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# *Examining the Role of the* **Classroom Environment** *in the Prevention of* **Problem Behaviors**

**A**s Early Childhood Educators it is likely that we will teach children who exhibit challenging behaviors that test our abilities. Typically, teachers have a “bag of tricks” that they attempt to implement in an effort to address misbehaviors after they have already occurred. These strategies may provide a short term solution but may be ineffective in the long run in preventing the challenging behavior(s) from recurring. Often, teachers are unaware that the more subtle aspects of the classroom’s physical and instructional environment are operating to maintain, if not exacerbate, these challenging behaviors.

Through a question and answer format, it is our intention to provide early childhood educators with specific strategies that we have found to be effective in *preventing* challenging behaviors through manipulation of the classroom environment. The following questions were selected based on a combination of the authors’ observations during classroom consultations and questions we frequently receive from teachers regarding challenging behaviors. Though many of these strategies may be well known, we have found throughout our work as consultants that it never hurts to be reminded!

## **Examining the Physical Environment**

The physical environment refers to the physical layout of the classroom. The placement of furniture, use of space, or any physical adaptations made to the classroom impact children’s level of independence. The size of the classroom, the color of the walls, the type of furniture, the amount of light, and the number of windows may all influence how children will learn (Dodge & Colker, 1996). Consequently, careful arrangement of the physical environment can help to deter challenging behaviors.

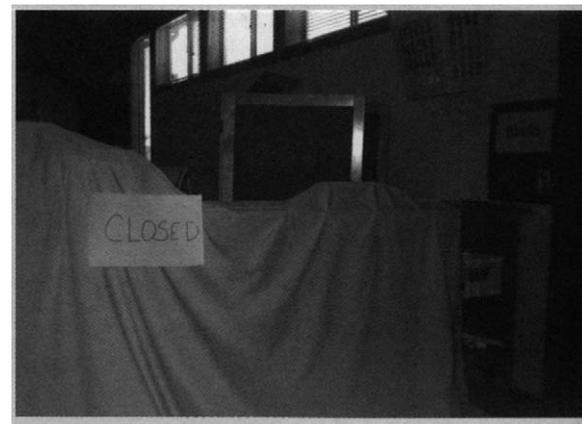


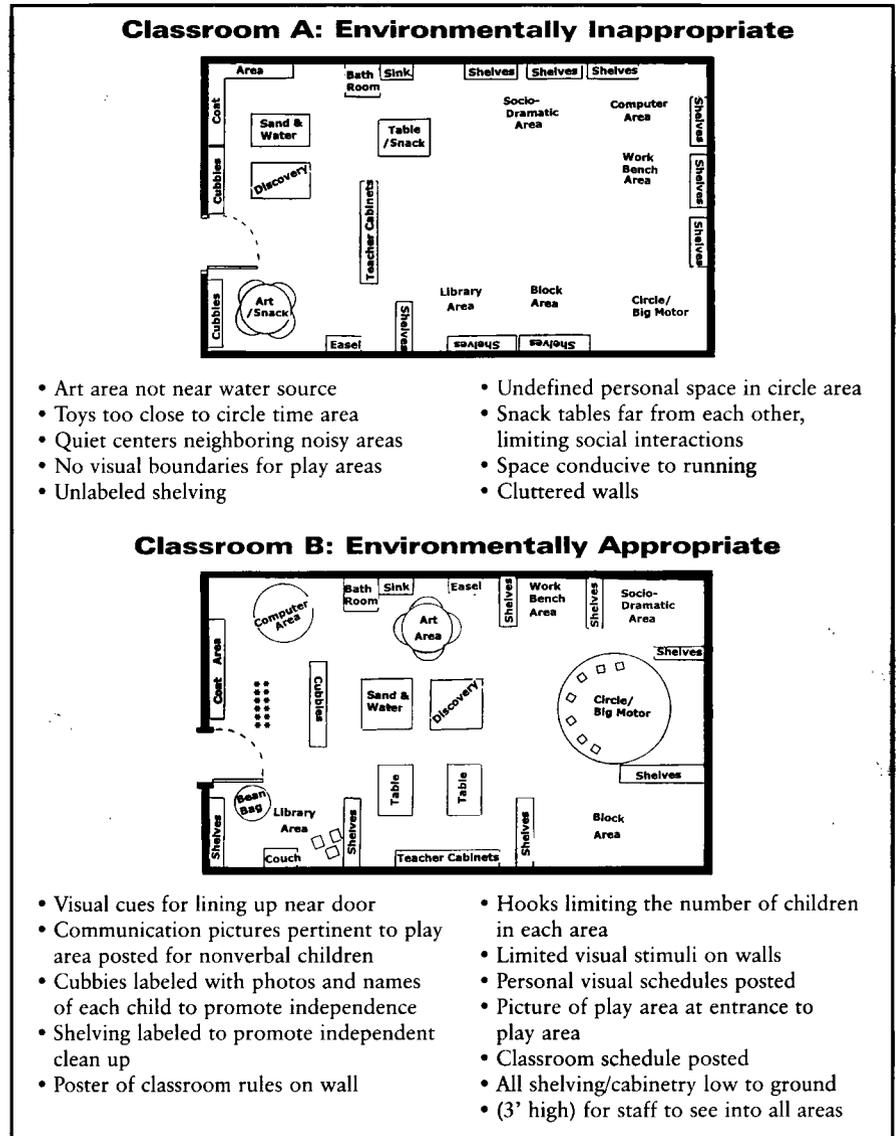
Figure 1: Bird's-Eye View of Environmentally Inappropriate & Appropriate Classrooms

