

Indoor Learning Environment

Well planned and organized indoor learning environments (classrooms) help provide guidance and direction for both children and their educators. Spaces should be intentional and offer the opportunity for children to choose the materials to engage them. Classrooms may be arranged differently depending on the ages served in the classroom, the program’s philosophy, or the limitations to the physical space available. So, what does a high-quality indoor learning environment look like or include?

Variety of Interest Areas

Having numerous designated areas of play allows children to choose where and what to play. Ideally, areas for large group play, small group interactions, and cozy spots for individual play exist in a given space. Traditionally, these areas of play are called “centers” and may be named based on the type of equipment or materials provided for play. Play areas are delineated using shelving, carpets, or table placement. However, alternative methods include using baskets for organizing similar items in infant spaces, employing rolling carts or larger storage bins in temporary or shared areas, or configuring shelving units to accommodate distinct play zones on separate shelves. In any situation, these areas should be clearly labeled.

The chart below provides examples of play areas and what materials they might include.

“Center Name”	Infants (0–17 months)	Toddler–School Age (18 months–12 years)
Manipulatives	Rattles, large knob puzzles, Magna-Tiles, stacking cups, sorting boxes	Legos, puzzles, small blocks, sorting or sequencing items, lacing games
Dramatic Play	Soft hats, plush dolls, kitchen items (pans, large spoons)	Costumes, dolls, dishes, puppets, phones, kitchen items, office supplies, small appliances
Art/Sensory	Paper, jumbo crayons, sensory tubs, texture boards	Paper, crayons, markers, glue, magazines, play dough, beads, pipe cleaners
Library	Soft or board books, puppets, soft pillows	Books, puppets, story boards, newspapers, magazines, soft pillows
Science/Discovery	Sensory bottles, mirrors, discovery shoeboxes, shells	Magnifying lenses, magnets, sensory table with items to pour and scoop, sensory bottles
Gross Motor	Soft climbers, push/pull toys, pull-up bar	Balls, large push vehicles, stepping stones
Music	Maracas, xylophones, bells, tambourines, scarves	Maracas, bells, percussion instruments, scarves, CD player and CDs
Writing	Not applicable	Paper, clipboards, office supplies, variety of writing utensils
Blocks	Soft blocks, soft play people, large push vehicles	Wooden blocks, vehicles, block play people, traffic signs

Although the table identifies more traditional names for areas of play and items that areas of play may contain, those designing classrooms are not limited to what is listed above. For example, Montessori and Reggio Emilia schools have defined areas of play but may use different names.

Ideally, louder and more active centers should not be placed near the quiet and more calm centers, and the classroom should offer various opportunities for quiet, active, and messy/sensory play.

The goal is to ensure that children have multiple places to play, learn, and experiment with varying materials that support growth and development.

For more information about interest areas or items to include, visit the [Digital Resource Collection](#).

Visual Stimulation

Each classroom should have postings of child-centered materials placed along the walls, shelves, and/or the floor (for infants especially). These displays, when shown at the child's eye level, help children feel proud of their work and connected to their classroom and also promote positive language and social-emotional development.

Key items to display are as follows:

- Children's art and other work created in the classroom by their peers or teacher
- Learning posters such as colors, numbers, shapes, or the alphabet
- Photos of real places, things, and/or diverse people (including photos of family and the class)

Although items hanging from the ceiling or posted high on bulletin boards can be aesthetically pleasing, these will not be considered as posted at the child's eye level. For older children, some bulletin boards may be considered eye level.

Accessible Materials

Play and learning equipment and materials should be arranged to reflect children's interests and made accessible so children know where they may find things and can easily select and return them.

The following are some ways to ensure accessible materials:

- ☐ Shelving units
- ☐ Baskets or small containers/bins
- ☐ Trays
- ☐ Printed labels
- ☐ Photo labels

Variety of Materials

Having a variety of materials allows children to explore their learning environment and participate in multiple activities. It is also important that child care programs provide enough age-appropriate equipment and materials for all children in order to minimize challenging behaviors and altercations. Typically, equipment or materials provided for play are store-bought, manufactured items specific to learning; however, to support whole-child development learning, materials provided should also include non-stereotypical, multicultural, and real items. Interweaving additional items throughout the classroom, in multiple areas of play, helps the children make connections to the world around them.

For more information about what the materials might be for each age group or area of play, visit the [Digital Resource Collection](#). View the Category 4 Real, Multicultural, and Non-stereotypical Items document on the [Texas Rising Star Tools webpage](#) for more information.