



Overview

As you work to create regulations that support the development of safe, healthy, quality early learning environments – spaces that nurture child well-being – consider the following excerpt from a LISC study conducted for the State of Rhode Island. [Full Study Here](#)

Early Learning Facilities have Unique Design Requirements that Ensure the Health and Safety of Vulnerable Populations and Support Delivery of Quality Programming



According to a report published by the National Institute for Early Education Research, a facility's layout, size, materials and design features can improve program quality and contribute positively to child development, while a poorly adapted and overcrowded environment undermines it. The physical configuration of early care and education spaces directly affects adult/child interaction and influences how children grow and learn. Good early learning spaces support teachers in their roles as professionals and send a message to families and the community about the value placed on young children and early learning.

Effective Early Learning Sites:

- Are located in areas easily accessed by families
- Provide sufficient space both indoors and outdoors to support program quality
- Offer opportunities for long-term site control by the program operator, either through ownership or very long-term, below market lease arrangements
- Are on sites and in buildings that minimize exposures to environmental hazards
- Offer safe and secure environments for very young, often non-ambulatory children

Early Learning Environments Should be Designed and Equipped to Help Young Children Thrive

These Seven Elements Support Child Development and Promote Quality Programming

Sufficient space in classrooms

There is a large body of research that shows that the amount of classroom space per child is the single most important environmental factor affecting the quality of child care programs and the welfare of children and staff. The well-being, constructive behavior and social integration of preschool children in group settings are highly dependent on the size of the classroom. The research has consistently confirmed that 35 SF of classroom space per child (measured wall-to-wall) is inadequate and that about 50 SF is required. The research dates back over 25 years. Some of the earliest research was done in the late 1970's for the U.S. Army Corps of Engineers to develop quality standards for Army child development centers. That study recommended a standard of 42 SF of activity area as adequate per child and 50 SF as optimum (Moore 1994).

Bathrooms and activity sinks in or adjacent to classrooms with child height fixtures

Even without considering ideal configurations of plumbing features, meeting just minimal requirements for numbers of fixtures per child creates unique design challenges to spaces. Plumbing features in or immediately adjacent to classrooms, playgrounds and other key activity areas support the critical development of autonomy in children while allowing teachers to easily provide direct supervision at all times, ensuring child safety. Specialized child-height features and fixtures build competence and independence in children while at the same time promoting good hygiene.

Child height windows in classrooms and common areas with a direct view of the outdoors

Extensive research has shown that access to natural light improves mental and physical health, improves focus, productivity and learning. Enabling children to see outside throughout the day helps orient them to the outdoor world, time of day and weather, all essential for growing minds. In many settings having a direct visual outside allows children to observe the natural world, which has been proven essential for child well-being.

Appropriate acoustics

Good acoustics have positive impacts on memory, learning and well-being. Very young children need low amounts of background noise in order to perceive speech at optimal levels; children's use of, and understanding of, language is poorer in loud classrooms. Research has demonstrated a link between chronic noise levels and pre-reading skills in preschool children (Maxwell & Evans 2000). High levels of noise increase stress and behavioral issues, and have negative impacts on learning. Classrooms open to other spaces, old buildings, incompatible shared uses and poor locations can all negatively impact noise levels.

Safe and engaging outdoor play spaces

Hospital and insurance company data shows that the vast majority of serious injuries that take place in early learning settings occur on playgrounds. Therefore, it is essential that the safety of outdoor play spaces be prioritized. Moving beyond safety, it is vital that the environment offers opportunities for children to get outside frequently throughout the day. Active play can help to significantly combat growing concerns with childhood obesity and for children spending significant portions of the day in early learning settings, they need access to these opportunities while at the centers. Access to nature and the natural world have significant benefits to child well-being. Outdoor play in appropriately designed spaces has been shown to improve attention deficit disorder and combat depression – both growing issues even in very young children.

