



HOME FROM HOME

When planning spaces for your youngest children, keeping domestic environments in mind will pay huge dividends, says **Ann Clare...**

Whenever a baby or young child is cared for in an out-of-home care setting there is a danger that the environments we create for them are institutionalised. This is not to say that they are cold and unwelcoming, but in most homes there is not the issue of finding a suitable place for babies and young children to play, sleep, eat and have all their personal needs catered for. It is therefore imperative that in out-of-home settings practitioners plan physical environments which endeavour to reflect the needs of the very young children in their care.

The EYFS recognises that the environment should reflect the domestic one of children's homes and that it should be of the highest quality. The danger is that the environments for very young children are 'dumbed down' versions of those environments that are offered to the older children. Babies and children under two do not compartmentalise their play, they are absorbed in the moment; they do not access books in a book corner, building in a construction area, imaginary play in a role-play area. This leads to the question, where and how can practitioners offer these very children the opportunity to develop their learning through quality experiences?

One thing to consider in daycare settings is how the children are organised. In this country, we traditionally group babies and children chronologically, with the exception in some cases of moving babies from the first to the second room when they are walking. I would challenge settings to consider this grouping. Previously, we discussed the impact that transition has on children but now we need to question whether this grouping is the best way of offering play for our youngest children.

Childminders care for children with a range of ages, playgroups cater for children from 2-5 years of age, so why do daycare settings have children grouped according to their age? Is this a logistical matter of staffing ratios? Is this because practitioners fear that the youngest of the children will be harmed (unintentionally) by their older peers? Are there not benefits for all ages if children are allowed to play in an environment where they



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can interact and relate not only to their peers but also to their siblings? As a mother of three children, who are three-and-a-half years apart in age, I witnessed the advantages for all three of my children of interacting with one another. My eldest

child developed her social and emotional skills, my middle child was necessarily challenged to be more independent in skills such as dressing and my youngest child was fortunate to have role models for language and challenge in all areas of her play.

I also conducted research in a setting where all of the children were cared for in one room, with a small picket fence sectioning off those under two as stipulated by the EYFS Welfare requirements. These young children were able to interact with their peers, share in routines, such as meal times, as they would in any family home. An environment where children could demonstrate Vygotsky's theory of the Zone of Proximal Development. (You can find further discussion on the use of mixed age grouping in my book *Creating a Learning Environment for Babies and Toddlers* and 'The National Evaluation of the Neighbourhood Nurseries Initiative' (Mathers & Sylva, 2007).)

The natural environment

Another environment to consider is the outdoors, which babies and young children should access daily. In the winter months, this is sometimes difficult as babies cannot access the grass which may be muddy and totally unsuitable. If this is the case, staff need to plan to take the babies out in buggies on a regular basis. If, however, you are planning the creation of an outdoor space then consider creating a decking area with a canopy where babies and young children can sit in comfort regardless of the weather.

I regularly visit nurseries and it is interesting to hear the barriers that are presented not to take the babies outside: the grass is unsuitable, there is not a designated place for them to play and they may get harmed. I once observed a whole nursery accessing

the outdoors on a warm summer's day; the non-mobile babies were sitting on a rug with an adult sharing books and toys with one another and looking at the older, mobile children modelling the resources that they soon would be able to access. Other crawling babies, under suitable supervision, were traversing the environment, challenging their newly acquired physical skills. Toddlers were experimenting with the small apparatus whilst observing the challenge of the resources for the older children. All of these children were safe and secure and enjoying a quality learning environment for a sustained period of time. The reason this could occur was the open-mindedness of the adults, who could see the value to all of the children of engaging in such play.

Practical steps

So how can this homely environment and atmosphere be recreated in a day nursery? A colleague of mine always asserted that you will never be able to make a day nursery like a home; at the end of the day it is an institution. My



Enabling resources

The key ingredients of an enabling environment for babies are comfort, safety, quality, sensory interest and flexibility. These qualities are in abundance in Stacking Hoops, an innovative twist on a nursery classic offering great play value and sensory-rich appeal. Similarly, Little Explorer's Storymats (pictured), with their cosy padding make perfect sleep or play mats for babies. Handmade and embellished with gorgeous detailing, pockets and flaps, these will appeal to babies, encourage tummy time and inspire stories and role-play as children grow. Visit playtoz.co.uk



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Ann Clare is an early years consultant and author. Her new book, *Creating a Learning Environment for Babies and Toddlers*, is available now, published by Sage.

challenge is that practitioners and nursery owners should have the thought of home in their minds when they plan and create an environment.

Firstly, look at the furniture that is used in the rooms. At home, babies learn to walk by pulling themselves up and traveling around the furniture in a home, not on tables and chairs that are designed for use in 'classroom' settings. An adult-sized sofa or armchair for snuggling in and feeding is a must. Both adults and babies can bond and share special moments together in comfort, which makes the outcome more enjoyable for all involved. (Also it saves the overworked backs of the adults who tend to spend most of their time either sitting on the floor or on low-level seating which offers no support!).

The next issue is sleeping arrangements. I have yet to discover a way of providing babies the opportunity to sleep appropriately in cots without the sight of more than two cots creating the scene of an outdated orphanage! The only way this seems to work is when the nursery has the advantage of being able to create a separate room for sleeping. Instead, I am an advocate of babies being put outside to rest in appropriately-sized prams where they can sleep in peace and be free from germ-generating environments for portions of the day, where nature acts as the

resource: a tree branch becomes a mobile, the leaves rustling and the birds singing, a lullaby.

Another problem for the practitioner is the high chair. In a home, we use these to bring the baby to the table to enable them to share in the social occasion of eating a meal. In a day nursery the tables are low to accommodate those children on chairs, so the high chair looks incongruous and makes meal times a very functional routine. We need to stop thinking of the high chair as a must-have item. If we change these chairs then we will negate the likelihood of the babies being fed as if on a factory conveyor belt.

Floor space

Babies and young children need floor space so that they can practise their developing physical skills. This means that the floor should not be covered entirely with toys; how can you practise tottering when pieces of plastic are in the way? Babies also need floor space in order to engage in tummy time activities, which help with the development of all movement skills, as well as increasing confidence and independence.

For young babies I would advocate the use of small baskets for resources. Why do we need plastic storage boxes which are overfilled and heavy? Small baskets of fabric, books and soft toys, with larger baskets for small blocks, make the environment more natural and more accessible. These baskets are easier to vary according to the learning needs of our very young babies, which can change so quickly; one minute they need their resources bringing to them and the next they can crawl around to explore and find what they want. Resources offered in this way are not to be confused with treasure baskets, which should not



be used as part of the babies' continuous provision but rather as a specific activity.

Finally, two other important issues to address within the physical environment are the décor and lighting. The rooms need to be painted in neutral tones, providing a background upon which other colours can be layered. Lighting is also important and settings need to consider why they paint murals on the windows, thus cutting down the source of natural light.

Creating environments for babies and young children is challenging and sometimes frustrating, but quality must be the keyword. Adults must start with the premise that they understand child development and that if they use this knowledge they will be able to create quality environments which are fit for purpose. We need to move away from the successful models used at the older end of the nursery and trust in our knowledge about how babies and young children thrive and develop.