

# Outside the box

Stand back and observe what children are doing, and assess the versatility of your resources, to allow natural creativity to thrive. By *Karen Faux*

If you are ambitious to ensure that your continuous provision keeps creativity at its heart, you will want to step back regularly and take time to assess whether this is being achieved for all the children in the setting.

That means observing closely what the children are doing and recording how they are using the nursery areas and resources. You will want to think about the opportunities that the children have for uninterrupted exploration, and the balance between child- and adult-initiated activities.

Starting afresh with creativity does not necessitate a complete revamp of your environment or big investment in new equipment, but looking with fresh eyes at the potential of the space you already have, based on how the children use it.

Does movement between the indoors and outdoors suggest that activity areas are sited appropriately? If, for example, you've noticed that children might not be making maximum use of the music space, maybe this is because it is placed close to the book corner, where the children need a quieter area to engage. Or perhaps your construction area is frequently experiencing a log-jam? Would it be a good idea to relocate it close to the entrance to the outdoors space, so the children can free-flow with blocks and other objects?

## OBSERVATIONS

Early years consultant and author Di Chilvers emphasises that creativity starts with observations, and practitioners' skill in linking these to the characteristics of learning.

'It's also important to look at whether children are playing collaboratively – and how the environment provides opportunities for this,' she further explains.

Documenting learning and play will provide a fund of ideas. Inspiration about what to buy or acquire, and where to position it, will be dictated by knowing your children and their fascinations.

Ms Chilvers highlights that imaginative play often springs from using the kind of everyday objects that children see adults around them using. She says, 'You may observe children outside sweeping with brushes, and as more children join in they will start to use other objects such as spades to follow the idea.'

'Where practitioners take photos of these activities, they will see a story develop. For example, they will see children thinking – "if I can't use a brush, what else will I use?" This can then be turned into a learning story, which can be read back to the children, and this in turn sparks conversation. From there, practitioners can ask: what can we do next with the brushes? Then they can implement extension activities, using paint-brushes and paper, and take the story in a new direction.'

This scenario bears out the importance of thinking carefully about how you stock a variety of resources, rather than having lots of things that are essentially the same.

'If you have a brush for everybody that is the same, that doesn't create opportunities to swap, share or use other objects,' says Ms Chilvers. 'When considering



**The skill lies in observing children's innate creativity and linking it to learning**

a stock of brushes, for example, think about having a range of them – anything from a small paintbrush to large rollers from B&Q.

'By putting the range out for the children to access, they will have to learn to negotiate, and bounce ideas off each other.'

## GOLDEN RULES

One of the golden rules when it comes to buying a creative resource is to ask: it might look nice, but what can this resource actually do?

Di Chilvers says, 'If you can't





use it in at least half a dozen different ways then it is probably not worth acquiring. Key to this is the ability of practitioners to use their own imaginations to see the potential of resources and materials.'

A creative approach to continuous provision does not mean overwhelming the environment with resources. There will, of course, be the basics such as buckets, jugs, boxes, fabrics, equipment for the home corner and role play, and large and small objects for construction. And then there will be the added-value items – materials and resources that practitioners are using to extend activities and create stories.

'There is no quick fix,' explains Ms Chilvers. 'Observation and knowing your children are at the heart of resourcing and equipping for creativity, and practitioners are undoubtedly your most valuable resource.'

#### **CASE STUDY: ACORN DAY NURSERY, SHENLEY**

At Acorn Childcare's Shenley nursery in Milton Keynes, manager Joanne Colton says creative continuous provision relies on tuning in to what the children are thinking. She says, 'The creativity is inside them, and it's a case of listening

to what they want to do and giving them free rein to use resources as they want to.

'Recently, our younger children decided they wanted to be pirates and they all put on hats. Although the hats were all very different, to each child their hat was special and made them a pirate. It's important that children can access these resources themselves and use them as they want to. Outside we've got blocks and crates that the children love to move around, which are great for big constructions and making things like fire engines, which are real to them.

