

# Children come first

**Selecting equipment**  
for early childhood education





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‘I think if I had one wish right now, it would be that all designers and architects would step back and ask, “What is really required in this situation? What will most honour the needs of the children and adults in this circumstance?”’

Anita Olds



# Importance of play



When we see adults skimming through their work with energy and genuine pleasure we say, 'Why, for them, that job is child's play!' There is significance in this phrase, 'child's play.'

While some adults' work reminds us of play, all children's play will remind us of work – if we observe closely. Listen to children muttering to

themselves, see that tongue poking out, feel the concentration. Whether they are 'it' at hide-and-seek or pushing a toy car up a ramp,

children are determinedly working through self-appointed tasks.

Here is a mystery we must respect: for the child, work and



play are one. The diligence and concentration children develop in play will serve them all their lives. Who knows how many adults today suffer from a lack of happy play in childhood?

Play is the child's means of discovery, of communication, and of expression. Loving guidance and appropriate equipment offer children opportunities to explore, through play, the world in which they live.

Nature provides endless opportunities for children's investigation and creativity. Digging in soil, balancing on rocks, rolling down grassy slopes, and climbing trees satisfy basic needs. These belong to childhood, and any child deprived of them is unfortunate. In urban settings, it is especially important to bring nature to children by providing natural objects and materials. Choosing play equipment that offers physical activities like those

provided by nature is essential too.

What qualities should we look for in play equipment? How can we support active, large-muscle play? What considerations should be borne in mind when selecting equipment for babies, toddlers or children with special needs? Our approach to these questions and to the role of play will determine the quality of the care and education we offer our children.



## Characteristics of good playthings

- Simple, intuitive design
- Versatile
- Easy to manipulate
- Invite spontaneous, cooperative play
- Provide small and large muscle activity
- Natural materials
- Durable
- Functional
- Child-sized
- Safe
- Generous in quantity
- Adaptable for children with special needs



# Large muscle play

‘Activities requiring total body involvement are likely to encourage problem solving. During early childhood, what a child feels about himself is largely dependent upon what he thinks he can or cannot do with his body.’ (Carson, 1998)

‘Young children learn primarily by moving their bodies in space.’ (Anita Olds)

It is exciting to see the moment of triumph when a child finally masters a new challenge. A sense of accomplishment

rewards the child’s persistence and boosts confidence and self-esteem.

‘One teacher was tempted to put away the wheelbarrow as “developmentally inappropriate” until she realised

that the child’s struggle to make it work *was* the learning.’ (Greenman 1996)

In early years settings, equipment must be provided to satisfy the needs of growing muscles to run, climb, push, bend and lift. Outdoor and covered play areas best support large motor activities.

Vehicles that children can ride provide large-muscle play. Such riding and push-toys should have castors, wheels, and hinges of industrial quality, designed to take group play.

Sufficient quantity and versatility of playthings are important for peaceful play. Elizabeth Prescott describes, ‘As there were not as many tricycles as children, tricycle play led to tension and discord. The addition of equipment auxiliary to tricycle play – trailers the





trikes could pull, blocks to load, traffic signs – permitted happy cooperative play. The children eagerly adopted roles the new equipment required. Some pedalled, some loaded the trailers, some rode in them, some directed traffic, and the teacher relaxed.’ (Prescott 1980)

Large construction also puts children’s large muscles to work, indoors or out. Milk crates and



hollow blocks are useful as they are light enough for children to handle. The wood used for hollow blocks must withstand constant use, have rounded edges, and must not splinter. Their design must allow small

hands to get a firm grip. Such blocks engage the whole child – not only in construction but in role play too, and girls as well as boys become fully involved because the hollow blocks build a world children can actually inhabit. You may wish to store them close to the role-play and outdoor areas. A role-play area adjacent to outdoor and construction areas will encourage spontaneous and cooperative play.



# Furniture



'How long will it hold up? Centre use is at least ten times as hard as home use. Sharp edges or corners? Parts to swallow? Toxic finishes? Will the item be pulled or tipped over? Will it wear or break in a manner that then makes it dangerous? Does it allow easy cleaning and disinfecting? Right size and scale for all children, also with special needs?' (Greenman 1996)

Furniture for your setting should be child-sized and safe for lively use. Since your initial investment must last for years, it is important that your furniture is durable. Choose products made of natural materials with a variety of textures. Wood is warm and friendly to the touch, and the variation of grain patterns and colours add welcome visual variety, as well as learning opportunities. 'Look, this was a tree!'

