



Table of Contents

- 6 Putting It in Perspective
- 11 Chapter 1: *Organizing the Classroom Environment*
- 25 Chapter 2: *Establishing Behavioral Routines*
- 41 Chapter 3: *Implementing Routines with Management Tools*
- 65 Chapter 4: *Preparing for Teaching and Practice*
- 83 Concluding Remarks
- 84 References
- 86 Glossary
- 90 Appendices

ORGANIZING THE CLASSROOM ENVIRONMENT

“Sharing responsibilities in the classroom community helps teachers and students work cooperatively and collaboratively to ensure success.”

Vicki Gibson and Jan Hasbrouck, 2008

There are many ways to organize classroom environments that ensure safe participation and efficient use. Teachers can create work areas that support intentional teaching and meaningful guided practice in small groups and options for learning center choices. Begin by determining available resources such as the amount of floor space and furniture in the room, access to health facilities, and needs for technology and storage areas. While evaluating resources, consider how many children will attend and participate in classroom activities.

Stand in the doorway of the classroom and scan the environment while thinking about possibilities. Consider placement options for furniture, and access around the room. Plan adjustments in the physical environment as necessary for children with special needs.

IN THIS CHAPTER

- Designating Classroom Work Areas
- Regulating Attendance in Learning Centers
- Selecting Activity Choices for Learning Centers
- Organizing Materials for Use and Storage



Ensure that entry areas and walkways remain uncluttered for safe access.

Consider how to use space and position furniture to ensure safety and allow:

- Clear visibility for monitoring children at all times,
- Safe access to all entry areas and walkways,
- Easy access to facilities for personal hygiene and handwashing,
- Sufficient space for any physical activity, either whole-group or small-group, and
- Storage space for instructional materials, either when in use or stored for use later.

Organizing the environment and assigning areas in the classroom should occur before furniture is physically arranged. Make decisions that ensure that the classroom environment will be structured to support teaching and practice.

Consider the following choices when making decisions about the physical classroom arrangement:

- Where will you create work areas for whole-group and small-group activities?
- How will you organize materials and supplies?
- Which wall areas or bulletin boards can be used to communicate expectations for children, other school personnel and support staff, and family members?

After you decide how the physical classroom space will be used, you will select management tools, routines, and procedures that promote compatibility and self-regulation, encouraging children to assume more responsibility for their own learning. Numerous suggestions for using management tools are included in this implementation guide. The tools are inexpensive and easy to construct and to use in classrooms as visual road maps for participation. The tools help children know what to do, how to participate, and when to perform.

Before discussing ways to teach and model efficient routines and procedures using these management tools, however, it may be helpful to provide more detailed information about specific areas that will help you prepare the environment to support teaching, guided practice, and collaborative practice in learning centers, using whole-group and small-group activities.

Designating Classroom Work Areas

There are many factors that affect decisions about the use of classroom space. Some areas will be used for whole-group activities such as creative movement, book reading and shared writing experiences, and collaborative discussions. Other areas in your classroom will be used for small-group instruction or collaborative practice in learning centers. Determine which work areas will require more space such as a Meeting Place for whole-group activities.

Consider these factors when assigning work areas:

- Large activity areas require more space—especially those that involve physical movement. These areas should be located away from any furniture with sharp corners or that could tip over if bumped.
- Small-group work areas often include furniture, such as a table and chairs, and shelving for supplies or materials.
- Work areas that involve technology may require safe access to electrical outlets.
- Small-group areas for activities that include more interaction and conversation during games or discovery activities should be located farther away from the teaching table and worktable to minimize distractions.

Select areas for learning centers and interactive, collaborative practice. Determine which centers will remain in your classroom all year, such as a home center, mathematics and science discovery center, or a literacy center.

