

# Creating Indoor Spaces Children Love

Children's experiences, as well as adults' experiences, in early childhood programs are directly impacted by how spaces are laid out and furnished. The nature of interior environments determine whether children's time in care is stimulating and comforting or disorienting and taxing.





# Places to Live:

## Important Dimensions of Child Care Settings

by Jim Greenman

*We have institutionalized childhood!  
We have institutionalized our children!*

Yikes! Shocking but true. Many young children spend all day, five days a week, 48 or more weeks a year in child care centers; up to 12,000 hours in the first decade of their life; about the same time they spend in school, kindergarten through grade 12.

Further, we are forcing children to get older, younger. When you look at what is expected of young children in early care and education, age 4 has become the new 6. (Interesting, this reverses itself for adults — 40 is the new 30!)

The hard edge shock value associated with the word institution is useful, not because institutions are bad, but because they can be bad, if we don't get them right. Institutions are valuable because they can represent order, stability, tradition, and the establishment of good practice.

Child care centers can be great institutions of learning and caring, if we pay attention to some important dimensions that also make them reasonable places to live.

### Comfort and softness

*It was a spotless classroom, gleaming tile floors, and shiny tables and chairs. It might have been a great playroom or school for a few hours, but a place for all day, all week, all year living? Something was missing, something important. When the children were gone, there was no imprint, none of the general residue or artifacts of lived lives. The care and the education were there, but it was a place devoid of feeling, character, or real warmth.*

Comfort is not the enemy of serious early childhood education. Most of us want comfort from the places where we live. We need pliability, responsiveness in our furnishings and the people we are with, and some freedom. We may need to sprawl, slouch, or collapse for a while. The strains and tensions of everyday life may be made manageable by a stretch on a couch, cuddling with a child or lover, or simply a few moments of silence in an easy chair. The ability to make an imprint on a setting where one spends up to ten hours a day for a number of years is important in the development of self-esteem. Young children, more recent womb-dwellers than we are and native sensualists operate in a world dominated more by sensory impression than by mind and language — *they sense the world.*

Children need a place where they have full use of their bodies and senses and

enough freedom to take advantage of the variety of life, where they can find or invent the spaces they need and have places and moments in time to pause and recharge.

But remember, comfort is subjective, and like everything else, culture bound. It has to do with our own sense of softness, responsiveness, familiarity, and a reasonable level of sensory stimulation — neither too much nor too little, that leads to a sense of calm.

### Softness

In many schools, workplaces, and most other institutions (like hospitals, nursing



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homes, dormitories, prisons), many things are far too hard, cold, and unrelenting. Most of us usually like things rounded and cushioned and warm to the touch. A hard physical setting, combined with the inflexibility of institutional or group life, can harden us or put us on edge. We may be left with no way to make an imprint — to **make our presence felt** literally on anything (for a child, the best imprint may be on a lap). Over 30 years ago, Elizabeth Prescott and Betty Jones identified *softness* as a key dimension in their research on child care settings:

“The dimension of *softness* was so named because it appeared to indicate a responsive quality of the environment to the child, especially on a sensual/tactile level. It was based on the presence or absence of 11 components:

1. malleable materials, such as clay or play-dough
  2. sand that children can be in, either in a box or play area
  3. laps — teachers holding children
  4. single-sling swings
  5. grass that children can be on
  6. a large rug or carpeting indoors
  7. water as an activity
  8. very messy materials, such as finger paint, clay, or mud
  9. child/adult cozy furniture, such as rockers, couches, or lawn swings
  10. dirt to dig in, and
  11. animals that can be held, such as guinea pigs, dogs, and cats
- (Prescott, 1984, p. 52).

A soft, responsive, physical environment reaches out to children and creates a nest that helps children to feel more secure, enabling them to venture out and explore the world, much the way that homes provide adults with the haven from which they can face an often difficult and heartless world. The moments alone rocking in a chair or on a swing, or kneading dough allow children to recharge. But softness has an

equally significant educational purpose, because so much of young children’s learning is sensory-motor based and requires hands-on (more accurately, bodies-on) experience. Pounding on play dough or smearing paint is not only therapeutic and fun, but also the medium for a young scientist learning chemistry and physics in action. Handling animals and plants requires children to be gentle and sensitive to living things. Adult stomachs and laps and arms reassure with the intimacy of touch, smell, and body warmth, and at the same time provide the proximity necessary for quality language interactions and social learning. The younger the child and the longer the day, the more importance softness and comfort assume to create the conditions for learning.

