

Enabling Environments: Continuous Provision Part 1 - Don't stop me now!

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[Wednesday, September 17, 2008](#)

What is meant by continuous provision, and what does it require of early years practitioners? Anne O'Connor explains the key elements.



'Continuous provision' is a term introduced only relatively recently, to describe the core of everyday resources that should always be available to children in early years settings. As an approach it is hardly new - in the past, we have used a variety of terms, such as 'resource-based play environment' and 'workshop approach', to describe the good practice of having a constant, ready supply of essential equipment and materials on offer from which children can make choices and direct their own play.

Terms such as 'free-flow', 'child-initiated' and 'enhancements' are also often used when practitioners talk about the environment and the way the day is organised - but not always with the same understanding or interpretation. It is easy to start using the jargon before we've understood the principle behind it.

A simple explanation of the terms might suggest that if 'continuous provision' describes the regular daily menu of experiences always on offer in a setting, then 'enhancements' are perhaps the 'specials' that are provided in response to particular interests or seasonal availability!

But perhaps there is a danger in oversimplifying the terminology. The words we use are not just describing a way of 'delivering' a curriculum for early years. In truth, they point towards a principled, philosophical approach, built on the 'developmental' and 'enquiry' approaches of the recent past and informed by what we currently know about the way young children learn best and develop well. The point about 'continuous provision' as an approach is that it offers children the optimum playful environment in which they can:

- be active, confident participants;
- make choices to create their own learning context;
- make choices based on their own experiences;
- have the time and space to wallow in it.

Tina Bruce believes 'wallowing' to be an essential element of 'free-flow' play, which she describes as an equation:

Free-flow play = wallow in past experiences + technical prowess, competence, mastery and control acquired (in *The Excellence of Play* ed Janet Moyles, p193)

That's a lot more than just choosing whether to play inside or out, which is how the term sometimes gets used!

Key features of free-flow play

There are certain features that are particular to 'free-flow play' which should help to explain that complicated equation.

1. It is an active process.
2. It doesn't have to have a product at the end of it.
3. It involves children being imaginative, original and innovative, creating alternative worlds for themselves.
4. It involves wallowing in ideas, feelings and relationships.
5. It incorporates previous experiences and reflection on what one already knows.
6. It can be solitary or in groups.

7. It doesn't involve conforming to external pressure in the form of rules or goals , though internal rules and tasks might develop as part of the process.
8. It allows the child to use previously developed skills and competences which enables them to be in control.
9. It is intrinsically motivated - although it can be initiated by adults or other children, the motivation to join in will come from themselves.
10. It is sustained and involves concentration, bringing together everything a child learns, feels, knows and understands.

Flow and challenge

All of this fits well with the theories of Mihaly Csikszentmihalyi, who has researched extensively the concept of 'flow' and what it means to be 'in' it. He describes it as 'being completely involved in an activity for its own sake' and where 'you're using your skills to the utmost'. His work is focused on the psychology of learning and fulfilment in adults, but as well as mirroring the features of free-flow play, it also links well with early education theories such as Vygotsky's 'zone of proximal development (ZPD)', and the approaches of Montessori and Reggio Emilia.

Vygotsky suggests that children learn best when they are in their 'ZPD'. This is where the level of challenge is just at the right level to take their learning forward - it is not too easy, nor is it too difficult so that it frustrates them.

This will be different for any child at any time, so it is important that their play allows them to draw on their personal experiences and to use skills in which they are already competent. Other children and sensitive adults joining in with the play often act as role models and help scaffold the learning development to the next stage through sustained, shared thinking.

Continuous provision provides an ideal environment for this to take place, as it offers lots of opportunity for children to make individual and spontaneous choices. This allows them to revisit and sustain activities as often as they need, as their new skills and competencies begin to emerge.

Key elements of continuous provision

1. Time

It is hard to 'wallow' in anything if your time is restricted. There's not much point in a beautifully resourced environment if the only opportunity for choosing what you do in it is limited to 'free play' slots after registration, before assembly, in between phonics and numeracy sessions - and you have to stop for snack, lunch and 'group' time.

Children need long periods of time for uninterrupted, sustained play if the experience is to be worthwhile. When natural and necessary interruptions occur (lunch time

being the obvious one), then children need to know that they can return to the same activity if they choose and that there is value in pursuing a project over time.

This is a significant benefit of a 'workshop' approach and can be seen to particularly good effect in the work of the Reggio Emilia pre-schools, where children are supported in sustained creative projects that can last for months at a time.

2. Relationships

Children need warm, caring and interested adults around them if they are to thrive. The most important learning resource for any child is the people around them!

As practitioners, we have to strike that tricky balance between allowing children to initiate and direct their learning, while providing sensitive intervention and guidance. We need to have an understanding of the needs and motivations of each child as well as the ability to reflect on our own understanding of the pedagogical processes involved.

3. Space

No space is ever perfect, but it's the ownership of the space by the children and adults who use it that makes a big difference to how well it works as a play environment. As practitioners, it is essential that we try to see the space from the point of view of the children and respond to what works for them.

4. Choices

Another tricky balance for practitioners to strike is between providing lots of exciting and stimulating choices, and being aware of how easily all of us can become indecisive when faced with simply too much choice. Once again, we need to look at our provision from the point of view of the child.

5. Previous experience

How do the choices we offer children allow them to incorporate the experiences they bring with them to the setting? Getting to know our children well, through observation and sharing information with parents, is essential if we are to match our provision to the children's needs and motivations.

6. Stuff

In her book *Resources for Early Learning: Children, Adults and Stuff*, Pat Gura uses the word as shorthand for all the resources (natural, manufactured, recycled) and equipment used for play. She points out, 'Anything can become a play material, as the player wills it: a child's duffle-coat worn by its owner as a Batman cape is a play material while play lasts.'

7. Accessibility

What is really important about the 'stuff' of continuous provision, though, is how easy it is for children to choose to use it. They need to know it exists and will fit their purpose; to know where to find it; to have help (if necessary) to use it; to be allowed to be creative in the way they use it; to refine how they use it; and to know where to put it back when they have finished using it.

- Future articles will expand on the key elements of continuous provision. Part 2 will be published on 16 October.