

Appropriate Environments for Children under Three

Helen Bradford



Supporting Children from Birth to Three

Appropriate Environments for Children under Three

Helen Bradford



First published 2012
by Routledge
2 Park Square, Milton Park, Abingdon, Oxon OX14 4RN

Simultaneously published in the USA and Canada
by Routledge
711 Third Avenue, New York, NY 10017

Routledge is an imprint of the Taylor & Francis Group, an informa business

© 2012 Helen Bradford

The right of Helen Bradford to be identified as author of this work has been asserted by her in accordance with sections 77 and 78 of the Copyright, Designs and Patents Act 1988.

All rights reserved. No part of this book may be reprinted or reproduced or utilised in any form or by any electronic, mechanical, or other means, now known or hereafter invented, including photocopying and recording, or in any information storage or retrieval system, without permission in writing from the publishers.

Trademark notice: Product or corporate names may be trademarks or registered trademarks, and are used only for identification and explanation without intent to infringe.

British Library Cataloguing in Publication Data
A catalogue record for this book is available from the British Library

Library of Congress Cataloging in Publication Data
Bradford, Helen.

Appropriate environments for children under three / Helen Bradford.

p. cm. — (Supporting children series)

1. Early childhood education. 2. Child development. I. Title.

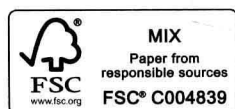
LB1139.23.B73 2011

372.21—dc22

2011008284

ISBN: 978-0-415-61262-3 (hbk)
ISBN: 978-0-415-61263-0 (pbk)
ISBN: 978-0-203-80495-7 (ebk)

Typeset in Optima
by FiSH Books, Enfield



Printed and bound in Great Britain by
CPI Antony Rowe, Chippenham, Wiltshire

Appropriate Environments for Children under Three

The most rapid and significant phase of development occurs in the first three years of a child's life. The *Supporting Children from Birth to Three* series focuses on the care and support of the youngest children. Each book takes a key aspect of working with this age group and gives clear and detailed explanations of relevant theories together with practical examples to show how such theories translate into good working practice.

It is widely known that babies and infants will flourish in an environment that supports and promotes their learning and development. But what constitutes an appropriate environment for children under three?

Drawing on recent research, this book explores the concept of an appropriate environment, both within and beyond the early years setting. It sets this within the context of child development and practically demonstrates how a high-quality environment can be created for babies and children under three that supports their learning and development.

Features include:

- clear explanation of relevant theories
- case studies and examples of good practice
- focus points for readers
- questions for reflective practice

Providing a wealth of practical ideas and activities, this handy text provides detailed guidance on how to develop an appropriate indoor and outdoor environment for babies and children under three, to help practitioners ensure effective outcomes for the youngest children in their care.

Helen Bradford is an Early Years Tutor on the Early Years and Primary PGCE course at the Faculty of Education, University of Cambridge, UK. Her previous publications include: *Communication, Language and Literacy* (Fulton, 2008), *Bears* (Fulton, 2006), *Woodland Creatures* (Fulton, 2005) and *Ourselves* (Fulton, 2005).

Supporting Children from Birth to Three

Series Editor: Sandy Green

The most rapid and significant phase of development occurs in the first three years of a child's life. The *Supporting Children from Birth to Three* series focuses on the care and support of the youngest children. Each book takes a key aspect of working with this age group and gives clear and detailed explanations of relevant theories together with practical examples to show how such theories translate into good working practice.

Each title in this series includes the following features:

- clear explanation of relevant theories
- case studies and examples of good practice
- focus points for readers
- questions for reflective practice

Collectively, the series provides practical ideas and activities to help practitioners develop appropriate indoor and outdoor environments, appreciate the importance of the planning cycle and gain a better understanding of all aspects of babies' and infants' wellbeing.

Titles in this series include:

Appropriate Environments for Children under Three

Helen Bradford

Planning and Observation with Children under Three

Helen Bradford

The Wellbeing of Children under Three

Helen Bradford



Contents

Introduction	1
1 Setting the scene: What is an appropriate environment?	5
<i>Providing the optimum early years environment</i>	5
<i>Providing the optimum early years environment: the case for a key worker approach</i>	8
<i>Providing the optimum early years environment: the indoor environment</i>	11
<i>Providing the optimum early years environment: the outdoor environment</i>	12
<i>Providing the optimum early years environment: the potential impact of the child's home environment in the early years setting</i>	15
<i>Conclusion</i>	16
2 The developing child	17
<i>Contexts for development</i>	18
1 Cognitive development	18
2 Brain development	23
3 Language development	25
4 Social and emotional development	39
5 Physical development	40
6 Play and development	41
<i>Conclusion</i>	49

