

A Child's Home Environment

(by Barbara Kahn)

The child's home environment is as individual as the child. Here follows a description of a real place designed with a particular child in mind.

Designing or reworking your home to meet your child's needs can be as simple as eliminating the toy box and replacing it with some gaily painted boards and bricks. Or it can involve a major change in your attitudes about children's rights and their current responsibilities. Some years ago in Italy I babysat for a five-year-old American boy whose home represented a blend of the Italian attitude of respect toward children and Yankee ingenuity.

Johnny's room was in the quietest corner of the house with a view into a courtyard overgrown with vegetation. The shutter type windows were the right height to look out and open for himself. Light switches and doorknobs were also at his level. Johnny's junior size bed was a mattress on top of box springs - just the right height for freedom, comfort and safety. A sleeping bag instead of sheets and blankets made it easy for him to make the bed in the morning. A small pinocchio hat rack held his pajamas and his outdoor coat. A large piece of felt over the bed served as a bulletin board with pictures of animals, flags, people and Johnny's drawings. Shelves for books and toys filled one complete wall. Yet the look was sparse rather than cluttered because an eye had been kept on finding appropriate containers.

Everything was in some kind of box, basket, tray or even plastic bag. A wooden crate held blocks. There was one base set and scrap lumber had furnished many extra and unusual pieces. A farm barn made by Johnny and his mother out of heavy cardboard was painted bright red and labeled "Johnny's Farm" in white over the loft. A small box of farm animals, and another box of people could combine with these open-ended sort of toys to create many different scenes. His Lego blocks were in a straw bag with a lid and handle so he could easily take them traveling. A tiny red table and chairs reflected the current project - an airport being constructed from cardboard and paper.

A long chest held Johnny's clothes. The drawers were the right height for him to open and look inside. The four drawers were labeled by Johnny - socks, shirts, pants, underwear. A side compartment had a slide-out rack for his one good outfit. One father built such a cabinet for his child and included a round hole for receiving dirty clothes. A small straw laundry basket in the room could serve the same purpose. Truly if the child's sensitive period for wanting to dress and care for himself is met with patience, love and a prepared environment, there can be no obstacle to his independence.

The continual feeling the room gave me was that this was not the 'child's room' but 'Johnny's room,' and it reflected his current interests and occupations. At the present he had a special interest in airplanes, models, the Air Force, aircraft carriers and a general interest in animals and all types of transportation. Order prevailed. Each toy was self-contained and replaced on the shelf.

Many parents have lamented to me that their efforts to create some order for their child's toys - blocks here, cars here, all the parts of the game in the right box- are undermined by the other parent's looser concept of order, which is typically 'off the floor, out of my way,' and into any available box. Creating this clear sense of external order is extremely important for all children, especially when they are younger than four. Parents must work together!

It is essential that the bathroom be prepared for your child's needs. Can he reach the sink, turn on the water, and reach his toothbrush and toothpaste without help? Can she reach the soap? Is there a special and consistent place he can reach for his towel and washcloth? Most parents provide bathroom stools, but small wobbly stools often do not provide enough secure, comfortable space for bathroom tasks. Some Montessori schools confronted with adult facilities build wooden platforms 6-8 inches high that actually fit around toilets and sinks.

MONTESSORI FELT THAT THERE SHOULD BE A CHILD'S CORNER IN EVERY ROOM OF THE HOUSE!

In the living room Johnny's records and record player were kept by a small straw chair and table. In a corner of his mother's room were rocks from a museum, fossils they had found and two butterflies. In the large hallway an art area was set up with a long table and a shelf containing all manner of art supplies. Separate containers held magic markers, crayons, paste, paper, fabric scraps and recycled household articles for making collages - paper tubes, bottle tops, corks, old gift wrap, ribbons, meat trays, egg cartons, etc. Tupperware containers with three little inner compartments kept his paint fresh and always ready.

One portion of the wall was covered with washable wallpaper. Here Johnny could write or draw on the walls; and a scrubbing exercise with brush, soap, sponge, drying cloth and a bucket was set up for him to scrub the wall clean. Children from age two to six take delight in caring for their environment, dusting, mopping, scrubbing, cleaning and polishing, and they should be able to do so as easily at home as at school.

This attitude of including children in your life so that there is comfortable furniture for them in every room where there is adult furniture was supported by the Italian culture. Attractive, light-weight children's furniture in a wide range of designs and colors was available at prices all could afford. Children want to be near adults who love and care for them, and a beautifully decorated second-floor bedroom with all their belongings within has little appeal to a child when the parents are in the kitchen. Family rooms off the kitchen or space within the kitchen is ideal for different activity centers, as long as the TV is not the main activity.

Montessori believed in concrete approaches. A major expression of your feeling for the child is demonstrated through the kind of home you make for her - not only from the point of view of facilitating her independence but also in communicating your awareness of her smaller, but nevertheless equally important, self.

"A sensitivity to the orderly arrangement of things, to their relative positions, is contemporaneous with simple perception, i.e., with the first taking of impressions from the environment. The young child can only sustain his purposeful actions if there is an exact procedure to be followed, and in no other way can he arrive at concentration and constancy in his work."

Maria Montessori
The Absorbent Mind