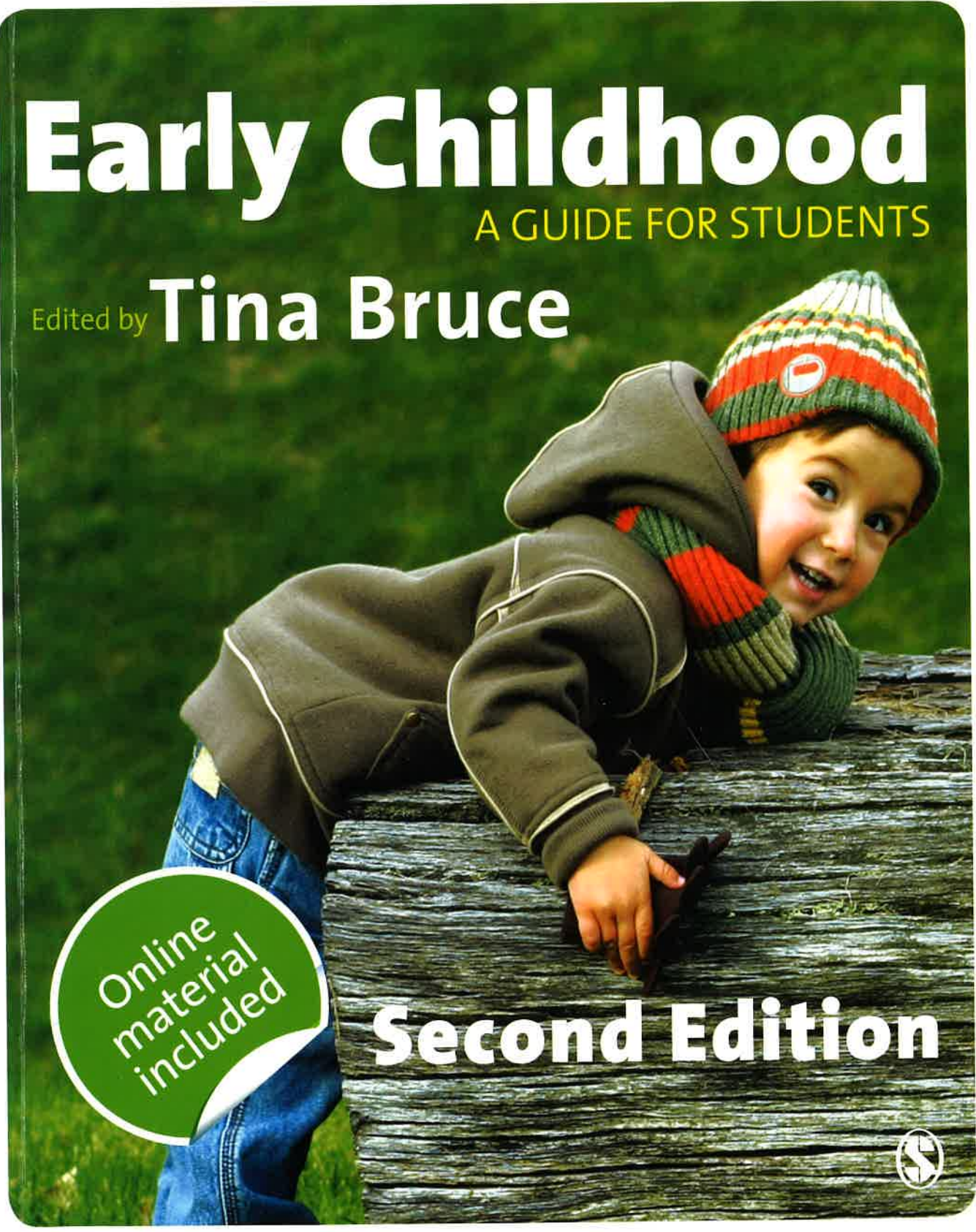


A young child with a joyful expression is leaning over a rustic wooden fence. The child is wearing a grey hooded sweatshirt, blue jeans, a green and red striped knit scarf, and a colorful knit beanie with a small logo. The background is a soft-focus green field.

Early Childhood

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CHAPTER

6

The Learning Environment: Creating a Learning Environment Indoors and Outdoors

Marion Dowling

Marion Dowling has an international reputation as an early years specialist. She is author of a number of books, including *Young Children's Personal, Social and Emotional Development*, is a vice president of Early Education and has directed two projects for the association on Young Children Thinking.



