THE NATIONAL CENTER ON
Quality Teaching and Learning

PRESENTER NOTES
DESIGNING ENVIRONMENTS

This guide walks you through presenting the in-service suite ***Managing the Classroom: Designing Environments***. These are suggestions, so please use the materials as you see fit. This in-service suite includes PowerPoint slides and supporting materials.

MATERIALS NEEDED:

- Presenter PowerPoint slides (16)
- Projector and audio equipment
- Learning Activities:
  - » *Assessing Your Physical Spaces and Strategizing Changes*
  - » *Content Design of Classrooms*
  - » *Matching Classroom Content to Learning Goals and Interests*
  - » *Preparing for Intentionally Grouping Children*
- Optional Learning Activities:
  - » *How the Physical Space Can Affect Behavior*
  - » *Strategic Planning for Groupings*
- Follow-Up Activity:
  - » *Tracking Patterns to Determine Design Needs*
- Tips for Teachers
- Tools for Supervisors
- Helpful Resources
- Flip chart or similar type easel paper and markers for writing participant ideas.

BEFORE YOU BEGIN:

- The purpose of this presentation is to provide participants with an overview of how to design physical spaces with appropriate classroom contents and how to strategically arrange groupings to create a more effective early learning environment.
- This is one in a series of in-service suites on *Managing the Classroom*.
- This in-service suite can be used as a quick review at the beginning of the year for returning teachers, as more in-depth instruction for new staff, and as a tool to examine problems that are occurring in a classroom.
- Participants are encouraged to use this time to reflect on their own practices.
- Learning activities offer participants opportunities to design their own classrooms.
- It can be helpful to have on hand some of the items from *Helpful Resources* to support the participants as they work on designing their environments.
- During any critique of the environments depicted, participants may need to be informed that teachers generously allowed their classrooms to be shared as a learning tool for others. These teachers may have been working with a number of unseen restraints such as working in portables, sharing space, location of bathrooms, etc.
- Optional learning activities are described in detail at the end of this document, after the closing slide.

NCQTL

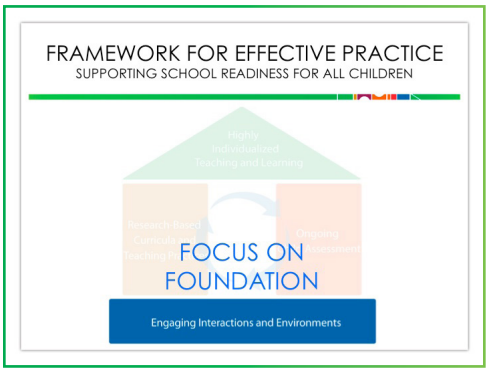
SLIDE 1:
DESIGNING ENVIRONMENTS

Welcome:

- Begin the training by giving participants background information on yourself.
- Provide an opportunity for participants to introduce themselves (e.g., where they are working, their current roles, etc.).
- Provide an idea for an ice breaker related to the topic (e.g., tell us about a well-designed feature of a classroom you have recently seen).

Introduce the topic:

- *Designing Environments* provides information and a process for creating effective classroom arrangements.
- Highlight that in organized, well-planned environments, children tend to be more engaged in classroom activities and engagement leads to learning.



SLIDE 2:
FRAMEWORK FOR EFFECTIVE PRACTICE

Review NCQTL framework for effective practice:

- The House structure supports school readiness for all children.
- The foundation represents effective and engaging interactions and environments.
- The pillars represent research-based curricula and teaching practices and ongoing child assessment.
- The roof represents highly individualized teaching and learning.
- All components interact with each other and are essential for effective everyday practice with all children.

