

## THE PHYSICAL ENVIRONMENT AS TEACHER

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## THE PHYSICAL ENVIRONMENT AS TEACHER

Human behaviour is influenced greatly by the physical environment. The environment includes physical spaces and materials, both indoors and outdoors. The environment teaches, affords opportunities to make meaning and connections, affects mood, guides children's behaviour, and influences interactions. The environment is a major contributor to children's experience in a children's service.

## THE SCOPE OF THE ENVIRONMENT

The physical environment in a children's service is much more than a backdrop for children's experiences. It is a major provider of opportunities and possibilities. More broadly it is a literal depiction of the identity, traditions, priorities, history and vision of the service. It has been asserted early in this Framework that the professional as the decision-maker is the major contributor to the experience of children in children's services. One of the professional's significant roles is architect and designer of the environment and the gate-keeper who determines what children have access to in order to construct meaning. The arrangement of the environment and what is in it reflect the image of the child that professionals hold.

Any environment presents both constraints and possibilities. Certainly, in children's services there is a range of physical spaces, from new environments thoughtfully designed and constructed specifically for the purpose they serve, to spaces that once matched the need of the service but no longer do (too small, too open, inaccessible storage), to converted spaces, to multipurpose spaces such as family day care homes, to temporary spaces that have to be set up and dismantled each time they are used. The Framework can be implemented fully in each of these environments.

Taking care of the physical environment supports a feeling among the people who use it that they and the things that happen in it are valued. In this way, the physical environment mirrors practice.

Encouraging children to care for and respect the physical environment both indoors and outdoors also engenders a sense of belonging and is one hallmark of a healthy community.

The full implementation of this Framework would be obvious in the physical environment of a service even when no one is present in it. In other words:

- It is obvious that relationships and collaboration are encouraged.
- There is evidence that children as seen as capable and resourceful.
- It is clear that this is a place that supports a range of appropriate opportunities for learning.
- The lives, surroundings, and interests of members of the community, especially children, are reflected.
- There is a rich array of materials accessible to children to engage with.
- There is evidence of diversity.
- There is attention to beauty and aesthetics.
- There is evidence of the processes as well as the products of children's experiences. This evidence is for children, professionals, and parents. This visibility of engagement encourages discussion and debate, which are hallmarks of a learning community.

## SUPPORTING THE CHILDREN'S SERVICE AS A COMMUNITY

The environment must work not only for the children who use it. If the service is a community, then the environment, while focused primarily on the wellbeing of children, is comfortable for parents and professionals as well.

The physical environment conveys a strong message of welcome and belonging to parents. This is achieved in many ways, including:

- the availability of sufficient safe and accessible parking
- a place to store children's belongings
- attractive notice boards with a range of information for parents (in appropriate languages)
- provision of an easy way for parents to jot down information for professionals
- a suggestion box
- an arrangement of space whereby the director or manager of the service is easily accessible to parents
- photographs of families
- a place to stop and have a cup of tea or coffee
- a space for entering and exiting the child's room so that parents do not feel that they are in the way.

The environment supports professionals to be capable, resourceful and responsive.

An organised and orderly environment, with materials and supplies at hand in accessible storage, frees up time and energy for interactions and for collaboration with children.

The presence of some furniture that is comfortable for adults, such as sofas and chairs, encourages warm physical interactions between adults and children.

Places for breaks, places for adults to meet for discussion provide opportunities for the development of adult relationships.

## ENCOURAGING RELATIONSHIPS AND INTERACTIONS BETWEEN CHILDREN

Having sufficient space that is well organised promotes positive interactions by not forcing children to be in close contact with each other. Sufficient well-organised space allows children to concentrate and play alone or with one or two other children. When the amount of space is inadequate children are forced to be close to each other, and consequently they are likely to interfere with each other and with each others' endeavours, especially if they are babies or toddlers. Even if children are participating for only a brief period of time, and most definitely when they come to the service for an extended period of time, there need to be places to "withdraw" safely, to take oneself out of the group or to be in pairs or small groups.

Relationships and interactions are encouraged by the choice of equipment and materials and the ways they are arranged and grouped. A service that implements this Framework, regardless of the age of the children in the service, will provide many opportunities for children to experience the satisfaction and pleasure of interacting with each other. The younger the children, the more challenging it may be to engage in sustained co-operation, but even babies enjoy playing together, for example, taking turns filling a container with sand, or chasing each other on hands and knees through a large appliance carton made into a cardboard tunnel. The older the children the more capable they are of being in close contact with other children without interfering with them. This means that even issues such as how close to each other children are at mealtimes are a consideration.

Providing materials that encourage co-operation or even parallel contributions support interactions. For example, a large surface (table or paper) for finger painting or a piece of pipe the weight of

which requires two children to carry it to the sandpit are provisions that encourage co-operation. Babies and toddlers will come together as they wish, and the idea with under three year olds is to allow them the choice. A cardboard appliance carton with both ends cut out permits a spontaneous chase and hide game between two almost one year olds.

