

# Contemporary spaces and places that inspire babies' and toddlers' learning and development

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Prior to developing Bond University's Bachelor of Children's Services program, Caroline Fewster enjoyed a long and varied career working with children in a wide range of Children's Services care and teaching situations. Starting out as a preschool teacher in the ACT, she progressed to advisory and consultancy roles with regional and government education authorities. Her experience encompasses all aspects of early childhood learning, from classroom teaching to managing services and from educating future teachers to consulting and developing professional development programs. Caroline consults for a range of non-government, community-based and corporate organisations, as well as local, state and the Commonwealth Government.

Babies and toddlers are unique. They have particular ways of learning about their world through exploration in the physical and social environment in an early childhood setting. Spaces and places for learning experiences, therefore, provide the foundation for knowing and understanding the social world, as well as shaping early development.

Contemporary spaces and places can be a vision of what the program values, and frame the possibilities and actions for living and learning with babies and toddlers. Learning materials in early childhood programmes are described by Curtis and Carter as *the bones of the curriculum and the foundation of the teaching and learning process* (Curtis D, Carter M 2008:54).

### Design principles

Designing and collecting learning materials and arranging them as invitations can be compared to the pleasure of finding a gift for a friend, carefully selected and presented in a beautiful way.

Contemporary spaces and places especially designed for babies and toddlers are presented to children within a framework of design principles:

- creating new possibilities for familiar spaces and places
- provisioning the environment with materials that honour and extend children's interests

- introducing collections of open-ended materials
- including symbolic representation of each child and their family.

### Particular places

Potential for a collective sense of our place and a number of 'my places' is important in baby and toddler programs. Space with character, friendly and defining objects will enhance other elements of the program that are critical to younger children and their families, and they can personalise the space. Introducing family stories so babies and toddlers can listen to their families all day!



### 'Thinking in things'

Babies and toddlers constantly use materials to learn about the world, explore their questions, and represent their thinking. Their initial experience is to examine the properties and functions of materials. As young children get more familiar with how objects can represent ideas and concepts, they begin to intentionally use materials for a purpose. Joan Newcomb calls this 'thinking in things' (in Curtis and Carter 2008:55)



### Introducing portable play and learning materials

Autonomy contributes to the simple enjoyment of life – to choose our space and objects gives freedom to invent the spaces babies and toddlers design themselves. If babies and toddlers are given the opportunity to create play spaces and places, they can make settings and things work for them indoors and outdoors, in many different ways.

*Potential for a collective sense of our place and a number of my places is important in children's programs* (Greenman J, 2007:93).



### Introducing the floor curriculum

It is estimated that 60% of baby and toddler play takes place on the floor. Look for treasures, intriguing objects and materials to stimulate curiosity and inquiry.



*Contemporary spaces and places that inspire babies' and toddlers' learning and development are places where young children can feel a sense of belonging, a sense of wellbeing — and a desire to discover and explore an early childhood setting.*

When early childhood educators design a learning environment with particular values and design principles in mind, along with engaging materials to explore, they set the stage for meaningful learning experiences for babies and toddlers.

### References

Curtis D, Carter M 2008, Learning Together with Young Children: A Curriculum Framework for Reflective Teachers.

Greenman, J 1998, Places for Childhoods: Making Quality Happen in the Real World.

Gandini L, Pope Edwards C 2001, Bambini: The Italian Approach to Infant/Toddler Care.