

All hands to the walls!

Kirstine Beeley

provides some helpful tips on developing interactive displays which truly stimulate learning...

Look! This is what a bear feels like!" came the cry from somewhere near the display on bears, swiftly followed by shouts of, "Look what this one's eating!" and "I've found a red and purple bear!". A recent visit to a pre-school showed me how a traditional display around a popular early years theme had, with a few exciting additions, become a central focus for discussion and exploration for the children in that setting.

A well-planned interactive display will engage children, stimulate their curiosity and spark their enthusiasm



Who will use an interactive display?

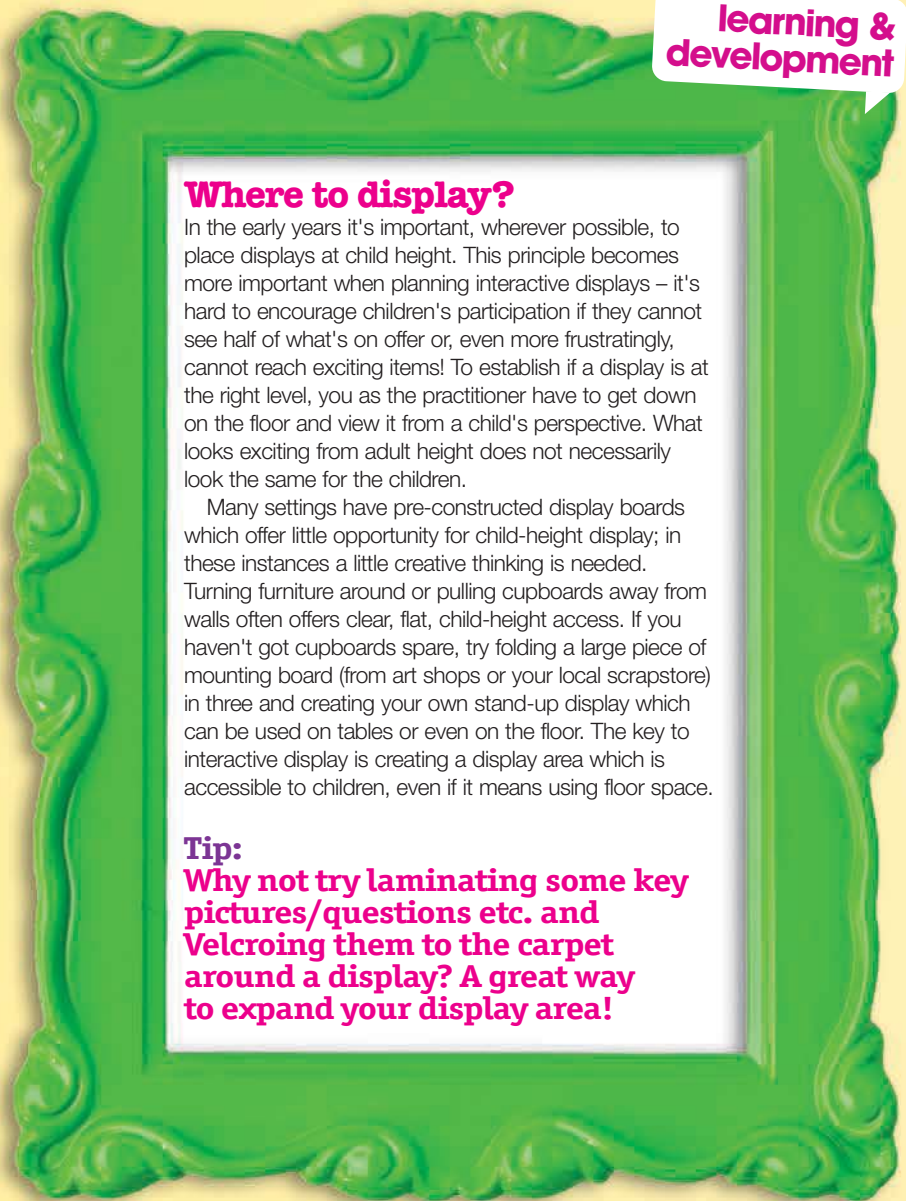
Over the years I've seen some amazing displays created by adults which have adorned the walls of nurseries and pre-schools without any ongoing reference after they were completed. This makes them (in my eyes) no more useful to the learning process than posh wallpaper (and wallpaper takes a lot less time and effort to put up!). If you really want to make displays an integral part of your learning environment they have to be planned and created so that they're constantly in use by children and adults alike. Ask yourself: "Will staff be actively encouraged to use elements of the display on a regular basis to stimulate learning and exploration, or are our interactive displays purely the domain of the children?" "Does the display offer a colourful focal point for shared discussion and exploration, or are children and staff discouraged from using it once complete in case it deviates from its original pristine look?"

Tip:

When considering interactive displays it's important to plan for how the adult practitioners will interact with the display and to note the potential for future learning that the display can offer.

In my last article I discussed the reasons for developing display in our early years settings and looked at how children can and must get involved in displaying their own creativity. This time I want to look in more depth at how display can be used to support and enhance the learning process.

