

A young child is hanging from a horizontal metal bar. The child is wearing a dark jacket, light-colored trousers, and white sneakers. They are positioned upside down, with their legs spread apart and arms gripping the bar. The background is a blurred outdoor setting with a blue mat on the ground and a green wall or fence in the distance.

# Planning the Pre-5 Setting

Practical Ideas and  
Activities for the Nursery

**Christine Macintyre  
and Kim McVitty**

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A huge thank you also to all the children who inspired us to carry on writing because they were so anxious to see their photographs in a real book! We thank their parents for giving permission for these photographs to be published. We hope that everyone enjoys seeing the children learning, discovering and problem solving in a colourful, friendly setting. If they do, our efforts will have been worthwhile.

# Introduction

This book aims to provide a clear and comprehensive guide to setting up a successful and happy nursery environment in either the private or the school sector. All the suggested planning and organisation were tried out, evaluated and retried until the staff were able to agree that a sensible and realistic ‘way that works’ had been found.

One of the considerations in writing the book is the knowledge that every nursery is different: the children, their parents, the staff and the setting itself all contribute to making the learning environment ‘their own’. While no one would wish otherwise, this does mean that some of the ideas suggested may need some adaptation to suit another context. Some parents, for example, may wish to have more information in their nursery booklet, while others – perhaps those who find reading English difficult – may prefer to have less. This book offers guidance, not prescription. Nursery staff are experts at being resourceful and imaginative, so we hope that the structure and strategies suggested here will provide enough material to enable them to plan and organise their own setting in a way that leaves maximum time for supporting their own children.

A second point is that the curriculum documents for different regions vary in the ways in which they group the competences they wish the children to acquire. While the headings within the developmental frameworks are therefore different, e.g. in England mathematics has a column of its own while in Scotland it is included under the heading, ‘Knowledge and understanding of the world’, the key learning outcomes aimed at guiding the teaching are essentially the same. This is discussed in the text.

Just as the children learn new things every day, so do the staff. Observing and interacting with three- and four-year-olds in a way which enables them to thrive are very difficult skills that are not easily acquired. Yet the rewards – building relationships with the parents and carers who are partners in their children’s education and seeing the children become happy, stimulated and increasingly independent learners – are such that most staff regard the nursery as the very best place to be!

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# 1 Settling in

Attending a playgroup or nursery for the first time is an important milestone in the lives of many children and their parents. It may be the first time parents have entrusted their children to 'strangers' and the first time that these children have had to cope without their parents at their side. Some will anticipate the new venture confidently while others will need more reassurance that good things lie ahead. So that everyone can relax and enjoy this new stage in the children's lives, it is vitally important that right from the start, a relationship of trust between parents and nursery staff is established. This chapter shows how that may be done.

## What do the children need to know?

While many children come into nursery ready to hang their coat on their peg and 'have a go', others need lots of reassurance to help them settle in. This may be the first time they have experienced:

- being 'left' with people they do not know;
- being among so many children, all busily employed;
- having so much space and so many toys;
- not being sure that Mum will come back.

They need to know that they are welcome to join in, that they can settle at their own pace with Mum beside them, that they can choose what they want to do and that they will soon make friends.

To prevent the children, especially the three-year-olds, becoming overwhelmed by all that goes on in the nursery, it is a good idea to make the first visit a short one of an hour or so. It is best if the child goes home before story time as sitting closely within a group could prove too much for the first day. Even although Mum is there in the background, it is better for the children to leave after a short, happy spell – then they will be anxious to come back tomorrow! Visits can gradually be lengthened, with mums absent for increasingly longer spells once the children have understood the layout of the nursery, the routine of the day and when they have recognised that they will be safe and supported in this new environment.

## What do parents need to know?

Parents who do not know the nursery or the staff are likely to require plenty of reassurance too. They need to know that:

- the nursery is a safe place for their children;
- their children will be valued as individuals and well cared for;
- the staff are qualified to teach very young children;
- their children will be supported and encouraged to learn;
- if any difficulty arises (e.g. the child not settling in or feeling ill), they will be contacted immediately.



Kiera and Hannah are supported as they learn

### ***Practical details***

Parents need to be sure of:

- the start and end times of their child's session;
- the number to call if they have a problem, e.g. their child is unwell or they are going to be late collecting their child;
- how to advise the nursery staff if any other person has their permission to collect their child – this is essential for security.

### **What does the nursery need to know?**

Parents need to provide essential information before any child can be left at the nursery.

### ***Personal details***

The nursery will need to have:

The child's name and date of birth.

Parents' names, home addresses and telephone numbers.

Any workplace telephone numbers (for emergencies only).

Details of a second reliable contact (name, telephone number, distance from the nursery).

Details of anyone else authorised to collect the child from nursery.

The name and telephone number of the child's doctor and/or health visitor.

Any dietary information, e.g. food that must not be offered at snack time.

Details of any allergies, e.g. asthma triggers such as dust or animal fur, or eczema that might be aggravated by the use of soap.

