

Spaces

Room layout for 0–5 year olds



“It is not the clay the potter throws that gives the jar its usefulness, but the space within.”

Lao Tzu



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Significance of environment

“In a well designed area, children are engaged and feel secure.”

Anita Olds

Perceptive educators have always noted the impact of children’s surroundings on their well-being and development. Reggio Emilia schools give great attention and care to room layout, recognising that the environment itself teaches children. In the early 1800s Friedrich Froebel compared designing a room for children to planning an ever-varying garden, to inspire children’s imagination and guide their behaviour. A century later Margaret McMillan took his ideas and founded the British nursery school. She said, ‘We are trying to create an environment where education will be almost inevitable.’ To create such an environment we must understand how children learn.

For children through Foundation Stage and into Key Stage 1, play is the primary method of discovery and a key way to formulate and communicate ideas. Lev Vygotsky, who developed the theory of children’s zone of proximal development, wrote, ‘In play, a child is always above his average age, above his daily behaviour; in play, it is as though he were a head taller than himself.’ Children who learn through their own discoveries get excited – and motivated children always push the boundaries of their knowledge, eager for more. When parents and practitioners realise that play is building a strong foundation across all areas of learning, they come to respect play as children’s ‘work’ and allow generous time and space to support it. A room layout that fosters learning must include ample space for group play and for individual play.



“[Children] construct their own models of reality, which develop over time in response to new experiences and exposure to other viewpoints... No one else can have experiences for the child or construct knowledge for the child. Children must do this for themselves.”

Hohmann and Weikart

“Play provides a rich method for children to express what they know and, most significantly, how they feel about the world and their relationships.”

Marjorie Ouvry

Much of children’s play is symbolic, for instance when they act out stories and experiences during role play (or small-world play) and when they build block constructions to represent imaginary or real-life places and objects. Symbolic play is the forerunner of more complex forms of representation; children must communicate thoughts in concrete ways before advancing to abstract symbolism such as written language. It’s fascinating how children interweave narratives with their play, confirming the connection between play and literacy. Of course children absorb many maths

and physics concepts while pouring water or building with blocks.

Since children learn so much through play, and since play is at the heart of their well-being, you can actually measure your environment’s quality in terms of the play taking place. Look around and ask: ‘How many children are playing?’ ‘How deeply involved are they?’ Keep these spot checks in mind because assessment of your environment’s play potential should be on-going.



Activity areas

“Activities should be as numerous as the keys of a piano, and... call forth infinite acts of intelligence when children are offered a wide variety of options.”

Loris Malaguzzi

A natural way to support learning through play is to divide your room into activity areas. In such a room children make smooth transitions in their own time much as they would at home. This continuous provision enables them to develop their own routines and follow their own interests. When deciding where to locate activity areas, first consider the flow of traffic through your room based on location of doors, sinks and toilets. Situate activity areas to sensibly accommodate this flow. Then observe over time; if any area is infrequently used, you can make changes or reorganise your space. Creating a motivational environment is an on-going process. Some activity areas might be:

Welcome area

Whether in an entry or in the room, your welcome area is the threshold between a child's two worlds. It makes a statement about your ethos and deserves careful planning. This is where child, parent and key person connect each day, so it's a good place for



cultural signs and displays, conveying respect for children's backgrounds. If there is enough space, parents relax and feel free to linger. Of course each child needs space for personal belongings.

‘In many nurseries we have set up cosy welcoming areas within the room that invite a child to come in and pore over their Learning Journey. Learning Journeys should be displayed at child height. Remember this is the *child's* document, co-owned by child, parent and key person. For older children, we set them on low shelves with a table, chairs and cushions nearby, plus pens and hole punches so children can add to their Learning Journey.’ (Nicola Amies)

Your welcome area is the ‘goodbye’ as well as the ‘hello’. The way you set it up and the displays you maintain here can give children a sense of ownership. They know they have left happy traces to which they will return. (Jennie Lindon)



“Be sure to purchase unit blocks to increase the educational value of the activity. Unit blocks are small modular plain wooden blocks that come in a variety of geometric shapes. The dimensions of the blocks allow children to experiment with spatial relations by using the lengths, widths and heights of the blocks in creating complex block structures.”

Mav Pardee

Construction and small-world

These are often combined in one area, where children build miniature environments and act out scenarios using vehicles and human or animal figures. This area needs maximum floor space and ample storage, and it must be protected from through-traffic so children’s constructions don’t get bumped. If this area borders role play, materials can be readily shared; large construction frequently evolves into role play.

