

# BEGINNINGS WORKSHOP

**Creating Invitations  
for Learning**  
by Deb Curtis

**Emergent Environments:  
Involving Children in  
Classroom Design**  
by Sarah Felstiner

**Great Places To Be a Baby:  
Infants' and Toddlers'  
Learning Environments**  
by Jim Greenman

**Transforming  
Environments Through  
Self-Reflection**  
by Wanda Billheimer  
and Gina Lewis

**Training Suggestions**  
by Kay Albrecht



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**Environments to Engage Children**

From the beginning of life, the physical world in which we live has a profound influence on both adults and children. This issue of Beginnings Workshop continues the quest for appropriate, pleasure-filled, well designed, functional, and aesthetically beautiful environments that began with the discussion of space in the January/February issue. The focus this time is on creating engaging environments that invite children to explore and think, involving children in designing their own space, providing special places for infants and toddlers, and enhancing change using self-reflection.

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# Creating Invitations for Learning

by Deb Curtis

The birds living in a tree just outside the window of our school generated quite a stir among the three- and five-year-old children in the program where I am a child care teacher. There was much excitement and delight as the children observed the birds build a nest and care for their new babies. To take advantage and extend on this wonder-filled event, I decided to gather some props and materials for our indoor environment and invite the children to more personally explore and represent what they were seeing through the window.

At the local craft store I found some beautiful bird families made from feathers, a set of tiny plastic eggs, and a few bird nests commercially made from twigs and feathers. I also collected feathers, dried leaves, grass, and moss and a variety of small, flat baskets. I carefully arranged these items on the top of a low shelf in the classroom and displayed books about birds and nests nearby. The children eagerly accepted this invitation, imitating the drama they had been observing out the window. They were especially drawn to acting out how the bird parents cared for their babies. The children also designed elaborate nests with the natural materials, sharing their theories about what kinds of nests the birds would like. Over the next month the children continued to play with the birds and nests, poured over the books about them, and participated in many other activities and conversations sparked by this enchanting event in nature and the opportunity to pursue it in active, meaningful ways.

In my work as a preschool teacher I have found that offering information about things that children have limited experiences with, or posing a series of questions to try to encourage

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their thinking doesn't seem to get much of a lively or sustained response. But when I carefully arrange props and representational materials in the environment with a particular focus in mind, the children are delighted to discover and play with them, eagerly share their ideas and theories, and seek more information. Because of this I have been steadily collecting, organizing, arranging, and offering props and representational materials that captivate children's interest.

## Designing Invitations

I call collections of interesting and carefully combined materials "Invitations" and I use them in a number of ways:

- Invitations to respond to and enhance an emerging interest, as with the Bird Invitation described above.

When I observe an interest among the group I intentionally organize props and materials for children to revisit and represent their ideas. As I observe their conversations and activities, I get new information for what else to offer to extend the activities and learning possibilities.

- Invitations to help children learn new skills and multiple uses for tools and materials that are a part of the daily environment.

I arrange materials and make displays throughout the regular areas of the room, often including documentation with diagrams, instructions, or photos of children's previous work in this area. For example, I arrange blocks and other block props in specific ways that suggest new possibilities for building and design and include photos of children's previous block constructions. The children use these Invitations as launching points for revisiting their work, adding complex ideas, and trying new skills.

- Invitations to offer activities and experiences with particular content knowledge.

Designing Invitations related to math, science, social studies, literacy, and other content areas of early childhood education gives children experiences in wonderful ways that are engaging and natural for their active learning styles. When creating these Invitations I try to highlight a particular skill, concept, or information, and offer an engaging way to explore or practice the concepts. For example, I created a small sensory tub filled with lavender scented rice and included an array of hollow, plastic, three dimensional geometric shapes for children to fill with the rice. As the children work, they are exploring the physical knowledge related to geometric forms and spatial relationships. We name the words for the shapes as they are filling them — cube, cone, etc.

- Invitations to introduce children to new concepts or events.

When I want to plan for a particular topic or concept, I arrange a collection of materials and props in an accessible place in the room for the children to visit and use throughout the day. I observe their actions and record their conversations so I can uncover their ideas and understandings for further planning. For example, I assembled a display of dolls with different skin colors, photos, and books about the Civil Rights Movement and differences among people. I left them out a few weeks before the celebration of Dr. Martin Luther King's birthday. As the children interacted with the materials, I took note of what they seemed to know and understand about the life of Dr. King. I was surprised to discover how little the children knew about this great man, but also heartened to see their intense interest in his life and work around issues of fairness. The information and interactions spurred by this simple Invitation helped me design more meaningful activities around the holiday celebrations, based on the children's ideas and awareness.

## Principles for Designing Invitations

As I have been studying how to collect and create Invitations, I have drawn inspiration from many sources. Maria Montessori and her well-known materials and methods, including Practical Life activities has made such an important contribution to my practice. Fredrick Froebel, known as the father of kindergarten and the inventor of blocks, described his

approach to organizing and offering materials as "Gifts" for learning. The educators from the schools of Reggio Emilia, Italy, talk of "provocation" and have given us innovative ideas for the kinds of materials that engage children and careful, aesthetically beautiful ways to display them. I have also learned from many early childhood teachers and caregivers and their creative collections of Curriculum Prop Boxes. All of these sources are worth studying as you seek to enhance children's use and learning with materials in your environment.

