

Social Emotional Development and the Physical Environment

The environments in which children play and learn can have a positive impact upon social emotional development. Creating learning environments using the principles of universal design makes it possible for students of various ages and abilities to enjoy spaces that are accessible, flexible and supportive for everyone as they grow and change.

When considering learning environments it is important to assess the sensory aspects of the space, such as lighting, noise and visual stimulation. Some sensory demands can exhaust students or cause them to feel frustrated and anxious. This can be particularly true if children find it difficult to process and organise sensory information. We all have different thresholds for sensory tolerance. Children with special needs may have sensory processing difficulties that make it challenging for them to cope in environments with too much sensory input. These environments can make it more difficult for them to regulate their emotions and behave in ways that are socially expected.

The following ideas regarding auditory and visual stimulation may be helpful for students who find it difficult to remain calm and focussed in noisy or visually stimulating environments.

- Take time to be still in the learning environment in order to identify noise from ventilation and other mechanical systems. Servicing can help to make these systems as quiet as possible.
- Add sound absorbing materials to the environment.
- Sit where children sit and try to figure out what aspects of the environment draw their attention.
- Identify visual “noise” or clutter in the classroom. Reduce clutter by organising or screening off materials.
- Maximise natural light in the environment.
- Bring the “outside in” by adding plants. They also help to filter light.
- Identify pathways in the classroom and make sure that they are unobstructed.

- Identify areas that need to be better organized and those that could be made more comfortable.
- Offer children flexibility about when and where furniture and materials can be used.
- Create micro-environments that are safe and intuitive to use and that meet the needs of children to regulate their emotions. For example, set up a quiet, secluded retreat area as well as an area for large muscle activity.
- Provide children with tools to decrease the auditory or visual demands on the sensory system such as noise-cancelling headsets and screens.
- Support children to recognize their needs with regard to sensory stimulation and encourage them to request changes to meet their needs.

When the learning environment is a space where children feel calm and focussed they are more likely to experience success. Becoming aware of the sensory environment is crucial in determining changes that need to be made to assist all children to be comfortable. It is important to remember that creating learning environments is a dynamic process and changes may need to be made periodically in order to meet the needs of all learners.

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