While reconstructing life in miniature, children develop their knowledge and understanding of the world as well as fine-motor control. There is firm evidence that block play strengthens all areas of

learning. (Gura) Talking to a five-year-old about fulcrums and centres of gravity is probably a waste of time, but a child building a lopsided tower soon discovers how to distribute weight to balance the blocks! Frank Lloyd Wright, a renowned American architect, attributed his interest in design to the block play he did as a child.

“Block play could form the core of your curriculum – everything could be built around blocks!”

Karen Miller



Role play

This area should be spacious enough for children to act out various situations and stories. You'll want something to store cloth and dress-ups, and child-sized furniture is a must. Best is versatile furniture that can become anything from a kitchen, to an office, to the doctor's surgery or the hairdresser's. Arches, windows, and mirrors intrigue children and enhance role play.



Include open-ended materials such as corks, conkers, dough, lids and cloth scraps which readily become anything a child envisions.

Tremendous social interaction takes place during role play, and imagination flourishes; children need long stretches of time in this area to develop their ideas.



“Learning starts with a child’s dramatic imagination. Play is the stuff of life. The logical narratives that develop in the doll corner and the block area, in the sandbox and playground, open the door for all future narratives about friendship and work, about family and community. . .”

Vivian Gussin Paley

Book area

Ideally this is situated in a corner away from noise and bustle. Children learn to love books when they are provided in a comfortable attractive space. Soft seating encourages curling up with a book or a friend, and this homelike quality is particularly important in settings where children spend long hours; they need cosy quiet places to retreat into during a busy day.



“Children need to master the language of things before they master the language of words and numbers. Words and numbers are meaningless unless children have the underlying concepts which these symbols represent. And young children learn these concepts best by active, and yes repetitive, engagement with manipulative materials.”

David Elkind

Science and discovery area

Since science is a process of investigation, this is a very exciting part of your room. The science/discovery area is often combined with wet play, as children learn so much while experimenting with water. You'll want to include magnifying glasses, magnets, pulleys, funnels and other intriguing tools and materials.

Some sort of nature display should be the heart of your science area, where children and teacher discover fascinating wonders together. Children are instinctively drawn to nature. Some schools have ant or worm farms, and if the teacher is comfortable with classroom pets, children enjoy the responsibility of caring for fish, guinea pigs or gerbils. One nursery even has a much-loved old dog – but it is usually found in the book area!



Wet area

Learning is profound in the wet and messy area which should be near the sink and ideally includes a water table, a wet-sand table and a dry-sand table as these materials invite involvement and are very different from each other. (Don't forget pebbles and seashells!) If this area is near your exit, wet activities can be brought outdoors.

Malleables are often incorporated in the wet area or the art area. Dough, clay and similar materials are excellent for sensory investigation, and children use all kinds of tools as they roll, indent, and shape their creations.





Workshop or Design and technology

A proper workbench is best in this area where children construct with wood and recycled materials. Tools should be real and reliable, not cheap imitations. Obviously the workbench must be well supervised and protected from traffic. (Some centres start with children hammering golf tees into pumpkins before progressing to nails into wood.)

