

Child Care Facilities: QUALITY BY DESIGN



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LISC has helped
to devise public
and private
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Executive Summary

Discussions about the quality of child care most often revolve around what takes place inside any given care center: curriculum and program content, adult-child ratios, teacher qualifications, and so on. Yet many of those factors — and ultimately, the quality of care in general — depend in no small part on the design of the center. The program's staffing, content, and leadership are all crucial, of course, but so is the space itself. Inadequate or poorly designed space isn't just unattractive or inconvenient, it actually reduces the effectiveness of the program — even when the other factors are first-rate.

Using the tools of community development

That observation calls for a new way of thinking, not just about child care, but about community development as well. The importance of buildings and architecture to the quality of child care means, among many other things, that the tools,

techniques, and resources of community development can be critically important to the way children are cared for in low-income neighborhoods. For that reason, the Local Initiatives Support Corporation (LISC) and its Community Investment Collaborative for Kids (CICK) are working with dozens of community organizations and policymakers around the country to craft a deliberate, organized approach to the development of well-designed child care centers — both as a way of revitalizing communities and as a proven route to higher quality care for the children who live in them.

The relationship between the design of a child care facility and the quality of its program is more than just theory or conjecture. Recent research has lent objective weight to the connection between space and program effectiveness. A Connecticut study originally meant for quite different purposes unexpectedly turned up persuasive evidence that facility design can profoundly influence children's experience in a child care center.

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Researchers observing adult-child interaction during children's free play activities found, to their surprise, that a change in the center's spatial arrangements led, by itself, to a seven-fold increase in the percentage of time children spent interacting with adults – a key indicator of program quality. Other than moving to a new space, there had not been a single change in the content of the program. How that improvement came about, and how the researchers were able to document it, is a story told in this paper.

Advocating for superior child care facilities

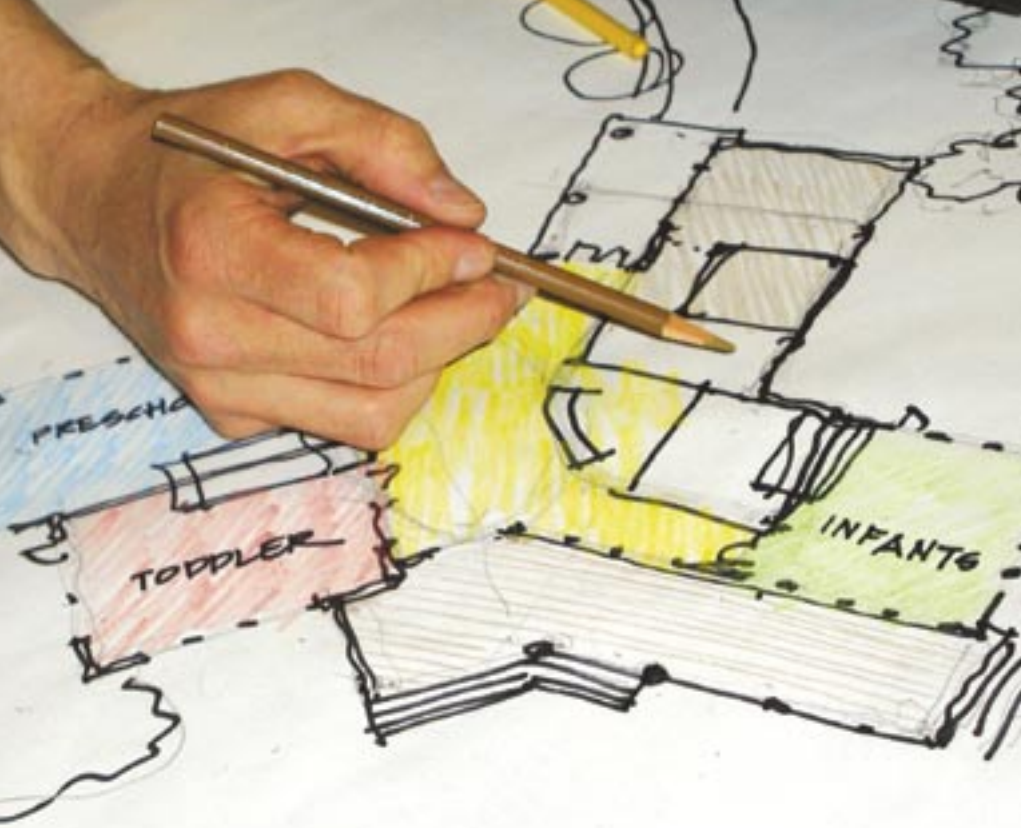
Despite considerable interest in child care among public policymakers, relatively little official attention has been paid to the financing, design, and construction of facilities — much less to the benefits of closer coordination between community development and child care programs. That is beginning to change. In several places, LISC has helped to devise public

