



UNIT-3

Enabling Children to Learn in the Early Years

Learning Outcomes

By the end of this unit the learner will be able to:

- ✓ Understand the importance of the three environments and discuss their characteristics
- ✓ Contribute to the creation and optimisation of effective emotional, indoor and outdoor environments
- ✓ More effectively consider each of the three environments from the perspective of a young learner

Unit 3

Enabling Children to Learn in the Early Years

The Early Years Foundation Stage (EYFS) is mandatory for ousted registered educational setting in England catering to children from birth to age five. Though early years education until a child reaches mandatory school age is optional, the guiding principles and statutory requirements of the Early Years Foundation Stage must be complied with by those providing early years education.

One of the most important principles in this documentation is ‘Enabling Environments’. This refers to the extent to which the educational environment in question makes all necessary efforts to provide a nurturing and conducive learning environment for early years pupils.

The concept of Enabling Environments can be split into three sub-categories of equal importance:

- **The Emotional Environment**
- **The Indoor Environment**
- **The Outdoor Environment**

Each of these environments plays a pivotal role in ensuring those taking part in early years education benefit from the best possible educational and developmental experience. In all instances, viewing the environment from the perspective of the child holds the key to ensuring its appropriateness and effectiveness.

“Adults admire their environment; they can remember it and think about it – but a child absorbs it. The things he sees are not just remembered; they form part of his soul. He incarnates in himself all in the world about him that his eyes see, and his ears hear.” - Maria Montessori

Even the smallest of adjustments to any of these three environments can have a big impact on a child’s experience in early years education. Hence, an understanding of all three environments is important for anyone working with children in an early years education setting.

Key Concepts and Principles

Creating and Nurturing Enabling Environments

It is impossible for an early years educational environment to be both enabling and appropriate, unless all staff and contributors involved understand the way children learn, the value of play and how children gradually establish independence. Early years education generally excludes formal testing, relying instead entirely on the continuous observation of both what children learn and how they learn.

A few key principles that apply across all three of the environments:

- Children respond particularly well to repetition in an educational setting, with research having demonstrated how repeating exercises builds and strengthens connections within the brain.

- It is also important to be mindful of pace, ensuring things progress at a speed young learners are comfortable and happy with.
- Providing children in an early years environment with the opportunity to observe, explore and investigate is essential. Games and activities should therefore encourage exploration, investigation and participation.
- In all aspects of early years education, process should be prioritised over product. Whereas the end product is typically more attractive to an adult, the thought process during any given activity is far more important in early years education.
- Children should be allowed to play and interact with objects in their own way and that their own pace, without interruption or constant instruction from adults.
- Effective resource planning is particularly important in an early years educational setting, in order to ensure there are enough resources available for children who may not yet have developed the capacity to share.
- Time should always be allocated in an early years education schedule to tidy and organise the space in which activities take place, which for obvious reasons can quickly become chaotic and cluttered.

These are just a few of the universally applicable principles that can and should be adopted to foster an enabling environment.

The Emotional Environment

“Babies and young children are very perceptive and aware of the feelings and atmosphere around them. Relationships between adults and children, between adults and other adults and between children themselves all have an important role to play in developing the young child’s sense of self and their understanding of how to interact with others.” - **Birth to Three: Supporting our Youngest Children. Learning and Teaching Scotland**

This is perhaps the most difficult of the three environments to define, as it refers to the collective sum of the atmosphere, mood and general ‘vibe’ of the learning environment. Most of which centres on relationships – the way those involved communicate with each other, behave and are treated by others.

It is a much less physical or tangible consideration than the other two environments, though is considered by many to be the most important of all.