Information about previous or ongoing contact with a hospital, a speech and language therapist, a psychologist or social work agencies.

Details of the first symptoms of any recurring illness, particularly if a GP has to be contacted quickly (e.g. asthma, diabetes).

Details of any medication. If this has to be given during nursery, written instructions of the dose and how and when to administer it are required.

(Note: a medical form provided by the school has to be completed. This gives staff the authority to follow the instructions that have been given.)

If special resources are required, e.g. a handrail in the toilets and in the garden, the more notice the school has the better (see also Ch. 7, 'Transitions', p. 105).

## **Planning a first meeting between staff, parents and children**

Although there is a great deal of administration to get through at a first meeting, some quality time must be scheduled for parents to ask questions and for the staff to share their plans and hopes for the coming session. The date of the first meeting needs to be carefully planned to give staff time to talk – ideally once the nursery is up and running and when the returning children have re-established their routines and their relationships with the staff.

It is a good idea to make special arrangements for parents coming into the nursery with their children for the first visit, depending on whether a home visit has already taken place (perhaps at the end of the previous term). All parents are offered such a visit but some families, for a number of reasons, may not have been able to participate and so some 'new starts' will be unknown.

## **Home visits**

Two staff together arrange to visit the children's homes, leaving precise details of the times and places of their visits (and their mobile phone numbers) with the remaining nursery staff. This preliminary meeting ensures that staff and parents are acquainted with each other before the first day at nursery. It allows the staff to see the children interacting with their parents, to understand a little of the home background and to begin to consider how much and what kind of support that particular child will require during the first days at nursery.

From these meetings the staff can decide the order of the children coming for their first visit. If they anticipate that one particular child will need special support, that child can come in as a 'single' whereas another two children with their parents could attend the same session – one at 9.30am and another at 10.00am.

It is important for all parents to feel that the staff have had the opportunity to talk with them individually and establish the first all-important, friendly link. This time allows the parents to see the nursery in action and gives the staff advance notice of strategies which might help their child settle down. If, for example, a particular child is keen on cars, the staff can set out some toy cars for his first visit to the nursery. A 'staggered start' or 'gradual entry' also prevents the nursery being swamped by adults! Organisational considerations such as these will help the staff to understand each child and provide the most appropriate support.

At a first meeting, there is no need to bombard parents with too many questions, for as the relationship between the nursery and the family develops, understandings will be built up which will make sharing information easier. From the start however, parents should be made aware of the importance of sharing details of everyday happenings in their child's life. Even small snippets of information, e.g. that the goldfish has just died, can explain why the child is upset and enable the staff to give the most appropriate kind of comfort or if a child has refused breakfast, staff can

ensure that an early snack is made available. In the latter case, staff could then check whether the child was willing/able to eat and if they find a problem this can be related back to the parents. The parents have to appreciate why this kind of personal information is needed or they could resent giving it!

## **Sharing personal information**

Useful information which could be passed on at this first meeting (or subsequently shared at arriving and leaving times) might concern any parental worries. Parents might have suspicions that ‘something’ is wrong with their child; perhaps, in their eyes, he or she is not progressing as fast as a sibling or other children of the same age and they would like the staff to confirm/deny this or initiate requests for specialist support. Maybe another child is showing signs of temporary difficulties due to changing circumstances or the arrival of a baby in the family, and the staff need to understand why the child’s behaviour is affected.

Understandably, some parents may find it difficult to share personal information or concerns about their child, suspecting perhaps that they might be considered bad or inadequate parents. In these instances, do not rush them but allow a little more time to discuss what both parties can do to help the children settle in – perhaps over a cup of tea. This will smooth the path of future communications!

Parents might also wish to explain:

- that their child needs to be reminded to go to the toilet;
- that their child’s speech is slow or that they have difficulty making themselves understood;
- that they suspect their child has a hearing difficulty;
- that they have recently moved to the area, the child is missing his or her old home and has not yet had the opportunity to make friends with the local children.

## **Getting to know the child’s world**

At nursery, children are encouraged to talk to the staff; they expect the staff to know their cat’s name, that Auntie Sharon lives next door and that they have a big brother – often in that order of importance. Conversations can break down if the staff have insufficient background information to reply appropriately.

Helpful insights might concern:

- the number of other children in the family and their names;
- whether the child attending the nursery is the oldest or youngest;
- which schools any siblings attend;
- whether one or both parents are at home when the child is at nursery;
- whether one or both parents speak English fluently;
- what religion the family observes;
- whether the child has had any previous nursery experience;
- the names of people in daily contact with the children;
- any pets and their names.

Staff who do not live close to the nursery could also carry out some research. Their first conversations will be more relevant if they know something of the local area and the people who live there. While no one should make any assumptions, understanding the children’s homes, their family arrangements and possibly what amenities are available to them, e.g. local shops, a library or a garden, can help interactions to be correctly pitched and will avoid the possibility of causing hurt or embarrassment to anyone.