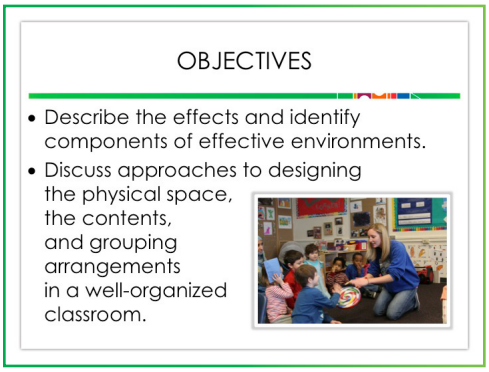
Designing Environments fits into the **foundation** of the House as it is about well-organized classrooms.

SLIDE 3:
THE FOCUS

While human relationships play a key role in children's healthy development, the physical and temporal environments also have significant impact. When environments are engaging, they support children's participation in activities that promote development and learning.

NOTE

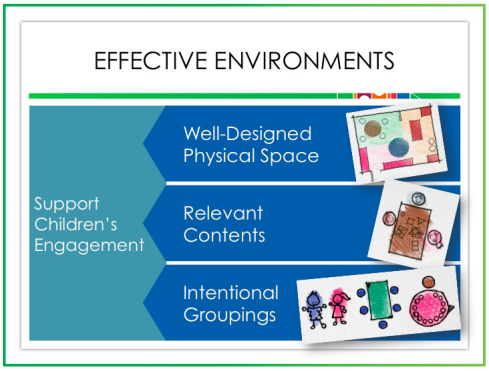
Both indoors and outdoors are important environments to take into consideration, though the central topic today is the interior classroom.



SLIDE 4:
OBJECTIVES

Outline objectives for the presentation:

- Describe the effects and identify components of effective environments.
- Discuss approaches to designing the physical spaces, the contents, and grouping arrangements in a well-organized classroom.



EMPHASIZE

Well-designed environments can increase a child's engagement in learning.

SLIDE 5:
EFFECTIVE ENVIRONMENTS

Effectively arranged environments can significantly increase child-engagement in learning experiences. The components of those classrooms include well-designed physical spaces, selection of relevant contents, and intentional groupings of children.

DISCUSSION

Ask participants about their experiences with how classroom space and design can impact behavior (e.g., positive peer interactions, running, fighting over toys, etc.). While there are many factors that can influence children's behavior, the role of the environment is sometimes overlooked or not fully taken into consideration, especially in relation to challenging behavior.

OPTIONAL

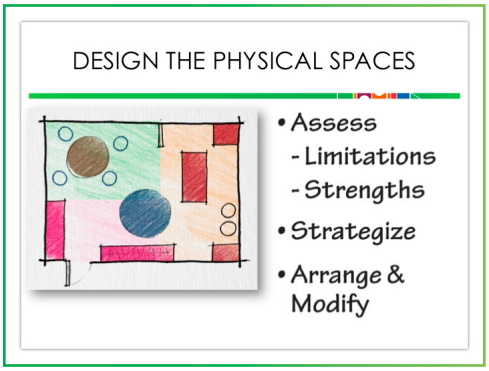
LEARNING ACTIVITY: HOW THE PHYSICAL SPACE CAN AFFECT BEHAVIOR

In this activity, participants examine the relationship between the physical environment and behavior.

This Optional Learning Activity can be used in place of or in addition to the discussion suggested for use with Slide 5.

NOTE

Presenter Notes for Optional Learning Activities are located at the end of this document, after the closing slide.



SLIDE 6: DESIGN THE PHYSICAL SPACES

Every early childhood environment is full of pros and cons; it is how educators work with the manifold facets of a classroom that can make a tremendous difference. Teachers can be surprised by the results when they:

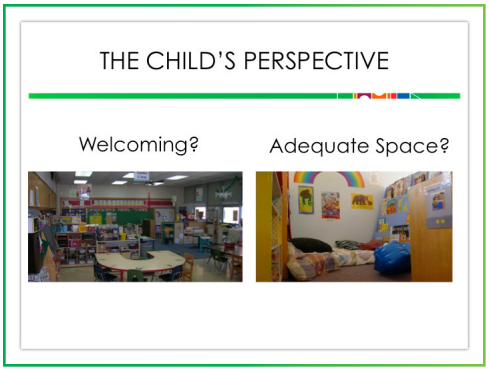
- Assess the spaces for both limitations and strengths.
- Strategize how to optimize what they have to work with in their classrooms.
- Try a different arrangement, see what happens, and then modify based on what is working and what is not.

