



Environment as the third teacher

"The environment is the context in which learning takes place. The environment was described by Loris Malaguzzi as "the third teacher" and is valued for its power to organize, promote relationships, and educate."

(How Does Learning Happen, 2014, page 20)

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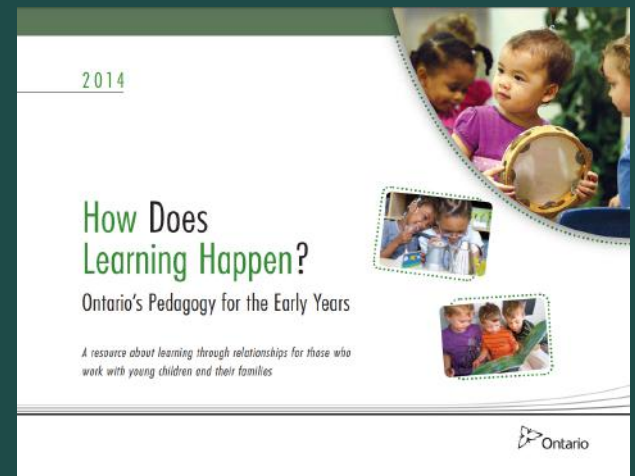
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Connections to How Does Learning Happen?

"When the environment supports children's growing autonomy and independence, challenging behaviours are reduced and educators can focus more fully on observing, interacting, and extending children's learning and development in meaningful ways.

Opportunities to experience nature enhance children's sense of wonder and joy in the world around them, whether programs are located in large urban centres with small patches of green space, gardens, and trees or in vast fields and forests. A growing body of research suggests that connecting to the natural world contributes to children's mental, physical, emotional, and spiritual health and well-being. Providing daily opportunities to explore, care for, and interact with the natural world helps to strengthen these connections."



(How Does Learning Happen, 2014, page 21)



Building an inclusive environment

The toys, objects, books and materials used in the program should have purpose. They should have meaning behind why they are set out and should have an intent. It is important to embed these in the program in a meaningful way so children can make connections to their world/environment without even realizing.

They should be developmentally appropriate as well, so that all children are able to participate. This includes being mindful of things such as having left-hand scissors available, books that vary in difficulty level, puzzles with varying amounts of pieces and possibilities.

Building an inclusive environment allows children, educators, families, and visitors to feel safe, connected, welcomed and comfortable, and allows them to engage actively.



Building an inclusive environment

When building an inclusive environment, consider the following ideas:

Ensure meaningful participation is available for all the children in the program.

It is important to consider all limitations within your program so all children feel a sense of belonging and can participate in activities freely without hesitation.

The art materials being used in the program are representative of all cultural backgrounds and are provided in an inclusive manner.

Ensure a variety of skin tones are available and have them mixed in with your crayons, markers, construction papers, paints, clay, etc. This way no colours are segregated and all colours are represented equally.

The displays being used in the program include images of people with varying abilities doing typical things.

It is important to have these displays so children in the program understand those with varying abilities equally participate in the program and it will allow children to make connections to their world.



Building an inclusive environment

It is important to incorporate different family structures in the program. There are so many different types of family dynamics and it is important that all families feel equally represented and supported within their environment.

Consider single-parent families, step families, same-sex families, adoptive families, extended families, etc.

Include different languages in the displays in the room. It is important to represent our diverse region and one of the best practices is that displays reflect the commonly spoken languages of the families and staff in the centre.

This can be done through photos, labels, anything displayed on the walls, etc.

The displays in the program should also include images of people from different backgrounds and identities and/or represent different international flags.

This will bring that sense of togetherness and will demonstrate equity. However, it is important to include cultures and identities in a meaningful way, otherwise it can be considered tokenism. Tokenism means incorporating a culture and identity because you feel you have to, so it is represented without purpose.



Space layout

Consider the classroom set up and layout. Configure the space so there is minimal room to run around. Set out your shelves and large furniture objects so the flow of the room is one learning area to the next.

Utilizing your space and setting it up into learning areas will create flow, routine, comfortability, and free exploration in a meaningful way.

"From the aesthetics of the space, to the type of furnishings and materials available, to the organization of time, the environment communicates a powerful message and contributes to shaping the actions that can be taken within it."

(How Does Learning Happen, 2014, page 21)



Learning areas

Having the room set up in learning areas will create purpose and has the potential to support positive interactions, meaningful play and exploration.



Art

Safe art materials and equipment are accessible to the children and are developmentally appropriate. Providing creative art with an assortment of materials promotes self-expression, creativity and individuality.



Sensory

Sensory learning experiences are made accessible for the children to participate. This will allow the children to explore their world using their senses of touch, taste, smell, sight and sound.



Books/Language and Literacy

A cozy and inviting environment is created to encourage natural opportunities for language and literacy enjoyment. Children are able to choose books freely, look at the pictures, and retell stories and situations with accessible props.



Cognitive

Spontaneous cognitive learning experiences occur throughout the day. Cognitive experiences allow educators to lead children to higher learning, based on children's observed cues and interests. This will allow the children to think, figure things out and explore.

Learning areas

Consider the placement of the learning areas in your program. You want your learning areas to be thoughtfully planned to minimize interruption and utilize your space to its full potential. For example, having the book area next to the music and movement area may cause those in the book area to be distracted. Therefore, having the cognitive area near the book area may be more beneficial.



