Chapter 9
Influencing Children’s Social Development by Structuring the Physical Environment

Objectives

On completion of this chapter, you should be able to describe:

• What structuring is and how structuring can enhance children’s sense of competence, independence, self-direction and self-control.

• How to use time, space, and furnishings to enhance children’s social development.

• How to work within the daily schedule.

• How to select and organize materials to promote social development.

• How to prevent or diminish undesirable social interactions.

• How to communicate with parents about structuring to support children’s social development.

• Pitfalls to avoid in structuring the physical environment.
Jerry, 3-and-a-half years old, sits quietly on the rug placing blocks carefully on a tower. His friend walks past carrying a sign saying “CLEAN UP 5 minutes” and ringing a small hand bell. Jerry surveys his structure and then carefully removes the blocks, replacing them on open shelves that are marked with the silhouette of each shape.

Mitsy, age 5, hurries to her cubby and removes her one-piece snowsuit. Spreading it out on the floor, she promptly sits in the middle. With quick efficiency she puts on her clothing and prepares to go outside announcing, “The snow will pack (for snowballs) today!”

Edward, age 7, scans his long pictograph to be sure that he has completed all of the starred activities for the week. Now that it is Thursday, he smiles because all of the required activities have been completed, and he can do whatever he chooses. He watches other children for several minutes, then moves into the science area where one of his friends is looking through a microscope at something. He records his participation on the science pictograph with a marker and begins to examine the materials placed in the center.

Nick, age 11, glanced at the scheduling chart hanging in the front of the room. He organized the materials that he would need for the morning and spoke to Peter about joining him at lunch before class began. After the morning announcements were complete, he and others in his work group read the directions for their project and began work.

Each of these children is functioning independently in an environment designed to foster their autonomy and sense of competence and control. The open storage for blocks with the shelves clearly marked enabled Jerry to put away his materials. Convenient coat storage and instruction in putting on winter clothing enabled Mitsy to move efficiently from the indoors to outside. The use of a pictograph facilitated record keeping for Edward, which enabled him to work more closely with his friends. Nick used the written schedule to organize his actions and acted independently to implement the plan of the day. In every case, the physical environment positively influenced these children’s social competence. This did not happen by chance. The deliberate organization of the environment provides the visual cues and resources so that children function with greater independence. This aspect of guiding children’s social development and learning is called structuring.

Structuring is the management of time, space, and materials to promote children’s social competence. Other aspects of child development and skills are also influenced by environmental factors. However, in this chapter, we will focus on the social domain.

There are three reasons why early childhood professionals structure the physical environment. First, adults try to anticipate children’s behavior and then prepare the setting before children arrive to promote desirable actions and minimize undesirable ones. This is the most common form of structuring. It requires adults to consider in advance what social goals to emphasize with the children and how time, space, and materials might best be arranged to help children pursue those goals. Secondly, adults structure on the spot to resolve problems as they arise. This strategy minimizes frustration and conflict among children as well as between adults and children. A quick environmental adjustment may alter the context sufficiently to minimize children’s difficulties and improve social outcomes. Finally, adults structure to enhance communication and social interaction among children as well as to promote appropriate on-task behavior. Used in these ways, structuring can enhance all seven elements of social competence described in Chapter 1. Examples are presented in Table 9-1.

Structuring Space and Materials

One of the ways that adults prepare the surroundings to promote desirable social behavior is by structuring space and materials. Buildings, furnishings, materials, and elements of the natural environment are concrete, visible resources that can be manipulated to facilitate the social competence of children. The physical environment in which children play and learn has much to do with the presence or absence of disruptive behavior. Many “discipline problems” in classrooms can be traced directly to the arrangement and selection of furnishings and materials (Weinstein & Mignano, 2007). On the other hand, self-control develops in a well-designed and well-arranged physical space. Friendships flourish in cozy, comfortable rooms where informal exchange is planned for. The general consensus of researchers and theorists is that a well-designed environment creates a positive, supportive setting for the group using it (Levin, 2003). Overall, professionals want the spaces in which children work and play to provide a sense of belonging and connection to others in the group. A flexible space with many open-ended materials that can be used to meet a multitude of goals is desirable. In addition, natural materials engage the senses and generate a sense of wonder and curiosity in the most effective spaces (Curtis & Carter, 2003).
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her place at the snack table so that Jason had a clean
spot for his snack. Having observed the teacher doing
this on other occasions, David and Mickhail set orange
cones across part of the open field to clarify a bound-
ary and to avoid running into others during a chasing
game that they were starting. Safety and health come
first in programs for children, with children learn-
ing these strategies themselves gradually. When the
environment is organized for health and safety, adults
are free to relax and interact with children. The need
for safety must also be balanced with the children’s
desire to attempt reasonable challenges (Kostelnik &
Grady, 2009).

Adjusting interior spaces to promote social
development. Supportive learning environments
come in all shapes and sizes. Some classrooms were
originally designed for children, but many (especially
those for very young children) are located in space ini-
tially created for other purposes. Fortunately, modifi-
cations can be made to make spaces more hospitable
(Knapp & Hall, 2010). Most of these alterations are
done as a part of the preparation of the environment,
though opportunities do occasionally occur for on-the-
spot changes.

TABLE 9-1 The Relationship between Social Competence Goals, Forms of Structuring, Teaching Goals, and Adult–Structuring.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Element of Social Competence</th>
<th>Form of Structuring</th>
<th>Goals for Children</th>
<th>Structuring Example</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Social Values</td>
<td>In advance</td>
<td>Put away materials that they use.</td>
<td>Provide easy access to well-organized storage.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Positive Self-Identity</td>
<td>In advance</td>
<td>Contribute to the group and receive recognition.</td>
<td>Display artwork, projects, or other work.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Interpersonal Skills</td>
<td>On the spot</td>
<td>Work together toward a common goal.</td>
<td>Add supplies to accommodate the numbers of children who want to work on a group project.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Self-Regulation</td>
<td>On the spot</td>
<td>Attend during whole-group efforts.</td>
<td>Cover a shelf of toys during group time or turn the shelf around.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Planning and Decision Making</td>
<td>In advance or on the spot</td>
<td>Choose between competing materials or activities.</td>
<td>Provide (or add) appropriate materials or activities from which to choose.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Cultural Competence</td>
<td>In advance</td>
<td>Recognize that people have various cultural backgrounds.</td>
<td>Add photos and other materials to learning centers depicting various backgrounds and abilities.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Emotional Intelligence</td>
<td>In advance or on the spot</td>
<td>Use a variety of feeling words to describe their reactions to new materials.</td>
<td>Add novel tools and materials a few at a time; post signs in the area on which a list of emotion words are written.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Building and Grounds

Architects, landscape designers, interior designers, and program administrators have the responsibility to build or modify a building to meet the appropriate standards for the intended use. Safety, convenience, durability, maintenance, beauty, accessibility, and specific adaptations for use are all considerations in this process. Playgrounds usually need fencing. All states have standards for safety and health for those facilities that serve children. Although the fixed features (doors, ceiling heights, room dimensions, etc.) of facilities have impact on children’s social behavior, practitioners who are working within programs cannot alter or change facilities easily by themselves. On the other hand, professionals may alter less permanent features such as furniture arrangements, lighting, or the amount of color in a room.

Maintaining health and safety. Children and adults alike have responsibility to maintain the physical environment to promote health and safety. Children learn social values of cleanliness, order, safety, and consideration of others through exposure to adults who practice safe and healthy maintenance. Having been coached to do this earlier, Laurel wiped
Walls. Color influences mood and the climate of the space. Warm colors such as orange or red are more stimulating, cooler colors such as blue or green are more calming, and white, black, and brown are depressing or ugly (Knapp & Hall, 2010). Adults can modify the walls by adding bulletin boards or corkboard strips to display children's work, placing furniture against the walls, or by hanging appropriate prints of quality art or other displays in the spaces. Children feel that the space is their own when they see simple, uncluttered displays of their own work as well (Clayton, 2001). This personalizing of space indicates that the territory belongs to them, which prompts children to be more comfortable and forthcoming socially (Trenholm & Jensen, 2008). A loft or an indoor climber with an elevated platform provides interest and possibilities for enclosures for personal spaces.

Light. Lower lighting and lighting dispersed around the room are most conducive to social interaction (Bogle & Wick, 2005). Adding lamps and turning some overhead lighting off will have this effect in institutional spaces. More intense lighting is needed for close work such as reading. Either too bright or too meager light is associated with disruptive behavior (Jago & Tanner, 1999). Turning the lights off to reduce heat during hot weather and adjusting blinds to control the amount of natural light coming into the room increases comfort. There is evidence that excessive heat reduces social interaction and makes aggression more likely, particularly in crowded spaces (Burgoon, Guerrero, & Floyd, 2010).

Sound control. Rugs and carpets can be added to decrease noise, which in turn reduces stress and supports conversation. Area rugs can be removed so that cleanup of messy activities is easier. A certain level of noise is to be expected as children talk and move about. Noisy learning environments lead children to tune out speech and contribute to children’s annoyance and fatigue (Evans, 2006). One way to determine if the environment needs changing is to listen carefully as children and adults are behaving appropriately. If the room still seems too noisy, additional sound-absorbing, soft materials should be added.

Carpets are easier to sit on and are softer to land on if a child falls from an indoor climber. In the block...
corner, a firm-surfaced carpet reduces noise without reducing the stability of blocks. One enterprising teacher hung three tumbling mats on a cement wall. This solved the problem of storing the mats when they were not in use, decreased the reverberation of noise in the basement room, and added color and texture to the wall. Most administrators will allow staff to bring additional rugs into such settings. Some examples of adjusting the interior are given in Table 9-2.

## Adjusting Exterior Spaces to Promote Social Development

All children from infancy to adolescence need opportunities to play outdoors. A wider array of motor and social play opportunities and greater independence are often more available outdoors (Evans, 2006). Natural areas particularly seem to reduce fatigue and enhance affect and emotional self-regulation, especially for those with attention deficit-hyperactivity disorder (Evans, 2006). Human beings need contact with the natural environment to maintain their mental health. Quite often, a child’s judgment of self-competence in movement is acquired outside and constitutes part of the sense of self-efficacy and body image. Freedom of movement in a safe environment allows children of all ages to explore what they can do as they investigate nature and practice their motor skills. Outdoor play spaces, like other areas, should

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Condition Observed</th>
<th>Adjustment</th>
<th>Impact on Children</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>The room is hot and stuffy.</td>
<td>Open windows, turn down heat.</td>
<td>Reduces stress and potential aggression; promotes greater comfort and more positive social interaction.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Block area is only large enough for two children at a time.</td>
<td>Increase amount of floor space devoted to blocks.</td>
<td>Encourages more opportunities for social interaction among children.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Playground gate latch is broken.</td>
<td>Tie a rope or bungee cord on the gate to keep it closed during session; report for repair.</td>
<td>Prevents children from leaving supervised area; enables adults to interact more comfortably with children rather than standing guard at the gate.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Children avoid the manipulative toy area.</td>
<td>Cover the room divider with cherry or orange construction paper using two-sided tape for temporary change.</td>
<td>Children are attracted to bright colors and are more likely to move to the area.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Noise of hammering on the “Pound a Peg” toy resting on a table is excessive.</td>
<td>Place a folded section of newspaper under the toy.</td>
<td>Child enjoying the pounding toy can continue without distracting others.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Children’s boots are on top of books in lockers or scattered across the floor near the lockers.</td>
<td>Add long narrow trays to the hallway to hold boots.</td>
<td>Classroom is more attractive, and children’s books are preserved. Adult admonitions eliminated.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

### Table 9-2 Adjusting Aspects of the Facility to Influence Children’s Social Behavior.
be developmentally appropriate, scaled to the size of the children, and designed to promote success and independence. Often young children are able to compare their skills with children of the same age, imitate others who are more skillful, and engage in play in noncompetitive ways. Such activity, while challenging one child, is a source of personal power to another who serves as the model.