and private funding programs to promote and finance the development of well-designed facilities, using techniques long familiar in community development.

LISC's work in public advocacy at the federal and state levels is designed to expand and replicate those successes and draw community development and child care policies into closer alignment.

This paper describes the interaction between building design and the quality of child care in more detail, offers examples of effective efforts to create superior child care facilities, and recommends further steps to bring the issue more squarely into the discussion of what both communities and children need for health, growth, and success.





Chapter 1

Community Development and Child Care:

A Convergence of Interests

The vitality of any community depends, in large part, on the ability of its residents to live securely, work, and raise children. All of that depends in turn on how well children can be cared for during the work day. The once-traditional family, with a male breadwinner and a wife working primarily in the home, now describes only 11 percent of American households. Nearly two-thirds of married women work at least part-time outside the home. For the great majority of families, therefore, a good place to live is defined partly by how well the community provides for the safety and healthy development of children during the hours when parents are working elsewhere.

That is true of nearly all communities. Yet the importance of child care is even greater in lower-income areas, given the additional pressures that poorer families normally face: the need to work long hours or hold more than one job, the challenge of stretching small incomes to meet

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expenses, the lower quality of public services and schools in many poor neighborhoods, and the added risks to children from crime or gangs. Numerous studies have shown that high quality early care and education is a proven means for preparing children for future academic success, especially children from low-income families. Yet compared with more affluent areas, poor neighborhoods have a very limited supply of child care centers, leading many parents to substitute more informal, unregulated, and often lower quality arrangements. Funders and policymakers who are concerned about community development therefore have a direct stake in the quality and availability of child care. Likewise, child care proponents often focus on those children and families living in the very neighborhoods where community-based revitalization is taking place.

Addressing the lack of quality facilities

For many child care providers, operating in a well-designed facility seems more a dream than a practical possibility. For them, as for many other human service organizations in low-income communities, revenues from government subsidies and customer fees barely approach the full cost of operations. Most child care centers in lower-income communities are consequently run by comparatively small, thinly capitalized nonprofit organizations that patch grants and government contracts together to keep the doors open and maintain quality care. Their budgets leave little

room to pay for real estate expertise or the capital expenses involved in buying, building, or renovating new space. Their leaders are usually experts in child development or in program management and administration, not in architecture, finance, or construction.

As a result, programs routinely end up in borrowed or makeshift space that was designed for other uses and is, at best, only adequately suited to the care of children. Those facilities are often just good enough to meet regulatory requirements for size and safety but a far cry from ideal. With limited time, expertise, and money, providers naturally concentrate on service. Real estate takes a back seat.