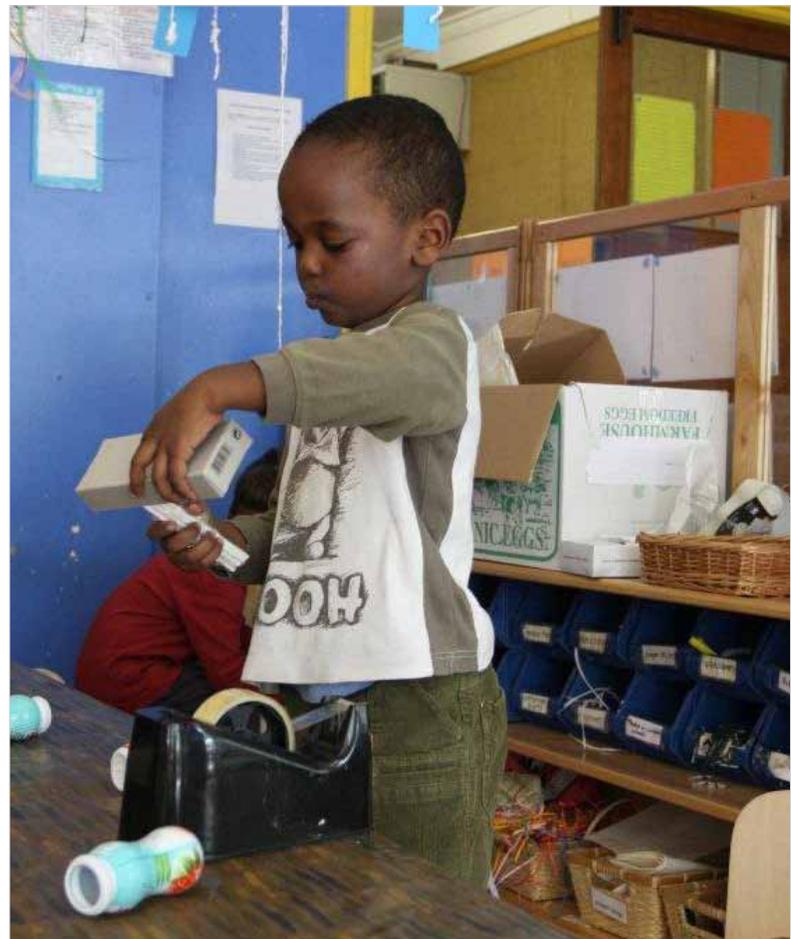
As in the science area, you will want to include wire, string, tape, rubber bands, dowels and other useful materials that invite experimentation.

Art area

The art area should be near the sink with tools and materials readily accessible. It should offer a smorgasbord to whet creative appetites; recycled and natural materials are excellent additions to commercial art products. Teachers must always bear in mind that the process is more important than the product. Creative activity here builds children's confidence and self-esteem. It opens avenues of discovery – as when a child is thrilled to realise what happens when blue and yellow paint mix!

“Art sharpens children’s powers of observation and awakens them to the possibilities of their own hands and minds... When encouraged to give form to their ideas, they learn the value of self-expression.”

JC Arnold



Mark-making

The name of this area varies: mark-making, writing, literacy, office, graphics... It is often adjacent to the book corner and sometimes borders the art area so materials can be shared. Some settings prefer not to include a specified writing area – they simply provide mark-making materials in every activity area to encourage mark making throughout the room. The same holds true for maths and problem solving.

“[Art is] both an approach to the world and a manifestation of life’s grandeur, [not] a narrowly defined set of activities in a set location.”

Jim Greenman



Crossover between activity areas shows that children are using their cognitive skills to make connections, for example when a child fetches paper and pen from the mark-making area to the home corner to make a shopping list. This ‘cross-pollination’ can be encouraged with inviting links such as arches or windows between activity areas.

Occasionally some child may play exclusively in one activity area. A boy in one nursery played only with blocks every day. To broaden his experience, the teacher brought other activities into the construction area. Soon he was using dress-ups, measuring tape, clipboard, paper and pencil in the course of his block play. Before long, he ventured to other parts of the room.



Provision for the youngest



“A baby room needs to combine a sense of spaciousness with intimacy, allowing free movement for mobile children and a quieter area for babies not yet able to move by themselves.”

Goldschmied and Jackson

Babies and toddlers have somewhat different needs from older children, being in what Piaget calls the sensorimotor period when they learn primarily through sensory input and physical movement.

Babies’ senses are awake from the beginning. The sense of touch affects newborns as their mothers caress, cuddle and care for them. As babies gain control of their movements, they reach up to touch the face above them; they like to feel with their feet too. They need objects of various textures to explore.

The sense of sight is active as a newborn studies his parents’ faces and looks into their eyes. Pictures or contrasting patterns placed in a cot can provide visual stimulation. Babies love to watch movement and enjoy mobiles. If a cot is placed beneath a tree, the infant will contentedly watch interplay of light and shadow through moving leaves.

Birdsong and classical music are soothing for babies, but best is the human voice; a baby loves to listen to a familiar voice speak, croon or sing. It’s exciting when babies ‘discover’ their own voices and start making purposeful sounds. They also learn to make sounds by shaking or banging objects.

Young children experiment with taste as they try new foods and explore objects with gums and tongue. Margaret McMillan planted borders of roses, lavender and herbs so children could have pleasant experiences of smell too. We can follow her example, even in inner-city locations.

Because babies learn through all their senses, we must provide suitable opportunities and materials. Many nurseries use treasure baskets filled with everyday items of varying tactile qualities for babies to scrutinise, squeeze, rub, bang, shake, and mouth at leisure: whisk, measuring spoons, bottle brush, lemon, fir cone, sponge, leather glove, sea shell, wooden spoon... Practitioners maintain safety and cleanliness as well as adding new objects to keep the babies' interest.