Durable materials that encourage active and messy exploration but enable easy clean up

Early learning settings receive high use from many active young children. Having the ability to easily clean floors, walls and furnishings is essential to offering an environment that invites exploration while also enabling that environment to be maintained in safe and hygienic ways.

Sufficient storage

Effective early learning curriculums are hands-on in nature. Robust sets of materials that are varied throughout the week, month and year are essential. Thus, having adequate storage both directly within classrooms and within centers is essential to supporting access to sufficient materials, without creating spaces that are cluttered and at times unsafe. In addition to storage of learning materials, consideration must be given to sufficient space for things such as children’s belongings, teacher’s personal belongings, medications, cots, food, records, cleaning supplies and teacher resources. All of these items require thoughtful planning and sufficient space.

“You have to meet square footage amounts, have windows in specific spaces where children spend their time, make sure the layout of the room is developmentally appropriate, that the noise level will not go past a certain volume, that there are a certain amount of sinks and toilets in the room.

Lighting is also a different consideration in a classroom [than other spaces].”

– Mary Varr, Executive Director of the Woonsocket Head Start Child Development Association, in Navigating the Childcare Gap in Rhode Island by Susan Fitter-Harris

There are a Vast Number of Regulations and Standards to be Navigated Across Rhode Island’s Mixed Delivery Early Learning System

A robust review of facility related program regulations, various building and fire code requirements and best practice guidance was conducted with standards assessed for any potential inconsistencies, lack of alignment, or especially onerous requirements. An online survey, focus group discussions, interviews with regulators and assessors and site visit interviews conducted with operators provided additional insights.

Robust Regulatory Review Doesn’t Indicate that Regulations Present Barriers to Growth

GUIDING REGULATIONS/BEST PRACTICE QUALITY STANDARDS

Community-based Child Care

General Building Regulations	Civil Law	Mandatory Regulations	Higher Quality Standards, Certifications & Accreditations	Best Practice/ Quality Guidance
RI State Building Code (SBC-1, SBC-3 Plumbing, SBC-4 Mechanical, SBC-5 Electrical, SBC-8 Energy Conservation, etc.)	Department of Justice ADA Standards for Accessible Design	RI DCYF Child Care Program Regulations for Licensure	BrightStars/ Environmental Rating Scales	Caring for Our Children
NFPA 1 and 101 (State Fire Marshal’s Office)	US Consumer Product Safety Commission Public Playground Safety Handbook (ASTM Standards)	<i>Child Care Center and Family Child Care</i>	RI Department of Education Comprehensive ECE Program Standards	US EPA Healthy Child Care Guidelines
City/Town Ordinances (Local Authority having Jurisdiction)		Head Start Facility Standards <i>Head Start Grantees and EHS Partnership Sites Only</i>	National Association for the Education of Young Children (NAEYC)	Best Practice Research on Impact of Space

GUIDING REGULATIONS/BEST PRACTICE QUALITY STANDARDS

RIDE Regulated Preschool Facilities

General Building Regulations	Civil Law	K-12 Regulations	Higher Quality Standards, Certifications & Accreditations	Best Practice/ Quality Guidance
RI State Building Code (SBC-1, SBC-3 Plumbing, SBC-4 Mechanical, SBC-5 Electrical, SBC-8 Energy Conservation, etc.)	Department of Justice ADA Standards for Accessible Design	Remediation of Hazardous Materials Releases	BrightStars/ Environmental Rating Scales	Caring for Our Children
NFPA 1 and 101 (State Fire Marshal’s Office)	US Consumer Product Safety Commission Public Playground Safety Handbook (ASTM Standards)	BEP 2009 Regulations	RI Department of Education Comprehensive ECE Program Standards	US EPA Healthy Child Care Guidelines
City/Town Ordinances (Local Authority having Jurisdiction)		RIDE 2007 School Construction Regulations Rules and Regs for School Health Program	National Association for the Education of Young Children (NAEYC)	Best Practice Research on Impact of Space

Note: Not all buildings/programs will have to meet every listed regulation or standard. Compliance will vary based on a number of items, such as if the building is new or existing, type of construction, location, CCAP accepting, Head Start, RIDE or DCYF licensed, etc.

