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Why Environments Matter

This chapter will:

- consider the increased importance given to the care and education of young children in recent years
- discuss the importance of early environments
- look at the provision made for this care and education across the UK
- introduce some of the children and settings used in the case studies.



Throughout recent history, the pioneers of early childhood education have very much focused their ethos and philosophy around children over 3 years of age, and as a result much research conducted has concentrated on these years. It has almost appeared as if society does not place value on any learning that has taken place in the first three years of life. This lack of evidence and research was recognized by David et al. (2003, p. 9) in the literature review for the *Birth to Three Matters* framework (DfES, 2002):

[There is] a paucity of evidence about processes and practices in ECEC for children from birth to three years. In particular the field needs research information about toddlers in educare settings, as well as that exploring the impact of practitioner training on the experiences of children and parents. (David et al., 2003, p. 9)

This quotation demonstrates that research for the under 3s has long been neglected and, for me, it was one of the starting points for my own personal research. Having worked in a range of settings in two north-west local authorities for over 10 years, it became evident to me that the quality of the environment available to a baby or a young child was vitally important in its learning, development and

wellbeing. I decided to investigate different early environments, and the practices of the adults working with children and babies under 3 in these environments.

The importance of environments

The importance that the development of children under 3 has gained in status over recent years has increasingly become the driving force behind some political initiatives (Field, 2010; Allen, 2011). Rightly, the development that children make in their early years is recognized as the precursor of future good outcomes.

With this and my own personal involvement of accessing private day care for my oldest daughter, I decided to conduct some research into the experiences of babies and children under the age of 3 in out-of-home settings, and the implications that this had for the adults involved. This book will draw on the case studies that emerged from the research I conducted, and on my own professional experiences of working within two local authorities. Throughout this book, there are case studies to illustrate the different experiences, relationships and environments that babies and young children are offered and affected by. The following detailed case study clearly identifies the themes of the book.



Case study 1: Observation of a mother and baby playing together

- Mum places 4-month-old Oscar on the blanket on his tummy. She lays in front of him, talking to him and trying to engage him in some eye contact. As she talks, she gently touches his hand.
- The tone of her voice is gentle and soothing.
- She calls Oscar by his name, asking him if he would like to roll over for her like he did yesterday. As he does not respond, she asks him if he is too tired. She refers to the rolling over as 'his new trick'.
- He pulls himself up fully on his hands and looks around. He begins to make babbling sounds as Mum still talks to him. She talks to him about yesterday when he rolled over three times in a row. She reinforces the pleasure that this has given her by saying, 'Such a clever boy'. Mum then asks, 'Are you going to go on your back?', as he begins to demonstrate by the sounds that he is making that he has had enough time on his tummy.

- She asks him what he wants to do instead, as she pulls him up on to his feet, talking to him all of the time and maintaining eye contact with him.
- As she lays him down on his back, she says, 'Down we go'. Oscar looks at his feet so Mum asks, 'Are these your feet? Do they belong to you?' He babbles and begins to smile in response. (Mum knows that he has a previous interest in his feet.)
- Mum bends over him saying, 'Would you like to play with these? Shall we sing a little song?' As she holds him by the feet, she begins to sing, 'Roly, poly up, roly, poly down, roly poly ever so slowly, roly poly up', moving his feet in time with the rhythm of the music up and down in the air. All through this episode, she maintains eye contact and Oscar responds by bursting out with loud giggles and starts to move his arms more vigorously. Mum asks him if it is his favourite song and shall she do it again? When he does not respond in the same manner, she suggests that they do another song, Wind the Bobbin Up, not with his hands but with his feet again. Oscar is still engaged with his mother.
- She pulls him up to her and then places him down, and notices that he has focused on a caterpillar which she refers to as Colin. She suggests that Oscar tells Colin about his holidays. 'What did you do on your holidays, Oscar?' She pauses and then supplies his response, 'Did you go the aquarium? Did you see lots of fishes? Which were your favourite fishes? Are you going to tell Colin about your favourite fishes? Or are your favourite fishes at home?' All through this interaction she pauses, waiting for response.
- Oscar puts his fingers in his mouth and Mum warns him, 'Don't put those fingers too far back. We know what happens when you put them too far back, you sometimes get sick'.
- Mum notices that he has begun to focus on a photograph, and so she follows this by saying, 'Are you looking at the picture of mummy and daddy? Is that what you are looking at? They don't look like that any more. That was a long time ago. It's in Japan, you would like it in Japan because there are lots of bright lights there. You like the bright lights, don't you?' Oscar responds by babbling in the pauses. She goes on to comment, 'There aren't many photographs of mummy and daddy left now as they have all been replaced by you'. As she says this, she bends down to kiss him.