**“How can I arrange my classroom to prevent frequently occurring problems such as running in the classroom, kids playing with toys when asked not to, children fighting over the same toy, and too many students in one play area?”**

Questions such as these should serve as indicators that your classroom may be poorly arranged. A classroom with well-defined play areas and clear boundaries is set up to visually remind children where, when, and how to play with materials. Figure 1 provides specific examples of well-defined play areas.

The physical arrangement of the classroom often encourages inappropriate behavior such as running. To help prevent this behavior, limit long and wide open spaces by strategically positioning furniture and by placing visual boundaries on play areas (e.g., using tape on the floor) to clearly delineate where areas begin and end.

Play areas that appear open and inviting may encourage students to grab toys from shelves at inappropriate times of the day. Frequently, children do not realize that it is not time to play with these enticing materials (especially when they are still in the process of learning the daily routine). Teachers can visually close play areas with a blanket or a sheet. Posting a “closed” sign or a “stop” sign at the entrance of a play center can also serve as a visual reminder. Too many students in one play area may result in fighting over toys, an inability to move around the center freely, or limited child-to-child interactions. It is



important to restrict the number of children in each play area based on the particular center's size (e.g., housekeeping may accommodate four children while the computer area may only accommodate two). Limiting the number of children allows them to work successfully in small groups and practice skills like negotiation and problem solving, turn taking and sharing materials, as well as establishing friendships (Dodge & Colker, 1996). Setting up a system, such as four hooks in each play center that

children hang a name card on, provides a concrete cue to children that a center is full.

**“Structured group time (e.g., circle time) seems to be the most difficult part of the day. How can I set up my circle time area in a way that will prevent challenging behaviors?”**

First, ensure that all items (e.g., toy shelves, book shelves) are removed from reach. Turn toy shelves around, cover materials with a blanket, or take materials out of the area entirely. Second,

Figure 2: Sample Daily Schedule

8:45-9:00	Table Time	Children have a choice between a theme related project or fine motor manipulatives. The activities are limited to the table area, giving children more structure. This allows children time to organize themselves and make the transition from home to school.
9:00-9:15	Circle Time	Large group activity that focuses on songs, finger plays, and social skills. Activities are sequential and repetitive. Props are used to facilitate socialization between children.
9:15-10:00	Center Time	Children may choose from activities in interest areas as well as participate in teacher-directed individual or small group activities. Play centers include: messy table, discovery, workbench, art, table toys, books, gross motor, housekeeping, blocks and computer.
10:00-10:15	Story Time	A story related to the weekly theme is read to the children. Hands-on props, visual materials, or puppets are used to increase engagement.
10:15-10:30	Snack	Children are assigned roles such as "Drink Captain" and "Snack Captain" to encourage peer to peer interactions.
10:30-10:40	Quiet Time	Children look at books in a cozy, soft, quiet area of the room until everyone has finished snack.
10:40-11:00	Outdoor Play	Children participate in outdoor motor activities.
11:00-11:20	Motor Group	Children choose between three play areas: fine motor (theme related art project), sensory motor (tactile materials) or gross motor (obstacle course).
11:20-11:30	Closing Circle	Children gather as a large group, sing favorite songs, talk about day's events, and prepare to go home.

arrange seating patterns to ensure that children are not sitting too close to one another. Make sure all children are at least one hand apart and can see the activity. Third, use items such as carpet squares, tape squares on the floor, or pictures taped to the floor to visually define each child's physical space.

