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# Learning Guide 3.5 Environment-

# Voices from the Field

## **Objectives**

* Identify practitioners’ and families’ experience-based knowledge related to learning environments for young children and the critical issues involved with making adaptations to effectively support child engagement.

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| **Related Content:** [Module 3, Voices from the Field](https://rpm.fpg.unc.edu/module-3-environment-plan/voices-field)  **Instructional Method:** Discussion and Discovery  **Level:** Intermediate  **Estimated Time Needed:** 20 minutes  **Learner Form:** Transcripts |

## **Description**

In this activity, learners will identify strategies and considerations that will help inform their practice designing and accommodating learning environments that maximize student learning. Learners will work together to create an email correspondence letter to send to the practitioner/family member.

## **Materials/Resources**

* Voices from the Field transcripts for Module 3 – Environment

## **Facilitator Instructions**

1. Break learners into three groups (if the class is larger than 12 students, choose multiple groups to work on the same transcript). Provide each group a copy of one “Module 3: Voices from the Field” transcript: Ted Bovey, Constance Walker, Amanda Arevalo, or Andre Miguel.
2. Allow time for learners to discuss the points made by the practitioner or family member using the following guiding discussion questions:
   * What did this practitioner or family member say that resonated with any experiences you have had working with young children?
   * What have you learned about implementing environment practices with specific populations?
   * How do you think these practitioner and family voices will help to inform your own practice?
3. Instruct learners to draft an email (individually or collectively) to the practitioner or family person describing how their insight will help inform their practice and asking two questions about how this practitioner or family member utilizes the DEC Recommended Practices for Environment to effectively engage young children in physical, social, and temporal environments.

## **Suggested Assessment**

None

## **Distance Learning Tips**

* Allow groups to respond to questions after listening and/or reading the transcript in online forums.
* Email drafts can be done individually.
* Provide timely feedback.

**Ted Bovey**

**Q1: How should the physical environment of the classroom be designed and organized to facilitate child engagement?**

One of the most important topics to examine with classroom programs is the organization and structure of the classroom environment.

In examining the classroom environment it’s helpful to look at the issue from two perspectives, 1) looking at the physical environment of the classroom as a whole and, 2) looking more specifically at the instructional environment created within specific activities and routines of the classroom day.

In looking at the physical environment of the entire classroom it’s useful for teachers to start by looking at their classroom design and the layout of the classroom and the play areas (or centers) within their classroom. Centers should be well designed and clearly defined using shelves or other barriers to close in play areas and define their unique space. Additionally, each center should be clearly labeled with a sign, picture or pictures of the center and the name of the center and also include a way for children to indicate they are playing in the center by using name cards, necklaces with pictures of the center on them, or other kinds of visual materials. Within centers, materials should be clearly displayed with well labeled shelves or bins so children can easily identify where toys and materials will go during clean up. Finally, when designing the physical layout of the classroom teachers should ensure that there is sufficient room for the classroom to gather together as a large group (say for Circle Time or Story Time) without being over crowded. It’s important when gathering as a large group that all children can easily see the teacher and the materials being used and it can also be helpful if children are organized in a way that facilitates the passing out and collecting of props and materials that might be used during your Circle Time, things like bean bags, rhythm sticks, shakers or other kinds of song and book props.

**Q2: What strategies can teachers use to facilitate the instructional environment of the classroom?**

When examining the organization of the Instructional Environment of the classroom we start with the utilization of a daily visual schedule for the classroom. Visual schedules should be accessible and frequently referenced throughout the day to help children understand and be able to answer four key questions that support child engagement, 1) What am I doing right now? 2) How do I know I’m making progress? 3) How do I know when I’m done? And 4) What comes next? This basic idea can be expanded on and implemented within individual activities and routines as well through the use of additional visual materials. One example of this is the use of visuals to support the different activities that occur during the course of your large Group or Circle Times. So for example, if your Opening Circle time includes a Gathering Song, Calendar, Weather, a Child Choice Song and then the kids get to choose their center and go and play, each one of these routines within Circle Time could have its own set of visual material that are presented one at a time. And if the sequence of these activities is kept consistent every day the children will learn the passage of time by the sequence of activities and the visuals that are being used. This in turn supports their independent engagement through the self-monitoring of their own behavior because they know what activities will occur during the course of Circle Time and they’ll know the sequence of those activities. Therefore, they will understand or comprehend how long or how many activities it will be until they’ll get to choose their center and go and play.

Thank you very much. I appreciate your time. Good luck!

**Constance Walker**

**Q1: What do we know about how early childhood programs are failing boys of color?**

We're finding more and more evidence that many of our early childhood programs are failing boys, particularly boys of color. Research shows us more than 80 percent of the children expelled from our programs nationwide are boys. Among African-American children, 90 percent are boys. What's even more disturbing, the number of boys identified with discipline and learning problems is increasing. Something is seriously wrong, and it's way past time all of us in the field addressed this issue.

We need to understand why so many boys are struggling, why there are such differences between boys and girls and why the problems are so much more acute among African­ American and Latino boys. Even more important, we need to know what we can do to make a difference.

**Q2: What strategies can teachers use to fully support boys in their learning?**

In my work with early childhood programs/classrooms, we've cut boys' discipline problems in half through simple solutions like finding ways for boys to move during sedentary activities, increasing time for indoor and outdoor small and large muscle activities, keeping verbal instructions to less than a minute and using more visual aids and manipulatives. Additional strategies that support boys include having materials for boys in the dramatic play area, recruiting positive male role models to come into the classroom to read to the boys, and developing a superhero corner (fantasy/real) to help boys to understand that “there is a superhero in them and that superheroes help people (not hurt).