The environment must be pleasant and supportive for both children and staff. Colour, lighting, acoustics, balance of hard and soft surfaces, storage, display, organisation of supplies, activity areas – all need to be carefully considered. Bright colours make interesting accents when used against a restful background. Let the children, their artwork, and their activities stand out, not the furnishings.

Multi-level play areas will stimulate the children's imaginations for social and dramatic play. Such areas provide a stage for a group play, or a quiet place for a child to withdraw for a time. Higher places such as lofts naturally attract children. They can observe life taking place below their vantage point and consider their place in it.

Children need security. Cosy, soft places where they can curl up alone or with a friend or caregiver are invaluable. Arrange your furniture to enclose some private corners, without sacrificing visibility for supervision. Your own childhood memories can inspire you. Where were your 'special places'?





Chairs should be stable and allow children to sit with their feet flat on the floor, providing security. Chairs that stack easily when not in use save valuable floor space. Choose table heights to match chair sizes. A 20 cm difference from seat to tabletop works well for most children. If tables have adjustable legs, they can be altered to support stand-up activities and special needs.

Lockers or cubbies may provide a good place to sit while tying shoes or putting on wellies, as well as a place for each child's personal belongings. A special 'my place' often strengthens a child's sense of belonging and security. 'See, this is my peg.' Many centres create a 'welcome area' in each room where children can hang their bags and where staff, parents and children

can mingle and interact. A welcome area supports happy, relaxed arrivals and departures.

Equipment and materials should have their own place. An important part of the play experience is learning to put things away. Ample child-height shelves, carts, book display, and tray units encourage orderly storage. Shelves can serve dual purpose if they are used as room dividers, so it is important that their backs, as well as their fronts, are aesthetically pleasing.



# Interest areas



'An activity area has five defining attributes. Physical **location**, with visible **boundaries** indicating where it begins and ends, within which are placed work and sitting **surfaces**, and the **storage** and **display** of materials used to execute the activities for which the area is intended. An area, like a room, has a mood or personality distinguishing it from contiguous spaces.' (Olds, 1989)

Support decision-making, encourage involvement, and promote independence for your children by creating clearly-defined well-equipped activity

areas where they can choose to play. Use shelves and furniture to define the activity areas and to provide display space for each area. Allow for easy movement

between areas and accessibility for children with special needs. Clear boundaries will prevent traffic from disturbing the activity within each area. These boundaries can be high enough to give children a sense of security, yet low enough that staff can oversee everything.

The Construction area deserves prime space because blocks are the most important unstructured material in an early childhood environment. They provide endless opportunities in physical, social, intellectual and creative learning. Children learn pre-reading skills, scientific principles and mathematics through the harmonious relationships of the blocks, while reconstructing their experience



of the world around them. Block play fascinates all ages, boys and girls alike, with the children's imagination being the guiding factor. Durable hardwood unit blocks will serve small-world play and maths, so make the construction area accessible for these areas of learning.

The role play area is essential, and its furnishings should be ample. When children want to bake pies and wash dishes, they need cookers and washing-up bowls big enough for real dishes and water. Some days the role-play area is really and truly the 'home corner,' but other days it may become a shop, office,

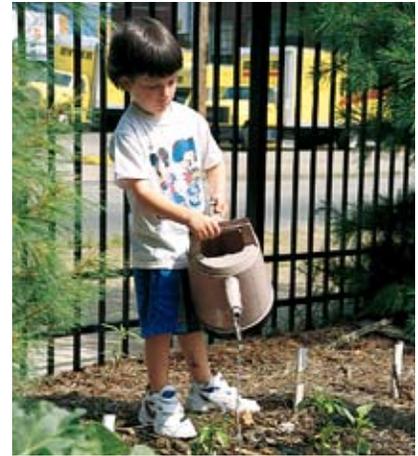
doctor's surgery or hairdressers, so furniture should be versatile and free of detail, allowing scope for the children's imaginations. A wardrobe of dress-ups is valuable to stimulate role play, but again detail is unnecessary. A dressing gown can be a king's robe or a postman's mackintosh;

'Far from the land of make-believe, designed for a fairytale time, the experiences children live through in their dramatic play are basic to every area of their lives.'  
(Bemm, 1996)

a bright cloth can be a bride's veil or a chef's apron. Leave opportunity for the children's



'Freedom of choice and access to a wide variety of materials is crucial to the quality of children's creative and imaginative experiences. Young children need opportunities for creative and imaginative play. Opportunities for discussion, of meeting minds and sharing ideas, integrated into children's experience are fundamental to the production of high quality learning.'  
(Sylvia Archer, Director of The Children's House, Stallingborough, North East Lincolnshire)



imagination. (Likewise, a basket of acorns or conkers can serve as sweets or money or food, whereas plastic grapes can never be anything other than grapes!)

