BRIGHTSTARS "TIPPING THE SCALES" | VOLUME 3 | ISSUE 1

TIPPING THE SCALES



IN THIS ISSUE

Substantial Softness in the Classroom

Program Spotlight

Staff Spotlight

SUBSTANTIAL SOFTNESS IN THE CLASSROOM

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In early childhood classrooms where much of what takes place involves active play, children also need areas furnished with substantial softness where they can rest, relax, and escape the hard surfaces of the classroom.

The Furnishings items across the ERS have different requirements for the amount of softness in each classroom based on the ages and abilities of the children. At the minimal, 3-level of quality, some softness must be observed in the classroom, such as area rugs, padded chairs or couches, and soft toys. At the good, 5-level of quality, a "substantial amount of softness" is needed, such as a gathering of soft furnishings like a padded chair or large cushion over a rug. It is important to note that the presence of soft furnishings or materials does not automatically constitute a "cozy" area, which is a separate requirement in the Room arrangement items, and which must provide a space in which children can stretch out, relax, and completely escape the surrounding hard surfaces of the classroom.

WHAT DOES "SUBSTANTIAL SOFTNESS" LOOK LIKE FOR DIFFERENT AGE GROUPS?

INFANTS

- Accessibility: Non-mobile infants need to be placed in or on soft furnishings. Mobile infants must have a reasonable opportunity to use soft furnishings as they move independently in the classroom.
- Examples of soft furnishings for infants include: an infant play mat, cushion, or padded blanket over the classroom rug, with additional softness like soft dolls, large pillows, or stuffed animals.

TODDLERS

- Accessibility: Toddlers must be able to reach and use soft furnishings independently, without physical or verbal barriers.
- Examples of soft furnishings for toddlers include: cushions, pillows, or toddler-sized bean bags over a soft rug, with additional softness like soft dolls, stuffed animals, or blankets.

PRESCHOOL

- Accessibility: Preschool children must have access to a clearly defined cozy area with a sufficient amount of soft furnishings for children to fully escape the hard surfaces of the classroom for at least one hour. However, children can and should be able to access the cozy area throughout the day. Soft furnishings must be within children's reach, and children must be able to use the soft furnishings to sit, play, or lounge on.
- To be given credit as a soft furnishing, the furniture must be large enough for at least one child to use. Examples of soft furnishings for preschool children include: two cushions whose combined size is equal to a bed pillow, a child-sized padded chair, a padded backrest cushion, and sufficiently padded cozy nooks.
- Because soft toys used for quiet activities in the cozy area are small, they are not counted towards the requirements for soft furnishings.

SCHOOL AGE

- Accessibility: School age children should have access to at least three soft furnishings, with at least one large enough to accommodate several children to use in play, as well as a planned cozy area where they can relax, read, listen to music, etc.
- Examples of soft furnishings for school age children include: large beanbag chairs, adult-sized couches, floor cushions, etc.

Cozy areas can provide a substantial amount of softness in one place for the children to access. One small soft item does not create a cozy area. For example, a small, padded chair, a small child-sized beanbag chair, a few small stuffed pillows, or a carpeted corner by itself is not enough. Large furnishings, such as a mattress, adult-sized couch, or adult-sized beanbag chair, might be credited if they provide the required substantial amount of softness, which allows the child to completely escape the hardness of the floor, walls, and nearby furniture. Typically, the cozy area would consist of multiple soft furnishings gathered together to create the required "substantial softness." For example: a large bean bag or cushion over a soft rug, with additional soft items, such as smaller pillows and stuffed animals.



WOODEN NOOK CUBES, LIKE THE ONE PICTURED TO THE LEFT, OFTEN DO NOT MEET THE REQUIREMENTS FOR A COZY AREA BECAUSE OF THE HARD SURFACING SURROUNDING THE INSIDE OF THE CUBE. THE INSIDE WOULD NEED TO BE FULLY PADDED TO PREVENT CHILDREN'S BODIES FROM CONTACTING THE HARD WOOD SIDES, AND ADDITIONAL SOFTNESS, SUCH AS BLANKETS, CUSHIONS, PILLOWS, OR SOFT TOYS, WOULD ADD THE SOFTNESS NEEDED TO MAKE IT TRULY "COZY."