Children have opportunities to help and encourage their peers in outdoor play (Hearron & Hildebrand, 2009). Often the social constellation of changes as the activities outdoors bring forth their various competencies. For example, boys tend to engage in more pretend play when outdoors than when inside. Leadership and playgroups may change in the outdoor spaces.

To enable all children, adults should plan multiple opportunities for small and large motor play, construction play, and pretend play, as well as other program activities (Hohmann, Weikart, & Epstein, 2008). Indoor activities can be moved outdoors, and natural materials moved inside (Oliver & Klugman, 2005). Active adult planning and supervision is as important outdoors asindoors, as failure to do so may result in having youngsters afraid to go outside, behavior outdoors becoming more aggressive, children becoming bored, or having children cling to adults (Bilton, 2002). Children outdoors need the support of adults in successfully negotiating social challenges that emerge as a result of greater space and mobility.

Plants are an important feature in the outdoor environment. Sod absorbs some of the stress when children are running or falling and is ideal for group games or rough-and-tumble play. Hedges around the perimeter reduce traffic noise and dust, and provide increased privacy at the same time. Sometimes practitioners add grass or clover seed to areas getting a lot of hard use. Children can contribute to the beauty of the environment while cooperating in developing a garden. Adult guidance is needed so that only nonpoisonous plants are put in the garden, and plants such as poison ivy are removed. Shade trees provide excellent group meeting spaces, and some groups of children have planted seedlings as part of their learning experiences. A thoughtful arrangement of bushes can provide enclosed places for small groups of children to play. Yard fencing is excellent to support pole beans, squash, or trumpet vines. With variations of climate and soil type, the modifications to the outdoor play space using plants is very large in scope, and other professionals or master gardeners may need to be consulted. Additionally, planning for these modifications may require consultation with those who share the space, but adding and deleting plants is quite possible.

A permanent climbing apparatus is a feature of many playgrounds in schools, parks, and childcare environments where children learn to take turns, move safely on the structure, and engage one another successfully. Although the structure itself cannot be changed readily, adults often must redistribute the impact-absorbing material beneath it to maintain safety. Movable outdoor equipment such as ladders, crates, and boards encourages cooperative play, and play spaces with many movable pieces allows children to alter their environment themselves (Felstiner, 2004).

Toys and equipment that are readily added or deleted according to the plans of the day promote the developmental competence of children. Sleds replace tricycles during the winter. During pleasant weather, any toy or material that is typically indoors may be used outdoors. The principles discussed in upcoming sections in this chapter may also be applied to exterior environments.

Generally speaking, the strategies for supporting social interaction outdoors are the same as those indoors. A few adaptations of nonverbal communications might be needed as children move more quickly and farther away when outside. Additionally, it is sometimes difficult to hear directions and guidance given the distances involved.

Structuring the indoor and outdoor facilities minimizes the numbers of rules that adults must set to keep children safe. In a well-structured place, interactions between adults and children are supportive, positive, and focused on achieving social competence.

### Arranging Furnishings and Equipment

A supportive environment allows children to control their surroundings when appropriate and permits and encourages movement so that children can interact freely with objects and people (Marion, 2011). Because safety always is of highest priority, adults should plan environments to minimize risk for children.

A supportive environment is arranged into learning centers, or areas that provide for individual, small-group, or large-group activities (Stuber, 2007). When these are organized, physical limits are clear and regulate the use of materials and the behavior of children. Conflict between children is reduced, and conditions for high-quality learning or play are established. The needs of children with disabilities must be kept in mind so that those children are able to function independently as much as possible (Sutterby & Frost, 2006).

The number and kinds of areas needed are determined by the age of the children and the size of the group. If an activity space is defined as that occupied by a child using a material, then the number of activity
Similar planning for outdoor play is necessary. The numbers for each zone, enclosure, or play area should be estimated carefully because they vary greatly. Some simple structures are suitable for one or two children; other complex combinations of equipment provide play space for many children.

**Private space.** A **private space** is an area designed for one child, or maybe two, to which the child can retreat from social interaction. In one second grade classroom, the teacher had painted an old bathtub red and filled it with pillows. A child in that area, usually reading or simply watching others, always was left undisturbed. A private area of this type is not to be used for punishment or time-out, but to provide a

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Activity</th>
<th>Number</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Six puzzles</td>
<td>6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Board game</td>
<td>2–4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Listening center with six headphones</td>
<td>6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Writing center</td>
<td>1–4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Reading area</td>
<td>2–4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Easel painting</td>
<td>1–2</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Activity spaces can be estimated as follows:

- Pretend play: 4
- Blocks: 4–6
- Six puzzles: 6
- Board game: 2–4
- Listening center with six headphones: 6
- Writing center: 1–4
- Reading area: 2–4
- Easel painting: 1–2

Spaces for a block area may be 4 or 6 because that number of children could reasonably use the blocks at one time. To prevent waiting, it is recommended that there be roughly one-third more activity spaces than there are children (Marion, 2011). A minimum of 27 activity spaces for a group of 20 children would be needed. Realistic estimation based on the physical space and the children’s age is necessary to attain the desired outcome. Generally speaking, preschool children play more successfully in groups of 2 to 4, and school-age children may organize some of their play in slightly larger groupings. When individual materials are involved, such as a puzzle or watercolor materials, then the number estimated should match exactly the number of materials. Do not count sharing except when the supply of materials is large, such as with blocks. Most manipulative sets of construction materials are suitable for 1 or possibly 2 children, so multiple sets are needed if you intend for more children to play.
sense of relaxation, comfort, and privacy in the midst of a public environment. The use of private space may reduce stress and eventually help a child attain higher levels of self-control. Children can briefly escape the noise and activity to a space that provides comfort and security (Frost, Wortham, & Reifel, 2008).

**Small-group space.** A small-group space is designed for fewer than eight children. In most programs for young children, four to six children may be playing together (housekeeping, blocks, water play) or engaged in studying (insect collections, number lotto, weighing cubes). A small-group work area should have spaces for sitting and a surface for working. Primary-school teachers generally conduct reading groups in a small-group area with the children sitting in a circle or around a table. Older children may have four desks clustered together for most of the day. Some areas of this type, such as an art area, are specialized so that materials may be stored on adjacent shelves. Other small-group spaces need easy access to water or electricity and should be placed in the room where these are easily accessible. Areas are more flexible when their use is not predetermined and materials may be brought into or removed from the area. Opportunities for social interaction abound in small-group settings.

**Large-group space.** Most settings have a large-group space that can accommodate all of the children at one time. Usually this space has bulletin boards, large book easels, and audio-visual equipment. This type of indoor space is normally used for a variety of activities: language arts, creative dance, group discussion, games, and music. Participation in whole-group activities helps children to see themselves as a part of the larger social network.

**Density.** The number of children per unit of space refers to the density of the environment. The total room could be very dense with furniture and children being crowded together. High classroom density impacts negatively on behavior as youngsters tend to defend their territory or withdraw. Less desirable behavior is diminished if children get access to materials that they want. Dense classrooms also lead to shorter interactions, more aggressive incidents, and less social cooperation (Evans, 2006). Crowding can occur in private spaces if two or three children enter a space suitable for one, in small-group spaces if either the numbers of children are great or the space taken up by furniture is too great, and in large-group spaces if children are bumping into each other when seated appropriately. Adjusting the amount of space in the activity area is one way to keep crowding limited. For example, moving a divider back only 12 inches or removing some furniture can decrease the density of a small-group space sufficiently for comfort and for improved interactions. Children cope well if the crowding is temporary (Maxwell, 2003; Knapp & Hall, 2010).

**Boundaries and activity areas.** Clear, physical boundaries tend to inhibit running, provide cues to where the child is supposed to participate, curb intrusions and interruptions, and designate appropriate pathways for children to move throughout the room. Usually, furnishings and low room dividers are used to mark separations in areas. Most youngsters under age 8 forget or ignore unclear boundaries, such as those formed by floor tape, or those described verbally such as telling the children not to play with the trucks when the area is used for large-group activity. Placing fabric over the shelf housing the trucks is a clearer restriction. Each learning center may be further defined by distinctive materials, such as books and cushions in one area, and child-size tables and chairs with board games in another.

Areas also should be arranged within the room so that activities do not conflict with one another or offer distractions. Quiet activities should be separated from more vigorous ones. For example, it is better to locate a study carrel near a work area or the independent reading area than near the block or game area to avoid setting limits for children who unintentionally intrude. In addition, two learning centers may be side by side, and deliberately left permeable to encourage small groups of children to interact (Hohmann, Weikart, & Epstein, 2008). The number, type, and arrangement of activity areas are within the control of the helping professional. Activity areas can be added, removed, or relocated to facilitate the achievement of program goals.

Activity areas are as useful outdoors as indoors. Usually, boundaries are established outdoors by varying the surface. Asphalt may be used on a ball court or a tricycle path, grass on the playing or running field, and sand or other resilient materials under climbing equipment. Resilient surfaces promote safety, decreasing the frequency of adult cautions and limit setting. Constructed boundaries, such as fences and pathways, are clear to children and provide them with clues to appropriate behaviors, as well as providing greater safety. Within well-defined areas, adults can influence social interaction by the use of mobile equipment and materials, such as the addition of water or shovels and pails to a digging area. Temporary boundaries may be added as needed to diminish reprimands and reminders, such as when orange traffic cones mark off a big puddle of rainwater on the playground.
Housekeeping area: What are the visual cues related to the numbers of children to play in the area, the care and storage of materials, and the degree of mobility expected?

Block corner: What are the visual cues to indicate the numbers of children who can play in the area, the type of play encouraged, and the standards for putting the blocks away?
Pathways. Activity areas also must be arranged so that movement between areas is easily accomplished without interfering with the activities in progress. Such pathways need to be sufficiently wide to allow children to pass one another without physical contact. Wider pathways outdoors are necessary to avoid collisions where children run. Pathway width may need adjustment if a child needs a walker or a wheelchair. In some rooms, the area designated as the large-group area also serves as a means of access to other activity areas.

Sometimes, the pathway is like a hallway without walls, with the large-group area at one end and small-group and private spaces arranged on either side of a central pathway. This arrangement may encourage running by toddlers, but a central pathway may be more effective for older children.

Storage. Accessible storage promotes responsibility for the materials and encourages children to care for their environment independently. Stored items should be sorted, placed at the point of first use, and arranged so that they are easy to see, reach, and grasp, and easy to replace by those who use them most often (Berns, 2009). Like items should be together. Materials that are used regularly should be readily accessible from pathways or activity areas. Storage of equipment and materials used outdoors should be suitable in size and accessible from the playground areas.

