Caring Connections:

Let's Talk About Environments

Podcast Transcription

[Music]

Jan Greenberg: Hi, and welcome to the fourth podcast in the Early Head Start Caring Connections Series. My name is Jan Greenberg and I am a senior writer/training specialist with the Early Head Start National Resource Center. We hope that you are enjoying these podcasts and sharing them with your colleagues or others you think would find them helpful. Also, remember to review the information sheet that accompanies each podcast. It directs you to resources that we refer to, and Head Start Program Performance Standards that are relevant to the information covered.

[Caregiver and young infant lay on blanket on floor in front of mirror]

In the last podcast about routines, host Amanda Perez noted that a primary social and emotional goal for infants and toddlers is to develop a sense of trust and security in their environments and with the people who take care of them. And when young children feel secure that their needs will be met, they can devote their attention to learning all that the world is offering them.

[Mobile infant walks up wooden ramp with support from caregiver]

This podcast builds on the topic of environments, but focuses, in particular, on the indoor physical environment and the important role that environment plays in promoting children's comfort, security, sense of belonging, and ability to explore and learn.

[Environmental clips of Alaska, Washington, Washington, DC (exterior shots of street), exterior of a house]

The physical environments that we and the infants, toddlers, and families we serve live, play, and work in are incredibly diverse. We're in cities, suburbs, and rural communities. We live in houses, apartments, and trailers. We shop in markets or stores large and small, spacious and crowded. We may visit clinics or doctor's offices, eat in restaurants, wash clothes at laundromats, and cheer at indoor sports events. And each of these diverse environments has a profound effect on how we think, feel, and behave.

[Clip of toddlers rinsing toothbrushes and brushing teeth at a sink inside the classroom]

Our physical indoor environment - the size of space, the types of furniture, equipment, and materials that are available and the way they are arranged, the amount of light and noise, and even the smells and colors - sends us daily messages about what's appropriate and what's not, what's expected, what's allowed, and what's encouraged.

[Clip of toddlers lying on cots and a caregiver patting a child's back]

We are comfortable, relaxed, and productive in some environments; we are less so in others. The programs in which we work with infants, toddlers, and their families are no different. Our programs are smaller versions of our larger communities.

[Caregiver rocking an infant and patting her back]

And the way we set up our learning environments – be they classrooms in centers, family child care homes, or socialization spaces – also communicates similar messages about what's okay and what's not. So it's important to think about how our learning environments speak to the children and adults who spend time in them, and to make sure the messages are positive ones.

[Toddler playing with blocks in front of a mirror]

[Slide of Louis Torrelli]

Let's listen to Louis Torrelli, co-founder of Spaces for Children and specialist in creating physical environments for infants and toddlers, as he talks about why environments are so important for infants and toddlers during a national Early Head Start orientation conference in 2010. As you listen, focus on what well-designed environments can provide for children.

[Louis Torrelli speaking with his PowerPoint showing to the right of him]

Louis Torrelli: Okay. So why is the environment important? Simply stated, the environment is important because it affects how children learn, and how teachers teach. That, you know, well-designed environments, children have a sense of security, they feel comfortable, they -- it feels intimate, it supports individual and small-group learning as well as pro-social interaction. And then, children in well-designed environments have a sense of control, you know. It encourages exploration. These are all things in terms of the child development component of, of our programming is what we should be focusing on. It supports self-directed learning, small-group interaction, and it all -- at the same time, while reducing aggressiveness and the aimless wandering that I got to observe firsthand as a teacher with my 16 babies and toddlers in a room, in a poorly designed space. And that, again, that's when I started to think about these, the impact. So, on this, on the same -- on the other hand, you know, the well-designed space, appropriate-designed environment doesn't automatically guarantee that there's a quality program, of course, no different than making sure we have small group size or ratio automatically guarantee, but that these are program components based on lots of research that say setting up a program in this way,along with, you know, skilled teachers, is going to provide the likelihood for quality experiences for children. Okay.

[Male caregiver and toddler boy plays with a rain stick]

Jan: Did you hear Louis talk about environments that are intimate, comfortable, and promote social interactions, that give children a sense of security and control, and that support self-directed learning and exploration? Those are all positive messages we can communicate to children and families through the environment. But Louis also added an important element – you, the skilled teacher, family child care provider, or home visitor. You have the opportunity to create environments that support relationships, and that let infants and toddlers know they belong, they will be safe, secure, and comfortable, and that they are free to move, explore, and learn about the people and world around them.

[Slide of a classroom]

Consider the learning environment as a valuable teaching tool and partner. What do you want it to teach the children in your care? If you want children to hear the message, "I belong," how might you create a warm, welcoming, nurturing environment that feels like a home away from home?

[Slide of a toddler boy sitting on a child-sized couch reading a book]

[Slide of the Early Head Start National Resource Center News You Can Use newsletter]

The Early Head Start National Resource Center News You Can Use publication called *Learning at Home and Homelike Environments* has some suggestions.

[Slide of an Alaskan native toddler girl with purse, native shawl, and other accessories]

[Slide of toddlers playing in the dramatic play area of a classroom]

For example, use textiles and fabrics common to your children's and families' cultures for curtains, blankets, and table cloths. Incorporate familiar cultural items such as toys, musical instruments, and art work.

[Slide of a toddler boy with an African drum]

Ask families to provide you with empty food containers or clothing items such as hats, vests, and bandanas for children to use in pretend play.

[Slide of a mobile infant playing with large water bottles with toys in them]

[Slide of toddler with an adult male hat on]

With families' permission, display photos of children and their families. Place them on surfaces at children's eye level. Put them in homemade books that children can look at on their own or while sitting comfortably with you.

