



Creating an enabling environment: Three to five-years-olds

Introduction

In the new EYFS Framework, the enabling environment is outlined as one of the four guiding principles which should shape practice in early years settings.

- *children learn and develop well in **enabling environments**, in which their experiences respond to their individual needs and there is a strong partnership between practitioners and parents and/or carers.*

Whilst the quality of the physical **space** which young children are in is certainly important, there are also other aspects to consider when thinking about how to create an enabling environment. These are how **time** is managed in order to capitalise on all the opportunities that the environment provides, and on the quality of the interactions and **relationships** between the children, practitioners, and parents/carers in the setting.

Space

The space available in different settings will vary, but a very common complaint is, 'We don't have enough space.' Although availability of space is certainly an issue, we frequently make this even more challenging by not making the best use of what we have.

An untidy, cluttered environment, full of things kept 'just in case they come in useful one day', limits children's ability to move around and restrict their freedom to play and explore. This in turn can often lead to problems with behaviour as children become frustrated or bored.

A high quality environment for young children should:

- Be clean, tidy and uncluttered.
- Be used flexibly by practitioners throughout the day in response to children's moods and interests.
- Include cosy, quiet spaces where children can play quietly, look at books, rest, or sleep.
- Be painted in calm, neutral colours to provide a backdrop to the children's activities.
- Contain only the furniture that is absolutely essential, leaving plenty of free floor space for children's play.
- Have space for individual activities and for group interaction.
- Be resourced with interesting open-ended toys and resources to look at, touch and explore.
- Support and enhance the play opportunities of all children, boys as well as girls.
- Have resources stored at a height where children can see and access them.
- Make good use of mirrors to create interesting environments to explore.

Time

As well as creating a physical space that is attractive and full of interesting resources, it is important to think carefully about the management of time. Children need time and opportunities to become absorbed in what they are doing, often repeating things again and again, until their curiosity is satisfied. They need time to play on their own, time to play with friends, and time to be part of a larger group at story time or when dancing or making music.

Children of this age will enjoy being involved in projects and activities that extend over several days or weeks providing the opportunity to come back to things and explore them in greater depth.

A flexible approach to time management which takes account of the needs and interests of the children, rather than a fixed routine which must be followed minute by minute, will lead to better outcomes for everyone; children and

adults. This approach gives children the opportunity to concentrate for long periods of time, investigating resources and exploring situations which interest them, thereby demonstrating deep involvement and high level learning.

For preschool children, although there will be daily events that have to happen at certain times – mealtimes and home time for example – it should be possible to be much more flexible about what happens during the rest of the day. Experience shows that this approach leads to a calmer atmosphere in the setting, gives more time for children to become engrossed in what they are doing, and results in a decrease in instances of negative behaviour.

Relationships

The emotional environment of the setting, strongly influenced by the way in which adults and children talk to and behave towards one another, has a very significant effect on brain development in young children. Strong positive relationships between adults and children based on mutual care and respect enhance a child's sense of wellbeing and emotional resilience. This is why personal, social, and emotional development has been designated as one of the prime areas of learning in the new EYFS Framework.

Establishing effective partnerships with parents makes a very important contribution to ensuring young children have the best possible experience in an early years setting. The role of the key person is essential to this as they 'look out for' and pay special attention to a child during his or her time in the setting. Each key person is responsible for a small group of children, getting to know them and their parents and family members well. Working in this way helps to show all children that they are respected and valued as individuals, and avoids the danger of children becoming anonymous in a large group setting.

Effective key person working involves practitioners spending time getting to know each child's family well, listening to what the parent has to say about their child and building up a relationship of trust with them. By listening to parents in this way, the key person can plan experiences and opportunities that will enable the child to have the best possible day in the setting. The key person can also help parents to feel fully connected with their child's life in the setting by sharing information – verbal feedback, written observations and photographs – with parents at the end of the day.

