

# HOME SWEET HOMESCHOOL

*If you're considering homeschooling, then keep in mind that your child's learning environment can be a teaching tool.*

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If you've made the decision to homeschool your child, it's likely that you'll be giving a lot of thought to the right curriculum and activities. There's no doubt these are crucial, but so is creating an environment that's geared for education—and this is especially important if your child has autism. Think of your homeschool as a center of learning, the place where you'll nurture your child's desire to find out more—and give it careful planning and attention.

## THE ENVIRONMENT AS TEACHER

Often we think of the environment as an inanimate object, but we should look to the work of Urie Bronfenbrenner, a Russian-born American psychologist, for his development of what he calls the “ecological systems” theory. He's also known as the co-founder of the Head Start program in the U.S.

Bronfenbrenner's theory explained how everything in the child's environment affects how a child grows and develops, but while it may be easy to understand how each of these systems molded each of us and our neurotypical children, it's more difficult to assess and understand how these systems may or may not have impact on the minds of our children on the autism spectrum.

While typical homes aren't really “built” to be the ideal setting for homeschooling children on the autism spectrum, there are things that you can do in your own home environment that will help better support focused learning

for your child. As parents, you know your child better than anyone else, so, the first thing to do is to assess the specific learning and behavioral challenges that are unique to your child's personality. This will allow you to better match the environment to their needs, styles and preferences.

Your goal always should be to nurture your child's ability to learn successfully by turning his or her environment into a teacher. This means taking into account the developmental age of your child, and any issues he may have that could impact learning. For example, your child may struggle focusing on close-up objects or may like to move while learning. You may need to use large wall areas for teaching or provide flexibility in furnishings to support that constant movement. You might also need to make smaller, more contained teaching areas with clearly organized work centers to support your child's focused efforts and reduce distraction.

## SPACED OUT...

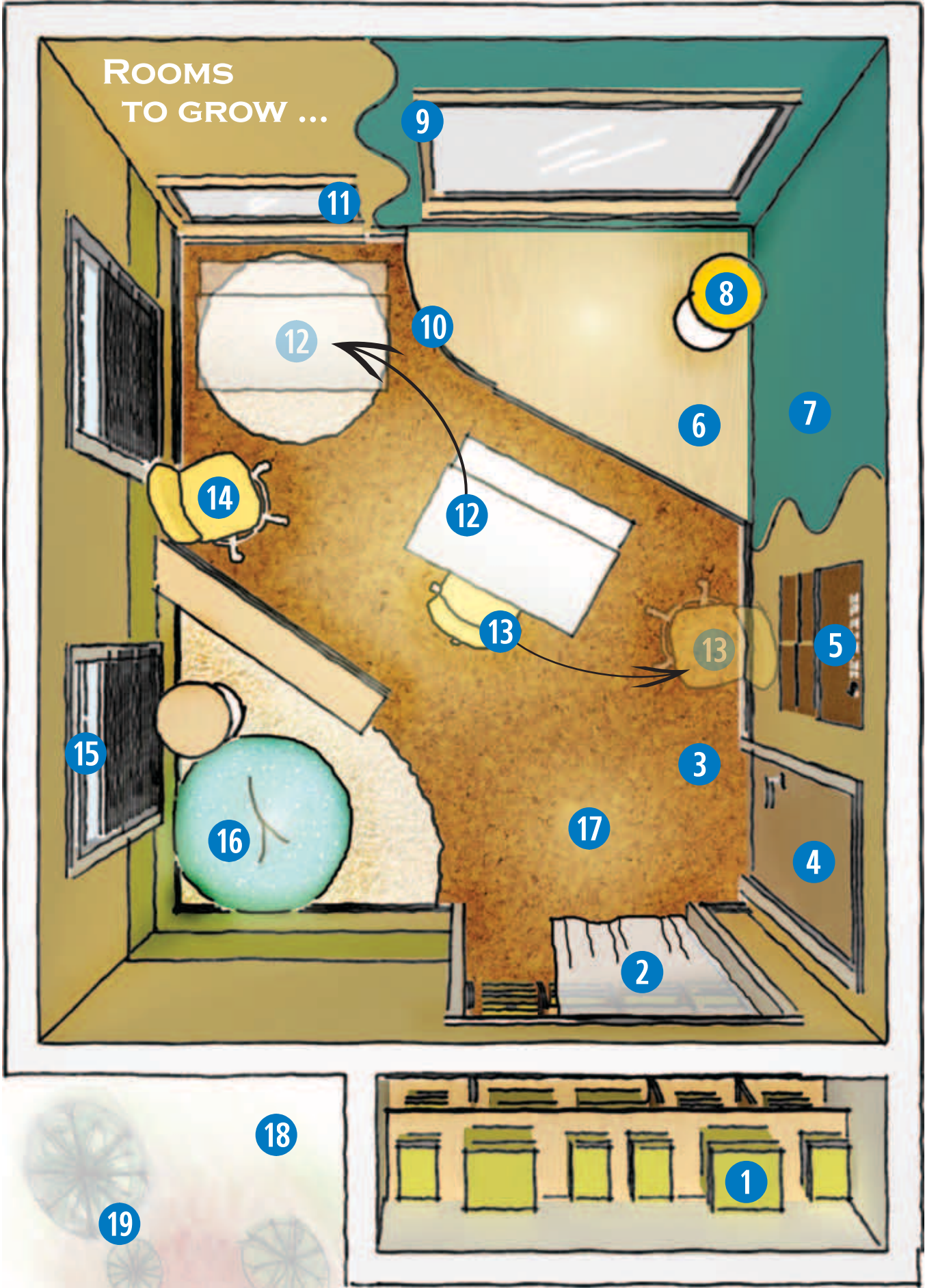
The spatial elements to be considered when planning a “classroom” space within your personal home include connections (positive and negative) to other spaces, creating a sense of belonging, flexibility for change, use of non-toxic materials, and visual images or color-coding for order.

