

OSCAR Venues

OSCAR venues come in all shapes, sizes and types. They're big/small, quiet/noisy, bright/dingy. They can be depressingly threadbare and drab, or over-crowded with all kinds of things that really don't belong in a children's place. While a fortunate few are blessed with an ideal venue, OSCAR programmes are often making the best of less than ideal situations.

[This article was originally published in our "5 and Up" Newsletter in 1998. Not much has changed in that time!]

1. Making a Place

What to look for in a potential venue

Indoor and outdoor active space

Toilets

Telephone

Staff only area

Secure storage

Administration area/ desk

Running water/sinks clean ups etc.

Kitchen/ hot water

Kids storage area for programme materials

Storage for bags

Furnishings, suitable chairs and tables

Floor coverings, carpets, rugs

Special purpose areas: messy/ art area, a quiet space (including cushions/ sofa), older-kids-only area, parents' place, notice board, display area



Things to get an agreement on with the building owner

- Days/ hours of use
- Rental/ contribution to costs
- What areas/ rooms/ equipment can be used
- Security arrangements
- Cleaning
- Insurance - what is the excess on the building insurance? (This is the amount you would probably contribute to any building damaged caused by the programme); take note of any existing damage. [If your programme is not the building owner, do you have public liability insurance? [Read more here.](#)]



General safety concerns

Most public buildings are required to have a 'warrant of fitness' which covers building materials, fire safety, exits, extinguishers etc., and also fire evacuation procedures. However it is highly advisable to do your own assessment of the building keeping in mind the particular purpose you have in mind. IS THIS A SUITABLE PLACE FOR CHILDREN'S RECREATION? e.g. a sports club that has a lot of glass display cabinets can be quite safe for its intended use, but completely unsuitable for children in active play.

A school hall may be far more suitable but pose some particular hazards for the free play-type programme because of the equipment/ facilities it contains - stacks of chairs, gym equipment, free standing basket ball hoops, a raised stage. The school (or other building owner) has a responsibility to provide a generally safe building, but you have to set down your own clear guidelines for how that building (and the things in it) are to be *used safely*, for the particular activities you are planning.

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Venue safety checks need to continue on a regular basis and be documented (for instance using a check list). If the venue is being used for other purposes on a daily basis, a simple daily check should always be carried out for any new hazards, dangerous materials etc... [OSCN has sample forms for these purposes.]

What facilities are OSCAR programmes using?

- Libraries
- Multi-purpose rooms
- Art rooms
- Former school houses (e.g. care-takers residence)
- Church halls/Sunday school rooms, scout/guide dens
- Recreation centres/ gyms/ sports club rooms.
- Private residences/converted garages/ cottages
- Recreation centres/ gyms/ sports club rooms
- School-halls

2. Our Place

Giving Children Ownership

“The environment.....is an important part of the program you provide and includes far more than just the way you arrange the furniture and hang the pictures on the wall. The organisation and care of the physical facility....and the emotional environment of the program send powerful messages to the children and their families.”

Kids' Time - A School Age Care Programme Guide, California Department of Education 1994, Sacramento



Positive, homelike, welcoming, relaxed, safe, stimulating, friendly, warm: common words used to describe the sort of environment that's desirable for an OSCAR service.

These terms can describe physical and emotional qualities e.g. a “warm” environment needs good heating in winter but also staff who like children and enjoy being with them; a safe environment needs to be regularly checked for hazardous objects but also needs to address the need for children to *feel* safe from physical injury and emotional harm (intimidation, offensive language).

In part 1 we quickly summarised the essentials of assessing and securing use of a new venue. Before we look into the practicalities of how to arrange and manage the venue to best meet the needs of the children, here is some thoughts on how the emotional environment can effect how children and their families feel about the programme.

