First principles

A nursery's design, from the way spaces are laid out to how books are stored and the furniture and resources used, can make a big difference to children's learning and behaviour, says *Nicole Weinstein*

The environment has a profound effect on how children learn and behave. The adult may be the most important feature of any caring environment, but the design, layout, furniture, storage and resources within a nursery all exert a major influence on a child's wellbeing and capacity to learn.

A big, open-plan space with children running wild and resources strewn across the floor does not make for a settled learning environment for children – to say nothing of the impression it gives to parents. But when children are playing and interacting calmly in designated learning areas with select resources, children – and parents – are more likely to feel at ease, and reassured.

So, if an economic recovery is really upon us and you are looking to expand or refurbish to enhance children's learning and attract new business, where do you start?

NATURAL LOOK
Many settings that are in the process of designing or redesigning their rooms are opting for a more natural look, using wooden furniture, lots of natural light and neutral wall colours.

Early education consultant Marion Dowling says, 'Children will learn well when the setting is comfortable and homely rather than institutional. For example, sofas with cushions; plants and soft lighting.'

Tricia Shirky, room layout advisor at Community Playthings, says that in the course of helping hundreds of nurseries plan their room layouts, she has noticed that progressive settings have 'moved away' from the bright plastic feel toward a more peaceful, natural environment.

She explains, 'They realise that the simplicity of wood conveys quality, and its neutrality creates the backdrop that allows staff to infuse the environment with their own unique character.'

Longevity of furniture and resources is also a key factor to consider when planning and stocking a nursery room. Martin Huleatt, training leader at Community Playthings, says, 'Purchasing cheap equipment and replacing it in a couple years is not value for money.

'Worse, I've observed that the cheap equipment often does not get replaced – it simply looks more tatty over time, making the whole nursery look shoddy. I don't think any nursery owner wants to convey that impression, especially when you realise that parents make their decision of whether to use a nursery within the first five minutes on their initial visit to the setting.'

PERSONALISED SPACES
All too often, nurseries benefit from visual makeovers that, although aesthetically pleasing, are let down by the fact that little thought has gone into the child's needs and how they respond to the environment.

Elizabeth Jarman, a consultant and trainer specialising in creating effective learning environments, says, 'Nurseries should be creating personalised spaces that reflect the needs of the children. The one-size-fits-all approach does not take into account the way that children wish to use their space. Before making changes, it is vital to tune into the environment from a child's perspective.'

There are two main questions to consider when designing an effective environment for young children. These are:
- How does the environment reflect the children's needs: their behaviour, their likes and dislikes, their ages and how they feel?
- How do the children connect with their physical space?

A CHILD'S PERSPECTIVE
Marion Dowling says that we can look at nurseries in 'identical accommodation' with similar equipment, but the 'quality' of provision and opportunities offered to young children is very different. She insists that the critical factor is 'what we do with what we have'.

She says, 'Children will learn well if the following is in place:
- 'they feel confident and at ease in their setting – for example, pictorial signs that they can understand; coat pegs that are easily accessible and visible to them during the day; images of themselves and their families displayed; mirrors; quiet withdrawal areas for children who are sensitive to high activity and noise levels; use of different colours to help children experience light, space, calm and stimulus
- 'there is scope to be independent. For example, a well-ordered layout where children know where each piece of equipment lives, where there is sufficient space for it to be easily accessible and which allows children to put things away easily; open-ended materials – planks, drapes, rope, natural material and recycled items – to allow them to exercise choice and transform their world
- 'outside, there are spaces and materials to build dens; parking bays to encourage children to access and return wheeled vehicles

Location, boundaries, storage and display, flexible solutions and calm and neutral spaces are all important areas to consider when designing or reconfiguring your nursery space, and here are some useful tips and points to help you:

Location
- The flow of the room is important. Within each room, there should be mini environments or activity areas, where it should be clear what's expected of the children in each area.
- Related activities should be positioned next to each other. For example, role play goes well with block play and it makes sense for the sand and water resources to be located near the science or art areas – and, of course, not far from the sink. In the same way, it would not be practical to put the cosy area next to an area of high activity.
- Remember natural light has a major influence on the creative process and literacy functions. In arranging a room, try to place the reading, writing and art areas nearest to the windows.

Boundaries
- Divide your space into child-size areas where children will feel relaxed and secure and can focus without distraction.
- Make sure that dividers are movable, so you can develop and change your space in response to varying needs or interests of the children in your care.
- Use shelves or panels as solid boundaries around activities that are floor-based or require concentration, such as reading.
- Active or messy activity areas can have more fluid boundaries. For example, an arch for a dramatic play centre, a change in wall colour, a rug or piece of fabric hung from the ceiling can all signal to a child that they are leaving one area and entering another.

Storage and display
- To promote independence, ensure that resources are well-organised, developmentally appropriate and that they can be accessed easily by children. Otherwise, the environment can become a hindrance with too many resources on offer and no easy means of tidying them up.

for themselves; an outside tap to allow easy access to water; large equipment for constructing; and plenty of activities that give scope for challenge – to take risks climbing, swinging and balancing, and experiencing play in all types of weather
- 'they are in an environment that intrigues and interests them. For example, a "giant footprint" marked on the floor; access to minibeasts – magnifiers and bug boxes, and stick insects.'

