
~ TRAINING SOLUTIONS ~

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MAXIMIZING ADULT LEARNING: CREATING A NURTURING ENVIRONMENT FOR EARLY CHILDHOOD PROFESSIONAL DEVELOPMENT

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INTRODUCTION

Creating a physical environment that nurtures learning for early childhood professionals requires care and planning. It does not just happen by chance. It intentionally blends the unlikely elements of play and professional pampering that have emerged from corporate training activities with current brain research related to adult learning. A practical room arrangement, accessible learning supplies, tasty food and beverages, playful stress relievers, and other "amenities" in the environment offer a comfortable and supportive foundation for the development and learning of knowledge and skills.

Although the business community may have been the first to embrace many of these elements, early childhood trainers and instructors should be just as excited about them. Here's what happens when we design learning environments with these elements in mind:

- ▶ When we consciously attend to the learning environment for adult learners, we **model practices** that can be used with young children.
- ▶ When we **encourage learners to play**, we not only enhance their ability to stay engaged but we promote the disposition to value play.
- ▶ When we **provide materials that stimulate brain activity**, we strengthen the learner's involvement and retention of information.
- ▶ When we **plan for a variety of learning styles and individual preferences**, we create a climate of acceptance and foster learning for individuals with diverse strengths and needs.

Not only do we want early childhood professionals to learn and retain what they learn in professional develop-

ment experiences, we are committed to a lofty purpose. We endeavor to provide adults with learning experiences that include processes, strategies, and techniques that demonstrate what participants are expected to do in their day-to-day practice with young children (Carter & Curtis, 1994).

Let's look at each of these purposes for creating a nurturing learning environment for early childhood professionals one at a time. Then let's consider in more detail what the physical aspects of a nurturing learning environment for adults actually looks like in practice. It will not take much effort to see how creating a nurturing learning environment serves as an important foundation for meaningful learning experiences.

~ A nurturing learning environment models practices that may in turn be used with young children.

When we do not model what we teach, we are teaching something else! Unknown

No one in the early childhood field would be surprised to see early childhood professionals encouraging children's play and learning. We all know that children benefit from a nurturing environment that provides developmentally appropriate tools and materials.

Modeling the practices we are teaching magnifies and maximizes each learning experience. Imagine the cumulative positive impact on participants and their practice if every early childhood trainer and instructor modeled what they taught during the learning experiences! In some cases, explaining the principles we are using as we model nurturing learning environments may be necessary to help participants make the connection to their everyday practice.

As we describe what creating a nurturing learning environment looks like in early childhood professional

development experiences, think deeply about how each practice might serve as a model for working with young children. Can you think of how having the environment prepared so we can freely welcome participants to the training session applies to early childhood practice?

~ **A nurturing learning environment provides opportunities to play.**

Adult educators have recently discovered the value of play—laughter, doodling, listening to music, playing games, and manipulating toys—and its role in enhancing attention during learning experiences and increasing creativity and problem-solving skills among learners. Many adult learners, who may have been doodling and fidgeting to help stay focused and engaged during learning experiences since they were children, are finding these activities are now being encouraged, instead of discouraged as they once were!

The business community was probably the first to pick up on the fact that “playing,” as described above, enhances brain activity and improves the ability to learn. In the competitive world of business, purposeful play has the explicit goal of maximizing the investment, enhancing the impact of training for employees, and increasing productivity in the work place, which, in turn, positively affects the profit margin. As a result, “playing” has not only become integral to corporate training activities, but wave machines and other creative desktop items abound in business environments with the intention of relieving stress, enhancing relaxation, and stimulating the brain.

When we encourage learners to play, we enhance their ability to stay engaged, strengthen their involvement and retention, and increase the likelihood that they will be able to develop the early childhood skills and practices we are teaching them. We are also helping participants develop the disposition to value play. When early childhood professionals have this disposition, they provide materials and arrange environments to promote children’s play, plan for uninterrupted periods of play, and observe children at play closely.

~ **A nurturing learning environment enhances brain activity and improves the ability to learn.**

In simple terms, our brains are divided into left and right sections that work together but process different types of information. The most common types of information processed in each section of the brain are described in the following chart:

Left Brain (Logical)	Right Brain (Creative)
Speech	Visual
Words	Patterns
Mathematics	Spatial
Logic	Creative

Some of us have a preference for left-brain or linear learning, which means that we learn best when ideas are presented in a logical, structured way. Those of us with a preference for linear thinking have more success with language and mathematics than with the creative, artistic areas of life. Others of us have a right brain preference—learning best when we are able to see the big picture—and typically have an aptitude for the visual and creative arts.

For effective learning to take place, we need to take advantage of the distinct abilities of both our right and left brain. Research has shown that tapping into “both” sides of the brain significantly enhances our learning ability. When we provide a variety of carefully selected play materials and learning supplies within the context of a nurturing learning environment, we help participants increase the value of the learning experience by literally encouraging the use of both sides of the brain.

