



Lead on

Teaching in an enabling environment is exemplified at one school in London. By *Anna Ephgrave*

The adult in the photo above is doing exactly what is expected of all the adults in the early years at Carterhatch Infant School: she is teaching. And the school is organised in a way to ensure that these teaching opportunities are maximised.

I rarely praise Ofsted, but it now provides a welcome definition of teaching in the early years in its *School Inspection Handbook*. As well as making clear that teaching should not ‘imply a “top down” or formal’ approach, the definition also acknowledges the broad range of teaching interactions that occur in ‘planned and child-initiated play’, including modelling, questioning, recalling and setting challenges.

So, in the above photo, the adult is teaching by:

- modelling language at a level appropriate for each child
- showing the children how the book contains information about snails
- explaining what some of the words mean
- responding to the children’s questions
- challenging them to look for specific details on the snails.

It is estimated that an early years practitioner has about 1,000 such interactions in a day. If each interaction involves some ‘teaching’, with the child making progress as a result, then progress over time will be fantastic for the cohort of children.

ENABLING ENVIRONMENT

The Ofsted definition also acknowledges the critical importance of the environment in supporting children’s learning, noting that teaching ‘takes account of the equipment adults provide and the attention given to the physical environment, as well as the structure and routines of the day that establish expectations’.

What this looks like in practice can be seen in the setting where good-quality – and clearly cared for – musical instruments are labelled and set out beautifully on shelves (they are actually next to a stage).

The children looking at the snails were able to find a book about snails on the book rack in the garden, a magnifying glass on the shelf nearby and a frying pan to keep the snails in, temporarily – they could have selected a bug box, but the frying pan was more appealing!

Clockwise from above: exploring snails; hands-on learning; and keeping the environment tidy

These examples also give an idea of the work involved in creating and maintaining a truly ‘enabling environment’. We aim to provide a learning space that allows children to be as independent as possible and caters for as many interests as possible. While most of the setting-up is done before the children arrive in school (in September), we constantly review and reflect on the environment to check that it is delivering the deep levels of involvement that we wish to see.

‘Rules’

Governing our enabling environment is a handful of ‘rules’, to provide clear and consistent adult expectations of children and to achieve, and maintain, a calm and purposeful atmosphere. So, children are guided by these rules: ‘We tidy up an area when we have finished playing there’; ‘Indoors we walk and we use quiet voices’; ‘We use our words to sort out arguments’; ‘When climbing, no-one touches anyone’. Helping children to meet these expectations is ➤

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ADULT ROLE

another important aspect of teaching. Equally clear and consistent are the structure and routines of the day, outlined in simple visual timetables in each room.

All these strands of teaching within a truly enabling environment can be seen in the meticulous organisation of the resources and the environment at our setting, and in how the children understand, and adhere to, the rules: they are talking quietly and walking – rather than running – around the room, tidying up as they go, and resolving disputes without any adult input.

Likewise, the children's play and learning is driven not by an adult but by the children's innate desire to learn. They often learn from their peers or by trying to complete challenges that they have set themselves. This level of independent learning leaves the adults free to interact with (that is, teach) children where they choose. Adults might be interacting with children, but will also be scanning the room, monitoring all areas and will be ready to move if they notice anything that needs their attention.

PLANNING AND ASSESSMENT

Another element of teaching covered within the Ofsted definition is that of planning and assessment, noting that practitioners need to assess 'what children know, understand and can do, as well as taking account of their interests and dispositions to learn (Characteristics of Effective Learning), and how practitioners use this information to plan children's next steps in learning and monitor their progress?'

At Carterhatch, while the adults constantly observe and assess the children, we plan in the moment, rather than plan ahead.

For example, an adult had noticed that one of the boys was interested in a seed pod (observation) and discovered, through conversation, that he didn't know what it was (assessment). Rather than delaying the learning by devising a particular 'seed pod' activity for a later date (planning next steps), the adult immediately explained what the seed pod was, showed the child how to break it open, supported him in digging a hole and planting the seeds.

Several other children became interested in what was happening and so lots of children learned from this new experience.

Well-being

Missing from the Ofsted definition is what we at Carterhatch consider to be the most vital aspect of teaching: supporting the well-being of children. We recognise how essential well-being is to effective learning and that children (or, indeed, anyone of any age) are unable to become deeply involved in learning if they are stressed and anxious. We therefore focus on and support children's well-being above all else in the induction period and beyond to make sure the children feel safe, secure, liked, important, valued and unique.

Free-flow play

With 25 years' teaching experience, I know that the best learning takes place when children are able to pursue their own interests in an enabling environment, supported by skilful



Planting seeds (above) and nailing bottle tops to a block of wood (right)



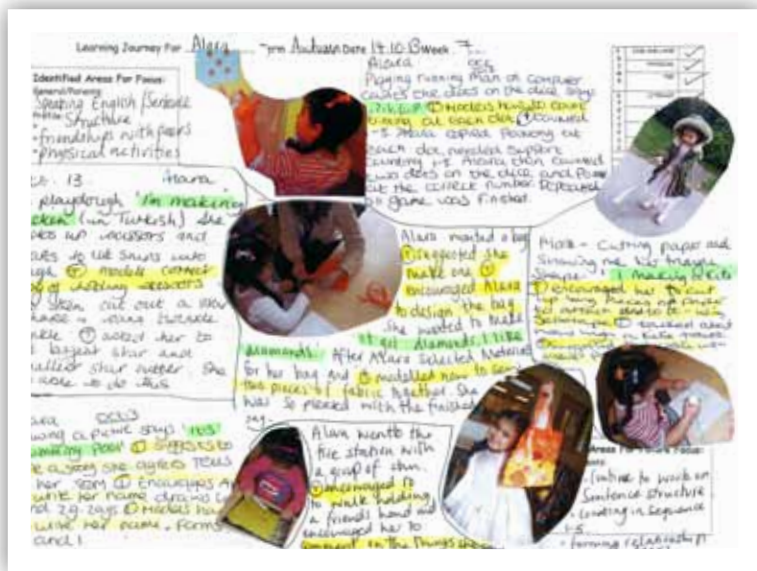
adults. This is 'free-flow' play – where children choose what to do and adults join them, interact with them and move their learning on as a result. So, to maximise the teaching opportunities at Carterhatch, we maximise the amount of free-flow time in the day.

The children are absorbed in child-initiated play from the moment they arrive – and the adults are equally absorbed with them – until 20 minutes before the end of the morning or afternoon session. They then tidy up and take part in a very short group time (including some developmentally appropriate phonics teaching). The 'timetable', therefore, is very simple, offering long periods of uninterrupted play, during which the adults are free to interact (and teach) the children. While the children are playing, the adults are not expected to do anything apart from teach; they do neither focused tasks nor any other adult-led activities.

Record-keeping

We try to keep paperwork to a minimum. We have a system of 'focus children', and each week we record our interactions with ten per cent of the children (three in each class). We record these interactions on a sheet that we call a Learning Journey (see example, left). Each entry on these sheets contains the complete teaching cycle – including observation, teaching and outcome. We keep paperwork to a minimum simply because the more time we spend writing, the less time we spend interacting (teaching), so the less progress our children will make over time. ■

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