Aims

To develop understanding of:

- ☐ the historic influences on current practice in setting up learning environments indoors and outdoors
- ☐ how these connect with current research and theories
- ☐ and recognising the implications for practice.

The learning environment has been rightly described as the third teacher but it is important to remember that the environment is not an end in itself. We can look at settings in identical accommodation with similar equipment but the quality of provision and learning is very different. The crucial factor is what we do with what we have. The indoor and outdoor environments should complement rather than duplicate each other. When we understand what experiences children should have, we can then determine where the provision is best located.

I am taking the learning environment to include:

- the planned allocation of physical space
- the use of display
- the selection and storage of material resources.

All the decisions we make about these aspects of our work will give out strong messages about children learning, and the messages will derive from our beliefs, values and principles.

Knowledge of child development and informed observations of groups and individuals lead us to recognise the best environmental conditions for learning. Children will learn well when they:

- feel confident and in harmony with their environment
- repeat, re-enforce and elaborate on early patterns of activity
- are with others
- use language as a learning tool
- become agents in their own learning
- want to do so.

In addition the EYFS stresses the importance of the emotional environment, drawing attention to the adult's role to support children's feelings (DCFS, 2007: EYFS Principles into Practice Cards 3.3, The emotional environment).

Children will learn well when they feel confident and in harmony with their environment

Indoors

Until children feel welcome and become familiar with a setting, they will be ill at ease. Are there pictorial signposts that young children can decipher? Is it easy for them to hang up their coats and are their coat pegs visible to them during the day (their coat may be a reassuring memory that home still exists!)? Are spaces designed and practitioners deployed to enable less secure children to work in small groups and have easy access to an adult at all times? Children are affirmed when they see images of themselves and their families: display can include family photographs; enlarged photographs of individual children can be used

to create personalised jigsaws; mirrors allow children to see themselves when involved in different activities.

Rudolph Steiner settings pay particular attention to providing a harmonious environment which allows each child to develop in his or her own way and time. Franz Jaffke (1996) a Steiner educator, claims that the aim is to 'carefully select the impressions which confront and surround the children'. We see this reflected in a Steiner setting, which is both simple and homely. An open space equipped with screens, wooden blocks, a table and lengths of material allow children to transform their world rather than leaving adults to pre-form it.

Outdoors

Outdoor provision can easily lend itself to supporting young children's natural means of learning. Sensory experiences are readily available. Children can observe minibeasts in their natural environment, match leaves of different colours, feel their textures and listen to the sound of their feet crunching on dry leaves. Movement is initially the prime way of learning. Children urgently need to become adept at using their bodies and they want to do so. While being sympathetic to the needs for young boys in particular to take part in vigorous super-hero play, this can be difficult to cater for indoors. Outside it is easier, not only to allow this play but to enter into it. Outside play is also very inclusive. There are certain groups of children who feel more at ease out of doors. Helen Bilton refers to traveller and refugee children who need to be outside where they feel more empowered (Bilton, 2004).

When the outdoor area is freely available throughout the session, children will start to use it in their own time and without pressure.

Repeat and elaborate early patterns of activity

Inside

An environment should provide, across the six areas of learning, a rich range of resources which is always available to children. This gives them scope to build on developing interests or schema and to practise and apply what they have learned. Very young children may use heuristic play to fill and cover containers again and again; the repetition strengthens a thread of thought which will emerge in other play experiences and in this way children make learning their own. When given time to follow their interests, children start to make connections. A layout and organisation of resources which encourages children not only to use a variety of materials within an area, but to combine them, will further strengthen their learning. If children's comments and questions which arise from their play are scribed, displayed and shared, this makes their thinking visible and helps them to remember.

Outside

Young children's schema (Athey, 1991) are initially linked with movement. In an outside area they can follow interests of transporting, for example, through using wheelbarrows to move leaves and fir cones. Ropes and pulleys allow exploration of moving things up and down, while using materials to build dens (always a favourite activity) strengthens interests about hiding and enclosures. Wherever possible, children need space to move, make and do things and to develop these interests without disturbing others.

Learn with others

Inside

Of course, children will learn a lot by themselves, but learning expands when they are with others. The environment can strongly facilitate social learning. Warm, inviting spaces invite conversation and conviviality. Interactive displays encourage children to explore and experiment with others. A comfy reading area invites children to share books together.