In *People under Three*, Elinor Goldschmied and Sonia Jackson introduced heuristic play. ('Heuristic' means helping to find out or discover and has the same root as Eureka!) Heuristic play was conceived with one- and two-year-olds in mind, offering opportunity to experiment with a wide range of objects. 'Children have a natural curiosity to investigate, so by providing items such as tins, corks, lids, cardboard tubes, chains and clothes pegs, we are supporting this exploration. Whilst the heuristic play session is in process, adults need to remain seated and quiet. This supports children in making their own choices and discoveries.' (Clare Crowther) Children of this age love to sort or arrange objects and do things with them, so it is essential to provide large quantities of each item.

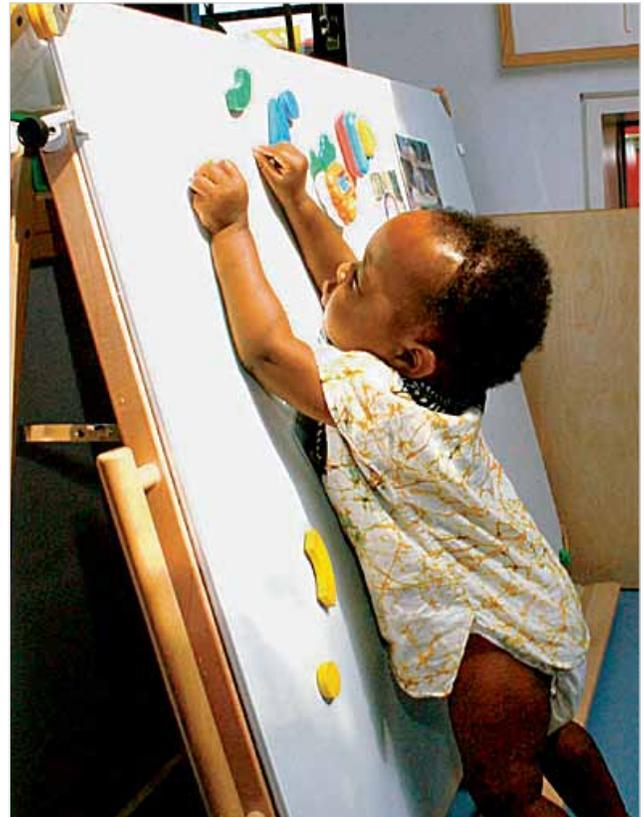


Regarding babies' physicality, they develop with amazing rapidity: from helpless newborns to confident crawlers or novice walkers in one year! They have an inborn drive to continually stretch their abilities, so the whole environment must support their urge to interact with everything around them. It is important for the youngest to be on surfaces where they can master new skills such as rolling over, reaching, and eventually finding their own methods of inching forward. Large cots with firm mattresses are good. From about three months, they are able to spend some time on the floor in a protected area with their key person beside them.



“Physical care and loving attention are required in different ways as a child becomes mobile. Exploratory behaviour takes the child away as she crawls, walks, and inspects the world around her. The educator is required not only to protect the toddler through closeness, but also to let go, to encourage growing autonomy.”

Selleck and Griffin



When babies learn to sit, they can suddenly observe much that was previously invisible to them. This is exciting but can also be frustrating, as an infant notices objects and activities that are out of reach. This is one reason the treasure basket is such an asset, offering exploration in spite of the child’s lack of mobility.

As babies learn to move and crawl, they want to ‘get going!’ Crawlers and toddlers enjoy climbing, sliding, crawling through a barrel... They learn through repetition, so practice every new action over and over.

Prior to walking independently, children learn to pull to a stand and then ‘cruise,’ grasping anything in reach for support. Make certain furniture is stable, offers handholds and has rounded edges. Playthings that encourage balance and practice in walking are helpful at this stage, for example a pushcart, a sturdy chair or even a strong cardboard box to push.

Because their experience centres around sensory exploration and physical movement, the following activity areas are recommended for under-threes:

Active play area

With maximum floor space and a nursery gym or similar structure on which children develop their spatial awareness, their physicality, their sense of balance and their feeling of well-being. A small amount of furniture to support emergent role play, small-world play and block play complement this area too.

Wet area

Located near the sink including malleables and sand for sensory exploration, as well as floor easel and basic art supplies. The wet area doubles as mealtime area.

