Setting the Stage for Children's Success: The Physical and Emotional Environment in School-Age Programs

by Karen Haas-Foletta and Lori Ottolini-Geno

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Program quality is about setting the stage for children's learning. A critical element of program quality is the environment, both the physical and emotional aspects. The environment strongly affects staff, children's, and parents' interactions with each other, and adults' ability to create an atmosphere where children's growth and development is supported.

The role of school-age care programs has been clarified over the last 15 years. Programs have been developed to provide children a complete out-of-school experience with recreational, social, and skill-building opportunities, and academic support. School-age programs are vital partners to families; the programs are often linked to a school's performance, and are a community's effort to ensure children's safety.

Two other shifts have occurred in this period. First, public awareness of the critical need for children and youth to be engaged in meaningful activities in their out of school time has lead to a proliferation of programs and increased public and private funding. Second, there has been an effort to define program quality in school-age programs and to push programs toward continued program improvements, one example being the number of programs achieving accreditation through the National Association for the Education of Young Children (NAEYC) or National AfterSchool Association (NAA).

The expansion of programs and the development of assessment and evaluative tools have helped define the provider of school-age care as a professional and have defined three components for high-quality programs: 1) qualified and capable staff; 2) facility, equipment, materials, and activities encouraging discovery, group development, exploration, and interest; and 3) effective leadership.

A quality school-age program:

- provides a sense of physical safety and emotional safety with the surrounding adults and peers
- is a place of supportive relationships, intentionally structured to build positive and supportive relationships
- has program leadership, vision, and ownership
- has staff trained in the skills necessary to build a sense of relationship and community, and provide activities designed and delivered to support key developmental, learning, and skill-building experiences for the children, including academic support and enhancement.

These components work together to create a healthy environment where children can thrive.

The physical environment

In a high-quality program, there is a focus on developing healthy and strong human relationships. In such a program, staff must understand their job is to guide rather than manage a child's behavior so the child can learn the skills necessary for life beyond the program. During the course of a day, program staff must work with a wide variety of behaviors of the children. Due to the ages and developmental stages of the children, their social and emotional well-being may cause behaviors that confound and frustrate staff.

Behavior is strongly affected by the environment. A well-planned environment encourages positive behaviors; children need a physical environment that matches their size, energy, and ability. Importantly, the environment must facilitate the supervision of children. The way a facility is arranged and how space is used communicates a strong message to

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children and their families about the program and its purpose. Program materials and equipment should be selected **based on** safety, developmental appropriateness and utility, and should support a balanced curriculum, including literacy and mathematics. Children feel most at home when they have helped with the design — helped to create their space. Children's participation in the arrangement of the physical space, as well as the selection and maintenance of materials accomplish this. Ideally, the physical environment is characterized by the following elements:

- well-trained staff
- developmentally appropriate equipment and materials reflecting the cultures being served; many choices to encourage growth, development, and positive behaviors
- a facility that ensures children's physical safety
- physical set-up is well-planned
- children have input into the physical environment
- ample storage for program equipment and supplies
- an area for snack and food preparation
- children's personal storage
- a family area
- a staff area

Programs fortunate enough to have dedicated space (where equipment and materials do not have to be set up and taken down each day) can modify their environment on an ongoing basis depending on the needs of the group, the interests of the children, and budget constraints.

The physical space affects the way we feel and what we feel like doing and should be comfortable and homey. As children grow and change, they need different environments to accommodate their different moods and activities. Organization and care of the facility and materials and the appropriate use of the space and equipment contribute to a high-quality physical environment.