The most important source for my learning about collecting and arranging Invitations in my child care room has been from the children themselves. When children are offered interesting open-ended materials, which are thoughtfully combined and arranged, you will see them work in amazing, yet predictable ways.

- Exploring — Children are drawn to the sensory aspect of materials.

*Principle:* Look for collections that have textures, interesting surfaces for touching or looking at or looking through, things that make sounds or move in interesting ways. Natural materials are always a good source for this kind of exploration.

- Transforming — Children are completely mesmerized with transforming materials and rearranging the world around them.

*Principle:* Look for materials and substances that can be changed, moved, reconfigured, or otherwise have some kind of cause and effect quality.

- Organizing and Designing — With an interesting, varied collection of materials preschool children will organize them by their attributes or use them in beautiful designs.

*Principle:* Find collections of materials that have similarities and differences and can be used for sorting, patterning, and designing.

- Building and Constructing — Young children like to put things together in relationship to each other, to connect things to other things, and to use building and construction materials to represent many aspects of their ideas and understandings.

*Principle:* Along with typical early childhood construction materials, seek out interesting shapes and sizes of items for building as well as things that can be used to decorate constructions. I also look for loose parts and recycled materials that resemble parts of something else, such as an airplane wing, a boat shape, or a dinosaur's scales.

- **Dramatizing** — With limited props preschool-age children will turn anything into dramatic play.

*Principle:* Keep an eye out for props and figures that can be added to any of the above background materials for an adventure or story.

- **Drawing** — Drawing is a natural medium for young children to express their ideas.

*Principle:* Regularly provide tools for children to draw and write as a part of Invitations.

- **Reading** — Children will thoughtfully study books and visual information related to a collection of props they have been using for exploring and representing.

*Principle:* Include resource books, stories, photos, posters, diagrams, and instructions to enrich the use of the materials by offering new suggestions and extensions, and support the development of literacy skills.

## Collecting, Arranging, and Displaying Invitations

The set of materials I gather depends on the focus of the Invitation I am creating. I always make sure that the collection has at least three or four aspects from the list above so the children will have a variety of options for combining and using the materials. I am always searching for items that convey a sense of magic and wonder, treasures that beg to be a part of a drama or creation as well as those that are substantial and have an important aspect or function. For example, in an Invitation to explore stones, I gathered a set of identical stones of varying sizes that are smooth and heavy to touch; they can be seriated by size, balanced and stacked into a tower, or designed as a habitat for a drama using a family of plastic snakes. Included with the collection are books about designs in nature, rocks, and snakes.

I have found that the way materials and props are offered is as critical to their use as what is offered. Thoughtfully col-

lected and carefully placed materials help children focus on what is available and spark their ideas and actions. When arranging the display, it is important to position the materials in an orderly fashion so the children can see what is available and the possibilities for their use.

- Designate an accessible location with enough space for one to four children to work with the Invitation, such as a low shelf, counter top, or small table. If I'm creating an Invitation in a regular area of the room, I make sure it is out of the way of the typical use and traffic flow.
- Provide a background for the materials such as a cloth or a tray to highlight the materials and define the work area. I think of this as offering figure/ground support like a puzzle, or a blank artist's palette to invite the work that will be done.
- Offer collections of like objects, for example all metal tools in the sensory table, all wood containers for sorting, or all natural baskets for storage. These like objects create a context for the materials so the Invitation does not look cluttered.
- Place like objects in baskets near the tools and materials they can be used with so the children can see what is available and how the materials relate to each other.
- Arrange the materials in beautiful ways that suggest how they might be used. For example, design a beginning pattern with tiles, partially build a small construction, offer an example of a simple drawing done with colored pencils, place the correct number of beads in the section of a tray with the corresponding numeral.

## Scouting for Invitations

Once you begin providing interesting open-ended materials and observe the marvelous ways the children use them, you will be eager to search for and provide more. Always be on the lookout in thrift stores, craft stores, garden shops, and garage and estate sales. You can develop an eye for the perfect treasure based on what you have seen children do with similar materials. You can also take a chance and offer children something that jumps out and captures your own curiosity. It's always delightful and surprising to see the children's unique ideas and approaches. What better way to offer learning experiences — as an invitation to wonder, explore, and create in as many ways as possible!



# Emergent Environments: Involving Children in Classroom Design

by Sarah Felstiner

As teachers and directors, we have a growing awareness of the need to design environments for young children that are aesthetically pleasing, inviting, and nurturing, in addition to being functional and safe. Taking our cue from the comforts of our own homes and from the careful attention to beauty we see in schools like those of Reggio Emilia, Italy, many of us are replacing molded plastic furniture and mass-produced décor with softer materials, wicker baskets, collections of attractive treasures, and elements from the natural world.

At the same time, we're also coming to value a teaching-learning relationship that gives children authorship of their own curriculum, moving towards a more organic model for planning activities and projects. Again, following the lead of the Reggio Emilia schools, we're using close observation of the children's play to consider what provocations or experiences to offer next. By embracing this kind of flexible planning, we're making room for unexpected courses of study to emerge, and for current interests to be deepened and extended.

Holding these two values together — a beautiful, inviting environment, and an emergent curriculum based on observation — we uncover a new possibility: we can create environments that reflect and support our vision of children as capable, powerful designers of their own learning. We can make a point of opening up opportunities for children to have influence on the physical space in which they work and play.