Safe crawl area

Contained and cosy for non-mobile babies. This is the perfect place for a little sensory corner with mirrors, CDs, crackly cellophane, rubber, emery paper, etc on the walls and fleece and treasure basket on the floor.

Quiet area

Where children can relax and sleep or spend cosy time with key person and books. A glider is lovely here to support bonding.



Paths and boundaries

If there is a clear pathway through your room, children will move easily from one activity to another. Paths should flow round activity areas and lead to destinations clearly visible from a child's viewpoint.

Activity areas need boundaries. Sometimes a carpet or similar visual boundary can delineate an area, but physical dividers should be used as well to guide flow and provide security for children's focused play. These boundaries need not be permanent and should not interfere with supervision. They can be made of fabric, lattice or furniture; using shelves

for boundaries is logical, serving the dual purpose of room division and storage.

When each activity area is bounded on three sides, play is not disrupted by through-traffic. In several settings, children were thought to have behavioural problems because they kept running through the room and would not relax. Practitioners were astonished at the transformation when they moved shelves forward from the walls to divide the space into areas: the room became peaceful as children settled into sustained meaningful activity.



Storage and display

“It is essential that children have access to a variety of media to express themselves and ample opportunities to apply their imagination in a purposeful way... As children learn new skills they should be given opportunities to practise them in different situations, to reflect on and evaluate their work. In all aspects of their development, children’s own work should be respected, valued and encouraged for its originality and honesty.”

Welsh Foundation Phase Framework for Children’s Learning

Storage is a big issue in any setting. Play materials, art supplies, books, dress-ups, science equipment, ‘good junk’, clothing, artefacts... any teacher could add to the list of necessary items. Storage should be considered early during design phase to ensure that decisions truly support children and staff in their use of the space. Good storage is safe, located at point of use, child accessible, clear and understandable, and aesthetically pleasing. (Greenman)

Built-in cupboards have their place, particularly for long-term storage in a corridor or attic. Avoid them within your room however, as they prescribe use of the space.

Moveable freestanding shelves are best within the room and should be placed to create the boundaries between activity areas and facilitate storage in every area. You will want a variety of shelf types to serve different functions: high shelves, low shelves, adjustable shelves, shelves that can be accessed from both sides, shelves that accommodate various types of display, shelves to hold specific equipment or personal trays for each child, shelves that children can access and some that are lockable... Most should provide accessibility at point of use, encouraging independence as children select and return materials.





Display celebrates children's efforts. It also encourages them to build on what they know. Youngsters like to revisit former projects, and visual reminders help scaffold their learning. Margaret Edgington (1998) reports that if children are allowed to follow an interest over a period of time, motivation and concentration improve. And of course children love to show their parents what they have made.

You can also create lovely displays for the children. They appreciate aesthetic beauty – even if they don't verbalise their feelings. Books too should be prominent in various areas of the room.

Display should be included in each activity area as well – in fact, display panels can help partition your areas. Pinboard or magnetic panels (and shelves with pinboard backing) provide surfaces for vertical display. Three-dimensional exhibits can be displayed on shelf tops. Both vertical displays (of photos, mark making and artwork) and horizontal displays (models and artefacts) should be changed frequently to keep them relevant and interesting. Children's independence and confidence are strengthened if they are allowed to help create and maintain displays themselves.



Flexibility

If a room's set-up never changes, it becomes like wallpaper that no one notices anymore; but a fresh arrangement can revive interest. Just as human beings need 'elbow room', a children's setting needs to shift within its space – to breathe, move about, and get comfortable. Flexibility is key.

"If the users are able to modify the way in which their spaces are used, they will be more inclined to feel that the building belongs to them."

Mark Dudek

In a responsive environment, staff can alter the furniture layout to allow for:

- Changes in numbers or ages of children
- Inclusion of children with special needs
- Behavioural challenges
- Recapturing interest
- Differing staff preferences
- New seasons or themes
- Varying functions (e.g. after-school club or community services)

Movement and Surfaces

Swiss developmental psychologist Jean Piaget said that movement is the bedrock of all intellectual learning.

Physical development is now acknowledged as a prime area of learning and development, 'particularly important for igniting children's curiosity and enthusiasm for learning, and for building their capacity to learn and to thrive.' (2011 revised EYFS draft) 'Physical development supports personal, social and emotional development as increasing physical control provides experiences of the self as an active agent in the environment, promoting growth in confidence and awareness of control' (Tickell). Children should have lots of time outdoors for the large motor activity that is paramount to healthy physical development and emotional well-being. But the indoor environment too must reflect an understanding of children's need to move.