Sometimes a modification can be minor (raising or lowering a shelf, "stop" signs over unavailable areas, masking tape to better define a space, etc.).

Highlight the "work-in-progress" nature of early childhood environments. As the needs of children change, the room may need minor changes or have to be rearranged completely to meet those needs.

NOTE

Most Head Start programs typically decide on the number and type of interest areas based on the guidance of a chosen curriculum. The curriculum usually provides detailed information about setting up the learning environment with interest areas and a daily schedule. This in-service suite does not cover those specific topics. It addresses the placement of centers or interest areas, the content of the centers, and overall design of the physical space.

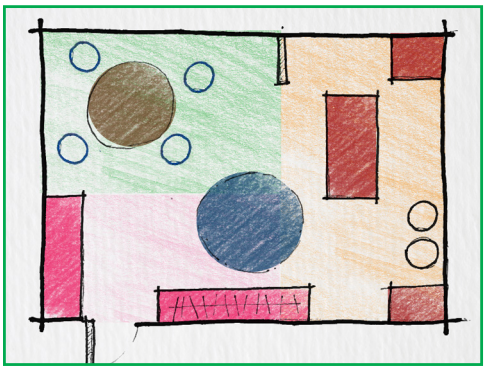


SLIDE 7:
THE CHILD'S PERSPECTIVE

As educators assess the environment, remind them to be aware of the child's perspective. It can be very helpful for a teacher to get down at a child's level and reflect on whether the classroom feels welcoming and safe from that perspective.

OPTIONAL DISCUSSION

Ask participants to comment on the two environments shown in the slide and to share their thoughts about what a child's reaction might be to each space.



LEARNING ACTIVITY:
ASSESSING YOUR PHYSICAL SPACES AND STRATEGIZING CHANGES

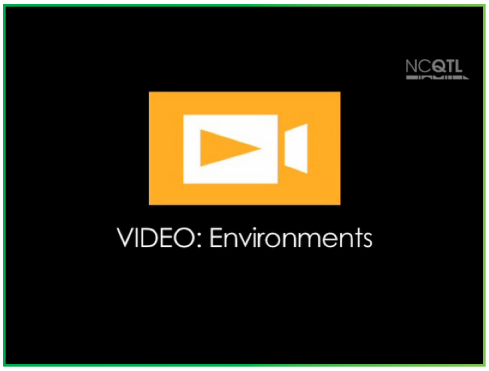
NOTE

This learning activity can be done before or after the video on Slide 8:

- Participants examine the classroom's physical spaces to assess strengths and limitations. When possible, have teaching teams work together.
- If this presentation takes place at the center where the participants' classrooms are, allow them to work in the actual classroom during this activity.

HANDOUT

- Distribute and review the handout: *Assessing Your Physical Spaces and Strategizing Changes.*
- Be prepared to help the participants address the limitations of the space and brainstorm creative solutions or to acknowledge how well they are working with the limitations.
- The concepts addressed in this learning activity can be reinforced in the potential Follow-Up Activity described in the notes for Slide 16.



Length of video: Approximately 2 minutes, 3 seconds

SLIDE 8:
VIDEO: ENVIRONMENTS

Introduce the video: Inform participants that the video contains photos of real classrooms. They are not featured necessarily to highlight models of best practices, though they do contain some good examples. They are featured as an opportunity for participants to improve their skills at assessing the environment for children's learning and development.

VIDEO

Please note that the video can be paused at any point for discussion. One suggestion is to view the video all the way through. Then on the second viewing, pause for discussion at the classroom photos.