'On a smaller scale, the children recently enjoyed making wands out of rolled up pieces of sugar paper, which they then decorated with different materials. We have one child who is really fascinated by tubes and cylindrical shapes, and we were able to follow this through with a range of resources that fed her fascination.

'We have a very confident group of children in the nursery at the moment and this means that there are lots of creative ideas flying around. All the children love music and dancing and we make time and space for this. One of the children recently went to India and wanted to show the others the dance she had learned, so her father brought in a CD and she performed for everyone.

'It's fascinating to sit down with two-year-olds and encourage their creativity to unfold. I was recently playing with Duplo with a little boy, and he was enacting the story *We're Going on a Bear Hunt*, making things go over the bridge, which was really interesting.'

Ms Colton reports that children's creativity and fascinations also follow on outside with its extra-curricular activities such as forest school.

She says, 'Children use and bring back natural resources. Sticks are a favourite, as well as pieces of bark, leaves and pine cones – all of which help them to create props to support role play and small-world play. The children also enjoyed making their own fairy garden and were able to make their fairies inside and then play with them outside.'

She adds, 'Children's imagination and storytelling have increased due to staff becoming more creative during



**From top: Rosewood  
Top Slit Drum; fantasy  
animal Misamee;  
Set of 4 Small  
Wooden Trees; and  
Pachyrhinosaurus**

storytime sessions – for example, the children having a story read to them on a magic carpet, or on a special storytelling chair, and it's interesting to see them then go on their own magic-carpet adventure.'

#### **CASE STUDY: TINSLEY GREEN NURSERY, SHEFFIELD**

At Tinsley Green Nursery in Sheffield, early years professional and team leader David Yates is always on the lookout for everyday materials that can be used in an open-ended way. He says he likes to see the children's thought process involved in exploring the possibilities of something ordinary such as a piece of guttering and finding out where it leads.

The nursery serves a diverse, multi-cultural community including Slovakian, Polish and Asian children, and increasingly families who are being rehoused in the area. Its creative approach has to accommodate the fact that some children are passing through, with a limited amount of time to benefit from what's on offer.

There are many different languages spoken by the children and their families, which can sometimes make communication difficult. Because many resources used by the children can be used in lots of different ways and have endless possibilities, the children can share and participate in play experiences together, regardless of the language they speak.

'Children need to be able to use resources in the way they want to, so it is important that they are not too prescriptive,' says Mr Yates. 'In our outdoor area, we've got mainly larger equipment such as hula hoops ➤

## **BEST PRACTICE**

Creativity is the gateway to the whole early years curriculum. Spatial awareness, language and fine motor skills can all be developed through creative activities. So, if you feel it's time to refocus on creativity in your setting, ask yourself:

- Do you know your children's play? Do you

understand what interests them and what drives their interests?

- Explore other philosophies such as Reggio Emilia to inform your thinking. Read books on the subject of creativity and get a team discussion going.
- Before acquiring a resource or piece of equipment, have

you thought about what it can do?

- Have you gauged accurately the quantities of equipment and resources that need to be the same and different?
- Does your environment enhance children's opportunities to play collaboratively?
- Are staff ready to

re-evaluate their ideas of creativity and link these to their observations of children and how they are using the environment?

- Is children's creativity being documented effectively, particularly in a way that allows them to participate in observing their own activities?





## MORE INFORMATION

*Creating and Thinking Critically (Learning and Teaching in the Early Years)* by Di Chilvers, Practical Pre-School Books

### Children should be given free rein to express themselves with resources

and tyres, and large wooden shapes. We've also got things like bread crates, and supermarket delivery crates and carpet rolls. The children have also spent a lot of time outside in our mud kitchen, mixing soil and

water and adding leaves, petals, grass and herbs that have been growing in our sensory garden. This has helped us to observe their creativity more closely and plan their next steps in relation to what interests them.



'We also have a table set out with interesting or inspiring objects, and these have expanded to include smaller things such as glass pebbles, ends of key rings, wooden bobbins, shells and polished stones, and it is set up to look very inviting for the children,' Mr Yates continues.