We adults need to grasp that movement is actually what enables children to sit still – sitting still requires advanced muscle control. Sally Goddard Blythe writes, "Those children who are unable to stay still are showing their balance and motor systems are not yet sufficiently mature to remain still for long periods of time."

So the floor is your primary indoor play surface, and children tend to get more deeply involved with floor activities than with table activities. On the floor they can adjust their posture, shift around and feel in control. In too many rooms all that can be seen from a young child's viewpoint is legs: table legs, chair legs, people legs! It's better to minimise the number of tables and chairs so the space is not crowded.



"The floor is your primary indoor play surface. Children tend to get more deeply involved with floor activities than with table activities."

Furniture

However, you will need some chairs. These must be stable and allow children to have their feet flat on the floor so they are comfortable and have optimum control of their upper bodies. Table height must correspond; a 20-cm differential from seat to table top accommodates most children well. Chairs with sides can give extra security to the youngest.

Seat height (cm)	13	17	20	25	30
Table height (cm)	30	36	41	46	51
1 year olds	50%	50%			
2 year olds			60%	40%	
3 year olds				100%	
4 year olds				40%	60%
5 year olds					100%

You need will also need some chairs that are low, yet scaled to fit adults, so staff can comfortably interact at child level.

All furniture should be child-sized and sturdy with rounded edges. Wooden furniture lends a natural impression and is friendly to the touch. Its varieties of pattern and colour offer opportunities for learning: 'Look, this was part of a tree!'

Regarding tables:

- Any table should have multiple uses. Why crowd a room with tables used only for meals?
- They must be lightweight and moveable.
- Tables should be height-adjustable so they can be heightened for stand-up activities or for older children.
- To be able to adjust a table's angle is also beneficial; a slightly slanted surface may give fuller control to a child with special needs.



Stimulation

The whole environment should stimulate interest and curiosity. However, we do not want to over-stimulate children. Several elements that are beneficial in moderation may be distracting in excess.

Colour is a prime example. For years there was a prevailing mind-set that children should be surrounded by bright colour. Walls, carpets, curtains and even furniture were done in vivid green, red, yellow, purple, orange... But in fact children find it difficult to relax or concentrate in an environment reverberating with loud colour. You want your setting to be homelike – does anyone fill their home with brilliant plastic furniture?

