As Diane Trister Dodge and Bonnie Kittredge say in Room Arrangement as a Teaching Strategy, “A well-ordered classroom promotes learning, helps build a classroom community, and frees teachers to observe and interact with children in positive ways. The classroom environment can convey powerful messages to children – ‘this is a good place to be’, ‘you belong here’, ‘this is a place you can trust’, ‘there are places where you can be by yourself when you want to’, ‘you can do things on your own here’, and ‘this is a safe place to explore and try out ideas’.”

As the quote above alludes to, the classroom environment in and of itself can be used as a teaching strategy and ultimately supports all facets of our work with children. This newsletter will be focusing on how to create classroom environments that promote engagement, learning, exploration, creativity and problem solving.

For children to be successful in our classrooms, they need adults who are warm, caring, and responsive; a sense of significance and importance; a way to relate to the world around them; opportunities to play and move; and people to help structure and support their learning. According to Jim Greenman (1988), early childhood environments should be:

**Rich in Experience:** Children need to explore, experiment, and learn basic knowledge through direct experience.

**Rich in Play:** Play provides a way for children to integrate all their new experiences into their rapidly developing minds, bodies, emotions, and social skills. Brain research supports this idea, stressing that children learn best through an integrated approach combining physical, emotional, cognitive, and social growth (Shore, 1997).

**Significant to Children:** Young children need to feel important! Children need to feel that what they do is meaningful to someone besides themselves.

**Places Children Can Call Their Own:** A basic human need is to belong. Children need to feel they belong, too. They need to be close to people they know, have familiar and comfortable objects, and be in a setting that has a personal history for them.

(Continued on page 2)
In *Designs for Living and Learning: Transforming Early Childhood Environments*, Curtis and Carter ask us to assess our environments by reconsidering our classroom environments from a child’s point of view. They ask us to put ourselves in the shoes of a preschool child who spends her days in our classroom space and think about the statements below then assess whether these are true for any or all of the areas you have created in your classrooms.

- I can see who I am and what I like to do at school and home.
- There are comfortable places where my tired mommy or daddy, grandma, or auntie can sit and talk with me or my teacher.
- The natural world can be found here (such as objects from nature, animals, and living specimens).
- There is something sparkly, shadowy, wondrous or magical here.
- My teacher leaves a special object out here every day so I can keep trying to figure out more about its properties and how it works.
- There are materials here that I can use to make representations from what I understand and imagine.
- I can feel powerful and be physically active here.
- I can learn to see things from different perspectives here, literally and through assuming roles in dramatic play.
- I see my name written, or I get to regularly write my name here.
- I get to know my teachers here – what they like, how they spend their time away from school, and which people and things are special to them.

Were you able to find places in your classroom centers where these components exist? Did you notice spaces where you could create something differently so that these ideas permeated the space? To make your classroom a place that promotes learning, it is helpful to take the time to identify what is currently working well in your space (are kids engaged and using the materials appropriately) as well as what is not working. Since you are already observing your children’s behaviors and interactions with materials on a regular basis, you already have begun this process. This is just expanding the picture of what you are observing to include your classroom space. Choose a day or two to observe and record how children and adults use and experience the space from the moment they arrive until the moment they leave. Throughout your day, carry a pencil and sticky notes/post-its with you so you can easily jot down what you are noticing. With this information, you can transform your classroom to create a learning environment that supports children’s ongoing engagement, learning, and development while providing you with a structure that supports you and your teaching.

How do you set up your environment to promote this type of engagement? Here are a few elements to consider when thinking about your classroom environments: connections and a sense of belonging; flexible space and open-ended materials; natural materials that engage the senses; along with wonder, curiosity, and intellectual engagement. How do you create a sense of belonging? To create a sense of belonging, an environment would have familiar items that generate memories of familiar routines from home. The space would also help a child to remember the past, to know what’s happening now, and to think about the future. Such an environment has a cozy, homelike feel that helps create strong connections. Some ideas might include photos of the kids, their families, and of the teachers. You can also create a sense of softness in your selection of color, furnishings, cushions, pillows, lighting, and materials. You can add specific features that represent the interests, families, and cultures of the children and of the staff (Curtis and Carter, 2003). What else might you be able to bring into your classroom to create this feeling? What does cozy and homelike look like to you and to your co-workers?

