



National Day Nurseries Association

★Brighter thinking
for early years

Factsheet

Enabling Environments

England

Enabling Environments

An enabling environment can play a key role in supporting and extending children's learning and development. A stimulating environment enables children to explore, investigate, be curious and follow their own interests and passions.

This factsheet will focus on both the indoor and outdoor learning environments, supporting you to reflect on your own environment and providing ideas for you to consider for your own provision.

Creating an enabling environment

For your environment to meet the needs of all children using the space it is important to review and reflect on what you are providing and how it is being used, so you can make adjustments and add to the provision when needed. When thinking about/reflecting on your environment it is important to consider all that it incorporates;

- The physical space
- Lighting
- Sound and noise
- Colour schemes
- Social aspects
- Cultural aspects
- Accessible resources
- The staff team.

When establishing an effective learning environment, it is important to consider the following:

- Is the environment safe and secure in both its emotional and physical aspects?
- Does it provide children with an appropriate level of challenge?

Physical spaces: This includes all available indoor and outdoor spaces for the age group you work with. It also incorporates any specific spaces you have created within your room(s), for example, a quiet cosy area, a reading nook, a sound stage etc. Identify the spaces available and think about how they are currently used. Are they busy spaces? Do children gather in the space to play or are they rarely visited? Is the space dominated by a specific gender group of children? Adults should get down to the level of the children using the space to see what children can see and access e.g. staff in the baby room should lie/kneel on the floor to view the space. Audit your spaces to see how they are being used and talk to children about their ideas for each space, what would they like to see? How can it be organised? Where should the displays go? etc.

The child's voice should be threaded throughout your provision with children involved in decision making e.g. children choosing where their displays go and which work/photos are displayed, their choices about who and what they play with and for how long, how they use the resources and where they choose to play. Think about which areas of your provision enable children to make independent decisions, for example, do children choose when they stop their play for their snack? Do children choose when they play outdoors? Do children choose the storybook they want to hear? Be realistic about the independent choices you can offer and design ways to include these in your everyday practice and routines.

Lighting: Natural light contains all of the colours of the visible light spectrum (the portion of the spectrum that is visible to the human eye) in equal measure so is the best light to have. Identify the different types of lighting you use in each space. Long periods in fluorescent lighting can negatively impact a child's health and behaviour; so if you have this type of lighting look to find ways to limit its use and consider a range of lighting options, for example, lamps, dimmer lights, overhead lights, table lamps, to suit the children's needs. Look at your windows to ensure you fully utilise access to natural light (removing any paintings or posters covering or blocking the light).

Sound and noise: The acoustics of the room (the way sound travels around a room) can have a big impact on children's language skills. Background noise or reverberant noise can affect how children hear and understand language, especially for children with language disorders or children who are second language learners. Think about the sounds and noises in each space – is there constant background music playing in one of the spaces, and if so, why? Ensure you have a specific reason for playing background music, if there is no specific reason, for example within a singing session, then turn it off.

What can you do to minimise noise if you are in one large room with hard floor surfaces? You can soften the acoustics by adding curtains, room dividers, rugs and soft furnishings or organise resources so quieter activities/spaces are close together and away from the noisiest activities so children can listen without being affected by room sounds.

Colour schemes: Colours can have an impact on the learning environment and can evoke emotions. Understanding how colours can affect a learning environment is an important sensory consideration. Are all your spaces brightly coloured, are the walls full of objects/visuals creating very 'busy' spaces? For more information on the research into colours in a learning environment see the end of this factsheet for a link to an Elizabeth Jarman article (The Communication Friendly Spaces™ Approach: The targeted use of colour in learning environments).

Social aspects: The social aspects of your environment incorporate; your parent partnerships, adult/child interactions, the way you set up your spaces to encourage social interaction - peer on peer and adult/child interactions, activities that support interactions, how you organise group sizes (big and small group activities) the balance of adult-led and child-led activities, adults providing emotional support.

Do you provide spaces for children to work in a range of social groupings? (From playing alone to playing in large groups?) How do you support key persons to build strong attachments? How do you monitor adult/child interactions? Do you know what percentage you have for adult-led and child-initiated activities? How do you support wellbeing and resilience?

Considering all of these aspects will create an emotionally enabling environment. The EYFS Framework 2021 highlights the importance of relationships in developing an effective learning atmosphere. This incorporates a specific focus on practitioner responses to children's needs and interests and the importance of developing strong relationships with children's parents or carers over a sustained period of time.

Cultural aspects: Elements of a cultural environment can include language, values, religion, traditions, social economics, beliefs, practices and customs.

Think about your own environment and how you provide a rich cultural environment for all children and families using your provision. For example, can all children find print material in their first language? Do you celebrate festivals and special occasions that are important to all your children and families? Ask families about their individual celebrations and special occasions and incorporate these into your setting's annual calendar of celebrations. Do you sing songs in children's home language? (You could record parents singing them at home).

What strategies do you have for welcoming all families? What communication strategies do you have for parents/carers who do not speak English or are just learning to speak English? Think about a buddy scheme with other families, using translator apps, inviting families to spend time in the setting getting to know your staff, routines and activities.

Create family books using family photos shared by parents, laminated for longevity, and display these in your book area so children can get to know each other's families, cultures, traditions etc. Walk around your setting and review your environment to see whether all your families are positively represented within your provision.

Accessible resources: The resources you make available to children includes the toys, activities and specific areas of provision that are accessible for children to self-select from. Resources should meet the development stages of the children using them and offer open-ended play experiences, challenge, cooperation, negotiation and collaboration, discovery, problem-solving, new experiences, fun and opportunities to follow their own interests and passions.

