



### ***Designing environments – more than furniture arrangement***

***Carrie Rose***

Carrie Rose has worked in early childhood education for over 20 years. Her experience ranges from her current Owner/Director position at Rosie's Early Learning, years of teaching across both private and community-based child care; lecturing in early childhood education; and consultancy work for the past nine years. Her passion focuses on using both emergent curriculum principles, designing educational environments and developing leaders in early childhood. She prides herself on the commitment to provide an engaging educational environment for young children.

As early childhood educators move away from 'boxed-style' programs to more 'child-centred', emergent curricula; thought, planning and collaboration are needed in designing the environment.

When we consider how children feel about the space that they play in then, just like adults, we see how it will guide the way they behave and the success of their learning. In many cases early childhood environments offer very similar materials for children to play with and familiar play spaces to play in. Instead, the environment should reflect the group projects the children are exploring, the games they are playing and the varying levels of their skill.

To do this, learning spaces should promote a variety of options and choices for



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*Environments should provide challenge, be aesthetically appealing and ignite the senses.*

children. Children cannot show their skills if we do not give them opportunities through environments that provide challenge, are aesthetically appealing and ignite the senses. The way in which the room provokes wonder and curiosity will assist in firing up the senses and imagination.

As educators we should base our decisions about the environment not on what we think, according to history or developmental milestones, but rather on inspiration, intrigue and function. The materials we offer should inspire and intrigue children to explore their environment. Although there are materials that can be purchased through relevant catalogues, it can be argued that many of these only have one main play purpose or function. Purchasing



*Old wooden dining tables and stools with legs cut down create space for children in art studio areas.*

recycled or second hand furniture and materials starts to give the learning space a closer connection to the 'home-like feel'.

Providing environments that engage the children in long-lasting play, that are creative and open-ended, with materials of interest, will create a context that will minimise challenging

behaviour and enhance their learning opportunities. As an example:

The children in the junior kindergarten room were investigating the ways in which their families celebrated and engaged in meals. The educators observed children celebrating birthdays, making birthday cakes, having picnics and cooking dinner. To support their investigation, four smaller learning pods within one space were created. After some time the children who had engaged in the birthday play decided to have a 'birthday picnic' with the group of children who had created the picnic play. Would this connection have occurred if the environment had not been intentionally designed to create the opportunity?

Below are the steps used by educators to reflect on the effectiveness of the current environment and the improvements that could be made:

**Step 1:** Decide on the learning spaces and functions.

**Step 2:** Draw a plan with materials needed. If you have older children you could involve them in the design and ideas.



*This space engages children in a variety of methods to explore their investigation of 'How families share meals'*

**Step 3:** Check you have everything you need.

**Step 4:** Start the change.

**Step 5:** Discuss and decide the rules with the children.

Investing time in Steps 1 and 2 is critical for success. When I consider learning spaces, I start by:

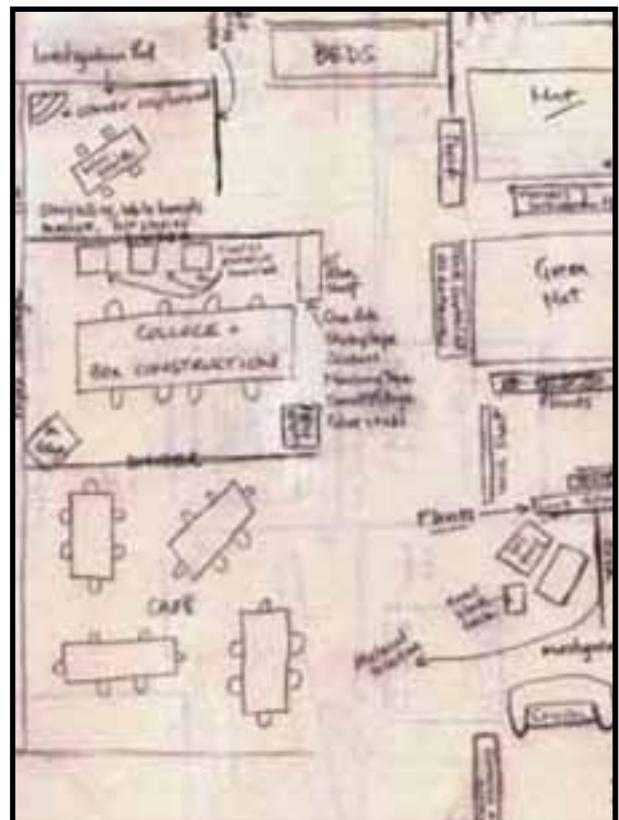
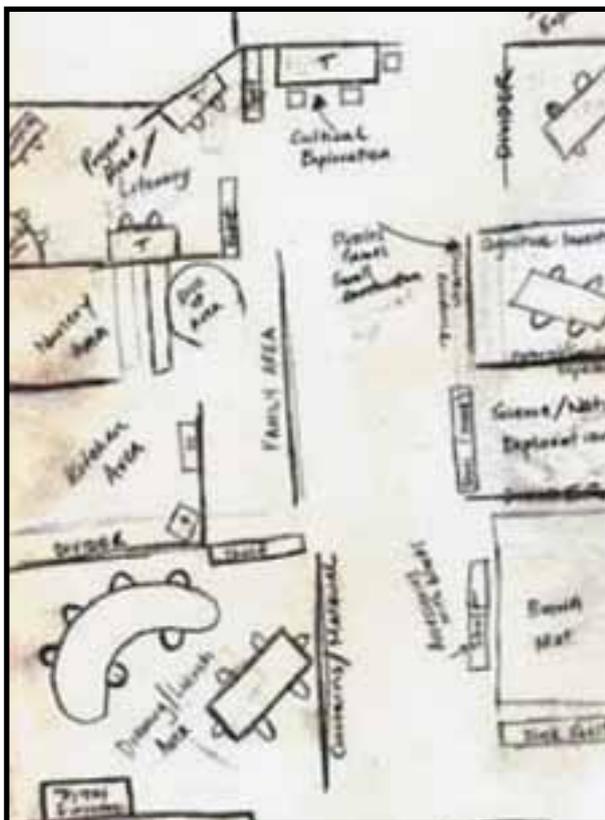
- thinking about the challenges the room or an area has and planning spaces that will work in these spaces
- considering the learning spaces I am wanting to develop and the skills the children will engage in
- identifying what the children are really interested in playing with compared with the size of the space
- deciding on how many children the space will accommodate
- reflecting on where the children play in groups, and by themselves
- reflecting on how spaces can be used in different ways

- reflecting on how the space can be more aesthetic and inviting.

Sketching out plans like the examples below will help educators to consider the connections in the room as well as the use of resources. These two examples are of whole room renovations but the strategy can also be used for just changing one learning pod.

Learning spaces indoors and outdoors can have a variety of functions and materials that provide children with opportunities to develop skills over a range of areas, no matter where they are playing.

*Spaces are about feeling inspired to explore and discover. Try to remember back to when you were a child ... what intrigued you? This is a great place for teams to start when reflecting on, and evaluating, the current learning space, and thinking about enhancements and improvements.*



The sketches identify where particular items of furniture will go including mats, shelving and curtains or screening.