Adult storage space that is inaccessible to children also is desirable for safety. Cleaning compounds, medicines, power tools, and potentially harmful substances and equipment should be stored in locked cupboards where children cannot get to them. Sharp-pointed scissors, electric fry pans, and other potentially hazardous materials should be stored out of the reach of children. Such items are sometimes stored centrally for a number of classrooms, outside of areas used by children.

Qualities of the physical environment have a continuing impact on the quality of interpersonal interaction within it. Hardness usually is associated with efficiency and formality, and softness is associated with relaxation and comfort. Younger children are more at ease in a softer setting and gradually learn how to behave in the more formal hard settings. When a material is closed, there is only one way to use it, but when it is open, neither the alternatives nor the outcomes are limited. More open settings encourage curiosity, exploration, and social interaction, and completely closed settings prohibit such behavior altogether. The simple–complex dimension describes the material in terms of the number of alternatives that can be generated. Children tend to play cooperatively with complex and super units more frequently than with simple units, which often elicit solitary or parallel play activity. Complexity encourages deep exploration, and variety encourages broad exploration. School settings need some of each so that children will focus on an activity for an extended period of time, which is more likely with complex activities, but also can move to other alternatives for a change of pace.

The intrusion–seclusion dimension describes the permeability between the program and the things and people outside it and the boundaries between people and things inside the program. Many classrooms have no seclusion within them and may be very fatiguing to young children. Children who are overcome by the stress of continuous interaction act up, cry, or daydream to escape for short periods. Private areas, as described earlier, are spaces in which children can have a degree of seclusion. Small-group spaces are partially secluded and enable children to moderate their level of seclusion. Children who have the opportunity to choose some sedentary activities and some active pursuits usually choose both in the course of the day. Prolonged sedentary activity causes children to wiggle to ease their muscles and to become bored and restless regardless of the interest or importance of the activity. They frequently engage in inappropriate behavior, irritating peers and adults and necessitating limit setting. To prevent this, daily schedules should provide for a balance between vigorous movement, moderate activity, and more quiet pursuits. When children’s need for mobility is taken into account, the selection of equipment and the use of space usually are changed.

Each of the dimensions varies by degrees and may vary over the course of a year or within a single day. Each dimension affects the social relationships of children in the setting. An open, moderately secluded, soft environment with low-to-moderate mobility is a conversation area, much like a living room, in which children can relax and interact informally.
### Dimension and Definition

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Dimension and Definition</th>
<th>One Extreme</th>
<th>Middle</th>
<th>Other Extreme</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Softness: responsiveness of the texture to touch</td>
<td>Soft: Pillow Upholstered chair</td>
<td>Malleable materials: Sand, water, and dough Grass or lawn</td>
<td>Hard: Cement Tricycle Walls</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Openness: degree to which the material itself restricts its use</td>
<td>Open: Blocks, toy stove Clay, ball</td>
<td>Semiopen/semiclosed: Accessible cabinet with doors, playing cards</td>
<td>Closed: Puzzle, tracing patterns, form boards</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Complexity: the number of components and their variety</td>
<td>Simple: Ladder, wind-up car Doll dress</td>
<td>Moderately complex: Jump rope Simple toy car Unit blocks Erector set</td>
<td>Complex: Large climber with multiple possible activities Computer</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Seclusion: permeability between boundaries</td>
<td>Seclusion: Study carrel; private space learning center Single stall toilet with door Large block building with roof A box or tent where children can close themselves in</td>
<td>Semisecluded: Bushes where children play, but adults can see easily Climber where toddler can crawl under and peek out Sunglasses or mask</td>
<td>Intrusion: Open windows in a classroom; sounds of children moving outside the room Lab schools with visitors</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Mobility: degree of opportunity for children to physically move their bodies in a learning center</td>
<td>High mobility: Gym; playground; tricycle; indoor climber; indoors during transitions</td>
<td>Moderate: Garden with pathways and boundaries Most early childhood classrooms; pretend play area; block area; often science areas</td>
<td>Low mobility: Nailed-down seats in a room; writing center; reading center; sometimes math center</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

**TABLE 9-3** Controllable Dimensions in the Physical Environment.

Planning for outdoor play and the number of children using the equipment is also necessary when structuring the physical environment.
Continuous evaluation of the effectiveness of the space to support children’s social development requires flexible thought. Sometimes adults continue in ineffective settings simply because the classroom or playground has “always been this way.” Sit at the child’s eye level and appraise the environment from various perspectives when children are using it and when it is empty. Box 9-1 provides guidelines for evaluating the childcare setting as a place that supports social competence.

Choosing Appropriate Materials

Adults can promote competent and independent behavior in children by providing a moderately rich assortment of exploratory materials (Dodge, Colker & Heroman, 2008). The goal in careful selection, maintenance, display, and storage of materials is to have resources that children can use in cooperative or independent activity. Carefully selected materials that meet the interests of children and support program objectives contribute to overall functioning, emotional adjustment, and the development of self-concept and self-control (Frost, Wortham, & Reifel, 2008). The equipment and materials that children use also affect the quality of social interactions during play (Sutterby & Frost, 2006).

**Developmentally appropriate materials.** Materials should reflect the levels of competence of children in the program. A range of activities that are challenging and can be completed eventually support children’s self-esteem. Adults would think it strange if someone gave a chemistry set to a 5-year-old. Not only would the child be at risk of swallowing some of the chemicals, but also in all probability, the set would quickly be destroyed, and the child frustrated with failure. However, the same set given to a 12-year-old could provide hours of pleasure and instruction. Frequently, materials intended for older children create potential risks and

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**Does the environment offer cues for appropriate social behavior?**

- Clear boundaries between learning centers or project areas
- Pathways designed so that children do not interrupt other’s activities
- Quiet and vigorous activity areas separated spatially
- Adequate number of activity spaces for the numbers of children
- Minimal wait times for materials and equipment
- Storage that is labeled and accessible

**Does the environment provide opportunities for conversations among children?**

- Places that are soft, comfortable, and informal
- Small group spaces in which only a few children participate at a time
- Private spaces for one or two children
- Spaces that are attractive, inviting, pleasant
- Materials and activities that promote cooperation; working together

**Does the environment minimize the need for adult direction or correction of behavior?**

- Hard surface flooring in messy areas (easy to clean)
- Softer surface flooring to minimize normal noise (block area)
- Learning centers well maintained and orderly
- Childproofing for safety (wall plugs, electric cords, appliances, and medications put away, doors closed, etc.)
- Self-care possible (toileting, hand-washing, putting on and taking off wraps)

**Does the environment promote the self-identity of the children?**

- Regularly changed displays of children’s art, projects, work
- Photos depicting all racial groups, abilities, and occupations for men and women
- Artifacts and pictures that represent the cultures of children in the group
- Learning centers accessible to all children regardless of ability or disability
- Opportunities for children to explore, experience challenge, and be successful

**Does the environment promote individual responsibility for the environment and for others?**

- Supplies available for cleaning up indoors
- Trash cans and gloves for playground cleanup
- Pictographs available for routine maintenance and cleanliness
- Movables stored in marked containers
- Adequate storage indoors and out

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**BOX 9-1** Evaluating the Effectiveness of the Space.
failure for younger ones. In addition, when older children use equipment and materials designed for young children, they lose interest because there is no challenge, and they find new, often destructive ways to use them.

**Structurally safe materials.** Materials should be examined for potential safety hazards. Sturdiness, durability, craftsmanship, and appropriate construction materials all contribute to safe products. For example, tricycles available in local stores are not as sturdily constructed as those designed specifically for use by groups of children. Care also should be taken to see that materials are not likely to cause choking. If an object is small enough to get into a toddler’s mouth and has a diameter between that of a dime and a quarter, it might get stuck in the throat. Safe materials enable independent use without multiple cautions from adults.

**Materials that work.** Children become frustrated when equipment and materials do not operate, which sometimes leads to disruptive behavior. The wheels of trucks should turn; scissors should cut; finger paint should be thick, books should have all the pages to the stories, and the paper should be heavy enough or glossy so that it doesn’t fall apart. It is nearly impossible to trace accurately through standard typing paper; tracing paper and paper clips make the job much easier.

Children cannot use basketballs, kick balls, or volleyballs that are underinflated. Children’s sense of competence is enhanced when they are successful, rather than experiencing failure due to inoperable tools and materials.

**Materials that are complete and ready to use.** Puzzles should have all their pieces. If one gets lost, it can be replaced by molding in some plastic wood (available in most hardware stores) to fit the hole. One 10-year-old was extremely upset when, after working on a hooked pillow cover for weeks, she discovered that there was insufficient yarn in the kit to complete it. Incomplete materials lead to unnecessary feelings of failure and frustration and loss of self-esteem.

In addition, some materials should be assembled in advance so that children do not have to wait while the adult rummages around in a cupboard or drawer for a pair of scissors or make children wait while they get a necessary item for a science experiment. Waiting children usually lose interest or become disruptive. Complete advance preparation includes some plan for cleaning up, so having a damp sponge in a pan would be appropriate preparation for a messy activity. In this way, the adult never needs to leave the group of children and can offer continuous guidance while children are able to complete projects with a sense of competence.

Sand provides protection from falls as well as opportunities for children of all ages to play. Because it is loose and malleable, it is excellent as a learning material as well.
Organizing materials storage. Storage should be where the material is most frequently used or where it is first used. If children know where something is located, they can go and get it independently, especially common items such as paper, crayons, and scissors. Materials also should be stored so that children can take care of them. For example, taping shapes of unit blocks on the back of a cupboard so that children know where to put each size and shape encourages independence as does labeling the difficulty of books on plastic bins. Materials that have many pieces, such as beads, small math cubes, or Cuisenaire® rods, should be placed in sturdy containers such as clear plastic shoeboxes or tiny laundry baskets because the cardboard boxes soon wear out. In this way, children can keep all materials that go together in one place and demonstrate their responsibility for their own classroom.

Attractively displayed materials. Neatness and orderliness are aspects of attractiveness. Attractiveness affects the mood of children and also leads to treating their work spaces with responsibility. Both adults and children are more at ease with one another in attractive spaces. Materials that are displayed in a moderately empty space on an accessible shelf are most likely to be used and are more appealing. Young children simply have difficulty in selecting materials on crowded shelves. Puzzles in a puzzle rack or laid out on a table ready for use are more appealing than a large, heavy stack of them.

Appropriate size of equipment and materials. Tables, chairs, desks, or other equipment add to the comfort and decrease the fatigue of children if they are sized correctly. Adults also should have at least one chair that fits them to sit on occasionally. Warm, comfortable environments encourage people to relax and to relate positively to one another (Knapp & Hall, 2010).

Fewer problems are encountered at mealtime if preschool children are offered 6-inch plates, salad forks, and 4- or 5-ounce glasses to use. Serving dishes (soup bowls) with teaspoon servers would enable young children to serve themselves amounts of food that they can reasonably consume. Using small, unbreakable pitchers for milk and juice encourages independence as well. When children determine portion size for themselves, there is less wasted, and children feel they have control. Children who are entering the growth spurt around the ages of 11 or 12 might reasonably use large, divided trays that can hold substantial servings.

The equipment and all the materials should be appropriate for their sizes of the children in the program to promote independence of action and children’s comfort.

