

Creating a Great Physical Environment – A structured Approach to Success



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During my time working in Early Years' settings I was often struck by how some resources were more appealing to children than others. Over time this led me to recognise that effective resources are key to creating a great environment for early years' development. Yet I didn't feel confident enough in my knowledge of child development to know just what makes for an effective resource. I became determined to really understand this and so took a degree course in Early Years' Education Studies. I now appreciate that it really is those resources that engage children's interest the most, which can offer the greatest opportunities for learning.

My practical experiences and subsequent academic study have inspired my passion to champion the importance of the physical environment and the need for quality resources in early years' settings. In my experience, all too often a setting's resource base can become a mushrooming muddle of items we tell ourselves "will come in useful" but in fact leave gaps in some areas of provision and a glut of tired resources in others! If you don't have a structured approach to deciding on resources that will enhance your learning environment, it can be a daunting task trying to decide what new is needed and then to make a selection from the thousands of resources available.

However, with a little thought and preparation it's possible for every setting to build an inspiring range of resources and create an environment that is truly worthy of interaction; one that works for them and, most importantly, inspires the children.

Working with settings near to me, I've created a simple step by step approach that you can use to build a comprehensive and effective set of resources for your setting. However small or large your setting and whatever the physical or budget limitations you have you can apply the principles and process.

Step 1: Decide upon your own philosophy or your 'pedagogical approach'.

This may sound very grand but it's a simple yet critical first step. Before you can decide what resources are right for your setting, you need to be clear about what you are looking for your setting to achieve for your children and how. Of course, we have to work to the Early Learning Goals, but what is it that underpins your setting's approach? To do this, you need to stay abreast of what is happening out there in the wider world of Early Learning!

You may find it useful to read about recent research such as the EPPE and the EEL projects, or

about other curriculum models such as Reggio Emilia, Te Whariki, Montessori, High Scope and others. You will find plenty to inspire you and very often you will find that it is not appropriate to follow one model completely, but that you may 'cherry pick' good ideas from each, to create a philosophy that is unique to and tailored for your setting and the children it serves.

For example, having read widely during my academic studies, the belief that I have formed and firmly hold, is that settings should primarily focus on stimulating creativity, encouraging discovery, developing social and communication skills and giving children the opportunity to guide their own learning. Having also understood the value of the Effective Early Learning (EEL) research I feel we should be searching for a way to heighten involvement levels for all children and in every area of the setting. With these themes as a guide we can then ask ourselves some simple but searching questions about the resources we are considering for our setting:

Will it stimulate curiosity?

Will it provoke a yearning to get involved?

Will it inspire an eagerness to explore?

Will it encourage a desire to learn?

Will it compel children to communicate?

Will it provide occasions for negotiation?

Is it open-ended ie; can it be played with creatively, in a variety of ways?

Will the children enjoy playing with this and want to revisit it again...and again?

Is there scope for an adult to sensitively extend the learning?

Asking opposing questions to these is another way of checking a resources learning value. For example:

Does it have a restrictive output?

Does it set the children up for failure?

Are there enough components for more than one child to play at one time?

Is the learning value limited?

Step 2: Audit your current resources.

What do you have already in your setting that meets the criteria you've set? And what do you have that doesn't and should be quietly side-lined? Or do you have duplicates that can be given to other settings of charity shops to make room for what is needed? Also, be realistic. Look at everything with a critical eye - perhaps on close examination you will find that the 'Lego' set that has been coming out for years actually has so many pieces now missing that the children are very unlikely to be able to create anything that will excite them!

Step 3: Evaluate your 'jury out' resources

If you are not sure what the children are getting out of some of your resources and need help to make the decision about what should go, observe the children whilst they are playing with them and ask yourself what the children are telling you!. Perhaps hold some discussions with the children, and involve them as part of the evaluation process – ask what they love to play with and why? You will find that the children's 'voice' is your most powerful indicator of the value of your current resources.

Step 4: Establish your resource gaps

Now that you have established exactly what you already have that adheres to your philosophy and principles, it is important to evaluate them against the following checklist. This will enable you to come up with a more specific list of: What is actually needed, What will be enjoyed by the children; and which will therefore enhance learning experiences within the setting.

1. The play areas within your provision.

Any quality early years' setting will have resources in the following categories.

- " Construction resources such as wooden construction sets, marble runs and others
- " Reasoning resources, such as puzzles and other table top toys and games
- " Physical resources for the development of both fine and gross motor skills
- " Music, rhythm, sound and listening resources
- " Heuristic resources - sand, water etc.
- " Imaginative resources- ie role play, small world play, puppets
- " Literacy resources - such as books, storytelling bags, storytelling gloves etc.
- " 'Messy' resources for the children's own symbolic representations
- " Outdoor resources.

And don't forget you'll need a quiet area just for the children to watch the world go by!

