

The Learning Environment

The physical classroom environment has a profound effect on individual children, the group as a whole, and your teachers. A physical setting that is safe, attractive, comfortable, and well-designed helps children engage in classroom activities. Such an environment can support children's educational goals and enable teachers to observe and interact with them in positive ways.

Classrooms that are conducive to high-quality learning experiences include:

- ✓ Adequate indoor space that encourages children to move and play freely, alone, or with a friend, protected from intrusion from other children.
- ✓ Child-related displays to show work done by the children and relate to current activities.
- ✓ Developmentally appropriate play equipment for both physical and quiet play.
- ✓ Low shelving units that define center areas and organize the materials to be accessed by children in each center.
- ✓ Materials that are visible and readily accessible to children so that they can remove and replace them independently or with minimal assistance.
- ✓ Chairs and table space of a suitable size available for each child which should be located in classroom learning centers and not positioned together as one central area of the classroom.
- ✓ Adequate time for rest or relax that is scheduled to meet the needs of each child, and space and quiet activities for children who do not sleep.
- ✓ Physical space divided into interest areas/centers with varied materials that offer children a range of clear choices, with materials changed frequently to align with curriculum.
- ✓ Access for children with disabilities by compliance with Title 2 of the Americans with Disabilities Act of 1990 and the Rehabilitation Act of 1973. The program makes reasonable accommodations and provides access to the full range of activities provided.
- ✓ An illustrated schedule posted in the classroom with activities that meet the variety of learning needs of young children.

Action Steps for Site and System Leaders

Emerging	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <input type="checkbox"/> Support teachers to effectively organize classrooms to maximize learning time and reduce disruptions or other issues caused by inefficient placement of centers and activities. <input type="checkbox"/> Ensure that classrooms spaces are safe, accessible for all children, with appropriately sized materials. <input type="checkbox"/> Require that teachers post an illustrated schedule of daily activities, and ensure activities are balanced between teacher-directed, child-initiated, bathroom, meals, and nap times.
Satisfactory	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <input type="checkbox"/> Adapt classroom instruction to enable including support personnel in the classroom, rather than removing children from the classroom to receive support. <input type="checkbox"/> Use flexible seating arrangements that facilitate peer and adult interactions, instead of desks or rows. <input type="checkbox"/> Observe whether children are able to move freely from one interest area to another, and provide recommendations to teachers to support increased independence. <input type="checkbox"/> Review schedules to ensure transition times are limited and as predictable as possible, and support teachers to plan transitions with a learning goal.
Successful	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <input type="checkbox"/> Organize materials to align with curriculum, and switch materials frequently to provide a variety that interests and engages children. <input type="checkbox"/> Optimize classroom set up for independent play facilitated by teachers, with many options available for children that they can access and utilize on their own, without the help of an adult. <input type="checkbox"/> Consider how balance of activities should shift over the course of the year to transition children into the next grade successfully.

Using Outdoor Play to Increase High-Quality Experiences

For young learners, outdoor play is conducive to exploration and learning that is critical to their development. Site and system leaders are responsible for creating multiple opportunities during the school day for teachers to take advantage of time and space outside. While level of activity may vary, outdoor play allows children to be active in the mode of their choosing and to practice movement and motor skills. Outdoor play also promotes social and emotional learning and development of social skills through high-quality peer interactions and even adult-facilitated interactions.

High- quality outdoor play is unstructured, but facilitated by adults to provide children opportunities to:

- ✓ Engage in self-directed social interactions with their peers
- ✓ Exercise and exert excess energy, allowing better focus when in class
- ✓ Practice and master emerging gross motor and physical skills like running, leaping, and jumping
- ✓ Use imagination and creativity to develop important skills (example: develop their cognitive and social/emotional skills through inventing games, improve their communication skills and vocabulary as they invent, modify, and enforce social rules, understand number relationships as they keep score and count, and understand social customs as they learn to play together and cooperate)

In addition to providing opportunities for free play outdoors, site and system leaders should think about how lessons, centers, and other activities can be conducted outside when appropriate. In many situations, curriculum can be modified to incorporate outdoor time and space. Even short breaks outside between longer instructional activities can benefit child development and maximize academic benefits.

Action Steps for Site and System Leaders

Emerging	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <input type="checkbox"/> Provide opportunities multiple times a day for unstructured free play outside. <input type="checkbox"/> Provide developmentally appropriate and safe spaces for children to freely practice gross motor skills, with sufficient materials and equipment and adequate accessibility for all children. <input type="checkbox"/> Train staff to supervise outdoor free play safely, including preventing bullying or aggressive behavior and intervening if a child’s physical or emotional safety is at risk.
Satisfactory	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <input type="checkbox"/> Train staff to facilitate activities such as games to teach rules and conflict resolution through high-quality peer and adult/child interactions. <input type="checkbox"/> Create policy to disallow withholding outdoor free play as a punitive measure.
Successful	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <input type="checkbox"/> Support teachers to modify their curriculum and add outdoor centers to increase learning experiences and activities outdoors. <input type="checkbox"/> Allow brief, frequent breaks during the typical school day for unstructured outdoor play.

Basic Safety Practices

For classrooms serving young children, it is especially important to maintain a safe environment that children are free to explore with limited possibilities of harm. In addition to minimizing potential hazards within the classroom, classroom space must meet all Fire Marshal and Sanitarian requirements, including but not limited to presence of smoke detectors, fire extinguishers, and total square footage per child.

Action Steps for Site and System Leaders

- Create and adhere to written policies and regulations that address the health and safety requirements of all children, including those with disabilities and identified health needs.
- Establish written policies to protect children against child abuse, including providing materials and training to parents and staff that address procedures and requirements around reporting suspected child abuse and/or neglect.
- Create plans for medical emergencies and evacuation procedures.
- Keep adequate unexpired first aid supplies available and accessible to adults trained to administer medication.
- Have a working and readily available telephone at each program site, which is accessible to all staff even if the administrative office may be closed. Appropriate emergency numbers for the local fire department, police department, poison control, and local medical facility shall be prominently posted on or near the telephone; and
- Keep prescription and over-the-counter medications, poisons, cleaning supplies, harmful chemicals, equipment, tools, and any substance with a warning label stating it is harmful locked in a room or in cabinets inaccessible to children.