This short observation of just over 6 minutes gives a wealth of rich information which is worthy of detailed examination. This natural observation of the play interaction between mother and child epitomizes the environment that we would all like to create for the babies and young children in our care. The positive learning that is taking place in this case study clearly illustrates the strong bond between

mother and child; both of them feel comfortable in each other's company. The mother has created an atmosphere of peace and calm and gives her son her undivided attention. He is in an environment with which he is familiar; it is not overcrowded by toys or bombarded by external noises. It is quiet, cosy and comfortable. The mother reads Oscar's signals well, responding to them as she changes his position but still endeavouring to maintain eye contact and sustain his interest. As she gains this contact, she chooses to sing a rhyme with which he is familiar and which is much loved. She knows that he likes his feet, so she uses these to do the actions. As she goes through the actions, Oscar responds by increasing his arm movements and by giggling with delight, letting her know that he is enjoying this and that his levels of wellbeing are high. Again, the mother follows his lead, noticing where his eyes are focused on Colin, a favourite companion, and so she suggests that Oscar tells him about his holiday and the fishes that he has seen. Here the mum is making links for the baby between his experiences, talking about the fish in the aquarium and the fish that Oscar likes to watch at home. When his attention focuses on a photograph, she comments on this and again links it to his experiences. This is his daddy. Japan is a place of bright lights, something which he likes. Again, the mother places these subjects within Oscar's experiences and interests.

In our day care settings, we need to ask ourselves if we create an environment such as this for the babies and young children in our care. I would suggest that as practitioners we are more concerned with what the aesthetic of the environment is like rather than how the environment can nurture. We are more concerned with the 'care' as opposed to the learning. Frequently, the environments for the very youngest of our children are made to look like the environments that I would expect to see for children of 3 years or more, which is completely inappropriate. The environment has to nurture the baby and young child, to make her feel safe and secure, to enable her to form attachments and to give her the opportunity to make links with her experiences. It is only when these things are in place that the babies and young children in our care will grow and develop emotionally, cognitively and physically.

The environment is the place where we as human beings conduct our research. As Gopnik et al. (2001, p. 158) rightly assert:

That leaves us free to explore many possibilities and to learn just what to do in our particular world. Childhood is a time when we can safely devote ourselves to learning about our specific physical and social environment. We can do pure basic research.

This research through engagement with our environments enables the brain to make connections and so aid learning. Environments for very young children should not just be clean and 'pretty looking' – they should be places of exploration, excitement and most importantly love.

The different threads of attachment, wellbeing, involvement, interaction, physical environment and knowledge of parents will all be unravelled in the following chapters.

Policy makers and the environment

It is clear from the publication of reports (Field, 2010; Allen, 2011; Tickell, 2011) that policy makers are alerting society to the importance of the first two years of life. These reports clearly identify that the first two years are key to the future development of an individual. It is for this reason that there are now initiatives which are targeting the vulnerable in our society though the children's centre programme which is becoming less of a universal service and more about the funding of these children taking places in care settings when they reach 2 years old. I would question the removal of the universal offer because parenting problems can occur any time and anywhere: a concern is that this becomes a form of crisis management for parents, mothers in particular.

