

# High Quality Learning Environments Help Young Children Thrive

From birth through the 3rd grade, young children move from concrete to abstract and symbolic thinking. At the same time, they develop the ability to regulate their emotions, collaborate with their peers, and understand others' perspectives. Shifts in cognition manifest in all aspects of their development, which are deeply interrelated. Indeed, young children's "emotional, social, physical, and thinking abilities are intertwined like

An effective environment is responsive to children's learning styles and interests. Because young children learn best through hands-on experiences in their environment, teachers can arrange the classroom with centers that encourage students to participate in focused learning both independently as well as in collaboration with their peers.<sup>2</sup> Learning centers create spaces for students to engage in the experiential learning opportunities that can make a lasting impression. Often, learning centers evolve throughout the year based on the students' interests and curriculum.

The environment extends beyond the physical arrangement to the overall organization

of the classroom, including the structures and guidelines that ensure teachers' time with students is used effectively. When teachers establish predictable routines and expectations that help students stay on task and meaningfully engaged, everyone in the classroom does better. Challenging behaviors and disruptions are reduced when children know what to expect and can follow the daily routines successfully.<sup>3</sup> A supportive classroom environment highlights children's work, their families, and their communities. It is a safe place that helps to build a sense of community.

The daily schedule sets the tone for the way that students will approach learning. A pictorial schedule encourages young learners' independence as they anticipate the day's activities and transitions. It is particularly important that the schedule for students include a rich balance of small group work, as well as movement. Indeed, **research shows that during kindergarten, gross motor development becomes more complex, and children actually become more fatigued from sitting for long periods of time than they do from moving.**<sup>4</sup> Teachers plan the day to ensure they offer a balance of activities that will meet children's needs and help them address numerous learning outcomes.

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a multi-fibred weaving. Each strand forms an essential part of the whole."<sup>1</sup> A thoughtful classroom environment that is sensitive and responsive to the way that young children process information, interact, and grow can foster development in all domains.

The environment includes the classroom's organization, schedule, routines, emotional climate, layout, furnishing, and materials. The environment also extends beyond the classroom walls and into outdoor spaces - a playground, a park, and in the immediate community - where children learn and grow with the guidance of their teachers.



■ **In prekindergarten**, the environment is typically structured with clearly defined learning centers and a space in which the whole class can gather for large group instruction. Prekindergarten teachers carefully select and periodically rotate materials to deepen students' knowledge, stimulate curiosity, and promote creativity. Teachers start the year by establishing and helping children learn appropriate routines and expectations, as well as, by making sure that each child feels as though s/he belongs to the classroom.

■ **Kindergarten** classrooms can include learning centers devoted to books, dramatic play, blocks, and technology. Additional learning centers may be organized around subject areas, such as math, science, social studies, and art. A predictable daily schedule and clear expectations for student behavior helps children learn with enthusiasm.

■ **In 1st to 3rd grade**, young learners are increasingly capable - they have longer attention spans, they typically are becoming more competent

readers, and they engage with more complex content. Although it is tempting for early grades classrooms to minimize the use of learning centers that characterize effective early childhood education, young learners thrive when their classroom provides a variety of spaces to work, learn, and play. It is particularly important that the schedule for students includes a healthy balance of cooperative work in learning centers, independent work, whole group instruction, and opportunities for gross motor movement.

## High Quality Environment in Action

In a prekindergarten classroom. The teacher has recently attended a professional development session on the Early Childhood Environment Rating Scales<sup>5</sup> and she uses it to arrange her classroom. She notices that some of the children are interested in bugs, and she takes advantage of their interest to guide instruction, the daily schedule, and the environment. The students go outside to collect ants, spiders, and other creepy-crawlies from the playground, and they put them in an aquarium with a vented lid. In the science and nature center, children use magnifying glasses to independently and cooperatively observe their collections. The teacher may ask children to notice the commonalities and differences between the insects to activate children's critical thinking skills. With the right guidance, children will use math skills as they count and compare their collections and make

pictorial representations/graphs of their discoveries. In the writing center, the teacher may work with the children to draw pictures or "write" field notes about what they observe to promote communication and literacy skills. Age-appropriate informational texts with a lot of photos of real insects are accessible and encourage the children to deepen their knowledge and use evidence to support their observations. ["How many legs do beetles have? What about spiders?"] Fictional texts about insects are placed in a quiet reading area to build children's sense of wonder and creativity. Throughout small group interactions in the learning centers, the teachers and children work together to build their social and emotional skills, and teachers model enthusiasm for learning as the students make new discoveries.