REFLECTING ON CHILDREN'S NEEDS
When redesigning your nursery room, it is useful to do an audit of the environment in order to understand the way that it is affecting children's social interaction, behaviour and ability to respond.

There may be an area of the nursery that is underused. This might be because the flow of the nursery makes this space unappealing for children, or perhaps it's an area with desks and chairs and the children prefer to stand up to do their artwork, so the space doesn't work for the children.

The room may be in a long, thin space with all the resources positioned around the edge, which results in children using the space as a racecourse, darting up and down. In this case, boundaries would need to be created to break up the space.

When looking at the physical space and deciding on how it can best connect with the needs of the child, Elizabeth Jarman says, 'Take a helicopter view of the space. Tune into how the children use it. Notice where they are drawn to and what is significant. Observe the flow of environment and pay attention to what the children are showing you.'

Above: be guided by how children respond to environments. Below (l-r): Happy Feet Nursery's baby room before and after refurbishment; and its pre-school room, which features a versatile 'shop'

- Missing puzzle pieces, jumbled toys and an overflow of dolls' clothes spilling out of a dressing-up box can make a room look and feel chaotic. A limited number of resources in organised baskets that are regularly rotated by staff is much more appealing for children and manageable for staff.
- Place shelves at right angles to the walls, so that valuable wall space can be used for display. The backs of some shelves also lend themselves well to exhibiting children's artwork.
- When it comes to book storage, manageable, small collections of relevant books that the children can transport to a place where they want to read will help to increase their engagement with reading.
- Using neutral backing for displays allows the children's work to come centre stage. Consider whom the display is for, how current it is and how the children interact with it. You might need to lower the height of display boards to make them more accessible.

Flexible solutions

When setting up activity areas, it is important to think about the position of the child while they are undertaking the activity.

For example, when engaged in art activities, some children prefer to sit on the floor, where they have more control of their bodies. Others may prefer to stand up and work at a table. Some tables can be limiting if they are the wrong size for the children's standing position.

Calm and neutral spaces

- Children need spaces that are calm and cosy, away from the hustle and bustle of activity. These spaces can be dens filled with soft cushions or fabric or carpeted areas with sofas or beanbags. Children can use these spaces to sit and read, alone or with a practitioner, to have chats with peers or practitioners or to simply reflect and recharge their batteries.
- Softness is really important in an environment. It's nurturing and supports the children's emotional independence.
- Also, think carefully about the use of colour in your environment. Neutral colours help to create calmer spaces, which will impact positively on children's behaviour and concentration.

CASE STUDY: BANK HOLIDAY MAKEOVER

Happy Feet Nursery in Larkhall, just south of Glasgow, benefited from a total refurbishment of its four nursery rooms over a May bank holiday weekend last year – and was back, open for business on the Tuesday.

Patrick Holz, owner and business manager, says, 'The nursery was totally transformed, literally overnight. The staff all helped out. We got stuck in on Friday night – we got rid of the tired, freestanding furniture, which was a mismatch of wood and bright plastic, and we replaced it all with a few lorry-loads of assembled quality furniture from Community Playthings.

'It's the best thing we have done. When we started up three years ago, we weren't in a position to buy everything at once so we purchased items gradually. Some of these weren't value for money. But now that we are going strong, with capacity for 138 children, from babies to after-school children, we decided to go for it.

'The parents were amazed at the transformation and the new environment has had a positive impact on the children's learning and the way they behave in the new space.

'Before, for example, each room was very open plan with no segregated areas for quiet time. This resulted in a lot of the children getting distracted when they were doing activities, such as reading or science. Now, the layout is completely redesigned.

'We have separate areas for different activities. There's a quiet area with a sofa, cushions and a bookcase. This calms the children down and is a good area for singing and nursery rhymes with small groups. In the

The toddler room (above and below, right) at Happy Feet Nursery, near Glasgow, neatly accommodates different activities

toddler room, we bought a multi-play area with a slide and stairs and a tunnel, which is great for the children's physical development.

'The dividers have been great because the areas are now enclosed. Children are a lot more focused, less distracted and there's a lot less running around. On the back of the divider panels there are mirrors for the dressing-up, display boards, window panels for role play, activity panels, and we have a library panel. It's all really multifunctional and, because it's also movable, we've made lots of changes to the layout to cater to children's preferences.

'The shelving has helped with the organisation of our resources. We have little storage areas with corner shelving where we can store natural resources and heuristic items.

'The shop in a pre-school room has been the most versatile resource that we wouldn't now be without. It can be transformed into a den, an ice-cream shop or whatever the children want it to be.

'All four rooms have also been equipped with furniture for the messy areas. These include sand and water troughs, various-sized art easels to accommodate all age groups, and drying racks.' ∎

ROOM PLANNING SERVICES

- **Community Playthings** offers a planning service and provides videos and articles giving planning advice, www.communityplaythings.co.uk
- **Elizabeth Jarman** specialises in developing effective learning environments through her Communication Friendly Spaces Approach, www.elizabethjarmantraining.co.uk
- **Morleys**, www.morleysearlyyears.co.uk
- **TTS Group**, www.tts-group.co.uk
- **Designs For Education**, www.designsforeducation.co.uk/RoomPlanning.aspx
- **Yorkshire Purchasing Organisation** offers a nursery planning service and uses its list of manufacturers to create bespoke furniture solutions, www.ypo.co.uk