A well-planned interactive display will engage children, stimulate their curiosity and spark their enthusiasm to learn more. Traditionally, displays which encourage children to pick things up, look, touch, listen and talk about what they see have tended to focus on science-based themes – a 'nature table' is a clear example of how we have, for many years, encouraged children to interact with the displays in our settings. However, with a little thought and a whole heap of imagination, I believe that any display can be interactive – and that we should plan for them being a key part of our ongoing provision.



Where to display?

In the early years it's important, wherever possible, to place displays at child height. This principle becomes more important when planning interactive displays – it's hard to encourage children's participation if they cannot see half of what's on offer or, even more frustratingly, cannot reach exciting items! To establish if a display is at the right level, you as the practitioner have to get down on the floor and view it from a child's perspective. What looks exciting from adult height does not necessarily look the same for the children.

Many settings have pre-constructed display boards which offer little opportunity for child-height display; in these instances a little creative thinking is needed. Turning furniture around or pulling cupboards away from walls often offers clear, flat, child-height access. If you haven't got cupboards spare, try folding a large piece of mounting board (from art shops or your local scrapstore) in three and creating your own stand-up display which can be used on tables or even on the floor. The key to interactive display is creating a display area which is accessible to children, even if it means using floor space.

Tip:
Why not try laminating some key pictures/questions etc. and Velcroing them to the carpet around a display? A great way to expand your display area!



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KIRSTINE BEELEY

A display for all senses

To develop and build truly interactive displays it's worth taking some time to reflect on what we already know about how children learn. You only have to look at the widespread use of treasure baskets and heuristic play to see that enough is now known about children's developing brains that we happily accept the need to stimulate all of a child's senses to maximise the building of new brain connections. Also commonly accepted is the theory that children have preferences for learning with tendencies towards visual, auditory or kinaesthetic (moving) learning. I firmly believe that it's possible to plan displays incorporating these principles and therefore to not only hopefully inspire and excite but also offer children a range of opportunities to develop their full and individual learning potential.

When planning your display, try and incorporate elements which stimulate children's senses. Lift-up flaps encourage curiosity and offer visual stimulation; small boxes with doors cut in them can be filled with items to touch; and recordable language pads offer a great chance to listen to key questions and comments. The more adventurous amongst us might also like to explore ways of incorporating smells into our displays (easy in spring and summer with flowery pot pourri or blended grass in small, sealed pots with holes in the lids!).

Tip:
Try to include both static and moveable multi-sensory elements to your display to encourage ongoing use.

Keeping up appearances

Once you've developed your display it's important to keep assessing it to ensure that enthusiasm for its use is maintained. Get down on the floor at regular intervals (ideally everyday, but definitely every week) and see if the display still looks interesting from a child's-eye view.

There are a few things you can do when building your display which help with increasing its longevity. Use Velcro squares/dots so that questions and tasks cards can be detached and changed around regularly. Laminate questions, cards and pictures to make them last longer. Recordable push button cards can be re-recorded to change questions. Put clear pockets (made from thick plastic filing pockets) on your display to hold objects and activities. These show clearly their contents but can be easily changed for ongoing excitement. However, remember that every display has its lifespan and once children's interest is waning it's time to plan and build another one.

Tip:
Displays should not be left up for a set period of time if they're being used as part of the learning environment. The old adage definitely applies to display in early years: "Use it, or lose it!"



find out more

Kirstine Beeley is an independent trainer and consultant, with experience of teaching in early years, primary and SEN settings, who focuses on helping early years professionals in creating exciting learning environments.

Words of advice

Five points to remember when planning, producing and promoting the use of your display...

- Make the display accessible to children.
- Build it to be used – laminate questions and use Velcro to create detachable elements. Don't get precious about its use!
- Keep reassessing: interest will drop over time – keep it fresh and fun to use!
- Include elements that stimulate all of the children's senses.
- Above all, use it (adults and children alike!).

Material world

Try these invaluable resources for your interactive displays...

- Talk Time Mini Cards – these recordable cards from TTS are great for placing next to pictures to ask questions at the push of a button. They're even available in speech bubble shapes! Also available are recordable picture frames and photo albums.
- Voile Bags – great for use as feely bags to add extra sensory excitement. Available from Sensory Toy Warehouse
- Wedding favour organza bags – these are great for tying up with dried orange, lavender, rose petals or other scents to add smells to your display. They can also be used as mini feely bags. (make sure they are tied tight for safety reasons). You could also invest in some wedding favour boxes while you are there for hiding objects for your display. You can find them at Hobby Craft.
- If you're searching for card, fabric or other arts and crafts materials, try your local scrapstore. Usually, for an annual fee you'll be allowed to visit the scrapstore (where businesses donate loads of fabulous materials which would otherwise go to landfill) and take resources for free or a much reduced price. I recently picked up fur fabric, artboard sheets, children's art books and seconds teddies from mine! Find your local scrapstore at childrensscrapstore.co.uk