

“We care about our nursery and each other...”

Settings need to pay close attention to the environment in which their children are cared for to support their emotional wellbeing, says **Cath Hunter**...

The physical environment of an early years setting can have a big impact on the emotional wellbeing of everyone who comes into the building, whether they are children, parents or staff. In order for children to feel safe and settled while they are there, a sense of organisation is essential. This is particularly important for children who may be experiencing disorganisation at home, as the structured and ordered environment that the nursery provides can contribute to their sense of safety and wellbeing. Settings that are clean, tidy and which ensure things are kept in the same place, so children can access them freely, provide an essential sense of stability and predictability. A child who lives with uncertainty can feel soothed by finding the bricks where he expected at nursery each day; a chaotic and untidy environment is at best confusing for children as they struggle to find things, and at worst frightening.

It is useful to remember that young children do not have the same language skills as adults and are unable to articulate their feelings, which are communicated through their behaviour. If the physical environment is calm, tidy and peaceful, children will feel safe and secure, and this will be reflected in how they behave – but if it is untidy and chaotic, children may feel anxious and scared, and their behaviour may deteriorate accordingly. It is worth reflecting on what first impression someone who is visiting your setting would have – does it feel warm, welcoming and nurturing, or is it messy, chaotic and cluttered?

CASE STUDY:

Jane had positive relationships with the children but noticed they struggled to settle after the weekend or holidays, as they were anxious and clingy. She asked me to observe her in the nursery. On entering the room I was struck by how disorganised and messy it appeared, and noticed the equipment seemed to be put away randomly, without having a permanent home. I suggested she work with the children to change this and involve them in the organisation,

labelling boxes with pictures of equipment. She agreed to this and immediately noticed a change – both in how she felt and the children's behaviour; as she was feeling more in control of her environment, the children's anxiety levels decreased.

Preparing for change

It is a good idea to warn children in advance of any changes to the physical environment – for example, a change of display or an area being moved – as even young children can feel anxious and unsettled by this. It is also important to explain why the changes are occurring, using appropriate language for their age and stage of development. For example, “The wall is being knocked down so we can have a bigger play area.” These changes might also include new toys appearing or old ones disappearing, as children may have become attached to things that we think are old and in need of replacing. Remember the bedraggled favourite teddy with one eye missing that you still love, even though it may now live in a box in the loft?

You should encourage children to have responsibility for taking care of their nursery, too. It is important to involve them as it is their space, and the more comfortable they feel, the easier it will be to ensure that they feel more settled and secure. Even very young children can be given jobs and roles, which will build confidence and self-esteem, along with a sense of belonging. It gives children the message ‘we care about our nursery and each other’. Nursery staff can explain and demonstrate to children how to care for things, and should ensure they do not make assumptions that children know or have experience in how to do this.

Children should also be involved in choosing themes for displays around nursery, and equipment and resources, if appropriate, to reinforce their sense of belonging and ensure they feel that their views are important.

Self-awareness

Encouraging staff in nursery to name and express their feelings appropriately is an effective way of helping children to learn to do the same. When an adult is able to share their feelings in an open, honest and appropriate way with a child, it gives them permission to do the same and creates a more positive atmosphere for everyone. It provides a positive experience of articulating feelings, and validates the experience of having them.

The verbal and non-verbal communication that happens between members of staff will be noticed by the children and responded to. For example, a child who notices that a worker always looks unhappy may try to cheer them up, or avoid them altogether for fear of upsetting

them. A worker who often appears stressed or anxious may communicate that in the way in which they respond to the children. This can increase the likelihood of the children feeling stressed and anxious, and create an emotionally unhealthy environment for staff and children.

When nursery staff are able to identify the possible feelings that may be evoked in situations and acknowledge this to the children, a deeper understanding and increased self-regulation occurs. For example, “I can see you look cross that you are having to wait for me to start reading the story”. The increased awareness and use of this approach by all staff will enable the process to be understood and used by both adults and children.

Using the environment

What the children see around them can provide powerful messages about being cared for. Walls that are bright and colourful or displays that are changed regularly, rather than tatty and faded, suggest a setting that is looked after and valued. It is important to provide displays with an emotional focus, for example, displays showing feelings faces, perhaps with images next to them – maybe a child looking sad when they drop their ice cream on the floor, or angry when another child takes a toy from them. These displays can be integrated into the daily routine as a way of ensuring that emotional vocabulary is used on a daily basis. For example, “Let's see if we can all find the picture where the boy looks sad. Why is he sad? Can anyone think of any other times when we may feel sad?”

Depending on their experiences and level of emotional development, from about the age of three children are often able to identify with their feelings. However, they need an adult to help them not to feel scared or overwhelmed by them. There are many opportunities within the nursery day to do this. Activities such as a feelings board with faces showing happy/sad/cross/scared and an arrow in the middle can be used at regular intervals to check how children are feeling, and to enable them to develop self-awareness. For example, “We were going to play outside but because it is raining heavily we have to stay inside. I wonder how that makes us feel?” The use of faces to demonstrate the feelings can help children to identify with their own feelings.

Regular discussions about feelings, along with efforts to ensure that your setting is clean and organised, will result in a more emotionally secure environment for everyone who uses the setting.

Cath Hunter is a therapeutic consultant, trainer, play therapist and supervisor. Visit therapeuticfamilyinterventions.co.uk



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CATH HUNTER