The older the child the more capable they are of sharing and collaborating. It is argued by some people that functioning well in a group is encouraged by deliberately building in opportunities for children to learn to wait, to cope with someone else having something that they want, or to take turns. However, in a children's service there will be many opportunities for children to learn these things without making explicit provision for them. In fact, when children are very young care is taken to provide an adequate number of play materials so that they are not continually faced with the temptation to take away attractive items being used by others.

### EXAMPLE OF ENCOURAGING COLLABORATION AND SHARING OF IDEAS

The painting easels were designed and made so that children work alongside each other and can see what each other is doing rather than the more traditional arrangement of working on opposite sides.

## RELATIONSHIPS AND INTERACTIONS BETWEEN CHILDREN AND ADULTS

A rich, well set up environment empowers children to engage independently with materials and equipment and frees the professional to engage in interactions that support relationships and that support children as capable learners. An environment that relies heavily on the professional controlling what children do will inhibit implementation of the Framework.

Ensuring that the environment is healthy and safe is a basic concern in a children's service. There is an

inevitable tension between providing a safe and healthy setting and one that encourages children to extend themselves, take reasonable risks, and meet challenges. The possibility of the kinds of interactions between professionals and children that promote constructive relationships is increased when the physical environment is safe, when adults do not have to be constantly vigilant about the safety and health of children.

The presence of some furniture that is comfortable for adults, such as sofas and chairs, encourages warm physical interactions.

The presence of objects, pictures, music, and other items that are of interest to both children and adults and that reflect them as people will promote conversation and interactions.

## THE CHILD AS CAPABLE AND RESOURCEFUL

When children are active contributors to setting up and maintaining the environment their sense of mastery and control is supported and their feelings of confidence and security are enhanced.

An environment that respects children and acknowledges that they are capable and resourceful is one where the opportunities provided match what is known about their strengths, capabilities and interests and also allow for unknown possibilities. It is an environment set up in response to what children tell professionals, sometimes in words, but more often in their behaviour, about how they want to spend their time, what they are interested in. In traditional discussions about children's services the necessity of providing challenges is stressed. This Framework is premised on an assertion that professionals can easily underestimate children's skills, abilities, insights and understanding. The possibilities for children are limited when professionals base their provisions for children solely on their prediction about what the children will want to do and what they think will interest them.

Within this Framework, professionals will make available to children a variety of open materials that lend themselves to innovation. Such materials may be combined in unusual ways, used in unpredictable ways, made into not-yet-thought-of products. Open ended materials and equipment, in contrast to those that have a single designated purpose, encourage children to create, improvise, and make their own meanings.

### EXAMPLE OF MULTIPLE USES OF OPEN EQUIPMENT

In the yard there is a huge tractor tyre. When it was placed there by the parent committee, the staff thought that it would be great for climbing on, in and out of. As the weeks went by the children showed just how many uses it had, none of which the staff had thought of. Some of them included: a cubby house, a rocket, a flying saucer, a car, a fire truck, a swimming pool, and the staff's favourite: "a giant chocolate donut that doesn't disappear"! It has also been a trampoline, a lion cage, a dog kennel, and at times just a tractor tyre to climb on.

### EXAMPLE OF FLEXIBILITY ABOUT THE USE OF THE ENVIRONMENT

Some boys were digging in the dirt and the digging was moving sideways. The teacher almost said "Not there, over here", but just left it, thinking that the benefits of these "tough" boys digging outweighed the work of filling in the holes later. The children negotiated with each other about who was to dig where and ended up saying that they were digging to China. The group co-operated. The sister of one of the boys was actually going to China and he told his sister that he was going to be there first. This work ended up taking almost a term to complete and became a huge group project.

Equally important as the amount of space is the organisation of space. One big open space invites

undirected aimless wandering (and running!) around. Dividing large spaces, whether indoors or outdoors, into smaller spaces provides tangible assistance to children to focus their attention. Some of these spaces may be designated for specific purposes (for example, block play, home corner) with clear pathways from one to the other and cues about the appropriate number of people for the space or the experience. For example, something as straightforward as placing two chairs at a table is a cue that what is there is most suitable for two people. The idea is not to restrict and limit unnecessarily, but to provide sensible suggestions to children through the set-up of the environment.

Providing a rich environment where children have considerable power and control over what they are doing and what they are using demonstrates trust in children. As an example, keeping equipment and materials out of children's reach or denying them access to part of the space is a message about their inability to choose or use those appropriately and safely. Careful thought needs to be given about the validity of reasons for restrictions. In some children's services the children themselves decide what artwork and other "products" are to be displayed.

## A RICH ARRAY OF MATERIALS

Another dimension of acknowledging the child as capable and resourceful is ensuring that the environment stays interesting, that there are things to talk about, get involved with, wonder about, figure out.

Providing an interesting environment raises issues about the balance between, on the one hand, sameness and familiarity that nurture feelings of security, empowerment, and being "at home", and on the other the need for change and novelty. While interest and novelty are important at any age, the younger the children the more important sameness is.

