

Creating a Culture of Calm for Social Emotional Learning

The core competencies of social emotional development include self-awareness, self-regulation, social awareness, forming and maintaining relationships, social responsibility and problem solving. Children learn social emotional competencies in physical, emotional and social environments. It is important that adults support learning in all aspects of these environments by creating a culture of calm.

If an environment depletes a child's energy, that child has fewer resources for playing and learning. It is important to become aware of ways that aspects of the environment make demands on children. This is the first step in establishing strategies that create a culture of calm which leads to a supportive learning environment for everyone.

Visual and Auditory Demands: Calming the Physical Environment

Consideration of the physical aspects of the environment is detailed in the SEED clinical perspective entitled: *Social Emotional Development and the Physical Environment*, found at <http://bccfa-seed.org/?page=4>

Attempting to experience an environment from a child's perspective can reveal much about the physical and sensory demands placed upon children. Sit on the floor or at the table in a child-size chair and experience the setting from the child's height. Look at the walls, the shelves, the toys and materials from the child's viewpoint. Take a quiet moment to listen to the ambient noise in the room. When adults become more aware of the environment from the child's perspective they can sometimes make minor changes that reduce demands on the child's nervous system. Creating a calmer physical environment might simply entail organizing toys neatly, removing clutter from the walls or turning off lights and making use of natural lighting. These small changes can help children to focus on learning.

A calm physical environment also entails providing resources that children can use when they need them. Adults support children by assisting them to access visual supports, adapted materials and transition tools.

It is important to make materials visually accessible by ensuring that they are not confused with other visual information. Learning materials that are bold and colourful, presented against a neutral background stand out and draw the child's attention.

Adults can often adapt materials to assist children to experience success. Short, easy-to-control pencils and markers make drawing and printing easier. Self-opening scissors and thick paper can assist children who are learning to cut but who have challenges with small motor coordination.

Transition tools are items that help children to feel more organized and to keep their focus as they move from activity to activity. Adults can provide these tools for children who find transitions challenging.

Emotional Demands: Calming the Emotional Environment

Attending to the emotional environment is equally important. Some children find it stressful to interact with others, to initiate activities, to make transitions or to participate in a group. It is often difficult for these children to maintain a sense of calm when emotionally stimulated.

Greeting children when they arrive gives caregivers an opportunity to connect with them, to notice their frames of mind and to hear how they are feeling. Sometimes caregivers choose to gather more information to follow up on comments children make. If caregivers are aware of issues that could affect a child's participation, they may be able to make adjustments to activities or to the day's schedule in order to meet the child's needs.

Some children, particularly those who take longer to *read the room*, to acclimatize to new sensory input or to initiate interactions or activities can benefit from a slow start to their participation. Caregivers can assist children who prefer a *slow start* by introducing a cooperative activity such as a group art project, a puzzle or an open-ended activity that children can join as they arrive or when they are ready. Caregivers might prepare children for an activity by asking them to make a *smart guess* about what their friends might be doing before they enter a room. Sometimes, explicit teaching supports a child's transition into a new situation. Caregivers can use visual aids and transition tools, such as something to hold, squeeze or mouth, to help children manage the emotional energy changes that occur when entering a group or starting something new.

Children need a space where they know they can safely go to recoup energy after a taxing social, emotional or cognitive event. This quiet space in a low-traffic area can be made more inviting by furnishing it with soft cushions and reducing visual stimulation by providing a covering or a physical buffer.

It is vital that adults be aware of their own energy states and the emotions they feel and express. When adults express their feelings in a calm way and model a peaceful energy state, children have the opportunity to experience calmness in action. Calmness is contagious and children often emulate the serenity of the adults around them. When adults do feel stressed it is helpful for them to articulate what they are doing to manage the stress and to model calming strategies such as deep breathing, taking a sip of water or taking a break to stretch.

If caregivers are comfortable with contemplative practises they can adapt these to assist children to calm their energy states. These practices which rejuvenate both adults and children, can be used to reduce stress and to focus and pay attention. Older children may benefit from knowing the foundation of contemplative practises and may be interested to learn about the neuroscience underlying these actions.

Cognitive Demands: Calming the Cognitive Environment

Every cognitive act has an emotional demand. The higher the emotional demand the less energy we have available to focus on other things. For example some people find reading pleasurable and relaxing; others find reading frustrating and tiring. Those who are exhausted by reading have less energy for other tasks. Thinking demands energy and may be quite stimulating. It often takes time to attain a calm state after performing a challenging cognitive task.

Generally we are all calmed and regulated by routines. Supportive routines help children to identify a goal or to make a plan. When we help children to sort and organize materials to start an activity or when we encourage them to tidy up at the end of play we assist them to build foundational executive function skills. Encouraging children to imagine what things will look like when a task is completed helps them to organize themselves and proceed towards the goal.

Relationships: Calming the Social Environment

Caring relationships are the foundation of all learning. Empathetic, trusting relationships develop when children realize that their caregivers are aware of and respect their preferences and that adults want them to do well. Through their interactions with adults, children learn that we attend to social interactions by focusing on and thinking about others.

Co-regulation refers to the effort of all people in an environment to help one another to identify and adjust their energy states in order to reach the optimal level of regulation. Co-regulation occurs during our communications with others. Children learn about co-regulation through play and interactions with their peers and through observation and conversation with adults. Co-regulation occurs in settings in which adults talk about internal states, label emotions in themselves and others, and model strategies to achieve a state of calmness. By creating an environment that promotes self-awareness and self-regulation adults indicate that they care about the child, that they are not judgemental and that they have confidence in the resilience of the child. In so doing they are creating a culture of calm for optimum social emotional learning.