



Key messages

- Babies, toddlers and young children thrive best in an environment that supports and promotes their active learning and development.
- Young children require space, indoors and outdoors, where they can be active or quiet, and where they can think, dream and watch others.
- The space needs to be appropriate for the age and development of all the children so that they can have suitable access to it and can interact within it.
- The space needs to be secure, appropriately heated and aired and free from hazards.
- There need to be well-organised areas and resources, both natural and manufactured, which are accessible to the children.
- There should be opportunities for a range of activities such as soft play, paint mixing, growing plants, mark-making, looking at books, reading stories, or exploring the properties of materials such as clay, sand or water.
- The space both indoors and outdoors should preferably be available all the time so children can choose activities and follow their interests.
- The outdoor space needs to offer shade and shelter, and children should have opportunities to experience changing seasons and the passing of time.
- In deciding what is an 'appropriate environment' it is important to understand the way babies, toddlers and young children learn and to provide for the age and stage of the children concerned.
- There is no ideal environment as babies' and young children's interests change, and the environment should change in response to these changing interests.

Why the Learning Environment is important

'An appropriate environment is key both to safety and to effective learning and development.' (DfES, 2006).

The Learning Environment involves both the people and the space in which children develop and learn. An appropriate physical environment is one where children feel safe, cared for and relaxed because they are in the continuous care of one, or a small number of, adults who are responsible for them (this includes a childminder's home). An appropriate physical environment offers access to an outdoor as well as an indoor space and should provide a place where children have opportunities to explore, learn and develop with the support of sensitive, knowledgeable adults.

The emotional environment

Knowledgeable adults who children trust and who observe and respond to their needs are an essential part of the Learning Environment.

These adults should:

- offer a range of experiences and resources which are regularly monitored and refreshed to keep them safe and stimulating;
- tune in to the children's interests and interact with them to support and extend their learning and development, jointly engaging in problem solving and sustained shared thinking;
- respond to observed interests and plan new materials and experiences within the environment that reflect these;
- monitor materials, children's involvement and their own involvement with children to ensure they offer relevant experiences;
- provide materials that reflect diversity in order to avoid stereotypical images or approaches;
- evaluate their provision to ensure that everything that is provided is of the highest quality.

Outdoor and indoor environments

- The outdoor and indoor environments should contain resources and materials that children can explore and investigate using all their senses.
- Some of the materials and resources should be familiar to the children from their home and community environments, and some should be new.
- The best materials have many uses, such as wooden hoops and pegs in a tin, with unlimited opportunities for children to use them creatively and imaginatively to support their learning and development.
- Families should be consulted and engaged in choosing the materials and resources the children use in a setting so that links can be made with home.
- The Learning Environment offers challenges through which children can learn about risk taking and keeping themselves safe.
- As well as providing opportunities for moving around, environments should offer a variety of surfaces and levels, places to sit or lie, to climb or swing and to make big movements such as spinning, dancing, jumping, running and so on.
- Adults need to support children's confidence in themselves and their developing skills as they tackle new experiences and develop a sense of what they can do and what they will be able to do as they practise and meet the challenges in the environment.
- Children need opportunities to dig, to climb, to swing and to control wheeled toys. They should be able to touch and feel a variety of textures and to move, stretch and crawl. They may like to make marks, to cut and join materials together or to shape and construct materials.
- They need to be able to rest and refresh themselves when they are ready.
- Children need time to play with what interests them and to make choices.
- They need opportunities to watch the natural world changing, to explore and solve problems.
- Children need opportunities to make friends and develop relationships.
- Children need time to learn and develop at their own pace.

References

DfES (2006) *Early Years Foundation Stage Consultation Document*, DfES Publications, Nottingham (ref. SESCO6_18).

Further resources

Bilton, H. (2005) *Learning Outdoors: improving the quality of young children's play outdoors*, David Fulton Publishers, London.

Using examples of good outdoor practice from a range of early years settings in the London Borough of Brent this handbook is an accessible source of guidance.

Early Years Outdoors is a dedicated service from Learning Through Landscapes that offers advice, materials and training to support practitioners in creating a seamless indoor/outdoor environment. Working with a number of interested experts, a shared vision for outdoor play and set of core values for high-quality outdoor experiences for babies, toddlers and young children underpins and drives the service. Learning Through Landscapes: www.ltl.org.uk; eyo@ltl.org.uk; tel: 01962 845811.

Edgington, M. (2002) *The Great Outdoors: developing children's learning through outdoor provision*, British Association for Early Childhood Education, London.

Starting from clear principles and considering the outside spaces that practitioners have available, this short publication helps them to evaluate the strengths and weaknesses of those spaces and how to organise and develop them.

Gura, P. (2001) *Resources for Early Learning: children, adults and stuff*, Paul Chapman Publishing, London. This book draws on effective practice and explores the value of a range of resources in the learning environment to support children's learning and development.

Lewisham Early Years Advice and Resource Network (2002) *A Place to Learn: developing a stimulating learning environment*, Lewisham (tel: 020 8695 9806; eys.advisers@lewisham.gov.uk).

Drawing on their work in many early years settings in Lewisham, south London, the early years advisers have published this flexible resource with many examples and colour photographs.

Lindon, J., Kelman, K. and Sharpe, A. (2001) *Play and Learning for the Under 3s*, TSL Education Ltd, London.

This is a practical book underpinned by sound theory and research which offers many ideas for adults who work with and provide environments for babies and toddlers.

Ouvry, M. (2000) *Exercising Muscles and Minds: outdoor play and the early years curriculum*, National Early Years Network, London.

Using examples of good practice this accessible guide looks at how to plan the outdoors as a learning environment – and addresses many of the assumptions that may obstruct this process.

Ryder-Richardson, G. (2005) *Creating a Space to Grow: the process of developing your outdoor learning environment*, David Fulton Publishers, London.

Using illustrated examples of case studies from the Kent 'Spaces to Grow' project, this book guides practitioners through the process of changing and developing their outdoor environment to maximise the learning potential for babies, toddlers and young children.

www.forestschoools.com

This website gives information about how this movement began and how it develops the natural outdoor environment for learning. It includes a detailed early years case study and links to other relevant sites.