

Inspirational indoors



How do you create an engaging Reception classroom to support child-initiated learning? **Anna Ephgrave** has the answers...

As with the outdoors, which I looked at last issue, an indoor classroom should allow for learning in all areas of development, though I'll stress again that the two areas should not mirror each other. There are many advantages indoors that should be exploited: it's dry, with a controllable temperature and no wind, making it the ideal place for children to be calm and quiet (and we enforce this requirement firmly and consistently at Carterhatch Infant School), pursuing activities which require small equipment, and using resources that will not survive the elements.

In both our nursery and Reception classes, children choose where to go and what to do from the moment they arrive - they initiate their own learning and adults join them and support them in their pursuits. I visit many settings where the practitioners say that the children can choose what to do, but I find the choice is limited by what the practitioners have already selected and put on the tables. To support genuine choice we have a 'workshop' set-up, which means that in all areas, resources are available and accessible to the children at all times, but nothing is set out. Areas are clear, stocked and tidy at the start of the day; the tables and carpet areas are free of equipment but the resources are available next to them. For example, the unit in picture 1 contains a box of play-dough and resources to be used with it. It's placed near a table and the children can choose whether or not to go to this area and what to do if they do go there.

Less is definitely **more** with indoor equipment: **fewer, carefully selected resources** will be well used and **easier** to tidy up

Obviously children's choices are limited by the areas and resources available, so it's crucial to have appropriate areas with varied, high-quality, open-ended resources. It's also vital that the areas are well stocked, tidy, clearly labelled (with picture and word) or shadowed, and arranged to allow optimum access. We constantly reflect on the environment to identify which may need altering. For example, although we have opportunities for mixing sand and water outside, we want the indoor sand to be dry to offer different opportunities. Therefore it's necessary to keep the water tray and equipment away from the sand tray. We also try to avoid making new play-dough every day, so this also needs to be placed away

from the water and sand. Shadowing resources (as seen with the water equipment in picture 2) helps children to be independent when tidying up. The 'shadows' are cut from coloured card or paper and glued to the shelf. Once the shelf is covered in 'sticky back' plastic, the shadowing will remain in place for several years. Open shelving, such as in pictures 1 and 2, is

ideal for displaying and storing resources. Children can see the resources easily and select what they want to use - a great improvement on trays or drawers. Less is definitely more with indoor equipment: fewer, carefully selected resources will be well used and easier to tidy up, and the majority can be used all year - the children will use them differently every day. In picture 2, the contents of the larger boxes on the bottom shelf can be changed to meet emerging interests. We also use shelving like this indoors for blocks (see picture 3), play-dough equipment, sand



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resources, individual items such as timers, abacuses, etc., and creative equipment.

Fresh approaches

We constantly assess and review our resources (as well as the different areas), making changes as necessary. For example, we noticed that a very large wooden house was rarely, if ever, used and we therefore removed it from the nursery classroom. I have seen many classrooms where the carpet area is only in use for group times and there is another (often tiny) area for construction and small world play in another area of the class. It's more logical to place the construction toys and small world equipment around and facing onto the carpet; that way, when it's not group time, the carpet area is still being used productively (see picture 4).

Another example of change was in one of our Reception classes where we noticed how the



is always a 'home corner' (either indoors or outside) as this is what is familiar to the children - this is where they can practise being the adults that they know (and in doing so, develop the vital life skill of empathy). Other role play is set up as and when an interest emerges - as illustrated by the vet's office in picture 7.

Other areas

A few points to finish with. Recent brain development research is providing evidence to support what many practitioners have suspected for a long time - that children who seem obsessed with computers and screen technology are actually 'addicted' to them, and also that such activity does not engage the whole brain, rather a very small part of it. We have therefore removed PCs from our classes. We have iPads, digital cameras, CD players and interactive whiteboards to support learning in all areas, but we are able to control their use more easily.

Away from technology, most settings have lovely book areas and we ensure that ours are as inviting as possible. We have a sofa, cushions, puppets and props to make the experience engaging. We also have books in numerous areas of the indoor classroom - craft books in the creative area, cookery books in the role-play area, construction and reference books in the small world area. The children also have a folder each and these are stored in low units so that the children can take them out and look at them whenever they wish (see picture 8).

Finally, while the physical environment needs to be well laid out and equipped with high-quality, open-ended, varied resources, adults are key in creating the emotional environment that supports children (see picture 9) - ensuring that they feel confident and independent, ready to try new things in the knowledge that help is available if necessary, without taking over. As Sugata Mitra says, "Children will learn to do what children want to learn to do", so let's support them by creating a superb enabling environment, including superb enabling adults.



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creative table was always over-crowded. We extended the area, making the table larger so that more children could access it at once. As illustrated by picture 5, a few years ago we also decided to combine the creative area and the 'writing' area. Young children combine their different types of mark-making - they make a card and write a message; they draw a picture and write a story; they create a robot and add labelled controls. In many cases, they need creative equipment and writing implements - we therefore store them all in one area.

We have also elected not to have a maths area in our classes. Again, young children do not usually say, "I'm going to do maths." Instead, they'll opt to build a symmetrical model, make a play-dough cake with 10 candles, sew a repeating pattern onto a bag, 'cook' enough pasta to fill the four bowls, use a small scoop several times to fill a large

container with water, or balance the ingredients accurately when making a cake (see picture 6). They will be experiencing maths in almost all areas of the indoor classroom, so we ensure that there is equipment (including Numicon) in all areas to facilitate this.

Remember to review your provision in terms of levels of involvement. If an area or a resource is not engaging children in purposeful play, then remove it or change it. For example, threading beads might engage a few children in nursery, but cutting fabric and sewing it to make a real bag will be far more engaging and lead to higher levels of learning. Areas that deliver the highest levels of involvement are the role-play areas, creative area (including sewing), small blocks, sand, water, play-dough and small world equipment (including cars and dinosaurs). With regard to role play, we ensure that there

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