From the Pupil's Perspective

As previously touched upon, the importance of viewing the emotional environment from the perspective of the child cannot be overstated. This means taking into account the following questions and concerns from the child, along with appropriate responses accordingly:

Concern	Response
Do the early years educators understand me and my family?	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● Organise meetings or interviews with parents ● Issue questionnaires to find out about the child and their family ● Encourage open and ongoing communication with families
What can I expect and will I like the learning environment?	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● Arrange open days and visits before the start of the new term ● Ensure children and their families are introduced to all staff present ● Show children and their families around the facility and allow them to ask questions
Am I welcomed and appreciated in the early years educational setting?	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● Encourage parents to stay and play with their children ● Ensure every child is welcomed warmly and addressed by their name ● Keeps things slow, relaxed, pleasant and enjoyable ● Remain positive and optimistic at all times, wearing a smile for all to see
How should I buy behave while I'm here?	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● Create and publish clear guidelines on behavioural policy ● Ensure adults are involved in the process ● Communicate behavioural requirements rather than making assumptions ● Ensure everyone involved serves as a role model for the children
How can I assure my individual needs will be understood and met?	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● Adapt teaching and communication styles to suit each child's unique personality and learning style ● Be flexible - plan and adapt activities and experiences to suit the children in the class ● Embrace diversity and equality

	actively and openly at all times
How will my experience make me more independent and confident?	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● Plan games and activities that encourage independent thought, exploration and investigation ● Give children the opportunity to access resources independently ● Let the children choose who they play with, where they play and how they play ● Keep things slow, relaxed and informal to encourage independence and boost confidence

Additional tips and guidelines for building and optimising an appropriate emotional environment include the following:

- Schedule regular meetings with parents and perhaps even plan to visit the child and their family in their own home
- Make every effort to build and maintain meaningful connections with parents, who should be seen as equal partners in the early years education process
- Issue questionnaires to parents at regular intervals to collect feedback, suggestions and recommendations for improvements to services provided
- Ensure every child is familiar to every member of staff and that they are addressed warmly by their name at all times
- Encourage every member of staff to continuously observe all children under their supervision and share information on their progress and development
- Keep things to a fixed routine or timetable where possible, as children are more confident and settled when they know what to expect
- Maintain a calm, compassionate, patient and understanding environment at all times, being sensitive to the feelings of nervous and apprehensive children

In addition, it is important to acknowledge, understand and allow for the fact that different children will have different needs – both in terms of their education and in an emotional sense. Flexibility is therefore key, as you cannot adopt the same approach (attitude, educational style, communication etc.) with each and every child and expect them to respond in the same positive way.

The Indoor Environment

“Adults admire their environment; they can remember it and think about it – but a child absorbs it. The things he sees are not just remembered; they form part of his soul. He incarnates in himself all in the world about him that his eyes see, and his ears hear.” - Maria Montessori

The above quote warrants revisiting at this juncture, given its relevance in the development of an appropriate indoor environment. Far from a contemporary concept, the extent to which a child’s surroundings have a direct impact on their education and development has been known for centuries.

To such an extent that some have described the physical environment in which early years education takes place as no less than a ‘third teacher’ in its own right. Children learn and gain so much more from the environment than an adult, who would be more likely to simply observe their surroundings than absorb and assimilate them.

From the Pupil’s Perspective

Once again, the key to getting things right where establishing and optimising the indoor environment is concerned lies in viewing things from the pupil’s perspective. Concerns and potential responses to consider include the following:

Concern	Response
Is the learning environment suitably welcoming and an enjoyable place to spend time?	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● Ensure the space is attractively decorated with colourful and interactive displays ● Consider what is attractive and exciting from the perspective of a child – not an adult ● Make sure resources, displays, pictures and so on are at an appropriate height (or eye level) for kids ● Avoid the creation of a stuffy or formal space at all costs
Will there be the opportunity to play, explore and be active in various different ways?	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● Consider the creation of individual activity zones and quiet spaces around the room ● Don’t get too carried away with attempting to keep things clean and tidy at all times ● Use soft furnishings like rugs, cushions and blankets to create a comfortable environment
Is there are plenty of space to move around freely and safely?	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● Strategically position fixtures and furniture to provide plenty of room for free movement ● Observe how children use the space and the furniture, making subsequent adjustments where appropriate ● Consider using folding furniture to be removed or repositioned with ease when activities necessitate ● Be mindful of health and safety at all times – essential when working with

