The Learning Environment

The second component of the Creative Curriculum framework is the learning environment—the use and organization of the space in your classroom, the daily schedule and routines, and the social and emotional atmosphere. In The Creative Curriculum, the learning environment meets children’s developmental needs. It makes all children—including those with special needs—feel safe and comfortable and that they belong. As a result, they are helped to become independent and confident learners. For these reasons, the learning environment is the starting point for actually implementing The Creative Curriculum. In this chapter we examine the learning environment from three perspectives.

Setting up and maintaining the classroom—the physical space of the Creative Curriculum classroom that is organized into 10 interest areas—Blocks, Dramatic Play, Toys and Games, Art, Library, Discovery, Sand and Water, Music and Movement, Cooking, and Computers—and Outdoors. Interest areas offer multiple opportunities for children to explore, discover, and grow. In each, the arrangement of furniture and the materials involves children not only in learning but also in caring for the classroom and what is in it.

Establishing a structure for each day—the daily routines and schedule that create a sense of order in The Creative Curriculum. Children know what to expect, and they understand what is expected of them. With the assurance that their environment is predictable and familiar, they can settle into learning and function as part of a group. The order around them creates a sense of order inside them.

Creating a classroom community—the social/emotional environment of the Creative Curriculum classroom. Teachers relate to children in positive ways and help them do the same with one another. The positive social climate helps children feel good about school and learn to the best of their ability.
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Setting Up and Maintaining the Classroom

The physical environment in your classroom has a profound effect on individual children, the group as a whole, and you. The physical environment includes the size of the room, the colors of the walls, the type of flooring, the amount of light, and the number of windows. While you may have limited control over many of these features, you do have options about how to organize furniture, what materials to put out, and what you can bring outdoors to make the total space available to you more interesting.

A physical setting that is safe, attractive, comfortable, and well designed helps children engage in the activities you offer. Such an environment can support your goals for children and free you to observe and interact with them in positive ways.

A physical space divided into interest areas is an ideal setting for preschool children who want to explore, make things, experiment, and pursue their own interests. Separate interest areas with varied materials offer children a range of clear choices. Sometimes children want to work quietly, either alone or with other children. Areas devoted to books, art activities, or toys and games provide several choices for quiet activities. Areas set aside for dramatic play, block building, woodworking, or large muscle activities provide choices for active engagement.

Interest areas, which subdivide the classroom into spaces that accommodate a few children at a time, address preschool children’s preference to be in a small-group setting. With a manageable number of other children, they feel comfortable and play more positively than in larger groups. Likewise, in a smaller well-defined space, where they can concentrate on their work, children’s play tends to become more complex and elaborate.

As we already mentioned, a Creative Curriculum classroom is divided into areas for dramatic play, block building, toys and games, art, looking at books and writing, sand and water play, and a discovery table. There should also be a place for cooking activities, even if it’s just a table that also serves as a “snack bar” where children can help prepare and serve themselves a snack. Ideally, children should have access to musical instruments and equipment where they can make or listen to music. Computers may have a designated space, be incorporated in the Library Area, or be located in areas of your room where they would have a natural use, such as a Discovery Area.
1. Blocks
2. Dramatic Play
3. Toys and Games
4. Art
5. Library
6. Discovery
7. Sand and Water
8. Music and Movement
9. Cooking
10. Computers
Guidelines for Setting Up Interest Areas

To set up interest areas, note the location of electrical outlets, windows, doors, a sink, and storage space. See what moveable furnishings—such as shelves, tables, freestanding easels, and dramatic play furniture—are available for defining space. Take an inventory of the particular challenges in your room: built-ins, columns, radiators, exposed pipes, the locations of doors that cannot be blocked, and so on.

Space Planning Guidelines

- **Establish traffic patterns** for entering the room, putting belongings in cubbies, using the bathroom, moving from one area to another.

- **Clearly define areas that need protection**, such as block building and a cozy library nook, using shelves and the walls.

- **Locate interest areas that are relatively quiet**, such as books, art, computers, and games and toys, away from noisier ones, such as blocks and woodworking.

- **Decide which areas need tables**—toys and games, art, writing/book area, cooking. Because young children use the floor and open spaces for so much of their play, keep the number of tables to a minimum. Remember that you need just enough table space so everyone, including adults, can be seated at one time for snacks or meals. The tables should remain in the interest areas where they are located, not moved together cafeteria style.

