

Using Calming Spaces in Family Child Care

Whether you're working with toddlers or school-agers, offering a space to be alone, cool off, and re-regulate is essential. You don't need a lot of resources to get started, but there are some important considerations to make while you're setting up and thinking about how to use a cozy space.

Why is a calming space useful, and what does it teach? A calming space is not a time-out. The goal is not to punish a child or remove a disruptive child from the rest of the group. This is a space to teach children emotion regulation, impulse control, and other executive functioning skills.

The best time to use the space is before the child becomes completely dysregulated. This can happen quickly, but intervening when you can tell that a child is having a hard time coping, but before they're crying or hitting, the child will be able to be receptive to the activities offered to calm down.

Teach children how to use the space! Co-regulation has to exist before a child can be expected to self-regulate. When a child starts to have a hard time, but isn't yet completely dysregulated, bring them to the space and offer materials with a simple explanation. "It seems like you're frustrated right now and not having a good time. If you'd like, you can lay down on these pillows, or push on the wall, or squish these fidgets, etc. until you're feeling better"

Keep the focus on how the child is feeling, rather than what they are doing. Instead of "go over there until you're ready to stop hitting," try "let's find something to help calm your body so you can get back to having a good time."

When you're designing your space, think about all of the sensory systems that can help a child get back on track. It might be helpful here to think about your own coping mechanisms. Does a hot cup of tea or glass of ice water help when you're overwhelmed? Noise-canceling headphones, calming music, or something that matches the emotion you're experiencing? This self-reflection can help you see what your children are looking for, too.



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One final thought: sometimes providers see a calming area and think of it as "rewarding bad behavior". For those providers, I ask you to consider the root cause of challenging behaviors. Most people, most of the time, want to please the people around them. When a child is struggling to meet behavioral expectations, we want to look for the deeper cause, what psychologist Ross Greene calls "going upstream." A child (or adult!) who is tired, hungry, sad, or frightened is going to act differently than one whose physical and emotional needs are met. In addition, when we can meet children's physical and emotional needs, they will develop trust in us which will strengthen that relationship. A child who is securely attached to their caregiver and trusts that their caregiver can meet their needs will have an easier time self-regulating and coregulating alongside that caregiver.



Incorporating Sensory Systems

VISUAL

Some items that can help regulate children through visual input may be water timers, glitter bottles, crayons and paper or chalk and chalkboards, and pictures of their families.



AUDITORY

A white noise machine or programmable speaker might be an item children can use semi-independently to meet their needs for heightened or lessened auditory stimulation. This can be a great opportunity to go old school with a CD player and headphones-- just be sure they have a limit on decibel level to protect children's hearing.

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OLFACTORY/GUSTATORY

Taste and smell can be difficult to pay attention to in a child care setting, but especially very young children can benefit from familiar and calm scents-- this is much of why special blankets/loveys from home can be so soothing. It can be especially useful for a child who is having a hard time adjusting to care to have access to a blanket that their parents sleep with and then send back to you so it smells like home. For infants, asking families to send in crib sheets that have been in their home can be very useful, too.



TACTILE

The type of tactile experience a child may want to calm down can vary from child to child, and by the emotion they're experiencing. A sad child might want to hug or lay on a big pillow, while that same child might later be angry and re-regulate by squeezing a stress ball or brushing their hair.



PROPRIOCEPTIVE

Proprioception tells each person where their body is in space. Some children can find stress relief through activities that stimulate the proprioceptive system, such as jumping, swinging, or doing yoga poses.