

# The Environment: Your Teaching Partner

The physical arrangement of your program is your teaching partner—communicating expectations and providing cues that support children’s development. The messages children receive from the environment strongly impact their interactions with each other and with materials. When the environment is working, children receive cues that actually promote their sense of order, exploration, and ownership.

**FOSTER A SENSE OF ORDER – Materials can be arranged to help children understand where they are stored and which ones go together.**

Children may not be naturally tidy, but they thrive in an environment that makes it easy and satisfying to put toys away—especially when putting materials away is as fun as playing with them.

Matching materials to pictures or words on the shelves, refilling intriguing storage containers, or sorting colored paper into same-color boxes is an engaging learning activity. Everyone benefits when your “teaching partner” cues children to take the lead in keeping play materials organized.

**INVITE EXPLORATION – Interesting, open-ended materials and play opportunities invite children to pursue their natural interest in exploring the world around them.**

Open-ended materials require imagination, have no “rules,” and can be played with in many different ways. They heighten children’s willingness and ability to explore in early childhood settings that are often quite structured.

How many uses for a toy? What can you do with water in a trough, a collection of keys, blankets, and other materials that offer seemingly endless play possibilities?



You can provide more cues that say “exploration is allowed here” by combining old materials and gathering new, open-ended materials. If you really want to see learning in action, watch children respond to the invitation to explore when they are provided with paper towel rolls, a bale of hay, giant cardboard boxes, seed collections, or yards of fabric!

**CREATE OWNERSHIP – You can also provide cues to children about their level of ownership and belonging in your pro-gram.** Make sure children can reach materials independently. Get them involved in designing the play space, making decisions about play themes for dramatic play, and deciding how to feature their art work and other creations.

Next time you walk into your program, get down on the children’s level and consider the messages they might be receiving from the environment. Then, go a step further, and look closely at the way children are currently playing in your program. Combine this information to help you find fun ways to use your environment to communicate to children, making it your partner in teaching.

Continue on page 2 

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## TRY IT OUT

Young children with sensory impairments may need very specific cues from the environment. It is often helpful to use the expertise of the child's parents and other team members to identify creative ways to let your environment "speak" to a child who has a hearing or vision impairment.

The first step, of course, is to **clearly communicate your goals**. Many parents and specialists may not realize you are trying to create a space that gives children specific messages about order, exploration, and ownership.

Next, be sure you **understand the child's strengths and abilities**; ask specific questions. If the child is blind, how have other team members tried to provide specific environmental cues? If the child has a difficult time focusing on verbal directions, has anyone tried using picture cues? Knowing what the child can already do and what works in other settings will give you good ideas about strategies you can use in your own environment.



Finally, **find a way to show the child's parents and other team members how you use the environment to send messages to children**. Learning from environmental cues is a typical way for young children to gain new information. Share your successes. When a child has a disability, it is important that all team members work together to take advantage of this powerful learning tool.

## RESOURCES

- Center on the Social and Emotional Foundations of Early Learning <http://csefel.vanderbilt.edu/>
- Wisconsin Model Early Learning Standards <http://www.collaboratingpartners.com/wmels-about.php>
- Division for Early Childhood Recommended Practices <http://www.dec-sped.org/recommendedpractices>

## TRAINING OPPORTUNITIES

- The Registry Training Calendar <https://www.the-registry.org>
- WI Early Care Association (WECA) Training Calendar <http://wisconsinearlychildhood.org/>
- MECA Special Needs Support Program (SNSP) <https://dcf.wisconsin.gov/meca/specialneeds>

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