

Physical Environment	Reflect on the Following
Furniture and Equipment	<p>Don't clutter the room. Consider the following:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Is there furniture or equipment that is rarely used? Could this be stored somewhere until needed? • What could we do without? • What is missing? • How can the furniture be organized to promote talk and collaboration? • Is there enough shelving for storage? How well is the storage space organized? • Are there enough tables for work spaces in the different learning areas? Are tables of the appropriate height for the children? • Are there quiet spaces for those children who need to be alone at times? <p>Select furniture that is:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • flexible, (can be used for more than one purpose -rectangular tables are more flexible than round). • moveable . <p>Example: A storage shelf that is on casters can be used to define a special area such as the quiet corner, as well as moved to serve as the front for a puppet show.</p>
Materials	<p>Materials and toys are the textbooks of play. Have tried and true toys available that appeal to children of all ages and stages (Lego, blocks, puzzles ...) Absolutely essential for any primary classroom:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • blocks of various size, materials, and features. • containers for sand and water exploration. <p>Materials that are open-ended, multipurpose, and flexible:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • scraps and larger pieces of cloth, wood. • modelling clay, and playdough. • ribbons, wool, string, paper plain and patterned, of different sizes, shapes, and thicknesses. • found materials – stones, feathers.
Use of Time and Space	<p>Lack of time and space is a major obstacle to play-based learning. Children need time to engage, sustain, and develop complexity in their play. Don't let unrealistic expectations, imposed by administration or of your own making, rob the children of play.</p> <p>Make a commitment to play, and set aside a dedicated period of time daily for self-directed play – no less than one hour of continuous time.</p> <p>Encourage children to be creative in the use of space. Are there areas outside the classroom that could be used safely for play but still be supervised?</p>

trust and risk-taking. The social environment encompasses the general atmosphere, as well as the quality of the interactions among the members of the group. From day one of school, educators work diligently to create a classroom community where each child is acknowledged and feels they have a place within the room. In this community, children's ideas are listened to and valued, and they have opportunities to make choices and decisions as individuals and as part of a group. Children hear respectful language modelled, see models of treating others with respect, and are treated with respect themselves. Children are invited to help others and are encouraged to seek help from their classmates, as well as from the adult in the room. These are the underpinnings of a classroom that allows children to function as they play.

Part of the environment also includes establishing the rules which are needed for managing a group of children. These rules enable children to function safely within the classroom and give them protocols for

Learning involves making connections. As teachers observe, they may reflect on possible connections between the play, other classroom experiences, and curriculum opportunities.

Scaffolding also involves establishing a social environment conducive to building



Social Environment	Reflect on the Following
<p>Exploration</p>	<p>Every child in the class needs to feel secure and valued. How are children welcomed into the classroom? How are they acknowledged? What are the practices in the classroom that build trust? As an educator, do I trust that children are learning as they play? Children should be encouraged to learn from their mistakes and not be afraid to take a risk. When things don't go well have them consider: <i>What did you learn?</i> <i>What surprised you?</i> <i>What might you do differently next time?</i></p>
<p>Respect</p>	<p>Show children that their ideas are respected by listening attentively as they talk and by taking more than one answer to a question. Recognize children's need to test limits and respond positively to this need. There is no place for racism, bullying, or making fun of a less able child.</p>
<p>Community Responsibility</p>	<p>Children need to have a say in what happens in the classroom.</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Give them choices of materials to use in the context of their play. • Provide a space for children to display their work. Involve them in putting up exhibits and displays of classroom learning. • Have them help plan special events. <p>Everyone is responsible for the clean-up at the end of the day. Encourage students to take care of one another, in particular take care of the less able. In some cases, children may need to be shown what this 'looks' like and 'sounds' like.</p> <p>Involve children in establishing rules and routines that are needed for the classroom to function and for learning. For example, ask: <i>What can we do about too many people wanting the computer at the same time?</i> <i>How can we organize the classroom library so that the books aren't jumbled together?</i></p>

accessing and using materials and putting them away, and for maintaining a clean and organized room. When children understand the routines and follow a typical pattern every day, they feel more secure and less anxious about what to do and what happens next. They need to know the routines so that their time for self-directed learning can run smoothly.

In a classroom that values children's choices and provides opportunities to make decisions, children are involved in presenting solutions

to problems as they arise. (What can you do when someone interferes with your project? What do you do when you need help? What might you do when someone hurts you in the classroom?)

Neuroscience research confirms what teachers have always understood, that is the emotional health of a child has the most profound affect on learning. Even in the most comfortable of environments, stress can overwhelm a child. It is play that provides a means of coping.

PLANNING AND DECISION-MAKING



The play that happens in school is different than play that happens in the home or outside. At school, the teacher makes informed decisions about how to organize the classroom and which materials to make available to optimize learning through play. In other words, there is much purposeful planning and decision-making that occurs before, during, and after play. Before self-directed play evolves, educators plan the time children will need within the schedule of the school day and set up the classroom with goals in mind, for example they may position tables to promote interaction and place the sandbox where children can walk around it to see their landscape from different perspectives. They carefully choose materials to facilitate learning, selecting appropriate sensory materials for information gathering, concrete materials for mathematical thinking, and tools for collecting data for science experiments. As the children play, educators actively support their learning. They observe the children and identify those who require support; they interact, making thoughtful decisions about when to enter into role play

and when to redirect play to extend the learning. After the scheduled time dedicated to exploration and play, educators provide opportunities for reflection and sharing, based on children's needs. Educators reflect on their observations to support individual children's needs and determine different ways they may connect the learning to curriculum areas.

Traditional models for planning curriculum that describe by subject what will be taught, and when, present a major challenge to learning through play. Teachers do need to have a firm view of what they are expected to teach within a projected time frame however, these expectations must be flexible if learning through play is to be effective. There must be time allowed for topics of interest to the students and teachers. What needs to change is the practice of pinning down topics with specific timelines. As one teacher commented, "If this is November, in grade 3 it must be pioneers." We would go a long way toward restoring the enthusiasm for learning of both students and teachers by having less rigid demands on time and content.



Once the teacher has set up the physical environment of the classroom and established an atmosphere where curiosity and imagination are valued, she needs to provide time for students to play freely. This notion of playing freely may be misinterpreted by some as an aimless ‘free-for-all’ that is without objective. To the contrary, this time provides educators with critical opportunities to observe the children and gain insight into their choices, interests, and needs so as to determine best strategies for addressing individual and group challenges.

THINK ABOUT IT

What do you see when you watch your students during free play?
 What does it tell you about what they know and can do?