

FOCUS

on Early Childhood Mental Health



*Pennsylvania Key
Early Childhood Mental
Health Consultation
Project
717-213-2063
micwal@berksiu.org*

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Child-Friendly Space

Grandma has an heirloom glass statue on the coffee table at her house. When three-year-old Jason visits, he is intrigued with the statue and constantly picks it up. Grandma spends a lot of time telling him to put it down and not touch it. She complains to Jason's mother that he doesn't listen and keeps going back to the statue. Who has the problem? Grandma or Jason? Most of us probably wonder why Grandma doesn't just put the statue away when Jason visits. This is an obvious example of how the physical environment, whether at home or in an early care and learning facility, has an impact on children's behavior.

Questions to ask (the best answer is "yes"!):

- Is children's space arranged to make it easy for children to play with each other, toys and other materials?
- Do learning centers have clear boundaries that children can see and understand? Do they allow multiple children to comfortably be at them at one time?
- Is the classroom arranged so there aren't large open spaces where children are tempted to run?
- Do children have opportunity and appropriate space for active play?
- Have you eliminated as many situations as possible that require you to constantly redirect children or say no? (e.g., things they're not supposed to climb on or touch)?

Tips for arranging a child-friendly physical environment:

- Create well-defined play areas to discourage running indoors.
- Use low shelves or borders to create different types of play space.
- Make sure children know how new equipment should be used.
- Keep equipment that is not appropriate for children out of the way and inaccessible.
- Create small cozy spaces where children can take breaks from large groups; be sure the rules for the use of the space are clear.
- Stock play areas with sensory-rich materials and keep them orderly and uncluttered.

Sources:

- "Creating a Child Care Environment for Success," British Columbia Child Care Association, <http://bit.ly/9yBFJq>
- "Enhancing Development Through Classroom Design in Early Head Start," www.spacesforchildren.com/enhanc.html
- "Inventory of Practices for Promoting Children's Social Emotional Competence," Center on the Emotional and Social Foundations of Early Learning, <http://bit.ly/axaemC> (Designing Supportive Environments, pp. 4-7)