

## Early Essentials

### Webisode 7: Environments

[Music]

Amanda Perez: Hey. I'm Amanda Perez with the Early Head Start National Resource Center, and welcome again to "Early Essentials." Today we're talking about environments, the spaces you create for children and families. We talk so much about relationships in this work, do environments really matter? Well, let's listen to this mom talk about her first impressions of an Early Head Start program.

Ashlei: It was very open. You could see the entire center from the moment you walked in. I could point, "My son's over there." The space, it – it was a very open space. You could see the baby side; you could see the toddler side. They had these nice little dividers right down the middle, so you knew your baby's not going to be trampled on by a toddler that doesn't know any better. [Laughter] Oh, I loved – they have pictures of all the babies all over the walls, and it just made it seem like it was much more inviting, that each child was special in that center.

Amanda: So, Ashlei tells us that the environment mattered to her. She looked to it to know something about how her child would be cared for and valued in that space. Did you know that environments make a difference to children, too?

I spoke with a variety of experts and asked them to share some environmental tips with us. Louis Torelli, an early childhood educator and environmental designer, got us started. Hey, Louis. So, let's start with a big question. What do you see as the most important element of the environment?

Louis Torelli: The most important element is you as the teacher, the caregiver. That's the most important piece of equipment in – in the classroom for the child. But the important thing to remember is that the environment can help you as a teacher support the needs of the children; support the emotional needs of the children, support the relationship, support the peer relationships between the children.

Amanda: So, the adult is key. And you also talk about the importance of a home-like environment. Tell us more about that.

Louis: So, the environment should feel welcoming for the children and the families, you know, and there's things you can do in terms of the materials as well as the setting. Things like, you know, asking parents to bring in photos of their children at home doing the things that they typically do with their parents and the other important adults in their lives and displaying those at children's eye level and, you know, making sure they're protected so that they last. There's simple things you can add to make it feel more warm and cozy and home-like. You'll find that children are more engaged in dramatic play when they have things that are familiar to them from the home settings.

Amanda: That feeling of home, Louis, can really help children feel comfortable to explore and to learn. And you suggest that the environment be set up to encourage them to explore independently, as well.

Louis: So, you want the environment to promote practices of independence with children based on their age. You should think about, how does that equipment support the children's ability to do things as

much as possible on their own with minimal assistance? So, for example, once a child can sit up independently, they should be sitting in chairs that they can either crawl to or sit in with minimal assistance from the caregiver.

In order to do that, the seat height has to be such that their feet can sit firmly on the ground. Chairs for that age group, for example, should – for infants, older infants, and young toddlers should have sides to it because they're just learning how to sit, and so they need that security of the sides. The table height is very important, that you want a table height that allows children to access the materials easily. You know, not up to their chin but, you know, making it the right height so that they can perform the activity, whether it's eating or doing a puzzle. And also, it's important not to have too much stuff available to children. So, there's that – the right balance.

Amanda: You describe some key elements here: the primary role of the adult; the importance of the home-like environment and one that fosters a child's independence, that engages but doesn't over-stimulate. Let's listen to some expert staff responding to these messages.

Maria Mottaghian: If I were to talk to a brand-new staff member about classroom environments for infants and toddlers, I think the very first thing I would tell them would be to get on their knees, explore the world at the level of an infant and a toddler, and that from that perspective is how they're going to build their classroom. And there's nothing like crawling in the steps of a child to find out what's the most appropriate. And also to relax. And to make the room not over-stimulating, but certainly an environment that is appealing not only to the children but to anybody who walks in the room. I don't think it has to be just infants and toddlers. I want the parents to feel as comfortable when they walk into that room.

Jan So: I can't tell you how many – how many times a day a child will go and point to the picture of their family. And they don't say anything; they just point or touch it. And that's – because it is this transition and this, you know, saying goodbye, and this is all new. And, you know, we sometimes forget that. So, just being able to kind of like make contact with the picture of their mom helps tremendously in making them feel safe. And we talk about their families during the course of the day – their sisters, their brothers, their dads, their moms – so that they feel this connection, you know, with their home, where they're – you know, and that feeling of safety.

