

Promoting Healthy Social Behaviors through Environmental Strategies that Promote Positive Social Interactions

What are environmental strategies that promote positive social interactions?

Environmental strategies are changes that can be made to a classroom's environment, schedule, activities and materials to encourage positive interactions between children. These strategies include providing visual cues to guide children, providing materials that promote cooperation, commenting on positive behaviors, etc. Environmental strategies require little adult assistance once the planning and organization are complete. Additionally, more positive interactions between children will help create a happier classroom for children and teachers!

Why is it important to use these environmental strategies?

Changes in the environment can increase positive interactions between children and decrease the use of challenging behaviors. Hence, a thoughtfully arranged environment can be an effective behavior management tool. When the environment is a partner in preventing problem behaviors, teachers have more time to engage with the children.

What can you do in your classroom?

You can arrange the physical environment and select activities and materials that encourage children to work together, for example:

- **Use toys and materials that promote cooperation and sharing:** By replacing toys and materials made for individual use with toys and materials made for cooperative use, you help increase the opportunities for children to play together. Many materials work best and tend to be more fun when two or more children use them together. Materials such as teeter-totters, rocking boats, wagons and other large play items require children to work together to coordinate their actions. You could also replace the art easel with large pieces of paper taped on the classroom wall or on a table so that children can paint and create together.
- **Keep toys and materials novel and interesting:** Rotating materials is an excellent and cost-effective means of maintaining the 'newness' or novelty of your classroom. Simply storing materials for a few weeks greatly increases the children's interest in them when they are returned to the classroom. Make sure there are enough choices of materials and activities for the number of children in your class. If children are bored and not engaged, they are more likely to use challenging behaviors.
- **Give positive attention to children who are playing nicely together and be specific in your feedback:** This helps children understand that social interactions are valued in your classroom (e.g., "You two are doing a great job building that zoo together!").
- **Pair children who have good social skills with children who have less developed social skills:** Just being near more socially competent children can increase positive interactions and reduce problem behaviors. You can encourage this close contact by making sure that planned activities are meaningful and enjoyable for all children and by giving children time and attention when they are playing together. Instead of having two children stand next to each other on one side of the water table, you could arrange the water table so children play across from each other. This promotes increased talking and sharing...and fun!

Research on this topic:

Research has shown that classrooms that have been carefully arranged can significantly increase positive interactions between children. Additionally, boys and girls both benefit from using these strategies, which have been found to be successful with both typically developing children and children with mild to moderate disabilities.

Food for thought:

Children whose needs and interests are being met do not have the time or inclination to use challenging behaviors as often. Defined, organized learning centers with a variety of choices and visual cues to help children understand how to use the materials will prevent many behavior problems. Although environmental strategies require time and planning, the results are often seen with little direct teacher involvement with the children. Positive results are truly a result of a teacher's best behavior management tool and partner...a well-structured, developmentally appropriate environment!

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