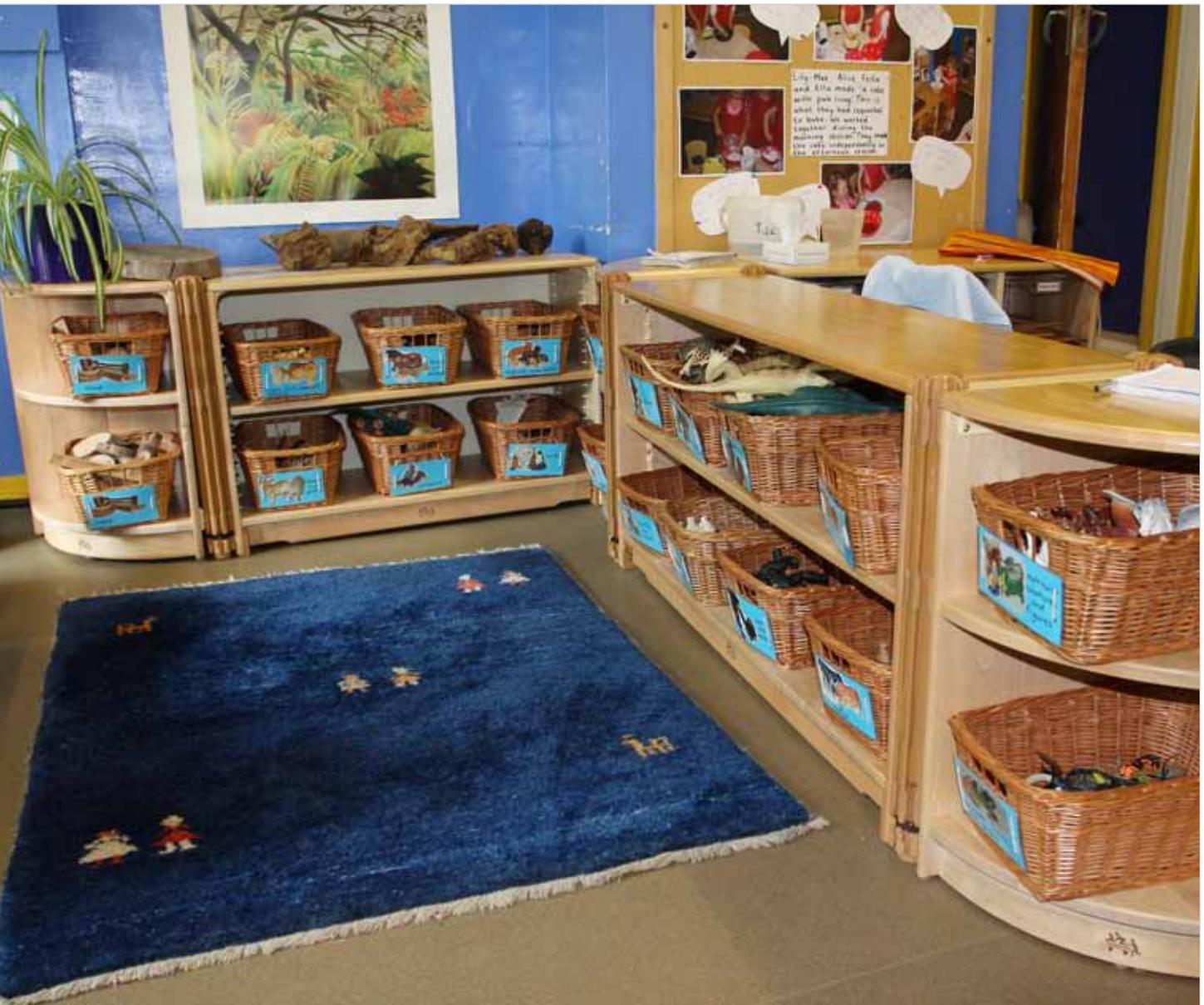
Nature demonstrates a tranquil environment, where vast expanses like oceans, moors, forests, and sky are varying shades of calm colours. Exciting colours come in smaller accents: flowers, butterflies, birds...

Likewise, a calm colour scheme in your room will support a peaceful atmosphere. Brightness can be provided through children's artwork, cultural fabrics or interesting objects that highlight activity areas. Reggio research points out that 'a significant chromatic presence is provided by the children themselves... The environment thus should not be saturated with colour but should be slightly "bare" so that the best balance is reached when the space is inhabited.'

"There should be a clear sense of order and aesthetic harmony within the environment as a whole."

Mark Dudek





Toys and materials in excess lead to clutter. Too much choice is overwhelming, causing children to flit from one occupation to another. Equipment builds up over time in any setting so one has to trim back occasionally, remembering that sometimes 'less is more'. Fewer materials, organised in an orderly way, give a more peaceful impression. Jennie Lindon emphasises that 'Children are active working members of their nursery' – in order to feel ownership of the space, they need to see exactly where to find (and return) what they need.

Sound is another element that over-stimulates in excess. In a setting with high ceilings and hard surfaces, noise can be exhausting for children and stressful for staff. This can be counterbalanced by the addition of acoustical tile, fabrics, window drapes, cushions and floor rugs that absorb sound. Background music is also wearing; it's better to sing and have times to make music with the children than to cope with never-ending noise.

Mood

Considering the number of hours children spend in school or nursery, it is vital that the atmosphere be homelike. Your setting will make a lasting positive impression if children associate it with happy memories and emotions.

Of course, the key element in creating a safe welcoming feel is the warm nurturing relationship between adults and children. There are many ways the environment can support this. Natural lighting, wall hangings, wooden furniture, wicker baskets and living plants engender a peaceful mood. To help a high-ceilinged room seem less institutional, one can hang ferns, fabrics, strings of lights or mobiles. The content of mobiles will depend on the ambiance you are trying to create; natural items like twigs and pinecones – or CDs and other recycled objects – are possibilities. Follow your inspiration!

Your own childhood memories can help: What made you feel comfortable as a child? To regain a child's perspective, get down on the floor, move around at that level and ask, 'Do I feel at home in this room?'



"It is the spirit of a place that makes it memorable, that expands our sense of possibility and puts us in touch with what is most loving, creative and human about ourselves."

Anita Olds





“Often children are more confident communicators in smaller spaces, where they feel safe and have some control of what’s going on around them.”

