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Clarke McGibben

University of Montana, Clarke.mcgibben@umontana.edu

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ALONE CENTERS: PRIVACY RETREATS FOR YOUNG CHILDREN TO MANAGE EMOTIONS AND SEEK SHELTER FROM OVERSTIMULATING ENVIRONMENTS

Clarke a. McGibben

Clarke McGibben currently work as an early preschool teacher at The Children’s Center in Missoula, MT. The center is NAEYC accredited and a STAR 4 rated program through the Best Beginnings STARS to Quality Program in Montana. Clarke earned a B.S. in Speech and Hearing Sciences from Portland State University and is currently pursuing dual M.Ed. degrees from the University of Montana in Curriculum Studies with initial teaching licensure for K-8 and P-3 Early Childhood Education.

Children often become overstimulated in their early childhood environments, and that constant overstimulation has potential impacts on cognitive development. In order to best support the emotional needs of the children, a solitary space should be provided and made available at all times in order to provide a refuge for them to retreat to when they are feeling overstimulated, frustrated, tired, or sad. Research has found that this space should be enclosed and away from noisier parts of the classroom. Additionally, this space should include materials to stimulate sensory needs such as calming bottles, different textures of fabric, books, and other items that may help the child regain control of their emotions so that they may communicate their emotions and needs.

INTRODUCTION

Young children are learning from everything in their environment, and it is often overlooked that these spaces can be overstimulating. Some environments do not provide spaces for children to retreat to when feeling overwhelmed, overstimulated, tired, sad, or when they simply want to be alone. Children who are frequently overstimulated may actually experience damage to their cognitive development. Spaces that are filled with other children or adults or that are too busy with colors, toys, sounds, etc. can create a high-density environment that may cause some children to act out behaviorally or break down emotionally. According to Lowry (1993), “The available evidence indicates that the continuous presence of closely spaced siblings and other children in the young child’s environment is negatively related to the child’s cognitive intellectual development” (p. 130). Early childhood environments should include spaces for solitary retreat for the children in the space so that there is an, “...opportunity to think and dream, engage in uninterrupted concentration, regain control of emotions, and unwind after intense periods of interaction.” (Bullard, 2014, p. 100)

Early childhood educators understand the importance of teaching children about emotions. Maxwell (2007) states that, “Young children need to learn how to interact with other people and how to regulate their own behavior” (p. 230). Providing refuge spaces designed specifically for overwhelmed children to retreat to, where materials to help them communicate their feelings are also provided, will allow them the chance to, “...retreat to rehearse aspects of behavior that will later be used in a social context. They may just need time for regrouping and self-enhancement and seek physical and psychological aloneness to do so” (Lowry, 1993, p. 132).

As adults, we expect that others around us give us the space and privacy when we are feeling tired, overstimulated, stressed, or upset (Lowry, 1993, p. 133). By not providing an area for children to retreat to we are not valuing their need for privacy even though we expect them to learn to give adults privacy and space. Lowry (1993) explains that, “Periods of being alone, playing alone, and having privacy of one’s own area or space are important elements in feelings of individuality and self-sufficiency. Private spaces are crucial to the development of self-concept and personal identity” (p. 133).

While safety is the number one priority for the children in our care, it is important that these alone areas are enclosed so that the child may have a feeling of disengagement from the environment to regain their emotions or rest their tired bodies. This can be done safely through a variety of approaches. For example, mesh fabric allows the child to feel hidden from others, but allows the caregiver to still view the child. Gramza (1970) states “The essential feature...lies in the encapsulations of a relatively small amount of space into which a child can enter and experience variable degrees of sensory discontinuity from the larger surrounding environment” (as cited in Bullard, 2014, p. 100). These areas should also include some materials for the child to engage with such as fidgets, books, pictures, and other sensory stimulating materials such as calming bottles and quiet noise makers. Thompson and Raisor (2013) state that “Dimming the lighting, talking softly, and providing a space for the child to go (a quiet, softly lit place) when she is overwhelmed will calm the child and help her recover when she is overstimulated” (p. 39). The alone space should be in an area of the classroom that is away from louder activities in the class such as dramatic play and blocks, and closer to quieter areas of the room, such as the library.

In the alone center I created for the children in my environment, I built a small wooden tent frame and sewed soft, brown fabric to fit around it. Inside I placed a dog bed, which was ideally sized and economical, and sewed various sizes of pillows for the children to lie on as well. I also sewed a small weighted bean bag for the children to place on their lap or squeeze with their hands. On the small wall space in the area, I hung information about social emotional skills from

the Center on the Social and Emotional Foundations for Early Learning (CSEFEL) trainings I have attended. CSEFEL is:

A national resource center for disseminating research and evidence-based practices to early childhood programs across the country. CSEFEL is focused on promoting the social emotional development and school readiness of young children birth to age 5. To support this goal, we have developed a conceptual model of evidence-based practices for promoting young children's social emotional competence and preventing and addressing challenging behavior.

(<http://csefel.vanderbilt.edu/about.html>)

These materials are displayed throughout the classroom as a constant guide and reminder to children on the range of emotions they may experience and solutions for when they are feeling frustrated, angry, or sad. Also within the alone center are various types of sensory materials such as calming glitter bottles, wooden sticks wrapped in different types of fabrics and materials, squeeze balls, and books about emotions.

CENTER PHOTOS



The soft cushion to lay on is accompanied by fluffy pillows and a weighted bean bag.



The center has several books a variety of sensory materials such as calming glitter bottles, quiet instruments, and a squeeze ball.



Hanging on the wall are two resources from the CSEFEL website regarding emotions and management of feelings.



A child rests in the alone center while looking at books and choosing between calming glitter bottles.

CONCLUSION

I observed that this center made a great impact for the children who were frequently acting out by hitting or pushing. This gave them a space to retreat to when they were getting upset and frustrated. It also served as a great location for some of the children who get more overstimulated in the afternoon. Even after rest time, they often need extra time to rest, and this space has provided a great comfortable, quiet area for them to fulfill that need. One child tends to migrate to this center in the afternoon. She likes to lay in the center and watch the classroom as she lays under a blanket. Her mother came to me and said that her daughter talked about the alone center so often at home that they created one in her room for her. She said that she will retreat there when she is upset, and often gets up from rest time at home to go to lie in the alone center rather than stay in her bed.

By providing spaces for children to retreat to when they are overwhelmed or overstimulated in the school environment, we are not only helping them calm themselves and helping to improve their cognitive development, but we are also helping them learn how to self-regulate their emotions. This includes teaching them that we value their right to privacy, and because of that, we have created a space that allows them freedom and choice in their environment

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