



## STANDARD 9: PHYSICAL ENVIRONMENT

Well organized, equipped, and maintained environments support program quality by facilitating the learning, comfort, health, and safety of the children and adults. For children's social, emotional, and cognitive development, the décor matters too. As explained in this article, the decorations in your preschool classroom can play an important role in helping children feel welcomed, calm, and ready to learn.



# Less Is More

## Taking Distractions Out of the Physical Environment

*Kristen Kennen*

In my role supporting my area's NAEYC Accreditation Facilitation Project, I am often asked to go into early childhood classrooms and provide feedback on the physical environment. At these visits, I look at and analyze the learning centers that have been created; the variety, amount, and appropriateness of materials; the overall room arrangement (traffic flow, space for children to be alone, in pairs, in small groups, and in a full group); and whether the environment reflects both the diversity of the children and families served and the diversity in the larger community.

I also spend time looking at what is being displayed on the walls and the backs of furniture and equipment. In doing so, I reflect on three components of the wall space real estate:

- The overall quantity of what is being displayed
- The amount of space given to child-created works vs. teacher-made or store-bought items
- The educational value and relevance of the images that are posted

Each of these components can be a point of reflection, helping you be intentional and selective when displaying materials around the room. Your choices have the potential to broaden children's interests, expose them to meaningful concepts, and make them feel part of a nurturing classroom community.

### Encouraging calmness—and learning!

When I reflect on the overall quantity of materials displayed, I think about the needs of the young children who spend time in the space. Many children have difficulty tuning out an excess of stimulation—and having lots of visuals can distract young children, resulting in less learning. Classrooms that have fewer visuals on the walls have a calmer feel.

This intentional reduction of visual stimulation fits nicely with the fact that children in early childhood tend to not regulate themselves easily. A more neutral visual environment can help

to compensate for the general noisiness of children: their joyful laughs, inquisitive chatter, shouts of frustration with peers, or tears about a missed parent.

In some classrooms I have visited, the amount of displayed material can be described as visual overload: I remember one classroom that felt like the walls were pulsing as I entered it! In addition to how the walls are being used, I also factor in the carpets when determining the visual load. Many carpets are designed with lots of bright colors, patterns, and pictures on them. While the manufacturer may do so with the belief that these designs are aesthetically pleasing (or good at hiding stains), I have had the unpleasant experience of unexpectedly sitting on a hard, bumpy toy simply because it blended into all the designs on the carpet. Ouch!

## Helping children—and their creations—shine

I also look to see whether child-created works dominate the walls. This helps children feel like part of the classroom community and promotes the value of their artistic creations. Ideally, the artwork displayed is truly creative (each piece looks unique) instead of product-oriented projects that all look the same.

In one toddler classroom I visited, the visual environment was enriched with a group feather collage done on contact paper. The teacher had removed the paper backing, exposing the sticky side. She mounted it on the back of a low shelving unit and allowed the toddlers to come and go, stopping to add a variety of colored feathers of assorted sizes.

### Creating an Early Childhood Learning Environment

A Conversation with Krissy Maksymiw, *Atelierista* (Studio Art Teacher)

Child Development Center Laboratory School at Naugatuck Valley Community College

#### What guides your thoughts as you decide what to hang on the walls (or put on the backs of shelving units)?

I look for moments or projects that really had the children engaged. Since the art studio is a shared space in our center and wall space is limited, I like to display collaborative pieces that make a statement when you walk in.

#### How do you ensure that your classroom isn't visually overstimulating?

I think that having a neutral palette as a base for walls, furniture, window treatments, baskets, containers, and rugs really helps keep a room from becoming too visually overstimulating. That way, when I do display the children's art, or when I set a table for an art experience or provocation, it doesn't compete with the permanent elements of the studio.

#### Can you describe a time when you felt a child had a positive interaction with something that you had displayed?

I experience this every April at our annual art exhibit, which is displayed at the college. Every child is represented, and all the children are excited to see their art on display. There is such joy and pride in the children as they find their work and are able to share it with their family and peers. The children also find excitement in searching for and talking about their peers' work. It empowers them and lets them know that what they do is important.

#### Has your decorating style changed over time and, if so, why?

Over time I have adapted a less-is-more mentality. I think it's fun to somewhat put limits on décor because you can challenge yourself. I gravitate toward a small number of statement pieces and unexpected elements, such as layering and texture. I find it more impactful to have these things where you are not expecting them rather than everywhere.

#### What are some of your favorite displays and why?

One of my favorite displays is one that I worked on last year for a project that one of the classrooms did on the composition of music. We had a few art experiences that involved children moving their bodies in different ways to different pieces of music with paint on their feet. The finished pieces with documentation were very long, so it gave me an opportunity to think outside of the box. I displayed the pieces vertically and on the ceiling, as if the children had danced up the wall and across the ceiling.

#### How do you get your wall real estate to be reflective of the children and families in your class?

I make sure that any display I put together includes the children's work, photos of the children engaged in their work or play, quotes from the children, or something that pertains to the children's interests. Children who see themselves reflected in their classroom can talk to their family about the important work they are involved in.

Displays like these have the added benefit of providing conversation prompts afterwards. While sitting nearby the following week to put on snow pants, the children talked about their experience. Comments like “Big feathers” or “My blue one” by the children were expanded on by the teachers: “You DID put that blue feather on. You put it right next to the brown one that Julissa put on. Remember how soft it was? And remember how you used it to tickle my nose?”

Displays like these also have children’s name labels placed next to each work of art, which can foster literacy and letter recognition. Child-created works can include children’s emergent writing samples, too.

## Considering educational value

When teacher-created or store-bought items dominate the real estate and some need to be removed, I try to help teachers reconsider the value of what is being posted. For example, if there are posters designed to teach colors, we talk about more personal ways to accomplish the same goals. Children and adults come into the classroom each day wearing clothing of many different colors, and early childhood toys and books are typically very colorful. Why would we use our precious wall space to teach concepts that can easily be taught using existing, child-focused materials? Removing those posters would not negatively impact a teacher’s ability to teach colors, but it would reduce the overall visual load.

For each teacher-created or store-bought item displayed, I encourage teachers to ask:

- What value does this add to my classroom?
- How does this item expand children’s knowledge base or reinforce concepts that we are currently learning about?
- How does this help children appreciate the diversity in society (e.g., there are many different kinds of families) or in nature (e.g., what does our tree in the playground look like in each season?)?

Some teacher-created and store-bought materials have educational value. A series of pictures taken from old calendars that shows local parks, mountains, and beaches could support learning about geography, nature’s beauty, and protecting the environment. A series of pictures of fresh fruits and vegetables may promote the value of nutrition, growing plants, and agricultural farming.



I encourage teachers to recognize that the visual environment they create for their children has the potential to be calming and engaging, and to promote a positive sense of community. You take great care in selecting meaningful and appropriate learning experiences—you can extend that intentionality to ensuring that the visual images you post are selective (not too many), provide opportunities for children to see their own creations valued in the environment, and enhance relevant and meaningful content.

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### Selected Accreditation Assessment Items Related to **Calm Environments**

9A.1 Classrooms are designed so staff can supervise children by sight and sound at all times, without relying on mirrors, cameras, or sound monitors.

9A.2 Classrooms are arranged to provide children with semiprivate areas.

3A.2 At least half of the classroom displays show children’s works of writing, art, graphs, or other creations.

3A.4 Show two classroom displays that have been created to help children reflect on and extend their learning.

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