

# Designing a Family Child Care Environment

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A special advantage of family child care is the homey atmosphere that many centers struggle to provide. But there's a special challenge, too - a dual personality. Although the environment should help the family and child care program enrich each other, sometimes their needs conflict.

One problem is traffic (when an area is used for an activity and a passageway). Another is access (when space is needed for two or more conflicting purposes). A third issue is storage. Good design can enhance the home and resolve these problems.



## Non-Traditional Approaches to Design Offer New Options

To create a comfortable environment, let go of preconceptions about how your home should look. And don't use a child care center as your model, or you risk losing that essential homey quality.

Instead, use your space creatively to meet everyone's needs. How do you know what they need? Ask them - and do some reading about arranging space. You'll learn that the science of designing environments to accommodate people comfortably is called ergonomics. By keeping everyone's comfort in mind, you can more easily make decisions about arranging space.

Use space in new ways, like these:

In the kitchen - Art Center, Housekeeping Play Area, Water Table, Science Lab, Office Space, Indoor Garden, Puzzles and Games (store in cupboard or on low pantry shelf, or on drop-down shelf installed underneath kitchen table), Play-Alone Space (tack or tape a sheet to edge of table to make a tent; roll up and secure with clothespins when not being used).

In a bedroom - Nap Corner, Large-Motor Area (place an old mattress on the floor for protection from falls), Cozy Corner, Book Space

In the living room - Cuddle, Reading, or Music Area, Dramatic Play or Puppet Area (use a curtain with a square opening, hung on a spring rod in a doorway as an inexpensive puppet theatre), Puzzle or Block Play (try storing blocks on large trays or in shallow drawers that slide under the couch when not in use), Large Muscle Area

In a bathroom - Water Play, Messy Art Area, Sensory Table

In the dining room - Puzzle, Game, Art Area (store materials nearby in buffet, or on shelves which you can conceal with curtains if you like), Dramatic Play, Science Area

## **Getting Ready to Create a Family Child Care Home Environment**

Now that you're thinking outside of the box, widen your horizons in these ways:

- Put safety first. Most accidents happen at home; be sure to check for safety.
- Visit other family child care homes to get ideas, and read authors such as Osborn, Greenman, Kritchevsky and Prescott, Harms and Cryer, Crowley, and Bates to learn about new ideas.
- Learn about standards of quality from the National Association for Family Child Care ([nafcc.org](http://nafcc.org)), or the Family Child Care Rating Scale (Harms and Clifford).
- Look beyond your own culture. In England, infants often nap in a shady outdoor area during summer. Creative ideas from Reggio Emilia, Italy, have revolutionized child care. Feng shui, an Asian approach to designing environments, is based on energy flow. The world offers many designs that can inspire you.
- Improvise. You don't have the money for beanbag chairs for a cozy corner? Arrange pillows around a no-longer-needed crib mattress. Use your creativity before spending money or doing without necessities.

## **Thinking Like an Architect**

Realize that surroundings affect behavior and mood. Here's how:

**Light:** The amount and color of light dictate mood. Warm, soft light encourages coziness and quiet conversation. Bright, indirect light encourages active play and creativity. Natural light is best. Use light-colored paint in a room with small windows. Keep colors on walls, floors, and furniture soft and neutral.

**Sound:** Noise stimulates. A little is good - too much is bad. Keep background music soft, or turn it off. Avoid leaving the television on. Napping or quiet play should be away from street or playground noise. Soft textures absorb noise; wood, tile, and plastic bounce sound around a room.

**Ventilation:** We feel best when air is fresh and there is some air movement. Keep windows open a little, and use fans to circulate air in stuffy rooms. Ventilate cooking odors and avoid heavy perfume and, of course, smoke.

**Temperature:** Your home's temperature should allow an infant to explore comfortably in bare feet. Design your outdoor space for daily use year-round, using windbreaks such as hedges, play areas

protected from hot sun, and outdoor shelters.

**Openness:** Big, open areas encourage running and loud voices. Enclosed areas allow for relaxation and intimacy. Eating, sleeping, and toileting areas should feel enclosed and cozy.

**Accessibility:** Store items where they are easily accessed. Place play materials where they are visible and appealing. Use barriers, rather than nagging, to keep children out of off-limits space.

You may need more than one area of the same type - for example, two separate small areas - one for toddlers and one for school-aged children.

### **Designing an Ideal Floor Plan**

Follow these steps to create an optimum family child care environment.

**Step 1.** Make a to-scale floor plan of your house, adding in fixtures, doors, and windows. Since some of your activity areas will be outside, you will need to make another map - this time you will need to measure outdoors, using a smaller scale. Be sure to add outbuildings, driveways, and other outdoor features.

**Step 2.** Using sticky notes, make a label for each one of the activity areas you will need. Use larger sticky notes for activity areas that will include several people or involve a lot of movement. Some activity areas will require storage. For example, in a dramatic play area you will need storage for dress-up clothes and other props. Put an asterisk on the sticky notes that represent activities needing storage.

**Step 3.** Place the sticky notes on your floor plan. Experiment with different combinations. Try putting all the areas that need quiet towards the center of the house and the noisier ones at the outer edge. Or, group the family outdoor activities in one area and the child care ones in another. Or, try putting all activities needing storage along wall space, with others in the middle of rooms. Or, create a whirlpool plan where activities for younger children revolve around you, but those for older ones are further away. Avoid planning for two activities to use the same area because that limits when either one can happen.

**Step 4.** Place each activity area in the space that now seems best to you. What's not going to work? Does each space have the right kind of light, noise level, ventilation, temperature, openness, and accessibility? Can you change things so they will? Are all activity areas present? What additional storage is needed? Will traffic flow easily or cause problems?

**Step 5.** List any materials you will need to make or buy, and begin to change your space. Some providers like to do this all at once; others prefer one change at a time. Make sure family and children are aware of the changes ahead of time, to make the change easier for them.

## **Dividing Space**

Without a doubt, you are planning for more activity areas than your house was designed for. To keep them from interfering with each other, use room dividers, which can be as simple as a visual mark, like a painted or taped line on a floor, or perhaps a change in surface like a carpet-to-tile floor change. Good options include using furniture, shelving, or folding screens (add wide bases for stability). Window shades, foam-core, curtains, or shower curtains can be hung from the ceiling to divide space. Bookshelves on castors are a time-honored tool in the provider's bag of tricks. A set of shelves filled with toys can define children's activity area by day; then it can be turned and placed against a wall to serve as a buffet or desk or sewing table at night.

Some activity areas work best if they are bordered on three sides by dividers, some need only one or two, depending on the level of noise and action, and how accessible you want the space to be. Room dividers should be high enough to block other views when children are seated inside, and low enough to see over when the child stands. Sofas and low bookshelves are ideal.

Safety is another reason to use dividers. Baby gates, half-doors, and doors with windows all allow you and the children to be in touch visually while keeping small children out of unsafe areas.

## **Making the Most of Your New Environment**

You will probably find many new and innovative ways of designing your family child care space. Take notes and pictures to share with your local family child care providers' association, and invite new providers to tour your home. You might decide to work with a fellow provider and develop a training session to share your ideas at a conference.

You can feel great about offering both an appropriate environment to the children you care for and all the comforts of home. That's the reward of designing a good family child care environment.

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