What are open-ended materials that engage the senses? Some common open-ended materials are clay, paint, and tools for drawing and writing. Others might include cloth remnants, foam, wire, leather pieces, rubber, and wood. Open-ended materials are particularly effective at encouraging creativity and imagination because they have no predetermined use. Their use is in the eye of the creator. A piece of cloth may be a table covering or tent for one child and a blanket for a doll or a rug for the dollhouse for another child. Materials that engage the senses can (Continued from page 1)
go beyond the typical manipulatives, sensory tables, and music players. Textures and scents are also materials that engage the senses, i.e. herbs, flowers, leaves, scented candles/soaps, shells, rocks, feathers, branches, and bark or wood (Curtis and Carter, 2003). Flowers, for example, could be used as part of a science activity, a drawing/art project, a component of pretend play or carefully displayed throughout the classroom as decoration. Shells, rocks, and branches could be used in a variety of ways as well. What would you do with these objects?

How do you encourage wonder, curiosity, and intellectual engagement? Children are deeply fascinated with the physical world and how it works. Some ideas of materials to include in your environment are objects that play with light and its relationship to color, or things that reflect, sparkle, spin, make sounds, and move or are otherwise transformed by moving air. You might create nooks where you can place rocks that glitter/shine, a set of costume jewelry, gemstones, or holograms. Because childhood is a time when the world seems full of magic and wonder, you can keep those brain pathways growing and expanding by placing intriguing discoveries in your environment (Curtis & Carter, 2003). What could you bring into your classroom that would shine and sparkle? What could you place near a window that allows the light to come through in exciting ways?

These are just a few examples of how you can set up your classroom environment to promote engagement, stimulate learning, support connections among children and teachers, and encourage curiosity and problem solving. In an environment such as this, children will learn because the space is interesting, engaging, and motivating.

Spring is in the air... remember that all children in your program for 6 months or more MUST have a progress COSF completed for Early Childhood Outcomes. For more information on the process please follow this link: http://cdd.unm.edu/ecspd/trainings/trainings_PSN_ECO.htm
This is a good place to be...
• Defined areas
• Child size
• Independence supported
• Safe areas
• Softness
• Color
• Neat
• Wide variety of interesting materials

You belong here...
• Personalized environment
• Names/photos
• Creations by children
• Multicultural – reflecting the community
• Family’s presence

This is a place I can trust...
• Visible schedule – visual schedule
• Consistent routines
• Materials labeled and in appropriate places

Quiet areas...
• Places to be alone or with one other friend
• Pillows, rolled up rugs
• A defined space
• Inside and outside

You can do things on your own here...
• Low shelves in an area that is typically used
• Open ended materials
• Music
• Things labeled with pictures and words
• Tools for investigation
• Job chart

A safe place to explore/take risks/try out new ideas...
• Display things in thoughtful, unusual ways
• The whole room supports learning: literacy, science, math... through exploration

Photos Courtesy of
Shining Stars Preschool
Rio Rancho, NM
How you set up your environment not only helps to promote engagement, but also helps prevent challenging behaviors. In Promoting the Social Emotional Competence of Young Children, the Center on the Social and Emotional Foundations for Early Learning, CSEFEL, talks a great deal about the importance of the classroom environment as one of the key components to preventing behavior problems in the classroom. Some of their suggestions are:

- Make sure that all children are visible to adults and that adults are visible to children.
- Clear boundaries so that children know where the center begins/ends and are not crowded together.
- Have enough centers for the number of children in your class and enough materials within centers so that children are engaged and not continually arguing over materials.
- Consider size and location of centers. A center with a high level of activity should not be placed next to a quieter activity center.
- Organize materials and keep them in appropriate places, taking into consideration children’s development of independence skills.
- Materials within centers need to be meaningful and relevant to children’s needs, interests, and lives.
- Change materials or themes in centers on a regular basis. Not daily or weekly, but often enough to spark curiosity and expand learning.

Other vital components for an environment that is used to prevent challenging behaviors are the use of schedules, consistent routines, thoughtful transitions, and visual supports. For children to feel that “this is a good place to be and a place they can trust”, a reliable and consistent flow to the day is foundational. Visual supports that help to manage difficult times and thoughtful and engaging transitions provide the necessary environmental supports to allow children to play, learn, and grow with success.