- **Think about activities that are affected by floor coverings**. Ideally, messy activities such as art, sand and water, and cooking should be on a floor that can be washed. Also assess whether you will need drop cloths, pieces of vinyl, or a shower curtain. Blocks require a comfortable, soft floor where children can sit or work on their knees.

- **Place interest areas near needed resources**. Art, water play, and cooking activities should be near a water source; computers, CD players, and tape recorders need electrical outlets.

- **Reserve areas with lots of light** for places where children will look at books, write and draw, care for plants.

- **Organize the room so you can see as much as possible** from every location to ensure children’s safety. Regulations on child abuse prevention require supervision of children at all times, which means always having children in full view.
You will know your classroom environment is well organized if children are able to act in these ways.

- **Make choices** and select activities on their own.
- **Use materials appropriately** and creatively once they enter an interest area.
- **Stay involved** with an activity for a sustained period of time.
- **Experience success** when they play.
- **Help care** for materials.

Take time to evaluate the physical environment. Does it convey the messages you intend? Is it working for you? Are you experiencing any problems that might be addressed by changing the environment?

### Does It Convey the Messages I Intend?
Teachers who are aware of the power of the environment arrange their space purposefully to convey the messages they want children to receive. Use the messages below and methods for conveying them as a guide to assess how well your room arrangement is working.

**“This is a good place to be.”**
- Furniture is clean and well maintained.
- Wall decorations consist mostly of children’s art displayed attractively at their eye level and with large spaces of blank wall so as not to be overwhelming.
- The room includes decorative touches, including plants, displays of collections (such as shells, leaves, stones), pretty fabric-covered pillows or tablecloths, and a well-lit fish tank.
- Bright colors are used selectively on neutral-colored walls to highlight interest areas or mark storage areas on shelves.
“You belong here.”

- Each child has a cubby or basket—marked with his name or picture—for keeping personal items.
- Furniture is child-size and in good condition.
- Pictures on the wall, in books, and in learning materials include people of different ethnic backgrounds and economic means, people with disabilities, non-traditional families, and women and men in different types of jobs.
- Each child’s work is displayed and protected.
- Materials, equipment, and furniture are adapted so children with disabilities can be involved in all areas of the classroom.
- Materials reflect the children’s home life and culture.
- Pictures of the children with their families are displayed.

“This is a place you can trust.”

- Equipment and materials are arranged consistently so children know where to find the things they need.
- Shelves are neat and uncluttered, and materials are labeled so children can make choices easily.
- A well-defined, illustrated schedule is prominently displayed so children learn the order of events that occur each day and know what to expect.
- Routines such as transitions, eating, napping, and toileting are consistent.

“There are places where you can be by yourself when you want to.”

- Small, quiet areas of the room accommodate one or two children.
- A large pillow or stuffed chair in a quiet corner with minimal displays invites children to enjoy being quiet and alone.
- Headphones for a CD player, tape recorders, and/or computers allow for individual listening.
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“You can do many things on your own here.”

- Materials are stored on low shelves so children can reach them without help.

- Materials are organized logically (drawing paper is near the markers and crayons, pegs are near the pegboards) and located in areas where they are to be used.

- Shelves are labeled with pictures and words that show children where toys and materials belong.

- Labels and printed material are in the home language of the children, if possible, as well as in English.

- An illustrated job chart (for older preschoolers) shows that everyone in the classroom has a job every day.

- Photographs of children doing interesting things in the classroom are on display.

“This is a safe place to explore and try out your ideas.”

- Protected and defined quiet areas encourage small-group activities (e.g., a table with three to four chairs enclosed by low shelves containing toys and games).

- Smocks are available for art activities and water play so children can express themselves without fear of getting dirty.

- Protected floor space for building with blocks is clearly defined and out of the way of traffic.

- The outdoor area is fenced in and protected.

- Materials are displayed attractively, inviting children to use them.