➤ Room Arrangement

A common approach to room arrangement in dedicated space is the establishment of learning centers or activity areas. These areas include prepared environments where children can choose activities depending on their interests and there is a free flow from one area to the next. To create a sense of permanence and belonging for children, consider including both fixed areas and areas that rotate regularly throughout the program week. Consider this list of program elements:

- Visual arts: materials to encourage artistic expression and learning
- Board games and puzzles
- Large manipulatives — blocks, building sets
- Dramatic play: children are developing work patterns; provide tools for everyday life
- Soft space: comfortable and relaxing area
- Performing arts: opportunities to experience music, dance, and theater
- Science and nature: opportunities for discovery and exploration
- Physical activity: indoor and outdoor
- Homework: supporting and enhancing children's academic experience
- Cooking and nutrition
- Field trips
- Collaboration with community resources

Some school-age programs have one space that children of all ages share. However, older children need a space of their own, even if it is just a corner of the room. Many older children have been in some form of group care since early childhood and would rather "be on their own." Their developmental, social, emotional, and physical needs are different from the younger children; their use of space and materials differs, based on their familiarity and past experiences. Older children need opportunities to use familiar items and activities in new ways and to have

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access to new materials and activities to stimulate their growth. If a program has two rooms, it is a good idea to divide the children by age for part of the day. Vary schedules so children are age-grouped at times, and other times they mix freely. Older children can serve as helpers, friends, and role models for the younger ones.

The emotional environment

In addition to understanding development of school-age children, we must also understand what drives behavior.

The emotional environment of the program includes staff's understanding of children's development and behavior and the factors affecting it. The work of the staff is intentional; there is a plan that is developed through ongoing assessment of children. The plan is implemented consistently and is evaluated periodically. Staff-child interactions (both verbal and non-verbal messages) should be emotionally nurturing, foster positive self-concept, and contribute to the development of trusting relationships. Literature on temperament and learning styles (particularly multiple intelligences) can be very helpful in this regard.

➤ Behavior

To create a quality environment, we must be familiar with the development of the school-age child. This is a very broad and long period of growth and development. Some of the markers of development in school-age children include:

- Motor skills are generally smooth and strong, with wide variety in coordination (especially eye-hand), endurance, balance, and physical staying power.
- Fine motor skills vary widely and influence a child's ability.
- Physical differences (height, weight, and build) are significant at this age.
- Language becomes more complex during this period.
- Children unable to express themselves adequately may exhibit more aggressive behaviors.
- Frequent physical complaints (such as sore throats, tummy aches, pains) may be due to heightened body awareness.
- Ability to focus and length of attention span increase during this period.
- School-age children are active, need strenuous physical activity, and should have opportunities to play sports in appropriate, safe, supervised areas, with proper equipment and rules.

In addition to understanding development of school-age children, we must also understand what drives behavior. We look at behavior as a whole, as a part of a pattern, not as isolated incidents. There are five premises of behavior:

1. People are social beings, with a need to belong.
2. Behavior is purposeful and goal-directed.
3. People are understood by how they see themselves in a situation.
4. People are decision-makers.
5. Behavior is goal-directed through the need for attention, power and control over people and situations, revenge and retribution, or withdrawal from people and challenges.

When we understand that behavior has meaning, we can guide and encourage acceptable behavior, and help children learn to behave appropriately, make good choices, problem solve, and resolve conflict. These goals are achieved when we:

- Create boundaries for children's physical and emotional safety.
- Set clear expectations for behavior.
- Model equity with staff who are responding to and expecting the same from each child. Fairness can mean that our response is exactly the same for each child; equity implies individuation in each situation but with some sort of consistency that children can expect.

- Ensure continuity and consistency of care. This is not about staff turnover, this is about staff creating an emotionally-safe environment for each other and the children through their continuity and consistency, appropriate stimulation, and healthy relationships.
- Be clear in our communication.
- Model appropriate behavior.

It is understood that our actions must be conducted in the context of children's ages and our understanding of developmental appropriateness. We have a much better chance of meeting children's needs when we understand their developmental challenges, understand how these challenges affect children, and then we align our expectations with children's ages and grades. A deep understanding of children's behavior and development comes through observation; a high-quality program includes observation as an integral part of a good environment. Through their behavior and actions, children reveal their thoughts and feelings. When we observe children, we increase our awareness of the individual child and the child within the context of the larger group. Our observations can help us learn about a child's health and physical development, temperament, skills and abilities, interests, culture and home life, learning style, use of verbal and nonverbal (body) language, and social interactions. When we devote the time necessary to observing children and documenting our observations, we understand, appreciate, and can plan for children developmentally, emotionally, and socially.