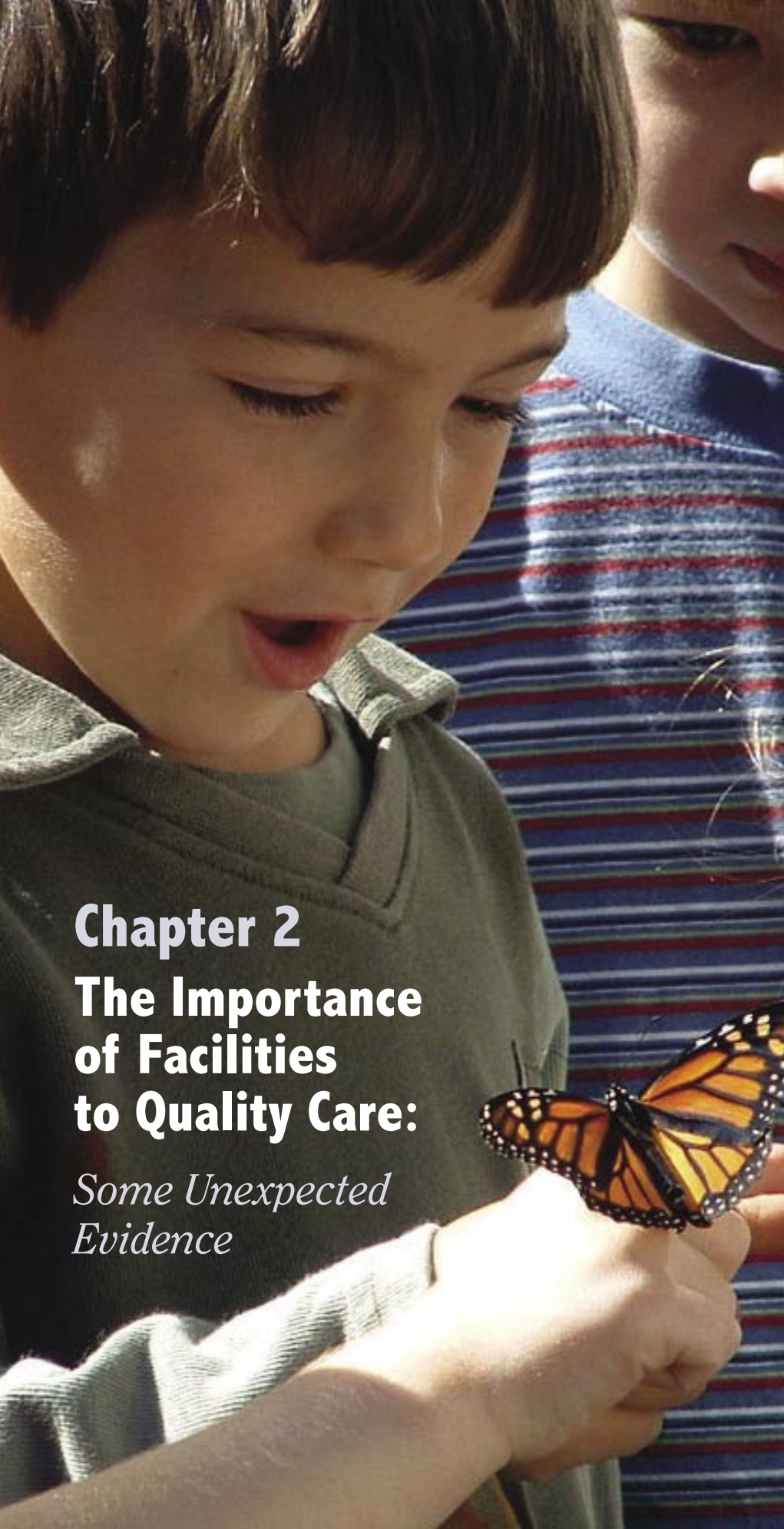
It is increasingly clear, however, that the quality of a child care facility is integral to good service. More and more, child care practitioners and theorists are discovering that appropriately designed buildings allow good programs to deliver significantly more effective care, and that poor space can actually undermine the quality of care. A facility is not merely where a program takes place, it's part of the formula for success.

In the most basic terms, child care is important to community development because children are important to communities. But community development is important to child care for reasons that are just as fundamental: experts in child care need experts in real estate development — people with expertise in planning,

design, financing, and construction — not only to improve the quality of their workplaces but to improve the quality of the services they provide to children and the community.

These are among the reasons that the Local Initiatives Support Corporation (LISC), the nation's largest community development support organization, created a child care program specifically aimed at the real estate development needs of child care agencies and systems. LISC's Community Investment Collaborative for Kids (CICK) offers project-specific technical assistance and financing to providers, plus support to public agencies for more effective policy linking child care to community improvement. The result, as of the end of 2003, has been more than \$120 million in new investments in high quality child care facilities in dozens of locations around the country.