Together with my co-teachers at Hilltop Children's Center in Seattle, I've been experimenting over the past ten years with



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ways to offer children a more significant role in shaping their classroom environment. What follows are a few of the strategies we tried and simple ideas we arrived at for engaging children in classroom design.

## Space for possibility

To begin, we need to cultivate an ongoing openness to change and development of the classroom environment, rather than keeping things "the way they've always been" or imitating traditional room arrangements. Anita Rui Olds, a visionary champion for quality child care environments, urges us to "design buildings that establish beliefs in opportunity and possibility. The key is to understand what nourishes our children and use this awareness to inform every step of the design process." Even when we're not starting with an architectural framework thoughtfully designed for child care, we can't let our thinking be stunted by the ever-present roadblocks of time, space, and money. "Action follows thought," Olds continues. "We can choose to change. We can choose to design spaces for miracles, not minimums."

Along with being mentally open to change, we may also need to clear the clutter and crowdedness from current room arrangements, and make physical space for possibility. The environment is a powerful educating force, in and of itself, and everything about it sends strong messages to the children who live there. Educators in the schools of Reggio Emilia sometimes refer to the physical environment as an additional teacher, playing a large part in shaping the learning that happens. And Anita Rui Olds reminds us that "rooms, toys, and play structures tell children what they can do" (Olds, 2001, p. 12). If we want to invite children's input for classroom design, we need to leave some space physically open so they can move and experiment with materials. A totally "finished" feel, with games and toys crowding every surface, sends the message that children's input is not welcomed.

In their book *Emergent Curriculum*, Elizabeth Jones and John Nimmo suggest that if we intend to build a curriculum around the passions and questions of each particular group of children, we need to see the environment as an invitation: "Teachers of young children begin by provisioning the environment with accessible, open-ended materials and tools, and an inviting aesthetic. In turn, the environment invites young children into action . . . That's how the curriculum starts to grow."

## Movable parts

Perhaps the simplest and most powerful way to involve children in classroom design is to offer materials that let children reconstruct and change the environment daily. If those items are readily available to children, they can use them as needed to design their own playscapes, experimenting and figuring out what they want. Every day at Hilltop we see children customizing their classrooms with:

- large sheets of cardboard, hinged with strong tape
- fabric of all sizes, and clothespins for clipping it to things
- wooden cubes (1 foot square) for stacking and climbing
- big plastic blocks and wooden hollow blocks
- tall cardboard tubes (about 1 foot in diameter)
- lengths of plastic rain gutter
- logs and large driftwood pieces
- and other cheap or found materials.

These kinds of loose parts are large enough to act as architectural elements; and children use them eagerly to create private spaces, rooms for small group play, surfaces to climb on or under, as well as instant castles, rockets, boats, and more.

As we added more unstructured, flexible, and natural materials to our classrooms, we noticed children using the other pre-structured games and toys less frequently. So we began storing those types of materials in closets and cabinets, for occasional use, and having the loose parts always out and available, easily and attractively stored. We found, serendipitously, that this made it easier for children to help keep the classroom in good order, further reinforcing their ownership of the space.

## Design based on observation

Just as we carefully watch children's play for cues about what possibilities and activities to offer next, so can we pay attention to the ways children use and modify the classroom in order to shape new designs for the physical environment. At Hilltop,

when we observe children repeatedly replaying a particular game — stacking blocks or burrowing in piles of pillows or gathering in small groups — we try to rearrange the classroom to facilitate or enable that kind of play. These changes have ranged from simple to elaborate:

- When we noticed that children kept carrying the same basket of dolls over to where the blocks are kept, we made a space to store the basket there.
- When children seemed frustrated by having to break apart their precious Lego® structures at clean-up time, we provided an empty "Saving Shelf" for work they want to revisit.
- When we heard repeated cries of "I can't see!" and "I'm getting squished!" at our morning meetings, we built risers that also serve as cubbies for nap mats.
- When we saw dramatic play games that always crowded out space for other kinds of play, we built a loft to create more room for drama play.
- When we recognized that small group projects and detailed art work were continually interrupted by more boisterous play, we rearranged class groupings and staffing throughout the school to provide two dedicated "studio" rooms for that focused work.

"Most of all," Carla Rinaldi points out, schools are "living spaces that are continuously characterized and modified by events and stories that are both individual and social" (Edwards, Gandini, & Foreman, 1998, p. 118). By cultivating an ongoing awareness of how children use the classroom space, you can customize it to meet the needs of the specific group of children who live there.

## Including children in the process

Once you've identified the need for a new room arrangement or piece of furniture, consider finding a way for children to be directly involved in making that change happen. For instance, if your observations of children's natural patterns indicate that the drawing supplies need to be closer to the blocks, tell the class some stories of what you've observed, and then enlist their help in making the move. Children love doing real, purposeful work; and by rearranging the materials themselves, they may also get a clearer sense of the reason for the change.

At Hilltop, we've often noticed the need for new furnishings to support the play we're observing, and we've usually tended towards custom furniture that can be inexpensively built by Hilltop families. Whenever possible, we've tried to include chil-

dren in the construction process, so they can see the new furniture take shape. Some of the things we've built— like a table for the fishtank and shelves for the water table toys — have been simple enough that children could do all the gluing and hammering of the pre-cut wood pieces themselves. For more intricate projects, we try to make the pieces elsewhere, but still do the final construction on site, for children to see.