**"How can I minimize distractions in my classroom?"**

Noisy areas are often too close to quiet ones. It is important to physically place quiet areas like the book area, table toys, or writing center away from noisier areas such as housekeeping, gross motor, or block area to help keep noise levels low. In addition, there may be too many visually distracting materials around the classroom, on the walls, and in the play areas. Try to limit such materials and rotate them throughout the school year instead of putting them out all at once. It is purported by Grandin (1995) that some students can be affected by certain types of lighting because they can actually see the flicker in the cycle of electricity. To limit distractions associated with lighting, try avoiding fluorescent lights and opting for indirect lighting or draping material on top of lighting to help create a calming effect. If you must use fluorescent lights, try to use the newest bulbs you can get as they flicker less. Also try placing a child near a window to minimize the effect of the light, but only if the child will not be too distracted by looking outside.

**Examining the Instructional Environment**

The instructional environment includes the daily routine of the classroom, transition times, the materials available for play at each center, and adult directions given to children. All of these activities are potential times to see problem behaviors. The consistency of the routine, the organization of transitions, the level of motivation to change activities, the kinds of toys available, and the way directions are given will impact the way children respond. Careful planning of the instructional environment can help deter challenging behaviors.

**“What can I do to ensure a smooth flow in the daily routine?”**

First, start by examining your daily class schedule. Is it balanced? For example, quiet times vs. active times, small groups vs. large groups, teacher directed vs. child directed. Are activities too difficult without adult assistance? Are activities clearly defined so that students can independently get started? Figure 2 provides an example of a well-balanced daily schedule with descriptions for each activity.

Most children feel safer and more secure when they can count on a consistent daily routine. Children, like most adults, want to know what will happen next. As a result, disruptions in the daily routine can be upsetting and cause tantrum behavior in some children. Children can be prepared ahead of time for changes through the use of visual schedules. A pictorial schedule representing the day’s events may be attached to a wall in the classroom and, if attached with hook and loop fasteners, easily manipulated as needed. Reviewing the changes at the beginning of the day with the entire class or individually may prevent tantrums from occurring later.

It is common for all of us to have certain times of the day when we function more or less optimally, and children are no exception. Many teachers are committed to keeping the same schedule year after year even though the students are different. Activities should be sequenced by degree of activity level (Whaley & Bennett, 1991). Proper sequencing of activities can positively affect child behavior

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(Krantz &

Risley, 1977). Try

altering the schedule to find the best time of the day for each activity. For example, you may want to start the day with a calming activity such as table time instead of an active exercise like outside time. If you notice children having consistent difficulty with the last 30 minutes of the day, you may want to provide them with a choice between a movement activity (obstacle course) in one part of the classroom and a quiet activity (modeling clay) in another part of the room.

**“How can I make transition times less noisy and chaotic?”**

Motivating children to clean up and independently begin the next activity is often quite a challenge. Additionally, if children spend too much time waiting for the next activity to begin they will frequently look for ways to entertain themselves. These problems can be resolved by making the transitions themselves entertaining.

Transitions, like other daily activities, should be planned. For example, play an upbeat song and challenge the children to clean up before it ends. Everyone who has cleaned up and is sitting ready for the next activity receives a stamp on their hand. Plan motor activities such as riding scooter boards, wheel barrow walks, or imitating animals to transition to the next

activity. Blink the lights or ring a bell as a signal to the children to meet you in the center of the classroom, then sing a song such as, “Touch your head, touch your head, touch your head, clap, clap.” This ensures that all of the children have stopped playing and are focused on you as you give the direction to clean up. A teacher can also avoid letting children “entertain themselves” by overlapping activities or having an adult available to greet children, get them started on the next activity, or sing songs with the group until everyone has transitioned.

Some children, particularly children with autism, may have a difficult time understanding or dealing with a transition from one activity or place to another. A child who consistently becomes stressed or cries when it is time to transition may benefit from an individual picture schedule. A picture of the next activity, place, or person paired with verbal instructions may help the child to better process information and prepare for what will happen next.