- Toys that have not been used for a long time are rotated frequently and new things added to keep children’s interest. Children who may find changes unsettling are prepared ahead of time.
### Daily Schedule

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Time</th>
<th>Activity</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>30 minutes</strong></td>
<td><strong>Planning/preparation time:</strong> Review the plans for the day. Conduct health and safety check (e.g., refill bathroom supplies, remove any broken or torn materials, check outside for trash). Prepare interest areas (e.g., mix paint, place puzzles on a table, display new books). Set out name cards in sign-in area. Think about individual children, any special needs, current projects. Set out self-serve breakfast.</td>
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<tr>
<td>(8:00–8:30 a.m. or earlier in child care programs)</td>
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<tr>
<td><strong>30 minutes</strong></td>
<td><strong>Arrival:</strong> Greet families and children individually. Help children store belongings, select a quiet activity, or serve themselves breakfast.</td>
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<tr>
<td>(8:30–9:00 a.m. or longer in child care)</td>
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<tr>
<td><strong>10–15 minutes</strong></td>
<td><strong>Group meeting:</strong> Give signal to gather the group and lead children in singing songs and fingerplays and sharing news. Read a poem, talk about the day’s activities, and talk about the choices for the morning. Consider the needs of children who are not ready for large-group activities (e.g., hold two smaller groups, have one teacher sit close to children who need extra attention).</td>
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<tr>
<td>(9:00–9:15 a.m.)</td>
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<tr>
<td><strong>60–75 minutes</strong></td>
<td><strong>Choice time and small groups:</strong> Guide children in selecting interest areas. Observe and interact with individual children to extend play and learning. Lead a short, small-group activity that builds on children’s skills and interests. Work with children engaged in study activities.</td>
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<tr>
<td>(9:15–10:15 or 10:30 a.m., depending on how snack will be served)</td>
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<tr>
<td><strong>15 minutes</strong></td>
<td><strong>Cleanup:</strong> Help children put away materials in each interest area.</td>
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<tr>
<td>(10:15–10:30 a.m.)</td>
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<tr>
<td><strong>10 minutes</strong></td>
<td><strong>Snack time:</strong> Sit with children and enjoy a snack together or supervise the “snack bar.”</td>
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<td>(10:30–10:40 a.m.)</td>
<td><em>Note:</em> Self-serve snacks can be incorporated into indoor or outdoor choice time (in warm weather).</td>
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<tr>
<td><strong>60 minutes</strong></td>
<td><strong>Group time:</strong> Invite children to share what they did, lead music and movement activity, read aloud (e.g., story, poem), record ideas, or write experience story.</td>
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<tr>
<td>(10:40–11:40 a.m.)</td>
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<tr>
<td><strong>Outdoor choice time:</strong></td>
<td>Supervise the playground toys and materials (swings, climbers, slides). Observe and interact with children as they jump rope, play ball games, blow bubbles, make nature discoveries, and so on. Extend study work outdoors, if appropriate. Help children to put away or carry in toys and materials, hang up jackets, toilet, and wash up.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
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<th>Activities</th>
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| **10 minutes** | (11:40–11:50 a.m.)  
*Story time:* Read and discuss a storybook. Use props to help children retell stories. |
| **55 minutes** | (11:50 a.m.–12:45 p.m.)  
*Lunch:* Help children to prepare the tables for lunch. Encourage conversations about the day’s events, the meal itself, and topics of interest to children. Guide children in cleaning up after lunch, brushing teeth, setting out cots/mats, and preparing for rest. |
| **60–90 minutes** | (12:45–2:15 p.m.)  
*Rest time:* Help children relax so they can fall asleep. Supervise rest area, moving about so each teacher gets a break. Provide quiet activities for children who don’t sleep. Adjust length of rest time to suit age of group and needs of individual children. |
| **30 minutes** | (2:15–2:45 p.m.)  
*Snack/quiet activities:* Set up snack so children can serve themselves and prepare some quiet activity choices. |
| **15 minutes** | (2:45–3:00 p.m.)  
*Group activity:* Lead group meeting/activity. Help children reflect on the day and prepare for home. Read aloud. |
| **60 minutes** | (3:00–4:00 p.m.)  
*Outdoor choice time:* Supervise and interact with children. Plan some special activities. |
| **60 minutes** | (4:00–5:00 p.m.)  
*Choice time and small groups:* Set out a limited number of choices for children such as computers, library, toys and games. Lead a small-group activity. |
| **60 minutes** | (5:00–6:00 p.m.)  
*Closing and departures:* Lead group discussion about the day and plans for the next day. Involve children in quiet activities, hanging up their artwork, and preparing for the next day. Greet parents and share something about the child’s day. |
| **As time allows during the day** |  
*Planning and reflection:* Discuss how the day went, progress of individual children (skills, needs, interests); work on portfolios and observation notes related to *The Developmental Continuum*. Review and make plans for the next day. |