

Physical Structure



What is Physical Structure?

Physical structure is a way of arranging the environment to reduce problem behaviors and increase independence and success. Good physical structure communicates expectations nonverbally; an individual can identify what needs to happen and where it will happen based on the structure of the space. Physical structure can range from setting up bookshelves to block distractions to setting up chairs in specific locations (identifying the number of people allowed in a work space) to creating separate spaces for free time and work time activities.

Types of Materials Useful in Physical Structure

1. **Bookshelves/room dividers/file cabinets** to separate sections of the room
2. **Tables with chairs** pre-set to indicate the number of students that can work in the area
3. **Chairs of varying types** to indicate where teachers sit versus where students sit
4. **Painters tape** to section off the floor or to create "x" spots to indicate places where certain activities occur
5. Using **tables versus desks** to indicate group activities versus independent work
6. The use of **fabric coverings** on shelves to indicate materials students should not access
7. The use of **pillows, cushions, or bean-bags** to indicate areas for free time versus chairs to indicate work areas
8. **Bins and containers** to keep materials organized so students can easily find materials



Understanding Physical Structure

Physical structure is helpful for learners with autism because it capitalizes on their strengths in visual processing. Learners identify where activities will occur and what to do in each area based exclusively on the appearance of the room (e.g., where free time occurs, where work time occurs, where to look, where to sit, etc.)—they don't have to process verbal input to be successful.

- Physical structure provides predictability and consistency. Once a room is set up using physical structure, it encourages staff to continue using areas in a predictable and consistent way. It naturally lends itself to following routines, which helps students better predict their days.
- Physical structure nonverbally communicates expectations. Instructors don't need to tell learners what to do when the structure has already clarified what work to do and where to sit to complete it.
- Physical structure promotes academic and behavioral success because students know what to do and what the expectations are. Learners are less likely to become anxious when their day is predictable, and reduced anxiety often results in fewer problem behaviors.
- Physical structure strengthens independence in learners because they know what is expected and can complete tasks without needing direct instructions.

How Can I Learn More?

Articles and Chapters

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- Hume, K. (2011). Structured Teaching Strategies: A Series Article 1: Physical Structure in the School Setting. Retrieved from <https://www.iidc.indiana.edu/styles/iidc/defiles/IRCA/Structured%20Teaching%20Strategies%20Article%201.pdf>
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- Wise, R. (2017). How to Set Up the Classroom for Students with Autism and ADHD. Retrieved from <http://www.educationandbehavior.com/how-to-set-up-the-classroom-for-students-with-autism/>

Video Webinar

- <http://www.unl.edu/asdnetwork/elements-structure-physical-structure-overall-classroom-schedules-part-2>



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