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## The Retreat Area: A Special Place to be Alone

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# THE RETREAT AREA: A SPECIAL PLACE TO BE ALONE

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## Introduction and research:

Do you ever feel overwhelmed in an environment? Young children can sometimes feel overwhelmed and overstimulated while engaging in play with their peers, observing a situation, or transferring from parent to primary caregiver. Children also have little control over the environment they have been placed in. Their teacher plans their daily activities, schedule, and design of the room, among many other aspects of the classroom. “Since children have little control over leaving an environment to see solitude, it is crucial that adults develop areas within the classroom where solitude can be found” (Bullard, 2017, p. 108). There needs to be a designated space where a child can retreat from social interactions within the classroom environment. “At times, all children feel an acute need for privacy, to retreat from intense play or conflict, or when attempting a new activity that is discovered to be too difficult or otherwise unpleasant. Although children need to interact with their peers, they also need to be alone, to get away and dream, and to escape from external pressure” (Lowry, 1993, p. 138). This space needs to be secluded away from noisy parts of the classroom to ensure that children will feel comfortable when they are in that special retreat area. “A private space adjacent to a popular activity such as block building does not provide a child with the opportunity to be alone” (Maxwell, 2007, p. 231). Not only does this retreat area need to be placed in a secluded location, the retreat area also needs to be equipped with materials that will help a child calm down. These materials include but are not limited to: bubbles, sensory balloons or bottles, puppets, books about feelings, feeling faces, playdough, etc. “Solitary retreats provide children the opportunity to think and dream, engage in uninterrupted concentration, regain control of emotions, and unwind after intense periods of interaction” (Bullard, 2017, p. 107). With the implementation of a retreat area in the classroom, the children will be able to escape when they feel necessary, calm down, and express the way they were feeling without exhibiting aggressive behaviors.

Each child comes from their own special background, which means they have acquired certain coping techniques. If a child becomes emotionally unregulated, then there needs to be a special place where the child knows it is okay to escape to. “They react in different ways because they integrate the information obtained through their senses from the environment differently. Most children process their daily experiences and regulate their responses with ease. But when a child is consistently having difficulty maintaining a level emotional state or engaging appropriately in activities, the child may be overstimulated (environment provides more stimulation than the child can handle through sensory integration) or under stimulated (environment does not provide enough stimulation for the child)” (Thompson & Raisor, 2013, p. 35). As early childhood experts, we need to help children regulate their emotions and teach them how to cope when they are unable to express how they feel. We need to give children the social emotional tools to be successful.

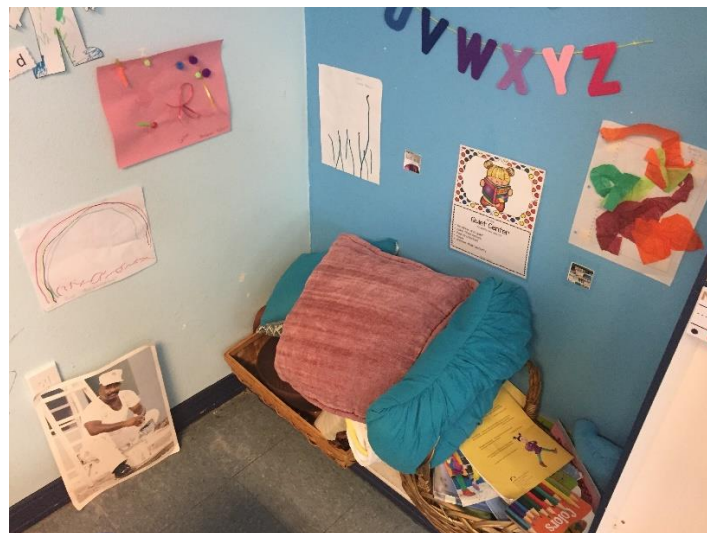
In the early childhood years, children are learning emotional self-regulation skills, how to cope with a variety of situations, and skills such as when they need to retreat from an environment that makes them uncomfortable. “Certain patterns of emotional expressiveness and regulation support more mutually satisfying experiences with peers and adults in the classroom, which in turn facilitate children’s greater attention to academic tasks, planning, and personal resources devoted to learning” (Herndon et al., 2013, p. 643). Young children need to learn their own emotional cues and learn when it is time to retreat from their current environment. Although that sounds like an easy task, children need to know there is a special space within their environment that is safe and equipped with the correct materials that one would need to regulate themselves. “They may need 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). While children are using the retreat area to get their emotions under control, they are also learning crucial social-emotional skills.