3	The policy context	51
	<i>Developing appropriate early childhood environments: some considerations</i>	51
	<i>Learning around the world: three examples</i>	52
	1 England: Sure Start children's centres and the Early Years Foundation Stage	52
	2 Italy: Reggio Emilia and the role of the environment	54
	3 New Zealand: Te Whaariki	55
	<i>Emerging themes</i>	56
	<i>Conclusion</i>	57
4	Developing inclusive practice	59
	<i>Developing inclusive policy and practice</i>	60
	<i>Developing an inclusive environment with a focus on play</i>	61
	<i>Conclusion</i>	65
5	Creating an appropriate environment: towards a review of practice	67
	<i>Reviewing provision: where do we start?</i>	68
	<i>Considering the needs of parents</i>	71
	<i>Setting up the setting: appropriate environments</i>	73
	<i>Setting up the setting: appropriate indoor environments</i>	74
	<i>Setting up the setting: appropriate outdoor environments</i>	78
	<i>Setting up the setting: extending appropriate environments</i>	81
	<i>Setting up the setting: appropriate environments, resources and storage needs</i>	82
	<i>Setting up the setting: ensuring consistency</i>	84
	<i>Setting up the setting: final considerations for effective early years practice</i>	85
	<i>Conclusion</i>	87
6	Drawing the threads together	89
	<i>Final thoughts</i>	91
	References	93
	Index	97



Introduction

Appropriate Environments for Children under Three is one of a series of three books providing supportive and accessible material for those working with the very youngest children, from birth to three years. The premise for all three books is twofold; all babies and young children are (a) social beings and (b) competent learners from birth. The other two titles in the series are: *Planning and Observation for Children under Three* and *The Wellbeing of Children under Three*.

The books are designed for all early years professionals and adults working with babies and children under three in their early years settings who are seeking ideas on how to optimise best practice using the space and resources they have available to them. The books explore some of the theories and principles behind good practice in each of the title areas outlined. *Appropriate Environments for Children under Three* includes case studies, examples from practice, and exercises entitled 'Reflecting on current practice', as well as a final chapter with suggestions for reviewing setting practice, including staff development. The series is written from the perspective of the early years practitioner as someone who is in a privileged position to work with children from birth to three; someone who is able to see and respond to each child they encounter as the individualistic person that they are. Thus, how can the early years practitioner working from such a perspective best meet children's individual needs? How can every child be best supported as they evolve to make sense of the world around them?

The books take a reflective, child-led approach where good practice begins with an understanding of child development, appropriate responses, honest evaluation and ongoing discourse amongst practitioners. *Appropriate Environments for Children under Three* relies on a staff team who can work

collaboratively to develop ways of providing high-quality learning environments so that all the children in their care feel secure and happy and are able to thrive. This means, paradoxically, that children must also feel able to take risks appropriate to their stages of development; to explore, inquire, and experiment as their knowledge and understanding of the environments they inhabit grows. As they develop a language, or meta-language, that enables them to communicate in and navigate those environments, and as they develop the physical and creative skills necessary to experience the exciting and intriguing spaces that unfold before them, children begin a journey of understanding that will support and equip them for life ahead. According to the Early Childhood Forum, '[pre-school experience] is a crucial time in children's development...pre-school experience provides many of the building blocks for the rest of their lives.' The key message of this book, therefore, is that appropriate environments play a pivotal role in supporting and extending children's development and learning.

All five chapters build on each other, whilst containing the same core messages. Chapter 1 outlines a definition of an appropriate environment to include a wider perspective than merely that of the physical environment the child encounters within the early years setting. The definition encompasses the child's wider environment and key relationships within it. Chapter 2 gives an extensive overview of the developing child from birth to three years, linking theory with appropriate practice within the child's physical, social and emotional environment. Chapter 3 looks at what can be gleaned in relation to appropriate environments for babies and children under three through awareness of a global early years perspective. Chapter 4 extends the definition of inclusion beyond provision for children with special educational needs and learning disabilities, instead considering the necessity for children, families and staff to all feel that they are accepted and valued in order for the setting to thrive. Taking play as an example, it shows what aspects to consider in order to address inclusive practice, aspects that impact on what is meant by the considered development of an appropriate environment for learning. The final chapter offers a potential way forward for an early years setting to begin to review current practice, linking what we know about the specific and unique needs of babies and children under three with practical responses.



Figure 1 The happy child

1

Setting the scene: What is an appropriate environment?