But it isn’t just about the kids. A six- to eight-hour day with children requires considerable giving of our adult physical and emotional selves. Just like children, we replenish our reservoirs of energy, patience, and goodwill through moments of relaxation free from the need to remain upright and erect. We can de-stress by working with pliable sensory materials like clay, bread dough, or water, and by having moments of relaxed physical contact with other human beings. The intimacy of snuggling with a young child or rubbing a baby’s stomach or preschooler’s back calms both human beings involved.

To say that comfort and softness are important is not to say that children’s settings need to be pleasure based. They are work settings for children and adults, sites for some no-nonsense upright learning and performing. Activities that require concentration of mind and body, such as building, listening, writing, and stacking benefit from a hard context with minimal distractions. There needs to be a balance. Comfort provides the security for fledgling scholars to tackle the demands of sustained concentration. It

masks and mutes the necessary efficiency and order of institutional life. A physical environment that yields compensates somewhat for the imposing demands group living requires of individuals, yielding to the pace, interests, and sensibilities of the group.

### Privacy and semi-seclusion: Places to pause

*Life in the group was constant. Everyone could always see everyone else, always in earshot, life in a pack.*

Good design in early childhood settings reflects the need for an active social environment, where positive social relationships are fostered; settings that facilitate play and encourage participation at different levels and at the same time allow non-participation. Early childhood programs are usually the first time a child submits to the judgment of peers. This is a serious business.

Being at our social best, at any age, requires private places that allow us to retreat. And lots of learning and play experiences require some seclusion. Reading a book, trading treasures with a best friend, or concentrating on a difficult task, such as playing with a stacking toy if you are 18 months or a model if you are eight, all require some seclusion. Away from the action and flow, *off the beaten path*, a preschool child can construct and sustain an imaginary world — a manageable world where he or she is at the center, working through the bewildering issues of growing up. School-age children can explore what it means to have best friends or exclusive, secret clubs.

Children (and adults) need simplified environments when they are feeling tired, unhappy, small, powerless, or out of control. Semi-private spaces to retreat to, removed from the stimulating hustle and bustle, allow for that. In all-day settings these feelings are more frequent.

Withdrawal can be a healthy and necessary adaptation.

Unfortunately, in the United States we have almost entirely defined *supervision as surveillance*, rather than a combination of carefully planned environments, and established norms and expectations for behavior. Privacy and seclusion are considered not only unnecessary, but inappropriate.

However, there are degrees of privacy in a space. Physical boundaries may or may not provide separation of all sight and sound. Acoustic separation assumes great importance in a noisy setting, particularly if the noise is sharp and irregular or if we want privacy to wail and moan or explode with joy.

What we need most are “places to pause for awhile,” enough separation and off the beaten path to stop: semi-enclosed spaces that allow a teacher to see in, enclosed spaces which allow children to see out, and spaces that may not be enclosed but that have a defined sense of place and allow lingering. Children need places to watch from and to hold back in, places in which to hide and seek things, and places which enable them to pause and reflect. Children are attracted to “elements within the environment that have a quality of delight and constant change.” Places to pause often reflect this — a window to the street, a view to another group, a fish tank, a mobile, or a teacher-designed surprise space. Low dividers, lattice or gauzy fabric screen, plants, or crates with openings can provide the illusion of privacy.

Unfortunately, these private spaces, retreats, and “places to pause” are often absent in centers or limited to a single “cozy corner.” The contrast with homes is dramatic. Imagine if our only alternative when you were feeling stress was to go to a cozy corner you shared with 15 other people!

When privacy is not available, people cocoon. We simply filter out or ignore

unwanted contact; our behavior in elevators or crowded sidewalks provides a good example. Children do the same. Young babies simply shut down all their systems when the environmental load gets too high. Programs, however, don't always recognize or allow children to regulate this need to simplify the environment, and “cocooning” or “spacing out” may be seen as a disciplinary issue or a sign of child pathology.

## Autonomy

*I can do it myself (maybe, at least some of the time, when I want to, when I need to, if you give me a chance)!*

Autonomy, the power to govern oneself, to be independent, is always a dual struggle for self-control and freedom from external restraints. Young children are struggling to gain control over their bodies, their emotions, and their impulses. At the same time they have to learn how to balance their desire to be independent with their adjustment to the demands of the larger world.