Typically, you will need space for these work areas in your classroom daily and all year:

Meeting Place. Identify a large area that will be used for whole-group activities. Children will report to this area during opening or closing activities and during transitions. In this area, children will sit closely in a group, listen to stories, and participate in collaborative conversations and shared writing, in addition to engaging in interactive fine arts and physical activities. Ensure that there is sufficient room for children to move and participate safely. You may also have children return to this area during transitions between activities to read books or complete assignments in their work folders.

Teaching Table. A teaching table is an area where you will work with small groups of children and provide explicit instruction differentiated to their capabilities and needs. Usually this space includes a table, 4–6 chairs, and shelving to store materials. At the teaching table, children will receive high-quality instruction and feedback using new and challenging content and skills. Children will be encouraged to make comments, ask questions, and seek help.

Worktable. A worktable is an area reserved for small-group guided practice using previously taught content and skills. If available, a teaching assistant, special education provider, or language specialist can work with a small group of children and provide extended guided practice. If no other adult is available, children will meet at the worktable and work cooperatively together. Usually the worktable area includes a table and 4–6 chairs so that children can be seated while participating in games or project-based activities where they work with peers with or without direct adult supervision.

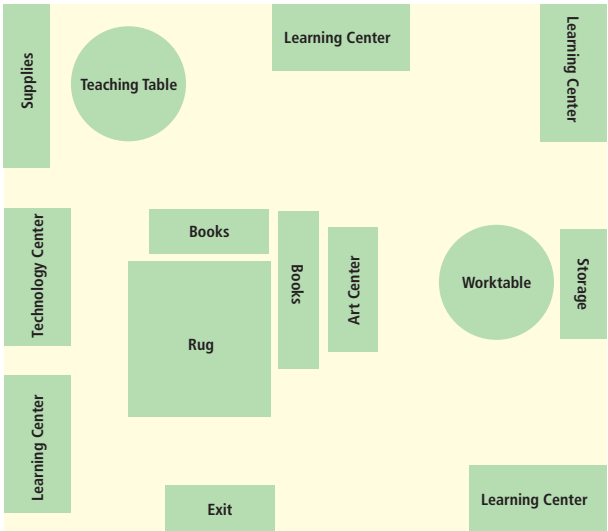
Learning Centers. The number of choice options for learning centers will depend on available space, materials, and preferences. Learning center activities may be aligned with curriculum content, themes, or skills that encourage children to interact and extend their learning using previously taught information. Preferably, children choose centers where they practice social and emotional self-regulation.

Assigning Space for a Teaching Table and Worktable

The term *teaching table* identifies a work area in your classroom where you will provide explicit instruction and feedback to a small group of children. Usually this area includes a table with 4–6 chairs and shelving or containers for storing supplies. When determining placement of the teaching table, some considerations about purpose and use are needed. Primarily, ensure that the teaching table is located in an area where there is less distraction from learning centers. Also, if electrical connections are needed for technology, ensure that there is safe access.

When you work with small groups of children at the teaching table, they have more opportunities to interact, express ideas, ask questions for clarification, and engage in collaborative conversations that enhance their understandings. Additionally, there are more opportunities for you to closely observe children’s responses to instruction and differentiate lesson content and pacing so that teaching is meaningful and children receive immediate feedback at the point of need.

The term *worktable* designates an area that will be used for extending practice using previously introduced content and skills. If a teaching assistant is available, the activities at the worktable can be used as guided practice to extend and reinforce learning. When no assistant is available, children work collaboratively in a small group completing activities that were previously introduced and require less direct adult supervision.



sample diagram for classroom setup

DISCUSSION POINTS 1

1. What in the text helps you realize that organizing the environment is necessary to provide high-quality, differentiated instruction?
2. What organizational changes would be necessary in your classroom to implement a teaching table, worktable, and learning centers? What furniture or supplies do you currently possess that would be useful? What additional furniture or supplies would you need?
3. How is the management system described in this implementation guide similar to or different from your previous practices using whole-group and small-group instruction?