Policy makers are directing initiatives with a focus on the home learning environment as discussed in *Opening Doors, Breaking Barriers: A Strategy for Social Mobility* (HM Government, 2011):

... the home learning environment is the most important factor in children's cognitive and social and behaviour outcomes. In the early years, a strong home environment is characterized by activities such as talking and reading to children, singing songs and learning through simple activities and play.

This therefore is the type of environment that babies and young children should have access to within our day care provision if we are to continue to support all babies and children to achieve their potential both cognitively and emotionally.

Theorists

There are two theorists, Vygotsky and Piaget, whose thinking is useful to look at when examining the case study described earlier. It can be used to clearly illustrate Vygotsky's (1978) theory of the zone of proximal development (ZPD), which he describes as the way in

which children have their learning scaffolded by others, their peers and knowledgeable adults, are influenced by what they already know and can do, and are within a particular society/culture at a moment in time, in order that they can move forwards. Oscar is undoubtedly having his learning scaffolded by his mother, as she models language and interaction for him. She makes links to things which he already knows and can do, such as his awareness of fish and his ability to roll over. The mother also places Oscar within the culture of his nuclear family by talking about his holidays, the fish at home, his father and the life that they had before they became parents. This close link to the theories of Vygotsky is not evidenced when we relate this case study to Piaget's theories of child development. Central to Piaget's thinking about a child's development are the steps that he said all babies and young children go through as they develop.

The four development stages are described in Piaget's theory as:

- Sensorimotor stage: from birth to age 2 (children experience the world through movement and senses and learn object permanence)
- Preoperational stage: age 2 to 7 (acquisition of motor skills)
- Concrete operational stage: age 7 to 11 (children begin to think logically about concrete events)
- Formal operational stage: after age 11 (development of abstract reasoning).

Piaget saw these stages as sequential, in that each child will go through the stages in order without missing any out. Piaget felt that children under the age of 7 are not social in their verbal interactions and in their play. He notes 'the absence of any sustained social intercourse between the children of less than 7 or 8 ...' (Piaget, 1959, p. 40) and that 'Up till the age of about 5, the child almost always works alone' (p. 41). Clearly, the case study demonstrates the interaction that Oscar is engaging in with his mother at the age of only 4 months.

The case studies used throughout this book will challenge the latter statement as they describe children initially playing alongside, and then beginning to actively engage in social play with, their peers and siblings. Piaget's studies have been criticized as more recent research (Burman, 1994; James et al., 1998) has emerged challenging his theories because he studied children's development through the laboratory rather than looking at how children interact with their environment, their peers and others.

Vygotsky, on the other hand, believed in the importance of adult support and interaction in structuring children's learning. In this respect, Vygotsky differed from Piaget (1959) when he states:

His [Piaget's] conception of the development of thought is based on the premise taken from psychoanalysis that the child's thought is originally and naturally autistic and becomes realistic thought only under long and sustained social pressure. (Vygotsky, 1986, p. 18)

Unlike Piaget, Vygotsky believed that it is a child's interaction with society and with others that enables him to develop. Piaget's child has to lose 'his' egocentric nature before 'he' can use social interaction as a driver for development, which is the opposite of Vygotsky (1986).

The present day

Many of the ideas, visions and theoretical thinking of the pioneers and theorists resonate in the political agenda of today, which is a challenging thought. How far have we come in the last hundred or so years if we are still legislating to pull children out of poverty, and if we are still questioning the quality of provision that we are providing for babies and young children? The introduction of the EYFS, the *Early Years Foundation Stage*, in England (DfES, 2007) gave early years practitioners a principled approach to follow with babies and young children experiencing out-of-home care, but we are still facing a political agenda which is looking to practitioners to meet targets and to achieve immediate successes, rather than perhaps taking a more visionary view on how these principles might impact on the future lives of these children. At the time of writing, we face a further challenge in a period of recession, one where many politicians have seen the work of the EYFS (DfES, 2007) as having been to create a 'nappy' curriculum, especially in relation to children under 3 years of age. It remains to be seen if we will return to an earlier place in history where the learning and needs of children under 3 were seen as secondary to those of children over 3. Are we perhaps in danger of losing all of the skills, especially of childminders and practitioners in day nurseries, acquired during the last 10 years?

