

DESIGNING A LEARNING ENVIRONMENT FOR TODDLERS IN CHILD'S CARE SERVICES

Rita Onyeizu

Abstract

Experts in the field of early childhood and care have increasingly come to recognize the importance of toddlers having the freedom to make learning choices and to experience the world on their own terms; and this approach is healthy, intellectually and emotionally. This is achieved by providing toddlers with close and responsive relationships with care givers by designing safe, interesting and developmentally appropriate learning environment that will support their discovery and learning. This paper therefore, discusses the room layout for toddlers, appropriate fitting programmes for early childhood, and creating a safe and healthy environment for toddlers.

Keywords: Toddlers, learning environment.

The child development associate assessment process defines quality learning environment for toddlers as those that are safe environments that promote health and learning. Much of the structure of an infant-toddler programme comes from a well-planned environment. According to Torelli (2005), a well-designed environment supports toddlers emotional wellbeing stimulates their senses and challenges their motor skills. A well designed care centre promotes children's individual and social development. It is comfortable and aesthetically attractive to both children and their care givers.

Researchers have shown that behavior is influenced by environment. That a structural environment gives children clues about how to behave in it. Infant and toddlers also get messages from the environment if it is well planned and consistent. In fact, learning to receive those messages is an important part of their socializing process as they learn about expectations for various behavior settings. It's equally believed that children with physical limitations will get specific messages if the learning environment isn't adapted to their special needs. For example if a child in a wheelchair isn't able to go outside or across a thick carpet, his/her experience in the programme will be limited. If toys or equipment aren't at his/her level, he/she gets the message that they are not for him/her to play with. Thus child care centers should make accommodations in the environment for all the children in the programme including those with special needs.

Although to Sadek (2006), there are some general rules for setting up an environment for toddlers care, whether in a centre or family child care home. In the environment, there should be a designated place for arrivals and departures; near this area should be storage for children's belongings. The sleeping area should be apart from the play area and should be subdued in atmosphere that is restful, colourful, quiet and non-stimulating. The eating area also should be somewhat separated from the play area, though the two may overlap at times because the care giver may use eating tables for various other kinds of activities. The diaper area should be away from the eating area and close to a bathroom or a sink. The indoor play area should be cheerful and well lighted and should invite explorations.

Room Layout

A class room learning environment should be highly functional, aesthetically attractive, age appropriate, child directed, and teacher supported. In cooperating a variety of levels, the caregiver redesigning her classroom is one way to create such an environment. Through the use of platforms, lofts, released areas, low walls and canopies placed along the periphery of the room, it is possible to sculpt the classroom into different activity areas (Torelli 2005). The walls frame the activity areas while the centre of the room remains fairly open, to allow for the circulation of children and adults as well as to provide flexible space that can change depending on the teacher's observations of the children's interest. Meek (2007) stated that similar to a house that has a number of rooms, each with a different function, the multi-level environment provides places for various types of individual and small group play. Such as reading, manipulative, constructions, dramatic play, and motor exploration.

Designing Activity Areas

It has been found that the most effective and efficient use of classrooms, which are typically short on space, is to carve out child-sized nooks for specific activity areas along the edge of the room. This layout makes the supervision by the caregiver easy, allowing children to engage in extended, individual and small group play, while the caregiver supervises two or three of these activity areas simultaneously. Placing activity area along the periphery of the room also allows children to play under natural sunlight next to the windows, to look outside, maintain a visual connection with the outdoor environment while indoors. Meek, (2007) asserted that classroom can be sculpted into distinct activity areas through the use of low walls, or toy shelves acting as low walls, as well as by strategic placement of a toddlers loft' or play materials. That low partitions allow the children to feel that they are in a discrete space, although they are easily supervised by the caregiver. Though, most activity areas will function best if designed with a specific activity in mind. Activity areas can be designed to be used for circle time activities, music and movement.

Create a clear space for circulation: The way in which space is used can either encourage or discouraged desired behavior. Where space is sufficient, children can play and work in a relaxed setting. Where areas are specifically designated for children of different age groups, conflict is minimized. Space which is aesthetically pleasing, planned and organized contributes to an environment which promotes good mental health and diminishes problems for children.

