

Waltham Forest Early Years Guidance

The Environment as a 3rd Teacher

The purpose of this guidance is to support, guide and empower staff in creating high-quality environments for children by using reflection, observation and questioning techniques.

What is the ‘environment as a 3rd teacher’?

Research informed by the [Reggio Emilia](#) approach recognise and value the environment as a ‘third teacher’. Behind educators and families, physical spaces and the emotional environment hold the potential to influence **what** and **how** children learn. The environment needs to enable children to explore their own interests and learn from their experiences.

Why?

The layout of the environment promotes relationships, communication, collaboration, and exploration through play. Materials are thoughtfully added to the environment to promote creativity, thinking and problem-solving skills, questions, experimentation and open-ended play, all positively impacting children’s learning and development. An environment with rich and built-in learning opportunities also frees educators to interact with children.

The environment has to matter; it has to be good enough to do the job of an educator!

Through reflecting on the environment and focusing on continual improvement, you will achieve better outcomes for children. Other benefits for children include:

- Their individual needs are met.



- Their self-esteem is increased, and their sense of perseverance is developed through appropriate challenge.
 - An appropriate, enabling, interactive environment is created, including suitable resources, and opportunities indoors and out.

How?

Some characteristics of engaging environments include:

- Interesting things. Natural materials and things of interest for children to see, touch and smell have a higher degree of complexity in terms of patterning and versatility.
- Provide children with an environment and accessories that promote imaginative play with role playing possibilities.
- Open-ended materials. Areas dedicated to different experiences such as creativity, books, blocks and building materials, can help.
- Flexible resources with self-access to promote independence and choice for children.
- A lack of clutter.
- Remove unneeded furniture, including tables, children need space to move, you do not need tables and chairs for all children!
- Opportunities are provided for long periods of uninterrupted play and learning.

“There are three teachers of children: adults, other children, and their physical environment.” — LORIS MALAGUZZ

What is the role of the manager?

As a manager, it is important to guide practitioners in reflecting on the current environment and considering ways this can be enhanced to meet the children's needs and support their learning and development. It is best to focus on one area at a time, for example, the home corner. Practitioners can use a tablet/I-Pad to record the children's current use of the area, then watch this back as a team and think about:

- How are children using the area?
- Are all children accessing the area? If not, why not?
- Are there enough or too many resources?
- Is the environment and the resources provided encouraging investigation, conversation, and collaboration?
- Does the environment enable children to develop a sense of who they are? How they belong? Support their understanding that people are not all the same?
- Observe the environment from a child's height, (get down on your knees) can you reach resources and see displays? Self-selection works hand-in-hand with a continuous provision approach to learning, where children are encouraged to do activities at their pace, direction and interest.



Encourage staff to answer these questions:

- What learning 'might' happen?
- What language 'might' develop?
- Have we got the right resources?
- How does the environment support the curriculum?
- Would I want to play here? If practitioners are parents/carers – would they want their child to play here?



What Next?

After reviewing the video recording and answering the above questions, practitioners should be supported to create an action plan to enhance the chosen area, taking into account what they've observed and discussed as a team. Depending on the developmental stage of the children, they can also be involved in this.

Some key points practitioners need to think about include:

- Plan a time to rearrange the area, some changes can be made easily, others will have to be made over time.
- Grouping resources together and clearly labelling the resource storage with both a photograph and name of the resource.
- Arranging the area; making sure there is room to move around freely. Introducing the area to the children.
- As time goes by, practitioners should review how the area is being used, what impact have the changes had on the children? If an area is not well used, they should consider why and redevelop it.

Above all, encourage them to have fun and enjoy the transformation! Do less and do it well!

Further ideas for activity areas:

The following areas are a guide only and in no way exhaustive; always check that your resources reflect equality and cultural diversity and are representative of your local community. Try to use real objects whenever possible.

Activity area and resource suggestions: Home corner

- Multicultural fabrics, cooking utensils and food packaging.
- Dolls in a range of skin tones, cots and baby equipment, child size broom, dressing up clothes, suitable size furniture, (not too small!) kitchen furniture may be made out of cardboard boxes.

Phone, diaries, notebooks, directories, pencils, books, clock, ornaments, tool box, laundry equipment.

Role play

•Dressing up clothes, props which can be used in a variety of ways, scarves, drapes, bags, hats, fabrics and saris. Shop and office equipment.

Creative workshop

•Well-sorted modelling resources; boxes, plastic bottles, corks, bottle tops. Sticky tape, masking tape, glue, paste, string, glue sticks, scissors, pens, pencils.

Painting

•A range of brushes, sponges, paint easels, printing items, offer a range of techniques to be developed over time.

Graphics or mark making

•Well organised pencils, crayons, pens, chalks, white boards, paper, chalk boards, clip boards, alphabet books, name cards, envelopes, different types and shapes of paper, notebooks, cards.

Tactile or sensory

•Open access to resources to use with play dough or clay, cutters, rolling pins, textured materials, garlic presses, bun tins, bowls and utensils.
•Builder's trays, gravel, soil, lentils, rice, cornflour, gloop, shaving foam, pasta, aprons, a bucket of soapy water for cleaning hands. Replenish resources as needed. Check for allergies.

Music and dance

•Music from a wide range of cultures, visits out and visitors or videos to observe performances of music and dance. Named musical instruments, home-made and bought. Space to dance, mirrors, scarves, ribbons, streamers, and bells.



Exploration and discovery

•Collections of resources such as magnets, torches, pulley systems, collections of items such as utensils, fabrics, wooden or metal objects, delicate natural items such as birds' nests, pinecones, shells, stones, reference books and magnifying glasses, paper and pencils.

Quiet space

•Make sure this is out of the flow of traffic. Supply cushions, bean bags or drapes to soften noise and make the area more private. Also provide books and a few good quality soft toys.

Book area

•A wide selection of good quality fiction, non-fiction and poetry books which children can access independently. Include big books, board books, and homemade books with photographs. A comfortable space for adults to share books with one or two or a group of children. Puppets and props for storytelling. Story sacks.

Construction or block play

•Good quality wooden blocks, small and large blocks which work together. Concentrate on a good stock of one or two sets. Consider the different techniques required when buying new construction sets. Store small world resources near the construction area.



Further Information

- [Early Years Alliance – Enabling Environments](#)
- [Early Years Matters – Enabling Environments](#)
- [Teach Early Years – 9 Ways to Improve Your Rooms](#)
- [Waltham Forest The Hub](#)