How you use the teaching table and worktable will vary according to the number of adults in the classroom and the amount of instructional time available each day. Having a full-day schedule allows teachers to work with small groups at the teaching table both morning and afternoon. More information about options for use may be found in the section devoted to creating a Daily Schedule on page 42.

Teachers working in half-day and full-day programs alike often comment about the challenge to get everything done. Using tools and routines, as well as designated work areas, will help you manage simultaneously occurring activities at the teaching table, worktable, and in learning centers so that you use instructional time efficiently. Conducting simultaneous activities increases daily opportunities for children to receive high-quality, differentiated instruction and feedback, and collaborative practice in learning centers where children apply what they have learned using previously taught skills.



Effective classroom management routines help teachers ensure that all children receive high-quality instruction and practice opportunities.

Designating Areas for Learning Centers

Learning centers are collaborative practice areas where children participate in engaging, interactive activities aligned with previously introduced themes, concepts, and skills. Children share learning experiences and engage in collaborative conversations as they create, discover, and make connections by integrating old and new information. Also, children have opportunities to engage in productive play that strengthens their social and emotional development while enhancing academic learning.

Consider the type of centers and materials that will be included in your classroom. Determine how many centers will be included and ways that you will introduce and teach children how to participate. All materials and activities used in learning centers should be introduced in whole group and then used at the teaching table and worktable to clarify understandings. Having children use materials and participate in activities with adult supervision prior to their use in centers is helpful in many ways. First, children will know how to perform without additional directions. This will prevent interruptions while you are teaching another small group. Second, having access to instruction and feedback prior to participating in centers, children experience more success. They develop confidence in their competencies and begin to self-direct and assume more responsibility for their own learning.

Materials that require more guidance should be used at the teaching table and worktable for extended practice under the direct supervision of an adult to ensure safety and correct use. Some materials, games, or activities will need multiple practice opportunities before they are used in learning centers. For example, teaching children how to use scissors, glue, or paint, or manipulate math or science materials, should include discussions about safety and demonstrations for use and cleanup prior to inclusion in centers.

Providing prior instruction and guided practice using materials and participating in activities prepares children to:

- Successfully create and expand imaginations safely,
- Explore, discover, and extend their learning,
- Enhance their comprehension and apply skills successfully, and
- Participate in self-directed, productive play that is monitored but not directly supervised by adults.



Centers for early learners provide opportunities for children to engage in activities that develop academic skills as well as fine motor coordination and social skills through creative play.



Children exercise choice when selecting learning centers for collaborative practice.

Regulating Attendance in Learning Centers

As children develop cooperative skills and form trusting relationships, they learn to share and use materials safely and collaboratively. Many children will regulate their own behavior more successfully when they attend learning centers that include fewer children and choice options, along with more familiar materials and activities. It helps to teach children how to use materials at the teaching table and provide practice at the worktable prior to placing the same materials in learning centers.

Each small-group activity period includes simultaneously occurring activities at the teaching table, worktable, and learning centers. With guidance, children will learn to consider choice options and select a center choice. Providing choices also requires limiting how many children can participate in a center at one time. Setting standards for attendance in each learning center will proactively help with children’s decision-making and self-regulation.

Regulating attendance in each learning center ensures safety and facilitates cleanup during transitions. Most centers include activity options and materials that will accommodate 2–4 children, depending on the available space and the type of activity choices included in the center. Some centers may limit attendance to 1–2 participants due to availability of equipment or materials, or to encourage behavioral compatibility if children are working in a small space.

When the maximum number of children has been reached in a center, no other children can choose to go there during that time period. Children who are choosing centers understand and accept that a boundary has been reached and no more persons may attend. They must select another center. Children know they will have many opportunities to attend centers each day, so there are no behavioral issues when first choices are not possible. Learning to have an alternative plan and accept when something does not go as wished is a beneficial life skill for children to learn in school.

