Getting Ready for the Revised EYFS – Learning Environment

The revised EYFS gives an opportunity for leaders, managers and practitioners to reflect on current systems, routines and everyday practice. In this week’s countdown to the revised EYFS we are highlighting the importance of the learning environment.

We know that there are NO changes to the principles and commitments in the 2012 EYFS Framework and as such take the opportunity to revisit and reflect on why the learning environment is so important.

**Why the Learning Environment is important**

We know that a rich and varied environment supports children’s learning and development. It gives them the confidence to explore and learn in secure and safe, yet challenging, indoor and outdoor spaces.

An appropriate physical environment is one in which children feel safe, happy, cared for and relaxed. It offers children access to indoor and outdoor spaces in which they can explore, create, think, learn and develop with the support and interactions from sensitive, knowledgeable adults.

**Challenges and dilemmas**

It is worth considering these challenges and dilemmas:

- Finding ways to promote the importance and value of the outdoor environment to all those involved in the setting, for example, the senior management team, other professionals, staff and parents.
- Meeting the needs of children of different ages in a shared outdoor space.
- Overcoming problems in accessing and using the outdoor environment because of the design or organisation of the building.
- Ensuring the indoor environment is ‘homely’ enough to feel comfortable while providing an environment suitable for learning.

We know that:

- Babies, toddlers and young children thrive best in an environment that supports and promotes their active learning and development.
- Young children require space, indoors and outdoors, where they can be active or quiet, and where they can think, dream and watch others.
- The space needs to be appropriate for the age and development of all the children so that they can have suitable access to it and can interact within it.
- The space needs to be secure, appropriately heated and aired and free from hazards.
- There need to be well-organised areas and resources, both natural and manufactured, which are accessible by the children.
- There should be opportunities for a range of activities such as soft play, paint mixing, growing plants, mark-making, looking at books, reading stories, or exploring the properties of materials such as clay, sand or water.
• The space both indoors and outdoors should preferably be available all the time so children can choose activities and follow their interests.
• The outdoor space needs to offer shade and shelter, and children should have opportunities to experience changing seasons and the passing of time.

In deciding what is an ‘appropriate environment’ it is important to understand the way babies, toddlers and young children learn and to provide for the age and stage of the children concerned. There is no ideal environment as babies’ and young children’s interests change, and the environment should be flexible to change in response to these changing interests.

Find out more about the learning environment from the Early Years Foundation Stage (2008) Principles into Practice Card 3.3
1. The outdoor environment

Outdoor learning is a crucial element of the EYFS Framework. Being outdoors has a positive impact on children’s sense of well-being and development. It offers opportunities for doing things in different ways and on different scales than when indoors. It gives children first-hand contact with weather, seasons and the natural world. Outdoor environments offer children freedom to explore, use their senses, take risks and be physically active and exuberant. Outdoor learning is fun!

We know that:

- The outdoor environment has unique characteristics and features.
- Outdoor learning has equal value to indoor learning.
- Outdoor learning has a positive impact on children’s well-being and development.
- Children need the support of attentive and engaged adults who are enthusiastic about the outdoors and understand the importance of outdoor learning.
- Outdoor learning is enhanced by an environment that focuses on using flexible resources in different ways.
- An approach to outdoor learning that considers experiences rather than equipment places children at the centre of the provision being made.

Children’s play and learning

Effective practice outdoors involves providing opportunities for children in meaningful, engaging experiences that support their development in all areas of the curriculum. This will include opportunities for children to:
- be excited, energetic, adventurous, noisy, messy
- talk, listen, interact, make friends
- imagine, dream, invent, fantasise
- create, invent, construct, deconstruct
- investigate, explore, discover, experiment with their own ideas and theories
- make sounds and music, express ideas and feelings
- find patterns, make marks, explore different media and materials
- investigate concepts and ideas
- be active, run, climb, pedal, jump, throw
- dig, grow, nurture, cultivate
- hide, relax, find calm, reflect
- take risks
- have responsibility, be independent, collaborate with others

Find out more from:  
Effective practice: Outdoor Learning

2. The indoor environment
The indoor environment provides a safe, secure yet challenging space for children. For some children, the indoor environment is like a second ‘home’, providing a place for activity, rest, eating and sleeping. The indoor environment contains resources which are appropriate, well maintained and accessible for all children. Indoor spaces are planned so that they can be used flexibly and an appropriate range of activities is provided.

- The indoor environment should contain resources and materials that children can explore and investigate using all their senses.
- Some of the materials and resources should be familiar to the children from their home and community environments, and some should be new.
- The best materials have many uses, such as wooden hoops and pegs in a tin, with unlimited opportunities for children to use them creatively and imaginatively to support their learning and development.
- Families should be consulted and engaged in choosing the materials and resources the children use in a setting so that links can be made with home.
- The Learning Environment offers challenges through which children can learn about risk taking and keeping themselves safe.
- As well as providing opportunities for moving around, environments should offer a variety of surfaces and levels, places to sit or lie, to climb or swing and to make big movements such as spinning, dancing, jumping, running and so on.
- Adults need to support children’s confidence in themselves and their developing skills as they tackle new experiences and develop a sense of what they can do and what they will be able to do as they practise and meet the challenges in the environment.
- Children should be able to touch and feel a variety of textures and to move, stretch and crawl. They may like to make marks, to cut and join materials together or to shape and construct materials.
- They need to be able to rest and refresh themselves when they are ready.
- Children need time to play with what interests them and to make choices.
• They need opportunities to watch the natural world changing, to explore and solve problems.
• Children need opportunities to make friends and develop relationships.
• Children need time to learn and develop at their own pace.

Find out more from:
Effective practice: The Learning Environment

3. The emotional environment
The emotional environment is created by all the people in the setting, but adults have to ensure that it is warm and accepting of everyone.

• Adults need to empathise with children and support their emotions.
• When children feel confident in the environment they are willing to try things out, knowing that effort is valued.
• When children know that their feelings are accepted they learn to express them, confident that adults will help them with how they are feeling.

Remember: Knowledgeable adults who children trust and who observe and respond to their needs are an essential part of the Learning Environment.

These adults should:
• offer a range of experiences and resources which are regularly monitored and refreshed to keep them safe and stimulating
• tune in to the children’s interests and interact with them to support and extend their learning and development, jointly engaging in problem solving and sustained shared thinking
• respond to observed interests and plan new materials and experiences within the environment that reflect these
• monitor materials, children’s involvement and their own involvement with children to ensure they offer relevant experiences
• provide materials that reflect diversity in order to avoid stereotypical images or approaches
• evaluate their provision to ensure that everything that is provided is of the highest quality.

Find out more about developing indoor and outdoor learning environments to support Mathematics:
Download Early Years Quality Improvement Support Programme (EYQISP)
Every Child a Talker: Guidance for Early Language Lead Practitioners