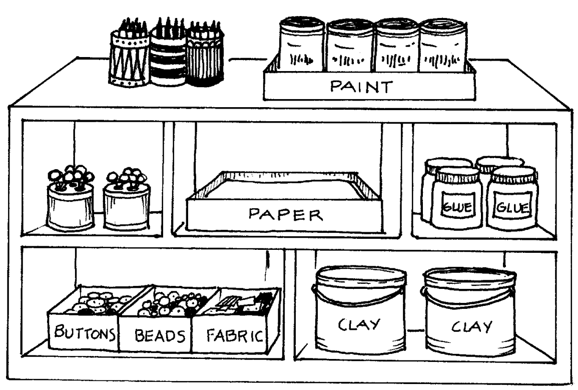
VII. DESIGNING THE LEARNING ENVIRONMENT

The physical environment includes all the surroundings of the preschool. The floors, walls, shape and size of the classroom, outdoor play area, furniture, materials, equipment, and toys all affects the preschool experience. Classrooms that are aesthetically inviting and comfortable help children and teachers feel good. Neutral colors with bright highlights, and warm and natural lighting create a happy atmosphere. The arrangement of furniture provides information on the use of the space and affects traffic patterns, safety, noise levels and teacher observation. The design of the indoor and outdoor space should be purposeful and carefully planned. A well-designed environment promotes complex play, independence, socialization, and problem solving. Children feel excited and compelled to initiate learning, explore materials, and discover new information. (See two drawings of classrooms at the end of this chapter.)

The classroom belongs to the children and the environment reflects the interests and culture of the children. Their art work is displayed attractively around the room. Their science experiments are labeled and clearly visible for everyone to watch. Block creations are allowed to remain in place overnight so further construction can take place. Artifacts, books, and food reflect the unique cultures of the children. Themes and projects transform the room into a garden, shop, or space station.

Respect for materials balances with children's curiosity to see how things work. Children are encouraged to care for materials and toys as well as help maintain the order of the room by putting things back in their proper places. Shelves and bins that are clearly labeled make this task easier.



Classroom materials and equipment are organized into areas that encourage children's play and work. These areas are called activity centers. Each classroom has several activity centers including:

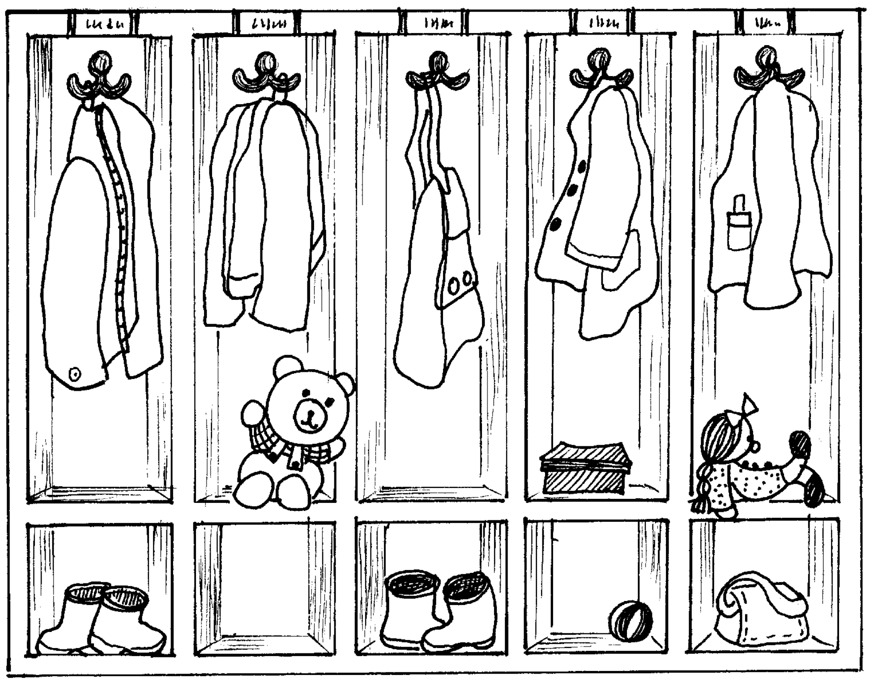
Art	Mathematics/Manipulatives
Blocks	Music
Cooking	Outdoors
Dramatic Play	Sand and Water
Literacy	Science

Activity centers contain a variety of materials that children use in creative ways. Materials should be carefully selected by teachers to encourage exploration and should be displayed attractively on shelves for easy use. Children should be encouraged to work with materials independently.

Many authors and theorists support the idea that play is children's work. For young children, learning is play and play is learning; the two should not be separated. Encouraging children to play promotes the natural development of skills and competencies. The Step by Step Program uses play as the basis of education by placing appropriate, compelling material in each activity center and providing planning and support from the teaching team. Children also learn from each other; activity centers and working in small groups provide them with opportunities for natural interactions. This gives them the opportunity to solve problems, make decisions, practice expressing themselves, learn about differences, become more independent, and learn from their peers.

