

A good place to be two

**Developing quality environments
indoors and out**



By Community Playthings with **Jan White**

Includes case study from Two-year-old entitlement pilot project



community playthings



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Developing quality environments indoors and out

Being two is not easy. At times you feel big and strong. You declare your independence in all kinds of ways; you want to be respected and given space. Other times you feel small and vulnerable; the world looms large and scary. You want to be held and hugged and treated like the baby you used to be. Sometimes your special grownups just don't get it, and then you fly apart!

Working with two-year-olds is not easy either. One moment they are trustful and endearing; the next, they throw their weight around like little teenagers, testing whether you really mean what you say. It's important to remain patient, to try to understand their viewpoint, to be consistent – and to keep your sense of humour! How can we set up the physical environment to support children in this unique and seemingly contradictory stage?

Arthur was playing with a stick but soon forgot it and started playing with something else. Suddenly he remembered his stick and started looking for it. When I pointed it out, he asked sternly, "Who dropped it?"

First, the environment should be dependable. Two-year-olds need to know what to expect and find security in repeatedly returning to their favourite spaces. They like to enter the room and know where everything is. It's also important for each child to have a designated place for personal belongings. Once you know the children well, you will 'feel out' when they are ready for little surprises in the environment – perhaps a teddy hiding behind a bush or a seashell appearing on the teacher's chair – leading into imaginative narratives.

As twos have a drive to 'do it myself', the environment must be rich in resources that invite experimentation. Sharing is still a new concept, so provide enough that children need not guard things from each other. Twos are emerging from babyhood, when understanding was centred round their own immediate needs,





to a growing perception of other people's feelings. This is a big learning curve; we support by providing equipment that builds co-operation – ToddleBoxes or a sand table for instance.

Two-year-olds thrive in a peaceful environment. They cannot cope with an overload of stimulation as they are just learning to control their feelings. So excessive dingle-dangles, brilliant displays and clutter are to be avoided. Wooden furniture gives a calmer message than coloured plastic.

As you establish varying moods in different areas, consider how lighting creates an atmosphere. Soft natural light sets a gentler mood than bright light. Children enjoy watching the interplay of light, especially through leaves or on water. Mirrors bring reflection into the room.

Curves in the environment are like open arms welcoming children in. Outdoors, curves develop naturally in bushes and trees; indoors, they can be formed with arches, curved shelves and wave panels. The environment should partner the warm caring relationships essential to children's emotional well-being.

Nature deserves plenty of space. Two-year-olds enjoy turning over stones to discover worms and woodlice; they are intrigued by flowers and insects. When developing your garden, consider which shrubs might attract birds or butterflies; and include areas where children can dig and plant – most love to help grow vegetables. There are many creative ways to bring nature indoors as well.

Jan White, Consultant for Outdoor Provision in the Early Years, contributed the section on children's physical development, movement and action. With her, we are excited about supporting early years educators in creating indoor and outdoor environments that offer two-year-olds both nurture and adventure.



From watching us staff, Hamida got the idea of picking up trash (or 'crash' as she calls it) and putting it in the rubbish bin. Now we have to check the bin regularly, as many things end up in the 'crash' that do not belong there!



A place to be active

The importance of movement and action for two-year-olds cannot be overemphasized. Their play is very physical, involving lots of movement of themselves and of things. They use their whole selves to learn about their world, to do their thinking and to communicate with others. In large-motor play, children test their physical powers. It's thrilling for a child to realise, "I can make these wheels move!" – which is why Kiddie cars and Pushcarts should be available indoors as well as out.

Being active is essential for brain and body development, and twos enthusiastically get on with it. Everything in their environment is an invitation for action and they can be wonderfully inventive! Adults must understand the foundational processes driving this intense need to be physical – that physical development comes through *using* the body: moving it in space and gravity, pushing and challenging it. This is just what every healthy two-year-old wants to do!

Twos have a strong biological drive for experiences that develop their 'vestibular sense' – they

love to rock, swing, spin, twirl, tip, teeter, jiggle, wobble, slide, bounce, be up-side-down and otherwise get dizzy! This foundational sensory system detects motion and orientation, enabling balance and coordination and giving a feeling of well-being and equilibrium.

