

Early Childhood Environments: Designing Effective Classrooms

Est. Time: 30 Minutes

Objective

Better understand how to arrange the physical, social, and temporal components of an early childhood environment to promote the full participation of all children.

DEC Recommended Practices

This activity addresses the Division for Early Childhood (DEC) Recommended Practices topic areas outlined below. (DEC is a division of the Council for Exceptional Children).

Environment

- E1.** Practitioners provide services and supports in natural and inclusive environments during daily routines and activities to promote the child's access to and participation in learning experiences.
- E2.** Practitioners consider Universal Design for Learning principles to create accessible environments.
- E3.** Practitioners work with the family and other adults to modify and adapt the physical, social, and temporal environments to promote each child's access to and participation in learning experiences.
- E6.** Practitioners create environments that provide opportunities for movement and regular physical activity to maintain or improve fitness, wellness, and development across domains.

Overview

Creating environments that support children's learning can sometimes be difficult for early childhood teachers. Well-designed classroom environments:

- Support responsive care giving
- Foster independence and feelings of competence in young children
- Encourage staff efficiency
- Promote children's engagement
- Decrease challenging behavior
- Facilitate appropriate social interactions among children
- Provide structure and predictability

The table on the page below describes three interdependent components of early childhood environments: physical, social, and temporal. These three components need to be carefully designed and implemented to create an environment that is conducive to the learning and development of infants, toddlers, and preschoolers.

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Components of Early Childhood Environments	Definition	Examples
Physical Environment	Overall design and layout of a room and learning centers	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Arrangement of furnishings (e.g., bookcases, tables, shelves, easels, pillows) and floor coverings (e.g., carpet or foam for quiet areas, center area rug) • Selection and placement of materials (e.g., toys, books, art materials) • Design and display of visual materials (e.g., posters, bulletin boards, pictures) • Lighting (e.g., natural, lamps) • Sound (e.g., quiet areas)
Social Environment	Interactions that occur within the classroom between peers, teachers, and family members	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Group size and composition • Teacher- versus child-initiated activities • Materials and activities that promote interaction • Family involvement
Temporal Environment	Timing, sequence, and length of routines and activities throughout the day	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • A variety of activities (high-energy and quiet) • Effective transitions • Routines and schedules • Continuity between program and home

Activity

If you are a teacher with an existing classroom, consider your current classroom environment. Or, if you do not currently have a classroom, visit an early childhood classroom in your area:

- Observe the different physical, social, and temporal components of the classroom environment. In the table below, note at least five items related to these components in the column labeled "Observation."
- For each of the five items, suggest changes that could be made to support the full participation of all children in the classroom. Note your changes in the column labeled "Suggestion" in the table below.
- In the third column, labeled "Environmental Component," indicate whether the changes to the environment are physical (P), social (S), and/or temporal (T). Note that the changes may be a mixture of all three environmental components.

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Observation	Suggestion	Environmental Component