In determining where teaching activities are located within the physical space, look at the potential traffic patterns to access materials, as well as external patterns going on which might interrupt your child's attention. These

## CHERRY ARCHITECTS HOMESCHOOL CLASSROOM DESIGN TIPS ►

1. Plenty of organized and labeled space to reduce clutter.
2. A curtain to hide distracting storage and materials.
3. Cork tile flooring to dampen loud or sharp sounds.
4. Insulated wood door for sound dampening.
5. Bulletin boards for posted rules and behavior rewards.
6. Raised platform to signify a hierarchy to the teaching zone and to allow student to experience elevated level for social skills practice.
7. Softer colors throughout the room, except the teaching zone, which is saturated to draw focus.
8. A stool for more comfortable teaching.
9. Taller white board for teaching and for active participation.
10. All corners are rounded for safety.
11. Low white board so a child may draw while seated or lying on the floor.
12. Desk with adjustable surface, on lockable casters for easy movement.
13. Ergonomic swivel-seat for quiet fidgeting and flexibility of placement.
14. Second seat for parent.
15. Shades that can be lowered from the top in order to reduce distraction from the outside but maximize natural daylight.
16. Plush rug and soft seating for sensory relaxation, separate from the teaching zone.
17. Dimmable incandescent lighting that can be easily customized with separate switching.
18. Southwest light ideal.
19. Outdoor space for learning, gardening, and other relaxation skills.

# ROOMS TO GROW ...





### 6 SHADES TO SEEK (OR SHUN!)

- 1 **Red** is believed to stimulate the mind and the appetite.
- 2 **Blue** is believed to be calming.
- 3 **Bright yellow** reflects light and can overstimulate (pale yellow can be soothing).
- 4 **Green** is believed to soothe and is associated with nature.
- 5 **Orange** can overstimulate and agitate.
- 6 **Pink** is believed to be soothing.

patterns can include the parts of the room between which there is naturally the most movement (for example, to and from the sink, to and from a bathroom, from the entry door to the table area, etc.).

Make all paths wide—ideally five feet—in order to provide ample space for your child to pass by furniture and to pass you without the stress of possible contact. Protect areas of fragile work, like puzzles, by routing paths around these areas. Create boundaries with furniture, so that your child or you don't destroy the work by bumping into it. Form multi-level areas in the classroom to allow your child to explore different spatial relationships with their body. Raised platform areas within the room will allow for alternative teaching platforms and could help support your child's sense of empowerment.

Arrange the seating to a manner which will reduce distraction from hallway traffic or outside movement seen

## MAKING SENSE...

**ONE OF THE FOUNDATIONS** of early neurotypical childhood development is that the senses play a large role in learning for young children. Typical classrooms should provide children with stimulation of the five senses—sight, sound, touch, taste and smell. However, if your child has autism, you'll want to manage each of these elements individually so as not to overstimulate him or her, and thus you need to control the environment.

through windows. Remove all non-essential furniture and clutter. Display clear and visual reminders of expected rules in a confined area and repetitively review these to reinforce the learning. Should your child have tactile sensitivities, select materials that do not trigger these specific annoyances. Create well-organized storage systems, and install ample lockable cabinets to hide teaching tools and equipment, and control access. These concealing systems can eliminate frustration and confusion for our children.

### COLOR CODE

When thinking about colors for your home classroom, know your child. Primary colors tend to communicate “kid space,” yet aren't always appropriate for certain children with learning challenges. Strong colors support attentiveness, but they can also drain or overstimulate a special needs child. Calm colors have a calming effect, but may not stimulate your child in a positive way. The affect of certain colors on ASD children can vary (see box), so you may have to try multiple colors to determine the one that is right for your child. Research has shown that some ASD children see colors more intensely.

It's commonly believed that soft, muted colors are more calming than bright, vibrant colors. Thus, if a child is incredibly active, one might try using calm colors in the teaching areas. On the other hand, intense colors that initially stimulate may have a positive effect on some children who might be prone to complacency. You might test the impact of color on your child before painting your entire room. You may also want to separate the “classroom” into two areas: one for calm activities, and one for active teaching. I wouldn't use patterns, however, as they can be distracting.