	children and toddlers
Are there activities available to stimulate all five senses?	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● Provide a variety of toys, activities and interactive experiences to stimulate as many of the senses as possible ● Encourage children to play and explore in a variety of ways and access resources independently
Do I have quick and easy access to all the resources and items I need?	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● Make sure everything has its place and that all storage containers are appropriately labelled ● Encourage children to collect and return with their own items and resources when needed ● Allocate each child their own drawer or basket to store their own personal items ● Tell children where to find the items they need, rather than handing them to them upon request

Additional tips and guidelines for building and optimising an appropriate indoor environment include the following:

- Draw a plan of the indoor learning environment on paper and experiment with a wide variety of potential layouts and adjustments to its current organisation
- Always ensure quiet and comfortable spaces are reserved for activities like sleeping and eating, away from more chaotic and cluttered activity areas
- Think carefully about movement and the flow of traffic when organising furniture and fixtures, with children's free movement and safety in mind
- Don't make the mistake of instinctively positioning all activity areas around the edges of the room – central activity areas can be extremely appealing
- Make an inventory of essential resources and ensure anything worn, damaged or lost is repaired or replaced as quickly as possible
- Ensure all furniture, toys, fixtures and features are in a good state of repair – don't compromise the indoor environment with dishevelled furniture and equipment
- Remove anything from the space that is neither welcome nor wanted (from the child's perspective) to prevent excessive clutter
- Review the effectiveness of the indoor environment on a regular basis and make adjustments where necessary

Given the uniqueness of every child's learning style and personality, there's no such thing as a 'perfect' indoor environment. Instead, it is the responsibility of those working in early years education to ensure a suitable indoor environment is created, in accordance with the requirements, preferences, personalities and learning styles of the children they work with. Precisely why flexibility holds the key to success, when creating a nurturing indoor environment.

Activity Areas and Separate Spaces to Consider

Every early years educational setting will comprise a wide variety of activity areas and designated spaces for children to play, learn, rest, socialise and so on. Just a few examples of these activity areas and resource suggestions include the following among others:

- **Drawing and Painting** – complete with paints, brushes, paper, colouring pencils and so on
- **Music and Dance** – a spacious activity area with the required audio/visual technology
- **Reading and Writing** – with a good selection of books and comfortable seating
- **Construction and Block Play** – self-explanatory, with plenty of blocks to play with
- **Display Area** – where kids' paintings, models and creations in general are displayed
- **Quiet Space** – for sleeping or general relaxation at designated times in the day
- **Tactile Play** – the perfect place for sand pits, water activities and textured materials

One of the best ways of establishing which kinds of games, toys and activities are appropriate for an early years educational setting is to consult with the children's parents. If it becomes clear that any activity spaces or activities in general are unpopular or ineffective, adjustments should be made where appropriate.

The Outdoor Environment

Just as important as the indoor environment in an early years educational setting is the outdoor environment. Outdoors, children are surrounded by the most extraordinary multi-sensory environment, which stimulates their desire to explore, investigate and learn about the world around them.

It's important to remember that the outdoor environment should never be strictly limited to the grounds of the facility itself. Organising regular trips to nearby parks, shops and interesting buildings can also be extremely beneficial for young learners.

What's particularly interesting is the way in which children often behave and interact with one another entirely different outdoors than indoors. You may find that children who lack confidence and appear inhibited indoors come out of their shells and blossom outdoors.

From the Pupil's Perspective

As an adult, it can be difficult to remember the wonderment even the simplest outdoor space can bring a young child. Though as before, the key to establishing the best possible outdoor environment for young learners lies in viewing things from their perspective.