Children also use action to build a neural map of their body in their brain that enables bodily control. They do this via their 'proprioceptive sense' (perception of the self) when nerve-endings in muscles, joints and tendons are stimulated by stretch, tension, resistance and impact. Actions that two-year-olds instinctively enjoy – jumping, hopping, digging and sweeping, washing windows, pushing a wheelbarrow or truck, throwing a ball, filling and lifting a bucket, carrying heavy objects, dancing and running – respond to this need for proprioceptive stimulation, thereby building strong body awareness and a robust sense of self.

Being physical underpins mental health through the joy of movement and through building wholesome self-image, confidence and self-esteem. Movement makes one feel

Wanjin is playing with a wooden truck. It's brand new, but he says, "See all that compost on my lorry? It's so dirty!" He fetches a cloth and carefully wipes it all over. I ask, "Are you done washing your truck?" He replies, "Nope. It will take a long time. Maybe all the way to Sunday!"





good through the production of mood-enhancing chemicals in the brain and the feeling of life in every limb. It also aids learning as it activates the brain, creates nerve connections, and provides sensory and embodied 'felt' understandings. Brain and body really do develop together.

Movement develops physical health through developing muscles, tendons, bones, nerve connections, co-ordination and the vast array of movement skills needed for life. It supports personal and social well-being as children form relationships through moving and acting together. Chasing, follow-my-leader, and roly-poly (rough and tumble) play are crucial bonding experiences, particularly for boys.

So a great environment will have lots of opportunities for all the physical experiences twos naturally engage in. It will have abundant open space both indoors and out. It will be three-dimensional, offering different perspectives and levels with lots of ways to move up and down between them – ladders, steps, look-out points, places for clambering and low walls to walk along and jump off. Outdoors, the less predictable features, angles and surfaces of nature are beneficial as they demand constant adjustment,

extend developing abilities, and help twos learn about themselves in relation to their world.

A great environment should include stimulus for travelling: pathways, tunnels, bridges, vehicles to ride, trucks and prams to push and pull. It should provide a variety of surfaces to move on and between – smooth and hard (flooring, tarmac, pavement), soft and giving (carpeting, bark, sand), uneven and bumpy (pebbles, woodland floor, grass) plus steps, slopes, terraces and other gradients.

Finally, a movement-rich environment will allow twos to move freely and easily between the indoor and outdoor halves of the whole. Set-up of the space will be fluid, responsive to children's current needs and interests. We want to create an empowering environment that fits round the child, rather than asking the child to fit into the environment.

Thanks to Jan White for this chapter.
janwhitenaturalplay.wordpress.com

Hasan, almost three, studied a family photograph. With a happy grin he exclaimed, "I like me best!"





A place to relax

While open areas are vital for active play, cosy enclosed spaces invite children to withdraw and relax. Two-year-olds need to occasionally disengage from action and interaction during a busy day so their bodies can recharge, their souls reflect and their minds process incoming impressions. They appreciate restful moments of solitude. They may also enjoy being alone with a friend.

Nature particularly fosters this 'breathing in', and children need opportunity to immerse in it. Staff at one nursery allowed the grass to grow in the garden (rather than having it mowed regularly) and were amazed at the qualitative difference to children's experience.

Two-year-olds were seen crawling through the long grass like tigers through a jungle. Some picked wild-flowers that grew with the grass. Others liked to lie in the tall grass and look up at the sky from their own little niche.

Adults remembering their favourite childhood chill-out spot might recall the 'cave' beneath a special bush or a snug hide-away under the kitchen table. Intimate nooks allow children to feel secure and 'in control', strengthening well-being and facilitating conversation. In the nursery garden, child-friendly recesses can be created in a bamboo thicket, a willow tunnel or a rhododendron that form a natural 'house'. Indoors, furniture can be positioned to

**My twos are grasping
for the finer details of language:**

"I'm go-to-ing nursery."

**"Why Sara has a hat
on his head?"**

"I will wash it yesterday."

**"My mummy watch
overs me."**

**"When Anna is a big
boy, she can climb
trees like me!"**

**"My baby is cute. She's
a cute-cumber."**





make small personal spaces. Don't forget that curves give a visual hug!

