Creating a Learning Environment

Many behaviours can be reduced or avoided by adapting an environment that makes problem behaviours less likely to occur.

Strategy Ideas

Environmental Issues and activity demands to consider:

- Number of children in classroom.
- Noise level.
- Use of peers as mentors.
- Amount of space available.
- Way activity is organised or presented.
- Proximity of an adult.

Environmental Strategies

Children with sensory processing difficulties and behavioural disorders have difficulty organising themselves, selecting what is appropriate to attend to and what is extraneous to the task. By adapting the physical setting to decrease clutter, you can create and promote a positive learning environment.

Large Open Plan Unstructured Rooms / Environments

Behaviours are more likely to occur in a large, open room. Large spaces have no existing boundaries to help the child sustain a sense of organisation and control. A child who has difficulty with organisation and staying on task will have greater difficulty in a large, unstructured area e.g. large open classroom, gym, cafeteria, grocery store or library. Large spaces must be visually separated and work areas defined. Large spaces may be visually structured into smaller spaces by subdividing a room, using furniture or delineating workspaces visually

Children may not understand the structure that exists within large open spaces. They may panic, become overwhelmed with fear, run. Other children may lose the ability to focus and organise themselves. Impulsivity, hyperactivity, distractibility and acting out behaviours may be their reactions to the environment. Teaching the child to understand the structure, to know where he needs to go, to see the smaller parts that make up the whole and to focus only on the salient aspects within the environment are important

Noise and Sound Levels

Auditory stimulation (high noise level) has been identified as a factor in a child with hyper responsiveness or defensiveness, self-regulatory and auditory processing problems. Auditory stimulation within the environment can quickly raise a child's level of arousal and stress negatively affecting his ability to register and process information.
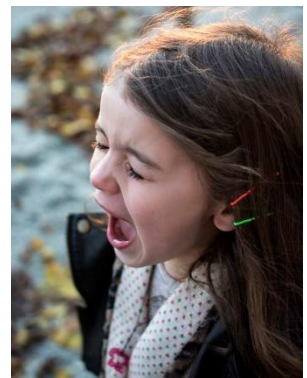
Summary of Strategies and Systems to Increase Performance:

- **Small Rooms** - Use small, enclosed rooms or subdivide larger rooms with portable partitions or bookcases.

- **Define Boundaries** - Set boundaries for expectations and behaviours e.g. a young child may need a carpet on which to sit, thereby defining the space that he/she must occupy during circle time

  A work desk at the front of a classroom or facing a wall or cubicle in which to work can also help the child define space.

  Coloured tape used to mark lines on the floor can separate large areas and help a child move from one class to the other or keep in line behind classmates.

  Classrooms can be arranged to make specific areas for different tasks such as reading, deskwork or circle time.

  Partitions or furniture can define the separate areas. Look at ways to subdivide canteen/dining areas and decrease the noise level through using partitions or carpet.

  When this cannot be done position the child at a table in a quieter corner.

  Have the child face a wall, or have his/her back to everyone coming in.

- **Noise Levels** - keep noise levels and reverberation to a minimum

- **Visual Distractions** - eliminate extraneous distractions on walls. Post only pertinent information

- **Task Presentation**
    - Break tasks into manageable parts.
    - Minimise down time within sessions and during transitions.
    - Gather needed supplies in advance. Keep them close by but out of sight until needed.
    - Take only the supplies needed at the time.
    - Put away all equipment when finished with a task.
    - When appropriate make clean up a part of the activity.
    - If it is inappropriate to spend time on clean up, move used supplies out of the child's view, proceed to the next activity, and put them away later.

- **Sensory distractions** - modifications may be required based on the child's primary need. Consider smells, number and proximity of other children, temperature, noise and visual distractions.

Important Considerations

- **Emotional Environment** - provide a nurturing, positive, supportive environment

- **Strategies and Systems**

  - Follow a plan. Use schedules, post activities or use picture schedules. Minimise downtime.

  - Make transitions seamless.

  - Give advance notice of transitions.

  - Prepare the child for change; give concrete reminders of time remaining or amount of work left before transition depending on level of child's cognitive level use visual strategies such as sand timers or time timer (available from companies such as www.sensorydirect.com ; www.rompa.com).

  - Use a preferred item to distract the child through the transition. Reinforce the child for focusing on the new task.

  - Begin each session with the same first activity.

  - Give choices and a degree of control.

  - Give concrete choices to help the child organise an acceptable choice.