

A child-led Christmas

Whether it's making decorations or planning a festive performance, it's important to provide children with the chance to explore their creativity, says **Judit Horvath...**



Christmas time with young children is a magical experience, as they encounter all of its wonders: the expectation of waiting and counting the days till Santa Claus's visit, the years of tradition there are to explore. During this time of year - from as early as the beginning of November - early years settings can become hives of activity and parental involvement, as children work through arts and crafts activities, stories and tales, and rehearse performances for the eyes of proud relatives. At Olympus KeyMed Day Nursery, our practitioners offer many educational opportunities to children, in order to help them to understand the real meaning of Christmas: being together, cherishing the love of family and friends, and celebrating belonging.

Settings, however, need to review carefully the opportunities they offer during the festive period. At our nursery, we have

close to 20 years of practice behind us, but after we reflected upon what it was exactly that children were being asked to do, we decided to change our methods. It was important to us that all children were encouraged to be creative and independent in their learning and choices. Being creative in our nursery means to observe freely, experiment happily, explore with interest, imagine, plan and create masterpieces by choice - rather than, for example, colouring predetermined outlines, using only red paint, and sticking pre-selected, universally square-shaped pieces of fabric onto pre-cut card, so adults can skilfully turn them into Christmas symbols in a bid to create the so-called 'Christmas spirit'!

We have decided to follow a different approach and offer opportunities to develop creativity as continuous provision, where children can study materials and make informed choices when engaging in art activities.

We introduce the subject of **Christmas** via storytelling, books, images and movies, and based on children's **conversations**, we **record** the story of their performance

The creative process

There are six stages in the process we use to enable children to unlock the creativity of the festive period:

1 Reception of creative information and inspiration

Firstly, we provide the children with information about Christmas, through books, movies, stories and objects, so they gain an insight into the celebration - a basic understanding about its meaning - and may be able to recall memories (depending on their age), or create new ones.

2 Internalisation of creative information

As the next step of the process, we offer the children a wealth of materials to explore and experiment with. We provide each child with a personal container and encourage them to select things that they like or prefer. Through this activity, children understand that each material has unique characteristics and the exploration gives them an idea of how different materials behave. This provocative activity stimulates children's imagination and their communication, interaction and sharing is a natural outcome.

3 Preparation of creative information

Whilst children are spending some time exploring these materials, we adults are observing the children touching, smelling, collecting, rejecting, choosing, throwing, selecting and sharing them. By closely examining their reactions, we can determine what they like, what they remember, what they want, and what they do not want, as they carefully examine objects one by one. Spending ample time observing the children significantly shortens our planning time.

4 Processing of creative information

Now the children express their reactions to, and views about, the materials via collections, arrangements, and sometimes verbal narratives. They start to arrange the goods and form their ideas about their usage in play. We often see an incubation or 'wondering' period occur here, during which the children process the information they have gathered.



A penguin mask for the children's performance



A Christmas reindeer

5 Planning and verification of vision

As a typical next stage of the process, we gather the children and plan activities/room designs together. By this stage into the process, the children possess a range of information via the information received from adults and from their exploration, so they are able to translate their knowledge into practical, new ideas.

6 Active realisation and implementation of ideas

In the final stage of the creative process, we facilitate the activities that children choose by providing them with various festive images and materials, sharing simple versions of the story of Christmas, and giving them plenty of time to create their very own magical Christmas experiences. Through these, children make connections, enhance memories and develop an awareness of the culture of the celebration.

Activities & performances

The possible applications of the creative process outlined above are limitless. When our nursery prepares for Christmas, we involve the children in all stages of planning, preparation and decoration. We organise cookie swap mornings, recipe

The Penguin Christmas story (written by the preschoolers of Olympus KeyMed Day Nursery)

This story was recorded by the children with adult help, so that when they performed it for their parents, it was narrated by their voices...

There was a baby penguin called Ralph. He lived in a cold place and swim in the sea. Ralph had two friends called Dean and Demon. They love splash around together. Christmas was coming, so Ralph and his friends write a letter to Father Christmas. Demon asked Santa for a new doll, Ralph asked Santa for water toys and Dean asked Santa for a ball.

It was really nearly Christmas. Pingu, the big penguin woke up and found that the world was white. It was magic. Pingu saw thunderstorm. It was a bit chilly out on the water. Ralph and his friends had to swim a long way to the post box to post their letter. On the way they met a shark called Bobby, he was scary and big and they were scared. Far away Pingu saw some white trees, and all the little penguins were there: "One, two, three, four, five, six...eleven and a shark. A shark?????" Pingu ran there with bells to scare the shark away. The shark just asked them: Where are you going?" "We

are going to the Snow Postman". "Can I come? I want a toy fish for Christmas." "Ok, come with us but don't eat us!"

They then went to the Snow Postman. After a long swim they found the post box and posted their letter to Santa over to the snow farm. It started to get dark and the penguins got tired and it was getting darker. They decided to sleep. But when they woke up they were lost. Then they saw a farm. On the snow farm Santa was feeding for reindeers, feeding some breakfast. There was a mummy Santa, a daddy Santa, an elf walking along and they are quite chilly, but they are not wearing anything. They must be really, really chilly cold! Cold for the reindeer.

Santa and mummy Santa was sitting on a chair next to some presents and angels. Pingu, Ralph, Dean and Demon started to run there. "A birthday to you...", Pingu sing. Santa give him a star. "It is not a birthday silly, it's Christmas." Santa went to the tree, a blue one. He then gave the polar bears, seals a present, and some food, star-food, in the snowing. Started snowing, star snow was falling, there were lights. Santa gave present to everyone.

sharing, Christmas table design sessions, Christmas tree decoration courses, in all of which the children take the leading roles, becoming, for example, event planners, trainers, DJs and caterers.

Our annual Christmas Show is planned following the steps of the creative process, too. We introduce the subject of Christmas to the children via storytelling, books, images and movies, and based on their conversations, we record the story of the children's performance. We also record the story told by the children - therefore both

the script and the narration are unique and personal (you'll find an example in the panel on this very page).

The EYFS states that 'Practitioners must consider the individual needs, interests, and stage of development of each child in their care, and must use this information to plan a challenging and enjoyable experience for each child in all of the areas of learning and development.' This, during the festive period at an early years setting, simply means that to fully experience the magic of Christmas, it's important for children to immerse themselves in the festivities and become involved with as much as they can, rather than only following adult instructions. For children, part of the reason why Christmas is so magical is because everything is new and exciting. So, instead of getting swept up in the clichés of Christmas, try to recapture that sense of wonder by indulging in the free-flow of creativity - in this way, new and exciting and meaningful Christmas memories will be guaranteed.



about the author

Judit Horvath is manager at Olympus KeyMed Day Nursery, an 'outstanding' setting in Southend, Essex.