In the discovery area, open-ended and sensorial play can be combined with children's increasing knowledge and understanding of the world. Providing adequate display surfaces to inspire children bringing items of interest to share is especially important.





Play is not the opposite of 'work' – both are part of everyone's life. For young children there is no division between 'play' and 'work'; they are learning through everything they do. (James, 1995)

A sand and water centre is a great asset, inviting experimentation and investigation until learning becomes inevitable. Brought into the garden, it further connects children with nature, life, and growing things.

A good art corner is a creative, self-motivating area where children feel at home. You will want to locate it near the sink. It will contain tables (often for stand-up work), easels, paper storage, a drying rack, and aprons to protect children's clothing. Providing an array of easily accessible materials will encourage independent choice and inspire creativity. 'Doing' is the reason for art projects, not the finished product.

Nonetheless, this area will provide you with plenty of colour and artwork to decorate your entire centre.

Music is key to bringing people together. Singing, playing in the rhythm band, humming their

own song – music is a language all children share. It is also a medium to celebrate cultural diversity. You can encourage this with your room arrangement. A corner that provides a few musical instruments and pieces of bright fabric will invite expressive play, dance and music.

A book area will interest all ages, whether the children are reading the pictures and words themselves, or are being read to by an adult. The book area can double as a cosy place for a child to relax, so use the book display and shelves, with plenty of soft materials like cushions, to create a quiet comfortable corner.

Throughout the room there should be opportunities for all types of display. Shelf tops exhibit work in process and finished projects. Found objects enliven the room and make it the children's own. Choose appropriate books for display in various activity areas (not just

the reading corner), enriching learning in each area while promoting interest in the written word. Shelf backs, often exposed in the middle of the room, provide wonderful display possibilities, especially if protected by clear plastic from curious little fingers.

# Open-ended play



'Children need to mix with other children in meaningful ways. One of the most meaningful contexts for young children is in play. During play children initiate, experiment, reflect, practise, negotiate and 'become' at their own pace.' (Bruce, 1997)

Open-ended materials such as blocks, sand, water, sticks and cloth invite happy involvement. They have no 'right' or 'wrong' use so readily become anything a child imagines them to be. A simple block of wood may be a bulldozer for one child and a doll or mobile phone for another.

Open-ended play begins in earliest childhood when children use objects as they please and gradually learn about the world around them. Think of a baby mouthing or shaking a set of keys – no one tries to guide such play. One-year-olds engaged in heuristic play explore how objects can be used in combination, with no adult prescription. As children grow older, they must still have ample opportunity to discover in their own ways, at their own pace.



Open-ended equipment empowers children to create their own realities. This is particularly important in the construction, small world, and role-play areas, where children reenact their experiences and fantasies most intensively. At one nursery, a group of four-year-olds were riding horses they had created from hollow blocks – except for one little girl; hers was a unicorn. Likewise, a piece of equipment that can be a kitchen cooker today and an office station tomorrow supports children's control of their environment.

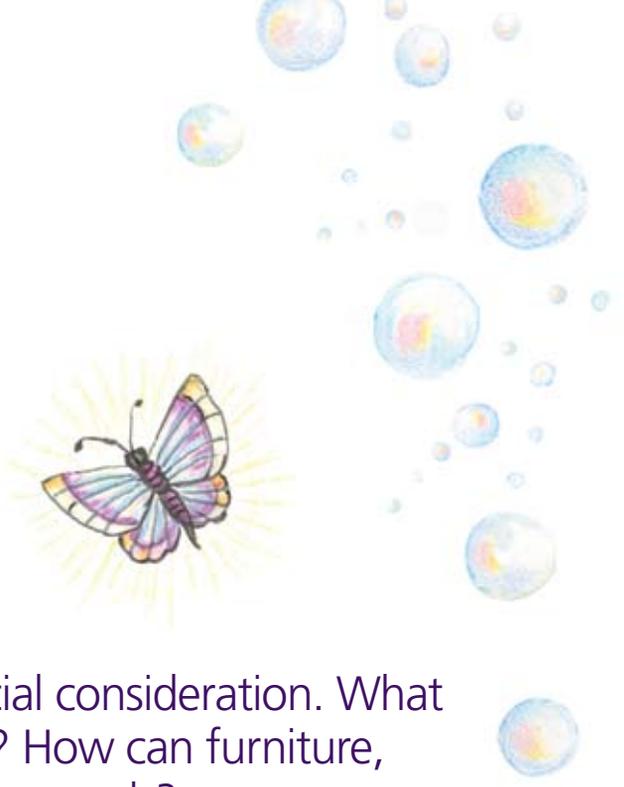
Nature provides wonderful opportunities for open-ended play. Where there is no right or

wrong approach, there is no failure, just freedom to discover and create. Children may decide a big log is a train or a ship – or even a chocolate factory.