Consider the following concerns and responses:

Concern	Response
Will I be able to play outside regularly and for how long?	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● Embrace the opportunity for outdoor play as often as possible/appropriate while the weather is amicable ● Ensure schedules and timetables include plenty of outdoor play and activities ● Leverage the natural desire of children to play, explore and build their confidence when playing outdoors
Do my teachers enjoy being outside as much as I do?	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● Always demonstrate enthusiasm, optimism and positivity where outdoor activities are concerned ● Instil a sense of excitement and joy in children when planning and conducting activities outdoors ● Ensure all staff give the impression that they like being outdoors as much as children do ● Communicate the value of outdoor learning with parents and take their ideas/suggestions on board
What kinds of activities will be available outdoors?	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● Try to provide the opportunity for children to take part in a wide variety of activities ● Grow fruits, vegetables and flowers to allow children to see the results of their efforts at a later date ● Encourage wildlife watching, digging, exploration and tactile interaction with their surroundings
Will I be in trouble if I am noisy, messy or boisterous when outdoors?	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● Anticipate, accept and even encourage a certain amount of chaos and messiness outdoors ● Give children the opportunity to shout, scream, run around and blow off steam outdoors when appropriate ● Provide protective

	<p>clothing/accessories to maintain appropriate cleanliness and hygiene</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Clearly communicate behavioural expectations and don't allow 'enthusiasm' to get out of hand
How easy is the outdoor space to access and will I feel safe?	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Always factor children with mobility issues into your planning decisions when setting up outdoor spaces Likewise, consider the requirements and personalities or more sensitive children or those who are less confident Focus heavily on health and safety, making sure children feel safe and comfortable outdoors Establish appropriate boundaries and make every child aware of the importance of not breaching them

Setting up an appropriate outdoor space brings children the benefit of being able to play and take part in activities that would be impossible or inappropriate indoors. Where an early years educational setting has access to even a confined outdoor space, it is the responsibility of the educators involved to take full advantage of it.

Outdoor Environment Zones, Spaces and Activities

As with the indoor environment, it is important to consider the establishment of various 'zones' and separate spaces when creating the ideal outdoor environment. What's appropriate for any given early years educational setting will be determined by its location, access to outdoor space and the requirements/preferences of the children and parents using the service?

Just a few ideas of the kinds of zones and spaces that could be established outdoors include the following among others:

- **Exercise and Play Areas** – with climbing frames, tunnels, ladders etc.
- **Pots and Planter** – for growing flowers, fruits, vegetables and herbs
- **Space for Outdoor Toys** – karts, bikes, bats, balls, beanbags and so on
- **Quiet and Secret Spaces** – for relaxation, quiet reading and general refuge
- **A Sandpit with Toys** – as large as possible to enable kids to play together
- **An Outdoor Water Feature** – or simply a paddling pool for warmer days

In Summary...

The extent to which the surrounding environment plays a role in a child's education and development has been well documented for at least two centuries. Research has shown that when equal priority is shown to each of the three environments – the emotional environment, the indoor environment and the outdoor environment – children flourish.

The most important pointer for those working in an early years educational settings where these three environments are concerned are as follows:

- Try to view everything from the perspective of a child
- Be flexible and modify your approach where necessary
- Learn to appreciate the individuality of every child and parent
- Work directly with parents to foster the best possible learning environment
- Be diverse and dynamic with tasks, games and activities
- Remain positive, optimistic and open minded at all times
- Be the best possible role model you can be
- Encourage children to establish their independence
- Embrace the inevitability of chaos and enjoy the experience!

Though early years education remains strictly optional, those who take part benefit in countless ways.

From building confidence to establishing independence to learning important social skills, everything that takes place in an early years educational setting primes children for their school years to follow.

Further Reading:

- ✓ *Enabling Environments in the Early Years: Making Provision for High Quality and Challenging Learning Experiences in Early Years Settings – April 1, 2011 by Liz Hodgman*
- ✓ *Child-Initiated Learning: Positive Relationships in the Early Years By Jennie Lindon*
- ✓ *The Whole-Brain Child: 12 Revolutionary Strategies to Nurture Your Child's Developing Mind by Daniel J. Siegel and Tina Payne Bryson*