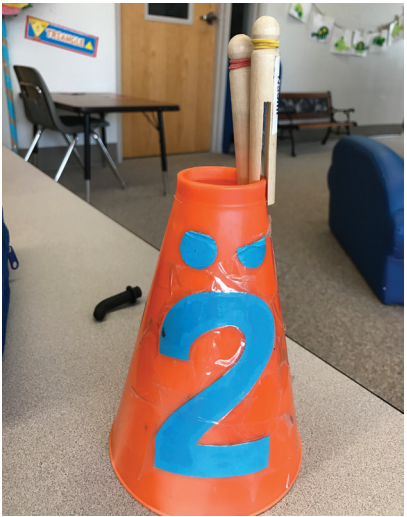
Also, when considering learning centers, plan for days when children, like adults, do not prefer or choose to be socially cooperative. In fact, some children prefer to play alone at the beginning of school because they feel safer and activities appear less overwhelming. Therefore, it is wise to include some center choices where the attendance is limited to 1–2 children.

Establishing a method for communicating expectations about how many children may attend each learning center at the same time is easy and affordable. You can create and use a sign or an athletic cone with a numeral printed or taped on it to regulate attendance in centers. Simply create a sign or use a cone and affix a numeral to indicate how many children may attend a learning center at one time. To avoid confusion, each learning center should have its own sign or cone.

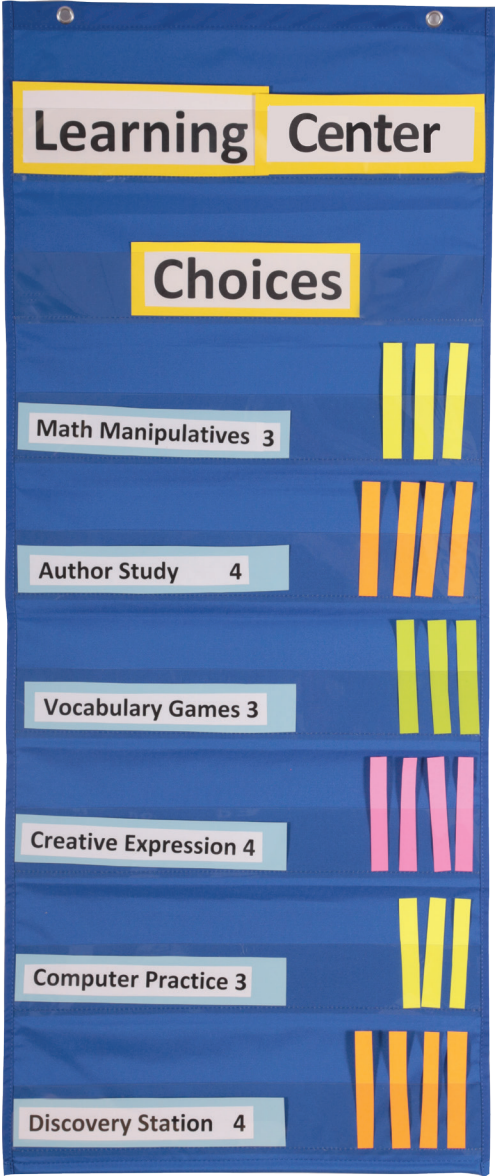
If children do not recognize words in print or numerals and the quantities represented by numerals, draw small shapes near the numeral on the cone or sign to illustrate how many children can attend the center. Combining the numeral with the shapes helps children understand expectations. Post the sign or set the cone near the entry of the learning center when the center is available for use. Remove the sign or cone when the center is closed and is not an option or choice.

Some teachers add other information to signs, such as:

- The name of a center and a photograph, icon, or geometric shape used to identify and name the center, e.g., home center, blocks, or creative dramatics, and
- The focus for instruction or subject or content area for a center, e.g., language, literacy, mathematics, or science.



Post a sign or cone near the entry of the learning center when the learning center is available for use. Remove the sign or cone when the learning center is closed and is not an option or choice.