Issues of autonomy are present in all aspects of children's environments. How much are children allowed or encouraged to hold sway over their:

**Bodily needs:** hunger, thirst, access to the bathroom, sleep, body temperature, and so on? “Can I get a drink, take off my socks and scratch my foot, lie down and rest (or get up and play)?”

**Mobility:** to move around, to be still. “Can I hop, climb, or stay and rest on this pillow?”

**Space:** to adapt, define, personalize, or protect a space. “Can I pull up a chair, turn a light on or off, create my own order or clutter which may look simply like a mess to the unknowing eyes of others?”

**Social life:** to choose one's own company. “Can I be alone, choose my lunch date, or my loft associates?”

**Time:** to set one's own pace, to stop and start. “Can I take a break?”

**Things:** to be able to select, determine the use of, and put things away. “Can I go get the Legos® by myself? Can I use them to make a space gun?”

**Activities:** to choose activities and conduct them free from intrusion. “Do I have to listen?”

Children are not adults. For reasons of safety we don't grant them the autonomy that adults often have — in order to protect them from their own impulses and from failure, and to protect the entire group from the effects of egocentrism run amok. Yet, without ample, measured autonomy, how can children develop into independent, resourceful, confident people?

Autonomy does more than build children's self-esteem and add to life's quality; it helps the setting work better. Given freedom and the necessity to do so, **children invent the spaces they need**. If children are given the opportunity to remake and adapt spaces, they learn that conditions are not fixed. They squeeze behind furniture, climb on whatever is available, seclude themselves under blankets, and build forts or houses. Creating spaces that allow children to do these things safely regulates behaviors like climbing.

Autonomy contributes to the simple enjoyment of life. From an early age, we all pluck our own joys and delights. Nothing can take them away from our minds. Poet Michael Brownstein said, “Pause before anything ordinary and it becomes important.” Yet, without the freedom to pause, to choose our objects of desire and wonder, life can become dreary and diminished, even at an

early age.

### Final word

There are other interrelated important dimensions that determine the livability of the group settings we inhabit: competence, order, the routines and rituals, mobility, and the sense of security. Together, they determine whether our places feel like *our* places and allow us to be the best people we can be.

### Reference

Prescott, E. (1984). "The Physical Setting in Day Care." J. Greenman and R. Fuqua, eds., *Making Day Care Better: Training, Evaluation and the Process of Change*. New York: Teachers College Press, 1984.

# Directory of Indoor Furniture

This directory represents a first step toward locating indoor furniture providers. To request free information from these institutions, visit [www.ChildCareExchange.com](http://www.ChildCareExchange.com) or circle the number for each institution of interest on the Product Inquiry Card located between pages 72 and 73.

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# Your Indoor Spaces

In our July 24, 2007 edition of *ExchangeEveryDay*, we asked readers to submit great indoor space elements from their early childhood programs. Readers sent photographs and brief descriptions of creative elements of their indoor environments. A sampling of ideas are shown on the following pages. Please go to [www.childcareexchange.com/resources/indoor.php](http://www.childcareexchange.com/resources/indoor.php) to see other indoor spaces submitted by our readers.



## Rainforest

In the spring of the year we visit the local zoo. Last year, to prepare for our visit, we read a book about the rainforest. The children really became interested in the topic and decided that they would like to visit the rainforest. We came up with the next best thing: we built a rainforest in our classroom. The children made animals, flowers, insects, and even a waterfall to make this an inviting place to relax and read a good book or to hang out with friends.

Mary Washington Howe  
Early Childhood Center  
Wilmington, North Carolina, United States

## Outside In

The idea behind this area was to bring the outside environment inside. We wanted to create a space for children to explore, build, manipulate, and create art from objects that they would typically only see outside. When entering this area, we wanted children to feel like they were surrounded by nature. We tried to make an area that defined the natural setting. We used twigs in baskets to border the area. In between these twigs, we put benches made of tree halves. We then brought in various other elements found in nature, which included: giant tree cookies, pine cones, giant river rock, woven baskets, and a woven rug as a wall hanging with a black and white picture of a forest hanging on top of the rug.

Isabel Patterson Child Development Center  
California State University  
Long Beach, California, United States



### Spider Web

Today the Toddler One homebase of Bright Horizons Riverside Children's Center created a spider web. The children have been especially interested in bugs and spiders. The teachers thought the children would enjoy creating their very own web, in which they could place their spiders. The children enjoyed taking turns putting their spiders in various locations and got caught up in "a web of fun"!