## All about the center:

The retreat center in our three-year-old classroom was in desperate need of an environmental change. The previous retreat center lacked a space where the children could safely exclude themselves from the environment while staying in the same room. The center also lacked materials that children could use to calm down. The center included a few pillows and a basket of developmentally appropriate books. When the center was first implemented, the children were unsure of how to use it properly. The primary teacher and I introduced the center slowly and taught the children how to appropriately use the

materials that were available. We also went over the rules of the center and how to make sure we were being safe in the classroom. The children were able to create three rules for their quiet center. They are as follows: one child in the center at a time, no throwing materials that are inside the center, and sensory bottles are for looking at and calming down. Before the center was implemented, there were many children who were using aggression to solve their peer conflicts instead of their words. The children were unable to identify how they felt, and the children were asking to leave their classroom if the environment became too overwhelming. After the retreat area had been implemented, there was only one child who was exhibiting aggressive behaviors. Many children were using the retreat area appropriately and the children were able to accurately describe how they were feeling.

Before:



This was the center before the semi-extreme center makeover took place. As you can see, the children are not secluded from the environment and the children did not have access to materials that would help them with their emotions.

After the semi-extreme makeover:



I made the center more enclosed in a quiet area of the classroom. Inside the space, the children can sit on a chair or a large floor pillow.



On the walls, I included a mirror, Tucker the Turtle Technique poster from the Center on the Social and Emotional Foundations for Early Learning (CSEFEL), the rules of the retreat center, and pictures of their peers being calm.



There are many materials to aid in self-regulation including cozy materials (such as puppets and various stuffed animals, and a Tucker the Turtle), calm down/sensory materials, developmentally appropriate books about feelings such as *Tucker the Turtle Takes Time to Tuck and Think*, a rain stick to make soft noise, feelings faces, and drawing materials.

Items that I added to the retreat center:



These are the different sensory bottles that the children helped create. The children were able to choose the materials they wanted in each bottle. I had the children help create the bottles because I

wanted to create interest and ownership over the materials in the center. If children were interested and felt ownership, I believed that they would be more likely to use the retreat center.



These are the different soft materials that are located in the retreat center. There is a worry eater, puppet, and a Tucker the Turtle. The children are able to put their worries inside the worry eater's mouth. When they do this, the worry eater then eats their worries. The Tucker the Turtle story was created by the CSEFEL. In this story Tucker the Turtle struggles with taking time to think before he reacts to a situation. The story teaches children that it is okay to be angry, but when they are angry they must not hurt their friends. The children learn to stop and keep their hands, body, and voices to themselves. They then learn, to tuck into their "shell" and take three deep breaths to calm down while thinking of a solution on how to make their problem better.



I also included feelings faces from the CSEFEL website. The children use these feeling faces to label their emotions. I chose to add the feelings faces because I wanted the children to be familiar with different emotions. I wanted the children to learn how to label the different emotions they are feeling.

## Closing:

Before the retreat center was transformed, there were children who were seeking a quiet place under the table, multiple children who were becoming overstimulated, and children who coped by using aggressive behaviors towards their peers. I saw the greatest positive impact on the children who were originally acting out and directing their aggression towards their peers. The children began to learn that if they needed a quiet moment, they had a safe place within their classroom to escape to. By providing a retreat area in the early childhood classroom, we are helping children understand their body cues and learn essential self-regulation skills that they will use for the rest of their life.

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