

# CREATING EARLY CHILDHOOD EDUCATION ENVIRONMENTS THAT PROMOTE EARLY LEARNING

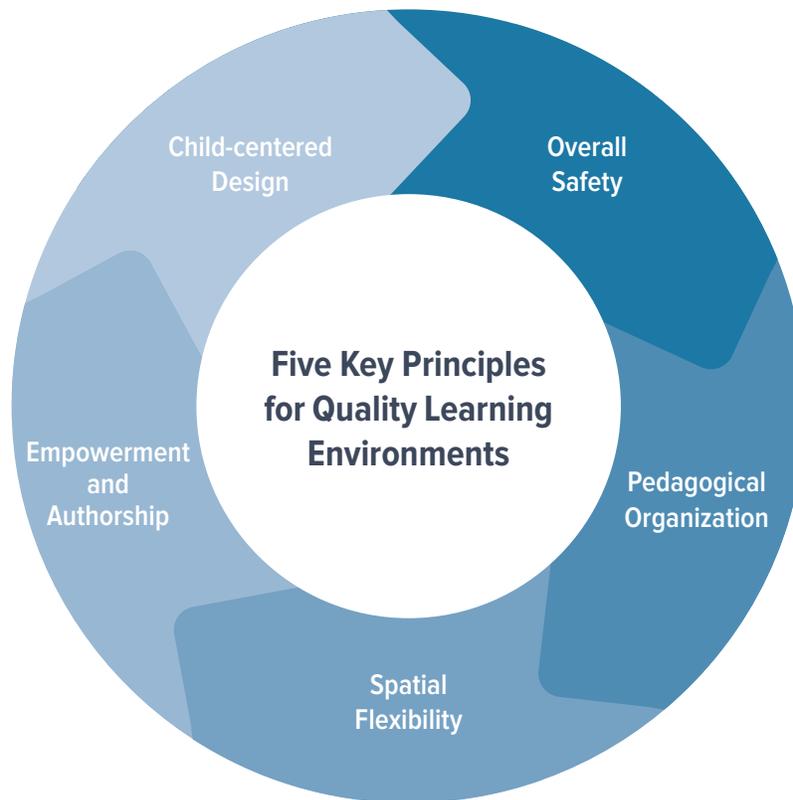
**This brief** is a summary of the chapter of the same name written by Cynthia Adlerstein and Alejandra Cortazar, in Bendini, Magdalena, and Amanda E. Devercelli, editors. 2022. *Quality Early Learning: Nurturing Children's Potential*. Human Development Perspectives. Washington, DC: World Bank.

## Creating the right learning environments

Early childhood education (ECE) environments greatly influence children's learning experiences as well as their health and development more generally. The right learning environment is about more than just a physical space. It is, at its best, about creating an environment conducive to learning that ensures children feel safe, make sense of the world, and feel empowered, understood, and free to learn actively and flexibly. The right learning environment allows children to interact with their teachers, peers and environments in a way that helps them to learn and better understand the world. ECE spaces that promote early learning allow children to circulate, explore and manipulate their surroundings. Sophisticated, expensive physical infrastructure and materials are not essential to ensure children's learning and there are local, affordable solutions for countries to improve the physical environments in which children learn and the materials they use. Beyond physical infrastructure, other aspects of program structure, such as duration and intensity, ratio and group sizes, influence ECE quality and impact young children's learning. Defining realistic structural quality standards for ECE centers and setting a regulatory framework for their sustainable implementation, including monitoring compliance can help improve service delivery conditions across public and non-state sector ECE providers.

## Strategies to develop and foster quality environments

There are five key principles to consider when working to improve the quality of early learning environments: (1) overall safety, (2) pedagogical organization, (3) spatial flexibility, (4) empowerment and authorship, and (5) child-centered design. These five principles can help create a supportive and nurturing early learning environment that reflects local cultures, landscapes, and community experiences. The right learning environment helps children learn about themselves, others, and the world's diversity. It is centered around learning relationships between children, adults, and materials, and is based on flexible encounters rather than rigid teaching.