**“How can I motivate children who refuse to clean up or constantly tantrum when it is time to clean up?”**

The first thing to consider is whether or not children are being given enough time to choose and become deeply involved in activities. Time allotted to play in centers should be longer than any other time of the day (Figure 2). The second thing to consider is whether you give children ample warning that play time will end soon. If you are utilizing these

strategies and you still have a child who gets upset when it is time to clean up, you may need to place a buffer activity between a favorite activity and clean-up time. For example, one might coax a child who really loves the sand table to a less desirable activity five minutes before clean-up time. It will be easier for the child to give up the less desirable activity to participate in clean-up.

**“How can I increase positive social interactions such as sharing and turn-taking between my students?”**

Children are often expected to know how to share toys and cooperate with others when they have not been taught specifically how to do so. Teachers should provide duplicates of novel toys and high-demand items until social skill training has occurred. A formalized social skills curriculum should be used at the beginning of the school year and reviewed periodically as needed. Skill training may include strategies for getting a friend’s attention, sharing, asking for a toy, asking for help, and giving a play idea (Strain, Kohler, Storey, & Danko, 1994). Use puppets and role playing to challenge the children with a social dilemma such as wanting a toy another child has. Encourage children to problem solve ways to ask for the toy. Pair words with strategies such as tapping a friend on the shoulder or holding out a hand to request a toy for children who are nonverbal or language delayed. Adopting a formal way of reinforcing the students or letting them know that you value their use of these skills is an important step in getting them to continue using the strategies. Also, try pairing each child with a peer who exhibits appropriate behaviors and social skills.

**“How can I increase ‘on-task’ behavior and prevent problems such as wandering, boredom, refusal to participate, and poor attending?”**

There are several reasons why a child may have difficulty getting started with an activity or joining other children in play. The two most common reasons, however, are that the child is bored with the toys/activities or lacks the skills necessary to initiate or sustain play interactions. If the same toys, materials, or activities are used for several weeks in a row, the children will become bored (and when children are bored, they will misbehave). Novelty is the key to preventing boredom. Rotating new toys in and out of the classroom as well as adding theme-related materials to the classroom will capture children’s interest and facilitate more active engagement with materials. A toy rotation plan can increase engagement in typical children from 71% to 81% in less than a month (McGee, Daly, Izeman, Mann, & Risley, 1991). New toys can be added inexpensively to the classroom by swapping toys with other teachers, asking parents for donations, or visiting flea markets and thrift stores. Consider setting up a twice a month toy rotation system with two other classrooms in your area.

You will know if your play centers are effective if children are able to:

(1) make choices and select activities independently; (2) use available materials appropriately and creatively once inside an area; (3) persist at an





activity and remain involved for a designated period of time; (4) feel successful when they play in an area; and (5) help take care of materials (Dodge & Colker, 1996).

Children who refuse to participate in play activities may also be reacting to the structure of the play interactions. Adults tend to think they are “playing” with a child when, in fact, they are merely giving a series of directions. An adult can potentially give a child many directions in a short period of time like, “Johnny, put the man in the boat. Make him follow me. Where is his hat? What color is it? Give me the dog. Share the boat with Suzie.” “Play” like this can be boring for children as evidenced by their leaving the area, ignoring your requests, or exhibiting tantrum behavior. Instead, try commenting on or narrating the child’s play (e.g., “You put the man in the boat. He is floating down the river. The dog jumped in the boat!).

Wandering from play area to play area may occur when a child lacks the skills needed to engage in play with toys. In some cases, it may be necessary to teach a particular child how to play with toys appropriately prior to teaching him/her ways to interact with other children.

Activities or materials that are not appropriate for children’s developmental levels may also

result in a refusal to participate or tantrum behavior. When preparing lessons, selecting toys, or choosing activities keep in mind that the age and skill level of each child will be varied. In other words, adaptations will need to be made for some children while other children will be ready for more challenging tasks. For example, if your circle time consists primarily of talking to or reading to the children, you will most likely lose the interest of children with language delays or attention deficits. Once you lose a child’s interest, he/she may try to leave the activity, lie down, or try to engage another child. Adding visual props and hands-on manipulatives can provide all children, regardless of their skill level, the opportunity to have fun, participate, and learn from the lesson. Furthermore, children who are ready to be challenged can be assigned roles to act out stories with the props, or act as peer teachers by giving directions and helping classmates who need additional assistance.