So, as you can see in our kitchen area, we have pictures of foods that are culturally appropriate for the child. So, maybe they see that – you know, tortillas and tacos and enchiladas and sopa and stuff in their home. So then they're going to see it here. So, we want to... Largely what we do in terms of decorating and being creative, in terms of our space, is really with a mind towards making the kids feel comfortable and safe.

Marie Tabanera: So, working with mobile infants, we try to bring everything down more, more to their level so that they're not having to ask for help. I think that brings out a little more independence for them and helps boost their confidence in, "I can do this. Watch me do this!"

Amanda: Maria, Jan, and Marie echo your messages, Louis, about the importance of a home-like environment where they can follow their own interests. We would like to create environments, then, that offer a balance of stimulation and security. As part of that, can you talk about the importance of having spaces where children can retreat a little?

Louis: So, if you think about it, you know, some children are spending 10 hours a day in the group care setting, and that's a long time. So it's important that children – within the classroom environment or within the general environment, to have places where children can break off and not feel like they're part of the full group the whole day. Settings where, you know, they can be by themselves and watch the other children, or be with just one other child or a caregiver. That doesn't mean that you can't supervise them. They're just sort of nooks within the general room that you can still see all the children and the children can see you. But simple things like a cozy, like, oversized chair or a love seat; you can add things like a fabric canopy space attached to the wall or to furniture to create a cozy space within the larger space. Even things like a cardboard cutout box provides a private space for the children.

Amanda: Right. So, we know those private spaces are so important for young children, and we also know that they're learning how to be with other children at the same time. How can environment help support those peer interactions?

Louis: Well, in terms of the learning centers, the functional areas, you want to make sure that they're big enough for at least two children to use at the same time. So, the amount will depend on the activity and also the age group of the children, whether it's, you know, the reading area or the block area or a housekeeping area. But you also want to make sure that the equipment is large enough that if it's one piece of equipment, that two children can use it at the same time, as much as possible. So, for example, instead of a single mirror, getting a double-wide mirror where two children can see their full body image at the same time. There's this balance, like we talked about before, of enough materials but not too many materials.

Amanda: We asked some folks from the field to comment, Louis, on the environments you describe, environments that support exploration and focus, security and relationships. Let's hear from them.

Janna Wagner: You really want to create an environment of "yes," where children are only exploring and doing and working, and you're not there saying no. It should really be a "Yes, I can do" space, not a "No, I can't do" space. And so, that means that there needs to be space for children to explore, to reach materials, for you to be down on the floor moving around. And infants and toddlers need to be able to reach those materials easily and have them accessible.

Matika Laxson: When I set up my classroom, I make sure that... Like, the biggest thing is traffic. I want to make sure that I can get to somewhere quickly. So, that's my first thing that I think about, is how if, you know, this baby starts crying or if this baby tumbles over or something, I'm going to be able to get there quick. So, that's the first thing I consider, is being able to get around. Second thing I consider is visibility, being able to see everything from just about anywhere.

Cleo Rodriguez, Jr.: And I think that we need to recognize that setting up an environment is not a one-time thing. It is an ongoing process. It should be – environments should be responsive. Like, how are we... As children develop, as children age, then we – the environment should change with young children. And so, when you set up the environment on day one, it might be a totally different environment on day 60, you know? Because we've had some developmental milestones that have occurred in young children, and so we've got to create and adapt our environment to respond to developmental changes of young children.

Amanda: Great tips here from Janna, Matika, and Cleo, tips that really help us think about how the environment can be a partner in offering children what they need for learning. Let's talk for a minute about gross motor experiences, Louis, particularly for infants and toddlers.

Louis: So, this is really key. Children need to have gross motor, large muscle experiences throughout the day. You know, only having a set time, it's not how infants and toddlers work. They're learning to move and moving to learn constantly. You know, you can do things like rolling or climbing or, you know, cruising for the children who are just getting – pulling up to standing and beginning on a – using a riser or a box. Rocking boats, you know, jumping – low jumping areas, low balance beams. These are all simple activities that children will engage in throughout the day, not just one particular time of the day. You know, it's important to remember that a safe environment means an appropriately challenging environment. And if you don't have appropriate challenges, children will find ways to find their own challenges, sometimes that are not as safe as appropriate challenges that you've decided to provide.

