

## **Enriching Your Classroom Environment**

by Jody Capehart

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### **Physically Enriching the Environment**

#### *Order*

Young children (18 months to 3 years) are in the process of ordering and organizing their environment so they can integrate all of the information coming in via their senses. Providing a place for everything helps children to organize their environment.

You may be saying, “Are you kidding? You haven’t seen my students—they don’t have an orderly bone!” Try picking out the favorite toys or items of those toys in your classroom. Put them on a low shelf with a clearly designated place for each one. You may designate the proper place by using a picture (such as from a catalog), a colored dot or shape on the shelf and the same colored dot or shape on the toy, or a word label. As children learn to match and line up the pictures, geometric shapes, and even words, they are learning more levels of organization.

As children experience order, they will come to want more of it. Believe it or not, children have a very strong need for order, especially around ages 2 and 3.

### *Categorize*

Separate loose items into containers so your children will learn to categorize. Again, label each container, code it, or put a picture on it. If things get out of order, sit down with your children, line up the containers, and reorganize. If you verbalize as you go, you will have provided a wonderful hands-on lesson in organizing. You will reap rich dividends in laying the foundation for teaching children to be organized learners.

A word to the wise—start simple. Begin with pieces for few mainline toys such as stackable rings, stacking tower blocks, and simple four-piece puzzle pieces. Graduate to containers for items such as crayons, blocks, trucks/cars, figurine dolls. Do not overwhelm or complicate the situation by providing too many items or too many containers. Slowly add items as your children demonstrate that they can effectively organize and care for them.

### *Color*

We all respond to color, whether or not we are aware of it. Bright red stimulates and may even cause over-stimulation. Blue soothes and has a calming influence. Green and light peach have been used by hospitals because of their healing effect. Yellow is a mentally stimulating color.

Research shows that the primary colors are better for babies because they are easier to discriminate. Many teachers, care centers, and schools have responded accordingly. Yet many of us still prefer the pastel colors for babies. Why? Perhaps because the pastel colors are so soothing to us as adults.

Color is a fun concept to play with. Play color games with your students. “I wonder what an elephant would look like red.” Color different colors in a coloring book instead of just the traditional and expected color choices. Get a prism and look at all the colors. Paint rainbows in a different order. Let your students’ color creativity abound!

When choosing colors for your room, be sure to consider the children you teach. If you have a number of children who display choleric or dynamic personalities, you may want to calm them down with a quiet blue or green room. Red, yellow, and orange may be too stimulating. Your quiet, withdrawn, and perhaps moody melancholy and analytic children may do well with the cheery stimulus of soft yellow. Red and orange may be too irritating to them, and blue and green may pull them deeper into themselves.

### **Emotionally Enriching the Environment**

Provide a warm, loving, nurturing environment. Remember to love and affirm children. Praise the children’s attempts to learn and master their environment. Appreciate the uniqueness of each child you teach. Strengthen your faith by

trusting that God made children in need of training and guidance, but recognize that their unique designs came from Him.

Children are like sponges. They absorb what is around them physically as well as emotionally. As you examine what you have placed in their environment, reflect on what messages you are sending. What do you want them to soak up? to absorb? to mirror back?

If you talk too loudly, how can you expect them to be quiet? If you are easily upset or rattled, how can you expect them to be gentle and loving? If you neglect to verbally affirm their efforts, how can you expect them to reflect back positive self-images? Remember that patterns of emotional response are generally formed by the time a child is 5 years old and it takes many years and much hard work to change these patterns.

### **Mentally Enriching the Environment**

We need to realize two very important and distinct differences in the way that children and adults perceive work and play. Adults often work for a living and play to relax. For children, work is play and play is work.

Children are close observers of the adult world. They imitate what they see. As they pretend to dress up, cook dinner, hammer nails, and mow the lawn, they are very happy. They do not perceive this work as a tiring process. It is wise to create an environment filled with child-size work as seen from the adult world. For example, provide orderly ways for children to learn how to sort materials, complete a task and put items away, clean up a center, keep their area neat, or organize their work.

Allow opportunities for creative, imaginative play. Let children talk to themselves, to imaginary friends, and with their toys. Remember that play can be healing. Children will often say more to a puppet, stuffed animal, or doll than they will to an adult. Don't hinder this creative play for children. It is as constructive as work is.

One way to enrich the mental environment is with books. Reading is rewarding for many reasons. It allows children to hear the patterning of language even before they can understand it or speak it—reading to them strengthens their ability to master language skills. Reading to children also teaches them to create pictures in their minds. It helps them to see the relationship between the written word and images, and it strengthens their own ability to read.

Provide a wide variety of intellectually stimulating activities. As we provide music, books, puzzles, and thought-provoking activities, we learn how God gifted the children we teach.

## **Spiritually Enriching the Environment**

Provide areas where children can be quiet, reflective, and contemplative. For example, on a low shelf place a Bible (or a picture Bible for young children) and something of beauty from God's world. Children will spontaneously go and sit there quietly. It seems to feed and nourish their souls with God's peace.

Have posters or pictures that show children being loving, kind, and gentle. Be sure that the posters are displayed at a child's eye level. If your students can read, place Bible verses around the room that will help them deal with character-trait qualities. When you share these items with your students, do so in a quiet voice. As you communicate love and reverence for our Lord and His world, children will begin to model this after you.

God created us to be co-creators. Paint, work with clay, read books, go on field trips, or go exploring. In the process you will discover many opportunities to share God's Word with your students.

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"Enriching Your Classroom Environment" is an excerpt from Jody Capehart's book, *Teaching with Heart* (Standard Publishing). Jody has been involved in education for over 35 years.