Quantities appropriate to the number of children. If there are enough materials for a particular activity, children can work cooperatively successfully. If there is an insufficient supply, either the number of materials should be increased or the number of children using them decreased. For example, if a third-grade teacher has 12 books and 14 children, she can either hold two consecutive sessions of seven children and use the books on hand or get two more books. Either solution is better than having children rush to the reading area to get a book for themselves. Toddlers as well as some inexperienced preschool-aged children do not comprehend sharing. In addition, a toy being played with by another child is more appealing than one on a shelf. Duplicate toys allow the desires of the youngest children to be met without conflict.

Adequate supplies of materials are necessary for any program regardless of the children’s age if children are to be reasonably successful. This will determine how well children get along with each other as well as influencing the quality of interactions. Materials should be accessible to all children, including those with special needs. This fosters independent action and allows children to work together peacefully.

Adding or Removing Materials, and Childproofing the Environment

Purchasing materials and equipment and the initial furniture arrangement or materials storage is usually the responsibility of administrators in the organization. Selecting specific materials appropriately and organizing and displaying them carefully are strategies teachers use to prevent frustration, interpersonal conflict, property damage, and physical risk. These strategies are the result of advanced planning with ultimate goals of supporting positive social interactions and appropriate behavior. Helping professionals, who are working directly with the children, structure the specific materials to meet their immediate needs and ensure that the physical environment is conducive to the development of social competence (Kostelnik, Soderman, & Whiren, 2011). In addition, supervising adults must make adjustments based on individual or group needs as children interact within the space, use equipment, and engage in the activities with materials in meaningful ways. The most common adjustments that adults make to the environment in support of children’s interpersonal engagement are to add materials, take them away, or childproof the environment.

Adding to the environment. There are many ways adults add to the environment. A photograph of each
child’s family or of the local community might be hung and discussed with the children. An artifact or an article of clothing representative of the cultural heritage of one of the children might be brought in to share. Fresh flowers or living plants and animals might be added temporarily in the setting to soften the environment and to add interest.

These additions are typical of the general strategy of preparing the environment. However, on-the-spot adjustments of adding to the environment occur daily. For example, if two children want to look at one picture book about trains, offer a second book with pictures of trains. If children are waiting a long time to use glue sticks, provide either school paste or glue. If Alyce is arguing with Theresa about leaving the store without “paying,” ask them what they think could be used for money and then help them to obtain the material if necessary. Such on-the-spot actions usually rectify the situation sufficiently for the children to move forward in their social interactions as well as support their problem-solving skills.

**Taking away from the environment.** Removing the picture books from an open library when young children were throwing them, not understanding their purpose, is appropriate pending additional informative activities. These books were returned after having been read once or twice and demonstrations given on how to use them correctly. Removing splinters of wood from the guinea pig cage or moving a frog from someone’s pocket into a terrarium until it can be returned to a more suitable place would protect the lives of these animals as well as demonstrating responsibility for living creatures. Sometimes the removal is temporary, but necessary, such as moving all the chairs away from a table so children can cook, or putting materials out of sight so they do not distract children from group times.

On-the-spot removals are also frequent. If Teddy drops materials in the toilet, remove them right then. If six youngsters are pushing and crowding around a table, remove one or two of the chairs to indicate that only four to five children may use this center at a time.

Generally the adding or deleting of materials are done to enhance play, minimize potentials for frustration or conflict, and promote cooperation and self-control. The environments in which we live and work affect our mood and our behaviors with each other and are relatively easy to change either before the program is in session or during it.

**Childproofing the environment.** Adding materials, taking them away, and altering them are necessary for childproofing the environment. Childproofing means providing the necessary adjustments to ensure the safety of the children. It is usually done before children enter the environment, but may occur when safety risks are first detected. Several examples of this are illustrated in Table 9-4.

The amount of space necessary may have been incorrectly estimated for an activity. For example, Mr. Bongard placed an indoor climber about 18 inches from an open, screened window one hot summer day because he thought that the vigorous activity would benefit from the potential air circulation. However, as he was watching Brad and Doug climb to the top between the window and the climber, they attempted to stand on the nearby windowsill. He hastily lifted Brad down and asked Doug to climb down before he moved the climber at least 3 feet away from the window. The quick adjustment to increase safety was essential.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Observation</th>
<th>Action Taken</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>A toddler pokes the electrical outlet in the hallway.</td>
<td>Add an outlet cover, and remove the child from the hallway.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>A 3-year-old has put the hot water on at full force to wash her hands.</td>
<td>Adjust the water temperature and flow.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>A group of fourth graders left boxes and papers in the hallway blocking a door.</td>
<td>Remind children to collect the trash and assist with removal as needed.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>A cord to the coffee pot is hanging over the edge of a counter in the teachers’ area, but it is in sight of children.</td>
<td>Fold the cord loosely, and fasten it with a wire twist or rubber band.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>A mother gave her child a plastic bag with medications and directions for administering them and sent her into the primary classroom.</td>
<td>Take the medicine from the child, and place it in a safe spot.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

**TABLE 9-4** Examples of Adjusting Materials to Increase Safety.
Other adjustments. Sometimes space should be limited instead of increased. Miss Adkins took her kindergarten children to the gym to run simple relay races. At first, she set the activity up so that children would run the length of the gym. She noticed that they were quickly tired and restless, as they had to wait so long for a turn. She then shifted to running a second group of relay races across the width of the gym, which still gave ample room to run, but cut down the waiting time. Adjustments by moving equipment or by increasing or decreasing space most appropriate for an activity are fairly typical of most child-centered programs.

Sometimes adjustments are made in the ways in which directions are given. At the beginning of this chapter, Edward used a pictograph so that he could assess whether he was free to choose completely on his own what he should do. Using sequenced photographs or drawings for routine activities such as washing hands, tying shoes, or taking off outdoor clothing are easy structuring strategies that support directions already given to children on how to do the task. In addition, individual children may not understand the directions on the use of equipment or materials, so additional explanations and demonstrations may be necessary for each person to be successful. For example, having a classroom computer with a variety of programs as one of the learning centers is not useful if the children do not know how to operate the machine. One demonstration to the group is generally inadequate. Mr. Rock discovered that children were hesitant to attempt independent use. He therefore adjusted his strategy of encouragement to one of training a few of the children in the kindergarten to use the machine and then asking those children to give demonstrations to their peers. This “each one teach one” adjustment also supported social interaction and contributed to the prosocial goal of helpfulness.

Occasionally, a center is adjusted by simply closing it. Mrs. Perry temporarily closed the thematic play center “Seed Store” when children were just throwing the seeds around instead of engaging in productive play. Upon close appraisal, she decided that the children didn’t have the necessary understandings about seeds, their use, or how they were bought and sold to engage in the play. After children learned more about shopping for seeds, the center was reopened successfully several days later.

Most frequently, adjustments are very simple behaviors that make the children more successful in learning and in their interactions with each other.

Mr. Turkus responded to the frustrated cry of 3-year-old George, who slapped his painting with the paintbrush and exclaimed, “Is not red.” The red drippings on the outside of the jar did not match the muddy, purplish red color of the paint inside. Mr. Turkus showed George how to rinse the brushes and jars, and provided a small amount of the three primary colors. He then demonstrated how to keep the red paint red by using a separate brush for each color. George resumed painting happily.

Ms. Polzin noticed Nicholas riding his truck through the block area and ramming into block structures that Claire and Raphael were building. When they moved to hit him, he seemed oblivious to the cause of their anger. After a settlement between the children was complete, Ms. Polzin provided masking tape to mark off a road for the truck where block structures could not be built.

Miss Peabody noticed that the four children at the table were pushing each other’s materials around and arguing as they tried to place large pieces of paper on the table. A basket with lots of scissors was in the middle, so Miss Peabody removed enough scissors for each child from the basket, placed them on the table, and put the basket on a nearby shelf, where it was still accessible; this adjustment left enough space for each child and eliminated the cause of conflicts.

Mr. Terrill noticed that Joe and Rodney had frozen up their computer. He quickly unplugged it, plugged it in again, and rebooted the program for them, explaining the process as he did so.

In each of these instances, the adults altered the environment to enhance the success of the children in their care. Structuring the furnishings, equipment, and materials of the physical environment prepares the setting for effective interactions by providing visual cues for behavior and materials needed for success. The impact of the learning environment is significant in that in a recent large study of 3- and 4-year-olds, the researcher concluded that children’s perceptions of the physical environment were related to measures of the children’s cognitive and social competency, particularly the 3-year-olds (Maxwell, 2007).

Apply what you have learned so far to the challenging circumstances teachers in the Happy Days Childcare Center faced in working with children running “wild” in the classroom.
Children ‘Running Wild’

Sometimes adults blame children for problems that are really the fault of poorly designed physical environments. Consider this situation at the Happy Days Childcare Center.

The Center is located in a church fellowship hall. The doors from the parking lot open into a very large tiled floor room (used on weekend as a mini-gymnasium) with six small classrooms coming off the huge open space. Wooden cubbies are located at the far end of the hall in the smallest classroom. Children have to cross through the entire big space to put away their coats. All 50 children arrive at about the same time.

Four activity areas (whole group, blocks, pretend play, and art) are widely separated in the four corners of the room with an eating area near the end where the kitchen is located. There is a large empty space in the middle of the hall. Three quieter learning centers (books, manipulatives and a listening center) are located in the smaller classrooms. Two classrooms are reserved for naptime.

One teacher told the new director, “The children are completely out of control when they arrive every morning. They burst from the vans yelling and running. They don’t seem to be able to settle down all day long and we are constantly reprimanding them to stop running and shouting. I’ve never worked with such ‘wild’ children. I think some of them need that intensive individualized intervention we’ve been hearing about so we can get a grip on things here.”

Following a few days of observation, the director recommended that the program not jump immediately to the top most tier of the Social Support Pyramid to address children’s out of control behaviors. She suggested they begin buy creating a more supportive physical environment (see Figure 9-1). Together the staff decided to try these initial changes:

- Move the cubbies to create an initial entry to the hall. This will encourage children to stop as they enter to remove coats.

In addition to planning for the physical environment, adults plan in advance for the use of time in programs and an orderly, predictable sequence of events for children. This sets the stage for the quality of interpersonal experiences adults and children experience.
children to use time efficiently is by teaching them a habit, for activities that are repetitious and are used regularly. Health habits regarding hand washing, toileting, and tooth brushing are routines in many early childhood programs and are formed with clear directions, consistent practice, and an understanding of their purpose (Oshikanlu, 2006). Sometimes, adults become angry with children when they are slow to develop a desired habit. At such times, the child either may not know an appropriate sequence of behaviors, or the sequence is so new that he or she must concentrate closely on each action. A typical example of not knowing an appropriate sequence is when a kindergarten child puts on boots before the snow pants, or when the first garment put on by the child is the mittens. Adults sometimes become irritated when such incidents make the group wait, mostly because they do not realize that the situation requires teaching rather than demanding and limit setting. Another way adults help children learn the cultural meaning of time is by organizing events into predictable sequences or routines.