➤ Positive Self-Concept

One area of the emotional environment a school-age program can effectively address is the encouragement of positive self-concept in school-age children. Again, referring to developmental stages, we know children are discovering who they are in relationship to the world. During this period, peer acceptance is very important. School-age children's friendships tend to be with members of the same sex, with interest in the opposite sex increasing as the child approaches adolescence. Their behaviors include risk-taking, with lying, cheating, or stealing as examples of behaviors a school-age child may employ when negotiating expectations and rules. In a healthy, safe, and secure school-age program, the staff is able to work with the children, promoting group success while offering individualization to encourage personal growth. A quality program provides opportunities to foster the children's self-esteem in age-appropriate ways.

Self-esteem is our ability to appreciate our own personal worth. Specifically, children indicate their self-esteem to us through their ability to socialize, make friends, be a positive influence on peers, cooperate in group activities, and follow reasonable rules. A child with high self-esteem has a realistic fear of new situations, but is able to experiment with new materials and social settings with confidence, demonstrates independence, and is creative, not hesitating to share freely his/her new ideas or creations. In sharing, the child displays a sense of personal pride and feels happy in this ability.

School-age program staff have a responsibility to foster self-esteem in children in their program. We do this by:

- looking at each child as an individual
- keeping expectations realistic
- giving children the freedom to make mistakes
- building in opportunities for success
- giving encouragement
- accepting children's unpleasant feelings and teaching them how to deal with them
- giving choices
- giving responsibility, expecting cooperation
- encouraging play and having fun

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Summary

Children spend many hours in school-age programs. Great growth and development can and does occur during these hours. A high-quality program sets the environmental stage for children's ongoing physical, social-emotional, and cognitive development. It ensures that responsive, caring, and professional staff will plan for the children's needs, interests, and developmental levels and will provide continuity and consistency through structure and limits. In this type of environment, children feel safe and secure and free to select and pursue activities that challenge and interest them.

In new programs for school-age children, there is often a focus on delivering services, aligning with the school curriculum, finding staff, and securing funding. As programs stabilize, they begin to look at their program components as part of an evaluation process tied to funding. This evaluation and assessment process propels programs to engage in a self-study process

focused on efficacy issues and the elements of program quality. Are most programs high quality? Currently there are approximately 550 school-age programs worldwide accredited through the National AfterSchool Association (NAA). Many more programs are in the process of self-study and others are still defining themselves. It is clear, though, that the criterion of environment, in its total scope, is a critical factor when assessing and evaluating a high-quality program.

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For further reading

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Resources

California School-Age Consortium (CalSAC): www.calsac.org

National AfterSchool Association: www.naa.org

National Institute On Out of School Time (NIOST): www.niost.org

School-Age NOTES
(800) 410-8780
www.schoolagenotes.com

Using Beginnings Workshop to Train Teachers

by Kay Albrecht

Clarifying the focus: These authors are clear that the physical environment (and the way space is arranged) and the emotional environment (how behavior is addressed and positive self-esteem encouraged) are two significant components of high quality school-age programs. To focus teachers' attention on these dimensions of quality, conduct a self-evaluation of the effectiveness of each environment — physical and emotional. Divide teachers into two teams. Ask them to identify how they will approach the evaluation, then, to implement it. Complete the experience with teachers reporting on their findings and recommendations. Approaching the evaluation from a team perspective will guarantee that the focus stays on what all staff can do to enhance the physical and emotional environments rather than on who is best at their jobs.

Pass it along!: Share your findings with children, families, and financial supporters and other stakeholders. Make sure to share your recommendations and action plans for improving these two components of the school-age environment.

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