

Classroom Special

Creating Environments That Sustain Children, Staff, and Our Planet

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Early childhood educators know that a child's values are formed before age five, yet our field has done little to teach young children how to be good stewards of the earth. We know that young children learn by watching others, yet we have rarely been environmentally conscious role models. This article discusses what early childhood practitioners can do to set a good example for children by demonstrating ways to be more in tune with Mother Earth. By doing this, we can also create environments that are better for children.

Green building design

The LEED (Leadership in Energy and Environmental Design) green building rating system is a voluntary US standard for developing high-performance and sustainable buildings. LEED rates buildings as Certified, Silver, Gold, or Platinum depending on whether they are "pale" or "dark green."

Public schools in the United States have led the way in LEED certified buildings for children; however, I know of very few childcare centers that are LEED certified. This situation may change, as nine major U.S. cities have adopted ordinances requiring that all new buildings be certified by LEED. Building green means less energy and water consumption, less impact on landfills, less global warming, and a healthier environment for children and staff. The payoffs are environmental benefits as well as improved health, financial incentives, and reduced operating costs.

While making green selections might cost more in the beginning, the long-term savings can be substantial. Choices described in this article can be

applied to new construction or renovation as well as for the day-to-day operation of a center. Let's start from the beginning.

Site selection

It is important to select a site that is environmentally healthy, which requires testing both soil and water for a variety of contaminants. While these risks may seem obvious, I was recently asked to evaluate a former glue factory for conversion into a child care center. Needless to say, this project never got off the ground.

An environmentally healthy site is also one that is far from large highways. Traffic pollution sensitizes a child's airways, which triggers allergies and inflammation. Asthma in children aged three to five increased 160 percent during a recent 14-year period according to the Harvard Medical School.

Choose a site where the building can receive maximum daylight. Save as many mature trees as possible during construction by protecting the tree's *drip line*, the area under the tree where the branches stop. Not only is shade required for the outdoor play area but it can also cut heating and cooling costs. Plants can provide children with the hands-on experience of developing empathy for nature and also control water run-off. Be sure to use water-efficient plants that are not toxic to children. This can be achieved by planting species native to your geographic area.

Energy efficiency

Consider using occupancy sensors or timers to control the lighting, so

lights are off when the classroom is vacant. Programmable thermostats and energy-efficient appliances also cut costs. Many utility companies offer free energy audits that can reveal simple ways to reduce emissions, such as sealing and insulating heating or cooling ducts.

When choosing center transportation, whether to purchase or to use on contract, look for transportation that is energy efficient. Encourage public transportation, if possible, for staff and when taking the children on school field trips.

Air quality

Air filtration systems reduce pollen and allergies. The use of low VOC (Volatile Organic Compound) materials such as paint, adhesives, caulking, and carpeting can improve air quality tremendously. I just painted the interior of our home with "green" no-VOC paint and was pleased with both the looks and the lack of a chemical odor.

The ability to open windows is desirable, as is a well-ventilated diaper-changing station. Diaper pails should be emptied several times during the day to cut down on odors and the spread of germs.

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