Elizabeth Jarman

Adults recalling their favourite childhood place often describe somewhere they, as a child, felt secure: ‘under my granny’s kitchen table with the cloth hanging to the floor’, ‘in a tiny closet under the stairs’, ‘in a big cardboard box’ ... Children love to snuggle into a private corner with their back against something solid, a haven from which to look out at the world. Curves are suggestive of hugs, and children seem to prefer them to right angles. So include some cosy nooks within your room, created with furniture or fabrics – or a combination. Frequently when children retreat to these small spaces, they are preparing for new situations or engaged in the observational learning crucial to the development of personal identity. (Olds)

When furniture is their size, children instinctively know ‘This is for me!’ Not surprisingly, research indicates that a child-scaled space increases children’s interest and focus. (White)

Research also reveals that light and the thermal and acoustical environment affect a child’s ability to learn. Make the most of opportunities for interplay of light and shadow, for instance a rattan screen hanging in a window and blowing in the breeze. At one children’s centre, the architect designed the building so rainwater in gutters reflected sunlight through skylights, creating moving patterns on ceiling and walls. Where children relax, meaningful play, communication and learning flourish.

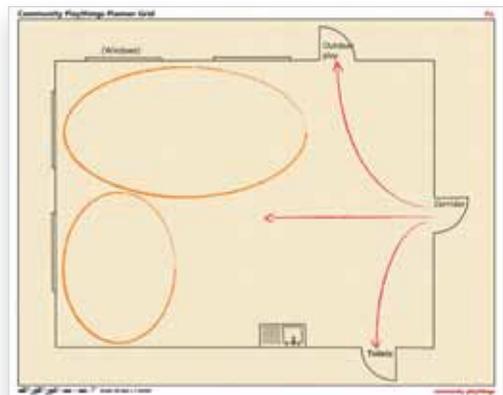
An enabling environment empowers children to follow their initiative. They can hang up their coats, turn on lights and taps, open doors and access materials. They explore the room and grasp the possibilities for play and discovery. They create and imagine, make choices and learn to think for themselves. They feel at home. The environment itself becomes a friend to the children and your own best assistant.

Three steps of room layout:

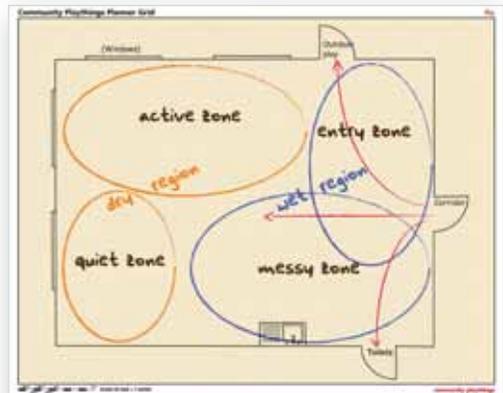
1. Draw the floor plan and mark in flow
2. Divide the room into wet and dry regions
3. Create activity areas



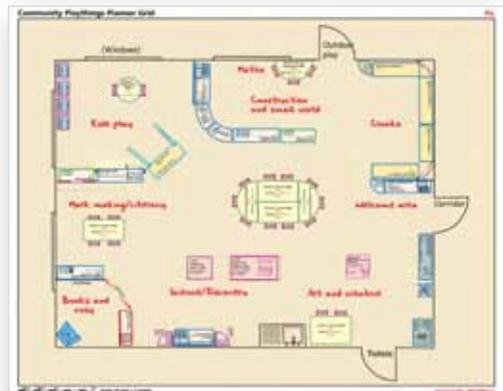
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Room layout

Free service

Using the principles discussed in this booklet, we have helped over 1,000 settings across the UK plan their room layouts. From an entire nursery for over 100 children to a single reception classroom, each project is unique and gives us new insights into the myriad of aspects that affect children and practitioners in the indoor environment.

If you can manage a visit to our display room in East Sussex, you can also tour our workshop and see how we build quality into each piece of furniture.



1 Phone in and talk about your plans. You know your children; we know our furniture. Together we can create a flexible room layout to support their learning.

2 You have two choices: Send your architect's plans for us to make suggested layouts or schedule a planning session at our display room in Robertsbridge, East Sussex. Either way the service is free of charge.

3 You will receive: 3D room designs, 2D layouts with furniture labelled and a quote with no obligation to purchase. If you decide to order, we offer two week delivery. An optional installation package is available.

Call us to discuss your project

0800 387 457



Robertsbridge, East Sussex, England TN32 5DR
www.communityplaythings.co.uk