When preparing large group lessons the following strategies can be used to prevent challenging behaviors and increase student participation: (1) limit structured group times to 15 minutes at the most for preschoolers; (2) add some kinesthetic motor movement to group times and give children chances to respond actively (e.g., clapping, jumping, acting out the story); (3) let children hold an item related to the theme or story or something that provides sensory feedback; (4) supplement your lessons with colorful images and props (i.e., puppets, photos); and

(5) vary the intonation and inflection in your own voice to make speech more engaging to the children.

Poor attention and inappropriate behaviors during large group activities may be prevented by utilizing group monitoring strategies. Effective monitoring strategies direct children to maintain appropriate instructional behavior and prevent the teacher from having to interrupt the lesson to attend to a child’s behavior. The classroom assistant quietly redirects children back to the lesson by whispering in their ear or by cuing the teacher to attend to a particular child. The classroom assistant is at an advantage in that he/she can watch the entire group and may observe behaviors the teacher may miss while teaching. When monitoring procedures are used effectively the teacher should never have to interrupt a lesson to attend to an inappropriate behavior. Observation of the group should be continual, and if all the children are on task and attending to the teacher, no other intervention may be necessary.

Monitoring strategies are also very effective in helping children who can only sit and attend for brief periods of time. When the teacher is unable to attend to a particular child, the monitor can quietly reinforce that child’s behaviors. For example, one might watch the child and every two minutes quietly whisper in his/her ear, “I like the way you are sitting,” or “You remembered to raise your hand.” The monitor can couple this statement with a touch if physical affection is reinforcing for the child. If a child has been sitting

appropriately for a long period of time and has not been called upon or talked to by the teacher, the monitor can cue the teacher, or remind him/her about the child with a small gesture.

Effective group monitoring requires that a second adult be available. Unfortunately, setting up for the next activity is often a priority for the classroom assistant, rather than helping the teacher keep children engaged. This would be a good time to look at the order of your daily routine. Schedule activities that need more preparation time right after play time. Plan ahead by closing a play center or table activity two to three minutes prior to clean-up. This allows the assistant time to set up for the next activity in that area as the children continue to play. The classroom assistant will then be ready and available to monitor children's behavior as they transition to and participate in more structured group activities.

If you do not have a classroom assistant, strategies such as providing visual props (e.g., masks, musical instruments, puppets, small animals) and offering jobs to children (e.g., carpet collector, song selector, line leader) during circle times can be outstanding motivators for children to attend to your lesson. Preparing materials ahead of time will likely be necessary, but the reward will be an attentive, actively participating group of children who all want turns with the novel materials.

#### **"How can I encourage appropriate classroom behavior throughout the day?"**

Many adults unwittingly fall into the trap of reinforcing inappropriate behavior with their attention. Part of our job as educators is to work on establishing student independence. Hovering over children who tend to misbehave is not a practical solution. As a proactive strategy, try encouraging appropriate behavior by praising the child or offering tangible rewards throughout the day when you see preferred behaviors (e.g., "Nice sitting quietly, Johnny!"). Build reinforcements into your daily routine such as kids clapping and cheering for one another, gaining access to a favorite item/toy, or earning a special classroom job. Research has shown that inappropriate behaviors can be dramatically decreased through the use of potent, child-selected reinforcers (Mason, McGee, Farmer-Dougan, & Risley, 1989). Be sure to make a "big deal" about children's appropriate behavior every time you see it initially and plan to gradually decrease the number of times you reinforce.

Finally, teachers can avoid spending too much time "putting out fires" by systematically teaching children the classroom rules at the beginning of the school year. Many teachers address classroom rules as infractions occur. For example, they see a child running and remind the child that running is not permitted. This is a reactive measure rather than a proactive strategy. Classroom rules stated in a positive way should be taught at the beginning of the school year, reviewed and posted as a continual visual reminder. Pictures of the desired behaviors should accompany each written rule (three to four classroom rules should be sufficient for preschoolers). When teaching the rules to children at the beginning of the school year use puppets or encourage the children to act out "breaking the rules." The class can then problem

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solve what the correct behavior should have been. Another effective strategy is to use rhyming or catchy phrases that children will remember. For example, "When I play inside my school, walking feet are really cool. When I play out in the sun, that's a good time to run and run."

