

Physical Environments for School Age Children in Long Day Care

Quality Improvement and Accreditation System

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There are a variety of long day care services that provide outside school hours care (OSHC) for school age children. Some have separate areas specifically planned and designed for school age children while others have environments that require older and younger children to share spaces and resources. Regardless of the space, physical layout and resources of the service, staff should plan physical environments that consider the needs and interests of early and middle childhood aged children equally.

Planning and evaluating physical environments

The physical environment provided for school age children influences the quality of their experiences at the service. Long day care services should consider special requirements that older children have when planning and organising environments for them.

Staff should have expertise in caring for school age children in this age group so that their needs and interests can be properly catered for. For example, they could think about the balance of active and quiet play that children are likely to need before school and when they return after a full day in the school environment.

Physical environment models

The separation of older and younger children into different physical environments is one model that many long day care services use for caring for school age children. In this model, separate spaces and resources are made available for school age children, allowing staff to focus on their specific needs and interests. Mixed age grouping where spaces and resources are shared can also work successfully. However, thought should be given to providing an environment that allows time for older children to play freely without jeopardising the safety of younger children.

Regardless of the physical environment, care for school aged children should be viewed as an integral and important part of the long day care program. Services should ensure that the specific needs of older children are considered equally alongside those of younger children. Caring for school age children in long day care should not be seen as an 'add on' service to families and children but as a crucial aspect of the care and education of children in our community.

Physical space

Long day care services should carefully consider the space needed to enable school age children to engage in a balance of vigorous play, quiet play and relaxation after a day at school. Consideration should be given to how much indoor and outdoor space will be required by the number of school age children in care. As a guide, services can refer to the *National Standards for Outside School Hours Care Services* for suggestions on adequate indoor and outdoor space.

Services should make sure there is enough space to prevent overcrowding and to promote positive interactions and relationships between children. When planning experiences, enough space should be provided to accommodate the activity that is likely to take place. For example, for charcoal drawing a small table may be all that is needed, whereas large construction or drama and dance activities will need more space. It is useful to discuss with children the limits for the number of children able to participate safely in each activity. The provision of adequate space for children's play will also assist in managing noise levels.



Indoor Environments

Layout of space

When considering the layout of the space used for caring for school age children, the same principles used for arranging spaces for younger children can be applied. To promote an interesting and engaging environment, it is useful to divide up areas to create smaller inviting spaces and zones. Quiet and private play areas can be separated from noisy and messy areas to promote harmonious play and interactions between children.

Avoid arranging large open spaces as this can create boredom for children and encourage running, shouting and distracting activity. In this environment children may find it difficult to focus on and enjoy activities or to find privacy and quietness. Creating smaller spaces allows children to focus on activities and will minimise interruptions, noise and accidents. Smaller spaces also create opportunities for quiet conversations and are ideal for homework.

Inviting, comfortable environments

An inviting, comfortable environment that is appropriate for school age children's needs will send a positive message that they are welcome and respected. The aesthetics of the environment for older children will also influence the way they participate in and value their surrounds.

A welcoming environment can be created by personalising the spaces used by older children so that their interests and experiences are reflected. A simple way to make an environment inviting is to create a home-like aesthetic. This can be achieved using table arrangements, sofas, rugs and soft furnishings. The use of personalised items such as photographs, artifacts, plants and displays of children's work and creations can also contribute to a home-like atmosphere. School age children should be involved in decisions about how space is organised and made to look pleasing.

Toilet facilities

Long day care services should allow easy access to private toilet facilities for older children as school age children require privacy when toileting. Children in their middle childhood years will be maturing and may be self conscious about their physical development. Girls of school age may be menstruating and require facilities for the hygienic and private disposal of sanitary products. Hygienic handwashing facilities should also be provided.

Safe environments and supervision

A safe physical environment allows children to play safely and ensures staff are free to supervise and interact with school age children. Risks can be minimised by ensuring the safety of buildings, grounds, equipment and furniture, and the safe storage and use of dangerous products.

Each situation needs to be assessed by staff to determine the level of supervision required. This will depend on the activity's difficulty and potential risks. Direct, constant supervision should be used for high risk activities and for activities that children are attempting for the first time. Scanning, listening and anticipating children's play can be used to supervise larger groups of children who are engaged in low risk activities.

Children naturally interact with the environment in an exploratory way, increasing the potential for injury, particularly when children are using new equipment or developing new skills. Identifying, assessing and engaging the potential for injury will assist staff to minimise injury.



Outdoor environments

Outdoor environments are valuable for older children to roam, play and relax after being in a classroom throughout the day. Access to open space and simple activities goes a long way toward supporting children's development and encouraging them to be active. Equipment such as balls, frisbees, skipping ropes, elastics and pavement chalk can be readily provided by most long day care services for use by older children. A range of group and individual activities will encourage maximum participation by children, as will sporting, music and dance activities.

Most activities that are offered inside can also be offered outside. Staff should consider opportunities for encouraging older children to use outdoor spaces to promote their fitness and overall development.

Questions to consider when planning physical environments for older children:

- Do staff put time and effort into planning and evaluating the physical environment for older children?
- Are dedicated spaces available for the school age children within, or separate to, the long day care environment?
- What are the strengths of the physical environment that you provide for the older children? What are the weaknesses?
- How can the spaces and resources be improved to allow older children to play and relax freely?
- Is the physical environment safe and adequately supervised?
- Does the physical environment minimise conflict between children by allowing enough space and suitable resources?
- Do staff minimise times when children are required to do the same thing at the same time?
- Does the environment allow children and staff to interact positively with each other?
- Are the resources used appropriate to the interests and needs of school age children?
- In a mixed age environment, how are the needs, interests and safety of older and younger children accommodated?
- Are there opportunities for school age children to be involved in planning and organising the environment?



Resources

Materials and resources that can be used flexibly with older and younger children are useful for long day care services that cater for school age children. Art and craft materials, music, balls and ropes are some of the basic resources that can be shared by older and younger children. However a 'one size fits all' approach to resources does not always work when planning for older children. Services should provide a range of resources specifically suited to older children such as games, books, fine motor resources and construction materials.

Try to find times and spaces where older children can enjoy using these materials separate from younger children. This will reduce conflict between older and younger children and can minimise potential safety risks to young children that equipment for older children can create.

Environments for mixed age groups

Environments that allow older to mix and play with younger children provide rich opportunities for children's development and learning. Older children can learn and develop a strong sense of self worth by caring for and helping young children, and younger children can gain from the support of school age children.

It is important to ensure, however, that older children are not expected or required to care for or supervise younger children. This is neither fair nor appropriate for the skill needs and interests of older children. Mixed age grouping also provides valuable opportunities for siblings to spend time together and share experiences.

When planning environments for mixed age groups, consider the needs and interests of individual children and try to arrange the environment so that there are few instances where everyone is expected to do the same thing at the same time.

The service's physical space and resources should be provided in a way that meets the needs of all children and does not disadvantage one age group or the other. There will be times when the interests of older children are not appropriate for younger children, for example some music, television programs and particular sport and play activities. Therefore in mixed group environments staff should provide times for older and younger children to play separately.

References and Further Information

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