The Daily Schedule

Schedules are organized time segments that pertain to the particular program and reflect its philosophy and goals. These blocks of time are orderly arranged, with children moving from one activity to another in an unsurprising pattern. The daily schedule or routine supports children’s ability to act autonomously. Events can be predicted; expectations for behavior are clear. All routines contribute to the children’s sense of safety and security. The need for constant guidance in what to do and how to do it is minimized, so children’s dependence on adult direction is decreased. The following are guides for consideration in developing a daily schedule (Bullard, 2010; Kostelnik, Soderman, & Whiren, 2011):

- Adjusted for the age of the children, their interests and needs and appropriate for the development of the child’s sense of competence and worth
- Includes scheduled times for shared spaces such as playgrounds, lunch rooms, or gyms where youngsters must coordinate what they do with the group needs of others
- Balanced for child-initiated (free choice) and adult-initiated (small-group and large-group times) activities with ample opportunities for children to have some control over what they do
- Balance of small-group and whole-group experiences supporting various types of social interaction
- Alternating quiet and vigorous activities where children experience privacy and rest and where they are very mobile and playful
- Balance between indoor and outdoor experiences that provides an array of opportunities for play that is especially supportive of children experiencing challenges
- Provision for in-depth experiences and cooperative activities that take longer
- Specific provision for transitions, with minimal wait times and purposeful behavior
- Visible through photographs, pictographs, or writing as well as oral directions when needed
- Regularly evaluated and adjusted to meet children’s needs

When a child first enters a formal group setting, the familiar patterns developed within the family often must be altered to fit the new situation. This change results in distress and confusion and often is referred to as the initial adjustment to the program. The problems of adjustment are reduced as children and families incorporate the new pattern into their behavior.

Routines, however, must be learned. Adults first must adapt to the toddler’s schedule and then gradually teach children to function within a group schedule. Children under 6 years of age may take as long as a month to adapt to a new daily schedule. Children in the elementary grades often adjust in two weeks or less; at this age, a pictorial chart or written schedule may help them to adjust more quickly. Routines may be flexible, allowing a little more time to finish an activity if the change is compatible with the requirements of other program segments. Sometimes, however, as when large groups of children must use the same resources, schedules must be quite rigid. The use of the swimming area in a summer camp requires that all children must arrive, enter, and leave the water in an orderly fashion if standards of safety are to be maintained; every group must operate on clock time if all groups are to be able to swim each day. In contrast, in an after-school family childcare program, children may move indoors and outdoors whenever adult supervision is available; a rigid clock-time schedule is unnecessary.

The predictability of a routine offers emotional security to young children. After a distressing encounter with another child, Cara, age 4, chanted the daily
schedule several times: “First we play, then we wash, then we have a snack, then we hear a story, then we go outside, and then my mama comes to take me home.” After each repetition, she appeared more cheerful and ultimately was able to participate comfortably for the rest of the day. Young children also will comprehend the sequence of the daily routine before understanding the concept of time. Ross, 3.5 years old, was distressed when his mother left him at the childcare center. He played for about 45 minutes, and then asked if the children could go outside. This was a drastic change of schedule—usually, outside play was the last activity of the day—but the teacher allowed Ross and two other boys to go outside with an assistant. Ross played happily for a few minutes, and then informed the adult that his mother would be there soon to pick him up! He had erroneously inferred that playing outside caused his mother to arrive because of the contiguity of the events. Older children rely on regular routines as well. Jen knew her “hard” work was done by noon; with her reading tasks finished, she could then pursue math and science the rest of the small-group time!

Transitions. A good schedule is continuous, fluid, and goal directed. Blocks of time allow children to finish tasks and provide for individual differences in speed. Waiting is minimal, and the transitions in which the whole group must participate are as few as possible. A group transition occurs when one time block is finished and another begins. These transitions usually occur when children move from one room to another or when there is a complete change of materials. In Cara’s verbalization of her routine (“First we play, then we wash . . . ”), she located all the group transitions by saying “then.” In elementary schools, transitions occur before and after recess and lunch and also may occur between activities, such as between math and social studies. An individual transition is when a child is finished with one activity and moves on to another within a scheduled time block.

Generally, there is a marked increase in the number of interaction problems between children and between adults and children during group transitions. Children may be confused about how to behave after one activity is over and before another begins. Sometimes youngsters deliberately run, call out to friends, or wander during a transition. Older school-age children use this time for conversation and play, with a resulting increase in noise. Therefore, decreasing the number of transitions results in the lower probability of interaction difficulties.

Short attention spans and differences in working speed can be managed by grouping a variety of activities together in a larger time period and allowing children to change activities individually. For example, in a second-grade room, a teacher combined reading groups, workbook activities, and selected games involving one or two children into one block of time. In programs for very young children, a large variety of materials usually is available at any one time. Individual transitions are generally smoother, with children most successful if they have decided what to do next. In general, the schedule should be adapted to the length of time children need to complete tasks rather than to rigid periods, with particular attention to the age of children and time of year. Youngsters tend to focus on their tasks longer as they mature, and from fall to spring have a longer attention span.

In any case, the goal is to meet the individual needs of children; strategies and standards for doing so differ according to program demands. However, there are 11 general guides that will help support transitions for all age groups.

- **Plan carefully** so that you consider just what each child is supposed to do and how they are supposed to do it. Teach repeating transitions carefully so that each child develops relevant habits related to that transition. Entering the building is one of these regular transitions that can be taught so well that it becomes a habit. For example, children should know which door to enter and which staircase (if you use one) to use, which side of the staircase to walk on, how to walk safely using the handrail, how to remove outdoor wear and where to put it, to wash and dry their hands (reduces transmitting colds), and where in the room to congregate or what the first activity should be. This kind of instruction with appropriate ongoing supervision tends to reduce problems such as running in hallways, fooling around in stairwells, and congregating in bathrooms or locker areas. Treat transition as a skill to be taught.

- **Provide enough time** so that the transition can be accomplished without rushing, yet eliminate waiting as much as possible (Lamm et al., 2006). Children can use sign-up sheets when more youngsters want a material than can be accommodated. Specific materials such as picture books might be used while children gather for a group experience. Making children wait for the adult is disrespectful and wastes children’s time (Bullard, 2010).

- **Give clear, precise directions.** Some adults write them out so that they use the same directions daily until all learn the task. They should be specific and direct, with three or fewer directions stated at one
time. For example, when it was time for a group transition from learning centers to another group setting or activity, one effective adult approached a small group who had been using a lot of blocks and said, “Put each block on the shelf where it matches the shape” (pointing to the silhouette). She stayed nearby to make sure these young children understood. Then she said, “Place all of the blocks on the shelves.” Seeing the children engaged, she moved on to another area to give directions to those children using paints. If necessary, this adult would return to the block area to give the same directions or a demonstration if needed.

- **Alert children that a transition is coming** soon so that they can either complete an activity or organize the materials so that completion is possible later. Use the same signal every day such as having the helper carry around a sign that reads “5 minutes to play.”

- **Plan for the movement of children** through pathways when the whole group is in transition. Dismiss children in small groups or individually to avoid congestion in bottleneck areas such as doorways. Consider the size of the pathway and whether one child will be walking past other children. In spacious outdoor areas, small groups of older children may pass each other without physical contact, but even then, rough-and-tumble play might begin through “accidental” contact.

- **Engage in active supervision during transitions.** Children need support and assistance to engage in socially appropriate behavior when the whole group is moving within the space. Scan the whole room, move toward children who are disruptive, and give directions to those who are wandering, disengaged, or withdrawn.

- **Tell children what is coming next** if it is a group transition, or ask children what they plan to do next if it is an individual transition. This helps children to develop planning skills and increases their ability to predict what will happen sequentially.

- **When children are engaged in a free-choice activity, start the transition to cleaning up the room by the whole group gradually.** Ask small groups of children with the greatest number of materials to take care of to begin cleanup before the other children. Then move to other small groups so that the whole group finishes about the same time.

- **Always send children to something or someone** that is prepared for them. Aimless wandering or dabbling with numerous materials is not desirable during individual or group transitions. Assure that each child knows where to be and what he or she should be doing at the end of the transition. Ambiguity often leads to uncertainty and contributes to over-stimulation or the perception that things are out of control.

- **Assist unengaged children** to find some way to contribute to the group effort during cleanup time if they are unable to identify opportunities for helping independently. This supports prosocial behaviors such as helping and cooperating with others.

- **Adapt transition strategies for children with special needs.** Children who have ADHD, those who are autistic, or those who use hearing aides may be particularly vulnerable to the noise that comes when children are on the “move” during a transition.

Bruce was a 5-year-old child with autism. His language skills were delayed and what speech he had was monotone. He avoided eye contact and had difficulty in most social interactions. He was very skillful in solitary play and showed superior problem-solving skills when working with his hands. When the group transitions occurred in the classroom, he withdrew to the book reading area, often covering his ears, though the transition was generally smooth. Dismissal at the end of the day was from the gym where four groups of children from the school gathered for music just before being picked up by their parents. The sound bounced off the walls in this hard space and it was unusually noisy, though orderly and controlled. When Bruce first experienced this setting, he ran in large circles screaming. The characteristics of the space had made the sound overwhelming and terrifying to Bruce. To solve the problem, Bruce’s parent was asked to arrive about 5 minutes early to pick up Bruce from his classroom before the children went down to the gym.

In this situation, the transition from the gym to home was generally quick, efficient, and orderly for most of the children. Yet, for Bruce, the transition was a miserable time of day. To meet Bruce’s specific needs, the timing and conditions of the transition were altered to provide him with a less stressful experience and, at the same time, maintain an effective group transition for others in the program.

All whole group transitions are noisy. Books are closed. People move from place to place. Children interact with one another. Transitions take longer initially and are much shorter after the specific transition habit
is acquired. However, if children are milling around, pushing and shoving, engaged in boisterous play and generally disorganized, then the adult should take immediate action. When this happened in Ms. Haden’s group, she flicked the light, asked all of the children to lie on the floor where they remained until the room was quiet. Then said, “Lie still until I ask you to stand up. You will be quiet as mice and not touch anyone. When I touch you, stand up and put away the materials you have been using and come sit in the group area.” She paused, then asked them to stand up and move quietly like mice. Her voice was soft and firm. Later she provided an opportunity for children to discuss what happened during that transition. She discouraged blaming others and helped children to think about what they did to contribute to the bedlam. She neither shamed nor scolded them. Later, she evaluated her instructional strategies, directions, and transition planning.

Rate and Intensity of Programs

The number of transitions that take place during the day determines the rate or pace of a program. For example, some children may experience three or more transitions in 1 hour. This is a fast pace with a rapid rate of change, providing only 15 to 20 minutes for each segment. A moderate pace would have at least one activity period of 45 to 60 minutes and others of varying length of time. A low-pace program would have few group transitions and two long periods in a half-day program.

The intensity of the program generally refers to the amount of change within a time segment and the degree to which children must attend to an adult. High-intensity programs have three to five novel experiences per week with fewer opportunities to repeat or practice skills. The adult–child interaction is high and the number of adult-initiated activities greater. In low-intensity programs, children have one or two novel activities per week and many opportunities to repeat and vary familiar activities; the role of the adult is that of observer and facilitator. Children may be overstimulated, rushing from one thing to another, or they may be bored with a very low-intensity program. In either extreme, children find it difficult to have congenial, easygoing interactions with their peers. Both over-stimulation and boredom generate fatigue, which limits children’s ability to cope with social interactions. A child who is able to solve interpersonal problems when rested may simply cry or become distraught if required to face the same situation when tired.

Some elementary programs require a 2-hour block devoted to reading. Direct instruction in reading groups are high intensity with lower intensity options designed for practice available for the other children. Regardless of the age of children and the nature of the program, teachers must balance components to minimize fatigue.

