



Creating an enabling environment: Under threes

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 environment – the physical **space** – which babies and toddlers are in is certainly important there are also other aspects to consider when thinking about how to create an enabling environment. These include 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

From the earliest age, babies use all their senses to explore their surroundings as they begin to make sense of the world around them. Through these interactions, connections between the nerve cells in the brain are created and consolidated as the baby's brain develops and matures. The physical environment therefore plays a very important role in supporting babies' and toddlers' healthy growth and development.

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 make the best use of what we have. An untidy, cluttered environment, full of things kept 'just in case they come in useful one day', will limit 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 babies and toddlers 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 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.
- Be resourced with interesting open ended toys and resources to look at, touch and explore.
- Have resources stored at a height where children can see and access them.
- Make good use of mirrors low down on the walls and in corners 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. A one-year-old baby is entitled to all the time he or she needs to enjoy the experience of being one, rather than being constantly encouraged to 'move on' to being two.

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. Given the opportunity, babies and toddlers will concentrate for long periods of time investigating resources and exploring situations which interest them, demonstrating deep involvement and high level learning.

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 flexible about what happens during the rest of the day. This is likely to lead to a calmer atmosphere in the setting; more time for children to become engrossed in what they are doing and fewer 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, also 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.

Establishing effective partnerships with parents makes a very important contribution to ensuring babies and toddlers 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 will be 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, building up a relationship of trust with them and learning as much as possible about the interests, behaviours and preferences of each child in their key group. They also need to listen to what parents have to say about their child and use this information to help the child have the best possible day in the setting. They 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 under two years: 3.5 square metres per child.
 - Two-year-olds: 2.5 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. There should be a separate baby room for children under the age of two. However, providers must ensure that children in a baby room have contact with older children and are moved into the older age group when appropriate.
- 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 ensure there are suitable hygienic changing facilities for changing any children who are in nappies, and providers should ensure that an adequate supply of clean bedding, towels, spare clothes and any other necessary items are always available.
- 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.
- Look for ways to alter the light levels in some rooms, or parts of the rooms.
- Get down on the floor to see how the room looks from the perspective of a baby or toddler.
- Make as much use as possible of natural light and be aware of how the light levels change during the day.
- Keep spaces flexible by using movable furniture to divide up the room.
- Use open shelves or baskets on the floor 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.
- Play quiet music and introduce distinctive smells such as pot pourri, flowers, or pine wood.
- Use mirrors in corners and low down along the walls to create unusual viewpoints.
- Maximise the available floor space by limiting the number of tables and chairs in the room.
- Display photographs of the children in different play situations along with brief explanations of what learning is happening. Include any comments which the children make about what they are doing.
- Talk to the children about the importance of caring for the environment they are in and be sure to act as a good role model.
- Respect and care for the physical environment by keeping it clean, uncluttered and well maintained.

Resources

- Use a wide range of open-ended resources to engage children's interest and encourage their creativity.
- Risk assess the resources you provide to ensure they are too big to swallow and are not likely to break. Thereafter, be adventurous in the range of resources you provide for babies and toddlers to explore.
- Create Treasure Basket collections for non-mobile babies to enjoy.
- Build up a large collection of heuristic play resources and organise regular heuristic play sessions for toddlers.
- Use collections of natural materials such as leaves, twigs, pebbles and shells to encourage multi-sensory exploration.
- Store your resources in baskets or boxes which are attractive to look at and add value to the resources they contain.
- Make some small collections of reclaimed materials – tubes, boxes, plastic containers, pieces of fabric, smooth pieces of metal – for the toddlers to explore and play with.
- Sand is great for digging, stirring, pouring, or scooping into containers; add water and it sticks together and can be shaped into mounds and castles and walls.
- Water can be transferred from one container to another to fill and empty plastic bottles and bowls, but remember not to put too many things into 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, and very young children benefit from having large pieces of clay to thump and squash.
- Even very young babies notice the effects of light and shadow, and toddlers will enjoy exploring what happens when objects are put onto a light panel or an 'old style' overhead projector.
- Observing a young child's schemas – patterns of repeated behaviour which the child applies in a range of different situations – will help to build your understanding of his or her individual interests and ways of approaching challenges and solving problems.
- Take the time to watch how individual children play with the different resources and use this information to plan new learning opportunities for them.

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 babies, toddlers, and children under three. 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 babies and toddlers welfare, learning, and development?
- Do we understand enough about the way babies and toddlers learn so we can provide appropriate environments for them?
- How could we go about auditing our environment to see 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?
- 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?
- What changes do we need to make to our environment so that resources are freely accessible to children?
- How effective are our risk assessment procedures in ensuring the suitability of the resources which the children use?
- Do we always act as good role models in the way we take care of our environment and resources?
- Do we have good strategies in place to explain the importance of the physical environment to parents?

Time

- How could we audit our current use of time to see if we could make our regular routines more flexible?
- How successful are we in working in a calm relaxed way that prevents children from being hurried along unnecessarily?
- Do we give toddlers enough time to practise and master skills for themselves?
- How good are we at giving children time to be active or quiet, time to think and reflect, time to stand back and watch others?
- How easy do we make it for children to come back again and again to things they enjoy doing?
- Do we plan enough opportunities for toddlers to be involved in activities that last over several days?
- 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?
- Should we be spending more time talking with parents 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 babies and toddlers thrive in an environment that supports and promotes their active learning and development?
- Do we all understand the importance of tuning in to and valuing individual children's interests and fascinations?
- Are we happy that we make the most of all available opportunities to promote babies and toddlers personal, social, and emotional development?
- Could we make more use of mirrors to encourage babies and toddlers to build up a strong self-image?
- 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?
- 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?