Although this article focuses on changes to the classroom environment, we would be remiss if we did not mention that keeping the lines of communication flowing with the family and other care providers is critical in understanding the *whole child*. Challenging behaviors can be the result of poor eating and sleeping habits or changes in the child's home life. If there is not a chance for regular face-to-face contact or telephone conversations, try implementing a home-to-school journal that addresses issues such as behavior at home, food/diet, sleep, medication(s), changes in the home/family, and other issues you think are pertinent for the particular child. The journal also provides a written record of such information for future reference and identification of patterns of behavior.

**Summary**

Research has indicated that a carefully managed classroom significantly impacts a child's behavior and functioning (Bailey, Harms, & Clifford, 1983; Dunst, McWilliam, & Holbert, 1986; Twardosz, 1984). The environment can either promote or detract from the efforts of the teacher, classroom assistants, and other team

Figure 3: Classroom Organization and Planning

		<b>Key: 5=Super / 3=Adequate / 1=Needs Work</b>				
<b>1. Organizes and maintains classroom in an attractive manner</b>	5 4 3 2 1					
<input type="checkbox"/> maintains a stimulating and orderly environment						
<input type="checkbox"/> ensures that the room and toys are cleaned regularly						
<input type="checkbox"/> sets up and maintains individual interest areas (e.g., sensory table, art, blocks, etc.)						
<input type="checkbox"/> displays children's art work						
<input type="checkbox"/> reduces or removes distracting stimuli when necessary						
<b>2. Maintains an organized daily schedule</b>	5 4 3 2 1					
<input type="checkbox"/> ensures that daily routine follows an orderly and predictable sequence						
<input type="checkbox"/> considers attention span and abilities of children when planning the length of an activity						
<input type="checkbox"/> posts classroom schedule in an area visible to staff, parents, and outside visitors						
<input type="checkbox"/> follows schedule in a predictable manner but allows for flexibility						
<input type="checkbox"/> provides a balance of activities (active/quiet, teacher directed/child directed, individual/small group/large group)						
<input type="checkbox"/> effectively plans and paces transitions; waiting time is minimal						
<input type="checkbox"/> prepares for transitions; supports children as needed and provides children with sufficient notice that a transition is coming						
<b>3. Arranges the environment and daily routine to support independence</b>	5 4 3 2 1					
<input type="checkbox"/> sets up and maintains individual interest areas (e.g., sensory table, art, blocks, etc.)						
<input type="checkbox"/> uses low furniture to separate play areas and reduce distraction						
<input type="checkbox"/> labels shelves with pictures of materials to support independent clean-up						
<input type="checkbox"/> places materials on low shelves making them readily accessible to children						
<input type="checkbox"/> establishes a system for children to choose and transition between play areas (name tags, necklaces, clothes pins etc.)						
<input type="checkbox"/> creates a predictable sequence within the daily activities (e.g., circle time includes, "Hello song," introduction of themes, choosing play areas)						
<b>4. Plans easily recognized unit themes</b>	5 4 3 2 1					
<input type="checkbox"/> selects themes that reflect children's interests and abilities						
<input type="checkbox"/> introduces and discusses themes during large group activities						
<input type="checkbox"/> creatively incorporates and embeds themes into play areas						
<input type="checkbox"/> brings materials related to the theme into the classroom						
<input type="checkbox"/> plans complimentary activities and experiences						
<b>5. Encourages teamwork</b>	5 4 3 2 1					
<input type="checkbox"/> encourages exchange of ideas, sharing observations, and discussion of new strategies						
<input type="checkbox"/> delineates roles and responsibilities to ensure smooth flow of daily routine						
<input type="checkbox"/> team meets as a whole to plan for themes and activities (regular ed & special ed together)						
<input type="checkbox"/> posts staff's duties (weekly) to ensure expectations are clear plans for all staff members to share in classroom responsibilities						
<input type="checkbox"/> communicates information regarding child needs, interests and programming goals with all staff members						
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members. The classroom should be arranged not only to support learning but to deter challenging behaviors. It is a good idea to reexamine the physical and instructional environment of your own classroom several times throughout the school year. One way of doing this is by using Figure 3 as a tool for self-evaluation.

No single environmental strategy will be sufficient for deterring misbehavior, especially for children with significant challenges, but applying multiple strategies in a consistent manner is a far more efficient and effective approach than responding after the fact. We realize that there are many challenging behaviors (e.g., hitting, biting, noncompliance) that are of concern to teachers and that these behaviors are often influenced by

factors beyond the scope of the classroom environment. For more information on responding to problem behaviors after they have occurred, read *A demonstration of behavioral support for young children with autism* (Dunlap & Fox, 1999).

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