

An outdoors for everyone

Albert Einstein once said, "Everybody is a genius. But if you judge a fish by its ability to climb a tree, it will live its whole life believing that it is stupid." It's a quote

I love, because to me it really sums up the underpinning belief that drives excellent teachers and practitioners to help every learner achieve their potential.

We are all differently abled and we can all do different things to different levels, but it is not always easy to create a learning environment that supports Freddy Fish to do his swimming thing but also allows Saheela Squirrel to climb her tree. The very best practitioners embrace every talent and allow each child to shine and feel a real sense of achievement in what they do.

I am of course using this as an analogy to describe how in early years settings we want to support those who really get on well with words as well as those who really get on well with numbers, but it also applies in a very practical way to play and learning in our external environments.

Some children seem to bounce and roll quite naturally around spaces; they are equally at home on their heads as on their feet and they recover with remarkable resilience from the most alarming bumps and scrapes. Others will hover more tentatively towards the edges of a play setting, gently testing their strength, courage and personal limits and sometimes deciding to give certain activities a miss as their own internal risk assessment auditor jumps up and down higher than a health and safety executive with a red-hot clipboard.

This is all natural and normal and very healthy as children can learn what they do and don't feel comfortable with

Inclusivity must extend beyond the confines of our settings' classrooms, says **Juno Hollyhock**...

and make adjustments to their activities accordingly. They can also have the chance, with a little gentle encouragement, to push their comfort zones ever-so-slightly wider and thus progress their skills and confidence.

But what if our environment actually prevents some children from progressing? What if they can see the chance for fun and excitement but cannot access it because, unlike their friends, they have different levels of mobility or perhaps they respond less well to challenging, brightly-coloured play equipment?

No play and learning space will ever suit every child all of the time, but there is lots that we can do to make our spaces as inclusive as possible.

■ By using different levels around our spaces we will accommodate those who use a wheelchair as well as those who can happily grub around on their hands and knees.

■ Introducing elements of shade, light and texture can make the environment more appealing to children who experience cognitive or sensory impairment.

■ Sensory gardens are a fantastic way to introduce a natural element to the outdoor area; they look and smell beautiful, and even the youngest child will enjoy smelling, touching and tasting from a bed of plants that they can reach by themselves.

■ Surfaces are important. Children who use a set of wheels to get around will benefit from thoughtful elements of decking or firmer surfaces in certain areas - there's nothing like getting embedded in a muddy grass patch to take the fun out of your playing experience.

■ Quiet space is also important, especially for children with hearing impairments: seating areas that allow them to be face to face with their friends to enable lip reading and interpretation of gesture and facial expression, areas away from the hustle and bustle so sound can be uninterrupted.

■ An ideal play space will allow a balance between fast and slow, shade and light, high up and low down, loose parts and fixed equipment, noisy and quiet, enclosed and open spaces.

Not everyone will have the square footage for the truly ideal environment for early years outdoor play and learning, but with a little creativity, and the use of loose natural parts in particular, it is possible to create spaces that have opportunity and potential for all children regardless of their ability to climb trees, make dens, create pictures out of cloud shapes, sing songs about beetles or get just generally involved in making something out of nothing.



about the author

Juno Hollyhock is executive director of Learning Through Landscapes, a UK charity dedicated to enhancing outdoor learning and play for children. For more information on a range of services and resources for early years settings, visit ltl.org.uk