As well as individual hidey-holes, each setting should have peaceful places where adult and child can share a story or a cuddle. Two-year-olds need to feel their key person's steady supportive understanding, so nurturing spaces must be available indoors and out. Ideas of how to offer this outdoors may be inspired through staff discussion – perhaps an arbour or a swinging seat; each garden will have unique possibilities.

Indoors the book area, removed from noise and bustle, naturally provides this attractive quiet space. Its boundaries can be formed of shelving and panels; fabric overhead adds a lovely enveloping touch. An arch might invite children in and a window panel links book corner to role play. Twos enjoy communicating through a window. Soft seating and cushions lend a homelike feel, so important where children spend long hours away from home. This comfortable book corner frequently doubles as sleep area, since most two-year-olds require a nap at some point during the day.

As a family, we have always sung with our children at bedtime. One evening Jed was singing so loud that I was about to quiet him, when he announced proudly, "The angels heard that!"





A place for tactile exploration

Two-year-olds' learning is tactile and sensory, so they need a wide variety of materials to investigate. Things that are rough, smooth, hard, soft, cold, warm, wet, dry, squishy, scratchy, fluffy, silky, prickly, sticky, crunchy, crackly etc. appeal to their innate curiosity – and encourage language development as children verbalise experience. Nature is where children discover many of these differing textures to explore. A two-year-old might pause while crossing the garden to feel the smooth roundness of an acorn, tread in squelchy mud or rub a tree's rough bark. Unhurried time is essential for children to make their individual discoveries.

This tactile learning includes practice with everyday processes and objects like taps, buttons and shoes. A two-year-old may find great satisfaction pulling a zip up and down or turning a tap on and off. She may work long and hard to put on her sock, only to pull it off and start again! From the child's viewpoint this is no different from stringing beads into a necklace and then sliding them off, or dumping the pieces after carefully completing a puzzle.

Twos manipulate objects in all kinds of ways: collecting, arranging, sorting, posting, transporting, fastening, detaching, enclosing, stacking, knocking down, filling, pouring... Such repetitive action strengthens fine-motor control and underpins cognitive development. It takes place in construction area, sandpit, mud kitchen, wet play area, home corner, cloak room – wherever children find things to experiment with! Natural objects like wood scraps and seashells, and everyday items like reels and cardboard tubes, can be included in many areas of the setting to support tactile exploration. Much can be learned about each child while observing their manipulative activity; various schemas emerge that reveal individual interests.

Malleable materials like dough, clay and goop invite sensory investigation; and children use all kinds of tools (including recycled objects) as they roll, indent, squeeze and shape their creations. Self-esteem is built as children realise they are making things happen! This learning process and sense of empowerment are more important than any end product. Finger painting, which is primarily a sensory-motor

Merle asks for 'snizzers' to cut paper. While cutting, she opens and closes her mouth every time she opens and shuts the scissors.





experience at this stage, is popular with many two-year-olds. Children finger-paint directly on the table or other hard surfaces (Perspex panels for example) or on paper attached to floor or easel.

It's sensible to offer wet and messy activities near the sink to aid in clean-up – twos love to help! This area includes a water table and a sand table, as well as basic art supplies. If your wet-play area is near the exit, these activities can be easily brought outdoors. Floor surfaces deserve consideration. Vinyl is preferable to carpet, as twos engage in so many messy activities; lay area rugs where children play or relax on the floor.

A large sandpit in the garden brings never-ending contentment. Twos not only manipulate the sand, but start to construct miniature environments and engage in small-world play. Natural materials like twigs, pebbles and fir cones are invaluable here. Mud kitchens too are deeply satisfying as a place to investigate materials such as soil, water, mud, gravel, grass, sticks and leaves – plus engage in role play. Every adult can recall the pleasure of concocting mud pies.

Block play strengthens cognitive development; children's minds are processing concepts of gravity and balance long before they learn these terms. Mini-hollow blocks are perfect for twos to manoeuvre (and to post things into when set on edge). Mini-unit blocks are great for play on table-top or floor. Block play begins as manipulative action – with children placing blocks in rows or stacks – but quickly develops into the realm of fantasy as children weave narratives through their play, so block play will be covered in the section on imagination.





