

Enabling Environments in the Early Years

Making provision for high quality and challenging learning experiences
in early years settings

by Liz Hodgman

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Why is the environment important in supporting children's learning?

This book is for all early years practitioners and aims to support managers and staff to develop the learning environment for the children in their setting. It will be useful for practitioners in nurseries, pre-schools, children's centres, home-based settings and schools.

What is an enabling environment in the early years?

It is a physical indoor and outdoor environment which provides:

- Space
- High quality resources
- Displays
- Accessibility
- Stability.

All of which are designed to promote young children's physical, mental and emotional health and wellbeing.

It is also an emotional environment providing warmth and acknowledgement of each child as unique. A truly enabling environment ought to support children's learning across the seven areas of learning of the Early Years Foundation Stage and ensure that "every child is a unique child, who is constantly learning and can be resilient, capable, confident and self-assured" (EYFS, 2014, Statutory Framework for the early years foundation stage, DfE, page 6).

Why is the environment so important?

The environment plays a key role in supporting and developing a child's learning and development. An enabling environment will:

- Provide a child with stimulation and challenge.
- Pick up on a child's interests and enable them to explore and experiment.
- Be flexible to allow for quiet, reflective and focused learning, maybe in a comfortable book corner, as well as more boisterous and physical play.
- Support children's learning across all six aspects of learning, allowing them to practise their skills and develop new ones.
- Help children to learn about rules and how to communicate with others.
- Encourage children's creativity and imagination and permit them to take risks and make mistakes.
- Promote equality and support children to develop a greater understanding of others' needs, cultures, religions and backgrounds.
- Provide safety and emotional support.
- Encourage independence and help children to develop a positive attitude towards learning.

Why is the environment important in supporting children's learning?



A book corner, welcoming and comfortable for the early 'reader'



Supporting independence and life skills

Every Child Matters

Providing an enabling environment links to the five Every Child Matters outcomes:

- **Stay Safe:** an enabling environment provides children with a safe and secure place to play and learn, with support from caring adults who will continually risk assess and evaluate the environment, help children to learn about dangers, and how to protect themselves.
- **Be Healthy:** an enabling environment provides children with support to develop good personal hygiene practices, such as hand washing, and a clean place to play, reducing the spread of infections.
- **Enjoy and Achieve:** an enabling environment provides a wide range of activities and resources that are stimulating and encourage participation, support learning and development, offer challenge, and the opportunity to succeed.
- **Make a Positive Contribution:** an enabling environment encourages children and parents to make contributions, where their voices are listened to and acted upon, where they are consulted about changes and developments in their setting.

- **Achieve Economic Well Being:** an enabling environment that offers challenge; where children learn and develop, gaining skills to support them in later learning and eventually in employment and adult life, enabling them to achieve economic wellbeing.

To access The Every Child Matters Outcomes Framework (DCSF, 2008) visit <http://www.dcsf.gov.uk/childrensplan/downloads/ECM%20outcomes%20framework.pdf>

The environment: different approaches and curricula

The environment has always been considered important in children's learning and development, and features in the research and approaches of the main theorists. It is also a principle of many early education curricula and frameworks across the world. The below lists summarise the importance that key theorists, followed by early years frameworks in the UK, place on the early learning environment.

Maria Montessori (1870-1952) was an Italian physician and educator who developed the Montessori method of educating children based on her research and experiences educating

Auditing your setting's current provision

Ofsted's Leading to Excellence Article describes stimulating environments as:

Adults plan the day carefully, tailoring the arrangements to meet each child's welfare and learning needs. They plan the use of space available inside and out to maximise its impact on outcomes for children. The timing of activities and how children move around is well coordinated. Appropriate resources are available and easily accessible to promote children's all-round development. Risks are assessed and managed well, enabling children to freely choose activities, test their skills and make new discoveries within safe boundaries.

(Ofsted, (2008) *Early Years Leading to Excellence*.)

Whatever type of setting you work in there will be times when you want to make changes to the environment. This might be because you have been given funding or a grant to make improvements, a change in the space you are allocated, you want to introduce a new activity or resource, or you just feel like a change or a turn around.

The starting point for making any changes to current provision is to look at what is already in place. Auditing the provision will enable managers and practitioners to use a systematic approach to establishing what is already available in their environment and what areas need to be further developed, strengthened and enhanced. It should also provide some valuable information for the settings Self Evaluation Form and evidence for a future Ofsted Inspection.

