

Hit or miss?

Removing toys from a nursery school in Bristol for a month resulted in the two-year-olds not wanting them back. **Nicole Weinstein** reports

Train sets, a role-play kitchen, dolls, toy cars and animal figures are among the items that 38 two-year-olds at

Ilminster Avenue Nursery School in Bristol have unanimously decided they can live without, following a month-long experiment which saw all toys removed from the classrooms.

The 225-place nursery school, which includes a specialist unit for children with severe and complex learning needs, opted to trial the tradition – that has taken place in many German Kindergartens since the 1990s – of putting away the toys for a month or a term and becoming what is known as a *Spielzeugfreier* (toy-free) setting.

At Ilminster Avenue, objects that are representational – such as trains or dolls – or anything that is a miniature version of a real object (for example, role-play items such as prams or kitchens) were removed for the month after February half-term. Instead, children played with giant cardboard boxes, milk cartons, old electrical items and lots of open-ended natural resources.

Head teacher Matt Caldwell says, ‘The aim of this project, which we tied into a piece of action research involving staff, parents and children, was to promote creativity and counteract the dependence on material objects. So far, the results speak for themselves. The two-year-olds have decided they don’t want to have the toys back. In the three- and four-year-old rooms, children have specifically asked about the dinosaurs, the doll’s house and the train set, and as the

project was never about depriving children of anything, they have come back into the room.’

PLAY AND EXPLORATION

Exploring the senses with open-ended, tactile materials is not new to the children, as they have plenty of access to open-ended natural materials in their play – as well as free-flow access to the outdoors where they get muddy and explore the changing environment. However, allowing them to concentrate just on these elements – without, for example, the distraction of holding onto a toy car because a child doesn’t want someone else to play with it – has given them a sense of freedom to explore and experiment.

‘It was the parents who really rose to the challenge,’ explains Mr Caldwell. ‘One of them works in a restaurant so we had 50 giant catering tin cans, which the children loved playing with inside



Keys (inset) and tins (below) were brought in by parents, and the children enjoyed free-flow access to the outdoors and exploring other objects (above)



and out – rolling, collecting things in, stacking – and another parent worked in a lost property office of a train station and brought in hundreds of keys, which the staff loved as much as the children.’

The two-year-olds enjoyed the sensory input they got from touching the rough metal on the shiny keys – and the sounds that they made. They also liked handling the heavy physiotherapy foam weights. Someone also brought in an old CD player and the practitioners took off the back, ensured the wires were safe and let the children explore.

‘So much sustained shared thinking took place as children poked their fingers into tiny spaces and explored the motherboard – as well as interacting with staff along the way,’ explains Mr Caldwell. ‘And if you think about it, two-year-olds are used to handling safe, smooth, light, often plastic, objects. But these experiences allow them to stimulate their senses.’

ALL ON BOARD

During the first week that the new resources were available, the children spent time with the practitioners discussing how the

open-ended resources could be used and coming up with some imaginative ideas. The emptier classrooms, which appeared more spacious and calm, were not a surprise to the children, who had been involved in clearing away the toys and discussing the project along the way. Nor was it a shock to the parents, who were informed in a letter and not only trusted the decision but were also interested to see what would change and how the children would react.

‘One or two expressed concerns that children might get bored or get into arguments, but most of them said they thought they themselves had too many toys at home and it made them think about having a clear out,’ explains Mr Caldwell.

Staff were initially curious and wondered if it would create more work, but by the end of the project it was the staff who were driving all the learning.

‘There have been no real challenges or resistance,’ Mr Caldwell insists. ‘And I think every member of our parent body was on board with it by the end. Some even started talking about how much their children were on screens at home, and the project had made

them reflect that this was the opposite of what we were trying to achieve in terms of communication and social skills. The conversations at the school gate and outside the classrooms were interesting and inspirational – there was a real buzz.’

KEY OBSERVATIONS

Within hours of the experiment starting, practitioners picked up on the fact that children were communicating with each other more and interacting with objects in a more imaginative way.

‘The overall consensus was that a third to a half of the children were using communication more and extending their personal development. We found that in the two-year-old room the children loved using old mobile phones to “chat” on and that they were fascinated by old kettles. The three-year-olds were more interested in making up stories in a giant den that took up half the classroom or taking to a stage to sing into a real, unplugged microphone. Outside we used pallets that had been donated to make steps, platforms and houses.

‘If you go with the notion that boredom is a requisite part of



MORE INFORMATION

- Head teacher **Matt Caldwell** will be producing a pamphlet in PDF format for parents and interested settings about the project and its findings, available from June 2019. Anyone who wishes to get in touch about the project can email him at matt.caldwell@bristol-schools.uk
- **Toy-free Kindergarten**, <https://bit.ly/2MqLVgK>
- <https://bit.ly/30TJ3f9>

learning,’ says Mr Caldwell, ‘it goes without saying that under-stimulated children will be motivated enough to want to connect with other children. And if they’re presented with something that’s unfamiliar or isn’t an obvious thing, they will look to interact with other children to work out what to do with the object or explore what to do together, using their imagination.’

A good example of this took place in the three-year-old room, where a resident artist came in to extend the children’s play with dens. She worked with the children exploring spaces in the environment and using maps. This resulted in representational role play, involving goodies and baddies and hiding from baddies at the base den.

‘The children extended this play after reading *Whatever Next* by Jill Murphy, and practitioners helped them to create a rocket out of carpet tubing. Children watched what was taking place and had great fun decorating the outside of the rocket with hieroglyphic paper and foil. Most of the children got involved, including those who would usually be more content to play in the small-world play area alone.’

ONE SIZE FITS ALL?

One of the areas that staff grappled with was removing toys from children with autism spectrum disorder and those with severe and complex needs. Some of these children like cause-and-effect toys or enjoy playing with objects of reference, such as train sets.

One child with autism, who had an obsession with cars, ‘didn’t miss them at all,’ Mr Caldwell remarked, and instead found that he liked cardboard boxes just as much. He sat in them and loved having the lid opened and closed, much to the surprise of the teachers.

Another child in the specialist unit who loved objects that light up – to the point where his mother carried them around everywhere she went and spent a lot of money on batteries – was happy to explore new objects.

‘When it was explained that there would be no toys with lights, the boy accepted it and didn’t challenge it. His mother also followed through at home and the result has been that she doesn’t have to worry about having lights on her wherever she goes,’ says Mr Caldwell. ■