

Pack away the daytime

Working in a setting that has to be set up and packed away on a daily basis need not restrict children's learning, as practitioners find ingenious ways to meet the challenges and to provide rich experiences.



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AS EARLY years practitioners, it seems to be part of our nature to never be satisfied with the amount of space we have to work in, or in which to store equipment. But next time you are tempted to complain about lack of space in your setting, and the amount of time it takes to tidy up, spare a thought for the settings throughout the country who each day have to set everything up from scratch and pack it all away again.

These 'packaway settings' are often held in church halls or community centres, and usually have to share their space with other users. Toilet and hand washing facilities are often limited, and designed for adult use. There is usually limited storage for equipment, and very little time to set up and pack away.

Some practitioners in this situation might respond by sticking to a very tight routine, with a limited range of learning activities that do not vary very often, or always plan to set out activities before children arrive, with little scope for child-initiated activities.

The quality of children's involvement and learning during group activities might also suffer because these take place at the end of the session, in order to give staff a chance to pack away, while the parents congregate outside. This is not always ideal because children may be tired, hungry, and unable to concentrate because of the noise made by adults tidying up.

However, many practitioners are able to meet the challenge by responding with ingenuity, resourcefulness and an ability to turn potentially unpromising and restrictive premises into hugely exciting and stimulating environments.

Whenever I run training days, I usually meet practitioners from packaway settings, and we talk frankly about working under these circumstances, and how possible challenges can be overcome. One of the big discussion points is how adults develop a

routine that is a balance between making the most of space and time constraints, and meeting children's needs in an imaginative way.

Tanya Bell, supervisor at Swallowfield Pre-School in Wokingham, and Tricia Cuss of Hare Hatch Montessori Pre School near Reading, surprised me by extolling the advantages of working in their packaway settings. They invited me to find out for myself how they and their colleagues create a dynamic and fun environment from scratch every morning.

Swallowfield Pre-School

Tanya described a typical morning at Swallowfield Pre-School, showing how it is possible to create an exciting environment for learning by balancing adult-led and child-initiated activities. Sessions are held in a parish hall every morning, and they can take up to 24 children from two-and-a-half to five years of age. All equipment, including furniture, has to be set up in 45 minutes, and packed away in a metal cage by 12.30 pm every day, ready for other groups, such as line dancing, badminton and the Women's Institute, to immediately take over the hall.

Practitioners arrive at 8.30 am and have the whole setting set up by the time the children arrive at 9.15 am. An adult is allotted to 'meet and greet' children and parents, and to help the children register themselves. This is a great opportunity to find out how children are feeling, to make them feel welcome and to help them settle. There is an easel for children to mark themselves in, in any way they choose – be it by writing their name, drawing a picture of themselves or making a mark.

Children begin immediately with adult-led small group time. This is always based on children's interests. For example, the children had shown a lot of interest in collecting leaves. This had extended to finding out about planting, so the children decided that they would like to see what might happen if they planted nuts.

At this time of the morning some children may want to be (or need to be) playing on their own. Adults will be aware of this, and prepared to support children who may not be able to access an adult-led activity.

The hall is divided into various 'zones', including a developmental movement area, a book area, and areas for mark making and role-play. Following the

Practitioners respond with ingenuity, resourcefulness and an ability to turn potentially unpromising and restrictive premises into exciting, stimulating environment



The challenge with packaway settings is that once the session has ended the room must be ready for a different group of people to use

adult-led groups the children take part in, what Tanya describes as, 'free-selective' activities, and a self-service snack 'café' is available from 10 to 11 am. Tanya described how adults use the free-selective time to influence what they provide for children's play. 'Pirates were a popular theme for the children, so for several days we made a "ship" together out of blocks and other paraphernalia.

We decided to have a 'Bring a Dad to Pre-School Day', and one of the granddads showed the children how to make paper aeroplanes. The children were fascinated, and this led to a great deal of discussion about planes and flight.

'Naturally, we then went on to organise a "Things that Fly Day". One of the parents used to be an airline flight attendant, and helped us plan special activities based around "Swallowfield Airlines". We used our large wooden blocks for the aeroplane, and set up a check-in desk, "luggage handling" – there was even a carton of juice and snacks on a trolley for the "passengers".

