

Operator Resource Guide: Elevating Childcare Environments

Based on the Childcare Lunch & Learn: Operator-to-Operator Insights

Why the Environment Matters

- The environment is often called the “*third teacher*” because it has a direct influence on how children feel, learn, and interact.
 - A thoughtfully arranged space communicates:
 - “*You are safe here.*”
 - “*You belong here.*”
 - “*You are important.*”
 - Environments are more than décor; they directly impact behavior, engagement, and the smooth running of the day.
 - A cluttered or poorly organized environment can create conflict and disengagement, while intentional design fosters cooperation, independence, and joy in learning.
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Practical Examples: Environment in Action

Dramatic Play Areas

- **Challenges (Not-so-great):**
 - Overcrowded with costumes or broken toys.
 - No variety or rotation — children lose interest or fight over materials.

- **Improvements (Elevated):**
 - Rotate themes regularly (e.g., grocery store, doctor's office, restaurant).
 - Use bins and labels to keep props organized.
 - Provide authentic, real-life props to spark imagination and role-play.
- **Impact:** Boosts creativity, encourages cooperative play, and helps children make sense of the world.

Outdoor Play

- **Challenges (Not-so-great):**
 - Only one small climber, limited toys, no shade.
 - Leads to boredom, short play sessions, and increased conflicts.
- **Improvements (Elevated):**
 - Incorporate loose parts (sticks, pinecones, buckets, chalk).
 - Create digging or building areas to support open-ended play.
 - Add shaded areas for comfort and longer engagement.
- **Impact:** Children problem-solve, explore nature, and stay engaged longer.

Creative/Art Areas

- **Challenges (Not-so-great):**
 - Only crayons and coloring sheets, leading to quick completion and limited creativity.
- **Improvements (Elevated):**
 - Provide open-ended materials: scissors, tape, fabric, cardboard, paper scraps.
 - Display children's work to build pride and ownership.

- Include materials that develop fine motor skills alongside creativity.
 - **Impact:** Extends engagement, fosters collaboration, and nurtures creativity.
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Calming Corners: Supporting Emotional Regulation

Why They're Important

- Children experience big feelings daily and need safe tools to manage them.
- Calming corners provide:
 - **Self-regulation practice** (breathing, sensory tools, books).
 - **Independence & choice** — children learn when and how to calm themselves.
 - A **safe, non-punitive retreat** — a “time-in,” not a “time-out.”
 - Opportunities to **expand emotional vocabulary** and coping strategies.
 - Reduction in **classroom disruptions** and smoother group routines.

How to Create One

- Choose a **quiet, cozy area** away from busy traffic.
- Define the space with rugs, soft seating, or a small tent/curtain.
- Stock with:
 - Comfort items (stuffed animals, pillows, weighted lap pads).
 - Visuals (feeling charts, calm-down step posters).
 - Books on emotions (e.g., *The Color Monster*).
 - Sensory tools (stress balls, glitter jars, sand timers).
- **Model its use** so children see it as a tool, not punishment.

Routines & Visual Schedules

Why They Help

- **Predictability builds security** — children feel safe when they know what's next.
- **Smoother transitions** reduce meltdowns, wandering, and repeated questions.
- **Fosters independence** as children consult the schedule themselves.
- **Supports all learners**, especially young children, dual-language learners, and children with additional needs.

How to Use Them Effectively

- Use **pictures + words** for each activity (arrival, snack, circle time, nap).
- Place schedules at **child's eye level** and review during morning circle.
- Make it **interactive** — move Velcro cards, clips, or markers as the day progresses.
- Engage children by asking questions:
 - “After snack, what's next?”
 - “What comes before outside play?”
- Keep it **flexible** for special events like field trips or visitors, so children can prepare for changes.

Pulling It All Together

When operators combine these small, intentional strategies, the benefits ripple across the entire program:

- **Environment:** sparks curiosity, engagement, and independence.

- **Calming Corners:** empower children with healthy self-regulation skills.
- **Routines & Visuals:** bring structure and predictability, reducing chaos.
- **Overall Impact:** smoother daily operations, happier staff, and children who feel safe, capable, and ready to learn.

“The environment is the third teacher.” – Loris Malaguzzi, founder of the Reggio Emilia approach