Across the UK, there are a range of frameworks to support the care and learning of babies and young children. In England at the time of writing, the EYFS (DfES, 2007) has just been reviewed and the report published (Tickell, 2011). There are a range of recommendations

which may have an impact on the way in which the curriculum is offered in the future. Two of these recommendations are:

- the development of key milestones for the development of children under 24 months
- the strengthening of the links between health and learning where parents and carers can contribute to a child's early childhood record (known as the Red Book).

In Scotland, for babies and children under 3 there is *Pre-Birth to Three* (The Scottish Government, 2010) which recognizes that a baby's learning takes place from conception – not just the natural physical development but also the important bonding and relationship-building that occurs throughout pregnancy. This is the only one of the home countries which recognizes the importance of the pregnancy months in the future learning and development of children.

Like Scotland, Wales has two approaches to supporting children in the early years. The Welsh *Early Years Foundation Phase* is to support children aged 3 to 8 and is statutory, and there is the Flying Start programme for the 0–3-year age group.

Like England, at the time of writing, the Northern Ireland early years strategy 0–6 is under review. In the Republic of Ireland, there is a loose curriculum – Aistear (2010) – for children from birth to 6 years. Interestingly, this is optional and within it there is an emphasis on practitioners interpreting it in line with their own skills and knowledge.

Maternity leave and parental choice

Mothers today are offered a year's maternity leave from their employment, which means that frequently babies are not accessing out-of-home day care provision until they are much older, which many practitioners believe causes more problems when it comes to separation. Practitioners often comment on how it is more difficult to settle babies when they are older, as they experience more anxiety at separation than when they were a few months old. This is in line with the thinking of Bowlby (1989) and Ainsworth (1969) when they conducted their research into attachment theory.

As well as having access to longer periods of maternity leave, parents are also offered a plethora of choices when it comes to choosing childcare, which are frequently influenced by economic factors. Most childcare today is expensive, and many parents prefer to leave

their baby with someone who is known to them. This role is increasingly taken up by grandparents who, after having cared for their own children, are now caring for their children's children, with an impact on the age and quality of their retirement. If a family carer cannot be used, parents of young children have to choose between full day care and childminders.

Case study settings and children

As they will appear throughout the book, the babies and children that I observed need to be introduced, and a description provided of the various settings they attended. When I first decided to conduct the research, a day nursery in the local authority where I worked was asked if contact could be made with their parents to gain permission to interview them and then to observe and photograph their children until they reached 3 years of age. The staff in the nursery were also asked if they would take part in interviews, so that an understanding of their perspectives could be gained. The initial response was poor, but I was able to go ahead and carry out the research with the children of 11 parents who had agreed to take part. At the same time, a colleague of mine, who was expecting her third baby, agreed that her child could be observed as she stayed at home to bring him up. Although the observation of this baby was not the driving force of my research, it ultimately became very important to me, not just for my research but personally, as Sam has become an important part of my life.

As the research continued, I was able to increase the number of children and families involved by recruiting another day nursery to join the study. A further three children for the research were recruited in this way. The two nurseries were completely different in the way in which they were run, and the addition of the second nursery ultimately proved to be fortuitous in the way that it contributed to the findings from the study, and in particular to the research study of the baby brought up at home by his mother.

