USING ENVIRONMENTAL ARRANGEMENTS IN EARLY CHILDHOOD SETTINGS

Adapted from Pennington, R. C. (2013). Environmental Arrangement. A Guide to Teaching Students with Autism Spectrum Disorders:(Prism Series, Vol. 7), 7, 3.

A Quick Start Guide for Educators

WHAT

Are Environmental Arrangements?

Environmental arrangements involve **organizing physical space, materials, routines, and instruction** to support children's learning, engagement, and behavior.

Rather than relying only on adult direction, environmental arrangements **set children up for success before instruction begins** by:

- increasing opportunities to respond
- reducing unnecessary distractions
- supporting independence
- preventing challenging behavior
- promoting engagement with adults and peers

Environmental arrangements are considered **antecedent supports**—they change the environment, so children are more likely to succeed.

WHY

Environmental Arrangements Matter in Preschool

Carefully arranged environments can help young children:

- understand expectations without constant reminders
- engage more successfully in play and routines
- stay focused during learning activities
- participate with peers
- transition more smoothly across the day

For children who are sensitive to noise, movement, or visual clutter, small environmental changes can lead to **meaningful improvements in behavior and learning.**

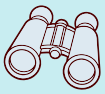
ARRANGE THE PHYSICAL LAYOUT

OF THE SPACE

When setting up the classroom or learning area:

- Ensure **clear lines of sight** so adults can easily supervise children
- Remove or block access to materials that could be unsafe or distracting
- Place children **away from known triggers** when possible (e.g., doors, noisy equipment)
- Arrange furniture to clearly define areas for play, group time, and instruction

Even simple room layout changes—such as seating placement or reducing access to distracting materials—can support positive behaviors.



USE SPACE

TO SUPPORT DIFFERENT TYPES OF INSTRUCTION

Arrange the environment to support a variety of learning formats:

- areas for **individual instruction**
- spaces for **small-group activities**
- areas for **large-group routines**
- play areas that encourage **peer interaction**

Consistent placement of materials and activities helps children learn what is expected in each space and supports predictability across the day.

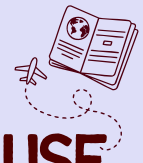
ARRANGE MATERIALS

TO SUPPORT ENGAGEMENT AND COMMUNICATION

How materials are placed matters.
Educators can:

- limit free access to highly preferred items during instruction
- place materials slightly out of reach to **encourage communication**
- strategically present preferred items after task completion
- organize materials so children know where to find and return them

These arrangements can increase communication, engagement, and appropriate requesting while reducing competition between instruction and preferred items.



USE

Environmental Supports and Visuals Together

Environmental arrangements often work best **alongside visual supports, such as:**

- visual schedules
- picture cues
- step-by-step task visuals
- clearly labeled areas or shelves

These supports help children understand what to do, where to go, and how long activities will last. Visual supports should be taught and gradually faded as children become more independent.

CONSIDER

Time and Activity Structure

The way time and activities are structured also matters. Educators can:

- keep activities short enough for children to be successful
- gradually increase activity length as children build skills
- alternate preferred and less-preferred activities
- embed brief opportunities for success and reinforcement

Starting with activities where children can succeed helps build engagement and persistence.

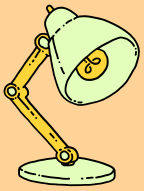
MONITOR AND ADJUST

the Environment

If a child is struggling, consider adjusting the environment before changing expectations. You might:

- reduce distractions
- move the child's seating or work area
- change how materials are presented
- adjust the length or structure of an activity

Small environmental changes can have **a large impact** on behavior and learning.



KEY TAKEAWAYS

Environmental arrangements are a **powerful, proactive way** to support young children's learning and behavior. By thoughtfully organizing space, materials, and routines, educators can create environments that are:

- predictable
- supportive
- engaging
- inclusive

These strategies provide a strong foundation for instruction and are an excellent place to start when supporting diverse learners in early childhood settings.