

What Makes an Outstanding EYFS Environment? SCRIPT

“Welcome to Session 1 of our new **Creating Exceptional Learning Environments** series.

Across the next six weeks, we're going to look carefully at the spaces we create for children and consider how those spaces influence learning, behaviour, independence and wellbeing.

And we're beginning with the big picture:

What actually makes an outstanding EYFS environment?

When we hear the phrase ‘outstanding learning environment’, it's easy to immediately think about how a classroom looks.

Beautiful displays.

Carefully arranged resources.

Inviting areas.

But an exceptional environment isn't defined by how impressive it looks to an adult walking through the door.

It's defined by **what it enables children to do**.

Can children make choices?

Can they find what they need?

Can they sustain their play?

Can they solve problems without immediately needing an adult?

Does the environment invite curiosity, conversation and independence?

Throughout this series, we're going to think about the environment not simply as the place where learning happens, but as something that can actively **support learning itself**.”

Slide 2 – Safeguarding Spark

“Let's begin, as always, with our Safeguarding Spark.

The scenario is:

During a routine walk around the learning environment, you notice a secluded area that cannot be seen clearly by staff. What should you do?

Take a moment to consider the options.

Would we leave it because children enjoy using it?

Mention it at the next staff meeting?

Close the area immediately without speaking to anybody?

Or review the area straight away, ensure children can be supervised effectively and report any concerns in line with our safeguarding procedures?

This is a really important reminder as we begin a series about creating exciting, engaging environments.

Children absolutely need spaces where they can become absorbed in play.

They may enjoy cosy spaces, dens and quieter areas.

But children's safety must remain at the centre of our environmental decisions.

An area can be inviting and still allow effective supervision.

So whenever we change our environment, one of our first questions should always be:

‘Can children use this space safely, and can adults supervise it effectively?’

Slide 3 – Safeguarding Spark: Answer

“The correct response is **C**:

Review the area immediately, ensure children can be supervised effectively and report any concerns in line with your setting's safeguarding procedures.

The word **immediately** matters.

If we've identified an environmental feature that could compromise effective supervision, we shouldn't leave it until next week's meeting.

But equally, this doesn't mean children can never have enclosed or quieter spaces.

The answer is thoughtful design.

Could furniture be repositioned?

Could the height of something be reduced?

Could we maintain the sense of enclosure while improving sightlines?

The aim is to balance children's need for exploration, privacy and calm with our responsibility to safeguard them.

And this principle will run throughout this entire series:

The environment must work for children — but it must also enable adults to keep children safe.

Safeguarding shouldn't be something we consider after designing an environment.

It should be built into the design from the beginning.”

Slide 4 – Success Criteria

“By the end of today's session, there are three things we're aiming to achieve.

Firstly, understand the key features of an exceptional EYFS learning environment.

Secondly, reflect on how the environment influences children's **behaviour, independence and learning**.

And thirdly, identify practical improvements that could make the greatest difference to children's daily experiences.

That final point is important.

We're not going to finish today's session by suggesting everybody completely redesigns their classroom.

Exceptional environments evolve.

Sometimes one small adjustment makes far more difference than buying lots of new resources or moving everything around.

So throughout today's session, keep your own environment in mind.

Think about the children currently using it.

Where do they flourish?

Where do they struggle?

Where are adults constantly needed?

Where does deep play happen?

Those questions can tell us far more about the quality of an environment than simply asking whether it looks attractive.”

Slide 5 – Our Journey

“Let's look at where we're going over the next six weeks.

Today, we're beginning with **What Makes an Outstanding EYFS Environment?**

Next week, we'll focus specifically on **Enabling Environments Indoors.**

Week 3 moves outside with **Outdoor Learning with Purpose.**

Week 4 explores **Using Resources to Promote Independence.**

Week 5 considers **Supporting Self-Regulation Through Environment.**

And finally, we'll bring everything together through **Continuous Improvement Through Environment Audits.**

There's a deliberate progression here.

Today gives us the principles.

Then we'll begin looking more closely at particular aspects of the environment.

And throughout all six weeks, we're going to keep asking:

‘What does this enable children to do?’

Because the best learning environments aren't simply well organised.

They're designed around a clear understanding of how young children learn.”

Slide 6 – Why This Matters

“Children's learning is shaped by the spaces they spend time in.

Think about how much of a child's day is spent interacting with the physical environment.

Choosing resources.

Moving between areas.

Finding tools.

Returning things.

Combining materials.

Revisiting previous ideas.

A well-designed environment allows children to make independent choices, sustain play for longer, solve problems, return to previous learning and access resources confidently.

And the final line on this slide is particularly important:

The classroom should support learning — even when adults are not directing it.

Imagine an adult is deeply engaged in sustained interaction with one child.

What happens everywhere else?

Does learning continue?

Can other children find what they need?

Can they develop their ideas?

Or does everything depend on an adult being available to organise, retrieve or direct?

A powerful environment quietly supports children throughout the entire day.

It reduces unnecessary dependence on adults and creates more space for adults to focus on the interactions that genuinely matter.”

Slide 7 – What Does the Research Say?