Chapter 2

The Importance of Facilities to Quality Care:

Some Unexpected Evidence

Until recently, the link between the quality of buildings and the quality of programs had been only vaguely understood and largely undocumented among child care providers. The most experienced of them no doubt always recognized a connection between space and program effectiveness, though there was little professional or academic literature on the subject to back them up. The idea recently took on some empirical strength when a research project to observe adult-child interactions stumbled onto a fascinating finding — one that was not even the focus of the study.

The research took place at the School for Young Children (SYC), a distinguished preschool program housed at St. Joseph College in West Hartford, Connecticut. Under the direction of Professor Carlota Schechter, students in an early childhood class at St. Joseph monitored the children's contact with adults during free play time. With clipboards and stopwatches, each student observed a single child for 30 seconds and wrote down the child's activity and whether or not the time was spent interacting with an adult. The result was a surprisingly low three percent of children's time spent in contact with an adult caregiver.

This was an important finding for SYC because individual attention from nurturing adults is a prime indicator of quality in child care programs. In part, that is also why every state has a minimum adult-child ratio for licensed centers. Programs of superior

quality normally exceed regulatory minimums, often by considerable margins, as does the highly regarded SYC program. How, then, could children enrolled in a program with a more than ample staffing ratio end up spending such a small percentage of time in one-on-one contact with adults?

Empirical evidence that space matters

The answer came quickly. Even as SYC executive director Beth Bye was digesting the researchers' negative findings, and well before she had a chance to come up with a solution, her organization moved to new quarters. A routine follow-up test in the new space immediately showed a strikingly higher result: 22 percent of each child's time was spent interacting with an adult. There had been no change in the management, staff, or program. Bye hadn't even had time to alert her staff to the earlier findings.

The sole change had been the architecture. The new space, which Bye had taken pains to design, was considerably roomier. There were bathrooms in each classroom. Telephones, storage space, and other logistical necessities were inside the classrooms, too. The result was that adults no longer had to leave the room to escort children to the bathroom, retrieve or store supplies, or take a phone call. Fewer distractions and interruptions for adults naturally meant more time for kids.

Because they were no longer crowded into inadequate space,

children also had better play experiences. The more generous square footage allowed staff to configure each classroom into well-defined areas for different activities. Children were less crowded together and distracted by one another, so they ran into conflicts less often. That meant that interactions with adults and with other children were more often constructive. Since teachers could use their time in a more effective and rewarding way, this meant higher morale and lower turnover for staff. Overall, the effect of the new space on the content of the program was considerable and measurable — even when not a single change had been made in the program itself.

What makes this story unique is that it happened to take place in front of researchers with note pads and stopwatches. In short, unlike other such experiences, this one benefited from data and analysis by outside observers. But it is far from the only case of child care programs improving their service by improving their facilities.

Another example is in Cleveland, Ohio, where child care provider Oakfield Child Development, Inc., joined forces with Union Miles Development Corporation, a decades-old community development organization that was renovating a historic library building.

For Oakfield, the library project offered space for expansion. For Union Miles, it was an opportunity to rescue an architectural gem dating back to the early 1900s, to reverse decline in the surrounding

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residential area, and to help Oakfield provide desperately-needed care for more of the neighborhood's children.

Improving service through facilities

The library's interior was spacious enough but not well configured for child care. Union Miles worked closely with Oakfield executive director Lee Smith to create the kind of space the center needed. When structural pillars couldn't be moved, Smith incorporated them into the design, ringing them with child-high seats. Where open areas provided an all but blank canvas, Smith was able to design an environment specifically tailored to Oakfield's program, including a large central foyer with benches, a perfect transition space for pick-ups and drop-offs. Classrooms have their own bathrooms with child-high fixtures so teachers don't lose time accompanying children out of the room, and children can learn to use the facilities on their own. Low windows between classrooms and the hallways present a bright, open environment that promotes a sense of connection among the center's staff, managers, and parents.