1. **Overall safety.** Children and teacher’s safety must come first – without it, there can be no learning. Safe physical learning environments not only protect children, teachers and communities, but they can help create a sense of care, safety-awareness and ownership within the community. Water, sanitation and hygiene practices (such as appropriate handwashing and waste disposal) are essential components of safety to ensure children’s health.<sup>1</sup> Low air quality and high noise levels have a direct negative impact on learning and spaces with no ventilation often have higher concentrations of carbon dioxide which can impact children’s learning.<sup>2</sup> Creating spaces that bring in natural light and encourage cross ventilation and use natural outdoor spaces for classes are cost-effective and can help overcome some of the most common challenges to delivering quality ECE today.
2. **Pedagogical organization.** ECE environments should motivate teaching and learning.<sup>3</sup> Pedagogical organization, while using low-cost, basic infrastructure, defines the way spaces can promote exploration, interaction and collaboration.<sup>4</sup> With low-cost and locally available materials, walls, windows and organized play zones or corners can become playful and stimulating learning spaces. The collaborative experiences that emerge within these learning centers are consistently associated with positive learning.<sup>5</sup>
3. **Spatial flexibility.** Flexibility means using being able to use space in many ways for diverse and stimulating activities. Flexible spaces can encourage more effective teaching, teamwork and planning among educators, and also develop more self-reliance among children to show initiative and collaboration.<sup>6</sup> ECE environments grounded in the 3 As (*adaptable, agile and attuned*) are more effective at promoting children’s exploration and collaborative learning rather than rigid teacher-centered arrangements. The 3 As are vastly preferable to an approach that mimics traditional primary school classrooms. Spatial flexibility requires specific planning around activities, behavior, transitions and sound control. Educators are more likely to adapt and rearrange rooms differently if they have been encouraged by training and policies to plan for spatial flexibility, take risks and experiment with versatile use of spaces to develop new pedagogical strategies.
4. **Empowerment and authorship.** Empowering environments are not finished spaces. Giving children, teachers and families opportunities to organize and personalize space, furniture and materials to support their learning projects, allows them to find their voice and shared meaning as well as a sense of belonging and ownership.<sup>7</sup> Empowerment is grounded

in a learning culture where teachers and learners are invited to make active choices about where to work and have the freedom to change spaces to suit their teaching and learning interests and priorities.<sup>8</sup>

- 5. Child-centered design.** ECE learning environments should be child-centered in design, reflecting children's developmental characteristics, social and cultural practices and everyday interests. Learning environments require appropriate child scaling, so they are easy and comfortable to navigate. In other words, they should be catchable, climbable and conquerable. This includes putting objects at eye level and in easy reach or finding appropriately sized chairs and tables. Adult-child ratios and class sizes should allow personalized and playful interactions to promote early learning. When groups are smaller, and staff-child ratios are low, high-quality pedagogical practices may significantly impact children by providing more frequent interactions and sustained shared thinking.<sup>9</sup> Crowded learning environments disrupt quality interactions, increase interpersonal conflict and intensify solitary-play, causing teachers to spend more time addressing conflicts, which leads to an increase in absenteeism, burnout and retirement.<sup>10</sup>

## Putting strategies into practice to develop and foster quality environments

There are three steps governments can take to provide children with quality early learning environments. These steps include *situation analysis*, *implementation* and *monitoring progress*. Involving children, families and educators in the on-going process is essential to create a sense of belonging and shared responsibility to sustain learning improvements.

- 1. Situation analysis.** The first step is to understand the starting point. Policymakers should ask questions grounded in local contexts to gain a better understanding of how learning environments are responding to the needs of young children. Examples of questions include if centers are meeting minimal hygiene and safety conditions or if the learning environment is easily adaptable for different types of experiences and groupings.
- 2. Implement.** Implementing the five principles requires different approaches. Developing *overall safety* and *child-centered* environments can be achieved through the development of standards, norms or regulations. Seven steps for developing quality standards include 1) A country study to assess the quality of ECE learning environments, 2) Assess feasibility of raising standards, 3) Set standards, 4) Calculate the quality gap, 5) Support programs to achieve standards, 6) Make standards official and 7) Develop a certification or monitoring system. Although setting standards may seem easy or straightforward, the challenge is to ensure meeting them is realistic and affordable.
- 3. Monitor progress.** Improving quality takes time and can be costly. It means setting realistic goals which can be achieved and are feasible and affordable. Educators and principals can assess learning environments to develop improvement plans or to evaluate the needs for renovating, maintaining or accommodating spaces. To do so, they need assessment instruments as well as time to conduct the observation and provide feedback. It is critical to consider resources to finance improvements in weak areas. Conducting regular monitoring and providing support for the achievement of goals can help create quality early learning spaces. This can be done at different levels, by programs or countries, depending on the goal of the assessment and resources.

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