“Research highlights several ways effective environments can support young children's learning.

They can reduce cognitive overload.

Promote independence.

Encourage sustained shared thinking.

Support executive functioning.

Strengthen communication and language.

And allow children to revisit and deepen learning.

There's an important idea underneath all of those points:

The physical environment influences behaviour just as much as adult interactions.

Think about a classroom where resources are difficult to find.

Children constantly ask adults for help.

Now compare that with clearly organised, accessible resources.

Children can make decisions independently.

Or imagine a noisy, cluttered area where children struggle to sustain attention.

Changing the physical environment may influence behaviour before we've said a single word.

Sometimes, when we find ourselves repeatedly correcting the same behaviour, it's worth asking:

‘Is something in the environment contributing to this?’

The environment can make desirable behaviours easier — or harder.”

Slide 8 – Everything Has a Purpose

“One of the most useful questions we can ask when evaluating an environment is:

‘What learning is this area designed to promote?’

Think about every part of your classroom.

Why is it there?

Not:

‘Because Early Years classrooms have one.’

Not:

‘Because it's always been there.’

But:

‘What does this space enable children to learn, practise or explore?’

Take a role-play area.

Is it there because we believe every classroom should have a role-play corner?

Or can we explain how it supports communication, imagination, collaboration, storytelling, mark-making and children's understanding of the world?

What about a construction area?

Can children plan?

Problem-solve?

Compare?

Collaborate?

Create increasingly complex structures?

If we can't explain the learning purpose of an area, perhaps we need to reconsider it.

Space in an Early Years classroom is valuable.

Every part of it should earn its place.”

Slide 9 – Accessibility Creates Independence

“Children should be able to find resources, return resources, select tools, choose books and access creative materials **without constantly asking an adult**.

This sounds simple, but it has a huge impact.

Imagine a child wants to attach two pieces of cardboard.

Do they know where the tape is?

Can they access it?

Can they choose between tape, glue or string?

Or do they have to wait until an adult notices them and retrieves something from a cupboard?

Every time children can independently access what they need, we're giving them ownership of their learning.

We're also communicating:

'You are capable.'

And that's incredibly powerful.

Of course, accessibility doesn't mean every resource needs to be available all the time.

We still make professional decisions about safety, developmental appropriateness and quantity.

But where children can safely manage resources themselves, we should ask whether our environment enables them to do so.

Because when children learn to manage their own environment, they become increasingly confident and independent learners."

Slide 10 – Quality Over Quantity

"This slide challenges a really common temptation in Early Years:

more resources must mean more learning.

But that's not necessarily true.

Busy classrooms can become overwhelming.

When shelves are overflowing and every surface is filled, children may actually find it harder to make choices, sustain attention or see the possibilities within individual resources.

Outstanding environments aren't filled with resources.

They're filled with **purposeful resources**.

So when looking at what we provide, ask:

Do children actually use this?

Does it inspire thinking?

Does it promote creativity?

Is it open-ended?

A box of wooden blocks may generate weeks of different ideas.

A very specific plastic toy may only have one obvious use.

Sometimes removing resources allows children to see what remains more clearly.

It creates space.

It makes choices more manageable.

And it can encourage deeper engagement.

So don't be afraid of empty shelf space.

Less can genuinely be more when what remains has greater purpose."

Slide 11 – The Power of Continuous Provision

“Children revisit familiar areas because they feel confident there.

And that's one of the great strengths of continuous provision.

Children know where things are.

They understand what is possible.

They can return to previous ideas and deepen them over time.

Sometimes we feel pressure to constantly change provision because we want the environment to look fresh or exciting.

But constantly changing everything can actually work against children's independence.

Instead, keep the core areas consistent and **enhance them thoughtfully**.

The slide gives some really simple examples.

Construction remains construction, but perhaps we add photographs of bridges.

Role play remains familiar, but we introduce real-life artefacts.

The creative area remains accessible, but we add natural materials.

The core is stable.

The enhancement gives children a new direction.

And often, one small enhancement can completely transform children's thinking.

That's much more sustainable than rebuilding the environment around a new theme every week.”

Slide 12 – Enabling Environments in Action: Book Corner

“Let's look at one area in practice.

Originally, this book corner contains:

shelves of books and cushions.

There's nothing inherently wrong with that.

Children have somewhere to sit and books are available.

But after reflection, the environment changes.

Books become front-facing.

Story props and puppets are introduced.

Family photographs are included.

Lighting becomes more comfortable.

Story recommendation cards are added.

Notice that none of these things changes the fundamental purpose of the space.

It's still a book area.

But now we're thinking much more carefully about **how children interact with it**.

And the result is that children begin reading together, retelling stories, acting out characters and discussing books independently.

The environment has moved from being somewhere that **stores books** to somewhere that **promotes interaction around books**.

That's a really useful distinction to apply across the classroom.

Does an area simply contain resources?

Or does its design actually encourage the learning we want to see?"

Slide 13 – Watch It in Action

“For this part of the session, I'd like you to mentally walk around your own classroom.

Ask:

Can children use every area independently?

Which spaces encourage the richest conversations?

