

## Research Digest Standard 2 Environments



Enriching environments, both indoor and outdoor (including materials and equipment) are well-maintained, safe, available, accessible, adaptable, developmentally appropriate, and offer a variety of challenging and stimulating experiences.

# Introduction

*“The outdoor and indoor environments develop children’s confidence to express themselves, to make choices, to test ideas, to develop and practise skills, to make discoveries, and to persevere in the face of difficulty and uncertainty” (National Council for Curriculum and Assessment [NCCA], 2004:55).*

Learning environments, both indoor and outdoor, should be motivating and appealing to all children. Children have different interests, needs and background experiences, and the materials, equipment and activities that the setting provides for them should be reflective of this diversity. Providing an environment where a child is encouraged and supported to have a positive sense of identity and belonging (  Research Digest/Standard 14: Identity and Belonging) is critical to her/his success as a learner. Similarly, there is an evident link between the environment and the interactions that take place within it (  Research Digest/Standard 5: Interactions). The environment, therefore, requires careful consideration, in order to support relationships, play and curriculum implementation as key contexts for learning.

# Recent Research

## Well planned indoor and outdoor environments

Flexible indoor and outdoor environments, which address children's differing levels of maturity, and which are adapted to meet children's changing needs throughout the year, should be provided (Centre for Early Childhood Development and Education [CECDE], 2005). The National Children's Nurseries Association (NCNA, 2002) offers guidelines on the planning, design, building or altering of premises for an early childhood setting. The provision of discrete areas for playing, sleeping, eating, bodily care, and storage of personal items is recommended, in addition to appropriate signage for all visitors and users of the setting. Sturdy, appropriately small-sized furniture, sanitary ware and equipment communicate an atmosphere of welcome and belonging for very small children. In planning a good learning environment, interest areas should be developed and arranged to facilitate easy movement and visibility. French (2003) suggests ideas for the use of internal and external spaces, and outlines guidelines for establishing a learning environment and arranging and equipping areas. Children themselves need to be participants in what adults are thinking, planning and doing on their behalf (Greenfield, 2004). Ulrich (2004) suggests that children should be reflected more personally in the environment, in order to enhance their self-identity and self-esteem. They recommend that practitioners consult with children and consider the following suggestions:

- Display children's project work
- Ensure that displays are at children's eye level
- Exhibit information about children's families
- Engage children in contributing photos or other materials for display
- Ensure that children's names are displayed

- Ensure that each child has some space that is personalised for her/him

The natural world can be appreciated and used as a foundation for creativity, play, sensory stimulation, and as a resource for continuity between settings (CECDE, 2006). Outdoor play space is sadly lacking in many early childhood settings, and outdoor experiences for non-mobile babies, toddlers and children with additional needs is particularly neglected. Bilton (2002) suggests that there are certain principles to be adhered to when planning for effective early childhood experiences:

- Integration and combination of indoor and outdoor environments
- Availability of indoors and outdoors simultaneously for children
- Both indoors and outdoors should receive equal consideration in design, layout, resourcing, equipping, management, planning, evaluation, staffing, and adult interaction
- Outdoors is both a learning and a teaching environment where play is central to children's development and utilises effective modes of learning
- Children need to be able to control, change and modify their environment
- Staff have to be supportive towards the development of effective outdoor environments

All of the above necessitates careful planning for a structured environment, to reflect the holistic nature of children's early learning and development (CECDE, 2005).

## Adaptability and accessibility

All aspects of the environment must demonstrate inclusivity and the flexibility to welcome children and adults with additional needs, as well as ensuring consistent ease of access and frequent use by all (CECDE, 2005). Practitioners who understand child development and how children learn, and who aspire to support children's individual growth and development, construct



environments which are adaptable and communicate a sense of respect and purpose (French and Murphy, 2005). Wheelchair and buggy ramps as well as wide double doors should be provided in services and, ideally, the setting should also be situated on the ground floor (French, 2003).

## Well maintained and comfortable environments

The environments should be safe, hygienic, spacious and bright, and afford opportunities to rest, play, eat and have bodily care needs met. They should be regularly maintained and evaluated. Settings also need to have some adult-sized furniture for adults' comfort. Both children and adults should enjoy their space (French, 2003; French and Murphy, 2005).

The NCNA (2002) observes that architectural design should extend beyond the basic requirements of accommodation in early childhood settings, and provide spaces to stimulate and interest the child. Advice on the use of colour, light and shade is provided, along with the need to divide spaces both horizontally and vertically, with suggestions for creating mood. The importance of paying attention to the kitchen, in terms of structural finishes and food storage and preparation, is also outlined. The health and safety of all children and adults is paramount and all out-of-home settings must, therefore, conform to all relevant health and safety standards (  Research Digest/Standard 9: Health and Welfare). Although safe equipment is vital, the environment should still facilitate challenge, exploration and risk-taking (Greenfield, 2004; CECDE, 2006).