EYFS space and premises requirements

The basic space and premises requirements for group settings as set out in the EYFS Framework are:

- The premises and equipment must be organised in a way that meets the needs of children. In registered provision, providers must meet the following indoor space requirements:
Children aged three to five years: 2.3 square metres per child.
- The provider must ensure that, so far as is reasonable, the facilities, equipment and access to the premises are suitable for children with disabilities.
- Provision must be made (space or partitioned area) for children who wish to relax, play quietly, or sleep, equipped with appropriate furniture. Sleeping children must be frequently checked.
- Providers must ensure that there is an adequate number of toilets and hand basins available (usually one toilet and one hand basin for every ten children over the age of two). There should usually be separate toilet facilities for adults.
- Providers must also ensure that there is an area where staff may talk to parents and/or carers confidentially, as well as an area in group settings for staff to take breaks away from areas being used by children.

Practical ideas for developing an enabling environment

Although the environment of every early years setting is different, there are many practical ideas you can use to enhance both the physical environment and the resources you provide for children to play with and explore.

Physical environment

- Try using neutral colours on the walls and ceiling to create a calm environment. This provides an ideal backdrop for displaying the learning activities of the children.
- Make as much use as possible of natural light and be aware of how the light levels change during the day. Draw children's attention to how sunlight or shadows move across the room during the day.
- Keep spaces flexible by using movable furniture to divide up the room.
- Use open shelves, baskets, and transparent trays to store resources so children can access them easily.
- Look for ways to make the environment multi-sensory by using textured wall hangings and floor coverings.
- Introduce multi-sensory experiences into the room using music and distinctive smells such as pot pourri, flowers, or pine wood.
- Use mirrors at angles to one another to create unusual viewpoints or to draw children's attention to particular objects or resources.
- Maximise the available floor space by limiting the number of tables and chairs in the room.
- Give children cameras and ask them to photograph the spaces they like and the spaces they don't like.
- Use this information to decide together how the indoor spaces should be arranged and used.
- Display photographs of the children engaged in a wide variety of play and learning experiences accompanied by brief explanations of what is happening. Include the children's comments and conversations about what they are doing.
- Talk to the children about the importance of respecting their environment and help them to take responsibility for looking after it.
- Respect and care for the physical environment by keeping it clean, uncluttered and well maintained.
- Talk to parents about how the physical environment supports their child's learning and development.

Resources

- There are a very wide range of open-ended resources that can be used with this age group to focus children's interest and encourage their creativity.
- Risk assess and regularly check the resources you provide to ensure they are safe for children to use. Thereafter, be adventurous in the range of resources you provide for young children to explore and create with.
- Use collections of natural materials such as leaves, twigs, pebbles and shells to encourage close observation, sorting, and classifying, and looking at similarities and differences.
- Store your resources in baskets or boxes which they children can access themselves, that are attractive to look at and that add value to the resources they contain.
- Make collections of reclaimed materials – tubes, boxes, plastic containers, coloured milk bottle tops, pieces of fabric, smooth pieces of metal, wood offcuts, and short lengths of plastic guttering. These can be used for sorting, pattern making or adding interest to small world play and construction.
- Reclaimed materials can be used to build 'machines' on a small or large scale, with discussion about the nature and purpose of these creations extending children's, especially boys', thinking and communication skills.
- Use interesting natural and reclaimed resources for counting and sorting, rather than plastic counters or shapes.
- Sand is great for digging, stirring, pouring, or scooping into containers, but add some pine cones, bark or driftwood and it becomes an imaginary world for small world play.
- A layer of sand in the bottom of a tray or shallow container can be used as a base for mark making with fingers or twigs, while shells, stones, leaves and cones can be used creatively to make interesting shapes and patterns on the surface.
- Water can be transferred from one container to another, poured down guttering, or mixed with sand, but try to restrict the number of things the water tray as this can make it difficult for children to explore and investigate.
- Clay can be rolled, squashed, squeezed, pinched, cut, and joined, helping to develop the physical movement skills of young children as well as their creativity. Naturally occurring clay has a quality of its own which is different from that of either playdough or plasticene.
- The texture of clay can be altered by adding water to make it thin and slippery, or by drying it out to make it hard and strong. It can be built into bridges, flattened to create roadways, or shaped to form houses and enclosures to add interest to small world play.