Teachers working with young children may use craft sticks or small strips of colored paper to indicate how many children may attend a center at one time. As children choose that center, they take away one stick or strip of paper. When no more sticks or strips remain, the attendance limit has been reached and remaining children must make another choice.

CENTER IDEAS

To save planning time, teachers will use some centers that change each unit, while others remain largely the same throughout the school year. Here are some suggestions for reusable center ideas.

Art Center – Children engage in multiple artistic media (e.g., finger paint, watercolors, crayons, markers, chalk, clay, construction paper, etc.) for creative expression.

Blocks Center – Children use wooden or plastic blocks, or other connectable materials, to build various structures. Children may recreate patterns or shape designs, or engage in free play.

Books Center – Children select books to look at or read and discuss, using prompts provided by the teacher.

Listening Center – Children use technology with headphones to listen to recorded stories, songs, plays, or podcasts.

Math Center – Children use manipulatives to practice counting, sorting, or recreating patterns or shapes.

Puzzle Center – Children select puzzles to complete individually or with a work partner.

Science Center – Children engage in activities designed to reinforce or expand previously learned scientific information (e.g., colors and color mixing, weather patterns, animal attributes, ecosystem attributes).

Technology Center – Children use technology to gather information and extend learning.

Selecting Activity Choices for Learning Centers

Now that you have planned how to use space in your classroom and assigned areas for the teaching table, worktable, and learning centers, the next step is to select activity choices that will reinforce instruction and provide opportunities for collaborative practice. Most teachers create 4–6 learning centers that include choice options for about 10–12 children. Since two small groups of children will be working in assigned areas—the teaching table and worktable—you need choice options for learning centers that accommodate about half of the children in your class.

Activities included in learning centers that will remain in your classroom all year can be coordinated with themes, content, or skills-specific activities. In the beginning, offer fewer choices and materials to facilitate use and efficient cleanup during transitions. You can add more materials and choices later in the school year to maintain children’s interests, but keep things simple in the beginning.

Selecting materials and activities for learning centers usually occurs after you have created lesson plans and set your instructional goals for 1–2 weeks. When selecting materials and activities, consider children’s prior learning, experiences, and current capabilities. It is vital to ensure that the foundational skills, or prerequisite skills, have been taught and developed before asking children to perform in learning centers where there is less immediate adult involvement.

You should always model and introduce concepts and skills in whole group and explicitly teach them at the teaching table. You can extend children’s learning by providing additional practice at the worktable before placing materials and activities in centers.

Many teachers change materials or activity choices in learning centers every two weeks. The content, materials, and activity choices are usually selected to coordinate with changes in instruction and needs for practice. However, there is no set time for changing or rearranging centers in your classroom. When children are no longer choosing to participate in a particular center, it is time to make changes.

For additional suggestions about creative play centers, see Appendix 2.

Organizing Materials for Use and Storage

Organizing and storing materials safely and out of reach prevents problems. Children will explore interesting-looking things! Children need instruction that clearly identifies how and when to use materials, in order to prevent problems later. When considering storage options, decide which materials will be used most often and where to store them in the classroom. It is helpful to have materials stored at the point of use, especially for the teaching table, worktable, and fine arts center. Placing materials in or near work areas increases efficiency and facilitates cleanup during transitions.

When you introduce new materials, demonstrate and explain expectations for use, storage, and cleanup. Show children how to use supplies and materials safely and cooperatively. Provide frequent practice opportunities with constructive feedback, complimenting children’s compliance and efforts as they develop habits that may not be similar to those used at home.

Place materials not in use out of reach and preferably out of sight.