Small changes— for example, re-arrangements of furniture or equipment, or the addition of something new, are often sufficient to re-ignite interest.

However, it is not a matter of the more the better. Children need choices, but overload in the form of too many things, too much clutter or colour, or too much noise can cause frustration and interfere with constructive engagement.

The environment needs to be language rich, using print, pictures, and symbols, providing much to talk about, encouraging children to understand symbols and to want to represent them. Particularly important is a rich collection of a variety of print material, including children's books and a range of other suitable material to read to, use with children or make available to them.

## REFLECTING THE CHILDREN'S SERVICE COMMUNITY

Relationships and interactions are encouraged when children are supported to develop a strong sense of their own identity. Including photographs of children in the environment, displaying selected pieces of children's work, and providing a place for each child's possessions and supplies encourage both a sense of self and community.

The physical environment in a children's service is personalised, reflecting the lives and interests of the people who spend time in it. This means that the environment will reflect the near geographic environment in which it is located. The near environment, wherever it is, is rich and varied and there is so much potential for the content of the children's experience.

The diversity within the children's services community and the broader community is reflected in the physical environment. Cultural diversity is perhaps what comes to mind first, but diversity related to gender, ability, lifestyle, family composition, and individual and family interests also be reflected. The environment reflects the cultural backgrounds and heritage of the families and professionals in it, as well as the broader

community. Not just in the children's areas, but in decorations, furniture and equipment and pictures used throughout the service. Professionals need to consult with parents and with members of the community to ensure that outdated stereotypes and tokenistic manifestations of cultural background are avoided.

## ATTENTION TO BEAUTY

If children adopt values from the experiences they have in their early years, and if an appreciation of beauty and aesthetics is to be fostered, then these are an essential feature of the physical environment. Attention is paid to colour, texture, light, softness, sound, and the presence of beautiful objects such as stones, flowers, fabric, baskets, seashells, prints and paintings.

## A PARTICULAR WORD ABOUT THE OUTDOOR ENVIRONMENT

The outdoor environment is a place where worthwhile learning and engagement can take place, not just a place for running around and getting rid of excess energy. The outdoor environment in the Framework is an arena, a space for being.

Enjoyment of and connection with the outdoors is part of the Australian identity. Australians identify with the land and have closeness to the natural environment. It is something unique and special about Australia and should be celebrated in all children's services. It is part of the culture all Australians share.

### EXAMPLE OF WONDERFUL POSSIBILITIES OUTSIDE AND OF EMERGING LITERACY

In the back corner of the play yard there is a garden which has a stepping stone path through the middle of it so that children are able to walk through it and see it from within. Each week, although the garden doesn't change in any major way, the children frequently explore, discover, discuss and learn many new things from it. For example recently some children discovered a bright orange tube-like plant growing under the fern. They came and told the staff member and they decided that they would need to look in a book or take it to the "plant place" to find out what it was. They looked in their garden book and learned (the adult too!) that it was a type of fungus (mushroom) but not one that could be eaten. One child commented, "I know you don't eat that mushroom because mushrooms aren't bright orange."

### PROMOTING THE VALUES OF THE SERVICE

Both the physical and human environments need to reflect the values and aims of the service.

- When relationships are valued, there are a number of small spaces that encourage small groups of children to enjoy and get to know and feel comfortable.
- When interdependence and co-operation are valued, there are many opportunities for children to collaborate and work together.

- When self sufficiency and containment are valued, there is sufficient space, and the space is arranged so the children are not forced to be together and they can be safely on their own for a time.
- When initiative is supported, the environment is arranged so that children can access materials and equipment unassisted and so that they play an active role in arranging and maintaining it.
- When concentration is valued, the environment is set up to minimise distractions.
- When it is desired that children explore actively, experiment, discover and create, there is a variety of open materials freely available that lend themselves to innovative uses.
- When making meaning is valued, there are many "real" and relevant things in the environment, materials that reflect the lives of the children, families, and professionals.
- When diversity is valued, the materials provide opportunities to engage in alternative ways of doing things. Decorations, materials and equipment portray diversity of all kinds, not just for children but for families too: signs and notices in a variety of relevant languages, posters, materials and equipment used, the music corner, home corner, food, arrangements for sleep and rest, and clothing.
- When beauty is valued and a sense of aesthetics engendered in the children, there is beauty in the environment.

The environment provides opportunities and possibilities for children's learning.

## QUESTIONS AND ISSUES FOR CONSIDERATION AND DISCUSSION

1. What examples can you identify of the environment empowering children?
2. How many things are there for children to do in the space before you put out any toys?
3. How can space be re-arranged to encourage children to spread out, to concentrate?
4. Conduct an audit of the physical environment. To what extent does it reflect the diversity in the children's service community? In the larger community?
5. Discuss the challenges presented by dividing big space into little space, particularly the possibility that all children will not be in view all the time.
6. Think about and discuss how often you change the environment, including equipment, play materials, pictures and decorations.
7. Collect examples from your own practice and that of your colleagues that illustrate the main points of this chapter.