The first day nursery

The first nursery was privately owned, and was established in 2002. It was fairly new at the time of the research study. This newness of environment and resources was one of the many reasons why parents chose it. It was situated near to a main arterial road network, which was another reason why many parents had chosen to attend this

setting, in a leafy suburban area. The building was old, and it had its own car park; there was a small hard-core outdoor area for the older children, and a small area of artificial grass for the 18-month-to 2-year-olds. The outdoor area was accessible from two of the downstairs rooms, and this was another one of the stated reasons for some parents' choice of setting. The nursery was divided into five rooms, and the children moved from room to room according to their chronological age, with the exception of the move from the baby room to the toddler room, where the babies moved according to the confidence in their mobility. There were 68 children under 5 years of age attending this nursery. The setting had 11 staff, and the proprietor was also the manager. When asked why they had chosen this setting over others, two sets of parents said that their child had previously been to another setting; the reason for the move had been the establishing of this nursery near to where they lived and for another parent it was due to her experience of that previous setting:

It [the first setting chosen] seemed OK. When I first walked round, it was quiet and calm ... when I went to pick him up, he was asleep in a rocking chair thing and he never falls asleep in those and they just left him – now if that had been me I would never have left him all hunched over even if it took him time to get back to sleep, I would have made sure he was more comfortable and then he was dead poorly when he came back ... and I cried myself to sleep that night. So the next day I went to this nursery. (Mother of Tim)

The second day nursery

The second nursery was also privately owned, and based in the city. It had no access to an outdoor area. To address this, children were taken on trips to the shops to buy the snack, and taken to the local park; the older children were taken on local transport to various locations. This lack of outdoor access was always a concern, because although the setting tried to address it through various means the children had very little regular access to a large area where they could experience space and freedom, which Margaret McMillan saw as their right. Margaret McMillan and her sister Rachel established nurseries which were a forerunner of the present agenda for giving more choice and opportunity for parents to be involved in their child's education. Within the nurseries, there was a great emphasis on nourishment, hygiene, exercise and fresh air and Margaret's methods still influence nurseries in England today.

As soon as he can toddle we introduce the child to a new environment, which is nevertheless his long lost natural home, his God-designed habitat, where his sense and spirit may be allowed to waken, and his impulse and activity will not meet unnatural obstacle or definite arrest. He is to live in the open air from the first, having shelter from rain, cold, and heat, every extreme and undue rigour of climate, but free to look upon the sky. (McMillan, 1930, p. 1)

This second nursery was also managed by one of the owners and was opened in 1995. There were 37 children aged from birth to 5 attending this nursery. The nursery was based in one room, with a small designated area for babies under 2. When parents were asked why they had chosen this nursery, two of them responded by saying:

It helped me. I often work until 6.00 pm, and I looked at the local ones and I would have been struggling if there had been an accident or something. I know they don't dump your child, but I didn't want to be late every night. My job gives me free parking opposite the nursery and that is how I saw it. (Mother of Georgina)

It is very near to work, so that if I had to because there was an emergency I can run round in 5 minutes. It is that accessibility as well. (Mother of Melanie)

This nursery is no longer registered with the same provider to offer day care for children.

The links between this second nursery and the findings of the study of Sam will be looked at in detail in Chapter 4.

The children

The following table lists the children involved in the study. Those children whose names are in bold are those whom I used in my final research for my PhD.

As many mothers now take extended maternity leave, the children observed in the day nurseries were often over 9 months of age when they first attended. This meant that the case studies did not really look at young babies, something that I was particularly interested in, and so the study of Sam, whom I started to observe when he was 8 days old, added another dimension to the case studies used within this book.

The settings that were used in the research, and those which will be referred to in general, are all nurseries that have achieved a 'good'