'The children enjoyed it so much they decided they wanted set up the aeroplane each morning for a

few days afterwards, until they had had enough and then reverted to the pirate ship.'

Everyone comes together at the end of free-selective, for a large group discussion and story, rhyme time and action games. They are then free to go outside – the setting has access to the park at the back of hall. There they can play running and ring games, explore the environment, and enjoy being in a 'story tent'.

Towards the end of the morning the children and adults come together for a group and story time. This is when the all the equipment is packed into a metal cage. This could be very distracting, but the adults are aware that group time is important so make as little noise as possible, and certainly would not chat during this time.

I asked Tanya about the vital ingredients that make her setting work so well. 'The chemistry between the adults is right. We are organised, but our starting point is what is right for the children. We have excellent parental support and a very positive parents' committee. Ted, our caretaker, understands how the Pre-School needs to operate, and is very supportive.'



Children's imaginations turn a small space in the middle of the hall floor into an igloo

Hare Hatch Montessori

In the early afternoon of a very icy day Tricia Cuss is waiting for me at Hare Hatch Montessori Pre-School, which operates every day at the Village Hall. This is another example of adult ingenuity in making the most of space, and incorporating children's ideas into activities.

When I arrive the session is already in full swing. I am ushered into the store cupboard, measuring 2.5 metres by 3.5 metres. It is now the 'Space Room'; thanks to 99p silver emergency blankets covering the walls, and rugs on the floor. An IKEA 'planets'

Key points

- When planning your layout it helps to view the environment from a child's perspective, even if this means observing it on your knees!
- Observe how the children use the environment: Whether it encourages particular behaviours, or how children access an area. The advantage of being in non-permanent premises is that it is easier to change the environment
- Zone the environment into areas of learning, for example, with low screens, movable display boards, storage trolleys and colourful rugs and soft furnishings
- Above all, ensure your environment is safe. However, the children do not care about the structure of the premises, what matters is the experiences you provide within the structure

lampshade and solar system posters complete the scene, while blankets and throws cover up unwanted items, such as a computer, which cannot easily be moved.

In such a small, but exciting space, which children naturally gravitate towards, they happily play and chat with each other in an IKEA space tent, wearing space suits. An adult stays with the children, supporting them to play with each other, while leading or supervising activities, such as a large space floor puzzle.

Just outside 'Space Station Hare Hatch' we find children at the snack table helping themselves to fruit, and then washing up and drying their plates. As we move around the room, two boys are sitting at a table playing with a large block of ice and some small penguins and polar bears.

In the middle of the room is an igloo tent, with three children and an adult inside. They are sharing penguin and polar bear stories and information books, and playing with soft toys. At another table, children are drawing and making marks. Behind them is a cabinet with shelves containing baskets with pencils, trays of paper, and puzzles. By the window is an interactive display about icy wastelands.

There is a cosy book corner with a quilt and cushions. On the quilt sits a parent sharing a story with two children. Nearby, are a large wicker basket with books and a stand with hand puppets hanging from it. Close to the book corner a practitioner sits with a child and shares a story sack that she has made recently.

Every aspect of the children's experience has been carefully thought about. Each adult toilet has been made 'child friendly' with a plastic step and a child seat, with more steps to allow the children to wash and dry their hands independently. A shower curtain has been rigged up, to provide privacy in case a child needs to change into another set of clothes.

Towards the end of the session, children and adults are involved in part one of the big tidy up, making sure small items are in their right places. Once the children have left, the whole setting is packed away in just over 10 minutes! Large items of furniture go onto the stage, and wooden-shelved cabinets with their contents inside are carefully folded and wheeled into the storeroom, where everything is packed away in exactly the right place.

In both these settings there is a clear and carefully thought out routine. The adults work together as a team, and are aware of where everything goes. But most importantly the adults have a clear sense of following children's interests and ideas, and plan and adapt accordingly.

What is remarkable is the way that a small group of adults, in a potentially highly restrictive environment, can provide as stimulating a learning experience as you would find in any established early years setting. Tanya Bell sums up how this can work: 'Above all, the children should give the adults ideas. It's not about what building you are in, but where you are in your head.'

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