Both children and child care providers benefit from making clear distinction between area to be used for activities and area to be used for circulation. With adequate space for circulation, care givers can feel confident that they will not inadvertently step on a child. According to Torelli;(2006), to differentiate activity areas, build low walls and platforms with equipment placed appropriately, and change the material of the floor. i.e., put linoleum in the circulation area and carpet in the activity space.

Create a carefully planned storage: When play materials are in good supply, familiar, developmentally appropriate, and be properly stored, children are encouraged to focus and become involved in productive learning experiences. One goal of an effective classroom is to support the caregiver in doing her job. A caregiver should be able to spend her time caring for children not rushing across the room or even to another room trying to find what a child needs for an activity. For this reason, Baker (2008) recommended including plenty of storage that is easily accessible to each activity area in a classroom. An adequate and varied supply of children's play materials, stored on toys shelves, make taking out and putting away toys a child directed activity. Installing a closed wall cabinet which only

adults can access is also recommended.

Adequate lighting of the learning area: The lighting of a classroom most specifically support the developmental needs of children. Visual perception directly affects a Child's ability to learn and interact with his/her environment. Lighting that is either too bright or too dim strains the eyes, harming visual development and leading to fatigue and crankiness. If the lighting does not work effectively with the environment to foster particular activity, both children and caregiver will feel frustrated. Poor lighting can negatively affect the general atmosphere of a classroom, but when well thought out, lighting can harmoniously compliment the intended activities of a space.

Also incandescent lighting rather than fluorescent is recommended by researchers because the quality of the light contributes to a child's visual development. That a flood of fluorescent lights at the ceiling, makes the space look and feel more like a hospital or an office than a place where children play. Incandescent lighting makes the classroom look and feel more like a home. Fluorescent lighting also often wastes energy by 'over lighting inappropriately.

To bring light to the floor level, the care provider can create pools of light using pendent lights and track lights. Dimmer switches; allows adjusting the lighting according to the brightness needed at varying times of day and in support of various activities. Children are naturally drawn to light. Therefore, lighting should be used to attract them to certain activity areas, whether by using natural light or pools of incandescent light focused on a child-sized area. By creating pools of light at each activity area, a sense of containment and purpose is reinforced, giving children subtle boundaries for their activities (Bake, 2008). Differentiating activity area from circulation areas can also be accomplished with lighting and can help to prevent children from being run into while they are playing.

Fitting programmes for toddlers (12months - 3years)

Adults who recognize the special needs of children, such as sensory motor learning and the development of autonomy, don't just tolerate this age group, they genuinely like children. The following can help a care provider get started in creating group setting that fits toddlers.

1. Structure the environment

Rather than depending on adult rules; a caregiver should put out only as many things as she can stand to pick up when they are dumped. Make sure everything is touchable (and moveable depending on how young the children are). Provide space and equipment for large motor activity (climbing, jumping inside, as well as outside). Include plenty of softness, supply toys that can be used in many ways, such as blocks, as well as toys that are realistic (Me Loyed, 1989). Toddlers, who are too excited or bored, are apt to make themselves and everyone else unhappy, so keep activities and materials at a level they can handle.

2. Expect toddlers to test limit

This is expected of a typical toddler, so the more the environment sets limits; the easier it will be for the caregiver. Again judge whether the limits are just right, rather than too strict or too lax, by observing the children's behavior. If the children are randomly wandering without getting involved, the caregiver should then pay more attentive and anchors the children to the activities. Also, it's recommended that the caregiver be consistent and firm about the limits set, otherwise children will be confused and will continue to test limit long after toddlerhood.

3. Direct behavior gently, but physically

A care giver should not depend on words alone, prevent dangerous behaviour before it occurs - hold a

threatening arm before it has a chance to hit, and lead the child away. Do not let children get in trouble and then yell at them. Avoid saying "I know that was going to happen" don't predict, rather prevent it.

4.Expect lots of sensori motor behaviour

All furnishings, equipment, toys, and play materials should be sturdy and safe enough to be dropped, mouthed or climbed on. Dumping puzzles is as much fun as working them. The sound as the pieces hit the floor seems to be music to toddler's ears. A caregiver can help children see the fun of putting puzzles back together but should not bother to convince them right away that construction is more pleasurable than destruction; for toddlers will always be toddlers.

