



National Day Nurseries Association

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# Factsheet



## Continuous Provision

England

# Continuous Provision

Birth to Five Matters defines continuous provision as the “environment and resources provided for children to explore freely, which support learning with or without an adult and enable children to revisit and build on their learning.” It is children being able to independently extend their learning through play. The Early Years Foundation Stage describes play as “essential for children’s development” and that they learn by leading their own play.

It is the practitioner’s responsibility to provide an enabling environment that taps into a child’s interests, ignites curiosity and allows them to explore and investigate independently. Alistair Bryce-Clegg summarises continuous provision as “learning in the absence of an adult” and the “areas of provision you create should be dictated by need, linked to assessment and broadly levelled so there is challenge and support in all areas for all children.”

## What does continuous provision look like?

Ensure resources are readily available, clearly labelled where appropriate and accessible for children so they can make choices, return to materials and experiences that interest them, to deepen and extend their thinking and learning. If labelling is appropriate, you may choose to use pictures, photographs, text and/or colours. Involving children in the labelling process can help to promote a sense of ownership and engagement with their environment.

Continuous provision includes all the different provision areas that children use every day and should include a core range of activities that are available to children all year round. Careful, considered planning of provision is necessary to ensure effectiveness. Provision should reflect, breadth, range and balance in terms of all areas of learning, children’s interests, culture, language and development and should include both indoors and outdoors.

## How do I plan for continuous provision?

Continuous provision is informed and supported by observation, planning and assessment.

- Observe children in their play and note if they are engaged with the continuous provision available and if so, how they are using the materials provided
- Assess if the continuous provision available suits their approach to learning, meets their interests, needs and developmental stage, is accessible, and provides sufficient challenge
- Plan how the continuous provision and enabling environment will support a child’s next steps.

Are there any areas or resources that are underused? Why is this? Think about the needs and interests of your current children and which resources you have to develop their interests.

Look at:

- The physical surroundings and the range of available resources
- Accessibility – are the resources easily accessible to promote self-directed learning and independent decision making?
- The resources and arrangement – do they inspire, encourage exploration, problem-solving and interaction?
- Areas - are there areas/activities that encourage group work, pair work as well as spaces for quiet time
- The development levels of the children using the space
- Children's current interests and fascinations
- Inclusivity – does the provision cater for the diverse needs and abilities of all the children?
- Enhancements that can be added to support children's development
- The open-ended resources, spaces and opportunities you can provide
- Flexibility – is your provision flexible and adaptable? Can it be easily changed as interests and needs change and does it accommodate spontaneous learning opportunities?

### How often do I change my continuous provision?

Continuous provision is an ongoing process that should evolve as the needs and interests of the children change. Observe children as they interact with the provision provided and reflect on their engagement or lack of engagement, then use this information to inform planning, adaptations or changes. Regular observation, reflection and evaluation will ensure that the environment effectively supports the learning and development of the children.

### Evaluating your provision

When reviewing your continuous provision remember to look at both the inside and outdoors, of the setting plus any other spaces the children learn and play.

The purpose of reviewing your provision is to ensure it meets the needs of the children. Observing how children use their existing and emerging knowledge and skills will enable you to plan further learning experiences through your continuous provision.

Stand back and observe how children are using the continuous provision:

- What areas do children access?
- Are there any areas not being accessed?
- Is the provision inclusive, allowing all children to participate regardless of gender, abilities, language or background?
- Are adaptations required to cater for the diverse needs of the children?
- Are there any signs of frustration in certain areas?
- Can you observe the characteristics of effective learning in children's play?  
Are they engaged, motivated and thinking critically?

- Do children have the skills and knowledge required to engage/complete the activities/challenges in your environment without adult intervention?
- What conversations are children having naturally – what skills and knowledge can you observe and how are you going to build on them?
- Are the children interacting with adults and vice-versa? Is there enough adult support and scaffolding of learning?
- How do children transition between the areas/activities? Is it smooth or are there some challenges?

Remember, continuous provision is provided for children to access independently and the resources you present should have the potential to help children learn and develop in the absence of an adult. Continue to review what is on offer to ensure it provides opportunities for children to be excited, challenged, explorers, investigators, creators, problem solvers, make mistakes and follow their interests, alongside knowledgeable staff who know when to sit back and observe and when to sensitively intervene to develop learning.

### Examples of continuous provision

- A range of books (fictional, factual, pictures, words, small, medium and large, different textures), magazines, recipe books, family books, story sacks, puppets, reading buddies etc.
- Mark making with a variety of implements to explore and a variety of surfaces to make marks on e.g. foil, wallpaper, wood, different sizes of paper, chalkboards etc.
- Block play and construction
- Open-ended and loose parts resources e.g. boxes, tubes, den making equipment
- Loose parts - materials or resources which can be constructed, deconstructed or combined with other resources. It can be natural or man-made materials e.g. bottle tops, wooden curtain rings organised in baskets, trinket trays or wicker baskets
- Natural resources e.g. pinecones, wood, flowers, leaves
- Treasure baskets for heuristic play
- Measuring equipment e.g. cubes, pencils, tapes, rulers, scales, measuring jugs, cylinders, clocks, stopwatches, timers etc.
- Numbers/letters that can be manipulated
- Water, sand and sensory play
- Small world equipment
- Role-play equipment relevant to the children's interests
- Real-life objects e.g. real fruit in the home corner, cups or real telephones to explore
- Large and small equipment for developing physical skills
- Games, jigsaws, puzzles
- Technology equipment
- Exploration equipment e.g. magnifying glasses, collecting boxes.

## Evaluating your practice

When evaluating your practice as a room or as a staff team, think about the questions you need to ask to fully review what you are doing. Here are a few examples to start your thinking:

- Is continuous provision part of your planning process?
- Are all areas of learning covered in your continuous provision?
- Are the learning outcomes aligned with the curriculum and support individual learning objectives?
- How are children's current interests incorporated into the provision?
- Do staff observe the characteristics of effective learning in children engaging in the continuous provision? Consider how the environment and resources on offer are helping children to develop their skills and knowledge and how this is monitored
- How does the provision contribute to the children's social and emotional development?
- How do you monitor the effectiveness of the provision on offer?
- What was the last item added or changed in your provision as a result of a child's interest?
- Are resources kept clean and in good condition? Are resources kept in the same place, so children know where to find them?
- How do the different areas of your provision link together to support transitions in learning?
- Are there opportunities for parents/carers to contribute resources/ideas?

## Further resources:

- Your Essential Guide to Working with Children Under Three - NDNA 2023 – [www.ndna.org.uk/underthree](http://www.ndna.org.uk/underthree)
- Continuous Provision in the Early Years, Alistair Bryce-Clegg 2013
- Continuous Provision: The Skills, Alistair Bryce-Clegg 2015
- The Nursery Year in Action: Following children's interests through the year, Anna Ephgrave 2015
- Birth to Five Matters: <https://birthto5matters.org.uk/>
- The Early Years Foundation Stage: <https://bit.ly/47MgfXG>



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# Factsheet

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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.

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