

Under the hammer

How can settings provide woodwork in a developmentally beneficial and safe way? **Pete Moorhouse** offers some tips



Once almost eradicated due to fears of litigation and overzealous health and safety concerns,

woodwork is now making a comeback as part of a more balanced attitude to risk.

This is good news for children, as they really enjoy it. They learn about managing risk and making decisions for themselves. Woodwork is exceptional for developing children's creative and critical thinking skills as they tinker and experiment with the possibilities of wood and tools, and then go on to express ideas.

As well as learning about how to manage physical risks in terms of

safety, children develop their emotional attitude to risk. For many children, woodwork will be a totally new experience. Being unfamiliar and outside their comfort zone, it can feel a risk just taking part.

HOW, WHEN AND WHERE?

There is no one answer to these questions as every setting is different, in terms of the available space, staffing levels and children. But base your decision on these considerations:

- Tools should be introduced in small groups with an adult-child ratio of 1:3. This ensures all children learn how to use the tools safely and gain confidence. Once they have learnt the

Using tools can take children outside their comfort zone

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techniques, you will soon feel confident to have more children working at a time.

- Ensure children are not working in close proximity. Depending on the size of the workbench, this is likely to be two to three children, but you can use other tables for hammering and screwing to involve more children at a time.

Another question is whether woodwork should be made available as continuous provision or as an activity session. The reality for most settings is that it works better on a sessional basis – this is largely to ensure the area is well resourced. The aim is to have children working as independently as possible and become deeply engaged with



their work. The area needs to be closely monitored at all times.

Woodwork can work well indoors or outside – but if very cold it can be better indoors. Either way, be sure to locate the bench in an area with limited traffic flow and distractions.

EQUIPMENT

The priority is to use tools that are easy and ergonomic, safe and allow the children to work as independently as possible. For example, a hammer with a short handle, good grip, reasonable weight and a large head is excellent.

The essential tools are: hammer, screwdriver, saw and hand-drill. You will also need a workbench or other vice. Safety glasses are another essential item, and then of course lots of wood, nails and screws! In terms of quantity, five hammers, three screwdrivers, two types of saw and two hand-drills would make a good start.

Wood

Start with balsa wood – it is very soft and easy to work with. Children very quickly master the techniques and gain confidence. Then progress to soft wood such as pine. Have plentiful additional resources for combining, such

as corks, bottle tops and fabric.

HEALTH AND SAFETY

Safety glasses should be worn at all times. With hammering, there is a very small risk that a nail could rebound toward the eye, or an item being hammered may shatter. Junior safety glasses, which fit small heads, are the best.

INTRODUCTION TO TOOLS

Ensure all children are given proper instruction on the correct use of all tools. Draw attention to sharp edges/points of tools. Keep a checklist of who has learnt to use which tool to ensure all children get correct instruction. Remind them that woodwork equipment remains in the woodwork area.

Hammering

When hammering into wood, children will be using considerable force. They should hold the nail with finger and thumb and use gentle taps to get the nail started, until it is standing up on its own. Then, importantly, hold the wood with hands well away from the nail before hammering hard to get the nail in. Short, thin nails are easier.

Sawing

This should be monitored 1:1. This is particularly to ensure no children are watching from, or passing in front of, the sawing area. A child sawing with a Japanese saw or pull saw should hold the saw with two hands. A European cross-cut saw

FURTHER INFORMATION

- **Learning Through Woodwork: Creative Woodwork in the Early Years** by Pete Moorhouse (foreword by Tina Bruce). Available from www.routledge.com and Amazon
- **Example risk-assessment form and health and safety checklist**, <http://irresistible-learning.co.uk/resources>
- **Early Years Woodwork Association**, www.stwerburghs.com/early-years-woodwork-association
- **CPD training: Pete Moorhouse**, <http://irresistible-learning.co.uk/training>

can be held with one hand, but the hand not holding the saw needs to be well away from the saw and holding the bench. Staff must ensure wood is always clamped tight in vice. After use, immediately place the saw out of reach (but visible to children).

Splinters

Check wood for splinters. Avoid very rough, splintery wood. Rough wood can initially be sanded; sand edges after sawing if rough – splinters can be a source of blood poisoning. First-aid guidance varies, so check local guidelines.

RECOMMENDED TOOLS

Hammer

The most suitable hammer is a 'stubby' 8oz ball-pein hammer.

Saw

Saws that cut on the pull stroke are so much easier for young children, being more controllable and require less effort. I am a huge advocate of small Japanese pull saws. These are light, have thin blades and everyone who uses them is taken aback by just how easy they are to use. You only need this, and a cross-cut saw, in your tool kit.

Hand-drill

The best hand-drills are those with enclosed mechanisms as there is no chance that fingers can get caught in the exposed cogs. Ensure work is clamped when drilling. Short drill-bits are less likely to snap, and they work best with 3-4mm bits.

Screwdriver

Use a stubby Pozidriv screwdriver. Short-handled screwdrivers are easier to control and the Pozidriv 'cross' shape means that the screwdriver is less likely to slip out from the screw.

Workbench

A heavy, sturdy workbench with a vice is required. The vice can clamp wood to be sawn or drilled (available from several suppliers). A cheap option is to buy a vice and attach it to a heavy, old table and cut the legs to the correct height.

→ Full details of recommended equipment and links to various suppliers can be found at <http://irresistible-learning.co.uk/resources>



A sturdy workbench is required. Community Playthings Basic workbench pictured top.