THIS SOFT NOOK CUBE, ON THE OTHER HAND, PROVIDES SUBSTANTIAL PADDING ON ALL SIDES, ALLOWING CHILDREN TO FULLY ESCAPE THE HARD SURFACES IN THE CLASSROOM. ADDITIONAL SOFT MATERIALS INSIDE WOULD CREATE A SOFT AND RELAXING SPACE FOR CHILDREN TO PLAY OR CALM DOWN INDEPENDENTLY.



Cozy areas must also be protected from active play. Children should be able to rest and relax in the cozy area without interruption from those engaging in active play, whether that includes building with blocks, engaging with dramatic play materials, or using musical instruments. Quiet areas of the classroom, such as a cozy area, should be separated not only by furniture but also by physical space; a barrier such as a toy shelf does not cut down on noise, so separation in physical space is needed. Cozy areas should also be clearly defined so the children understand their purpose - to allow others to relax, daydream, and to participate in quiet activities. Examples of materials for use in quiet activities include:

- Stuffed animals
- Soft dolls or puppets
- Books
- Quiet fidget toys

Keep in mind that different age groups require different levels of softness in their environments. The cozy area should evolve to fit the physical needs of the children in the group. For example, a classroom with a wider age range (such as 0-36 months, or 3-5 years), would need a cozy area that is large and soft enough to accommodate the differing sizes of children in the group. An area that is considered “cozy” for infants or young toddlers may not meet the threshold of a cozy area for two-year-olds or preschoolers who are physically larger, move more independently, and participate in more frequent active play.

PROGRAM SPOTLIGHT: PATHWAY KARATE ACADEMY

Congratulations to Pathway Karate Academy for increasing the program’s BrightStars rating to 5 Stars! The program’s team and the owner, Arndres Mason, have worked hard these past 2 years to go from a 1-star rating to achieving 5 stars. Since engaging with the BrightStars team, Arndres has made sure that her program provides an environment and high-quality curriculum that helps the children in their care grow and thrive. They are an asset to the children, their families, and the community that they serve!

BRIGHTSTARS STAFF SPOTLIGHT: ANGELIZ ROSA

MEET ANGELIZ ROSA, BRIGHTSTARS PROGRAM ASSESSMENT SPECIALIST SINCE JUNE 2025



Angeliz holds a bachelor's degree in human services with a concentration in Early Childhood Education. Since she worked closely with BrightStars in past years, Angeliz is very familiar with ECERS and ITERS tools. Angeliz also completed Level II of the Rhode Island Early Learning and Development Standards (RIELDS) to improve her skills in curriculum development, child assessment, and family communication.

Q: Why did you join the early childhood field?

A: I joined the early childhood field because from a young age, I always knew I wanted to be an educator. I loved going to school, learning, and just everything the school had to offer. In college, I fell in love with the ECE childcare center. I was able to shadow an early childhood educator for a few weeks, and learned about policies and procedures, ECE workforce competencies, and curriculum. When I finished my degree I went straight into an early learning center, working with all ages - infants through school age. Within the organization I worked for, I became heavily involved with the creating/developments of ECE policies and procedures within this organization (curriculum-based ideas, PD growth opportunities, etc.).

Q: What do you find most rewarding about your work?

A: Something that I find most rewarding about my work is the ability to still learn as I grow. When I think about education, I think about how educators are teaching, shaping, and helping children from a young age with their full capacity to learn. I find that everyone in the ECE community is here because they still want to learn as they grow. I'm grateful to be in a place where I can continue to advocate for what I believe in, and that is early childhood education.

Q: How do you like spending your free time?

A: The way that I like to spend my free time is with my husband, my children, and my family. We are either outdoors doing something as a family, or individually (bike rides, walks, hikes). I love to host events where my family and I bake different desserts and come together to try it all. I love to do game and paint nights!

Join Us at the 2026 RIAEYC Early Childhood Conference!

We're just under a month away from the 2026 RIAEYC Early Childhood Conference: Making Waves in Early Childhood Education! Join us on Saturday, October 10, 2026, at the Crowne Plaza in Warwick, RI, for a day of learning, connection, inspiration, and professional development with early childhood educators and leaders from across Rhode Island. Tickets are available now - don't miss the chance to make waves with us!

riaeyc Early Childhood Conference 2026