Review the activities you provide in outdoor/natural environments. Do they provide all of the points above? Outdoor play isn't about just bringing something from the inside into the outdoors, it is about experiencing things in a different way, for example, painting outdoors will incorporate painting on different surfaces (such as snow, walls or floors) or using natural materials to create paintbrushes (sticks, twine and leaves, vegetation or flower). You may have bigger spaces to utilise outdoors for large scale projects or need to be creative with how you organise your smaller spaces e.g. turning a small unused space into a cosy corner with drapes and cushions.

The staff team: Children need staff that can build secure attachments, use observation to tune into and plan for children's individual needs, understand when to step in to scaffold learning and when to sit back and let children make their own discoveries, knowledge of child development and can work cooperatively with families.

Best practice tip - enabling environment reflection

Create a document with each of the eight headings above to enable you to reflect on each aspect of your provision. Look at it together at a staff meeting and discuss each of the individual aspects or challenge staff in each room/age group to go and review their environment together in the space and come back together to share each groups' findings.

Continuous provision

Creating an enabling environment for child-initiated, open-ended play can be supported through your continuous provision. This empowers children to make choices and explore a range of resources to support their learning and development.

Alistair Bryce-Clegg describes continuous provision as "not the provision that is continually out. It is far more rich and complex than that. If you just put random resources out within your environment, then you are relying on a great deal of luck when it comes to children's engagement and attainment.

Continuous provision should 'continue the provision for learning in the absence of an adult'. What I mean by that is the areas of provision you create should be dictated by need, linked to assessment and broadly levelled so that there is challenge and support in all areas for all children."

How do you link your continuous provision to your planning? Do you include continuous provision on your planning sheet so you can think about what you might need to add to support the children's learning when the adults are not there?

Updating and enhancing your continuous provision does not need to be financially costly, you can source natural materials to extend learning e.g. different size/width feathers to use for mark making. You can also ask for donations for items that parents and families are no longer making use of or have more than one of e.g. dual language books or outgrown wellies/dressing up clothes. Local allotments may donate seeds and plants for children to plant or local tyre services may donate tyres for planting and growing. Join your local library for adding to your book selection in order to support children's current interests. Before making a decision to purchase items have a look around your local community to see what you can source as a donation or low-cost purchase.

Outdoor play

Children must have daily access to the outdoors and where possible this should be free flow where children can freely move between indoors and out, as they choose. Free-flow play enables children to continue their play, without rigid stop-start routines. When outdoor play is timetabled staff can tend to see this as a supervised period where children 'let off steam' and practitioners have a 'chat' whereas free-flow play can create more opportunities for learning, interaction and play, which supports children's all-round development.

Being outdoors supports physical activity and helps children develop coordination and control of their large and small movements. Our understanding of its importance has increased in recent years along with our understanding of its impact on children's all-round well-being.

Outdoor spaces should support all areas of learning, whether you have a very small outdoor space or large grounds for play. If you have small spaces be creative with the use of what you have available e.g. using blackboard paint on walls, fences or floors, using old sheets tied to fences to create a shady spot for children. You may also be able to access more open spaces by using local parks, forest schools or by linking with a local school for access to their amenities.

Having access to the outdoors every day (unless there is exceptional weather conditions, very high winds, thunderstorms (lightning risk) exceptionally high or low temperatures, hailstorms or torrential rain (time-limited) or smog or heavy fog (not mist) enables children to learn about weather patterns and changes through the seasons and connect with the natural world. Think about how you can support children and staff to be out in a variety of weather conditions through appropriate clothing or a rota so staff can take breaks.

As with the indoors audit your outdoor spaces to review your continuous provision and how or if it is being used and by which groups. Are children able to self-select activities outdoors to follow their interests and prior learning? What items do you have outdoors to support individual children's current interests or development stages? Are all seven areas of learning being promoted across your outdoor spaces? Do staff engage with children outdoors as they do indoors? Is sustained shared thinking happening in the outdoor spaces? Do children have access to natural and open-ended materials such as:

- Rubber inner tubes, tyres
- Rope, string, tape
- Fabric
- Cardboard boxes and large cardboard tubes like inside rolls of carpets,
- Planks, branches and wood of different sizes
- Pegs
- Guttering and drainpipes
- Pallets and crates

- Straw
- Natural small resources such as pine cones, shells, small twigs, pebbles, leaves.

Practitioners who regularly observe children playing outdoors find that they are more resilient and more able to persist with their learning. Outdoor play such as den making helps children's ability to assess problems and risks and find ways to overcome them – difficulties that elsewhere may have led to children disengaging with their learning.

Review your resources and continuous provision both indoors and outdoors to ensure they are meeting the needs of all the children, that they provide opportunities for children to build on their existing knowledge and skills and provide challenge and stimulating fun

Use peer observations, alongside supervisions and appraisals to review staff strengths and areas to develop.

Further reading

- Elizabeth Jarman, The Communication Friendly Spaces™ Approach: The targeted use of colour in learning environments. <https://bit.ly/3nevC6z>
- Birth to 5 Matters: <https://bit.ly/3nm7qzf>
- ABC Does – Continuous Provision: <https://bit.ly/3r9HmL>



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NDNA is the national charity and membership association representing children's nurseries across the UK. We are a charity that believes in quality and sustainability, so we put our members' businesses at the very heart of ours.

We are the voice of the 21,000-strong nursery sector, an integral part of the lives of more than a million young children and their families. We provide information, training and advice to support nurseries and the 250,000 people who work in them to deliver world-class early learning and childcare.

See the full range of NDNA factsheets at www.ndna.org.uk/factsheets

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