### LIGHTEN UP AND LISTEN...

Select a room in your home that is well lit by natural sunlight. Maintaining relatively equal levels of light in the interior room to match the exterior natural sunlit space is best—thus, a room with southern exposure would be the first selection. Create well lit and dimly lit opportunities by installing a dimmer control on the room's switches, and don't use light bulbs that flicker.

Students with auditory processing issues can struggle to stay in an environment in which inaudible sounds are causing conflict in their brains, so you'll need to eliminate or minimize noxious noise. Cold or hot rooms can also greatly affect focus, so individual temperature control is ideal.

### STRUCTURE

Our children often act out when they are stressed, and they may not have the ability to manage their stress especially when they're younger. Asking special needs children to sit straight in their chairs and stop fidgeting is only failing them as children. Thus, creating a classroom environment that mimics standard school settings with structured seating potentially sets our children on the spectrum up to

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*Consider your whole house a teaching opportunity for your child. The mastering of life skills is so significant for their future independence.*

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fail. The environment must promote positive behavior; providing seating that allows for comfort and movement can help.

Also, where children sit makes a difference in what they learn. Having your child sit facing you greatly increases student participation because it allows you, the teacher, to make eye contact with your child/student and allows you to see each facial expression. If your child learns best by lying on the floor, mount the white board at a low

appropriate social interaction. Look to utilize many areas of your home for this teaching activity to allow play-acting of social situations. ◀

level. A soft seating area for chilling out will be important.

Also, historically, the greatest cognitive growth occurs through social interaction. Social pressure provides the opportunity for children to learn lessons, whether easy or difficult. As parents, we know our kids with autism struggle with

## EQUIPPING YOUR HOMESCHOOL CLASSROOM

**MANY SCHOOL SUPPLIES** are manufactured using polyvinyl chloride (PVC), the most toxic plastic for children's health. It's not only made with chemicals known to cause cancer, but often contains toxic additives like phthalates, lead, cadmium, and organotins—all chemicals that may be harmful to children's health.

By saying "No" to PVC products, you, as a consumer, can affect powerful change in the marketplace with your purchasing power. With those same purchases, you, as a parent, can also protect the health of your child. Follow these tips for choosing safe school supplies from the Center for Health, Environment & Justice. (CHEJ)

- 1 Check for PVC. Products that contain it are often labeled with the words "vinyl," such as vinyl 3-ring binders, and also may be imprinted with the recycling symbol "3" inside it, and/or the letter "V" or "PVC" underneath it. Avery (available from most office supply stores) manufactures PVC-free binders and binder pockets (check labeling to be sure), as do Green Vision and The Green Office.
- 2 Don't use notebooks and organizers that are bound with metal spirals encased in colored plastic. The colored plastic coating on the metal spirals usually contains PVC. Select notebooks with uncovered metal spirals to avoid PVC. Also avoid notebooks with plastic coating, as this may contain PVC.
- 3 Avoid "polymer" modeling clays such as Fimo and Sculpy, as these are often loaded with phthalates. Look for clays made without PVC and phthalates (Crayola Model Magic, Mary's Softdough, Makin's Clay), or make your own (for a simple recipe, log onto [www.theholidayzone.com/recipes/dough.html](http://www.theholidayzone.com/recipes/dough.html)).
- 4 Use cardboard, fabric-covered, or polypropylene binders. Most 3-ring binders are made of PVC. Look for binders labeled as "PVC-free."
- 5 Stick to plain metal paper clips. Colored paper clips are often coated with PVC.
- 6 Going on a field trip? Avoid packing food in lunchboxes carrying a warning that says something such as, "WARNING: This product contains



chemicals known to the State of California to cause cancer, and birth defects or other reproductive harm." This means the product likely contains lead. Many lunchboxes also are made of PVC, or coated with PVC on the inside.

- 7 Look for lunchboxes labeled as "PVC-free" or use cloth bags instead. Studies have found chemicals also can leach from PVC food wrap into food. Use PVC-free butcher paper, waxed paper, parchment paper, low density polyethylene (LDPE) or cellulose bags. (See p44 for our tasty school lunch recipes).

### FIND OUT MORE

- ▶ **Green Vision** [www.greenvision4biz.com](http://www.greenvision4biz.com)
- ▶ **Crayola** [www.crayola.com](http://www.crayola.com)
- ▶ **Naked Binder** [www.thenakedbinder.com](http://www.thenakedbinder.com)
- ▶ **The Green Office** [www.thegreenoffice.com](http://www.thegreenoffice.com)
- ▶ **Mary's Softdough** [www.softdough.com](http://www.softdough.com)
- ▶ **ReUselt** [www.reusit.com](http://www.reusit.com)
- ▶ **Red Apple** [www.redapplesupply.com](http://www.redapplesupply.com)
- ▶ **Makin's Clay** [www.makinsclay.com](http://www.makinsclay.com)
- ▶ **Center for Health, Environment & Justice** [www.chej.org](http://www.chej.org)