Does the environment give children a sense of ownership, for instance by:

- displaying children's artwork
- having somewhere secure for children's possessions
- reflecting diverse cultural backgrounds in the displays and activities
- displaying activity ideas and plans that incorporate feedback and suggestions from children

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Does the environment give children a sense of choice and independence, for instance by:

- providing books etc. of activity ideas for children to browse through
- displaying planned activities
- having some materials and equipment stored so that it is freely available to children
- having some specific spaces set up for particular types of activities
- having equipment rotated and varied to provide different play opportunities



Does the environment give children a feeling of safety, for instance by:

- displaying written rules that are clear and easy to understand
- children being able to discuss and comment on the rules
- ensuring the venue is clean and well-maintained
- having safe/quiet areas

For parents and others who come into the programme is there displayed: the name of the programme, photos, pamphlets, names of the staff. Is there any room to sit and rest, talk to their children, talk confidentially with staff?

Creating Signage and Displays

Signs, displays, notice boards all contribute to the way the environment sends messages like “Come on in”, “It’s OK to just have a look” and most importantly “This is *our* place”.

In shared spaces it’s not always easy to have displays and in a busy programme the focus is usually more on getting through each day. Creating displays can easily get relegated to “sometime, but not today.”

But displays and signs can be a programme activity - a time-saver and a good way to involve children. They often have brilliant ideas!

Where sticking things on the wall is not possible, try *hanging* or *standing signs*.....

Hanging signs: fasten a bamboo stick to along the top edge of a piece of cardboard with a bit sticking out at each end. Hang from window winders, discrete nails etc. Heavy cardboard is less likely to curl - good for a notice board.

Standing signs: pinex board covered with hessian makes an attractive noticeboard that’s light to move around. They can be held securely against a wall with two hooks and a piece of string or elastic and easily removed at the end of the day.

Hinge two pieces of board together with string to make a free-standing notice board or display (and an irresistible play accessory).

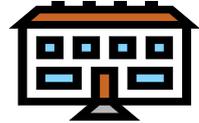
The benefits of attending the emotional environment as well as the physical environment is that by fostering the children’s sense of ownership of the programme, greater care is taken by the children to look after the place and its people because it is “*our place*”.



OSCAR Venues (cont.)

3. Shared Space

Sharing space is nearly always a matter of necessity, rather than choice. While it will seldom be seen as ideal, a lot of very successful programmes operate out of a shared facility. These situations work well due to a combination of good communication and creative ideas for organisation of the space and equipment.



Common Concerns

The arrival of an OSCAR service can create considerable anxiety for the owners and other users of a shared venue. In a venue that's never accommodated a group of children there may be concerns about:

- damage to the venue or other users equipment
- safety of the venue for children
- complaints from neighbours and other hall users (esp noise - see later in this item)

The venue may already be accomodating other groups of younger children - such as a crèche and playgroup - and they will be concerned that their play equipment is not suitable for older children and could again be damaged. In other words "these children are going to run riot".

Simple Guidelines

Fear of the unknown is of course part of human nature. It therefore makes sense to try and allay some of these fears before the programme actually starts:

- prepare a simple set of guidelines that outline how the programme will run in a way that's safe and won't cause avoidable damage
- find out who the other users are and try to meet them
- establish this liaison as the role of one of the staff or management people

Make Yourself Known

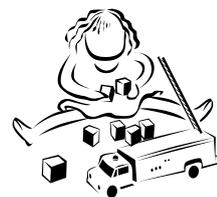
Programme staff, by taking the initiative in making themselves known, can hopefully allay some of the concerns about the programme and also open lines of communication with everyone in the venue, which is much better done *before* there are any specific problems or conflicts.

Support the Venue Owner

The OSCAR programme must of course foster a good relationship with the venue manager/ provider/ owner - provide regular reports on the programme, find solutions not problems, give *them* support and feedback. After it's thanks to them that you have a home!

A Co-operative Environment

- Can some equipment be shared?
- Can the programme work together with other people who use the centre, encourage them to visit the programme when it is running and involve them in the activities
- There is bound to be some conflict but where there is a will to work through problems there is *always* a way



OSCAR Venues (cont.)

Safety in shared spaces

A shared venue needs to be checked before each OSCAR session for hazards that other users may have created - poorly stacked chairs, broken glass, a wet floor. The venue owner also needs to be reminded that it is not appropriate to have maintenance, repairs or renovations undertaken in rooms the children are using unless it is of a minor and non-disruptive nature and the area being worked in is sectioned off and supervised by the worker involved.