Blocks/Construction

Children should have access to a large variety of props and blocks that they can build, create, and explore concepts. This will allow the children opportunities to work together, imagine, learn about cause and effect, patterning and sequencing.

Science/Nature

Materials reflecting science and nature encourages children to explore through cause and effect experimentation and observation. It allows children to form their own opinions based on their observations and findings.

Dramatic Play

Provide children an environment and accessories that promote imaginative play with role playing possibilities. This will allow children to enhance their social interaction skills, emotional development and language extension through open-ended play.

Music and Movement

By exposing children to an assortment of cultural music and musical genres, educators are promoting skills such as language development, rhythm awareness, self-regulating and self-concept.

Invitations to play

Encourage children to learn through exploration by providing materials in a creative way.

Set up activities in a non-directive way with no criteria for success.

Consider using open-ended materials, often referred to as "loose parts," to enhance children's imagination and spark their curiosity and creativity!



Invitations to play

Have the elements set out in an obvious space/area so they are welcoming and eye-catching and invite the children to participate.

There should be little adult direction; the invitation to play will be decided by the child or the children as a group.

Children are given the opportunity to make their own choices, be independent, ask questions, and approach play in a way that is meaningful to them.



Your program outdoors

It is important to know that whatever is done indoors can be brought outdoors to enhance and continue the children's learning experiences. When going outdoors, you can have your outdoor environment set up with learning areas as well.

Bring out art supplies, have a block and construction zone, create a music wall and have a spot for children to read. Bring sensory outdoors, freely make a mess, and consider an outdoor dramatic play area. The outdoors is also a great way to have the children explore nature and ask questions about their world. The possibilities for outdoor learning are endless and can create a new and exciting learning environment! Bringing the indoors outside allows the children to continue their play, learn, and expand on their interests.



Your program outdoors

"Outdoor learning is also promoting daily physical play and encouraging a healthy lifestyle to allow children to experience their natural environment in all different weather conditions. It is also encouraged that children are given choices of physical play learning experiences both in the morning and afternoon. Active physical play learning experiences promote large muscle development, coordination skills, and reduce undesirable behaviours."

(Durham Region Operating Criteria, 2016)



"Through active play and physical exploration, children gain increasing levels of independence, learn to persevere and practice self control, and develop a sense of physical, emotional, and intellectual mastery and competence."

(How Does Learning Happen, 2014, page 29-30)

The environment is a teacher

"The Ontario Early Years Policy Framework presents a view of the child as competent, curious, and capable of complex thinking. If we embrace this view, and see children as able communicators, collaborators and meaning-makers who are forming relationships every day with people and materials, who are capable of empathy, whimsy, sensitivity and joy, how would the classroom reflect this?

A lack of clutter, and thoughtfully organized, aesthetically rich open-ended materials invite the children to make relationships, and to communicate their ideas in many ways. Pedagogical documentation, strategically located, prompts expansion on ideas, complexity, and reflection. It is not merely a matter of decorating. The arrangements of materials should invite engagement, meaning-making, and exploration."

(Think, Feel, Act, 2013, page 12)



Questions to guide reflection and decisions

- How well does each part of the environment invite investigation, lingering, conversation and collaboration?
- Are children's words and work visible in the environment in a way that conveys respect, values communication, and forms meaningful connections?
- How well does the environment "challenge children aesthetically to respond deeply to the natural world, their cultural heritage, or to their inner world" (Tarr, 2001)?
- To what extent are children able to discover and develop their capabilities through reasonable risk-taking?
- Does the schedule support thoughtful, sustained engagement with ideas, materials, and friends?
- What can we learn from how children respond to the life, materials and events in their environment?

(Think, Feel, Act, 2013, page 14)

Early years learning environment videos

Watch the videos below by clicking on the title or by scanning the QR code. These videos are retrieved from the [Ontario Ministry of Education website](#) and connect to the ONgov YouTube channel with the Early Years Learning Environments presented by Karyn Callaghan.

(Ontario Ministry of Education, 2014)



[A new perspective on creating engaging spaces for children](#)



[Supporting children's curiosity and ongoing investigation](#)



[Learning with children and building on their ideas](#)



[Supporting children as competent learners](#)



[Designing spaces with children's input](#)



[Following children's interest and natural curiosity](#)



[Investigating the natural world](#)

How to use a QR code:

To use the QR codes above, open the camera on your handheld device and hold it up to the QR image you wish to view. The QR code will then generate a link to YouTube for you to click on.



References

Ontario Ministry of Education. (2013). *Think, Feel, Act: Research from Lessons with Young Children*. Toronto: Queen's Printer.

Ontario Ministry of Education. (2013). *Think, Feel, Act: Research from Lessons with Young Children*. Learning Environments Videos. <https://www.ontario.ca/page/think-feel-act-lessons-research-about-young-children#section-1>

Ontario Ministry of Education. (2014). *How Does Learning Happen? Ontario's Pedagogy for the Early Years: A resource about learning through relationships for those who work with young children and their families*. <https://Files.Ontario.ca/Edu-How-Does-Learning-Happen-En-2021-03-23.Pdf>. <https://files.ontario.ca/edu-how-does-learning-happen-en-2021-03-23.pdf>

The Regional Municipality of Durham. (2016). *Durham Region Operating Criteria (DROC), Embracing Quality in Child Care and Early Learning, Early Learning and Care Assessment for Quality Improvement*.