The environment and the Self Evaluation Form

The Ofsted Self Evaluation Form (SEF) is available to complete online at www.ofsted.gov.uk or you can download a copy. (Reference 130184 October 2013.) A guidance document

is also available to download to support practitioners in its completion. (Reference 120342, October 2013.)

It is important to remember that completing a Self Evaluation Form is not simply a question of ticking boxes, rather it is a question of reflecting on the services offered, assessing their delivery, and then evaluating what impact they have had on the children's learning and development. The table on page 9 outlines the key areas of the Ofsted SEF that link directly to the environment, and details of where supporting information can be found for each requirement within this book. (Reference 120342, October 2013.)

See page 9 for the environment and the Self Evaluation Form.

Audit of current provision

The following pages provide guidance on auditing various areas of your provision, to provide you with either an individual assessment of one aspect, or completed as a set to produce a holistic picture of the setting. A sample checklist on the general learning environment has been fully laid on page 10, with room for comments on whether each aspect of the learning environment has either been fully developed, partially developed or needs developing. For other aspects of provision such as the outdoor environment, we have provided a list of areas for you to assess and to form your own checklists.

These checklists can be completed by the manager or a senior practitioner/room leader or as a staff team. Using time during a staff meeting to look at one of the checklists will bring fresh ideas and viewpoints. It is very easy to miss things when you are in a familiar environment every day. For example, the nursery nurse in the baby room of a large day nursery will be able to give a different perspective on how she sees the outdoor area for the toddler room.

An audit will provide you with information on:

The outdoor environment

Some of my earliest and happiest memories are of playing outdoors with my siblings. I was one of four children and we spent huge amounts of time outdoors playing, exploring and learning. We learnt about risk taking when our elder brother encouraged us to climb trees. We experimented with 'perfume' making, using petals and leaves from the garden. We mixed earth, water and chopped grass to make 'school dinners' for our dolls, or 'mucky gooey' as we called it! We dug really deep holes, thinking we would eventually arrive in Australia, until our Dad explained how big the world was! We challenged ourselves physically with our 'puffa puffa' races and found ways to resolve our sibling quarrels without normally involving our parents. We adapted our few garden toys to suit our activities; my metal dolls pram hardly ever had a doll in it, normally earth, stones and grass... it made a great wheelbarrow! We converted the small shed into a whole range of things, but mostly it was a 'lift', taking us and our scooters to the next level of the 'car park' in our shopping game. We explored with little supervision from our parents, discovering things for ourselves and developing independence. Our play was child-led: we were in charge of our own play and it was real and natural.

So what were the elements of my childhood garden that made it such an engaging learning environment?

- Freedom and space
- Opportunities to explore the natural world
- The opportunity to use my imagination and be creative
- The opportunity to take risks within a safe and secure environment.

This chapter looks at how different childcare provisions can tackle the issues they face in providing an enabling outdoor environment and includes case studies across a range of settings.

The Early Years Foundation Stage Framework (EYFS) states that *'Talk with children about their responses to sights, sounds and smells in the environment and what they like about playing outdoors. Encourage young children to explore puddles, trees and surfaces such as grass, concrete or pebbles.'* (Development Matters, Early Education 2012, page 39.)

Freedom and space

'Plan space to encourage free movement.'

(Development Matters, Early Education 2012, page 22.)

Having space to walk, run, skip and hop supports children to develop their gross motor skills. However it also gives them space to let off steam and release energy. This is especially important for boys. Health experts agree that if young children are not given regular access to outdoor physical activity they may be more likely to be at risk of obesity, type two diabetes, cancer and heart diseases.

Playing outdoors gives a great sense of freedom, even when the ground area is limited; the sky above provides a great feel of space and openness. This may explain why often children outdoors are more co-operative, confident and tolerant of others. Being outdoors has a major impact on children's emotions, personality, behaviour and their ability and attitude towards learning.

When visiting Purley Nursery the children were eager to show us how much they enjoyed the freedom of being outside. They ran up and down the garden, often with their arms wide and heads up to the sky. What was so amazing was that during their several laps of the garden, round the wooden playhouse and down the slope, they stayed in their order, there was no attempt to overtake each other, the children were not racing or competing with each other. They were running because they wanted to, it was fun and they were clearly enjoying the freedom and space.