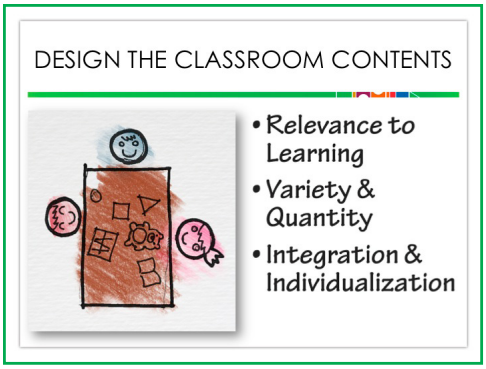
DISCUSSION

If the following key points are not brought up by participants, be sure to highlight them:

- Traffic patterns need to discourage running.
- Use furniture, rugs, and similar items to define boundaries.
- Ensure that teachers can see what is happening in all areas of the classroom.
- Cultural and home-like features are present in the room.
- Spaces are being used as flexibly as possible.
- Quiet and noisy centers are spaced appropriately.
- Ensure interesting classroom content selection is balanced with appropriate stimulation versus overstimulation.
- Each center provides enough information about what to do there and how to play.

Ask participants to reflect on the questions towards the end of the video:

- How do your spaces support child-directed activities?
- How does your environment support learning goals?



SLIDE 9:
DESIGN THE CLASSROOM CONTENTS

It is optimal if all of the materials and activities in a classroom relate to children's interests and developmental needs. It is easier to reach educational goals when a teacher selects the contents for:

- Relevance to learning: How does this toy, material, or object relate to the learning goals of the children or of the lesson plan?
- Variety and quantity: Are there items for different developmental levels? Are there duplicates of favorite items? Is there enough but not too many?
- Integration of learning domains in centers and individualizing for children: Are relevant books and writing materials in every area? Are there items that match children's interests?

EMPHASIZE

All of the materials contained in a center or interest area need to support children's learning and development.

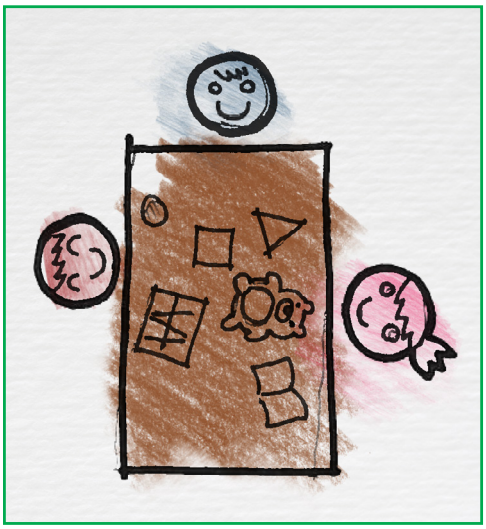
SLIDE 10:
GUIDE LEARNING

Ask participants to examine the photograph. What in this room is guiding the learning of the students? Be sure to highlight each of the bullet points on this slide's arrows:

- Books and music
- Props
- Visual displays
- Materials
- Toys

SLIDE 11:
HOW IS THE LEARNING BEING GUIDED?

Here are more examples of areas in the classroom. In what ways are the children in these rooms being supported to make independent choices around learning? Use the points on Slide 10 to focus participant responses.



LEARNING ACTIVITY:
CONTENT DESIGN OF CLASSROOMS

NOTE

This learning activity focuses on evaluating the contents of the classroom; it can be used with the photos in Slide 11 and/or by using the video from the Optional Slide. If the video is used for this activity, it is the same video as on Slide 8 only without sound, and the questions on the handout guide the discussion. Pausing at various places is recommended to give participants time to reflect on the classrooms and the questions.

- Using the photos on Slide 11 and/or the video on the Optional Slide, participants can discuss the questions in small groups or as a whole group.

