

A YES Environment: Promoting Positivity in Your Classroom

by Kaila Weingarten

A recent study from UCLA found that toddlers hear “no” an average of 400 times a day. How can we cut back on the negativity and create a positive classroom? Young children are born with a healthy curiosity, and they need the freedom to safely explore their surroundings to discover what their world is all about. They learn by using their senses, especially through touch and play. It is important to not inhibit this natural inquisitiveness by constantly reprimanding children for touching things.

Everyone needs a YES environment to do their best. A YES environment is a safe, positive place that encourages personal growth by allowing the freedom of reasonable risk taking. For children, this means a place:

- that is secure and childproof, so safety concerns do not hinder children’s independence.
- where they can independently learn and explore.
- where predictable, yet flexible, routines and schedules contribute to a warm, caring environment.
- equipped with toys, supplies, and activities that are developmentally appropriate and readily available.
- where no centers are off limits or ‘closed’ for the day.
- where items not intended for children are placed out of reach.
- where the word “no” is used in moderation; therefore, children are more likely to listen when it is said.

Your classroom and center should be a place geared for children, and every aspect should show it.

You, the teacher, are the one who can enable this positive setting. With your knowledge of the children, their developmental level, and their backgrounds and interests, you can set up the physical environment to meet all children’s

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needs. Your presence and active, consistent participation will keep the classroom an enjoyable environment.

To design a YES environment that brings out the best in children, and encourages growth, and independence, you want it to have a Goldilocks-like perfection: not too hard and not too easy. Children should learn and be active participants, yet they should not become frustrated by the difficulty of the environment or lack of guidance available. Teachers’ efforts to scaffold their learning should serve as a guide, not a restraint. The best ones to lead us through this process are the children. Who can better help you design a setting for children than the children themselves? Children are naturally creative and playful and endlessly curious. As Picasso stated, “All children are artists. The problem is how to remain an artist once he grows up.” So how can you involve children in designing their environment?

Following the interests of the children in your classroom can help you create a positive, safe place. Depending on the age level of children, you can give limited choices, or have active discussions about the setting. It can be as simple as where to put a child’s cot at naptime, or a big decision such as where to put a new piece of furniture. Are you adding a tent to the classroom and don’t know which center to keep it in? Ask the experts: those who will use it. Children also can be actively involved in the aesthetics of the classroom. Hanging a new piece of children’s art? Why not allow the children to choose where it should be displayed?

Playtime: Center Stage

It’s easy to understand the benefits of setting up the environment according to children’s interests. The problem is that children’s interest and ours can clash. How can we merge the two and make it work? Let’s take a look at some typical classroom rules and how these can be reconsidered in the YES environment.

No ripping: The temptation to rip books is often too hard for children to withstand. Some young children really enjoy tearing paper. One mother in our program had an innovative idea.

YES: This mother brought old phonebooks, catalogues, and magazines for the art center. Children loved tearing them for collages.

No throwing: Children may get frustrated while trying to figure out how to play with a new toy and they end up throwing it around. How can a YES environment prevent disappointment for you and the children?

YES: Give information — introduce new classroom materials to children and explain how they are to be used. Tell them what it is and how and where to use it. If you have a pet, explain that animals are touched with gentle hands. Some simple information can prevent many “nos.”

No fighting: Children all like to play with the toy camera.

Photograph by sxc.hu/profile/jwarletta



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YES: Ensure you have an appropriate number of toys for the classroom. Don't have just one popular toy; children will fight over it. Each child doesn't need to have one, but a sufficient number will enable a YES environment.

No whining: You are at the bakery on a field trip and the children want everything in sight.

YES: If you are going on a trip, tell children what to expect, and show them pictures of what they will see: “We are going to a bakery. There will be a lot of bakery items such as cookies, cakes, and pies. We will buy one box of cookies for the class to share. Everyone will get a cookie.”

No destroying: Two groups of children are building in the block corner, and there is not enough space. A fight is about to break out.

YES: Prevent problems by keeping an eye on the children. “Let's see where you can work on your Lego® structure, so this group has more room to build their block castle.” Can you move the furniture around to create a bigger block center if this becomes a recurring issue?

No touching: What do you do when a child discovers electronics, such as a cell phone or camera in the classroom?

YES: Can you let them explore these items under your supervision? Can you bring in some old electronics or toy ones for children to play with?

An important aspect of a YES environment is consistent routines. Think of your favorite radio or television channel. You know when to tune in to hear traffic, sports, news, and weather. The consistency makes you go back

for more. By utilizing predictable, yet flexible scheduling, you give them a chance to know what's coming. When children know what is expected of them and what's coming, they are happier.

Flexibility is fundamental here, too. Just as you would not want someone to force you to watch your favorite show at a specific time, children too, should have freedom and flexibility. You don't want to miss out on a teachable moment because "it's time to go in now."



No crying: Notice children's behavior: are they getting antsy?

YES: Do a physical activity: run in the park; put on music and move. Let the children's behavior guide you into setting up an optimal schedule. You will prevent a lot of frustration, both for you and the children.

Mealtime

Family-style eating and children's participation during mealtime can be a challenge in the classroom. Your role is to model appropriate behavior for the children to help children learn, and to step back and let them do things for themselves as soon as they are able to.

No pouring: At breakfast, the orange juice bottle was set on the table. Sam, a young toddler, reached for it and almost knocked it over. Teacher Ellen cautioned Sam, "No, Sam. If you would like more orange juice, I will do it."

YES: The orange juice can be put in a child-safe pitcher, and Sam can have opportunities to pour in the water table first to practice.

What if Sam is too young or has low muscle tone? Picture this: Ellen sees Sam reaching for the bottle and says, "Sam, would you like more juice? I can help you pour."

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Ellen guides Sam's hand onto the bottle to pour.

Self-Care

Involving young children in self-care and teaching them the self-help skills necessary is an important

part of our work, but it has its challenges. Consider your choices carefully.

No pulling: Toddlers find the allure of pulling tissues and wipes out of boxes irresistible. Teacher takes away the box.

YES: How can you put a positive spin on this? How about putting scarves in a box? The children can pull out as many as they want. Or allow toddlers to pull out the wipes and help 'clean.'

- How does your environment invite children?
- How can you improve it to provide even more benefits?
- What knowledge of child development can you put into practice?
- How can you better facilitate activities and routines?
- How do you encourage independence in children? What works? What does not?

Don't let good enough be enough. Strive for innovation, imagination, and ongoing evaluation. Create a YES environment!

Photograph by Bonnie Neugebauer