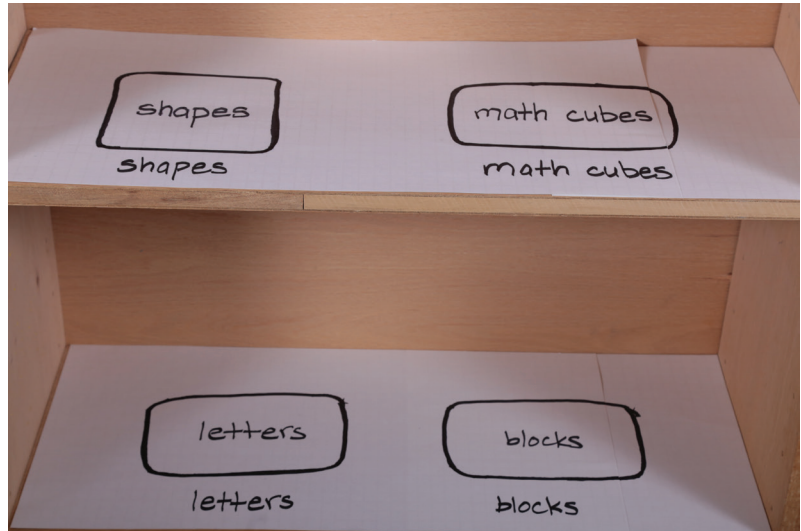
Store learning center materials in individual plastic bins. Include a label that identifies the name or theme of the learning center, and a list of contents.



Posting pictures of cleaned work areas helps clarify expectations so that children learn routines and procedures more quickly.

Consider these options for organizing and storing materials that will be used at a later date.

- Materials not in use can be stored in plastic containers or boxes with lids and stacked to conserve space. Position the stacked containers or boxes in a corner and cover with a tablecloth or sheet. Having the materials out of sight reduces children’s interest to explore what is in the containers and makes the materials appear new when you do use them.
- Select shelving and small containers that you can use to display currently needed supplies. Line the shelves with butcher paper and secure with masking tape. Use a permanent marker to trace the outline of each container on the butcher paper indicating where children should replace containers when not in use or at the end of an activity.
- Take pictures of each work area so that children can see where things should be placed or stored. Use the photographs to discuss which objects may or may not be used, how supplies and materials should be used and stored, and how to follow routines for efficient cleanup during transitions. Post the photographs near each work area or display all of them on a pocket chart. Children can look at the photographs and easily understand how work areas should look after cleanup.



Younger children learn cleanup routines more efficiently when storage procedures are clearly defined.

Once your classroom environment is organized and materials are stored safely, begin to develop simple routines that you can use to teach children so they know how to participate successfully. Take nothing for granted and over-teach expectations for performance. Frequently demonstrate how to perform, and consistently repeat your model. Have children mimic your model as you verbally explain the expectations again and again until children demonstrate understanding and compliance.

Remember to adjust your instruction when the directives you are teaching include new information. Speak slightly slower and use fewer words. Avoid overtalking or repeating directions differently the second and third time. Consistently use the same words and word order in your directions so that children process the information with understanding.

Provide short, simple directions and fewer choices and options initially. Reducing the number of things to think about helps children focus their attention and complete tasks. It also helps you! There is less to explain and monitor and less for children to remember when you use fewer words and shorter sentences. You will add more materials and choice options, especially in learning centers, after children understand routines and follow procedures.

Your and the children’s success will be directly correlated to the amount of time spent on role-play during the first weeks of school. Provide frequent opportunities for children to practice and receive coaching and feedback so they develop successful school habits for performance and require less support or prompting from adults. Frequently model and verbalize your thinking about ways to communicate respectfully, cooperate with peers, share and use materials, and act responsibly during all activities. Children learn by observing others, especially teachers. Model expectations often. Your behavior teaches more than your words!

DISCUSSION POINTS 2

1. What are the key factors to remember when designating areas for learning centers and storing center materials?
2. How does a teacher determine how many learning centers are needed at one time?
3. What learning centers would be useful in your classroom? How can you collect materials for those centers in ways that are inexpensive and efficient? What would be the best way for you to organize and store center materials?
4. What aspects of your current curriculum could be “redefined” as learning center activities?