HANDOUT

- Distribute and review the handout: *Content Design of Classrooms*.
- Participants examine the photos and/or video for how the contents of the room guide learning, then discuss ways to improve the contents.
- Remind participants that they are looking for visual displays, toys, materials, books, musical instruments, and other such items that can guide the learning.

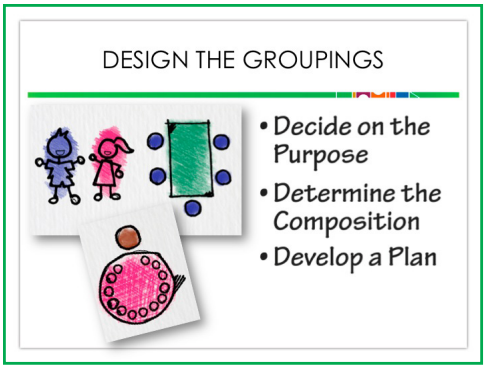
LEARNING ACTIVITY:
MATCHING CLASSROOM CONTENT TO LEARNING GOALS AND INTERESTS

HANDOUT

- Distribute and review the handout: *Matching Classroom Content to Learning Goals and Interests*.
- Participants practice using children's learning goals and interests to select materials for the classroom.
- There are different ways to approach this activity and to expand on it. For example, by providing participants with early childhood catalogs, scissors, and glue it can become a cut and paste activity.
- Having participants bring a list of current learning goals for their children can help enhance the activity.

NOTE

Vignettes and examples of hypothetical children may also be used in the learning activity.



SLIDE 12:
DESIGN THE GROUPINGS

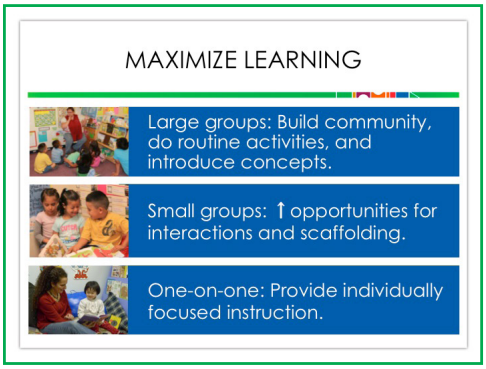
Another aspect of an effective environment is the grouping approaches a teacher employs. Throughout the schedule of the class, intentionally grouping children can enhance a teacher's ability to provide instruction. This can be done spontaneously in the moment, or planned well in advance. Either way, educators:

- Decide on the purpose (intended goals of the activity).
- Determine the composition (what size group and which children).
- Develop a plan (who goes where and does what).

NOTE

Advise participants that the above bullet points do not need to be time consuming but they are instrumental to the success of the grouping purpose. Teachers will be able to group children readily and with better outcomes when they:

- Know which skills children are working on currently.
- Know their children (developmental level and preferences).
- Clearly articulate educational goals for classroom activities.



SLIDE 13:
MAXIMIZE LEARNING

Recommend that teachers match the group size with the type of activity the class is engaging in:

- For introducing concepts, routine activities, and building community, large groups tend to work well. While introducing skills can be successful, teaching them is less effective in this type of grouping.
- For engaging interactions and increased opportunities to support children's learning (with both peers and adults), small groups are most effective. This is where instruction can be tailored for each grouping of children.
- Any child may need a periodic boost of one-on-one instruction. When introducing a complex skill or when a student is struggling, highly individualized instructions offers the best outcome.

LEARNING ACTIVITY:
PREPARING FOR INTENTIONALLY GROUPING CHILDREN

HANDOUT

Distribute and review the handout: *Preparing for Intentionally Grouping Children*.

- In the first table, participants take recent activities done in classrooms and then consider the intended purposes to decide which type of group composition would work best for that activity.
- In the second table, participants will review the class schedule, what group compositions have been selected, and then envision ways that groups could be composed or grouped in the future.

