

## Burlington Little School, Seattle, Washington

Cindy Hayertz, Preschool teacher

# Environments That Inspire

Compiled by Susan Friedman

**M**any classrooms offer fantastic opportunities for young children to explore, learn, and grow, but in some environments the expectations for learning and development are especially clear. In this piece we share photographs from a few schools and centers across the country and in overseas Department of Defense Dependents schools (DoDDs). We asked directors and teachers to share their thoughts on the environments shown in the pictures. Each setting is different, yet what they have in common is the great care taken in creating an environment that sets the stage for learning and growing.

NAEYC staff member **Susan Friedman**, MEd, serves as editorial associate for *Young Children* and coordinator of [Beyond the Journal](#).



## Building with sticks

In our big yard we try to re-create the feeling of freedom children once had when they would play outdoors for hours on their own. Our designated stick-building area is very popular. We keep our eye on the area, but we try to let the children work on their own. The older children do this well; the four-year-olds need teacher assistance now and then.

We installed several braces to make a sturdy starting point for children's stick creations. The children work together to create incredible struc-

tures. We offer other materials they can use in their buildings—cloths, strings of beads, boughs from fir trees with the greens still on them. A group of girls created the structure in this photo and used it in their dramatic play about fairies. Adding cloths and beads encourages the girls to build with the sticks as well. It's not just for the boys.

Sometimes people ask us if letting the children build with sticks is safe. We have an excellent teacher-to-child ratio so we can really supervise the area. We cut off the smaller branches from large sticks so that children won't get poked. We have used these sticks for years, and the children have never had more than a minor mishap.

## Beautiful places

Children deserve beauty and so do adults. We like to give children beautiful, magical things to interact with. We offer a few theme-based setups for the children to use and interact with in the classroom. The materials in this photograph reflect a springtime theme that gave the children a few ways to explore how plants grow. A setup is an arrangement of interesting materials for the children to explore. It might be a display of prisms hanging in the window or a tray of smooth, round rocks alongside pictures of different ways to arrange them. Children are incredible designers—especially when they use natural materials. Setups provide an opportunity for a child to take a break and explore, move things around, and interact.



Photos © Deb Curtis

## Chicago Commons Child Development Program, Chicago, Illinois

*Denise Romo, Professional Development coordinator*



Photos © Margie Carter

### **Light table**

The light table allows children to explore color, light, and shadows. They can look at shadows, draw on transparent paper, and explore how light affects color. They manipulate colorful objects and experiment with transparency and shadow. The light table offers children a different perspective on the light and color they see in the world around them.

### **Entryway loft**

The loft is the first thing children and families see when they enter this building. This area provides highly interactive activities for children to explore; it is meant to stimulate the senses. Inside the loft, children are surrounded with different levels. There are musical instruments and many opportunities for dramatic play. Children can bring a book into the loft, sit on the stool, and read.



## Child Development Center II, Fort George G. Meade, Maryland

*Nancy Motonaga, Center director*

### Viewing window

Army Child Development Centers were designed with windows in the hallways to see into all of the children's classrooms. These windows bring a sense of sharing and community to the center. The windows eliminate dark, hidden areas, which decreases the possibility of false child abuse allegations. Families, staff, and visitors can observe without disturbing children and teachers. The windows help children and parents with separation by allowing them another glimpse of each other before parents leave for work.



Photos © NAEYC



### Toddler painting

Low tables with chairs that allow children's feet to rest on the floor give children independence. Children can sit down and get up whenever they want. The seating arrangement also allows several children to participate in an activity at one time, reducing children's waiting times. With this arrangement, the teacher can easily supervise activities and the safe use of materials by a group of young children.

## Child Development Center III, Fort George G. Meade, Maryland

*Ethel Davis-White, Center director*

### Flexible space

We created a defined area for nonmobile infants, partitioned on each side with low movable storage units. An assortment of soft toys, mobiles, and cushions are available. The windowsill has a rounded edge and is low to encourage young infants to practice pulling themselves up to a standing position.

This area creates a sense of security for young infants, who can spend some private time lap sitting as a caregiver sings or softly describes the activities of the other children in the room. For infants just starting to crawl, it offers a place for motor exploration away from more active toddlers. When needed, to accommodate children's changing skills, the storage units can be rearranged.



Photos © NAEYC



### Early literacy for babies

The book area in the infant/pretoddler classroom is in a cozy corner of the classroom on a soft carpet. A variety of soft plastic, cardboard, cloth, and tactile books sit on low, open shelves. Infants and toddlers can reach the books themselves, look at the pictures, turn the pages, and explore the wonderful world of books. They can also enjoy looking at books with a caregiver.

