Checklist for Assessing the Visual Material Environment

The toys, materials, and equipment you put out for children; the posters, pictures, and art objects you hang on the wall; and the types of furniture and how you arrange them all influence what children learn. What children do not see in the classroom teaches children as much as what they do see.

Rate each item:
N—not yet; S—still working on it; or Y—yes, we do this well

*Posters, signs, photographs, puzzles, games, etc., that authentically reflect . . .*

- All aspects of identity of the children, families, and staff in the program (e.g., family structure; economic class; aspects of physical appearance such as skin color, hair texture, eye color, and body size; physical abilities; language).
- Children and families from the major racial/ethnic groups in your community, city, and state.
- Diversity in family structures: single parents, extended families, gay/lesbian-headed families, interracial and multiethnic families, adoptive families, etc.
- Elderly people of various backgrounds doing different types of activities.
- A balanced ratio of images depicting women and men doing jobs in the home and outside the home, and all different kinds of work (e.g., professional roles such as doctor or teacher, “blue collar” roles such as factory worker or truck driver, and community roles such as firefighter).
- People of various backgrounds with different abilities and disabilities with their families and working. People with disabilities as active and independent.
- Creativity of artists of diverse backgrounds and cultures (e.g., paintings, drawings, sculptures, weavings).
- Images of important people, both past and present, including people who participate(d) in important struggles for social justice.
- Balance and variety, so that there are no “token” images of any particular group.

*Dramatic play materials that support . . .*

- The home lives of children, families, and staff in the program.
- Diversity of gender role playing.
- Diversity of cultures in your community, city, and state (supplementing the diversity of children, staff, and families in the program).
- Economic class diversity.
- Accessibility and special needs.
- A variety of ways to care for a family, cook and eat, keep house, play, etc.

*Language: Every day the staff support . . .*

- The languages that children, families, and staff speak through songs, labels and signs, stories, and interactions among children and with adults.
- The ongoing development of children’s home languages, and the development of English language skills.
- Regular opportunities to engage with American Sign Language and Braille.
- Children’s different communication styles, giving everyone equal opportunity to voice their ideas and feelings.
Art materials are regularly available, including . . .

- A range of skin tone paper, paint, crayons, markers, and playdough.
- Mirrors for children to reflect on their own physical features.
- Collage materials with images of diverse people and lifestyles.
- Items meant for individual and for group art activities.

Dolls (purchased and homemade) that represent . . .

- A fair balance of the physical characteristics of children, staff, and families in the program and in the community.
- Diversity in the United States beyond what is represented in the classroom.
- A fair balance of males and females, and also some anatomically correct dolls.
- A range of different kinds of disabilities and a range of doll-size equipment that support people with disabilities.
- A variety of types of dress (i.e., not just dresses for girls and pants for boys; not just dominant culture styles of dress).

Manipulatives that reflect . . .

- Diversity in racial identity, ethnicity, gender, physical ability, and occupation (for all manipulatives, including puzzles, memory games, reading and number literacy games, and other small toys).
- Diversity of skin tones, body shapes and sizes, physical abilities, clothing, and ages for play figures of people.
- Accurate depictions of people in terms of current life in the United States, avoiding stereotypes of all kinds.

Children’s books that contain accurate, non-stereotypical depictions of . . .

- Physical characteristics and lives of the children, families, and staff in the program.
- Different languages, especially those spoken by children, families, and staff in the program and in the community.
- Diversity of gender roles, racial and cultural backgrounds, and special needs.
- A range of occupations and income levels (that support and supplement the diversity present in the program).
- Many different family structures, so there are no “token” books of any particular type of family.

Books that . . .

- Present accurate images and information, with no overt or covert stereotypes.
- Challenge unfairness and prejudice.
- Encourage children to take action when faced with unfairness toward themselves or others.

Note: This list was compiled from the teaching work of Julie Olsen Edwards and Julie Blason.