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# Establishing the Preschool Learning Environment

by Alisa James and Douglas Collier

**M**ovement provides young children with opportunities to explore and learn through interaction with their environment (COPEC, 2000). As children explore, they think about the movement as well as feel how their body moves, which helps them experience their environment in a holistic manner.

Through this process of thinking about and feeling how their bodies move, children often make decisions about their level of success with respect to movement. These decisions are made in several ways. Children often observe other children and, early on, compare their success in movement to the skill level of others. However, the most significant way children determine success is through their own movement experiences. Children often challenge themselves to jump or throw a certain distance. If they meet or surpass that goal, they feel successful and continue with the activity. Successful preschool movement experiences play an important role in how children feel about themselves and thus contribute significantly to the development of self-esteem.

In light of this, it is important to establish an environment in preschool physical education that contributes positively to the development of self-esteem while also supporting the learning of skills. Establishing a positive learning environment requires consideration of both managerial and instructional techniques (Graham, Holt/Hale, & Parker, 2004).

A preschool learning environment should convey to children that they are welcome and that each student is important to their teacher (McCall & Craft, 2000). One way to communicate this is to greet each student by name as he/she enters the gym.

Creating a supportive learning environment for preschool children requires knowledge of their cognitive, affective, and motor characteristics (see Table 1). These characteristics guide the physical educator in the selection of appropriate rules and routines that structure a learning environment where students can learn in a positive and exciting fashion.

## Rules and Routines

Rules and routines are very important for preschool children because physical education may be the first experience these children have moving with others in either large or small spaces. Although a gymnasium may be available, gross motor activities might take place in smaller rooms as well. Establishing appropriate rules and routines for both the level of child development and the environment ensures safety and promotes learning (see Table 2).

Cognitive development must also be taken into consideration when developing rules and routines. Preschool children develop cognitively in a manner that eventually leads them to think logically as well as understand different concepts (Gallahue & Donnelly, 2003). Prior to that, preschool children often draw conclusions without justification, so it is important that rules and routines are simple and easy for them to understand.

Affective development must also be considered when rules and routines are created. For example, preschool children have difficulty respecting the personal space of others as well as sharing equipment and taking turns. These characteristics have implications for children being able to follow rules and routines. Physical education teachers may select from several instructional strategies to further students' understanding of concepts such as respecting space and taking turns. To facilitate students' respect for and recognition of personal space, use concrete markers such as numbers, carpet squares, or poly spots to define each student's personal space. Teachers can also provide learning activities that allow children to explore self-space through curling, stretching, and twisting actions. Clear feedback and reinforcement for appropriately using personal space can also be extremely effective.

Turn taking is a skill that most preschoolers are just beginning to develop. Thus, it is crucial to provide learning

**Table 1—Developmental Characteristics: Their Impact on Rules and Routines**

Developmental characteristic	Rules	Routines
Short attention span	Make fewer rules and state them in short concise phrases.	Routines should be practiced and positively reinforced.
Egocentric	Create rules that encourage sharing and turn-taking. In addition let students have input in the rule making process.	Discuss with students why it is important to have specific routines such as starting and stopping routines.
Fearful of new situations	Make rules that help all students feel accepted and safe.	Include routines for fire and tornado drills as well as routines specific to physical education.
Seek adult approval	Positively reinforce students for following the rules.	Positively reinforce students for following the routines.

**Table 2—Sample Preschool Routines**

Routine	Suggestions to Enhance Routines
Clear start and stop signals	Music is an excellent choice for preschool children.
Entry routine and exit routine	Use of colorful poly spots or carpet squares are beneficial.
Boundaries	Lines are too abstract for preschool children. Instead use cones, mats, benches, etc.
Bathroom and drink routines	Use a bathroom pass so children can use facilities when the need arises.

activities where turn taking is not overly emphasized. For instance, when using stations, there should only be one station where turn taking is necessary. It is important at that station that each child receives generous and clear praise for appropriate turn taking behavior. As children develop, the number of stations where waiting for a turn is required can be systematically increased.

A waiting area that maintains the student's attention (McCall & Craft, 2000) is another beneficial strategy. Use bright and colorful posters to create a stimulating waiting area for students to look at while they wait their turn. It is important to recognize children's limitations in terms of respecting personal space and turn taking in order to structure a learning environment that facilitates development of these important affective skills.

In creating rules, there is an educational value in allowing students some input by involving them in the decision-making process. Student involvement promotes self-discipline and gives children some control over the rules, fostering a feeling of ownership. If rules suggested by students are inappropriate, they can be modified.

After soliciting student input, it is appropriate to have children continue to think about how they behave with regard to the class rules. For example, does Peter listen quietly when the teacher gives directions? Teachers can facilitate this process by using "smiley faces" to help students decide whether or not they do a good job following the rules.

## Instruction

As noted, an effective learning environment includes both rules and routines. In addition, instruction is intimately interwoven with rules and routines, which further strengthens the learning environment. The interaction between instruction and rules and routines is very important as it has a significant impact on the teaching-learning process.

Several instructional steps can be taken to enhance the preschool learning environment. For example, give clear and concise instructions so children can be active most of the class time, minimizing opportunities for them to be distracted or off task. In addition, when students understand the instructions, they are more likely to explore and learn independently. Table 3 lists instructional recommendations to keep in mind that create a positive and effective learning environment.

When instructing preschool-aged children, their developmental characteristics must again be taken into account. They are at a stage where they are learning how to

**Table 3—Instructional Steps**

- Give clear brief instructions.
- Select activities that engage all children.
- Allow for each activity to have more than one way to complete the task.
- Plan only one station in which children have to take turns.
- Provide positive and specific feedback to all children regardless of individual differences.
- Be actively involved and play with preschool children.
- Make activities simple and fun.
- Use a variety of instructional approaches such as stations and songs.
- Center instruction around themes such as winter or the circus to help children relate the activities to other aspects of their lives.

control and move their bodies. They begin to realize they can move their bodies and objects through space in many different ways. They also realize that how they move and what they do influences the world around them. For example, if they roll a ball quickly, the pins go flying. If, on the other hand, they roll the ball slowly, the pins just topple. Having opportunities to experiment with movement with the teacher's support allows children to learn cognitively, socially, and motorically.

One way physical education teachers can provide support is by providing specific feedback as children engage in experimental movement. In addition, keeping activities open-ended and allowing more than one way to complete a task creates a dynamic environment that supports students and helps to ensure their success. The combination of an active teacher, who facilitates children's skill learning by moving among them with specific positive feedback, results in an environment where students want to explore and do so independently and productively.

Developing an effective learning environment for preschool students takes a lot of forethought and planning. The ideas presented in this article have been successful in establishing an effective and positive physical education environment for preschool age children. In establishing this environment, children's developmental characteristics must always be kept in mind. When designing learning activities, it is important to take advantage of their interests, curiosity, and eagerness to explore. By keeping these ideas in mind, physical educators can provide experiences that are not only developmentally appropriate, but also safe, positive, and exciting.

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