This chapter explores the concept of what constitutes an appropriate environment for babies and children under three. It challenges the reader into a more holistic understanding of a term that encompasses and responds to the child's wider environment, both within and beyond the immediate early years setting. Within the early years setting, an appropriate environment includes all aspects of the indoor and outdoor environment and the responsiveness of that environment – including the adults who work there – in meeting the physical, emotional and learning needs of all the babies and children under three in their care. It is one where children are able to acquire new knowledge and understanding about their world or a new skill or behaviour as a result of experience. An appropriate environment for babies and children under three thus further encompasses the provision of developmentally appropriate care.

Providing the optimum early years environment

The physical environment of the preschool setting should reflect knowledge of and respect for the safety, physical wellbeing, intellectual stimulation, and social support of the very young...environments for young children should always reflect concern for all aspects of child development; physical, intellectual, social, and emotional. Space and materials...should enhance socialness, support a sense of emotional safety, and reflect respect for the familial and cultural experiences of the child. It is imperative that the transition from home to school should not be so drastic as

to cause psychological or emotional stress by imposing rigid schedules, long periods of sedentary activity, confined spaces, unsafe equipment, or intense academic pressures on young children.

(Renck Jalongo *et al.*, 2004: 144)

A major context for this book develops from an approach that recognises that babies and children under three have unique characteristics, behave in particular ways and have specialised needs. A number of educators have, over time, defined the 'ideal' early years learning environment. Child-centred approaches, particularly Froebelian, were based on the notion that a child's inborn characteristics must be allowed to flower; 'to make the inner outer' (Seefeldt and Barbour, 1998, cited in Li, 2006: 37). Froebel believed that the early years educator should provide opportunities for spontaneous play. Susan Isaacs, on the other hand, outlined the importance of leaving children free to choose their own form of expression. This line of thinking continues with Holt's (1989) argument that real learning is not the result of direct teaching, but the outcome of working things out for oneself.

Many early childhood educators such as Froebel, Montessori, Isaacs, Steiner, Vygotsky, Piaget and Bruner based their theories upon the view that children learn to make sense of the world by building up concepts through interaction with their environments (Moyles, 1997). Following on from such theories of what constitutes good early years practice, today's early years practitioner is expected to start from a child's everyday understanding and construction of knowledge of their immediate surrounding world and to discover and create opportunities to support and scaffold their active exploration of it. Active learning has been acknowledged as crucial to the cognitive and other developmental processes of young children (Moyles, 1997). Children learn as they make physical and mental connections with the world through sensory exploration, personal effort and social experiences, and actively seek meanings from those experiences. The purpose of care and education is therefore to help the child achieve higher levels of development through interactions with their physical and social environments.

The first nursery school in the UK was established in 1816 in New Lanark, Scotland, by the social reformer Robert Owen. It formed part of the Institution, which was a place of support, community and education for families. The Institution offered a variety of services including parenting classes and employment training as well as an academic education. It was also set up to ensure social inclusion. In England, almost 200 years later, the 2006 Childcare Act underpins the statutory provision of early years services

and children's centres for babies and children up to the age of 5, services regulated to deliver a similar ethos of integrated provision. Local authorities are required to (a) ensure that they provide sufficient childcare to enable parents to work, and (b) improve outcomes for young children through targeted early years provision in their area, with the remit to narrow the gap between those children who do well and those who do not (Alexander, 2010). The concept of 'provision in their area' is important because it recognises that, in this country at least, people often live in culturally diverse communities. Whilst local authorities might operate under a blanket policy framework, this must remain somewhat open to interpretation. There has to be an element of flexibility involved as any early years provision should be tailored to meet the specific needs of each community, an approach important for the identity of each early years setting which should be perceived as a community in itself.

As suggested, the two above-mentioned requirements for local authorities are not necessarily new concepts. The following quotation, taken from Owen's Address to the Inhabitants of New Lanark, outlines the role of the nursery school at his Institution:

to afford the means of receiving your children at an early age, almost as soon as they can walk. By this means many of you, mothers and families, will be able to earn a better maintenance or support for your children; you will have less care and anxiety about them, while the children will be prevented from acquiring any bad habits and gradually prepared to learn the best.

(Address to the Inhabitants of New Lanark, New Year's Day, 1816)

Quite what Owen meant by 'bad habits' one can only speculate. Perhaps it is about expectations surrounding what it means to be a good citizen. Or was it that his far-reaching thinking perceived the nursery to be an appropriate environment for these very young children, a setting advantageous, in many ways, for them to participate in? The nursery was, perhaps, somewhere to support these children in their early years, to equip them with the necessary skills in order to be able to succeed in later life. The sentiment behind his message is clear enough, however; it is one of appropriate support in an appropriate environment, somewhere that meets the needs of its attendees. It is in this appropriate environment that one is 'gradually prepared to learn the best'. This is important, as we will discover further in this book, in relation to a child's particular stage of development.