Amanda: We often think about the outdoors as the place for gross motor learning; but what you're saying is that children use their gross motor skills anywhere, indoors too, and we really need to plan for that. And by the same token, the outdoors can be a place for all kinds of learning, right?

Louis: Think about the outdoor environment as an extension of the classroom. So, everything that you do inside – most of the things that you do inside has the potential to happen outside. So, you know, weather permitting, you could have table activities outside. You could read outside. You can do block building outside. You can have housekeeping activities outside. And this really changes the nature of the outdoor environments.

Amanda: We've heard a lot from our experts so far. Let's take a moment to apply some of the things we've heard. Take a look at what's happening in this outdoor area at a family child care home in Florida. This program serves a mixed-age group of children with different temperaments and interests, and at different stages of development. Notice the ways they use the space individually and together in smaller and larger groups. Look at this group together. What do you see here? And here? Watch this little girl. And here's another young toddler. What is happening for this child? Watch the boy in red. What is he doing?

So, this space accommodates children in a large group activity, but also offers lots of materials and child-sized spaces to meet individual needs and interests. This infant has a protected space to be on her tummy. And when she gets frustrated, her caregiver, who's close by, picks her up to eat. With her body, this adult offers a safe environment where the baby can both enjoy her bottle and watch the other children. And those children are busy. This little girl wants to be close to her friends at first; but when she wants some quieter time, she finds a place to paint at the edge of the group. Children have many interests, and she has lots of options here.

This young toddler also likes to paint, but has chosen a different space for her project. She carefully and deliberately explores her materials sitting by herself at a low table. She has unhurried time and ample space to follow her own interests. This toddler enjoys long, uninterrupted play at the water table. Notice the ducks he has lined up here, and his fun with sand. This is an environment of yes. The sand doesn't need to stay in the sandbox, and he built a play space for his ducks that he explores with them. Did you see how these friends play in sand? What is sand like when it's dry? Later, one of them plays at the water table, focuses on water, wonders how the sand his friend left behind will move through his waterwheel.

In this space, children at different ages with different interests and different temperaments have lots of options. Each can play independently at their own pace and rhythm, and choose whether to be with others or alone, focusing on what interests them. There are opportunities for play that invite children to play in different ways, with small and large muscles, for example. There are enough materials for everyone to use as they'd like, and the arrangement of the space and the adults in the environment encourage discovery, exploration, and learning. How does your environment encourage independent exploration?

We've thought a lot about environments that staff design, indoor and outdoor. Home visitors can adapt some of these ideas for their work with families. But what else can they be thinking about in home-based services? We asked Brenda Jones Harden about the home environment.

Brenda Jones Harden: I think home visitors have the unique opportunity to coach parents to try and create that kind of child-centered environment where they can provide as much stimulation, as much support, as much nurturance as they can. So, it's important for home visitors to work with parents to try and, I think, create three characteristics in that environment: make it safe, make it stable, and make it supportive. So, clearly, supportive has to do with stimulation, being able to not just provide children with books, you know, and all that kind of stuff, but really have parents talking to them, showing them things, following their lead, all that kind of stuff, but also being as nurturing as they can.

Amanda: So, Brenda reminds us that environments belong to children and families, and that staff have a role there working in partnership with families, of course. Calvin Moore reminds us that environments are for you, for staff, too.

Calvin Moore, Jr.: So, the learning environment is a key tool for providers. They use the environment to help children build and construct knowledge about the world around them. But it's also important that the provider realizes that they're building a sense of community. It's a no-risk environment where both the provider and the child can take risks, that they can challenge themselves, that the provider can build and construct knowledge about teaching at the same time that the child is building and constructing knowledge about the world around them. It really is a wonderful experience when the provider facilitates learning in this community of learners. And I hope that that's what they do.

Amanda: All of our experts here remind us that the environments you create are social as well as physical. And you – the decisions you make for your space and those important interactions with children and families – you are the most important environmental element of all.

[Music]