'They often come to the table and take away anything they want and use it as a prop in other areas of the nursery. The possibilities for these objects are endless, and when it comes to gathering them back together at the end of the sessions, you get to know all the different places to look where the children have been using them!

'We also have a craft area with lots of different coloured paper, lollipop sticks and tissue paper for the children to use in their artwork. There's also bubble wrap, carpet or material samples, shredded paper, cotton wool and coloured wood shavings. And the children have access to "junk modelling" boxes so they can create 3D models based on their ideas.

'It's also important to include real-world resources in the home corner to help the children make their role play more realistic by using things they can identify with.' ■

## RESOURCES

To capitalise on the potential of creative play, practitioners need to provide resources that are open-ended. Many such materials are cheap, or free, but settings shouldn't lose sight of quality, and some are definitely worth investing in.

### BLOCK PLAY

That is true of blocks, a staple of creative play. Market leader Community Playthings ([www.communityplaythings.co.uk](http://www.communityplaythings.co.uk)) provides both hollow and unit blocks. Other packs include Set of Wooden Blocks (£86, [www.earlyexcellence.co.uk](http://www.earlyexcellence.co.uk)), Building Blocks in Trays Pack (£219.95, [www.hope-education.co.uk](http://www.hope-education.co.uk)) and Cork City Construction Set – Large (£249, [www.playforce.co.uk](http://www.playforce.co.uk)).

### ROLE PLAY

Show that you value children's play by stocking your role-play

areas with flexible units (see pages 8-10) and add pieces such as the Super House-cleaning Set (£57.83) from [www.ascoeducational.co.uk](http://www.ascoeducational.co.uk).

Well-chosen fabrics will double as capes and costumes, but consider providing some superhero props as well.

The Superhero Dress Up Set 2 has three outfits, each with a cape, mask and gauntlets, (£49.95, [www.tts-group.co.uk](http://www.tts-group.co.uk)). Cosy Direct's range includes Superheroes Cuffs (£17.95) and a set of three Superhero Masks (£9.99, tel: 01332 370152), while the range at [www.earlyexcellence.co.uk](http://www.earlyexcellence.co.uk) includes the Superhero Belt (£12.50) and Black Hooded Cape (£15).

### SMALL WORLD

Cones and twigs can provide the basis for some play, but supplement them with high-quality props.

Schleich offers an impressive range (see [www.schleich-s.com](http://www.schleich-s.com) to view the range and for suppliers), and a wide selection of animals, scenery and props is also available from [www.earlyexcellence.com](http://www.earlyexcellence.com), including Set of 4 Small Wooden Trees (£19.95), Elephant Family (£13.95) and Set of Shells (£13.25).

Don't forget about providing scope for children's fantasy play. A new set of mythical creatures, including Misamee (£6.25 at [www.amazon.co.uk](http://www.amazon.co.uk)), has been added to Schleich's range of fantasy products.

Fantasy-play resources are also available at [www.yellow-door.net](http://www.yellow-door.net), including Sea Fantasy Wooden Characters (pictured above, £25), and there is a range of dinosaurs at [www.reflectionsonlearning.co.uk](http://www.reflectionsonlearning.co.uk), including Pachyrhinosaurus (£7.99).

### TOOLS FOR THE JOB

Consider too how much more enjoyable – and creative – an activity will be when a child has the right 'tools' for the job.

In particular, aim for quality products in your art and D&T areas. See, for example, Children's Paint Brushes 4 Chunky Hogs Hair Brushes Size 18 (£2.36 at [www.amazon.co.uk](http://www.amazon.co.uk)) and Large Format Drawing Paper (£22.99, [www.earlyyears.co.uk](http://www.earlyyears.co.uk)). The Corvus Kids at Work range is comprised of real tools designed for children – see [www.mindstretchers.co.uk](http://www.mindstretchers.co.uk).

The same goes for music. Home-made shakers might be effective, but provide alongside some high-quality instruments – see, for example, Rainbow Xylophone (pictured, page 26, £26.95) and Rosewood Top Slit Drum (£18.65), both from [www.mesdirect.com](http://www.mesdirect.com).