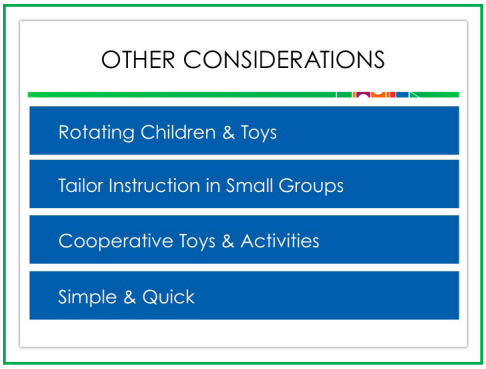
OPTIONAL

LEARNING ACTIVITY:
STRATEGIC PLANNING FOR GROUPINGS

In this activity, participants look at how many adults are needed to make intentional groupings work in the classroom, brainstorm ideas for how groupings can happen, and generate action steps.

NOTE

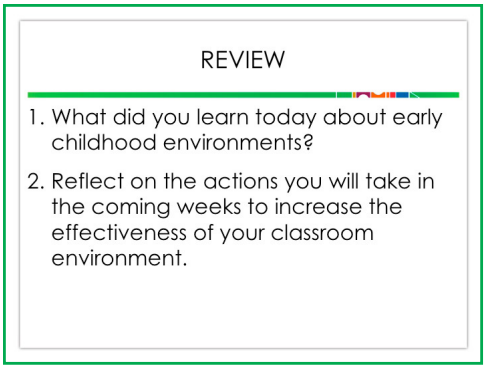
Presenter Notes for Optional Learning Activities are located at the end of this document, after the closing slide.



SLIDE 14:
OTHER CONSIDERATIONS

When teachers are designing their classroom environments, there are some other considerations to keep in mind:

- Rotations:
  - » Recommend that participants avoid grouping the same children together all the time, especially when pairing skilled with less skilled children.
  - » Many teachers limit the number of children per center and create a system for rotating children through favorite areas.
  - » Many teachers also regularly rotate toys to generate a sense of newness.
- Instruction can be tailored within small groups to meet educational goals. For example, one group of children that is working on learning numbers can read a counting book; another group working on fine motor skills can do beading; still another group of children working on social skills can practice joining play.
- Emphasize cooperation by choosing toys and activities that require it (e.g., large appliance boxes, games that need two or more players, balls for throwing back and forth, etc.).
- Whenever possible keep the design elements simple (both for the teacher's sake and because simple tends to be longer lasting). Also, some aspects of designing can be done spontaneously and quickly (spur of the moment) and still be effective.



SLIDE 15:
REVIEW

Ask participants what they learned today. Discussion can take place in small groups or in the large group. Some points to draw attention to are:

- The components of effective environments (well-designed spaces, relevant classroom contents, and intentional groupings).
- How to assess, strategize, arrange and modify the physical spaces.
- Classroom content selection (relevance to learning, variety and quantity, and integration and individualization).
- Ways to design groupings of children (purpose, composition, and plan).

Encourage participants to create a few action items of things they want to try out in the coming week or weeks.

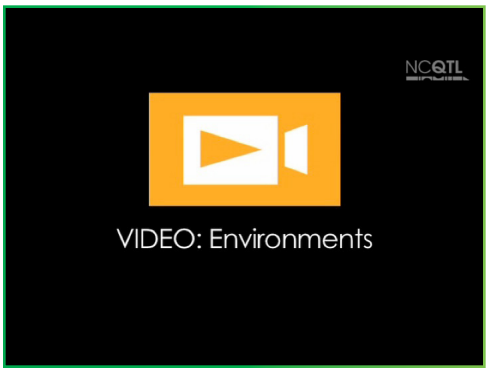
HANDOUT

Distribute handouts if not distributed during presentation. Based on participant roles:

- Distribute and review *Tips for Teachers* handout.
- Distribute and review *Tools for Supervisors*. This is meant for participants who are supervising programs or grantees.
- Distribute *Helpful Resources* list and review key resources.