The brain also needs adequate nourishment and frequent fluids—especially water—to function optimally. We know that participants who are hungry or thirsty are distracted from the learning tasks at hand. Accessible food and drink and encouragement to “help themselves as needed”—not only during breaks—literally helps participants’ brains stay ready to learn.

Can you think of ways the simple practices just described might apply in an early childhood environment?

~ **A nurturing learning environment is responsive to individual learning styles and preferences.**

A large portion of [adult education] involves setting the stage. The task of getting everyone comfortable enough to learn comes with the territory.
Tom Drummond

The value of a nurturing environment in adult learning is supported by what educators have learned regarding individual learning styles and preferences. While there are a number of elaborate ways to categorize learning styles and preferences, a brief look at sensory modalities serves to illustrate the point.

Most people take in and process information either a)

visually (through seeing), b) aurally (through hearing), or c) kinesthetically (through physical experience or emotions). Most of us have a decided preference for one of these sensory modalities. However, as with the left or right brain preference, when we use all of these areas we significantly increase our capacity to learn. Providing a nurturing learning environment during professional development experiences can help participants use all three of these modalities and maximize their potential to learn.

Formal learning situations such as classrooms, lectures, or training sessions often challenge a participant's level of concentration. On average, we concentrate for 20 minutes at a time before becoming distracted or starting to daydream. When professional development experiences include small tactile toys on the table, participants can pick them up and play with them while thinking about concepts and listening to the trainer or instructor. Toys and baskets of learning supplies are particularly beneficial for people who have a preference for kinesthetic learning, which is often the least used modality in formal learning situations. However, people of all learning styles can benefit from these resources.

It is now known that learners' attention spans increase when they have something to manipulate in their fingers. As learners play, unwrap candy, or doodle, they stimulate the nerve endings in their fingers which send impulses to their brains to keep them more awake, alert, and energized. The shape, color, and visual impact of toys also stimulates the brain. The fact that learners are being allowed to "play" or "fidget" helps them relax, and being relaxed further enhances the ability to learn.

Again, can you think of ways these strategies might apply to the early childhood setting?

PUTTING IT INTO PRACTICE

At Child Care plus+, we emphasize the need to be responsive to different learning styles and preferences in both children and adults. In order to model what we believe in a very basic way, we consciously arrange the physical environment for learning and frequently provide supplies, snacks, and play materials for participants who attend our training sessions. We are quite deliberate and thoughtful in the selection of these items with the goal being to meet a variety of learning needs thereby increasing learning outcomes. We do this whether participants are trainers or child care provid-

ers, with the same goal in mind: to model what we teach.

We are keenly aware of the learners whose needs are often ignored, such as those individuals who learn best when their senses are stimulated. For instance, we often provide background music, both scented and unscented markers, and a variety of manipulative toys. We regularly receive feedback that these small "amenities" have helped participants feel welcome—even nurtured—and stay focused on the learning activities.

This amount of effort and investment in resources is especially important and most applicable to those occasions when participants will be attending 3 to 4 hour sessions, daylong, or multiple-day training sessions. During these longer sessions, we clearly see the benefits. It is unlikely that many of these resources would be used to any great extent in an appropriately interactive two-hour workshop, and the cost in time and effort would be out of balance with the benefits.

Participants who have little experience with professional development observe that the nurturing environment calms any anxiety and promotes their involvement in small group activities. Participants who travel long distances to attend the session consistently remark on the usefulness of our efforts in helping them overcome the effects of early morning rising and long hours on the road. And participants accustomed to frequently moving around facilitating children's activities claim they would really be at a disadvantage if the environment were not set up to meet their needs!

A nurturing learning environment serves to offset many of the unpredictable as well as individual influences on learning. Below is a more detailed description of the essential elements of a nurturing learning environment.

~ Room Arrangement

Successful [trainers] spend 10% of their time optimizing the arrangement of the physical setting as well as the psychological setting—a climate of collaborativeness, supportiveness, openness, pleasure, and humanness. M. S. Knowles

We all learn more readily in comfortable and nurturing environments. Conferences and training events often include pitchers of drinking water and cups on tables covered with tablecloths surrounded by cushioned chairs. A number of conference hotels even provide a small notebook, pen or pencil, and perhaps a piece of candy for each attendee. The room arrangement creates the foundation for learning and makes it easier

to become—and stay—involved.

We make certain the training room is arranged for comfort and learning. We try to maintain a comfortable temperature and select training rooms with windows, when possible. We prefer large round tables so 4 to 6 participants can be naturally arranged in small groups. Not only do they have enough space for their materials but also the ability to converse across the table with ease. Participants at each table have ready access to markers and flip charts for learning activities. We even make sure there are boxes of facial tissue available in several spots in the room.