Bright Horizons Riverside Children's Center  
Columbus, Ohio, United States



### Real Woodworking Shop

The workshop features real vices, clamps, saws, drills, hammers, screws, nails, etc. for children's free exploration and project work. It has grown over three years through generous grant funding from our own Parents' Association. Upon noticing his mom watching him saw a 2"x2" piece of wood, one child recently remarked, "This is for real mom."

We made a treehouse out of a thick cardboard crate into which children screwed Phillips-head screws through bark they broke off a fallen hickory tree on our school property.

University Lake School  
Hartland, Wisconsin, United States



### Feel At Home

The space that we created in our preschool-age room gives the children a "home" feel. Installing a simple outdoor tent gave the dramatic play area the look and feel of a home living environment. We included space for literature to be displayed, as well as room for young imaginations to grow! An area that was barely used before suddenly became a popular play spot for all the children!



Preschool-Age Program  
Fairchild AFB Development Center  
Spokane, Washington, United States



### Science Table

A science table in a kinder classroom invites children to use magnifying glasses to learn more about plants, rocks, bark, and insects. The table has been covered with newspaper and varnished.

The Early Childhood Section  
The American School Foundation of Guadalajara  
Guadalajara, México



### Cove Chair

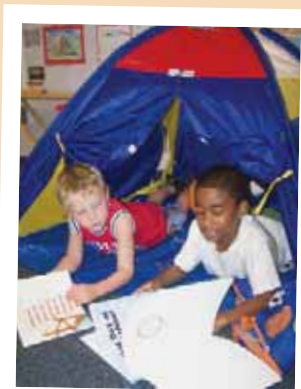
The brown rattan “Cove Chair” is better known as THE reading space. The “Cove Chair” invites more than two or three children and teachers to enjoy quality reading and listening to stories together. The comfortable cushions and cozy pillows surrounding the reading space encourage children to snuggle and be themselves as they express interest to read independently or in groups. Besides reading, the “Cove Chair” serves as a place for children to interact and pretend to be reading astronauts in “rocket chair.” This “rocket chair” sets them off to a world of imagination as they discover greater heights.

The Caterpillar’s Cove  
Ngee Ann Polytechnic  
Singapore

### Camping

We organized our dramatic play area around a camping motif. The children enjoy sitting around the campfire and singing their favorite songs while engaging in a new cultural experience. Our children, staff, and parents brought in materials to set up the area, including tents, chairs, and even stuffed animals to serve as wildlife. The children went outside to find the sticks that were needed for the tissue paper campfire.

Preschool Classroom 11  
Moody Child Development Center  
Valdosta, Georgia, United States





### Train

This is our children's "most" favourite area in school — the train-palace area. Inspired from the book *Totochan* in which a teacher in Japan converted empty train buggies into a school, we made this colourful multi-use train in our school. Today children want to do everything in the train — sit, hear, talk, eat, colour, play, gossip, draw, watch shows, wait for parents to pick them up, and, if we allow them, they would even like to sleep.

Podar Jumbo Kids Preschool  
Santacruz branch  
Mumbai, India

### Studio Space

The studio is a space where artistic things happen; a place where the environment supports thinking and encourages the expression of knowledge through materials. It is within this space that children explore with their hands and their minds. Children have the opportunity to use a variety of materials, tools, and techniques while in the studio. They explore the properties of and build relationships with materials such as wire, clay, paint, and paper. This knowledge can then be used to extend and support experiences and projects they are involved in or wondering about in other areas of the classroom.

Terra State Community College  
The Early Learning Center Coordinator  
Fremont, Ohio, United States



### Treasure Table

The "treasure table" (which is really a sand / water table with a lid) is an indoor space that the children love! Placed in the table are small wooden and plastic cars, trucks, trains, boats, airplanes, small wooden and plastic animals, and people. Sometimes I remove the toys listed above and place a lot of fiori (small flower-shaped pasta), noodles, blocks, dishes,

puppets, various size stones, jewels, rocks, sea shells, magnifying glasses, or water in the table. It is amazing to see how excited the children get when I remove the lid from the table. It is as if they are getting ready to play with the items within the table for the first time! The children really have a lot of fun interacting with each other, and they even solve problems together! The children easily play / explore with their treasure table for at least one half hour!

In Arms Reach Home Day Care  
Baltimore, Maryland, United States