Another example is in Richmond, Virginia, where the Better Housing Coalition, a community development organization that operates region-wide, transformed 45 blighted acres with decaying subsidized housing into a vibrant community of nearly 500 new houses and apartments and 50,000 square feet of retail space. Since

many of the new housing units were specifically aimed at young families with low incomes, a child care center seemed indispensable. The inclusion of 105 apartments for the elderly provided an added bonus: some seniors might welcome the opportunity to take part in a child care program nearby. So the Coalition partnered with the Friends Association for Children, a child care agency. Friends and the Coalition worked together to plan an entirely new building, shaped to the contours they considered valuable. In the end, they created a center where all classrooms are self-contained units, with their own storage, sinks, bathrooms, and other essentials. Low windows, where children can look out easily, face the common greenspace and extensive play areas outside, providing plenty of light and a view of the wider community. Inside, some play areas are elevated so that children can play both above and below the platform, either on a dramatic raised "stage" or in cozy nooks below.





Chapter 3 Common Ground in Practice and Policy

LISC has worked closely with federal, state, and local policymakers to devise more effective ways of financing child care centers, including tactics similar to those used for other kinds of community development financing. At the federal level, LISC led a successful effort to make child care facilities eligible for federally guaranteed loans through Section 108 of the Community Development Block Grant program and, more recently, for equity investments through federal Low Income Housing Tax Credits. The lack of financial equity and capital subsidies have been among

the greatest barriers to expanding center-based child care. Typically, to even consider financing and building a new facility, providers must cobble together multiple grants and accept debt burdens that can be extremely risky, given the tight cash flow of most child care programs.

Generating new facility resources

LISC's efforts to adjust the Section 108 and Housing Credit programs have begun to generate crucial new resources for the field, as well as a more effective combination of federal policies on community development and child care. LISC also spearheaded an effort with the National Children's Facilities Network to secure a \$2.5 million federal appropriation for technical assistance on facilities.

With its national Rural program, LISC joined up with the National Head Start Association to convene the Rural Collaborative, an innovative partnership with the

U.S. Departments of Agriculture and Health and Human Services, the Federal Housing Finance Board, and the Federal Home Loan Bank System. The Rural Collaborative pooled \$3 million in grants, loans, and guarantees for early childhood centers — while also bringing the federal agencies together in their first collaboration on facilities financing. Following this partnership, LISC advocated for legislation enacted by Congress that strongly encourages USDA to make its community facilities loan program available for new centers constructed or renovated by a nonprofit developer and leased to another nonprofit, such as a child care provider.

Increasing state interest

LISC has applied some of the same ideas and resources to state government, working with legislators, other state officials, and funding collaboratives to design better ways of generating capital for child care facilities. State-level work has been particularly important because the federal Child Care and Development Block Grant has shifted much of the responsibility for child care policy to the states. Plus, growing interest in school readiness and early childhood education has made state leaders all the more interested in the settings where preschool children receive care. One example of this work has been in Connecticut, where LISC played a lead role in crafting the state's pioneering revenue bond program for child care facilities, which generated \$46 million for new centers for more than

3,000 low-income children. LISC assembled a pool of philanthropic and corporate dollars to form the Connecticut Children's Investment Partnership (CIP) to complement and enhance the state bond funds, and administers CIP on behalf of the various funders, working closely with the state. A similar child care facilities fund in Rhode Island — organized and operated by LISC in partnership with government, foundation, and corporate funders — invested \$2 million in new or upgraded child care facilities in its first year.

Linking policy innovation to improved facilities

In these and other places, LISC's work in public policy goes hand in hand with on-the-ground support for individual projects. In Waterbury, Connecticut, for example, LISC provided technical assistance on program planning and design to help the Children's Center of Greater Waterbury Health Network win financing from the state bond fund for a new facility for 130 children. Because the project entailed the construction of a completely new facility, the Center was able to arrange its classrooms along the building's perimeter, where children have expansive views of the outdoors and plenty of sunlight. Windows in the infant

rooms go all the way to the floor, so every child can see out.

Sonya Lewis, the Center's director, wanted the building to provide extensive square footage for younger children, toddlers in particular, who are newly mobile and require space to explore a variety of activities. The new facility's classrooms for toddlers are twice the size of those in the previous facility. One result: incidents of conflict between children — such as biting, hitting, or pushing — are now dramatically rarer than in the smaller space. A feature that Lewis is particularly proud of is a bathroom that opens right onto the playground — an innovative design idea that prevents teachers from disrupting the play of nine other children to make a "field trip" to the indoor bathroom for just one child.

