

# Curating environments for early childhood

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Many play-based approaches, most prominently the Reggio Emilia inspired approach, honor the environment as a major player in children's early learning and development. Often referred to as the child's "third teacher" (after their parents and classroom educators), intentional environments spark curiosity, honor children's temperaments and play urges, introduce new sensory experiences, and help to set the overall tone of the classroom. Schools devoted to play are leaning away from teacher-directed activities and towards teacher-curated environments as "yes" spaces where children can guide their own learning with the materials and provocations provided.

At Stepping Stones we tapped into expert Sandra Duncan's book on rethinking the classroom landscape to help guide us on setting up environments for a new program year. Try some of these tips at home to create beautiful, playful, spaces for your whole family!



## Tip #1 Creating Habitats of Refuge:

*Do you have a place in your home where you go to relax and unwind? How does that space make you feel? When are you drawn to the comfort of that space?*

Children also deserve a place they can go in search of privacy, quiet and calm. Creating spaces of refuge in the classroom environment supports a child's ability to regulate their emotions and behaviors when they are feeling overstimulated, to honor a more introverted temperament in need of alone time, or to get a break from managing play with peers. Habitats of refuge can be simply a quiet corner with cozy pillows and soft lighting, a tented area with books and quiet materials nearby, or a den made of sticks & leaves in the outdoor play space.

Whatever form it takes, spaces of refuge do wonders for everyone's social and emotional wellbeing.







## Tip #2 Understanding and Honoring the Child's Perspective

*Have you ever gotten down on your knees to better understand how your child views the world? What have you noticed about your child's play patterns at home? Does your space allow for your child to follow their play urges and interests?*

In the classroom setting, we have the unique opportunity to create a space exactly to meet the needs of young children. All the furniture is their size, all materials are meant to be played with, treasures, art & photos are kept low to honor the child's viewpoint and perspective. Perspective can also be playful and spark curiosity. Providing a step under a high window, adding a riser to the building area for a new view point, or mirrors in the art studio to support exploration of identity.

*How do you honor and play with perspective in your space? Do children have access to multiple perspectives for play, like floor space, risers, tables, easels, stumps, or forts? Are there materials that spark curiosity and support their play interests at their level?*













## Tip #3 Be an Illuminator of Space and Play

The light in our environment has such a powerful effect on mood, behavior, focus, and curiosity. Light can define space, it can lift and lower energy levels, and it can make things grow, reflect, and sparkle. *How do you use light to define space in your home? Are you able to capitalize on natural light? Can you diversify your light sources to include the warm and focused illumination that comes from lamps in addition to overhead lighting? Are there reflective materials that can catch the light, change it, or make it move to spark curiosity?*

In the classroom environment we try to use a variety of light sources to create spaces of warmth and calm, of bright and lively, and of focused intentions. We also play with light to create artistic and scientific discoveries. Our classrooms include clamp lights, light ropes, tea lights, lamps, projectors, light tables, and flashlights to name a few. How do you play with light?





## Tip #4 Display Children's Art and other Work with Honor

Displaying children's work with honor in your space creates a sense of belonging, of pride, and an opportunity for them to reflect on their own learning. In the classroom we consider opportunities to display children's work at eye level and in a way that celebrates the process behind the work. *Do you have a space in your home where you celebrate your child's artwork and play creations? Does your child have an opportunity to revisit their investigations and processes through the use of photographs?*

Some tips on honoring children's work is to keep backgrounds neutral or black to help the work itself pop as a focal point. Add photos to show the process of how something was made so your child can reflect on it and revisit or expand on the idea behind it. Displays don't have to be on the wall. You can make books or binders of projects to revisit together. Don't have a budding artist? Display photos of unique building structures near the blocks, or an image of your child investigating bugs near the magnifying glasses, and see how they react to seeing themselves in action!









## #5 Seek Beauty and Purpose

Children deserve high standards of design and beauty in their spaces. Neutral color pallets that allow for treasured materials to shine, images of the children at play to pop, and their own work to be honored in displays around the classroom. Natural materials that inspire exploration, and provocations that spark wonder should take the stage in our classroom spaces.

*How can you elevate design in your child's play spaces at home? Can you store busy and bright materials in wicker or neutral storage containers to tone things down? Can you incorporate nature and natural materials that add beauty and intrigue?*

## Resources for Teachers and Families:

- Dr. Sandra Duncan – [bio and bibliography](#)
- [Creating a Yes! Environment: Supporting Creativity and Exploration](#)
- [Inspired by Reggio Emilia: Emergent Curriculum in Relationship-Driven Learning Environments](#)
- [It's Time for a Change: Creating Indoor Environments for Young Children](#)

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