

# MIXED MESSAGES



We need to pay close attention to how we convey information if we are to communicate effectively with parents and children, says **Nicola Gibson...**

**H**ave you ever picked up a book only to find a crucial page missing? Frustrating as that may have been, you were probably able to piece together enough information to make sense of what was missing. However, not everyone finds information, or the lack of it, so easy to understand.

Provision of clear, good-quality 'information' makes our lives easier and is generally productive for both the provider and recipient. In the retail industry, the provision of effective tangible and subliminal information is considered to be so important that a considerable amount of time and money has been spent on making improvements to both. The historic 'pile it high and get them in' attitude has mostly disappeared, replaced with a much more welcoming approach. Changes to frontage, layouts, décor and signage, and the provision of well-ordered, attractive displays and assistive communication have helped with customer understanding and engagement. The investment and improvements in the industry have paid off because the retail sector is now one of the most important and thriving parts of the UK economy.

In many ways the early years sector could benefit from taking elements of this approach and using it in early years environments because the aim to

improve understanding and encourage engagement is much the same. This is especially relevant if the early years environment presents both psychological and physical barriers to parents and children that struggle with communication.

## CASE STUDY LITERACY

*Tina took her son Glen along to the local preschool to register him for a place in the setting. Although Tina was initially apprehensive about going, her health visitor reassured her that the staff in the setting would be friendly, and that Glen would benefit from attending. Much to Tina's relief the health visitor was right because as soon as Tina entered the building, a member of staff warmly welcomed them both. She invited Tina to wait in the reception area for a few minutes until the manager was free to see her and Glen.*

*As she walked away from Tina, the member of staff pointed towards a display, board and said, "Have a read of the parents' board because there is a lot going on here that you will need to know about". Tina glanced at the board, which was laden with documents, and her heart sank. As the staff member disappeared, Tina quickly gathered her belongings, grabbed Glen's hand and left before the manager arrived because then no one in the setting would ever know that she couldn't read.*

There are over 5.1 million adults in England with literacy difficulties, some of whom are

parents to the 1.4 million children who have speech, language and communication difficulties. Many of these parents face a daily battle to make sense of, and interact with, the world around them, and in turn may struggle to support their children's early language and literacy skills.

For many parents just the process of registering their child with an early years setting can be fraught with difficulties, and it may take a parent considerable amount of courage to even set foot in the setting. Therefore, barriers to their engagement must be addressed in order to make that first visit and hopefully subsequent visits easier.

The way we communicate messages in the early years sector is vitally important because although it may seem like an easy process, getting it right can be difficult. Non-verbal messages can easily give the wrong information, for example, complicated or missing signage, inaccessible entrances, crowded notice boards, hard-to-read information, complicated room layouts, poor use of space and tired-looking home corners. Effective messages will provide both the child and parents with valuable clues about how things work and how to interact with the world and the people around them.

A well-organised and presented early years environment with supportive, caring staff will enhance the educational pedagogy of the provision and provide a model of good practice that may be copied and replicated in the child's home by the parent. The structure, composition and use of both the external and internal environments contribute to the

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nursery management

model and act as, in the parlance of the Reggio Emilia approach, a 'third teacher', conveying valuable clues and messages as to what things are and their function.

## CASE STUDY ENVIRONMENT

*St Christopher's nursery is situated in a purpose-built block in the grounds of a school with two main rooms and a small outside playing area. The main room is fairly large so most furniture and activities are set up at the front end of the room leaving a large, undefined area at the back. Leading on from the playroom is an adjacent room, which leads directly into the garden.*

*Over the summer holidays the setting undertook an environmental audit of the provision. The audit identified a few issues, including the poor use of space in the setting. The main problem identified was that some of the older children were using the open space in the main room to race from one side of the setting to the other, which often resulted in smaller children being knocked over. Also the adjacent room was dimly lit and only used as an overflow storage room and exit to the garden.*

*The staff set about making changes to redefine the layout of the main room and utilise all unused space. They also painted the overflow storage room, improved the lighting and changed the function of the room into a permanent indoor garden area, which flowed directly into the external play area.*

Undertaking an environmental review can help to identify and address environmental factors and specific communication barriers in early years environments, especially for parents and children who are new to the provision or have specific difficulties. Such a review is an ideal activity for staff planning as well as revealing any areas of concern which require adjustment.

These areas of concern might include tangible and subliminal barriers that influence what both a parent and child 'read' from the

environmental clues around them. For example, signage is usually the first detail that parents look for when they are visiting a new setting, so if a sign is confusing, difficult to read or obscured from view then the setting has failed to communicate basic information, even before parents set foot in the door. Well-considered, maintained signage and thoughtfully planned, accessible walkways will help guide and attract visitors in, where as a broken unkempt or vandalised sign hidden under a mass of nettles is more likely to put visitors off. Good signage not only helps parents identify the setting but also acts as a visual landmark to help children identify the venue and understand its purpose.

With care and attention any setting can improve the conditions for learning within its walls, and the quality of its communication; those that do will improve outcomes for children and parents alike.

Nicola Gibson is inclusion manager at the Pre-school Learning Alliance.

## find out more

*Language Links, a new publication by the Pre-school Learning Alliance, identifies the type of barriers that may present for both parents and children in early years environments and explores ways of making improvements to help create a communication-rich environment. It is priced at £9.95 for members and £14.95 for non-members. Visit [shop.pre-school.org.uk](http://shop.pre-school.org.uk)*