Fatigue. The following are possible explanations for fatigue:

- Bodily changes that might be the result of “running hard” for a long time
- Frustration with one’s inability to cope with a situation
- Boredom with the activity
- The normal wear and tear of life due to stress

It is quite possible to have some children in a program frustrated, others bored, and still others exhausted from the stress of working under pressure to keep up. Factors that influence the rate at which children can function are motivation, health, knowledge, skill, practice, age, stamina, habit, and the number of people involved in an activity (Berns, 2009). Crowded conditions are more tiring than those in which the density is lower. Interacting continuously with someone is more tiring than sporadic contact during the day. Interruptions lead to frustration and to fatigue. In a childcare center, if the pace and intensity of the schedule are low to moderate, children are more likely to experience only the normal fatigue that is the result of daily activity, which is reduced by napping, and they will be able to engage in more pleasant social experiences during the rest of the day.

Helping Children Develop Standards

Children learn self-expectations and standards from their interactions directly with the environment as well as from adults and other children. The consequences of their behavior become clear as children engage in their programs. Materials not returned to the correct shelf are difficult to find. Youngsters who are distracted by materials during whole-group activities are themselves distractions to others. When adults organize the physical environment so that positive outcomes are obvious when social expectations are met, children will make the attempt to comply with these expectations because, in the long run, it is to their advantage to do so.

Both adults and children are able to recognize that the age and experience of a child must be taken into account when considering how good is good enough. Very young children can express what they like or prefer and what they dislike. Older youngsters and more experienced ones may account for differences in standards within the group by indicating, “Gracie hasn’t
learned how to do that yet,” regarding a youngster whose intellectual development is not as rapid as her peers, while insisting that the same behavior in a more competent child is unacceptable.

Adults help children develop standards by communicating reasonable expectations, providing directions and appropriate guidance, demonstrating these behaviors themselves, and providing reasons for the standards to children. Some children set their standards too high and never seem to experience satisfaction and acquire the self-worth that comes from accomplishment. Others set standards so high that they are fearful of failing their attempt to meet the objective. A few children only attempt tasks when they are almost assured of easy success before they begin. Unfortunately, some children have had little experience of appropriate standards and have not yet learned to judge with accuracy what might be appropriate in a specific situation. All children benefit when adults structure activities so that goals can be achieved gradually, but are challenging enough to promote growth (Copple & Bredekamp, 2009).

Probably the best recognized learning opportunity for children to develop standard-setting skills is when they select their “best work” or “best picture” to be included in their portfolios or for display. When discussing the reasons for their selection, young children may initially be very idiosyncratic in their reasoning. Older children who have discussed standards for their products with others will actually state more objective criteria. Children of all ages may have more difficulty in expressing the idea of “good enough” related to more obviously social problems. When Jason, who had four cars, was asked if he was satisfied with the distribution of cars with Brian, who had seven cars, he affirmed that he was and continued playing. He glanced at the teacher when she noted the difference in number and ignored her comment with a shrug.

The ability to plan and implement decisions using limited resources is an essential social competence. Children learn to anticipate the potential consequences for themselves as criteria for decision making, and, as they mature, they take into account the consequences for others. By the end of childhood, youngsters are capable of generating rules for the use and preservation of limited resources such as how to make a limited supply of glue last for the year. With guidance, children learn to organize space, materials, and time to achieve their own goals.

Opportunities to manage materials and events appropriate to the child’s age help children feel they are competent and have some control over their immediate environment. These feelings of autonomy and confidence contribute to positive self-esteem and eventually to greater social competence.

If you were asked today to implement the ideas in this chapter, could you do the following?

• Arrange the furniture that has been moved to the center of the room in a pile?
• Organize materials so children can use and care for them easily?
• Supervise children in a space designed for them?
• Facilitate the transition of individuals and groups according to a planned schedule?

The skills section that follows should help you to move from simply knowing about these things to actually being able to carry out the tasks.

Skills for Influencing Children’s Social Development by Structuring the Physical Environment

Arranging the Room to Support Social Development and Learning

Classrooms, playrooms, gymnasiums, and other spaces are used for children’s activities. Following are some general guidelines for initially setting up a room. However, the nature of the program and the nature of the space will greatly influence the specifics.

1. **Survey the space.** Note the placement of potential hazards such as electrical outlets and probable pathways such as doorways, water sources, and windows.
things into electrical outlets (that should have been covered). Surfaces next to areas where children form lines are usually touched, leaving dirty fingerprints. Young people frequently run and mill about during arrival and dismissal as well as other scheduled transitions.

3. Arrange the furnishings in the room so that the need to set limits is minimized and children are safe, comfortable, and as independent as possible. Consider all of the dimensions of the space so that children are most likely to interact together appropriately and are less likely to interrupt each other or come into conflict. Some specific suggestions are as follows:

- Place quiet activities, such as looking at books, away from the more active areas of the room.
- Place cubbies or lockers near doorways, electrical equipment near outlets, and paints near a water source.
- Place messy activities on hard-surface floors and potentially noisy activities (blocks, workbench) on carpets.
- Attach fabric to the open shelf units with Velcro™ fasteners so that the shelves may be closed off during group time.
- Interrupt long pathways that invite running by placing interesting activities partway down them that would require children to turn right or left.
- Use shelving that allows storage and display of materials such as paper, glue, pencils, crayons, and scissors to be readily accessible and near where they would be used; this prevents children from having to move across areas of the room repeatedly. If necessary, have writing supplies for older children in all centers.

4. Evaluate the placement of furnishings in terms of social development goals. If peer conflict regularly occurs in the same place, consider reorganizing the space. Are children able to move through the space with confidence and ease without interrupting someone else? Where do most of the limit-setting instances occur? Use the answers to these questions to help you restructure the area.

5. Use furnishings of appropriate size only.

6. Adapt the room arrangement as needed to meet the needs of children experiencing physical or mental challenges. Children in wheelchairs must have more space in pathways than children who are independently mobile. Children with broken limbs who are temporarily experiencing limitations in mobility may also require space adjustments so they may do what they can for themselves. Children with sensory or mental impairments may require greater attention to maintaining clear walkways or opportunities for seclusion from time to time. Parents and specialists usually can provide suggestions for meeting the special needs of individuals. In principle, adults structure the environment to enable the successful participation of all the children within it.

7. Adjust furnishings and equipment as necessary to support children’s social behavior on the spot. Move tables or other large equipment a few inches so that youngsters can move freely without interfering with another person. Observe for pushing, shoving, loud voices with protest, or other disruptions, and consider alternatives in the physical environment to change the conditions before setting limits. Change the location of the activity if it is too close to other activities that interfere with the children’s success and enjoyment.

8. Add or subtract objects in the physical environment to achieve specific goals related to children’s social development.

9. Share your observations of children’s use of space and room arrangement with program leaders if children’s interactions indicate a consistent or ongoing problem. Cooperate with fellow team members by discussing structuring issues. As a group, view the room at the level of the children and evaluate whether or not it supports the social competence of the children or if it generates potential problems for them.

**Maximizing Safety**

The safety of children is every adult’s responsibility, regardless of role. Usually, the adults in charge of a program will check the environment and childproof it so it is safe. Occasionally, however, people overlook less obvious risks or forget to follow through in making the adjustments.

Therefore, all adults must make it a habitual part of daily practice to apply the principles of childproofing the environment. Taking simple precautions is much better than telling children to be careful or scolding them for playing near something hazardous. You always have the option of inquiring about a situation you think is unsafe.

1. **Scan the environment inside and out for potential safety hazards when supervising children.** Remove hazards promptly. People may throw glass bottles or cans into children’s play spaces. Sometimes, when other people use space during other time periods, Continued
Skills for Influencing Children’s Social Development by Structuring the Physical Environment—continued

materials and equipment are left out that may pose a danger to the children.

2. Keep safety in mind when supervising activities. Some materials are potentially hazardous if used improperly, but otherwise are safe. A stapler used properly is safe, but little fingers can get under the staple. Large blocks usually are safe, but a tall construction may require an adjustment of a lower block to ensure balance of the whole structure. Remain alert and observant throughout the day.

3. Act promptly when a safety hazard is noticed. Act conservatively and, if your judgment is at fault, it is better to be more protective than less protective in an ongoing program for children. For example, if some 8-year-olds taste the fruit of a bush near the play yard with which you are unfamiliar, remove the fruit and the children from the area and contact the local poison control center according to program procedures. If the plant turns out to be harmless, consider it a fortunate event rather than being embarrassed that you inquired. If three preschool children are at the top of a slide all trying to come down at once, climb the slide, help one child to go down at a time, and monitor the number that are able to get to the top to take a turn. Do not hesitate to act.

4. Review any actions during the program day with other adults. For example, plants not known to be safe can be removed or fencing can protect the area. Adults who are not with the children for the full time they are in session also need information so that the same hazardous situation does not reoccur.

5. Know the local and state legal guidelines and periodically check that they are being maintained.

Managing Materials to Promote Independence

Organizing according to the following guidelines can minimize problems with cleanup done by children.

1. Store materials to be used by children in durable containers near the point of first use so that they are easy to reach, grasp, and use. Help children place materials in the correct storage container, if necessary.

2. Establish a specific location for materials so that children will know where to put them. Mark storage areas with words, symbols, or pictures as needed to identify materials that should be located there.

3. Check equipment and materials to be sure they are complete, safe, and usable.

4. Demonstrate the proper care of materials. If necessary, tell the children exactly what to do while demonstrating step-by-step, and then take the materials out again so that the children can imitate the behavior. A camp leader may need to demonstrate the cleaning and folding of a tent several times before children learn to do it correctly.

5. Give reasons for the standards that you set. For example, say: “Put the pieces in the puzzle box before putting it in the rack. That way, the pieces won’t get lost.” You might ask older children to read the numbers on the spine of a book and replace it exactly so that another reader can find it.

Arranging Space and Materials So Children Have Clues for How to Behave

1. Provide only enough chairs for the maximum number of children that can participate in an activity. Children become confused if there are five chairs at a table, but only three children may participate in the activity. To avoid this problem, remove extra chairs.

2. Use signs, labels, or pictographs placed so that children understand what is expected from these visual cues. For example, put one colored cube in a plastic bag and tape it to the exterior of the opaque bin that holds the cubes. Place a label on the container as well. Then draw a cube, color it, and label the shelf where the bin is stored. Children will know how and where to place the cubes when pickup time occurs.

3. Use more floor area for larger groups and less space for smaller groups. For example, the computer, table,
and two chairs can be placed in a small area near the library comfortably. However, the thematic play space should be three to four times larger as more children are likely to play there. Usually children move through large open space or bring materials into the space to use them there.

4. **Make all activities appealing and attractive.** Add color to attract children such as placing a piece of construction paper under a puzzle, much like a place-mat. Opening a few books with lovely illustrations and arranging them so that children can see them from afar might draw children into the library area. Where excessive clustering occurs, sit on the floor or in a small chair and really look to see if all of the activity areas are equally appealing.

5. **Encourage children to personalize their space by making room decorations, using the bulletin boards, or having a display area.** Keep written messages, pictures, and photographs at children’s eye level. Put child photographs on the locker or cubby or place family photos on bulletin boards where children may talk about their families with each other.

6. **Provide for appropriate activities for a private space.** Plan activities that children may do alone. Permit the child who needs some seclusion an opportunity to behave appropriately while withdrawing from the main flow of action.