When we added a new loft for dramatic play, children and families worked together on painting it. Two years later, an entirely different group of children began inventing ways to pull things up and down from the loft with baskets and strings. Teachers eagerly supported this new development by launching an in-depth study project with a small group of interested children to design and build a system of pulleys for the loft. These children drew their theories about pulleys, tested their hypotheses, visited the hardware store and the science museum, met with a parent who would be constructing the pulley system, and finally helped with the installation.

Children feel powerful when they play a real part in designing or changing elements of the classroom to enrich their own play, and they have the right to exert control over the place where they spend such a significant part of their childhood. Don't forget to keep watching and assessing once you've altered the environment — are the changes creating new possibilities for play and learning?

## Documentation: process and product

One other critical thing we can do is to create a classroom that reflects and represents the children and families that live there, by making sure their faces and their work are visible throughout the classroom. Much has been written about the power of documentation — both as an organic *process* of flexible planning based on observation, and as a tangible *product* of books or display panels that tell the story of the children's work. And there are plenty of simple ways to make children's lives evident — artwork on the walls, photo albums and journals, framed family photos on a shelf, a basket of child-made books, etc. — the important thing is that children see their own ideas and images having an impact on the physical space around them.

Carla Rinaldi challenges us to discover “how many possibilities there are for the individual child and the group of children, the protagonists of the experience, to have a story, to leave traces, to see that their experiences are given value and meaning. It is the question of memory, narration, and documentation as a

right, and as that which embodies the vital quality of the educational space” (Edwards, Gandini, & Foreman, 1998, p. 119).

The dual characteristics of documentation — the *process* of observing and responding, and the *product* of visible displays — both play a part in our intentions for an emergent curriculum, and for a child-designed classroom. First, our careful attention to children's play informs new possibilities for curriculum, as well as the ways in which we might want to reshape the physical environment. And then, the displays we create to tell the stories of children's work naturally infuse the physical space with an authentic identity.

## The children's classroom

When we engage children in designing the physical environment, we improve the functionality of the classroom by customizing it to their natural play patterns, thereby enhancing the developmental appropriateness of the space as well. We support young children's innate drive to experiment and feel powerful, and strengthen their ownership of and care for the classroom.

By genuinely including children in classroom design, we also cultivate a curriculum that places children at its center. Veà Vecchi, an art specialist in the Reggio Emilia schools, proposes that “without a philosophical basis that gives meaning to the educational experience to be lived in the space, the identity of the space will not emerge” (Edwards, Gandini, & Foreman, 1998, p. 166). But by combining our intentions for an emergent curriculum with a rich and responsive physical environment, we can create a classroom that belongs uniquely to the children who live and learn there.

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## Great Places To Be a Baby: Infants' and Toddlers' Learning Environments

by Jim Greenman

The baby's first place is a person. When young infants enter child care, they have come from a place of flesh and fluid; first *inside* that place, and subsequently, almost always attached or adjacent to that place — mother. Physical and emotional contact between the baby and the mother/place is the territory of the infant's development. Babies enter the world with four big jobs:

■ **To make sense of the world.** Through exploring the sensoryscape of the places they enter, infants progress from seeing to looking, smelling to sniffing, hearing to listening, feeling to touching, and from being moved about to moving.

■ **Discover and develop all their bodily powers.** The landscapes they inhabit help or inhibit their efforts to move from laying around to roll over to pull up, from creeping to crawling to stepping to toddling, from grasping to holding to dropping to tossing, from finding to searching, from poking to digging, from doing to thinking and planning.

■ **To fully connect with others.** Through coming to deeply know others and be known and prized, babies move from the womb to the world, from mothers to others, to "I" to "we" to "us," from instinct to basic trust, from total dependency to autonomy, from only I want to I want to give.

■ **To learn to communicate fully:** Through conversation, babies go from cries and gurgles to many vocalizations; from: Ma or Da to hundreds of words; from: "I want" to "please pass the potatoes"; from talk to drawing to writing.



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### What Do They Do?

If those are the important jobs of infants and toddlers, what do they actually do? *Infants and toddlers are extraordinarily competent sensory motor scientists who systematically investigate their world using their scientific tools: mouth, eyes, skin, ears, and their developing muscles. Toddlers are babies determined to get into things, use their new mobility to explore with their whole bodies, their mouths, their skin, all their senses and soon their newly competent hands, fingers, and feet.*

Some of the many things a young baby does: see; watch; look; inspect; hear; listen; smell; taste; feel; touch; mouth; eat; reach out; reach for; knock away; grasp; hold; squeeze; pince; drop; transfer hand to hand; shake; bang; tear; clap together; put in; take out; find; look for; kick; turn; roll; lift their heads up; sit up; pull up; crawl to, in, out, over; creep around, in, and under; swing; rock; coo; babble; imitate sounds; react to other; accommodate to others; solicit from others; and experiment endlessly.

In addition to doing many of the above, older babies: walk in, out, up, down, over, under, around, through; climb in, up, over, on top; slide; swing; hang; jump; tumble; take apart; put together; stack; pile; nest; set up; knock over; collect; gather; fill; dump; inspect; examine; select; sort; match; order; carry; transport; rearrange; put in; take out; hide; discover; investigate by trial and error; explore with each sense; imitate familiar acts; try adult behavior; doll play; paint; smear; draw; mix; separate; pour; sift; splash; make sounds and words; label; "read" symbols; converse; follow directions; cuddle; hug; kiss; test others; accommodate to others; and help themselves wash, eat, dress.



