

# Meeting the EYFS requirements for the learning environment through play

**Helen Easby, winner of the 2008 Nursery World Early Years Professional of the Year, tells us how she has risen to the challenge of creating a playful, child-led learning environment...**

*The EYFS states that the indoor environment should;*

- ◆ 'provide a safe, secure yet challenging space for children'

*and that the*

- ◆ 'indoor spaces are planned so that they can be used flexibly and an appropriate range of activities is provided'.

## Flexible space

I have never adopted the approach that specific areas are used only for certain activities. The space that we have at the College Nursery is limited and so we find ourselves being quite ingenious with our use of it. Activities change frequently - our home corner can be a hairdressers first thing in the morning and a restaurant in the afternoon, or a vets, hospital, jewellers or flower shop all depending on what the children want to do. We always let the children decide what they want to play with - we will decide and set up for them arriving but if they want to change it then we will. Sometimes they will look for the same activity that they enjoyed the previous day so we will repeat it and if appropriate extend it by adding something, or slightly changing it. Other times we will leave it exactly the same, allowing children to practice and develop skills and also to revisit and consolidate their learning.

## 'Challenges and Dilemmas'

How do we manage this? Or to take the phrase from the EYFS what are the 'challenges and dilemmas'? Our main method is that we don't plan in advance what we are going to do, so no weekly or daily plans with reams and reams of paperwork for staff to struggle to find time to do.



ALL PHOTOS: HELEN EASBY



The staff spend their time really getting to know the children, what they like and don't like and talking to parents.

It sounds like a recipe for disaster but it is all very carefully thought out! We have information in place to show where we are going and what we hope to achieve, each child has an individual learning journey and their needs are individually met through thoughtful 'planning'. By cutting down on paperwork we are able to spend more time thinking about the environment that we are creating and the relationships that we are building.

## Art and...mess!

None of our creative or art activities have an expected end result. A variety of resources are put out and the children are left to discover what they can do - sometimes we put them on the floor so that smaller children can reach. When finished, large group activities will be put on the wall, the only modification being the addition of a border, giving the 'work' value.

The children love sensory play, so we provide at least one messy activity per day per room. I am slightly



suspicious that the staff have a secret competition as to who can produce the messiest activity! This was fuelled recently by the sight of several children and staff painting themselves with paint in a very dubious colour - I shall monitor this with interest! I am often asked by staff from other nurseries how the parents react to these activities - the answer is, often with horror, but they soon realise that when I tell them at enrolment that their child will get dirty and messy, I did actually mean it!

**Free choice**

Open shelving and easy access drawers mean that the children are able to freely choose their own activities. Again, this could be potentially disastrous, but with a few 'ground rules' such as having to tidy one activity away before we get the next one out, it all becomes easily manageable.

There is an emphasis on the balance between child-led and adult-initiated activities. Perhaps it is best that when the activity is adult-led, the adult knows when to allow the activity to become child-led if it doesn't go



according to a pre-conceived plan. This is something that can be tricky to achieve but when it happens is so much more rewarding. The children get so much more out of it as well it allows them time to enjoy their self-directed play.

**Time to be**

Time is an important factor sometimes. Children need time to stand and watch others, or just to think. Sometimes there is a temptation to encourage children to join in and ask what they would like to do, but often what they want and need to do is to watch and think. We should plan for this - to help children to think should be our main aim, as Socrates said:

*'I can not teach anybody anything, I can only make them think, which is far superior to passing on my little wisdom'.*



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**Playwords would like to pass on our congratulations to Helen who has just won the prestigious 'Nursery World's Early Years Professional of the Year 2008' – well done! The award was presented by Angelica Bell, children's TV presenter, at a posh frocks event in London on 21 November.**

Helen (right) with her deputy, Jackie, of Newcastle College Day Nursery