Position on Indoor Environment

The way the classroom is set up reflects the UHMCC mission and philosophy for the overall program as well as the teacher’s approach to education. What is included or not included in the environment determines what the child is able to do, what behaviors are encouraged or discouraged, and what is valued or focused on. Because young children need to work on concepts over a long period of time, we also use the environment as an extension of our working memory.

UHMCC values independence, creativity and democratic collaboration. To foster these values we set activity centers in the environment that include art, dramatic play, and large construction (block studio). These areas support exploration through open-ended, child-guided work. Materials in these centers change to maintain interest and engagement, and we often include materials that reflect the unit or theme currently being worked on. The spaces are large enough to promote small-group cooperative play, but have a natural limit to the number of participants.

UHMCC is an accredited preschool, and therefore includes additional centers that are more academic. These include reading or story centers, writing centers, and inquiry (science) centers. Activities presented in these centers may be child- or teacher-guided, or a combination of the two, and tend to be more directly linked to the curriculum and/or focus unit or theme.

Bulletin boards and displays reflect the units or topics currently under discussion. They are set at the child’s level so he can interact or reflect on this work in his own time. Descriptions are added to inform and engage parents and encourage teacher reflection. We try to limit displays of child work as decoration that does not promote a larger cognitive skill. We can honor the child’s individual work in other ways that are more meaningful than simple display, such as the child’s portfolio.

Furniture is arranged to limit runways (straight aisles) and racetracks (looped or curved aisles) to make running in the classroom more difficult. Couches, upholstered chairs, lamps and pillows are included to create a comfortable home environment. Institutional furniture, like shelving, may be further balanced with fabrics and other home-like decorations. This helps give a feel of comfort to aid in transitions.

From the child’s perspective, the environment has a variety of interesting things to do, allows her to explore things of interest, and reflects the things we are learning about so she can take time to reflect on them and discover new meanings in her own way and in her own time. From the teacher’s perspective, what is needed is present, what is not needed is not present, and the room is organized to ensure everyone is visible from strategic places where teacher-guided work is done. The teacher can also present self-explanatory displays that communicate what is being worked on to the parent and administration. Form the parent’s perspective, the environment is kind and loving, is geared toward the child, and he can discover what his child is working on and how his child is performing without having to work too hard. Behavior is naturally modified so teacher nagging is limited.

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What It Looks Like By Age

Age 2 to 3
Furniture is low to allow the child to use it independently. Bulletin boards are nearly on the floor. Child-guided centers include construction, gross motor climbing, sensory, music and reading. An additional area is included so that teacher-guided work can be rotated in for small groups. These are usually several multipurpose tables that support changing curricular activities, then may be used for lunch service or cleared to flex the focus of the room to another area. The room also includes a space that can be used as a gathering area for large group work.

Age 3 to 4
Furniture is raised to fit the child. Bulletin boards are raised, but still accessible to the child. Child-guided centers include construction, sensory, music, reading, dramatic play and art. The larger tables are for teacher-guided work to be rotated in, and the large group gathering places noted above are also present here. Work with small pieces, such as puzzles, continue to be part of teacher-guided work to monitor swallowing hazards. Shelves and cubbies are labeled with pictures and words to help children independently identify where things are put away.

Age 4 to 5
Furniture and bulletin boards are raised again to fit the child. Child-guided centers include construction, music, dramatic play, puzzles and small construction, and art. Teacher-guided centers include inquiry (science and math) and writing, as well as tables where other focused curricular work can be rotated through. Shelves are labeled with pictures or icons to assist in putting things away independently, but just names are present on cubbies to challenge children to recognize their name and the name of friends.

Mixed Age
In general, classes with mixed-age groups will set up the environment using the lower band approach, but include furniture for larger children and use the rotating, teacher-guided multipurpose tables to introduce more challenging work for the older children. Child-guided centers will also include a wider range of materials to stimulate everyone's thinking and imagination.

Suggested Reading

*Caring Spaces, Learning Places: Children's Environments that Work* by Jim Greenman