- Rocks and stones come in an infinite variety of shapes, colours, patterns, and textures, and provide good starting points for extending children's vocabulary and descriptive language.
- Wood that has been freshly cut from a pine tree has a distinctive smell and often oozes a sticky, viscous sap; wonderful for investigating the properties of materials.
- A range of magnets of different shapes and sizes, along with a selection of metallic and non-metallic objects, will prompt interesting investigations and discoveries. Children can make simple magnetic 'fishing' games, or explore how to make paper clips in a plastic tray 'dance' by moving a magnet around under the tray.
- Light panels and overhead projectors provide young children with many different opportunities to explore the properties of materials and investigate and interact with shadows.
- Mirrors placed at an angle to one another provide unusual viewpoints and challenge children's thinking as they explore movement, numbers and symmetry.
- Take time to watch how individual children play with the different resources and use this information to plan new learning opportunities for them.
- Display photographs of the children exploring and playing with the resources, accompanied by the conversations they have and comments they make. This provides an invaluable insight into what young children are thinking.
- Spend time helping parents to understand the value of children playing with a wide range of open ended materials, not just shop bought toys and games.

How to create an enabling environment

Use these reflective questions to think about how you might organise and resource your environment to meet the needs of young children aged three to five. They could become the starting point for planning any changes you decide to make.

Space

- How well do we all understand the contribution the physical environment makes to supporting the welfare, learning and development of young children?
- Do we all agree that creating a calm, neutral environment is preferable to the more typical colourful, busy environment common in many early years settings?
- How good are we at tuning in to young children's interests so we can provide appropriate environments for them?
- How could we go about auditing our environment to establish how well it meets our, and the children's, needs?
- Do we all understand the purpose of the different spaces we have in the setting, and are they all used effectively?
- How aware are we of which spaces around the setting the children like, and which they dislike?
- Are we happy that the children, as well as the adults, can change the layout of the spaces?
- How could we change the organisation of our environment so that children can access resources freely?
- Could we involve the children more actively in managing our risk assessment procedures to ensure the suitability of the resources they use?
- Do we always act as good role models in the way we take care of our environment and resources?

Time

- How could we audit our current use of time to see if we could make our regular routines more flexible?
- Do we always create a calm start to the day and do we work in a calm relaxed manner that prevents children from being hurried along unnecessarily?
- Do we regularly ask children what things they enjoy doing and what they don't enjoy and do we do anything on the basis of this information?
- Are there ways we could give children more control over how they spend their time in the setting?
- Does the rhythm of the day provide opportunities for children to be active or quiet, to think and reflect and to stand back and watch others?
- How good are we at giving children time to be creative, time to think, time to solve problems and time to practise and master skills for themselves?
- Do we plan enough opportunities for children to be involved in projects that may last days, or weeks?
- How easy do we make it for children to come back again and again to things they enjoy doing? Can they store 'work in progress' safely so they can complete it at a later date?
- Do we spend enough time talking with parents in order to understand their perspective on their child?
- Could we do more to share our knowledge of child development with parents to help them to value the things that their child can do, rather than focus on the things they can't yet do?

Relationships

- How well do we demonstrate our belief that an enabling environment is essential to support and promote young children's active learning and development?
- Do we all understand the importance of tuning in to and valuing individual children's interests and fascinations?
- How well do we show that we value the interests of the boys as well as those of the girls in our setting?
- Does our key person system fully support the development of strong relationships with children and families?
- How could we minimise the number of transitions a child may experience while they are in our setting?
- Do we do enough to help children establish friendships with their peers?
- How could we do more to support parents and children with the transition from pre-school to school?
- Are we conscious enough of the role models we provide in terms of how we speak to and behave towards one another?
- Do we make enough use of photographs and images around the setting that show how we value children and the communities from which they come?
- In what ways could we develop our partnerships with parents to help them to feel an integral part of the life of the setting?