## Hilltop Children's Center, Seattle, Washington

*Ann Pelo, Mentor teacher*

### Drama play area

Our nontraditional drama area combines blocks with other open-ended materials. Boys and girls become deeply engaged in making up stories that involve both adventure and family caretaking. Together they act out their themes for long periods—often more than an hour and sometimes even over several days.

The structure in the photo shows how children use open-ended, interesting things in many different ways. We put out baskets filled with natural materials, like small stones, pieces of wood, even cinnamon sticks, and children use them as props in their play scripts and to create beautiful designs in their block buildings.



© Ann Pelo

## Children First, Durham, North Carolina

Donna King, Director

### Space for families

With all the learning opportunities we would like the room to provide the children, we have found it hard to cede any of the space to furniture for adult bodies. At the same time, we have learned that if we want parents to read documentation, if we want them to connect with all the children in the program and with each other, they need a space in which they can stay and relax for a while. Without a space for families, no matter how many ways we said, "You are welcome!" our classroom itself shouted, "No, you're not!" We cleared out a small area where parents and children enter in the morning. From this "snuggle spot," parents can view their children's portfolios. They can stay a while to interact with their child and with each other.



Photos © Donna King



### Mailboxes and mail table

In the same room as the family snuggle spot, there is a designated space where children can write and receive messages. Children's mailboxes are located on the same shelf unit where families and teachers have their mailboxes. Each mailbox is labeled with a child's face, name, and sign (a unique image chosen by the child to use as an

alternate signature). Writing supplies and children's journals are kept on the shelf above the mailboxes. A few steps away, the children's writing table faces a bulletin board filled with meaningful words (like "thank you," "I love you," "Mom," and "Dad"). The board also includes reminders such as a note about someone who needs a get-well card.

## Giessen Elementary School, DoDDs, Giessen, Germany

*Melinda Stevens, Sure Start teacher*

### Reading pool

To create an inspiring classroom environment, we use a project approach to learning. When children can influence the direction of the curriculum, they stay motivated and engaged. The class becomes quite industrious during our investigations.

In this photo a child is curled up in the “aquarium” section of a zoo project our class created. As part of this project, the children decided to put a wading pool in the corner and fill it with “coral”—colored beanbags. The bookshelf is within arm’s reach and is filled with literature about animals and zoos.

This child is reading a book by Dr. Seuss. The previous day the entire school had celebrated his birthday. Here she can relive and revisit his stories in a safe, cozy corner.



© Jennifer Halley

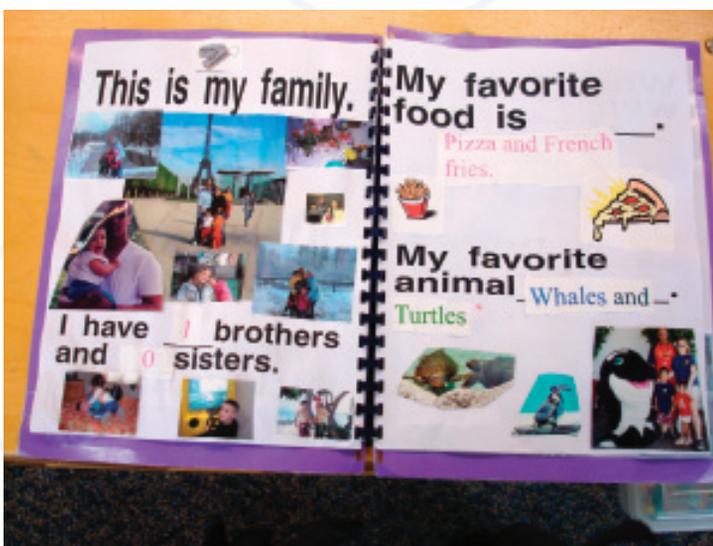
## Illesheim Elementary School, DoDDs, Illesheim, Germany

*Janice Langford, Sure Start teacher*

### All About Me books

We focus on the family and each individual child with the All About Me books and display. These books celebrate each child’s uniqueness, encourage literacy, and communicate that families are essential partners in learning and daily classroom life.

I provide a template for the All About Me book to each family during the initial home visit before the school year even begins. I ask the parents to work together with their



Photos © Beverly Erdmann

child to provide information about their family. They can include any pictures or information the child feels are important about his or her likes, family experiences, and other things that capture the uniqueness of the child. We bind the books at school. If any additional support or materials are needed, we welcome the families into the school to access resources.