## Providing challenging and enriching experiences

The physical environments and experiences provided for children, indoors and out, have a powerful impact on their present and future (Greenfield, 2004; Ulrich, 2004). The experiences offered to children should support all children (and adults) to:

- Work independently and with others
- Actively explore and learn

- Make and follow through on decisions
- Engage in first hand, real and creative experiences
- Solve problems
- Experience co-operative, symbolic and dramatic play (French, 2007)

Environments structured to meet the child's needs should provide a balance between the child's active approach to learning in terms of security and safety, and an appropriate level of risk (CECDE, 2005). 'Safe risk' is challenging for the child and supports the development of autonomy and self-reliance, and provides a positive sense of control. As young children learn from interacting with materials, events and ideas, it is essential that practitioners provide environments which:

- Encourage curiosity, interest and choice
- Are both dynamic and diverse
- Build on children's interests, learning dispositions and needs (CECDE, 2005)

There is considerable evidence that the absence of public play spaces in the community impacts negatively on children's opportunities for physical activity among their peers (CECDE, 2006). Ouvry (2003) suggests five reasons why children should experience outdoor play:

- Movement allows children to relive their experiences
- Children need daily outdoor access as a right (given the potential health benefits in later life)
- There is a need for 'risky freedom'
- Unique opportunities for learning take place, such as change in weather, finding beetles under a stone, space to undertake large scale constructions
- Behaviour improves outdoors

The most effective learning comes from simple, versatile, and abundant materials. Children gain significant play value from



elements within the natural environment, such as slopes, trees, bushes, sand, long grass and water. Natural features such as these should be retained or provided in play facilities (CECDE, 2006).

## Implementing the Standard

Ensuring that the indoor environment provides a range of developmentally appropriate, challenging, diverse, creative and enriching experiences for all children requires the setting to provide a variety of different spaces and areas. These should facilitate and support the development of social activities and interactions and so, should be age-appropriate. For babies up to eighteen months old, for example, designated areas could be assigned:

- Floor area - carpeted section, adequate storage for equipment (e.g., soft toys, balls, blocks), etc.
- Book area - quiet area of the room, natural light, comfortable seating, carpeted sections, cushions, display units, puppets for story-telling, large books in a variety of formats, etc.
- Sensory stimulation area - wide variety of musical instruments which reflect a variety of cultures, equipment (e.g., tape recorders), different types of music (e.g., classical, opera, pop, traditional), wall-mounted mirrors, treasure baskets, scented materials, suitable storage, traditional nursery rhymes, etc.

For toddlers, these spaces could be expanded to include water and/or sand areas, paint areas, collage materials, a home corner, role play and other special theme areas (e.g., clay, computer area, woodwork, cooking, etc.). All should be fully supervised and operated in compliance with relevant health and safety regulations.

To support the child's learning and development, developmentally appropriate equipment and material should be made available to all children within the setting. In order to ensure that the learning needs of each child are met, the practitioner should consider:

- Providing sufficient amounts of equipment and materials
- Regular inspection of equipment and materials, ensuring repair/replacement when necessary

- How the equipment and materials support the implementation of the curriculum/programme
- Provision of equipment and materials for children with special needs to ensure access to the curriculum/programme
- Careful use of television/video/DVDs/computers to initiate interest, develop ideas and extend learning
- Reflecting the diversity of the wider society within the setting (  Research Digest/Standard 14: Identity and Belonging)

## Conclusion

The indoor and outdoor environment require planning at every level, from daily considerations such as seating arrangements, heating, availing of dry weather to use outdoor spaces, type of play etc., to the broader decisions, such as design and layout, compliance with health and safety regulations, and the determination of what is developmentally appropriate for children of different ages. This planning and layout should consider and accommodate the needs of all children and adults in the setting.

It is crucial that the environment provides a range of developmentally appropriate, challenging, diverse, creative and enriching experiences for all children. In ensuring that this is provided, the setting becomes more than a just a place where children spend a great deal of time being cared for; it becomes a place where their initiative is encouraged, their competence is nurtured, and their curiosity is aroused.



# Resources for Environments

Bilton, H. (2002). *Outdoor Play in the Early Years: Management and Innovation* (2nd ed.) London: David Fulton Publishers.

Centre for Early Childhood Development and Education (2005). *Early Childhood in Ireland: Evidence and Perspectives*. Dublin: Centre for Early Childhood Development and Education.

Centre for Early Childhood Development and Education (2006). *Review Document*. (Unpublished).

French, G. (2003). *Supporting Quality: Guidelines for Best Practice in Early Childhood Services* (2nd ed.). Dublin: Barnardos' National Children's Resource Centre.

French, G. (2007). *Children's Early Learning and Development: Background Paper for the Framework for Early Learning*. Paper commissioned by the National Council for Curriculum and Assessment. Dublin: National Council for Curriculum and Assessment.

French, G. and Murphy, P. (2005). *Once in a Lifetime: Early Childhood Care and Education for Children from Birth to Three*. Dublin: Barnardos.

Greenfield, C. (2004). 'Can Run, Play on Bikes, Jump the Zoom Slide, and Play on Swings': Exploring the Value of Outdoor Play. *Australian Journal of Early Childhood Education*, Volume 29, No. 2, pp. 1–7.

National Children's Nurseries Association (2002). *We Like This Place: Guidelines for Best Practice in the Design of Childcare Facilities*. Dublin: National Children's Nurseries Association.

National Council for Curriculum and Assessment (2004). *Towards a Framework for Early Learning – A Consultative Document*. Dublin: National Council for Curriculum and Assessment.

Ouvry, M. (2003). *Exercising Minds and Muscles*. London: National Children's Bureau.

Ulrich, C. (2004). A Place of Their Own: Children and the Physical Environment. *Human Ecology*, Volume 32, No. 2, pp. 11–14.

## Children's Books

Featherstone, S. (2003). *The Little Book of Growing Things: Little Books with Big Ideas*. London: Featherstone Education Ltd. [Indoor and outdoor activities for toddlers and young children, encouraging shared responsibility for the care of plants, flowers, etc.].

Stephens, H. (2002). *Glittery Garden*. London: Macmillan Children's Books. [Tactile book, exploring the outdoor environment].

Stephens, H. (2002). *Sparkly Day*. London: Macmillan Children's Books. [Looks at different weather conditions and games that can be played outdoors].



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The National Quality Framework  
for Early Childhood Education