A word about toddlers and young twos: Neither infants nor preschoolers, toddlers/and young twos are furiously becoming: increasingly mobile, autonomous, social creatures armed with new language and insatiable urges to test and experiment. They embody contradictions: anarchists with an instinct to herd and cluster, assertive and independent now, passive and completely dependent moments later. These restless mobile characters have a drive to take apart the existing order and rearrange it, by force if necessary, to suit their own whimsically logical view of the universe. (The label *terrible twos* speaks to the lack of appreciation for the toddler mode of being.)

## Infant and Toddler Learning Centers

Organizing the environment into clearly labeled learning centers makes sense for infant and toddler environments for the same reason it does for preschoolers: child choice and parent awareness of caregivers as educators. Built-in learning — using the walls and floors (and ground) — is important to allow caregivers to concentrate on one-to-one nurturing and learning interactions. The learning environment needs to stem from all that they do, not the tried and true categories for older children like art, music, and science. A small six square foot area might form a reaching area or a texture spot with a mirror. The space between a couch and a wall could be a discovery corner or a sounds area. Under a table or a counter is space for sorting, or building, or a texture cave. Busy boxes, telephones, pictures, or fill-up containers can be attached to the back of any shelf. Dividers can become peek-a-boo or poke-through boards. Chairs with trays are art spaces. For older toddlers, pick up and collection points for hauling and dumping, a throwing or dropping corner, telephone booths, sorting spaces, and other small activity areas work well.

Following are a few of the many possible learning centers or activity areas appropriate for infant and toddler rooms. Remember that an adult label for the area should not restrict the types of activities children think of themselves to engage in (e.g., sensory exploration will happen in all areas). Note: staff should always be aware of the hazard that materials present to small scientists who use their mouths to explore — choking on small pieces; toxic finishes. Keep a choke testing tube handy when equipping centers.

- **Loveseat area:** A place for laps and bottle feeding and cruising
- **Infant Reaching/Grasping/Kicking Area:** Various hanging materials hanging on rope, elastic, or fabric materials

- **Infant Peek-a-boo/ Object Permanence Area:** Divider with holes in it, large appliance carton with holes cut in, curtained area. Objects on a string that swing in and out of sight
- **Infant Play Pit, Nest, or Plastic Wading Pool:** A programmed, protected, contained space that the child chooses to play in
- **Infant Individual Seat with Trays:** An individual play space for activities such as picking up and manipulating small objects that the child chooses
- **Climbing Area:** Loveseat, futon, platform, risers, planks, low cubes and rectangles, platforms, mattresses, or one or two stairs
- **Mirror Areas:** Various mirrors attached to walls, or attached to divider backs
- **Light and shadow lightscapes:** lights, prisms, screens
- **Infant Blocks:** Large cardboard/milk carton, plastic foam blocks, sturdy boxes
- **Toddler Block and Construction Area:** The above and unit blocks, building blocks. As props: wheel barrows, trucks, wagons, dolls, and vehicles
- **Vehicle Center:** Infant: smooth wooden and plastic vehicles. Toddler: trucks, cars, trains, props like little plastic people, houses, trees, small rocks and wood, blocks, ramps
- **Hauling/Transporting/Push-Pull Area (contents to be used throughout the room) and Collection Points:** Pull toys, wagons, shopping carts, baskets, bins, buckets, cardboard boxes, toy boxes, mail slots, tubes
- **Soft Toy Area:** All sorts of stuffed animals
- **Treasure Baskets:** Baskets of different sizes and textures filled with natural and household objects for babies to explore
- **Dramatic Play:** Prop boxes, cubbies, small tables and chairs, appliance boxes, flashlights, old baby equipment such as car seats, changing pads etc., ace bandages, paintbrushes, bowls and buckets, household items, any found or salvaged “junk” that is safe
- **Language and Book Area:** Pictures of objects that have meaning for the child, sturdy books (cardboard pages), special picture books that may be used with adult supervision, pillows, couch, chairs, futon, stuffed animals, tape recorder (used with adults)
- **Home Corner Area:** Child sized furniture stove, table and chairs, refrigerator, beds for dolls (important that they be big enough and sturdy enough for children to lie in as well), strollers and buggies. Props: dishes, dolls with pieces of cloth to wrap around them (simpler than doll clothes to take off and put on), blankets, saucepans and other cooking implements, handbags

■ **Costume Area (materials to be used throughout the space):** Scarves, hats, carpenters' aprons, goggles, belts, shoes, mitts, animal noses, wigs, ace bandages, nets, all sorts of dress-up clothes

■ **Toddler Art and Expressive Materials Area:** White board, chalkboard (can be on the floor), easel, crayons, newsprint or other large pieces of paper for whole arm scribbles, etch-a-sketch taped to wall or table, thick paints, collage materials, paste, cardboard, wood, tape, tables

■ **Messy Areas:** Sand table, texture/water table, dish/garden tubs, sinks, smearing surfaces such as a table top or linoleum tiles, sponges, brushes, dish towels

■ **Manipulative Materials:** Wading pool, pit, table with rim, small rugs, as surfaces; unstructured materials such as juice lids, pipe pieces, knobs, wood pieces and stone, poker chips, large washers, shoe laces, straws, manipulative materials from catalogues, large beads to string; any sort of container such as cans, cups, buckets, baskets, pans, boxes, tennis ball cans