As teachers plan and create activity centers, they should think about the kind of space required. For example, the block area must be large enough for several children to work together or alone and to safely build their sprawling creations. It is a good idea to have a carpet or other floor covering in this area because it reduces noise and is more comfortable to sit on. The dramatic play activity center is often placed next to the block center. Both are noisy, active areas. Children often combine block play with dramatic props such as dolls for block houses, stuffed animals for stables, and fire hats for a fire engine built out of hollow blocks. If possible the science center should be designed around a sunny window on which plants and small seedlings can grow. The literacy area should be smaller and more intimate, with carpeting, pillows, soft chairs, and a table for writing and drawing. The location of a sink in the classroom may effect the placement of the art activity center because it is helpful for children to have easy access to water for clean-up. The sand and water table also is placed in close proximity to the sink for easy filling and emptying of containers. Activity centers are divided by shelves, peg board, foam board cut to size and other pieces of furniture. This separation provides definition to the area; limits the number of children in each center; and promotes safe traffic patterns.

Children also need a cubby or drawer that is marked with their name (and photograph) to keep their personal belongings.



Each center should have a variety of materials so that several children can use them at the same time. In the art area, for example, one child might be working with play dough, another making a collage, another painting at the easel, and two children drawing a mural together with crayons.

Activity centers become laboratories for child-initiated learning through play and interaction with materials. Children are allowed to choose materials and to play with them as they like. In this way, Legos become a house for one child, while another uses them to count, and another uses them to sort by color.

Children move freely from one activity center to another. Time spent in any one center varies from child to child. When children are actively engaged in play, creatively using materials, they will move less frequently and spend longer periods of time at their work.

The teaching team changes the centers by removing materials that have become very familiar and introducing new ones. They can individualize the centers by building on children's interests. The dramatic play area, for example, can become a spaceship for a child who wants to learn about astronauts when teachers add aluminum foil, space helmets, and a cardboard instrument panel.

A child who is interested in snakes will be pleased to find reptile books in the library area. A child who likes to build bridges will be happily surprised to find that boats and cars have been added to the block center.

Classrooms are dynamic. Teachers should evaluate how effective the room arrangement is and feel free to change it during the school year. A Classroom Environment Checklist is provided as a guide for teachers.

THE CLASSROOM ENVIRONMENT CHECKLIST

Present?

______ Space is divided into defined activity centers — outdoors, art, dramatic play, literacy, mathematics/manipulatives, blocks, sand and water play, music and science.

______ Materials that encourage math and science exploration are included throughout the classroom.

______ Materials are grouped logically and located in appropriate areas of the room.

______ Activity centers are clearly delineated. Shelves, floor covering, storage containers, easels, tables, and lofts can all be used to divide space.

______ Materials and activity centers are labeled.

______ The furniture and equipment are placed in the room in ways that promote safety, allow children to move around the classroom (e.g. there should be no clear pathways across the room which encourage running and cleaning supplies and other dangerous materials should be above the child's level).

______ Areas in the classroom allow for individual play and small and large group activities.

______ Quiet and noisy areas are separated so children are not disturbed. (the volume of noise influences the desire to move, anxiety level, creativity).

______ Soft areas such as pillows, covered foam mattress, bean bag chair, are available for reading, resting, listening to music.

Present?

______ Hard surfaces such as linoleum or wood flooring are available for painting and sand and water play.

______ There are enough tables and chairs for the children to sit comfortably to eat breakfast and lunch (tables should be in different areas of the room).

______ The classroom is set up so the teachers can see most of the activity centers and the children playing.

______ Children have access to outside play areas.

______ Materials and children's work are displayed at children's eye level.

______ There is space for children to keep their personal things.

Classroom Safety

The children's emotional and physical safety are primary responsibilities of the teacher. An outdoor safety checklist is found in the section on outdoor play. Emotional safety is discussed in the section on Building Community. Indoor safety requires careful planning, record keeping and maintenance of equipment. The following checklist will help in keeping children safe and healthy.

SAFETY CHECKLIST

- Does the classroom contain smoke detectors and a fire extinguisher?
- Are cleaning materials, medications, and other hazardous materials out of the reach of children?
- Is the number of the nearest hospital, poison center, ambulance, and fire department posted by the telephone?
- Are all exposed electrical outlets covered? Are electrical cords and appliances in good repair?
- Are poisonous plants identified and out of the reach of children?

- Is there a first aid kit in the classroom?
- Is a staff member trained in cardiopulmonary resuscitation and first aid procedures?
- Are furniture and toys free of splinters and sharp edges?
- Do children and staff know what to do in case of fire?
- Is there a health form for each child listing allergies, doctors names and numbers, parent and other responsible adult's name and daytime phone numbers?

In the following chapters (VIII - XVIII) there is a description of each activity center with information on the developmental goals of that center, materials and equipment, roles of the teaching team, and suggested ideas for activities and projects. Each teacher will individualize the curriculum, adding activities and ideas for materials that make it alive and appropriate for the children and families enrolled.

COPY CENTER
SCAN ARTWORK

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