7. **Provide materials that are developmentally appropriate.** Avoid offering activities that are too simple or too difficult. Modify the planned activity if necessary for children to participate. Use information available from other professionals and from the literature if you are uncertain about the appropriateness of an activity.

8. **Have all the materials ready and all the equipment and furnishings in place when the program begins.** Supervise the children continuously rather than leaving to get supplies. Survey the areas you are supervising, check the materials for usability, quantity, and safety, and confer with the leader, if necessary, to ensure the smooth functioning of activities. Then you are free to interact with the children.

9. **Organize materials so that physical work is minimized both for children and for you.** Observe children and other adults for ways to eliminate or simplify unnecessary work. For instance, use a tray to carry several items instead of making many trips. Make suggestions to help children make their own work much more efficient.

10. **Send children to an activity or an area rather than away from one.** Give children a clear notion of what alternatives they may pursue. Give a direction, such as “Put away your books and come to the large-group area,” or ask the child what he or she plans to do next. Avoid ending a statement by saying things like “You should finish up” or “You’re all done.” Neither statement helps the child decide what activities are open for him next.

**Minimizing Potential Conflict over Materials**

1. **Provide materials in an appropriate number for the task and situation.** In an open classroom, use the ratio of 1.5 to 2.5 play spaces per child. Check the number of spaces and the amount of materials available when mobility is excessive or when child-to-child conflict occurs. Either too many or too few activities can produce this effect. Either add or remove activity areas and play units, based on your assessment.

2. **For young children, especially toddlers, provide duplicate or near duplicate play materials.** Substitute a duplicate or similar object for the one under contention.

3. **Arrange the space so children can get materials and take care of them without interfering with other children.** Place furnishings so children can move to and from storage without bumping into other people or asking them to move their activity.

**Supporting and Working within the Daily Schedule**

1. **Know the time schedule for your work or participation hours and be on time.** Check the environment when you arrive to be sure it is acceptable for children and the necessary materials that you need are there. Notify the program if you are going to be late or absent due to illness. Then others can make appropriate adjustments to their plans.

2. **Know the children’s daily schedule and the schedules for any other groups of children when common spaces or equipment are shared.** Make sure that you understand where you are supposed to be at any given time. Find out about any anticipated changes in the schedule for special events.

3. **Remind children of the daily schedule as necessary to aid them in making decisions about their activities.** For example, if there are less than 10 minutes continued
Skills for Influencing Children’s Social Development by Structuring the Physical Environment—continued

until cleanup, the child who has decided to carry a tub of digging equipment to the sandbox may need guidance: “I notice that you want to use some digging tools. It is nearly time for cleanup. Maybe you should only take out one shovel and one pail. Then there will be less to put away.” The ordinary expectation is that children could play with a variety of scoops and containers. Another example in a camp setting is when the adult leader blows her whistle 15 minutes before the group leaves the tent area for breakfast so that children have time to finish dressing and to make their beds. She also blows it again 5 minutes before leaving.

4. Be on time to the activity area or learning center and begin immediately. End on time. In general, lead the children. Either enter an activity with them or before them in time, particularly when groups share space such as a gym or playground. If only one group can use the space at a time, and if you are delayed in leaving or arriving, you may be decreasing the opportunities of another group of children to use the resource. In addition, the other group may have to wait until you exit, which is generally a time of disruption and restlessness among children.

5. Know how normal routines are implemented in the program. Learn the typical ways of handling arrival or departure, diapering or toileting, meals, naps or rests, movement in hallways, all group assemblies, and other regular program events. Adhere to established routines as much as possible. After children learn the routines and understand the behavioral expectations, they will most likely behave in socially appropriate ways. When children do not recognize a routine, give directions for the expected behavior, and provide them the time and opportunity to practice it until each child can participate successfully. For example, Scottie, age 3, began to run into the parking lot where cars were moving as well as stationary when he saw his parent’s car. Ms. Shinn grasped his hand and admonished him, “You are really excited about seeing your parents. You wait until either your parents or a teacher takes you by the hand to your car.” Explain the routines to children who do not comply with them, especially new children and very young ones.

6. Make on-the-spot adjustments as needed to support children’s appropriate behavior. Refrain from rushing or hurrying children during transitions. Instead, start the cleanup or the beginning of the transition sequence earlier than the scheduled time if the activity is obviously going to take longer than normal. Make small adjustments on your own. Anything greater than 5 to 10 minutes should be checked with the head teacher.

Supporting Children’s Attempts to Plan, Implement Plans, and Assess Them Using Environmental Resources

Children have their own social goals and their own ideas of how, when, where, and with whom resources should be made available. This means that there are many opportunities for adults to help children in making plans throughout the day and from day to day in their programs. Planning for the use of resources is one of the most useful skills that children can develop.

1. Identify opportunities for children’s participation in planning. Help children identify problems in the course of daily activity. Let them solve these dilemmas for themselves when they cannot endanger themselves or others. Assist them in reflecting on their choices and the consequences of what they have chosen to do.

2. Use behavior and affective reflections to help children clarify the problem. Use reflections to assist children in sorting out the feelings of the moment, which get in the way of children’s clear thinking. Observe, listen, and consider what the children's purposes are, and construct your reflections accordingly.

3. Assist children in identifying possible alternatives. Use open-ended questions as necessary. “What ideas do you have?” “What do you think we can do about this?” “How long do you think that will take?” “What other people might like to do this or play?” “Is there another alternative?” and “How much more room do you need to do that?” are examples of open-ended questions. Avoid contributing your ideas to the solution of their problem. Do not take the initiative and the ownership of the problem away. Help children to identify possible alternatives. Listen respectfully to their ideas, even the unlikely ones. For instance, Kendal and Erica were putting train tracks down that ran into the pathway where other children were passing. After the problem was pointed out to them, they
6. After children have generated alternatives and determined the plan of action, review the plan with them. If there are several hours between planning and implementation, review it again. Write down what they are planning to do. Draw a plan if space and furnishings are involved. Such drawings are very rough, but can convey the idea. For example, some 4-year-olds want two “houses” to play neighbors. When they ask the teacher, she asks them to share their ideas with her and eventually with the larger group of children. To do this, they sketch a map of where things might be put.

Ask older children to write out a plan to correct their own behavior when they have difficulty with their social interactions with others. Assist them to organize and think through a course of action in regard to their behavior and to develop a concrete map to follow.

7. Use reflections and open-ended questions to support children’s evaluations of their plans. For example, was the child satisfied with the process? (“You figured out a way to . . .”) Did the outcome meet his or her expectations? (“You have rearranged the playhouse into two playhouses. Tell me how you think that is working.”) Consider the process successful if the

What choices might you offer this child?

suggested several alternative ideas to the congestion in the pathway:

- Continue building as they had, but let others step over their train.
- Move a table to deflect the people traffic around them.
- Make signs about a railroad crossing and put them on chairs on either side of the intersection.
- Change the direction of the railroad to avoid getting in the pathway.

4. Encourage children to make specific plans to implement their decisions. Ask leading questions such as: “How will you accomplish this?” or “What materials will you need?” or “Are there other ways to accomplish the same thing?” or “What steps will you need to take to be able to do this?”

5. Provide sufficient time for children to cooperate in planning group efforts or making complex plans. Listen attentively to ideas; avoid rushing to completion. Schedule planning time into the day to avoid the sense of being hurried. Make decisions yourself if there is not time for the group to carry out the process. Avoid imposing your choices on children when you have told them that they can choose.
Skills for Influencing Children’s Social Development by Structuring the Physical Environment—continued

plan is satisfying to the children and the implementation of it meets the needs that generated it “well enough” for them. Accept their plans, even though they are not likely to be what you imagine. Assist the child in the group who is less satisfied than another. This, too, is typical of any planning group. Allow older children more time to assess their plans.

Supporting Children’s Social Competence Through Careful Supervision

1. Maintain a global perspective of all people in the environment as well as those closest to you. Observe all children carefully by rapid scanning, being alert to noise and smell. Note all children and adults present before focusing in on the children nearest you. Watch for children having difficulties with materials or other children. Note the needs of other adults as they are engaged in interactions so that you may supply materials or give assistance as needed. Try to avoid daydreaming or other intruding ideas when supervising children as needs arise quickly that require your attention. Turn your cell phone off, and do not text while with the children!

2. Situate your body so that you can view the whole space and all of the children. Usually have your back to a wall, a corner, or a boundary. If seated in an area where visibility is limited, stand up occasionally. Reorient when you hear unusual noise or notice unexpected movement.

3. Take action if necessary to protect children. Adjust the blocks if they appear to be unstable. Retrieve a toddler if the child has managed to open a gate and go through. Ask unfamiliar adults if you can help them if they remain in the vicinity of the playground awhile. (The person may or may not be a threat to the children.) If safety is the issue, always act without delay. If another adult is closer and is moving into the situation, return to your place, scan the whole area, and continue your activity. If an accident should occur, reassure the other children, and continue with the program.

4. Check carefully that all adults and children are present and accounted for during “inclement weather” drills and fire drills. Count them before you leave the classroom to move to a safer area and when you get there. (When children are frightened, they may hide in a place that makes them feel secure rather than moving with the group.) Regular drills enable children to predict the sequence of events.

5. Modify the use of materials, space, or equipment as needed to support social goals for children. There are only three things you can do: You may add materials, equipment, or space. You may remove or limit materials. You may alter the space in some way.

- Adding to the environment: Add more dough to the table if it appears that children need more to play successfully. Offer the children an alternative (additional) activity perhaps with sand or water if there is no more dough. Add a “house plan” diagram from a homemaking magazine and suggest they build it if the block area play appears to become disruptive. Either move adjacent furniture a few inches, or shift the activity elsewhere if the space appears too congested. (Note: If you add space in one area, you are limiting it by the same amount in an adjacent area.)

- Removing material from the environment: Remove furnishings to other locations, put materials away, or close cupboards. For example, if children are consistently having conflicts with peers as they throw balls into the basket, provide feedback to them and give a warning. If the inappropriate behavior continues, take the balls away. This can be done during the session as well as later in the day and is a logical consequence of the children’s actions. Remove access to distracting material rather than actually shifting the location. Limit the number of place settings and chairs at each table if children appear to be bumping and shoving at lunch. (Note that another table would need to be added or the eating divided into two sessions so that everyone can be served.)

- Adjusting the physical environment: Substitute a less complex puzzle for one that is proving too difficult for a child. Add flour to play dough that is too sticky. Blow up sports balls with insufficient air to make play fun. Simplify an activity using the same materials, but different directions so that children who have special needs or who are less mature may participate with success. Enhance the complexity to an activity by modifying the directions for children who need more challenge. Alter the pathways of the room to wider, straighter spaces when
children who have crutches or walkers are added to the group. Consider both the challenge and the success as you make alterations.

Sharing Ideas about Structuring the Physical Environment with Families

1. Apply structuring strategies to behavioral problems that parents bring to your attention. Structuring the environment to promote appropriate behaviors is applicable to many situations that parents encounter. Strategies that are used for children in groups may be modified and applied to family situations. Following are some fairly typical experiences with some structuring possibilities that might make family life more pleasant.

- **Toileting accidents:** Can the child easily walk to the toilet, remove clothing, and get on and off the toilet easily and independently? Do these accidents generally occur at the same time of day or in the same conditions, such as when they are outside? Modify clothing, add a small stool, or monitor the reminders given children.