■ **Action Center:** Busy boxes, switches, zippers, Velcro®, locks and latches, doors, pounding benches; ramps, tubes, containers to drop or roll materials into; things to take apart

■ **Sound Area:** Chimes, whistles, instruments, strings to pluck and plunk, shakers, record player or tapes, listening center with headsets

■ **Animal Pretend Area:** Rubber or wooden animals, pictures, animal masks or noses, puppets, places for animals to live, props to create fences

■ **Cozy Areas, Places to Pause (Note: more than one cozy area):** All sorts of cushions and pillows, couch, bed, throw, inner tubes, throw rugs, bolsters, futons, blankets, parachutes, sheets, canopies, boxes, nests

■ **Body Image Space:** An area that responds to the child's whole body movement; a space filled with beach balls, paper, hanging fabric

■ **Surprise Areas:** A place where surprises or new experiences occur (of course, this will not be the only place for surprises and new experiences)

■ **Please Smell Areas:** Scent boxes, leaves, flowers, plants

■ **Please Touch Area:** Different textures, coldness, hardness, smooth metal, rough bark, ice, sand paper, velvet, corrugated materials

■ **Please Look Area:** Mirrors, kaleidoscopes, colored plastic, smoked plexiglas, paintings, videos, wave tubes, fish tanks

■ **Zoo Areas:** Birds, hamsters, chameleons, guinea pigs, bunnies, fish, frogs

## Essential Environmental Elements to Transform Environments

■ **Pillows:** Bed pillows work beautifully to create pillow mountains, and transportable soft spaces

■ **Small rugs and carpet squares, blankets, quilts, throws, and other fabric:** Different sizes, colors, textures.

Outdoor Areas — Infants and toddlers belong outside (and not just in carts and strollers).

■ **Playground Landscape:** A park-like playground with trees, grass, shrubs, and flowers make the playground a good place to be a baby and be with a baby

■ **Shade and Dramatic Play:** Shade is critical and infants enjoy being under objects. Canopies, umbrellas, awnings, pop-up tents, miniature gazebos, play houses, lean-tos and essentially any structure with a roof provides shade and play opportunities

■ **Outdoor Motor Exploration:** Tunnels, cube structures, very low platforms with ramps, half buried tires, smooth round boulders and logs; really anything that is safe for a baby to interact with and crawl over, under, in, out, through; and climb over, around, in, and out

■ **Visual Exploration:** Maximizing visual exploration comes from allowing children to perceive the world from different angles, under different lighting, from different perspectives. Windows or frames that frame experience, using colored plexiglas, allowing children to look down on the world all maximize exploration

■ **Auditory Exploration:** Provide materials that react to touch or wind with sound and motion such as gongs, wind chimes, to fabric that whistles in the wind

■ **Swinging:** Porch swings, glider swings, and hammocks allow babies to swing with adults. Infant: bucket swings, cradles; for older twos: chain tire swings that are set low to the ground and allow only gentle back and forth motion

■ **Water Play:** Wading pools are health hazards, but sprinklers, dripping hoses, and water tubs allow good water play

■ **Sliding and Rolling:** Berms and gentle slides safe for infants

■ **Sandboxes:** Older infants enjoy sand play in clean sand

## A Closing Challenge

The sad truth is that it is all too rare to find places with many of the above areas: *great places to both be a baby and be with a baby.* Far too many infant and toddler environments are dispiriting places to be: too small, too barren, or too plastic, and with limited opportunities for motor or sensory exploration. There is little taste for exuberant infants and full of life toddlers, and the environment is often only marginally supportive of staff. Babies and the people who care for them deserve much better.



# Transforming Environments Through Self-Reflection

by Wanda Billheimer and Gina Lewis

As Head Start Coordinators, we, like scores of others in early childhood education, are inspired and enthralled by the Schools of Reggio Emilia. As we discovered the ways of those Italian educators, a fire was rekindled within us. Our passion for and vision of the value of childhood was reawakened and we could not contain our enthusiasm. Any success we have in influencing others has been simply the result of sharing our enthusiasm, experiments, and discoveries as we explore the meanings and possibilities of early childhood education.

What we offer here is by no means the definitive way to empower teachers to transform their environments; it is the story of our experience.

In August, 1999 we participated in an in-service training given by Chicago Commons Head Start. They had been studying and applying the principles and practices of the Reggio Emilia approach for several years. It was thrilling and eye-opening to witness a Head Start program that incorporated the values expressed in Reggio Emilia.

In Chicago we experienced curricula that was intellectually stimulating, creative, and alive. This was manifest in the emergent project work, the use of documentation to make learning visible, the role of teacher as researcher, the emphasis on collaboration and community, the employment of reflective questions, and of course, the unique, engaging, and beautiful environments.



Wanda Billheimer and Gina Lewis are Child Development Coordinators for Puget Sound Educational Service District Head Start in the Seattle, Washington area. They have a combined 50 years of working with young children, teachers, and family child care providers. They have shared their experiences in the Seattle area, nationally, and most recently at the 2003 Canadian Association of Young Children Conference in Vancouver, British Columbia, Canada. Their participation in the Spring 2001 Study Tour to Reggio Emilia, Italy has inspired their work as have their association with early childhood consultants and authors, Deb Curtis and Margie Carter.