5. Share, wait and use kind words to solve problems but do not expect children to always follow the behavior you model. Toddlers cannot share until they first experience a sense of ownership. They need to see that they can trust that a favoured item will not be taken away from him/her. Waiting is hard for children; thus, if a wait is unavoidable, keep children active with play or songs, so they have something to do while they wait. Even when they (toddlers) lose control, caregiver should maintain theirs by using words, rather than hitting or using harsh punishment, to solve problems. Choose words that respect children and support their needs, not words that ridicule or shame. For example, 'respond to a toilet accident with 'oh Chioma, your cloths are all wet. They're probably uncomfortable for you too. Let's find your dry clothes and then wipe you clean" rather than look at the mess you made! Am I going to have to put you back in diapers?"

6.Be gentle and help children talk through problems: Fight and struggles are bond to occur, but children will learn to solve problems with each other sooner if the caregiver do what Mc loyd (1989) calls sport announcing -" I see how much you want that, Amina" rather than refereeing - chioma had it first, so give it to her. Avoid making arbitrary decision for children, and instead help them search for constructive solutions.

7.Expect difficult behaviour. Resistance to activities (wandering off in the middle of a song), rejection (NO) and crying when they say goodbye to parents are all good behaviors - that is what toddlers should be doing. These behaviours show clearly that the children are in Erikson's stage of autonomy. Toddlers who are not developing well may appear depressed, have low self-esteem, seem to lack attachment to their families, or use on behavior in every situation. All toddlers wont exhibit difficult behaviours, but it is important for caregiver to recognize such behavior as normal and natural.

8.Define curriculum in realistic terms. An appropriate curriculum for toddlers is one that centers around.

- Self-care activities (Such as eating, sleeping, toileting and dressing)
- Learning to cope with separation
- Making new attachment with children and adults, and
- Free play while they learn in a safe and interesting environment

Creating a safe and healthy environment for toddlers

Safety is a first consideration in planning for toddlers learning environment. The following according to Gonzalez- Mena (2005), are the checklist to get started:

- Cover all electrical outlets, so children are kept well away from them
 - Protect children from all windows and mirrors that aren't shatter proof
 - Remove or tie up all drapery cords. (long strings, cords and ties of any kind should be

- eliminated to prevent strangling)
- Get rid of all slippery- throw rugs
- Instructions about fire should be obtained from the local fire department on how to put together a plan in case of fire. Consider the number and location of fire extinguishers, easy exit and methods for carrying children who can't walk. Periodic fire drills can also be scheduled.
- Make sure there are no poisonous plants in the environment. Many common house and garden plants are deadly poison.
- Make sure all furniture is stable and in good repair
- Remove lids from toy storage boxes to prevent accidents
- Keep all medicine and cleaning materials well out of reach of children at all times
- Beware of toys with small parts that can come loose and go into mouths; such as button eyes on stuffed animals
- Remove all broken, damaged toys and materials
- Be sure no toys or materials are painted with or contain toxic substances
- Caregiver should be trained on first Aid and CPR and keep a first-aid kit at hand
- Keep emergency number handy along with parent's information.
- Make sure the play equipment is appropriate for the age group served.
- Supervise children well and allow them to take only minor risks. But no risks with grave consequences. And do not differentiate between boys and girls in the degree of risk allowed.
- Clean toys and play materials daily for any group of children who are young enough to mouth object.
- Vacuum rugs and mop floors regularly
- Be sure all children in the centre are up to date on their immunizations.
- Caregivers must be trained to recognize the signs of common illness.

Conclusions

The most important factor in a learning environment is that, it should be developmentally appropriate for the age group. Toddlers of course, need even more space and gross motor challenges appropriate to their age level. They also need an environment that encourages independence; and since toddlers must be toddlers, their curriculum and learning environment must be structured around preparing them for school age. The play space should contain a variety of age -appropriate toys and equipment that encourage active, creative, whole-body play as well as manipulative skills. It should suit the mood of all children at any given time on any given day - those who feel energetic, those who feel mellow, those who want to be alone, and those who feel sociable.

When toddlerhood is seen as a special and distinct stage of development with its own set of task and behaviour, toddlers behaviors' becomes more understandable and manageable by caregivers.

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