[Slide of a classroom with family photos on the walls and window ledge]

[Slide of a toddler laying on a cot with a photo on the wall next to him at eye level]

[Slide of a caregiver showing a mobile infant pictures of his family]

[Slide of toddlers eating]

Your environment can also communicate messages of safety, security, and comfort. For example, in addition to doing daily safety checks, make sure that furniture and equipment are appropriately sized for infants and toddlers and in good condition. Put mats on surfaces and under equipment where children are learning to move and climb. For comfort, consider adding large floor cushions or soft child size furniture. Make sure there is space for you and family members to join children in play.

[Slide of a caregiver and toddlers sitting at a table eating]

[Slide of caregiver giving a mobile infant a cracker]

[Slide of a mobile infant crawling and pulling up on a table]

[Slide of a caregiver assisting a toddler walk up a carpeted ramp]

]Slide of a toddler sitting on a child sized couch with a doll]

Finally, does your environment say "yes" to children's ability to
move freely and explore? For example, are furniture and equipment arranged so
that there is adequate space for active movement and play? Can children easily
reach toys and materials? Are there multiples of popular toys? And are toys,
books, and other materials kept in consistent places so that children and adults
know where to find them?

[Toddler playing with long string]

[Toddler kicking a small stuffed animal around the room]

[Two adult caregivers sitting on the floor with two infants and toys]

[Caregiver reads with a toddler]

Up to now, I've mostly talked about creating environments that
send positive messages to children and families. But I want to come back to you
– the teacher, family child care provider, or home visitor – and focus for a
moment on how the environment also needs to communicate positive messages
that speak to your needs. Listen as Louis Torelli talks about creating comfortable
spaces for all users, including adults.

[Slide of Louis Torrelli]

[Louis Torrelli speaking with his PowerPoint showing to the left of him]

Louis: So, having comfortable space for all of the users, and that should
be for the adults in the space, if your doing socialization groups, you know, my
ideal socialization environment, it has all of the, you know, functional areas for
the children and the age range, but also should feel, you know, somewhat
like a home, maybe like a living room space. So, the reading area might have
a loveseat, a small chair, as well as pillows and stuff just so that the fam –
the adults in the space feel more, more comfortable as well as the children.
There's different ways to do it but just thinkabout accommodations for all
of the users of the space.

[A caregiver bottle feeds an infant]

Jan: Louis spoke about socialization spaces in particular, but his message is broader. You benefit from a place that's comfortable for you and that supports the important work you do.

[Caregiver zips a toddler's jacket]

The Program for Infant Toddler Caregivers resource, *A Guide to Setting Up Environments*, suggests that creating a totally child-centered environment shouldn't be your only goal. Rather, aim to create environments that accommodate adult needs as well as those of the infants and toddlers in your care.

[Caregiver prepares a cradleboard for an infant]

Adult-sized comfortable seating, well-organized storage areas for program materials and personal items, and steps for children to climb to a changing table are just a few examples of adult accommodations.

[A mother sits with her daughter on her lap in a rocking chair]

[Slide of Louis Torrelli]

We now return to Louis Torelli one last time. Prior to this clip, Louis refers to a photo from 1978 of a young infant in a wind-up swing seat and talks about how mobile infants and toddlers tried to use the swing seat to practice their newly found skills in pulling up to stand, climbing, and pushing objects to make them move. We no longer recommend equipment like swing seats in Early and Migrant and Seasonal Head Start programs, but pay attention to Louis's message about the effect that inappropriate equipment has on both children and adults.

[Louis Torrelli speaking with his PowerPoint showing to the left of him]

Louis: So those are all, you know, appropriate activities, you know, typical development that we should support – you know, pulling up to standing, climbing in, pushing. But because children will do this – I'm just using this as an example, but there are, you know, other types of equipment they'll do that to also, furniture. Because it's not appropriate and potentially unsafe, the teacher redirects the child, and so children get this message that that, that which I'm interested in doing, self-initiated exploration, exploring my new found, my new ability to move, is being prevented instead of promoted by my primary caregiver. That has implications on development, one, and number two, it's exhausting for the caregiver to spend half their day redirecting children and being prohibitive. So again, this is why the environment is so important.

[Toddlers standing on stairs]

Jan: To wrap this up, I want to leave you with a quote from *A Guide to Setting Up Environments.* It goes like this.

[Caregiver reading to toddlers on a child sized couch]

[Toddler placing toys in a basket]

[Slide of two rocking chairs, toys, and pictures]

If the environment makes you anxious about the children's safety, you cannot relax and play with children. If the room arrangement does not allow you to find things easily, you get frustrated and waste precious time. If you do not have a place to relax away from the children for a few moments, you may suffer burnout.

[Caregiver holding the hands of a mobile infant]

So, think about the environment that you've created for infants, toddlers, their families, and yourself. What messages does it communicate? What else can you do to strengthen the positive ones? And remember, make sure the environment meets your needs as well as the children's so that your time is freed up to interact with them and build those relationships that are so important to their growth and development.

[Slide of a classroom environment]

[Caregiver holding an infant after bottle feeding in a rocking chair]

[Caregiver holding a toddler on her lap facing her]

Thanks so much for joining us today. You can look us up at www.ehsnrc.org or on Head Start's Early Childhood Learning and Knowledge Center at eclkc.ohs.acf.hhs.gov for more resources designed to support you in your work. Stay tuned for the next Caring Connections Podcast on "Following the Baby's Lead" hosted by Amanda Perez.

This is Jan Greenberg at the Early Head Start National Resource Center wishing you all the best in your work.

[End of video]