The Waterbury story illustrates the inextricable connection among superior building design, improved public policy, and quality of care for children. By helping to design a better financing program for Connecticut, and then enabling the Children's Center to use that program to finance the building it needed, LISC helped link a policy innovation to the development of an improved building and a better experience for the Center's 130 children.



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Conclusion Brokering a Coalition

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CICK was created for several reasons: to promote and design better financing programs for child care, to direct resources to the development of child care facilities, and, perhaps most important, to draw the fields of community development and early childhood education more closely together. Nearly a decade of work at the intersection of the two fields demonstrates how much still needs to be done.

Building an infrastructure of support

The early childhood field needs more dedicated sources of equity and favorable financing to augment limited community development

resources. It needs to develop an institutional infrastructure to support those development efforts, including favorable public policies and facilities development intermediaries like the statewide child care facilities programs that LISC has created and runs. Finally, early childhood organizations and community developers need to establish a knowledge base to inform their work in this emerging field of practice.

Community development agencies, meanwhile, need ways to ensure that critical human services such as employment, education, health, and child care are available, even when the majority of their work concentrates on the physical environment.

Communities thrive — and environments improve — primarily when they offer economic and social opportunity to residents, a safe and constructive environment for children, and a mix of services, recreation, and convenience. More and better child care in high quality facilities contributes to those fundamental needs.

The surprise research findings at the School for Young Children have provided the first empirical evidence that “space matters” in early childhood education. Investing in quality early childhood facilities is therefore not just an important strategy for creating economically healthy communities. It is also a way to provide generations of children with a richer experience in their early years and greater opportunities as they grow.



Child Care Facilities Design Checklist:

■ Offer a warm, homelike environment

Strive to avoid an institutional feel. The School for Young Children created a nurturing environment with the earthy tones of its natural wood floors, a centrally-located kitchen (used frequently to fill the center with the aroma of freshly baked muffins), and a parent lounge that resembles a living room.

■ Support teacher effectiveness

Design child care centers to support and ease the work of caregivers. Certain features — such as bathrooms adjacent to the classroom, accessible cubbies, and child-sized sinks, counters, and other furnishings and fixtures — increase children’s autonomy and competence. At the same time, adult staff need classroom work surfaces, storage, sinks, phones, and seating for their use, as well as areas where they can comfortably meet, relax, or work away from the children.

■ Create enough space

The temptation in an underfunded industry like child care is to keep construction costs low and design classrooms to the state-licensing minimum, typically 35 square feet of primary indoor space per child. This is too little, even in rooms that are efficiently configured. Start with 45 or 50 square feet per child as a minimum, after allowing for cubbies, counters, and other large fixed objects that take up floor space. In addition, centrally-located multi-purpose space should be available outside the classroom for gross motor activities in foul weather and other special activities.

■ Welcome families

Parents should see physical evidence that they are welcome. Areas for parents can include a cozy nook for quiet time with a child having a hard time separating, a place to display parent resource materials, and storage for car seats and strollers.

■ Build community

An early childhood facility should foster a sense of community for the children, staff, and parents through common spaces, windows between classrooms, and other features. This is particularly important for teaching staff, who often find spending days in a classroom with 20 young children and one other adult to be demanding and socially isolating. Focus groups conducted by LISC and St. Joseph College confirmed that staff want more connections with other adults and the rest of the center.

■ Think beyond the classroom

Early childhood education requires more than classrooms. A well-functioning program needs administrative offices, a kitchen, a welcoming and secure reception area, a spacious playground, and plenty of storage.

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Amy Gillman is the Senior Program Director of LISC's Community Investment Collaborative for Kids (CICK). She created CICK nine years ago to improve the supply and quality of early childhood facilities in low-income neighborhoods. Since then, this initiative has spurred over \$120 million in new investments in quality facilities nationwide. Ms. Gillman is a frequent presenter on early childhood facilities issues at national conferences, and has played a leadership role in the National Children's Facilities Network as the chair of its Executive and Public Policy Committees.

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