We loved what we were seeing, hearing, and feeling and we also knew we didn't fully comprehend it. We understood that copying or duplicating what we saw would not work. We didn't know how to capture and apply the essence of what we were witnessing. The primary thing that we were clear about was the potency of personal reflection. We saw that this type of teaching had to be developed from within the hearts and minds of the educators and caregivers. Full of hope and energy we returned to our Head Start family child care providers in the Pacific Northwest with photos and anecdotes.

## Changing Our Meetings/Methods

As Child Development Coordinators we work with family child care providers who contract with our program. We meet with our 12 providers once a month for two hours. In the past we usually spent the first hour on announcements and administrative issues and the second hour on training on Head Start standards, documents, and systems. It was during these monthly meetings that we initiated a change. We invited our family child care providers to question, challenge, consider, and think with us. What are we doing in our work with children? Why? What is the child's perspective? What do we really want for children? For ourselves? How can we have it?

Groping for a starting place, we began by exploring the concept of "the image of the child." We learned that the Schools of Reggio Emilia are founded on holding a particular image of the child, a perspective that honors children as intelligent, capable, creative, resourceful, and worthy individuals. The reason for having beautiful, dynamic environments is to support and encourage the development of such children. We read Loris Malaguzzi's article, "Your Image of the Child: Where Teaching Begins" (March/April, 1994) and discussed its meaning for us. As a group we recognized that often our stated image did not correspond to our practices.

# BEGINNINGS WORKSHOP

Early educators say we respect children, yet in our practice we often manipulate and objectify them. If we truly respect children and believe they are intelligent, why do we provide curriculum that only asks them to receive what we think rather than asks what they think? These adult driven agendas limit the opportunities and possibilities for children. These adult curriculum activities typically are topics that are irrelevant and meaningless to children's lives.

We were determined to begin to hold our practices up against our image of the child, beginning with the environment. This seemed a logical place to start as it was concrete, practical, and immediate.

We gave the providers several small convex mirrors (the kind used to enhance vision on the side mirrors of cars) and asked them to place them in their child care environments. We asked them to observe the children's reactions and to consider their own responses. We discussed their discoveries at the following meeting. This was a small and simple beginning, yet it was a huge shift in our practice; we were asking the providers to observe, reflect upon, and record their own emotions and thoughts in relation to their work.

The following are our questions and some provider responses from this initial experiment:

■ How could the use of mirrors enhance children's thinking, socializing, and self-concept?

*The mirrors helped them see each other differently, without looking directly at each other's faces. They really engaged each other when they captured glances.*

*The mirrors give a view of the children and the surroundings that they may not have seen before.*

■ What did you find out about the children from their interactions with the mirrors?

*That they use things differently than adults think they will.*

*The children are actually quite observant of each other. They would study the other's expression and then copy or just enjoy it. It's amazing the power that facial expressions have.*

■ What did you learn about yourself — your thoughts, reactions, feelings — from this experience?

*I was surprised by the children's reactions; I didn't realize how fascinated they could be by such a common item.*

*It was fun to see the children's reactions to a simple thing and how many questions arose from this.*

*I learned how good it is to see your own face. Everyone else sees you all day. It doesn't need to be "vanity" to want to see yourself more often. It feels good.*

This initial experience with mirrors gave birth to a pattern of Provocation/Reflection/Dialogue. We began to repeat this pattern throughout the next several months of meetings.

## Providing Worksheets for Observations and Self-Reflection

Poetry, children's books, visits to each other's homes, quotes, simulations, our own childhood memories, chapters of *The Hundred Languages* (Edwards, Gandini, & Forman, 1998), guest speakers, and slides of beautiful child care spaces all served as provocations for our reflections and dialogue. The provocations were followed by a monthly activity worksheet of reflective questions, often including observations of children or themselves. These written reflections by providers were followed by group discussions at our meetings in which more insight was gained into our own values, motivations, practices, and strengths. What each provider brought to and received from exchanges in our meeting was highly individualized. Each was provoked to seriously consider their values along with their image of the child.

Through this process the providers were empowered and their child care environments began to transform. Some of the changes were subtle, others quite dramatic:

■ *We love it. It is a space that we are drawn to even when the child care is closed. When we have company over, we always seem to end up there. Children and adults enjoy spending time in that space. I didn't really know how important the environment was . . . it makes a difference in the way children play. It enhances and extends their play. I thought if it makes that much difference for them it can do that for me too.*

■ *I've grown in the idea of a less commercial environment.*

■ *In ECE classes I was taught to have specific areas for specific activities. Now, we don't have spaces where certain activities must*

stay. There is flexibility in how the space is used, which continues to interest the children and gives them many choices. For me, to limit where they set up or where they move toys and materials is to tell them that their instincts to explore and move are not good. That's certainly not the message I want to send.

■ I realized that using glass tumblers instead of plastic sippy cups and dishes instead of paper plates shows respect for the children. The children, in turn, use the tumblers and dishes with care.

## Making Changes Visible

During visits to the providers' homes we began to photograph the changes they were making to their environments. Soon we had a collection of before and after pictures. We copied these onto transparencies (and later into a digital presentation) and presented them at our monthly meetings. This provided the participants with the experience of having one's own learning made visible. More questions, considerations, and possibilities were generated as we studied the before and after photos together.

We believe these transformations were profound because they were born from the providers' own experiences and insights into their values and their image of the child.

