

Module: **Developmentally Appropriate Orientation and Mobility**

Session 4: Motor Development and Movement

Handout K: Defined Spaces

Lowry, S.S. (2004). *Defined spaces*. Chapel Hill, NC: Early Intervention Training Center for Infants and Toddlers With Visual Impairments, FPG Child Development Institute, UNC-CH.

A defined space is any area in which meaningful objects are kept in predictable, accessible, and easily detectable locations. Defined spaces provide incentives for movement, exploration, and independent interaction with the environment. The use of defined spaces should change and expand as the child grows. They should be viewed as lifelong organizational strategies to enhance efficiency, self-reliance, and confidence.

Key factors

Defined spaces should be individually designed according to the needs and abilities of the child, the characteristics of the setting, and customs of the family, caregivers, and teachers. The following key factors are critical for developing defined spaces that actually facilitate motor and cognitive development.

- Predictable storage of objects
- Objects highly meaningful to the child
- Space and objects accessible using current motor and postural abilities
- Opportunities for making choices are provided
- Space is easily detectable

Designing defined spaces

The primary play space should be located in a central area, where the child and family tend to spend time together. Time spent in a play space should not replace opportunities to socialize with family and peers. An infant who is not yet moving may need only a single, small play space in the family room. If the family spends significant time in more than one living area, the infant may need additional spaces.

As the child becomes older and more mobile, the size, number, and type of defined spaces should change. An infant who rolls and scoots well may need a larger version of the original play space, plus additional single toys ("spots") arranged in two or three locations in the same room. The child who moves from room to room may benefit from several types of defined spaces, such as one or two "floor spaces" in different rooms, "spots" in several places throughout the house, a "kitchen space," and an "eating place" for promoting self-feeding. Parents and classroom teachers should determine how

many and what types of spaces the child can realistically manage in the course of a typical day. A typical preschooler may use multiple defined spaces that consist of personal play and self-care areas that are merely well organized and accessible. These may look no different than the same areas in other homes, but will be predictably and efficiently arranged and maintained.

Method

The intention of the defined-space strategy is to provide opportunities for environmental interaction when the child is playing independently. The ultimate goal, as parents, interventionists, and therapists, should be to promote optimal play skills that occur spontaneously in daily routines. This handout should be used to supplement direct intervention, therapies, and adult-facilitated play. Guidelines follow:

1. Select objects, materials, and toys that are favorites of the child's. Children with visual impairments may be interested in a limited number of conventional toys. Add household objects, unusual textures, and novelty items that children like. Cause-and-effect and switch toys should be considered. Arrange the space and show the child, using sounds and touch, what items are there and where each is positioned. Observe the child over several trials to determine how frequently the objects are found and how motivating they are. Renew interest by occasionally providing a sound cue. Adjust the size of the space, the arrangement, and the types of objects as needed, then leave them for an indefinite period.
2. Return the child to the play space frequently throughout the day, showing the child each time where two or three of the favorite items are. Allow the child to play independently, but periodically stop to help him re-engage with the toys and objects in the space. Allow children to move out of the space at will; return them again when they appear bored or when play becomes disorganized.
3. Help reach for and re-place objects. When children are young, caregivers and interventionists will need to re-place objects to their positions when children are finished playing with them. If possible, children should assist the caregivers and interventionists, even indirectly, in re-placing the toys. Later, caregivers and interventionists should assist children; ultimately children should be expected to re-place the toy or personal item independently, with reminders.
4. Invite peers to join children in the play space and play with the same materials. Older peers should be expected to re-place the objects when finished. Caregivers and interventionists will need to re-place items regularly in a setting with very young children, such as a toddler classroom. Predictability will probably be sporadic in this kind of setting.

Variations

Defined spaces vary greatly depending on the intended use, the available setting, and the needs of children and caregivers. Examples of defined spaces for home and childcare classrooms are presented below.

Play space

- Floor space. Blanket or quilt on the floor with individual toys and objects around the perimeter and borders created on two to three sides by furniture, walls, etc.
- Pull-up space. Floor space, as above, arranged beside sofa, upholstered chair, or low, stable shelves; additional toys and objects attached to vertical surface or stored on sofa seat or shelf, used to promote pulling to stand and cruising
- Crib. Use only as a secondary play space and only if child enjoys waking periods in the crib, with individual toys, objects, and textures placed and attached on sides and above; make sure overhead objects are secure and supervise the child
- Sitting center. Adapted seating with toys and objects secured or stored within child's reach beside, in front, and above using PVC frames, tray, adjacent shelves, and attachable toys
- Playpen. Use only as secondary play space; out of vogue but sometimes the best alternative for parents who need containment; toys, objects, and textures placed and attached on sides and vertically; provides opportunities for pulling to stand, cruising, and first steps, but use only for brief, infrequent periods
- Play station. Floor space with small throw rug or mat of contrasting texture or color; objects and toys in containers (small cookie sheets, plastic baskets, or shoeboxes) or on low, stable shelves
- Play box. Three-dimensional space created with large appliance box or small table (nonwalkers only), with toys and objects attached and stored inside
- Spots. Individual small toy, switch, or activity panel attached to a doorknob, cabinet, sofa, or wall near a meaningful landmark; can be used as an object symbol to represent the activity or area nearby
- Toddle town. Three-sided center with toys and objects stored on lower, middle, and upper shelves; small table in center used to provide secure walking space and facilitate quality postural transitions

- Traditional center. Toys and objects meaningful to the child added to existing objects; declutter if necessary, and add a carpet square or runner to mark location of favorite objects
- Obstacle course. Play and motor equipment in predictable arrangement and used routinely, with a design that lends itself to returning to beginning of course independently; incorporate motor planning, postural transitions, prepositional concepts, etc., but add or remove small sections at a time

One-on-one

One-on-one play incorporated into familiar play space; adult uses shelves or other storage to store objects and resources in clearly marked, predictable location; child locates a named item or chooses between two or three, completes task, then receives assistance to replace them; watch for generalization to free-choice playtimes

Eating place

Highchair tray, placemat at table, tray at table, predictable arrangement of utensils, cup and bowl; table, chair, and nearby landmark (e.g., sink or trash can) in predictable arrangement; assigned and marked chair for the child; lunch tray or utensils routinely kept at nearby landmark so child can get and bring them to the table 1 to 3 feet away

Kitchen space

Spots, play box, or eating place set up in kitchen; special cabinet designated and marked containing child-safe pots, lids, plastic containers, small cans of food, spoons, whisk, etc.; cabinet or drawer designated for child's personal utensils, cup, bowl, plate to obtain independently within routine; juice cup or snack stored in designated place inside refrigerator door child allowed to obtain independently

Self-care center

Personal items stored in predictable positions within arm's reach or a few steps of where they will be used in daily routine; bathing, brushing teeth, dressing, snacking, simple chores, etc; use textures, braille, special features, small baskets, and trays to mark items as needed

Outdoor space

Area in backyard defined by play equipment, furniture, garden, fencing, wind chimes, and other points of interest; area located within a few feet of door for ease of access; predictable storage for smaller outdoor toys, wheeled vehicles, and push cart located beside door; radio or music used as sound source to return to door