Storage

For a daily after school programme it is important to establish some storage at the venue:

- sturdy stackable boxes (a good variety of on the market)
- small secure cabinet/ locker - on wheels for easy movement - for valuable items, enrolment forms, first aid kit etc.
- trolleys and storage trays, also on wheels - mobile 'art centres' **see below**.....

Furnishings

- Screens, plants, rugs, colored cloth can all brighten up the place.
- Lightweight wooden frames connected by hinges and covered with cloth can be used to divide up separate spaces.
- Alternatively use large appliance boxes that can be collapsed each day.

Can Parents help?

Parents who may not want to become too involved in the management of the programme may still like to help out with building simple storage and display equipment, repairing and installing old furniture etc. possibly a working bee.

Display

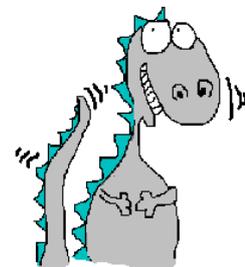
- Finding some means of displaying children's work is crucial to raise awareness of the programme and make a visible contribution to the facility. It also gives the children some sense of the space being in part theirs. How about a small display cabinet with a little bit of information and photos in the main lobby/ entranceway of the venue.
- If nothing can be stuck to the walls can things be hung away from the wall - e.g. a "clothesline" style display hung from a few small hooks.
- Attach art-work to free-standing screens and ask for them to be displayed at public events at the venue. Pinex boards covered in hessian make attractive displays. They can also be used to divide off a quiet space during the programme and section off a small area where programme equipment is kept - labeled 'please don't touch'.
- Don't offer to store art work at the venue unless you can be sure it is safe there.

SEEN and Not HEARD ??

Along with damage and safety, NOISE is the other common concern where children get together. This can be a fairly thorny issue.

- ☹ If people are expecting a classroom-type environment, they could be quite appalled at how constantly noisy a programme can be.
- ☹ A certain amount of constant low-level noise is normal, unavoidable and therefore needs to be accepted and tolerated by others in the venue.
- ☹ If you can't get out for active recreation more noise is unavoidable.
- ☹ In a one-off situation (say, due to the weather), let other users know and beg their tolerance.
- ☹ Plan a burst of noisy games and activities so as not to disrupt other things happening in the venue.
- ☹ Use furnishings, curtains, mats to minimise noise.

Remember that
NOISE is NORMAL!



OSCAR Venues (cont.)

Cleaning

It is reasonable to expect users to maintain a clean and hygienic environment. Are toilets cleaned daily? Otherwise the programme may have to arrange this. Cleaning up can be less burdensome for the staff if there is a definite time of the day when children have to stop their work and tidy up. Staff need to work towards this time each day and make sure children can either finish their activities by this time or stop and leave them until tomorrow.

Support Your Staff

Sharing venues can be a positive experience, but it is harder work for staff. They will need to allow more time for planning, keeping in contact with other hall users and of course for setting up and packing away equipment. They will need more support and feedback. In managing to maintain an amiable and co-operative environment they have achieved a great deal and need to be congratulated!

4. Policy Tip

Damage to property [Public liability insurance is also an important consideration. [Read more here.](#)]

Like most policy, you probably won't develop guidelines on damage to property until you need it, but that's not a good time to be making things up on the spot.

- The bottom line is "who pays"? And parents should be clear on when they will be liable before they are asked to cough up!
- Schools and many community facilities will have insurance to pay for damage to the building but NOT users' contents - except maybe in cases where the building owner is also the service provider. Ask the building owner what coverage they have. You will have to take out your own insurance if you want to cover your property.
- You will possibly be also liable for the excess on the building owner's insurance, so you may well have to bear the cost of minor damage such as broken windows. You could ask for a written agreement with the building owner.
- Having established the programme's potential liability, you then need to formulate a clear policy in regards to what parents will be required to pay. One suggestion would be to require full payment from the parent when the child was at fault - outside the programme boundaries, using equipment incorrectly, breaking rules etc. When the damage was accidental ½ the cost could be payable.
- Display any new policy as 'draft' and gauge parent feedback on it before finalising and adopting it formally.
- Of course there is also the need to consider what restitution and/or consequences are possible for the child who caused the damage.