Where do children remain engaged for the longest?

Which resources are rarely touched?

And:

What could be simplified?

That final question is one we perhaps don't ask enough.

Improvement doesn't always mean adding.

Sometimes the most powerful improvement is taking something away.

Perhaps there's a table that constrains the way children use an area.

Maybe a shelf is overcrowded.

Perhaps resources are organised according to what makes sense to adults rather than children.

The suggested viewing on the slide includes Early Excellence, Birth to 5 Matters, the Curiosity Approach and Early Years Stronger Practice Hubs.

As you explore examples, try not to simply think:

‘That looks lovely.’

Instead ask:

‘What are children able to do because the environment has been designed that way?’

That's the question we want to bring back to our own provision.”

Slide 14 – Indoor Environment Audit

“Now we're going to make this practical.

Working with colleagues, choose **one area of your classroom**.

Not the whole room.

One area.

Then discuss:

What learning is promoted here?

Can children access everything independently?

Which resources are most valuable?

Which resources are rarely used?

And finally:

What one change would improve this area?

Perhaps the construction area has brilliant resources but children can't independently access half of them.

Perhaps the creative area has so much available that children struggle to choose.

Maybe the book corner is attractive but rarely used.

Perhaps an area works brilliantly when an adult is there but not independently.

Be specific.

And importantly, don't immediately jump to:

'What could we buy?'

Often the solution costs absolutely nothing.

Move something.

Remove something.

Reorganise something.

Make something more visible.

Remember:

Outstanding classrooms evolve through continuous reflection — not complete redesigns."

Slide 15 – Reflection Activity

"This week's reflection activity continues that idea of making **one purposeful improvement**.

Choose one indoor learning area.

Then observe how children actually use it for a full day.

Try not to change anything immediately.

Watch first.

Who uses it?

Who doesn't?

How long do children stay?

What do they do?

What resources do they repeatedly choose?

What gets ignored?

When do they need an adult?

Then make **one purposeful improvement**.

Perhaps you remove unnecessary resources.

Improve accessibility.

Introduce one meaningful enhancement.

Or reorganise storage.

Then observe again.

That's the really important part.

Did anything change?

Did children stay longer?

Were they more independent?

Did conversations improve?

Did different children begin accessing the area?

Environmental improvement should be based on observation rather than assumption.

We don't change things simply because we think they look better.

We change them because we believe children's experiences will become better — and then we check whether they actually did.”

Slide 16 – Spark Forward

“This week's Spark Forward is very simple.

Choose **one indoor learning area**.

Observe it.

Then make **one purposeful change**.

That's it.

Don't redesign your classroom.

Don't spend the weekend scrolling through beautiful Early Years environments online and deciding everything needs replacing.

Start with your children.

What are they telling you through the way they use the space?

Perhaps the biggest improvement is removing three baskets of unused resources.

Perhaps it's moving something down to child height.

Perhaps it's adding one open-ended material.

Perhaps it's changing how resources are labelled or organised.

Then notice the impact.

Because our aim isn't to create a classroom that looks outstanding.

Our aim is to create a classroom that **works exceptionally well for the children within it.**

One small tweak, based on careful observation, can begin that process immediately.”

Slide 17 – Final Reflection

“I want to finish with the idea on this slide:

An enabling indoor environment doesn't direct children where to go. It invites them to explore.

To create.

To investigate.

To collaborate.

And to return again and again because there is always something new to discover.

That's a powerful way to judge an environment.

Not:

‘Does it look impressive?’

But:

‘How does it make children feel and behave as learners?’

Do they feel capable?

Do they feel trusted?

Do they feel that resources belong to them rather than to the adults?

Can they make decisions?

Can they develop ideas?

Can they return tomorrow and continue something they began today?

The best classrooms aren't remembered because they looked impressive.

They're remembered because they helped children **feel capable.**

And when the environment empowers children to become independent learners, it has achieved perhaps its greatest purpose.

So as you look around your classroom this week, try to see it through the children's eyes.

Ask:

‘What does this environment allow me to do without an adult?’

The answer will tell you a great deal about how enabling that environment really is.”

Slide 18 – References & Closing Thought

“Today's session draws on the **EYFS Statutory Framework, Birth to 5 Matters**, Loris Malaguzzi's concept of the environment as the **third teacher**, Julie Fisher's work on starting from the child, Elizabeth Jarman's work on communication-friendly spaces and the Education Endowment Foundation's **Preparing for Literacy** guidance.

There are different approaches represented here, but the presentation brings them together around a common principle:

the environment matters.

It isn't simply the backdrop to learning.

The way we organise space, resources and access influences what children can do.

So don't finish today's session thinking:

‘What could I add to make my classroom better?’

Instead, perhaps ask:

‘What could I change to make children more capable?’

Because an exceptional EYFS environment isn't created by how much we put into it.

It's created through the quality of the thinking behind it.

Every shelf.

Every resource.

Every area.

Every enhancement.

Each should have a reason for being there.

And when those decisions consistently help children become more curious, independent, communicative and deeply engaged in their learning, the environment is doing exactly what it should.”