Name of child	Date of birth	Date observations started	Number of observations	Parent interviewed	Reasons for ceasing observations
Amy	March 03	19/2/04	15	Yes	Moved house
Mark	November 01	17/2/04	11	Yes	Observations stopped when 3
Ben	November 02	27/2/04	14	Yes	Observations stopped when 3
James	December 02	18/2/04	16	Yes	Observations stopped when 3
Harriet	October 01	27/2/04	3	Yes	Left to go to Independent School nursery
Felicity	August 01	17/2/04	7	No	Moved to maintained nursery school September 2004
Maisie	June 02	19/2/04	10	Yes	Observations stopped when 3
Josh	January 02	18/2/04	5	Yes	Left to go to funded playgroup September 2004
Tim	May 03	15/9/04	14	Yes	Observations stopped when 3
Lynda	October 03	14/12/04	15	No	Observations stopped when 3
Dan	April 04	15/12/04	5	Yes	Observations stopped when pattern of attendance changed
Martin	July 05	9/2/05	13	Yes	Moved house
Melanie	March 04	9/3/05	16	Yes	Observations stopped when 3
Georgina	January 04	9/2/05	16	Yes	Observations stopped when 3
Sam	August 04	20/8/04	31	Yes	Observations stopped when 3

Figure I.1 The children involved in the case studies

or better outcome from their Ofsted inspections. All the settings described illustrate what good day care can look like in a range of different ways. A setting may not demonstrate good quality because of its lack of outdoor provision, but may demonstrate it through the way in which it supports young children's emotional wellbeing. It's important to remember that these are real settings battling with common constraints and problems, and that their successes and difficulties offer us an opportunity to reflect on how to deliver good quality care for babies and young children. Also, I think it is important to continue to challenge settings and practitioners, once they have started on the road to reflection and quality.

The baby cared for at home

Sam, the baby cared for at home by his mother, was the youngest of three children, as the older two children had already accessed out-of-home care, childminders, day nurseries and pre-school, whilst their mother returned to work for three days a week. Observing a baby at home as part of my research proved invaluable when looking at what out-of-home care can offer as a balance to a child staying at home with his mother. Staying at home to care for a child is in line with the thinking of Bowlby, but in today's economic climate it is not an option available to all families.



Questions for reflection

- Consider how in your practice you embed the Vygotskian theory of the zone of proximal development. How do you challenge babies and young children through your interaction and support?
- Reflect on the different early years strategies for the countries of the UK. How could they contribute to your philosophy and practice?

Further reading

Gerhardt, S. (2010) *The Selfish Society*. London: Simon & Schuster UK Ltd.

This is a critical look at how society has focused more on economics to the detriment of children.

Dex, S. and Joshi, H. (2005) *Children of the 21st Century: From Birth to Nine Months*. Bristol: The Policy Press.

Hansen, K., Joshi, H. and Dex, S. (2010) *Children of the 21st Century: First Five Years* v. 2 (UK Millennium Cohort Study Series). Bristol: The Policy Press.

The above two books document the outcomes so far of almost 19,000 children who were born at the beginning of the 21st century and give an insight into the policies that have impacted and are impacting on today's children.

The Scottish Government (2010) *Pre-Birth to Three: Positive Outcomes for Scotland's Children and Families*. Available at: www.ltscotland.org.uk/earlyyears/prebirthtothree/nationalguidance/index.asp

This website gives the opportunity to look at all aspects of the innovative Scottish Framework for Early Years.

McMillan, M. (1930) *The Nursery School* (revised edition): London: J.M. Dent & Sons E.P. Dutton. Can be viewed on the following website: <http://studentzone.roehampton.ac.uk/library/digital-collection/froebel-archive/nursery-school/index.html>

The book details how Margaret and Rachel McMillan established their open-air nursery schools in Deptford, London. It gives an insight into the thinking and philosophy of the sisters and gives the reader the opportunity to question their own practice and reflect on the history of childcare and education in this country.

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Useful websites



- www.education.gov.uk/childrenandyoungpeople/earlylearningandchildcare
- www.ncca.ie/en/Curriculum_and_Assessment/Early_Childhood_and_Primary_Education/Early_Childhood_Education/Aistear_Toolkit
- http://wales.gov.uk/topics/educationandskills/earlyyearshome/foundation_phase/?lang=en
- www.ltscotland.org.uk/earlyyears/prebirthtothree/index.asp
- www.deni.gov.uk/index/pre-school-education-pg.htm