Children can share their books with each other during class meeting times. The books are placed on a special display bookcase that also contains other class publications. These books, as well as other reading materials, are accessible to the children throughout the day.

## Indian Island School, Early Childhood Program, Old Town, Maine

*Karen Thomes, Teacher*

### Universal design

Our program is inclusive and universally designed for all abilities. We choose equipment and materials with intentionality. We believe families, schools, and communities include people of varying abilities and we need to plan ways to include all people from the start. When making purchases, we evaluate how the item can be used for all children. For example, we make sure furniture is adjustable and suitable for children of differing heights and physical needs. We ask, Does the space provide materials and work and play areas for a wide range of competencies and abilities? We make sure the floor space and storage units can be arranged and organized for mobility and accessibility.



Photos © Bonnie Blagojevic



### Painting chair and writing board

Different types of drawing, painting, cutting, and writing tools support a range of fine motor abilities. Equipment is readily accessible, multipurpose, and can usually be used by all children with minimal adaptation.

### Sensory materials

Our seating choices include chairs of varying heights, rocking chairs, therapy balls, inflated cushions, and equipment to help children develop balance, such as a seesaw, swing, hippity-hops, and scooter boards. A variety of sensory and play materials is available to all children throughout the day.



## Clayton Schools' Family Center, St. Louis Reggio Collaborative, Clayton, Missouri

*Lori Geismar Ryan, Director*

### The ministudio

Our school environment is a balance of physical and psychological space that is grounded in best practice and the fundamentals of the approach to early childhood education known as Reggio Emilia. The photograph right gives a multilayered look into this classroom, showing the relationship between the ministudio and the other elements of the environment.

In the ministudio, children have access to a variety of high-quality colored pencils, markers, papers, glues, paints, brushes, wires, ribbons, and yarns that support



© St. Louis Reggio Collaborative

self-expression and creativity. Materials are arranged on low shelves so children can easily access and use them throughout the day. As teachers we encourage children, beginning in infancy, to represent themselves through many media and through the languages of paint, wire, clay, drawing, and collage.

We believe that children's learning thrives on the energy of the dynamic, ongoing relationships and exchanges between areas throughout the classroom. The ministudio plays a central role, often serving as a hub to support children's expression of learning throughout the classroom and the school.

## Martin Luther King Day Home Center, Seattle, Washington

*Deb Curtis, Toddler teacher*



Photos © Deb Curtis

### Staying connected with families

I ask families to bring in photos so we can create family posters to display in the classroom. Children visit them all the time; they are an integral part of the day. When the children see them they say, "Mommy! Daddy!" and go up to the posters and kiss the pictures. When one girl was playing with water, she went over to her poster and "washed mommy" with a sponge. The family posters are one way to keep children connected with their families during the day. Rather than focusing on separation, I focus on keeping them connected.

### Open-ended wooden materials

It's hard to find good toys made of natural materials for toddlers. I go to a local thrift store to look for interesting things. Toddlers love the wooden bowls and spoons that lots of people get rid of. I also collect wooden massage tools with wheels. I'm always on the lookout for interesting textured objects that don't just beep at you—things the children can use to manipulate and create.





## Outdoor Nursery School, Chevy Chase, Maryland

*Barbara Hutchinson and  
Susan Miller, Directors*

### The outdoors as a classroom

Offering art outdoors reflects our school's philosophy that outside is the best classroom for children. When children have the sense of freedom and relaxation that can come from being in a big open space surrounded by natural light, we find they will experiment with natural materials and make more observations about their artwork.

Some of the art we do outside may reinforce a theme the class is studying that week. The children in this picture have been studying the galaxies and the differences between day and night skies. A visit to the planetarium helped inspire the children to create their own night sky with chalk on black paper. Children who are not working on art projects enjoy other outdoor play.

Easels and art tables are set up in each of the four woodland play yards, but equipment varies and each yard offers different opportunities for the children to explore, run, and climb. The yards feature wheel toys, tire swings, climbing trees, nature trails, climbing walls, slides, large building blocks, sandboxes, and a train.



Photos © Susan Friedman

## Vilseck Elementary School, DoDDs, Vilseck, Germany

*Bernadette Kollbrand, Sure Start teacher*

### Reading with small groups

Here, a small group of children is in the library area. They are highly engaged in the reading process and eagerly await the opportunity to share their experiences and ideas. The teacher facilitates, accelerates, and validates each child's development by letting children know that their ideas are interesting, important, and worth sharing.

In a small group setting, each child can choose and share books that are of interest. Because of this, both the teacher's and the children's responses tend to be more personal and focused on the individual child.



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