Early Childhood Education Serves a Vulnerable Population and Therefore is a Highly Regulated Industry

Early learning facility operators are supportive of regulations that protect children and promote quality, but indicate the regulations are difficult to navigate due to their own lack of expertise in real estate development, a lack of clarity and specifics in many regulations, the number of entities that regulate the industry, inconsistencies in regulatory interpretation within and between agencies and a lack of one centralized place to find all requirements and contact information in an easily navigated format.

REGULATIONS CONSIDERATIONS

Those developing new classrooms in community-based facilities and public schools would benefit from an easier way to access all of the regulatory requirements for this type of space, while operators would benefit from a better understanding of the specific regulations that will be evaluated during ongoing inspections.

- **All buildings, including early learning facilities, are subject to regulations and codes designed to protect their occupants**
These include building and fire inspections
- **In Rhode Island, each municipality has its own set of regulations connected to facilities and approval of the construction process, including things such as zoning, parking and permitting**
- **Early learning facilities have additional, unique regulations and are also required to meet “best practice” standards to achieve high quality ratings**
Regulations and best practice guidance provided by licensing agencies, BrightStars quality assessors and the Department of Education are generally very well-aligned and consistent in written form, but, due to the intentionally open ended nature of most standards, are frequently interpreted differently within and across agencies
- **Other highly regulated industries serving non-ambulatory populations (such as hospital systems) typically have someone on staff with expertise in facilities, building codes and regulations to assist with new construction**
This is unlikely to be the case with early learning providers, whose primary expertise is child development
- **Because Rhode Island utilizes a mixed delivery system, regulations and standards and regulatory bodies vary between program types**
This creates a unique challenge in providing one clear and distinct regulatory pathway for all providers in the system
- **Research shows most operators are not concerned with the regulatory process per se**
Only 29% of operators view building regulations as a barrier to opening new classrooms and even fewer (18%) indicate they would need help navigating the regulatory process if they were upgrading their existing facilities
- **Rather, the concern appears to be regulations and standards that are ambiguous, for example “must be in good condition”**
This lack of specificity allows for too much and too varied interpretation of regulations and standards

What We Found

Operators Say Less Ambiguous Regulations as well as Tools to Help Them Better Navigate the Process Would Reduce Barriers to Expansion

Rhode Island's early learning providers would benefit from:

SMILEE Regulations

Specific

Using terminology like “enough” leads to varied interpretations – offering defined minimum numbers allows both regulators and those being monitored to understand criteria in an objective way. For example, instead of saying something like “enough materials” provide specific lists of minimum required materials

Measurable

Using terminology like “near” leads to varied interpretations – offering defined measurements allows both regulators and those being monitored to understand criteria in an objective way. For example, instead of saying something like “no clutter near emergency exits” say “provide clear, 2-foot pathway around emergency exits”

Incremental

The aligned system of regulations and standards should clearly support an ongoing pathway of quality improvements where even programs currently operating at the first quality levels clearly understand the pathway forward and have a quality improvement plan that aligns to incremental progress – base licensing should have a strong focus on building a health and safety foundation with quality components layered on as programs progress

Logical

Research based regulations and standards should continue to be prioritized

Enforceable

Items that provide undue burdens to enforce and create unnecessary confusion should be reviewed and reconsidered in next revision to standards

Enforced

Failure to provide robust and ongoing monitoring at any level of the system creates a weakness in the system as a whole – a strong focus on staffing and systems that support monitoring and enforcement is essential

Regulatory Tools

that guide assessors in their work and are available to the field for self-evaluation of their space

Note: LISC has developed a robust tool to guide programs in assessing their space across all of the various regulations and requirements and devising a quality improvement plan, but it is not required that programs use this tool in any way

Clearinghouse

of all regulations and regulatory contacts in a centralized online location