When possible, we arrange the room and organize materials ahead of time. Having the room prepared allows us to greet participants as they arrive. Occasionally, we set up learning activities or a warmup activity related to the learning topic so early participants can begin thinking about the topic and, in general, feel welcomed and at ease.

When it is not possible for us to set up ahead of time, such as during a conference when sessions are back to back, streamlining and being organized becomes even more important. Needed materials must be in proper order, readily available, and easily accessed. Sometimes, we invite participants to help distribute handouts and arrange tables and chairs, if necessary.

This careful attention results in a space that welcomes learners, helps them feel comfortable, and increases the chances of a successful learning experience.

~ Supplies

Offering miscellaneous learning supplies at an accessible location in the room encourages participants to view the session as a collaborative experience and sets the tone for meaningful learning. A variety of supplies helps participants feel more comfortable, encourages creativity during learning activities, and offers alternative ways to organize materials during the session.

We set up a supply table that includes: masking tape, markers, scissors, scotch tape, manila file folders, blank paper, paper clips, 3-hole punch, extra pens, 3 x 5 index cards, alternative name tag cases, wet wipes, etc., for participant use. Having these supplies on hand also ensures that we as presenters have access to any materials we might need!

At each participant table is a flip chart and a basket that contains colorful large and small post-it notes and colored markers. These materials may be used by

participants at will but are also readily available for specific learning and feedback activities. Depending on the length of the training, we may also provide a pen or highlighter and a lined note pad for each participant.

~ Snacks

Food is fun. It is also essential to learning. For these reasons, we are careful to include healthy snacks and, occasionally, a light breakfast, during any lengthy training session. We do not want to leave to chance something so important to learning!

We recommend that there be coffee (both regular and decaffeinated) and hot water for tea or cocoa as well as drinking water available throughout the training session. When snacks are provided, we try to address differing dietary preferences and ask for that information on participant applications. We try to balance sweet and salty (fruit/nut breads in the morning and chips/salsa in the afternoon), regular and low fat (muffins and bagels). Whole or sliced fruit, fruit juice, and lemonade are provided as often as possible.

Small bowls of assorted candy on each table are frequently offered as might be found at an upscale business event. This is a simple way to help participants feel pampered and keep them stimulated and alert, especially in the afternoon! Candy is carefully chosen to provide quality, variety, and a balance of chocolate and non-chocolate. Only candies that are individually wrapped are provided. At multi-day trainings, we often supply a small bag of chips or a granola bar for each participant on a daily basis.

~ Toys

Toys are for play and also for learning. When toys and manipulative items are chosen carefully, they enhance involvement and learning during the learning experience. We use the following criteria in making decisions about which kinds of toys to provide:

Select toys to meet a variety of learning preferences. A few examples of learning needs and toys that meet that need include: creativity (play dough, magna-doodle, wikki sticks*), soft manipulation (play dough*, silly putty, gel balls, bean bags, stretch frogs/snakes, koosh balls), hard manipulation (clicks, tangles, bendable magnetic people, goobers and zots), and curiosity (magic cubes, puzzles, glitter wands).

Select a variety of toys. Some individuals prefer to manipulate a puzzle while listening, thinking, or participating; others prefer squeezing a gel-filled ball; another

person may lightly toss a koosh ball from hand to hand.

Select toys that are:

- ▶ colorful.
- ▶ hand-sized.
- ▶ relatively quiet.
- ▶ sturdy.
- ▶ mostly one-piece.
- ▶ easily washed and disinfected.
- ▶ appropriate for adult handling.

Select materials to avoid the possibility of spreading germs. We often provide individual play dough or wikki sticks for each participant to keep. We wash toys after each session with a mild bleach solution.

In our efforts to facilitate the education and learning of early childhood practitioners, we should make every effort to help them feel like and see themselves as early childhood professionals. Does the use of toys in early childhood training sessions imply that participants are not professionals? We do not think so.

CONCLUSION

Thoughtful arrangement of the environment, including selection and use of toys and play materials, during professional development experiences is part of an overall approach to adult learning. It is not intended to replace meaningful facilitation of learning activities related to the learning topic. When implementing these ideas, be reasonable. More is not necessarily better. Attention to these details can, however, improve the learning experience for participants overall and increase the likelihood that they will learn something during the experience and retain it longer. ~

RESOURCES*

- * www.officeplayground.com
- * www.wikkistix.com
- * The Playful Adult: 500 Ways to Lighten Your Spirit and Tickle Your Soul by Sue Baldwin (2002). IN-SIGHTS Training and Consulting: Stillwater, MN.
- * Training Teachers: A Harvest of Theory and Practice by Margie Carter and Deb Curtis (1994). Redleaf Press: St. Paul, MN.

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