Providing the optimum early years environment: the case for a key worker approach

Babies and children under three thrive on consistency; for example consistency of routine and of familiar places and patterns, both at home and in their early years setting. Consistency within the early years setting suggests an environment that is regular, predictable and constant. This should extend to include regularity, predictability and constancy of relationships. A major element of provision of consistency within the early years environment can be offered through the key worker approach, an approach in which one person assumes overall care and responsibility for a child. A key worker is someone with whom the child can form a secure, trusting relationship. Whilst in practice many tasks within the setting may be shared by more than one person, the intention should be that as much as is feasible should be carried out by the key worker. A key worker is likely to assume overall responsibility for a group of key children. Noddings (2002: 178–9) argues that, ‘we would all prefer to be cared for by someone who enjoys our company rather than by someone who acts out of grim duty’. Babies ‘learn best by playing with the things they find in their world, and above all by playing with the familiar people who love them’ (David *et al.*, 2003: 150). Key workers should be practitioners who are experts in their field. They are specialists who understand and respond to babies’ and young children’s needs, both physical and emotional; specialists who can support developing social skills, who interact willingly with the children in their care and who share conversations fuelled by mutual enjoyment of genuinely shared interests. Specialist practitioners know how to develop the early years environment to support young children’s individual needs.

An effective key worker approach supports the following benefits for babies and children under three:

- promoting healthy emotional attachments with a child by providing familiar, trusting, safe and secure relationships. The key worker is the person who knows the child well and is aware of all the special details of how they are cared for, helping them to feel cherished and able to express themselves fully, to relax and feel confident that they matter and have value. The key worker becomes the child’s safe, secure and consistent base to return to, physically and emotionally;

- following and recognising the patterns, tones and rhythms of a child's life, thereby developing a deep understanding of their individual needs. The key worker understands a child's current skills and interests and can engage them in, and extend, their play;
- establishing open communication with a child's parents to ensure the child's needs are met and planned for. The key worker is the person who knows each child, their family and their circumstances and is seen as someone who values what families want to say about their child. Conversely, parents are more likely to spend time talking to someone they feel is committed to caring for their child;
- acting as an advocate for the child, sharing with parents and other practitioners the specific interests and needs of their key children. The key worker has a powerful impact on the wellbeing of their key children and their ability to develop and learn.

Outcomes for the setting of a key worker approach will include improved care and learning for the children, and parents and families who are confident about leaving their children there.

For self-reflection

Have a look at the box below adapted from Manning-Morton and Thorp (2006). If you are a key worker, reflect on your practice using the following as guidelines. Is it time to arrange a meeting with your 'knowledgeable manager or colleague'?

The role of the key worker working with babies and children under three

- Take responsibility for developing secure, trusting relationships with your key children and families.
- Spend time with each key child's family to learn about the child's changing routines, interests and dispositions.
- Settle new key children into the setting gradually, with yourself as the main point of contact for the child and their family.

- Receive and settle your key children as they arrive each day.
- Change and toilet your key children. Use sensitive handling and familiar words/actions/routines.
- Dress and wash your key children. Offer help as needed but also allow for and support growing skills and independence.
- Eat with your key children in small groups.
- Hold key children who are bottle-fed on your lap to feed. Maintain eye contact and conversation.
- Interact with your key children by being physically and emotionally available for them to come back to you by sitting at their level and in close proximity to them.
- Interact with your key children with reciprocal sounds, words, facial expressions and gestures, responding to their individual temperament.
- Provide a secure base by supporting your key children's interests and explorations away from you, perhaps by nodding and smiling as they explore and draw your attention to things.
- Use body language, eye contact and tone of voice to indicate that you are available and interested. Gauge these according to the child's needs and culture.
- Understand and 'contain' children's difficult feelings by gentle holding, providing words for feelings, showing them their expressions in a mirror and showing empathy in a way suited to each child's needs.
- Comfort distressed children by acknowledging their feelings. Offer explanations and reassurance calmly and gently.
- Acknowledge and allow children to express a range of feelings: happiness, anger, joy, distress, excitement, jealousy, disappointment, love.
- Regularly record observations and share them with other staff and the child's family.
- Take responsibility for planning to meet your key children's interests, skills and schemas.
- Take regular opportunities to reflect on the emotional aspects of being a key worker with a skilled, knowledgeable manager or colleague.