We're also taking a good look at ourselves. Because so many of us are women, are we expecting boys to act more like girls? Do our boys need more male role models in our classrooms? Can we interest more men in early childhood careers?

We want all of our young children to thrive. And that means finding new ways to support boys in our early childhood environments. When we do, our experience shows us the girls do better, too.

The work I do with early childhood programs/classrooms are based on the book, Wired to Move: Facts and Strategies for Nurturing Boys in an Early Childhood Setting (2013) written by Ruth Hanford Morhard for Starting Point for Child Care and Early Education.

**Amanda Arevalo**

**Q1: What are some examples of assistive technology supports for young children?**

As an early interventionist, the ultimate goal is to provide a child every opportunity to develop age-appropriate skills and keep up with their peers.  However, there are times when children have special needs and are not able to develop those skills without assistance.  It is crucial to consider assistive technology when therapy alone will not help the child achieve his/her goals.  Assistive technology (AT) can include an array of items something as simple as an adaptive pencil, crayon, scissors, utensils; or mildly complex such as an adaptive chair or tray; to something more complex, a walker, stander, orthotics, hand splints, augmentative communication, etc. Assistive technology can also include thinking outside of the box, like using household items or other items for different purposes than what they were intended to do. For example, using a pool noodle or 3-ring binder for positioning, Velcro for fine motor adaptations, or make-up wedges to adapt a book for easier page turning. These are just some ideas of how assistive technology can be simple, complex, but also may require creativity.

**Q2: What considerations should a practitioner keep in mind when discussing assistive technology with people involved in the child’s environment?**

Let’s consider a child that is 30-months-old crawling on the floor in a daycare/preschool environment, meanwhile the child’s peers are walking in this setting. This might seem satisfying for the parents because they have waited so long to see their child move independently, yet he/she is not keeping up with his/her peers. How many 30-month-old children do you see crawling at a daycare? Can this child explore his/her environment fully when he/she is on the floor versus upright? What learning experiences is he/she missing out on? Remember the child’s parents are happy with the child’s development, so what do you do now? How do you approach a family that might be oppose to assistive technology? How do you begin to discuss assistive technology to this family? What kind of assistive technology would you consider? And, is the physical environment (i.e. daycare/preschool) lend itself for the use of assistive technology within the physical space?

There are so many factors that need to be considered when discussing assistive technology with people involved in the child’s environment. Yet, these factors should not be the cause of intimidation or avoidance for an open discussion about assistive technology. After all assistive technology is intended to improve the child’s independence, learning experiences, and help meet his/her developmental goals in various environments.

**André Miguel**

**André talks about the process of identifying and accessing assistive technology for his daughter and the practitioners' role in the process.**

Alaina was diagnosed with severe-profound bilateral sensorineural hearing loss when she was only 6 weeks old. We had to learn everything about sensorineural hearing loss in a relatively short amount of time, all while caring for a new baby and dealing with the shock of the diagnosis. The early intervention team, which consisted of her audiologists, case manager, parent advocates, teacher of the deaf and speech/language pathologist started educating us about the different communication styles available to families of children with hearing loss. This ranged from fully visual communication (also known as American sign language) to combinations of visual and aural communication (like cued speech and lip reading) and finally fully oral-aural communication, which is using assistive technology and auditory-verbal therapy to teach Alaina to listen and speak.

The early intervention team made it very clear that our communication style with Alaina was our choice and we never felt pressured in one way or another. My wife and I chose oral-aural communication for Alaina because it aligned with the kind of communication we always imagined we would have for our daughter. It was what we were used to and we knew that we wanted Alaina to be a full and present member of our family and community.

The early intervention team then began educating us about the available assistive technology in the field of hearing loss. This ranged from high-powered hearing aids to cochlear implants. When Alaina was 3 months old she was fitted with hearing aids to maximize her hearing in those crucial early months. The audiologist along with her early interventionists utilized the hearing aids to measure how much of her auditory environment she was able to access. We learned special games to play with Alaina and how to make our play “sound first” to encourage Alaina to use her sense of hearing as much as possible.

However, after 7 months of trying out hearing aids, we realized that Alaina would not be able to access speech due to the severe level of her hearing loss. Together with my wife, extended family, and the expertise of Alaina’s therapeutic team, we made the decision to fit Alaina with cochlear implants. Again, Alaina’s audiologists and early interventionists were there to support us at every step of the way. They worked with us to schedule her surgery at the optimal time, provided the choices in implant manufacturers for Alaina, and prepared us for the surgery and recovery period. It was difficult to make such an important decision for Alaina in a relatively short amount of time but we knew that the best outcomes for her listening and speaking would occur with early implantation.

Alaina was implanted when she was 10 months old. The surgery took about 6 hours, the longest hours of my life. Her surgery and recovery went very well and her implants were successfully activated two weeks after the surgery. We left the activation appointment with two huge bags full of equipment, batteries, and user guides. We felt excited about this next phase in our lives but we were also feeling a little overwhelmed. Once again, our team was there to guide us through the process.

Alaina now is now learning to talk, listening to songs and stories… My wife and I have also become confident and comfortable in caring for Alaina’s equipment and also teaching other caregivers in Alaina’s life such as babysitters, family members, and her teachers at school on the proper care for the equipment.

This experience has made it clear to me the importance of practitioner’s roles in helping families access assistive technology for their child’s special needs. Alaina’s team not only supported us in making informed decisions about assistive technology, but also were there to support us emotionally. They saw us as equal partners even though they had extensive experience and knowledge about the technology of hearing aids and cochlear implants. We are grateful to those practitioners’ guidance and sensitivity throughout the process.