

Parent Aware Tip Sheets

Making Small Spaces Work for Child Care/Early Education

Although high-quality child care programs have many things in common, they do not necessarily look the same. Some programs have spaces dedicated to each age group. Some programs use mixed age grouping and serve children of differing ages in one space. Some programs are large, some programs are small.

What are the space requirements in a child care/early education program?

Child care/early education programs must have enough space for the number of children in care. In center-based and family child care 35 square feet of space per child is required.

What should you think about when you are using small spaces for child care/early education?

When caregivers use small spaces for care some challenges and some opportunities present themselves. Small spaces can be cozy and comforting to the children in care. Children can easily become familiar with the materials, equipment and furnishings in small spaces. But small spaces also have some challenges. It can be difficult to provide a wide variety of activities. Physical activities such as climbing or group games are hard to implement. Caregivers caring for children in small spaces must thoughtfully plan the arrangement of the space and the implementation of the activities to make the most of the environment.

How should you organize your small space and equipment?

When arranging a small space for use by young children consider the following:

- Eliminate seldom used equipment, furnishings and materials. Since space is at a premium, put away those things that are not regularly used. Minimize decorations or any materials that are more storage than useful.
- Create multi-use areas. Arrange quiet activities near one another, arrange noisy activities together. But don't worry about creating a separate area for every type of activity planned in the program.
- Use visual dividers between spaces that do not take up precious floor space. For example, use rugs to define a block play area.
- Focus on open-ended, multi-use materials. Materials that can be used in many ways will continue to intrigue children day after day. These materials are good choices for small spaces because they are nearly always in use rather than taking up space. Popular open-ended materials include blocks, play dough, art & crafts, dolls and dress up clothes.

How should you plan activities and storage?

When planning activities for young children in small spaces:

- Make time for outdoor play every day. Outdoor time allows children to move and get important physical exercise. When children spend much of their day in small spaces that do not easily accommodate active play, outdoor time is especially important.

- Plan a few activity choices at a time. While it is important for children to have choices, they do not need to choose from all of the activities at one time. It is a good idea to put away a few activities so that children are not overwhelmed by too many options in a small space.
- Rotate toys and materials frequently. While it is a good idea to limit the number of choices available in a small space, children can become bored if they do not have enough variety. Caregivers should develop a plan to regularly rotate the toys that are available at any time.
- Manage the quantities of materials available at one time. For example, put out enough small blocks for two or three children rather than blocks for eight or 10 children. Then help children choose activities that are not already overcrowded.
- Use areas for multiple activities. For example, a table can accommodate art activities on one side and puzzles on the other side.
- Use unconventional, small scale storage options. To reduce the amount of floor space used by furniture, consider simpler, smaller options. For example, store a few books in a basket or a book bucket rather than a book shelf. Or use small suitcases for theme-based dress up clothes. Bring out a “community helper case” or an “at the beach” case for an afternoon. Other great portable storage options include tote bags, tackle boxes, dishpans and file boxes.

Small spaces can be delightful, warm environments for young children. Many of the same things that make large spaces successful are also important in small spaces. All spaces where young children receive care, regardless of size, must be safe, clean and focused on their needs.