Open-ended play's appeal for children is the joy it brings. Its attraction for adults is the glimpse it gives into a child's thinking.



# Birth to threes



Care for the youngest children needs special consideration. What are the particular needs of this age group? How can furniture, equipment, and playthings help meet these needs?

The first three years of a child's life are the most formative in the development of mind, body, and spirit. Sleep, emotional and physical nourishment, movement, and sensory stimulation are crucial at this stage. The young child is developing rapidly in sensory learning, in the use of large and small muscles for motor control,

and in ability to communicate. We must provide a secure child-friendly environment, and age-appropriate equipment and playthings. Paramount is a warm personal atmosphere created by loving adults.

For babies who are not yet able to walk, it is helpful to create a safe-crawl area with equipment and objects they can enjoy.

Babies learn through all their senses. They explore objects with mouths and hands, so treasure baskets filled with objects of various weights and textures bring satisfaction to babies who can sit up but are not yet mobile.

One-year-olds have an urge to move piles of items and to gather, dump, refill, carry, stack, and knock down. They love to put pegs or fingers into holes, to sort, and to experiment with things in combination. That is why they love heuristic play with natural and found materials collected by their caregiver. Wooden blocks also support developing motor coordination and pleasure in manipulating objects.

Furniture should be scaled to the size of these little children. Chairs should allow good posture with feet on the floor, and be able to be pushed or



carried by the toddler. The wobbly one-year-old needs a chair with a broad base. Tables should be firm and stable with rounded corners.

Toddlers quickly learn where things belong. Child-accessible storage labelled with pictures encourages independence. (Teacher storage beyond children's reach can be useful as well.)

Except when eating and sleeping, the young child is very much on the move. There should

be equipment for climbing, pushing, pulling, rocking, riding – all involving large muscles. Playthings that give practice in walking and balance are important. At this stage, children get more involved with toys they push than toys they pull.

Wheeled toys are valuable, channelling the urge for continuous legwork and total body involvement. Kiddie Cars, big lorries, and any vehicles that move easily are in great demand.

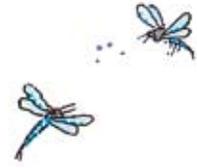
They should be the right size to straddle, and there should be enough so several children can ride simultaneously. These vehicles can double as transporters, as toddlers love to move things from place to place.

Solitary and parallel play are typical of babies and toddlers. In time, this leads naturally to cooperative play. Enough variety of playthings and sufficient quantities prevent unnecessary conflict. As Elinor Goldschmied and Sonia Jackson point out in their book, *People under Three*, toddlers are too young to grasp the concepts of sharing that they will later master.

Every child is unique and develops at a different pace. Practitioners need to observe and respect their children in order to provide what each needs to develop in his or her individual way.



# Children with special needs



Inclusion of children with special needs benefits all children. It will also bring challenges, but with the right guidance, natural acceptance and friendly cooperation will blossom.

Play is important for every child, regardless of ability or disability. In spontaneous play, the child is free of pressure to achieve. Therefore, play provides our best opportunity to see potential gifts that may not emerge under stress. What a child accomplishes in play can outbalance a host of failures met elsewhere in life. For a child with special needs, play can be a huge incentive for development as well as a great joy.

Versatile equipment supports the special needs of all children. Look for designs that accommodate varying needs and levels of ability.



# More than **85 Years** – community with children

Children are an important part of our communities. For more than 85 years we have had our own childcare centres and schools.

We are a fellowship of families and single people seeking to live according to the life and words of Jesus, sharing all things in common as the early Christians did.

Over the last 60 years we have been developing play equipment, relying on input from early childhood professionals as well as on our own experience in communal childcare.

Community Playthings has provided a livelihood and wonderful relationships with people who care for children

across the UK and in many other countries.

Together with you, we strive to create inspiring environments and equipment that will support your children's well-being and healthy development.



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