

Creating Child-Centered Environments using Observation

Perhaps one of the best ways to go about creating a child-centered environment in your home is through careful observation of your child. What task is your child attempting consistently? What physical motor skill do they seem to be practicing repeatedly? What objects in your home environment consistently call to your child? What objects or activities is your child interested in?

When answering these questions, it is important to recognize two major goals: safety, and freedom. The connection between these two qualities may not seem immediately obvious, but through creating a safe environment (child-proofing), we can allow a comfortable, dynamic space that allows the child freedom of movement.

There are many online resources available to help us realize safety hazards in the home, but one of the best ways to get down on your child's level and move around your house imagining which objects or features could pose risk. One website that can help with this is: askdrsears.com/topics/parenting/toddlerproofing.

On the other side of the spectrum are online resources that help us deeply respect children's need for independence and movement in our homes. You can search by typing in "Montessori home" or "child-centered home". You will see how altering a few things to meet your child's needs can create a very enjoyable, harmonious environment for the whole family.

Here are some examples:

- Is your child wanting to continuously open and close doors or drawers? You could have one low cabinet available (with no child safety locks) that has household objects that are safe for exploration, such as Tupperware, pots and pans, tins and boxes, etc. Children love to have an outlet to practice opening and closing containers. Try to find items that have varied latches or designs (screw-on lids, tins, zipper enclosures, snaps, etc.). In the absence of an entire cabinet, try to find a large basket that is accessible to your child filled with these types of items, and rotate them once in a while for continued interest and variety.
- Is your child wanting to climb? You could have some large pillows on the floor and show them how they can be climbed. You could carve out a few minutes each day that you are willing to hold their hand to practice on staircases at home. (Of course, you will want to close the gate when this practice time is finished.)
- Is your child emptying your shelves or coffee tables of everything? You could have the lower shelves arranged with puzzles or other small manipulatives (baskets of blocks, etc.) that engage the child and their busy hands!
- Is your child interested in making lots of noise? Young children LOVE cause and effect. For a certain portion of the day, you can provide rattles, shakers, and other materials you have at home to meet this desire for noise. A small pot and a wooden spoon will suffice! (When you are not interested in having this noise, you can place these materials out of reach.)
- Is your child interested in turning things on and off repeatedly? Most toddlers would LOVE for you to hold them up at the light switch light and turn in on and off for a VERY long period of time. One good substitute is to find small, easy-to-operate, flashlights. Have them in a basket and make them available when you can be present to observe. (Be careful of small batteries as they can pose a significant risk.)

- Is your child interested in sitting in big chairs or on big stools? It is nice to provide a small, child-sized chair that your child can access on her own. If you notice a particular interest in chairs that would pose a significant risk (easy to tip), such as bar stools, it might be a good idea to remove them from your living spaces for awhile until these larger motor skills are more established.
- Does your child like to look in the bathroom mirror? Place a framed mirror in a low spot where your child can experiment and see herself easily.

The other important thing to observe in relation to our environment is mood and emotion.

- Is there too much loud music or constant TV noise happening?
- Are there always bright overhead lights on?

These elements could be overstimulating and causing your child to be distressed or “cranky”. Some quiet time, with ambient lighting, provides a respite from noise or brightness.

Another important element in your child’s environment is the people themselves. Are we taking care of ourselves so that we can be calm and responsive to our young children? Are there some times during the day where the adults “follow” the children’s enthusiasm and devote some dedicated attention and time to their favorite activities? Children can feel the adults’ moods and emotions and rely upon us to provide calm, mindful, and caring attention.

In working to have your home environment meet your child’s needs consider these three steps:

1. Observe your child
2. Analyze their movements, needs, and interests
3. Plan how you can alter the environment, and make it happen! (experiment)

You can always change or alter your plan as you observe your child’s response to it.