different parts of the room. She makes and puts up these labels for the areas: Library Corner, Games and Puzzles Table, Writing Table, Blocks Place, Art Studio, Housekeeping Room, and Science Space.
- She makes sure that all of the children can comfortably sit on the big rug next to the Library Corner. She knows she will have them sit there when she and the entire class read books and do other activities together.
- She provides dress-up clothes and other props in the Blocks Place and the Housekeeping Room. These will be the areas in which the children engage in dramatic play. She provides writing materials— pencils, crayons, and paper—next to the Writing Table as well as in the Art Studio, Blocks Place, and Housekeeping Room. The children often incorporate writing into their artwork as well as their dramatic play. She encourages them to label their drawings and to write out lists and plans for their dramatic play.

- She displays many examples of printed materials, yet she does not display excessive print or print that is not meaningful. The children are able to see labels, signs, and printed directions in the places that count.
- Alphabet displays on a nearby wall were placed at the children's eye level as they sit at writing tables.
- The children's work was displayed throughout the room.
- She changes the labels as different toys, games, and puzzles came into the classroom. She has the children provide the names and sometimes the signs. As the children learn more about print, the labels that appear in the classroom get longer and more detailed.
- She places a rug and big pillows in the Library Corner, making it a cozy, inviting place. The children quickly learn that they can go there with several friends to look at and discuss books and magazines.
- She makes sure that the bookcases contain a variety of books— traditional storybooks, modern storybooks, alphabet books, number books, wordless pictures books, and books about animals, plants, and the peoples who live in different parts of the world. She includes books that portray the cultural and language backgrounds of the children in the classroom. She keeps current issues of magazines for young children on an easy-to-reach shelf.

Most of the books on the bookcases come from the classroom library, but others are part of a revolving collection of books that Ms. Coleman gets from the public library. She changes the collection of books every few weeks, based on the topics being studied by the children and their current interests.

- As the year progresses and the children create their own books, she sets up a special display shelf to hold the children's work.
- She prepares one shelf for cassette players, headphones, and tapes for the children to use to listen to stories.

Applying Your Knowledge

How does the information presented in this section affect your work with young children?

The early childhood classroom provides the foundation for child and staff interactions and children's development and learning. An organized classroom environment can assist the teacher in facilitation of learning and positive guidance. Age appropriate classroom equipment and furnishings can facilitate children's development of self-help skills, independence, and set the tone and atmosphere for classroom activities.

Check your Understanding

- ✓ Explain the importance of the classroom environment on the learning process.
- ✓ List an example of classroom learning experiences in cognitive, language, social/emotional, and physical development (large and small muscle).
- ✓ List three learning centers that are appropriate for the group of children in your classroom.

Resources

Printable Resource

DHS – Toys and Equipment – Guidelines for Compliance

http://www.azdhs.gov/als/childcare/documents/providers/forms/toys_equipment_compliance.pdf

Additional Resources

Scholastic – Explore on the Floor <http://www.scholastic.com/browse/subarticle.jsp?id=3959>

References

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Wardle, F. . Creating Indoor Environments for Young Children, Retrieved from Community Playthings website <http://www.communityplaythings.com/resources/articles/whatallchildrenneed/creatingindoorenvironments.html>

Module 4-Section A Worksheet

Explain the importance of the classroom environment on the learning process.

List an example of classroom learning experiences in cognitive, language, social/emotional, and physical development (large and small muscle).

Cognitive:

Language:

Social/Emotional:

Physical Large Muscle:

Physical Small Muscle:

List three learning centers that are age appropriate for the group of children in your classroom.

1.

2.

3.