- **Rough-house play or noisy interaction in the car:** This behavior is very distracting and potentially dangerous. Family members may add something for the children to do. There are numerous small games that children can play while riding.

- **Sibling fighting or older children hitting younger ones:** This usually occurs when the younger child intrudes on the older child’s space or possessions. Parents can clarify which things are personal possessions, which belong to both, and where each is stored. They also can provide opportunities in which either child is free from intrusion.

- **Cleaning up play space:** Principles related to storage and schedules apply here. Children need a warning that play is finished at home as well as school and are able to learn a standard that is acceptable at home. Young children should help, and eventually they will learn how to do this if they can see where things are to be placed. Open shelves and plastic containers at home work well.

2. Communicate with family members about any major changes in the child’s group membership, room arrangements, daily schedule, or equipment and furnishings. When parents know about changes in advance, they are able to reassure the child. They are also less likely to experience distress than if they discover the changes all on their own. In childcare settings, when older toddlers move from the comfortable room they know into a new group of preschool children, both the children and the parents should be part of this transition. Adding a loft to a kindergarten in the middle of a semester is stressful, although usually it is seen very positively. Usually changes that involve the group are communicated in a newsletter, and changes that involve an individual are communicated in person or on the phone.

3. Tell family members how structuring is used to support the children’s appropriate behavior in the group setting. After listening to your ideas, parents can adapt them at home. For example, seating in a classroom often supports friendship. Noting this effect of physical closeness, parents might consider inviting children who live nearby to come to their homes for play. Separating materials for older and younger children is another easily transferable idea.

4. Structure family members’ arrival, observation or participation, and dismissal so that they and their children have a successful experience. Some mothers breast-feed their infants in workplace childcare programs; therefore, a secluded area and a chair with armrests are most comfortable. New parents may wish to observe their children, whereas others may want to visit the program for short periods and leave again. Parents who volunteer in grade school may want to observe their child during a session. Regardless of parental needs, professionals should structure these events so that parents, children, and staff are all comfortable with the plan.

Engaging Family Members in Structuring the Physical Environment

1. Invite parents to participate in events that contribute to the maintenance and beauty of the facility. Periodic yard cleanup days or paint-and-fix days (held for 3 or 4 hours, 2 to 4 times a year) contribute to the quality of the program at a lower cost than if carried out by contractors or employees. These events are usually done by nonprofit organizations, but may also be implemented by public schools or public parks. If carefully structured, adults enjoy themselves and feel very positive about contributing to their child’s program.

2. Ask family members to contribute materials or equipment to the program. Paper rolls, fabric scraps, wood scraps, plastic food trays, baby food jars, film canisters, wrapping paper, holiday cards, and many...
Skills for Influencing Children’s Social Development by Structuring the Physical Environment—continued

other materials that are often discarded can be used by programs for young children. Dress-up clothing, computers, toys in good repair, or surplus household items that might be sold may also be willingly contributed. If you are soliciting contributions, write a very specific request to parents.

- State clearly the acceptable conditions such as “a doll carriage in good working order,” “clean baby food jars with the labels removed,” or “clean, squeaky baby toys in good condition.”
- Accept all contributions with thanks, gracefully and individually. Avoid making an issue of contributions for children whose families were unable to participate.
- Provide a written thank-you for the contribution of items that might be sold so that parents may use the contribution in their income taxes. You do not have to state the dollar value of the gift.
- Avoid making an issue if parents are unable or unwilling to provide materials requested by the program that become costly such as snacks, crayons, paper, glue sticks, pencils, cleaning supplies, and so on. Make sure that all children have access to resources equally.

Pitfalls to Avoid

In structuring the physical environment to enhance children’s social development, there are certain pitfalls you should avoid.

1. Making too many changes at once. Children need security and predictability. Even though you can think of several major alterations to make, such as altering the daily schedule and rearranging the room, do them gradually. Younger children are more upset than older children by major changes.

2. Evaluating too soon. Sometimes, when new materials are added, rooms changed, or schedules altered, you will anticipate an immediate positive result. Young children usually are very active as they become familiar with the area again. Increased noise and confusion can be expected immediately, with improvements more discernible after three weeks.

3. Failing to supervise. Never leave children unattended by an adult. Children may misuse materials usually considered safe. Even if you are just gone for a minute, a situation that could endanger a child may occur at that time. In addition, children may lose interest and behave inappropriately.

4. Planning inadequately. Do not initiate major adjustments in the daily schedule or room arrangement on the spur of the moment. Of course, you can add materials, such as plants, books, or toys. But impulsive major changes upset children, especially younger ones. Follow the guidelines. Sketch major furnishings on a floor plan before moving heavy items. If they do not fit, you will have to move them again, thereby increasing your fatigue and frustration.

5. Adhering rigidly to the plan. When you have evaluated the situation, and it is clear that the plan won’t work, adjust the plan, modify it, or give it up. Sometimes, the very best plans don’t work out as anticipated and must be adjusted.

6. Directing rather than guiding when supervising children. Occasionally adults are more focused on the product than on the children doing the activity. Therefore, they tend to make all the decisions, establish the standards of what is good enough, and tell children what to do and how to do it at all points. Directing is only the best choice when an issue of health or safety is involved. If adults direct too much, they diminish children’s autonomy, confidence, and feelings of competence.

7. Inserting your own alternatives for decisions or contributing too much to children’s planning too early. Adults tend to take over the process of the planning from children by offering too much help too soon. Wait for the children to ask, then review some of their ideas, and ask for other ideas. Let them develop and discard unworkable solutions. Approach this knowing that lots of ideas can be considered, even those that
are unlikely to work. Taking over undermines children’s self-confidence and their trust in you.

8. Giving unnecessary or over detailed directions. Adults sometimes give too many directions when children are already competent to do the task. This may lead to children tuning out the adult. Keep directions simple and direct. When in doubt, ask children if they know how to do the task.

9. Confusing situations that require setting limits with those that require giving directions. If a child knows how to do a task or knows the expectations of behavior and chooses not to follow through, then limit-setting is appropriate. Do not give directions repeatedly as a means of trying to achieve compliance; however, if the child does not appear to know how to do the task, give directions. The key here is to judge the child’s previous experience and knowledge. For example, a child who is new to the program wanders in the hallway. Perhaps she is lost and needs directions as to where to go. Another child who has been in the program for weeks also wanders in the hallway. This child needs to have clear limits set.

10. Assuming that a child knows how to do a routine. Learn to distinguish whether a child does not know how to do something or is refusing to do it. Children do not automatically know how to dress, undress, wash, put away materials, get food in a school cafeteria, or clean cupboards. If you are supervising a child, teach the child how to do a task correctly rather than criticizing the child’s best effort. Comments such as “Didn’t your mother teach you anything?” “If you can’t do it right, don’t do it at all” or “Can’t you even wipe a table? I’ll do it myself” are all inappropriate. Instead, use comments like “You are having a hard time with that. I’ll show you how, and you can finish it.”

11. Assuming that the observations of support staff are not important. Support staff members are usually working near the children and can see how they are functioning in an area and with the materials. It is their responsibility to share this information with the group leader who then can work toward more effective planning. If you are the head teacher, encourage support staff to share what they observe and find ways to make this a regular part of the program. If you are in a support role, be observant and share your observations with your head teacher or others in charge.

12. Assuming that nothing can be done. Sometimes, you may go into a room and assume that the present arrangements cannot be improved. You may not be able to do much, but most spaces can at least be made attractive and can be personalized. When you do not know whether the materials, furnishings, or decorations can be changed, ask someone in authority. Usually, an extra pillow or small table is no major problem. Such things may be available.

13. Failing to communicate your plans to other adults and to children. When engaging in any aspect of the structuring process, change is involved. This requires communication to all parties. Everything will run more smoothly if adequate preparation of children and adults has been accomplished.

Summary

The processes of structuring to achieve the goals of social competence were discussed in this chapter. Preparing a physical environment that is efficient and pleasant reduces fatigue, promotes independent behavior, and facilitates interaction. Organizing the materials, furnishings, and equipment can minimize interpersonal conflict in the group as well as support safe learning opportunities. Planning and implementing change that is goal-directed may be time consuming, but leads to satisfaction for both children and adults.

General structuring processes were applied specifically to time management in programs for children. Special consideration was given to the importance of predictability and routine for children’s sense of security and emotional adjustment to the environment. Transitions are generally unsettling for children, but there are strategies to promote appropriate behavior.

Principles of structuring also were applied to the selection, storage, and use of materials and to the arrangement of space. The quality of the environment influences social interaction among children and adults. Skills were described for establishing and changing room arrangements, supervising
children, and promoting efficient use of materials. Techniques were presented for adding to or subtracting from the environment as a means to facilitate social interaction.

Finally, suggestions were made to help parents use structuring to support their child-rearing practice and to organize opportunities for parents to donate time and materials to the program.

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### Key Terms

- activity space
- boundaries
- directing
- feedback
- high mobility–low mobility
- intrusion–seclusion dimension
- large-group space
- learning centers
- open–closed dimension
- private space
- schedules
- simple–complex dimension
- small-group space
- soft–hard dimension
- structuring
- transition

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### Discussion Questions

1. Explain why professionals structure the environment and how they do it as simply as you can so that someone who does not know the vocabulary would understand.

2. Describe how you would apply the structuring process to the problem of disruptive, noisy, or difficult transitions from free play to a story-listening experience.

3. Why might the standards of order and efficiency differ among similar kinds of programs in different settings?

4. Explain the role of communication between adults who rearrange a room or make major changes in the schedule of the day. Identify various strategies by which ideas can be shared, and situations in which the adult-to-adult communication about structuring might be problematic.

5. Why would a decision rule such as “The job at hand is less important than the child doing it” become widely accepted among professionals and be frequently repeated to professionals in training?

6. Explain how the management of time and of the daily schedule is related to children’s social and emotional development. Is it important throughout childhood? Why?

7. Explain the importance of having a private space in programs for groups of children.

8. Think back over your own childhood and recall instances in which you were denied opportunities to make choices. How did you feel? How did you behave? Did the adults make explanations to you? How did they behave?

9. Write a letter that could be sent to family members asking for materials for the program or asking them to participate in a volunteer workday. Make the letter friendly and inviting, as well as very specific. Exchange your letter with a classmate and discuss the differences and reasons for those differences.

10. Referring to Appendix A, NAEYC Code of Ethical Conduct, determine which of the situations listed here would constitute an ethical problem, and identify the principles and ideals that influence your thinking.
   a. Showing up 20 minutes after you were expected without calling in advance in a program with young children
   b. Failing to mention that the gate to the fenced playground is broken
   c. Letting a preschool child carry a pot of very hot water
   d. Scooping the pieces of many sets of materials together and dumping them in one container to make cleanup faster
   e. Failing to have images of adults and children of all racial groups and some disabling conditions available to children
   f. Moving a toddler from the infant/toddler room to a preschool room without informing the parent or preparing the child
   g. Placing the cooking project on a table that is across the pathway where children walk and using an extension cord to connect the hot plate
Field Assignments


2. Observe any program for children, and note the daily schedule as posted. Compare it to what actually happened. What adjustments were made and why? How did the children know when to make a transition? Describe in detail the transitions you observed, identifying what adults said and did and how children responded.

3. Make a visit to an early childhood program. Draw a detailed floor plan of one of the rooms. List the strengths and weaknesses of the room arrangement in relation to children’s social development. Suggest improvements in the physical layout.