## A High Quality Learning Environment Supports the Essential Capacities of the New York State Learning Standards

The New York State Learning Standards promote college and career readiness by describing the knowledge and skills in math, reading, writing, speaking, listening, and language that students should gain as they advance through the grades. Like developmentally appropriate practice, the New York State Learning Standards support interdisciplinary learning,

higher order thinking, creativity, and the use of language and literacy skills throughout the day. As students master the standards, they gain seven essential capacities that promote their intellectual development.<sup>6</sup> High quality environments support each capacity.



Essential Capacities	Characteristics of High Quality Environment
Demonstrate independence	Has routines that are well established, and expectations for student behavior are explained to encourage cooperative and independent learning. The classroom arrangement includes learning centers and materials that are clearly labeled, which enable students to pursue their interests and clean up independently.
Build strong content knowledge	Contains a wide variety of materials that are accessible in learning centers, and teachers thoughtfully add materials to build children's knowledge and vocabulary. For example, if students are interested in transportation, teachers will leverage that interest to teach math and literacy. They will also add cars, other vehicles, and informational texts about transportation to the block center to promote children's enthusiasm for learning and their content knowledge.
Respond to varying demands of audience, task, purpose, and discipline	Arranges learning centers to guide students' conversations. When a teacher introduces a new topic and adds materials to a learning center, the discussion in the center extends further and in new directions, which allows students to communicate their ideas in many ways.
Comprehend as well as critique	Is structured to ensure all students have opportunities to deepen their understanding of the content through thoughtful attention to the room arrangement, schedules, class rules, and routines. It is a supportive space where questions and discussions are encouraged.
Value evidence	Provides children with access to sources of information that can help them answer their questions. For example, a reading center includes ample informational children's books about relevant topics. The environment may include computers so that teachers may help students use the internet to collect evidence.
Use technology and digital media strategically and capably	Includes computers or other digital media in an area of the classroom. Children's time in this area should be monitored because young students learn best through interactions with their peers and teachers, as well as, through hands-on learning.
Understand other perspectives and cultures	Includes materials (e.g., dolls, music, and books) that reflect the children's cultures. Pictures of students' families may be included in an area of the classroom to help children feel comfortable and to ease the transition from home to school. The presence of these materials can stimulate conversations and understanding of cultural differences and similarities and provoke discussions about social justice. Teachers model respect for all family and community traditions.

### Strategies For Teachers

- Arrange the classroom with learning centers that promote positive interactions, focus students' investigations, expand and reinforce new knowledge, and include materials that reflect current topics
- Display materials that highlight children's work, their families, and their communities
- Ensure that the outdoor spaces are designed to extend the learning environment
- Establish clear and appropriate classroom rules
- Use a pictorial schedule that includes a balance of movement, small group work in centers, and whole group instruction

### Strategies For Leaders

- Encourage teachers to use learning centers that reflect current topics, promote interaction, and expand and reinforce new knowledge
- Support professional development that includes visits to different classrooms to help teachers consider alternative ways that they can create a positive environment and achieve their learning goals
- Provide adequate funding for developmentally and culturally appropriate materials
- Schedule adequate planning time for teachers so they create a high quality classroom and outdoor environments

*To learn more and view the other briefs in this series that address instruction and interactions, the classroom environment, assessment, and leadership, please visit The New York ECAC website at [www.nysecac.org](http://www.nysecac.org) or contact Patty Persell at [ecac@ccf.ny.gov](mailto:ecac@ccf.ny.gov)*



When young children are active, they are physically, emotionally and cognitively at an advantage.

