

Manipulating The Environment

When working with children, especially those exhibiting “challenging behaviors”, the old saying “an ounce of prevention is worth a pound of cure” is especially true. Although most practical advice focuses on correcting children’s “bad” behavior, manipulating the physical environment can often help prevent misbehavior in the first place.

You can start by assessing the physical environment and how it might affect the children’s behavior. Move among the various activity areas and study them from a child’s perspective. Observe traffic patterns, interactions among children, and where behavior problems occur. Then ask yourself, “Can the environment be changed to prevent misbehavior? If so, how?”

Following are some examples of typical misbehaviors and possible ways to rearrange spaces to improve the situation:

1. *The child jostles the other children during seated activities and/or the child has difficulty remaining seated.*

- Spread the tables and chairs out so the children don’t bump into one another.
- Create enough space for children to move around without disrupting others.

2. *The child plays with pens, scissors and other supplies.*

- Reorganize the supplies so that they are in bins/baskets that can be put away between activities.
- Hand out supplies immediate prior to activity and collect them as soon as the activity is over.

3. *The child has difficulty following directions and/or completing activities.*

- Write the directions on flipchart paper. Break the directions down into small parts. Post the directions on the wall where the children can see them and you can help them complete each task.

4. *The child interrupts during discussions or when reading aloud.*

- Provide a speaking stick. Children only speak when they hold the stick.

5. *The children run through the room even when told to walk.*

- Rearrange the furniture, eliminating long corridors, to discourage running.

You may also need to adjust your activity schedule if the children seem to be misbehaving often. Children have short attention spans and they need physical activity.

Here are some tips:

- Offer several short, 15- 20 minute activities rather than one long activity.
- Mix sit-down activities with games and activities that allow the children to move around.
- Give them a warning before moving to next activity. For example, tell them they have two more minutes to finish their project then you will start the next one.
- Have some extra activities or “solo” games for children who finish an activity before the other kids.
- Have plenty of clean-up supplies so they can all help clean after each activity.

In summary, you can prevent a lot of misbehavior from occurring by adjusting the physical space, schedules, and location of materials.