SLIDE 16:
CLOSING

Provide participants with NCQTL contact information and encourage them to visit our website for additional resources.



Length of video: Approximately 2 minutes, 3 seconds

OPTIONAL SLIDE:
VIDEO: ENVIRONMENTS

This slide is part of the Learning Activity *Content Design of Classrooms*. Be prepared to pause the video at various places to give participants time to reflect on the classrooms featured and the questions in the activity. It is the same video from Slide 8 except there is no sound in order to focus attention on the visuals.

FOLLOW-UP ACTIVITY:
TRACKING PATTERNS TO DETERMINE DESIGN NEEDS

NOTE

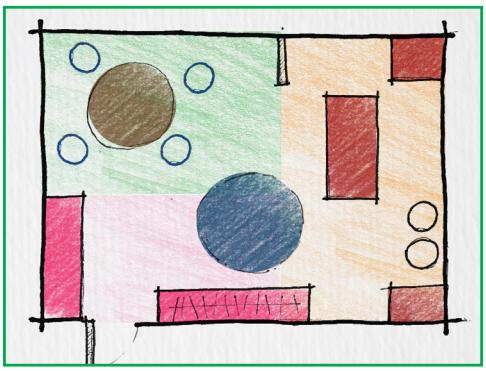
This follow-up activity helps teaching staff figure out where and when behaviors happen in their classrooms, and how they can change classroom design to better meet children's needs. It is intended to help participants apply the concepts learned in this in-service suite to their own classroom practices.

HANDOUT

Distribute and review the handout: *Tracking Patterns to Determine Design Needs*.

Participants can use a diagram of their classrooms or the chart included in the handout to record data in their classrooms. These data, plus the answers to the questions provided in the handout, can help determine possible classroom design changes.

OPTIONAL



LEARNING ACTIVITY:
HOW THE PHYSICAL SPACE CAN AFFECT BEHAVIOR

Suggested placement after Slide 5.

NOTE

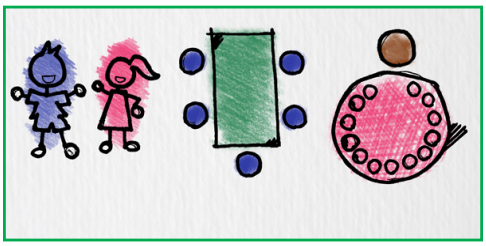
This learning activity can be used in place of or in addition to the discussion suggested for Slide 5.

- In this activity, participants examine the relationship between the physical environment and behavior.
- Be prepared with examples that are relevant to the participants, e.g., small centers can lead to more pushing and fighting because there is not enough space for a large enough number of children to play; or, long straight pathways around the classroom can lead to running.

HANDOUT

Distribute and review the handout: *How the Physical Space Can Affect Behavior.*

- Participants can do this activity in pairs or small groups.



OPTIONAL

LEARNING ACTIVITY: STRATEGIC PLANNING FOR GROUPINGS

Suggested placement after Slide 13.

NOTE

This optional learning activity can also be used as a tool for supervisors to support teachers attempting to group children with more intention.

HANDOUT

- Distribute and review the handout: *Strategic Planning for Groupings*.
- Participants look at how many adults are needed to make intentional groupings work in the classroom, brainstorm ideas for how groupings can happen, and generate action steps.
- Consider doing this activity with audiences that may have little experience with implementing intentional groupings.
- Be sure adult resources available in the local community are included in brainstorm (e.g., parent volunteers, flexible part-time staff, nearby college, Child Development Association (CDA) programs, or other such resources from which to recruit adults).

This document was prepared under Grant #90HC0002 for the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, Administration for Children and Families, Office of Head Start, by the National Center on Quality Teaching and Learning.

FALL 2012