A place for imagination

As mentioned, children's tactile involvement leads directly into imagination. Albert Einstein said, "Imagination is more important than knowledge; for knowledge is limited, whereas imagination embraces the entire world"! Ability to use imagination is a life skill, crucial for possibility-thinking.

Imagination adds a rich dimension to children's lives and is key to understanding the feelings of others. It is one of childhood's great arts – and two-year-olds become masters! There are many ways practitioners nurture imagination: story-telling, singing, sharing poems and, most importantly, allowing abundant time for child-initiated play. The physical environment also plays a crucial role.

An outdoor environment rich in variety – open areas, slopes, inviting nooks, sand pit, lots of open-ended materials, shrubs, mud kitchen – allows imagination to flourish. Indoors too imagination will blossom in every part of the room, but two areas particularly foster fantasy play and should be given special consideration: the construction area, where twos start to create miniature environments with blocks and act out narratives using small-world figures, and the role play area (or home corner) where the children themselves are the actors.

It's good if role play and construction areas are adjacent, since large construction frequently evolves into role play, and materials are often shared. Shelves storing resources can form boundaries or partitions between these two areas. These boundaries protect children's play, give a sense of security, and help children focus. If shelves have fuzzy backs, they simultaneously provide storage for the area they face, and display for the area behind. For instance, a shelf

holding blocks for the construction area can have an enticing display or large mirror on its back, facing the home corner. Boundaries can also be formed with bamboo, Perspex or fuzzy panels. Window panels or arches make inviting links between these two activity areas.

The role play area must be spacious enough for twos to act out all kinds of scenarios. Furniture should be child-sized and versatile so this area can be kitchen, bedroom, doctor's surgery, hairdresser's – whatever the children decide. You'll also want a storage unit for dress-ups. These dress-ups need not be elaborate. In fact, ornate costumes tend to limit imagination (it's hard to be the postman in a fairy dress), are difficult for two-year-olds to put on, and cause squabbles if several children want the same one. A few old handbags, hats, shawls and pieces of bright fabric serve just as well. With a towel round your shoulders and tea cosy on your head, you can be anything from queen to fireman!





Twos find special satisfaction in playing 'Mummy and Daddy'. They become deeply involved with simple materials such as corks, lids, conkers and dough, which readily become 'food' or anything children envision. This is true symbolic play. Dolls take whatever characteristics children endow them with. Although ethnic-specific gender-specific dolls (and dolls that walk and talk) are available, a floppy rag doll may be just as dearly loved. Adults must consider: What do children want from a doll? They often prefer a doll with simple facial indications to one with a fixed radiant smile, because they want their doll to share their own mood – which isn't always radiant.

The construction area too must have ample floor space. Block play is still new for two-year-olds, and each child's play will develop at his or her unique pace. It's best to limit small-world props until children are comfortable with the blocks themselves for play and representation. Children frequently use blocks as symbols. A two-year-old might sit on a car (or horse) made of Mini-hollow blocks and use a Mini-unit block as a mobile phone. Or a child might stack Mini-hollow blocks against the wall saying "Here's the cooker!" and then slide Unit blocks into the gaps, saying "That's the bread!"

Block play eventually sets the stage for small world play, which begins with basic scenarios. A child might build a small enclosure with blocks and place zoo animals or miniature people inside. This will expand into full-fledged narratives if children have ample time to develop their ideas. For small-world play, as for role play, simple props support imagination better than elaborate toys; flashy remote-control products are unnecessary. Little human and animal figures and vehicles are useful, and children will use natural and everyday objects to enhance their play and decorate their constructions. Clothes pegs, feathers and small logs become anything in the hands of a two-year-old. For more on imaginative play with simple materials, see *I Made a Unicorn* downloadable at www.communityplaythings.co.uk

Twos frequently 'think aloud' during small-world play, thus developing language and giving adults a peep into their imaginings. A child may busy himself with little blocks while saying, "Everyone come to the table – supper is ready!"

Two-year-old Rhiannon was overheard in the home corner saying firmly to her doll, "No apple tart till you've eaten your sprouts!"





Case study

Barkantine Community Nursery, Tower Hamlets

Pilot of free entitlement for disadvantaged two-year-olds

Barkantine Community Nursery in Tower Hamlets made vital changes to their environment when piloting the expansion of entitlement to free education for disadvantaged two-year-olds. It was a privilege, when we visited, to see such deeply-involved children.

