

INTERIOR DESIGN FOR CHILD CARE CENTRES: WHAT YOU NEED TO KNOW ABOUT FLOORING

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Since small children spend a great deal of time both near and on the floor, the choice of materials is much more important in child care settings than in other environments. The selection of the right flooring is a crucial decision in the design of a child care facility. It must be considered not only for construction cost, but also ongoing maintenance costs, durability, appearance, ease of cleaning, health and environmental concerns, and of course, safety.

Flooring materials fall into two distinct categories: ceramics and other hard finishes that are really only suitable for wet or entrance areas; and resilient flooring, an industry category that includes a great variety of materials including regular vinyl tile, rubber tile, linoleum, cork and vinyl wood plank. Though similar looking, residential wood grain laminate flooring has a particle board back that will not withstand water and regular mopping.

Floor Costs (pay now or pay later)

Flooring decisions are, unfortunately, often made only on the basis of installed construction cost. Using only that criterion, the lowest price



Vinyl wood plank floors convey a warm natural look, but are more durable than residential quality wood grain laminate.

is always the familiar 12 inch square vinyl tile at approximately \$2.00 per sq ft. The other materials mentioned above range from \$4.00 to \$6.00.

The more important cost decision is how much the floor will cost to maintain over its life. On that basis, vinyl tile is clearly the most expensive because it requires regular buffing, liquid sealers, waxing, and occasionally stripping off the build up of wax. If they are not regularly maintained, they will become scuffed and dirty looking. Linoleum also should be regularly washed and

buffed, and occasionally waxed.

There are several floors that require only damp mopping. Silicone impregnated rubber comes in large coloured tiles and is easily maintained, even by centre staff, with only a sponge mop. Its soft sheen does not show marks and does not require wax. Wood grain vinyl gives a natural residential look and is available in a plank strip that has a tough textured finish that resists scratches and needs only mopping. If you are using vinyl tile floors, talk to your maintenance contractor or staff to see what the real cost of your floor is before you make any new floor decisions.

Environmental Concerns

The lack of need for commercial cleaning chemicals is a major bonus of these new easy care floors. There is no advantage in using chemicals that are both expensive and off-gas as they are sprayed and dried. The

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other environmental precaution with all new flooring is to always specify glues that contain no VOC's (volatile organic compounds). Traditional flooring adhesives release harmful solvents into the air. Fortunately, the green movement has caused most manufacturers to develop new products.

Durability and Safety

Ceramic tile floors are ideal in wet areas such as washrooms and entrance areas and are hard wearing, water and scuff resistant, and require only washing. Porcelain tiles are preferable as they are coloured throughout and have no glazes or coloured finish to wear off over time. Their durability also means they are extremely hard if a child or staff member happens to fall, which means they should be used sparingly. To avoid slipping, tile surfaces should never be polished, but just rough enough to grip while at the same time not hold dirt.

All of the resilient floors are somewhat hard and slippery except silicone rubber. Area carpets and padded mats provide the best protection. Linoleum offers the interesting advantage of being able to be bent up the wall to give a seamless easy clean edge at the wall. The joints in linoleum should be specified to be heat welded to give a seamless floor that repels water.



Solid colours and a consistent texture give this centre a spacious look.

Floor Design Matters

Floors are a major design element in any space and set the tone for the facility. Quality materials make the centre look unique and can give it a special high quality feel that will be noticeable to prospective parents. The materials can link and connect rooms and allow for a spacious and calming feeling. Floor colours do not

need to be beige or grey and can be interesting and colourful. Take care to avoid overly bright reds or yellows as they can clash with all the other floor carpets used in the room. Solid colours should be chosen with a small fleck or pattern to help hide any marks. Wood grain floors can give a very homey feel to a space and yet still be durable.

Flooring colours can be used to signify activity zones. Try using blue to signify wet areas, green for activity zones and yellow for reading and quiet rooms. Children easily understand that "wet things are only on the blue floor" and "the yellow area is for the little kids, so there is no running in there".

When considering floor materials, whether as a replacement or in new construction, ask your designer to recommend new materials and remember to consider the environmental and long term maintenance benefits of all materials as well as their initial costs.

The Ideal Environment/Brian Lee Architect is an architecture and interior design firm specializing in childcare design. For more information please see www.theidealenvironment.com.



Children easily understand the colour coding used on this floor and know that wet things are only allowed in the blue area.