Outside

Settings that offer prolonged periods of free access to a challenging outdoor environment report that generally children behave more co-operatively, particularly boys (DCSF, 2008). Large construction and resources for imaginative play encourage collaborative work, while a friendship bench situated in a quiet area suggests shared conversations.

Become agents in their own learning

A setting which is organised as a workshop can increase opportunities for children to use their initiative.

Inside

There is a need to have a well-ordered layout where children know where each piece of apparatus lives, where there is a space for everything and where it is possible to put things away easily. (I warmed to 4-year-old Luke who, after trying feverishly and unsuccessfully to unscrew an ill-fitting lid on a container, threw it down in disgust, muttering 'Why don't things bloody work here?')

Attention to detail when organising resources should make it possible for children to succeed for themselves.

Outside

Children are offered more scope for challenge outside; opportunities to take risks in climbing and balancing, in having more spaces in which to hide, in experiencing the weather, in building and constructing. Provision of parking bays encourages children to access and return wheeled toys for themselves. Provision of an outside tap or a rain barrel with a tap allows easy access to water. The nature of outside play means that children are more likely to instigate activities for themselves rather than being reliant on the adult.

Want to do so

We can plan the curriculum in detail and have highly organised routines, but we cannot insist that children learn. Both indoor and outdoor environments can tempt children into, or dissuade them from, learning. If we observe young children playing and really listen to them describing what they like to do, this gives us clues about what to provide. Four-year-old Tasmin said that she loved dressing up 'more than anything in my life'. Joe, when asked, simply pointed to the large construction blocks. Children need to know that when they arrive each day there are intriguing and interesting things to experience.

Indoors

The physical environment needs to appeal to children's channels of learning – initially their senses. Spaces should as far as possible be carefully designed to allow for comfort, ease of movement and to be easy on the eye. The following points matter:

- Noise levels – some children are very sensitive to noise and need quiet withdrawal areas.
- Fresh air – the young brain needs oxygen in order to function well.
- Colour – use of different colours can help children to experience and create light and space, calm and stimulus.

It is important to make purchases which allow children to have access to a variety of materials but also to have sufficient resources to allow them the satisfaction of working in depth. Some commercial equipment, particularly for construction, is expensive but may be supplemented with found materials such as cardboard boxes and tubes.

Outside

When given a choice, children often prefer to play outside. The environment should give them scope to develop their own interests through a wide range of continuous provision. Even a small area which is planned well should cater for children's differing

needs over a period of time. Rather than overcrowding an area with fixed equipment, it is preferable to provide a wheeled trolley with transparent or wire baskets filled with different equipment – items for gardening, small-scale play props with mats, equipment for being minibug detectives.

EXERCISE 6.1

Consider:

- what you know of parents' attitudes to their children playing outside and how you might find out more
- how you might persuade more reluctant parents of the benefits of the outdoor environment.

From time to time you need to audit the continuous provision you offer both indoors and outdoors.

- Are there sufficient resources to allow children to elaborate and extend their ideas?
- Is there a good balance between commercial, found and recycled and natural materials?
- Is the provision well laid out and accessible to children?

In a large play area some young children may not be aware of all the resources that are available; you can usefully draw their attention to a particular area by playing there yourself or using it as a base for story telling.

Further reading

Gill, T. (2008) *No Fear, Growing Up in a Risk Averse Society*. London: Glouste Gulbenkian Foundation. Although this is pitched for those living and working with children from 5 to 11 years there are many important messages for the early years. The author contends that childhood is being undermined by the growth of risk aversion and its intrusion into children's lives. Gill argues for a climate of resilience that will help to counter risk aversion, helping to achieve a better balance between protecting children from genuine dangers and allowing them rich, challenging opportunities through which to learn and grow.

Jarman, E. *Communication-friendly Spaces*. London: Basic Skills Agency. This useful and well presented toolkit (a DVD, collection of research, case studies and commentary and an audit workbook) helps early years practitioners to think carefully about how speaking and listening skills can be improved by developing their environments.

Warden, C. (2007) *Nature through Nature*. Mindstretchers. www.mindstretchers.co.uk
A beautifully illustrated book which argues passionately for children to have a connection to the outside in order to nurture their all-round development.



Go to www.sagepub.co.uk/bruce for the case study and reflective questions to accompany this chapter.