2. Your children's interests and preferences

You should also think about the individual children you have in your setting. Think about their interests and preferences. A child has to be excited to engage and to learn, so as much as you can find out about what makes each of them 'tick', the better! Refer to their learning diaries and look for clues!

3. The Early Years' Foundation Stage Document

Go through the process of familiarising yourself with the principles of the new Early Years Foundation Stage, as your resources will need to fit within this updated framework from September 2008. One of the central principles is the provision of an 'Enabling Environment'. You will also see that your resources will need to encourage Active learning, Creativity and Critical thinking and Play and Exploration in all six of the curriculum areas

Step 5: Consider the ethical side

It seems reasonable that if we are creating an environment to educate the future custodians of our planet, that we equip it in a way that is respectful to the planet and to all the people on it. If we are able to open up a dialogue with young children about their resources, where they have come from and the processes and people that made them, then they will be learning about respect for the environment and others in the global community in a context that is meaningful to them. We can aim to set a pattern of respect that will last a lifetime. It is also worth remembering that ethical considerations are becoming more and more important to stakeholders and parents.

Step 6: Create a priority sourcing plan

Now that you know in which areas you have gaps; or for which children you have gaps; or for which Early Learning Goals you have gaps; you can identify what your priorities should be and work from there! You should be able to come up with a definitive list of what you need and prioritise this to maximise the positive impact for your setting over the shortest time.

Your full procurement plan may span several years, but if the resources that you have are good quality, resilient, have longevity and will not go out of fashion, then it will be worth the wait. Even settings with the tightest budgets, can, over time, simply build and build on the exciting and compelling range of quality learning resources that their setting has to offer the children.

There are lots of great sources you can find the things you need from. Parents, charity shops and recycling shouldn't be overlooked but to take the time and guesswork out of your sourcing, you can use an Early Years' specialist supplier. A good one will know what constitutes a quality early learning resource, and can offer you inspiration, ideas and guarantee great learning value. They will be able to highlight the learning value inherent in each product to save you time and to help you match your identified needs to suitable resources

Bear in mind that it is quality - not quantity that counts! If your budget is limited, do remember that a good quality open-ended resource will cover several curriculum areas, and, because it can be played with in a multitude of ways is likely to cover the learning needs of a wide spread of individual children. For instance, a really good set of plain wooden building blocks can be used to create a garage, a tower, a zoo, a dolls house, a kennel, a rocket, a cot or a pirate ship. It can teach a child to create, to plan, to negotiate, to experiment as well as give children practice with their fine motor control. It can therefore be used throughout the setting in a multitude of ways that will suit different children.

Step 7 Organise your environment

It is all very well having excellent resources, but remember that for the children to build the self esteem that comes from control over their environment, it is important to have all the resources as accessible to them as possible in order that they may pick and choose what to play with creatively, uninhibited by adult ideas and expectations

Try to look at the environment through the eyes of the children and pick up on their interests to make it as exciting and compelling as possible so that they want to interact with it. Remember that a child who does not go to the book corner to look at books, but loves role play may be thrilled to find a recipe book in the home corner, or a child who loves cars may feel compelled to look at a book about car maintenance which has been put with the cars and garages. A child who doesn't construct, but loves animals may be very excited to find the wooden animals in the same area as the bricks so that they may build a 'den' for them. It is all about provoking them to learn in whatever way works for them, and a thoughtfully organised environment is a very powerful way in which to do that.

I created this structured plan because I know that a full review of your resources can seem like an overwhelming task. But by breaking it down into my 7 steps you can make it a manageable task that will help you ensure that your setting provides a learning environment that creates capable, and confident learners.

Key Points

- Decide upon your settings philosophy or 'pedagogical approach'. Read widely so that you may 'cherry pick' ideas and approaches that will fit with the needs of children in your setting as well as suiting its physical limitations.
- Audit your current resources according to what fits with your philosophy, and what doesn't. Look critically at resources which are past their best, or which are constantly overlooked by the children.
- Evaluate your 'jury out' resources. If you are not sure, watch and listen to the children. Their 'voice' should be an important part of decisions regarding their environment.
- Establish your resource gaps. Look at the resources you have left and weigh it against a list of the areas within your setting, the needs and preferences of the children in the

setting, and the Early Years Foundation Stage document. The 'gaps' should now be glaringly obvious

- Consider the ethical side. Remember that we are creating an environment for the global citizens of tomorrow. Pay attention to where your resources are coming from!
- Create a priority sourcing plan. You should now have a definitive list of what you need which may now be prioritised to maximise the positive impact for your setting over the shortest time. Remember that a few quality open-ended resources will fill a lot of your gaps at once!
- Organise your environment with the needs and preferences of the children at the forefront of your mind. Remember that resources should be accessible to children if they are to realize their full potential.