Bozena Myslinska, deputy, described how their approach evolved. She and manager Sajida Malik, an Early Years Professional, attended a five-day **ITERS/ECERS** course; the rest of the staff attended a one-day session. This helped them plan the set-up of each activity area to support children's learning. She commented that **Roomscapes** furniture has been integral to the process as it allows them to create protected (but flexible) areas 'and lasts forever'.

A staff inset day on **Communication Friendly Spaces™** taught the value of calm. The environment formerly overstimulated children with overbearing displays, loud colours and dingle-dangles, so they de-cluttered. They made areas inviting with gentle colours, living plants and meaningful displays at child height. A cosy lamp and palm tree in the book corner makes it 'home away from home'. Bozena says, "Once you listen to the children, you can create something amazing."

Has the pilot made a difference? One two-year-old was withdrawn and frustrated; he couldn't make himself understood. Staff asked his parents' permission to involve a language therapist for one-on-one support. The child is becoming happier, engaging with others and learning to communicate his needs. He will soon be moving to a school setting, where he will continue to receive support. Thanks to his uptake of the free entitlement, the outlook is positive.

The pilot has inspired closer working with early years advisors and sharing of ideas with other nurseries in the borough. Staff at Barkantine are determined to continue developing the environment. They feel it's important to define activity areas but also to allow children the flexibility of bringing their creative play to the home corner or their construction skills into the art area.

Because they use shelves and panels to partition areas, it's easy to shift this furniture in response to children's needs. Bozena says, "We want children to drive their own learning. We see ourselves as resources for the children."



More information:

Roomscapes:

www.communityplaythings.co.uk

Communication Friendly Spaces™:

www.elizabethjarmantraining.co.uk

ECERS and ITERS:

www.ecersuk.org



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Conclusion

Finally, an environment for two-year-olds must be flexible as well as dependable. That's because designing an environment for young children is an on-going process as the children grow, learn and develop across all areas. Although you don't want to cause anxiety by changing the environment too often, you will want to occasionally expand or contract activity areas to meet children's changing needs – or rearrange areas to recapture their interest. The main thing is to remain tuned-in to the children, so you know when they need stability and when they are ready for change.

Now, get down on their level and consider: If you were two, how would you feel in this place? Do the spaces invite you in and lead you on? Are there areas that offer the thrill of adventure to support your big moments and cosy nooks for when you're feeling small? And even more important than this wonderful environment: are there grownups who love and understand you, even when you don't understand yourself?

It's a privilege to work with young children – to see through their eyes and experience life through their emotions. It will be a privilege too to reflect and work as a team to create a truly enabling environment for twos.

Thanks

For photos

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Magic Dragon Nursery
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Choosing equipment for two-year-olds

Role play		Book corner		Creative/messy	
	Child's sofa		Playsize set of four		Bench glider
	Mini art island		Large sand and water		
	Compact drama centre		Rocking chair		Library rack
	Drying rack		Tulip aprons		
	Play collection		Woodcrest table set		Browser box
	Creative unit 3		Peg tree		
	Peg tree		Doll's highchair		Cosy nook
	Help yourself trolley		Small sand and water		
	Role play under 3s		Child's armchair		Woodcrest chairs
					MultiTables



Block play	Large muscle play	Rest/changing	Mealtime	
 Unit blocks	 Pushcart	 Nursery gym	 Rest mat	 Childshape chairs
 Small trucks	 Kiddie car	 Mini hollow blocks	 Robin's nest	 Woodcrest chairs
 Fixed shelf	 Push me-Pull me	 Large trucks	 Child's sofa	 MultiTables
 Mini hollow blocks	 Small trikes	 Wheelbarrow	 Hedgehog cottage	 Teacher low chair
 Mini unit blocks	 Hollow blocks	 ToddleBoxes	 Changing table	 Me-do-it chair



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"Community Playthings has captured the essence and joy of being two. Local Authorities will value this supportive guidance as they offer training to settings providing the two-year-old entitlement."

Sue Egersdorff, Director of Early Years Leadership
National College for School Leadership

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