Photo courtesy of Community Playthings

## Effective Environments in Prekindergarten through 3rd Grade: Building a Strong Foundation for the New York State Learning Standards

As members of the NYS Early Childhood Advisory Council, the NYS Head Start Collaboration Office, the NYS State Education Department, and the NYS Association for the Education of Young Children are providing guidance support our youngest students, their families, teachers, and leaders by highlighting key features of high quality early childhood teaching. **We firmly believe that young students can best meet New York State Learning Standards when they have effective teachers who use intentional, experiential, and developmentally and culturally appropriate practices.**

This brief provides helpful strategies related to setting up a classroom environment that will help to put the State's young learners on a path to social and intellectual success as they master the foundational skills to meet the New York State Learning Standards.



To learn more and view the other briefs in this series that address curriculum, the classroom environment, instruction and interactions, assessment and family engagement, behavior and play, please visit the New York ECAC website at [www.nysecac.org](http://www.nysecac.org) or contact us at [ecac@ccf.ny.gov](mailto:ecac@ccf.ny.gov)

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## Resources

- **Environmental Rating Scales**  
Environmental Rating Scales Institute  
[www.ersi.info/ecers.html](http://www.ersi.info/ecers.html)
- **Tips for Teachers: Schedules and Routines**  
Head Start National Center on Quality Teaching and Learning (NCQTL)  
[www.eclkc.ohs.acf.hhs.gov/hslc/tta-system/teaching/docs/schedulesandroutines-teacher-tips.pdf](http://www.eclkc.ohs.acf.hhs.gov/hslc/tta-system/teaching/docs/schedulesandroutines-teacher-tips.pdf)
- **Tips for Teachers: Designing Environments**  
Head Start National Center on Quality Teaching and Learning (NCQTL)  
[www.eclkc.ohs.acf.hhs.gov/hslc/tta-system/teaching/docs/design-teacher-tips.pdf?utm\\_medium=email&utm\\_campaign=OTL%20Back-to-School%20-%20September&utm\\_content=OTL%20Back-to-School%20-%20September+CID+b349630f29b5589d8076a1f2fc63febb&utm\\_source=CM%20Eblast&utm\\_term=Tips%20for%20Teachers%20Designing%20Environments](http://www.eclkc.ohs.acf.hhs.gov/hslc/tta-system/teaching/docs/design-teacher-tips.pdf?utm_medium=email&utm_campaign=OTL%20Back-to-School%20-%20September&utm_content=OTL%20Back-to-School%20-%20September+CID+b349630f29b5589d8076a1f2fc63febb&utm_source=CM%20Eblast&utm_term=Tips%20for%20Teachers%20Designing%20Environments)
- **New York State Education Department**  
[www.nysed.gov](http://www.nysed.gov)

## Sources

- <sup>1</sup> How the Brain Develops (2013). *Early Childhood Mapping Project Alberta*, pg. 3
- <sup>2</sup> Faulk, J. & Evanshen, P. (2013). *Linking the primary classroom environment to learning*. Young Children. National Association for the Education of Young Children.
- <sup>3</sup> Ostrosky, M.M., Jung, E.Y., Hemmeter, M.L., & Thomas, D. (n.d.). *Helping children understand routines and classroom rules*. Center on the Social and Emotional Foundations for Early Learning Retrieved, January 21, 2014 from: [www.csefel.vanderbilt.edu/briefs/wwb3.pdf](http://www.csefel.vanderbilt.edu/briefs/wwb3.pdf)
- <sup>4</sup> Pica, R. (2004). *Experiences in movement: Birth to age eight (3rd ed)*. Clifton Park, NY: Delmar Learning.
- <sup>5</sup> Harms, T., Clifford, R., & Cryer, D. (2005). *The Early Childhood Environment Rating Scales-Revised Edition*. New York, NY: Teachers College Press
- <sup>6</sup> New York State Education Department (2010). *New York State P-12 New York State Learning Standards for English language arts and literacy*. Retrieved February 27, 2014 from: <http://www.p12.nysed.gov/earlylearning/standards/>



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## Guidance from

New York State Head Start Collaboration Office  
New York State Association for the Education of Young Children  
New York State Education Department



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