## Changes for Us

Creating a social and emotional environment conducive to reflective practice was important in being able to ask providers to think about their work on a deeper level. The "environment" in our relationships with the providers also had an impact on the transformations we witnessed. These environments, expressing the "soft virtues of hospitality" (Palmer, 2002) invited dialogue and risk taking. Trust was built as we conveyed to the providers that we were not experts in this process and we, too, were learning. We let them know that we were exploring the Reggio Emilia approach alongside them and that we had no right or wrong answers. This exploration was a parallel learning process for all of us. We knew it was important to model how we hoped they would work with children (Jones, 1986). Sharing our excitement and experiences and being open about our discoveries encouraged providers to do the same.

We found that we were becoming stronger in our philosophy and beliefs as we witnessed how empowered these family child care providers became while participating in these experiences (Belenky, Clinchy, Goldberger, & Tarule, 1986). Their environments were a metaphor for what was taking place inside of them. Their image of the child was becoming clearer as was the

image they had of themselves. They knew that we appreciated and valued their work and were just as excited about their discoveries and growth as they were.

Using before and after photos of their child care environments was a powerful way for providers to see how much they had changed. In the writings of Carter & Curtis (2003), Malaguzzi and Greenman we found corresponding ideas that validated our perspective on how environments convey messages of what is valued by the people who live in them.

It has been nearly five years now, and we still haven't impacted all of our staff, nor reached all of our goals, but we have made significant changes. Our suggestion to others interested in transforming their environments (which in turn transforms other aspects of your program) is to start asking questions of yourself and your staff. Try using the process of Provocation/Reflection/Dialogue. This may help you to design environments that embody your own ideas of "best practice."

*We must ask ourselves what values we want to communicate through learning environments, and how we want children to experience their time in our programs. From the physical to the social and emotional environment, how are we demonstrating that we respect and treasure childhood and the identity of particular children and families? Are we showing pride in our work and an ongoing commitment to developing ourselves and our profession?* (Curtis & Carter, 2003)

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# BEGINNINGS WORKSHOP

## Using Beginnings Workshop to Train Teachers by Kay Albrecht

### ■ CREATING INVITATIONS TO ENGAGE CHILDREN by Deb Curtis

**Invitations — an opportunity to explore children's thinking:** Curtis introduces the idea of invitations as a source of enhancing emerging interests children have as well as to challenge additional areas of consideration or exploration. Try this idea out with your faculty by setting up some "invitations" using the guidelines and principles shared in this article as starting points for discussion between and among teachers. Send teachers back to try out their ideas and reconvene to report what happened.

**Designing environments:** Curtis has a new book out with Margie Carter that has numerous photographs and ideas for environments. Consider locating a copy of this book and adding it to your faculty library.

### ■ EMERGENT ENVIRONMENTS: INVOLVING CHILDREN IN CLASSROOM DESIGN by Sarah Felstiner

**Choosing to change:** What a challenge! Use this article to discuss with your faculty the advantages of choosing to change from the way we do it now to a new way. Explore your teachers' resistance to change to see if its origins are sound or just based on tradition and experience. Take the next step as well — consider what changes might be in order.

**A starting place:** Work with families and teachers to collect the list of resources on p. 42 (and any other resources teachers identify) to create moveable parts for the indoor environment. Then move on to the outdoor environment.

**Let the children help?:** The interesting idea of including children in the redesign of the classroom may sound challenging but is worth a try. Explore with teachers how one or more areas of the classroom might consider the children's input on design, function, and equipping. If one works, take on another one with children's support.

**A great idea!** Felstiner proposes a starting place for helping children and families convert the classroom to a place they feel powerful and reflects and connects to its occupants. Adding the faces of families is that starting place. Work with families to explore how to do this and create your own starting place for collaboration.

### ■ GREAT PLACES TO BE A BABY: INFANTS' AND TODDLERS' LEARNING ENVIRONMENTS by Jim Greenman

**My place is you!** This interesting idea deserves further consideration. How much does your physical space and approach to early care and education take this important idea into consideration? Explore with teachers this powerful idea of the connection between mother/teacher and baby as the territory of development. See if you can develop strategies to validate and value this idea in your environment.

**Take our infants and toddlers to task:** Greenman identifies several jobs for infants and toddlers. Divide teachers into teaching teams and explore how their classrooms, routines, and curriculum support these important jobs. Plan additional ways to do so and implement the plan.

**Make your own environmental inventory:** Take this magnificent list of infant and toddler learning centers and conduct a classroom inventory. Make sure your classrooms are a great place to be a baby or toddler and to be with a baby or toddler rather than a dispiriting place with too much plastic and too limited opportunity.

### ■ TRANSFORMING ENVIRONMENTS THROUGH SELF-REFLECTION by Wanda Billheimer and Gina Lewis

**Walking in your shoes:** What a gift from these talented people! A starting place for sure — one that you can customize and modify to fit your faculty. Begin the reflective process by modifying your meetings just like these authors did and see what happens. For teachers (and administrators) to whom reflection is new, this experience will be powerful and produce rich, unexpected results.

**Before and after:** Use the idea of before and after photos as a metaphor for considering the changes brought about by reflection. Talk often about before, then consider after to open up the possibilities. Take before pictures of the environment, start your reflective experiences, and then wait to see what "after" becomes.

**What is a provocation?:** Reggio Emilia educators talk often about provocations — challenges to produce interest and responses from children or adults. Think carefully about your provocation — the starting point for reflection. You may want to use the one suggested in the article (exploring the view of the child; then using convex mirrors to reflect that image) or create your own.