

Come on in!

Observe, then give your book corner a makeover, advises *Michael Jones*

Although an essential part of a setting, book corners are often too small or too full of books, cushions and large cuddly toys, so that only the most enthusiastic ‘bookworm’ is tempted to enter. There is often the added problem that adults don’t spend much time there either.

As part of my role as early language consultant, leading the Every Child a Talker (ECaT) project in Thurrock, I helped settings make over their book corners with some quick and effective changes.

INVITING SPACES

I work on the principle that ‘less is more’ when it comes to book displays. A huge array of books, often squeezed tightly on to shelves, looks unappealing, and such a display damages the books and limits the children’s ability to make an informed choice.

We have noticed that as soon as you put a low roof on a space, be it indoors or outdoors, children are drawn to it. So, at Homesteads Pre-School in Stanford-Le Hope, Claire Jarrold and fellow practitioners created their book corner by draping a piece of thin fabric over a strip of elastic. A set of fairy lights draped over the roof was the final touch that really excited the children.

Claire found involving children in creating wall displays for the area was another way of drawing them in. ‘Making a dragon and lanterns for the book corner, as part of our Chinese New Year celebration, created a lot of excitement,’ she says.

Jean Simmonds and colleagues at East Thurrock Kids Club took the drastic step of removing all their large cushions and replacing them with child-sized chairs, a table and a cabinet filled with easily accessible mark-making resources.

She says, ‘It was a bit of a gamble, because the area initially seemed very formal and uninviting, but the children loved it, and immediately wanted to be involved. They could find the



Book corner at Horndon Village Playgroup, before... and after

books they wanted, and the resources they needed for drawing and mark-making. Gradually we have created interactive displays together, and the more time we spend with the children, the longer they stay, sharing books and mark-making.

‘We asked parents to bring in magazines that they enjoyed, reflecting the interests of all the family. Pride of place went to *Total Carp*, a magazine dedicated to men’s pursuit of massive fish!’

BALANCING THE BOOKS

It is important that books reflect the children’s interests. I find that most book areas predominantly contain storybooks. Though these are essential for developing children’s literacy, language and love of books, they can be challenging for some children to understand.

Consequently, children often prefer non-fiction books, particularly those with photos that reflect their interests and knowledge. Choosing books, comics, magazines and even catalogues from local high street stores

that appeal to children is a sure-fire way of keeping them involved. In one setting, a display of books and toys relating to children’s TV programmes and films created a huge amount of interest.

The book corner at Chadwell St Mary Day Nursery has a soft space, with a quilt on the floor, and children are encouraged to take their shoes off before entering. Staff had observed that this made the children more relaxed – something essential to sharing books calmly.

The very youngest children have a small, enclosed box-like area with a small arch that they can crawl through to enter. Within this space are board books appealing to babies, and baskets of soft toys. The children love to crawl in and explore the books and toys.

STEP BY STEP

At Horndon Village Playgroup, Karen May led her colleagues through a series of steps to revamp

their book corner. They:

- started by sorting their book collection into themes. Those that had been loved to death, or were very old or torn, were culled.
- involved the children in choosing books about dinosaurs – their current interest – and creating a display, including a dinosaur puppet and other dinosaurs toys
- created a balance between storybooks, rhyming books, and non-fiction, a move that immediately attracted more children to the area
- invested in a new sofa and created an enclosed cushioned space next to the book shelves
- provide, on a nearby table, a mark-making activity that relates to the current display of books, which has again drawn in children who would not normally spend time there.

Ms May concludes, ‘Really, there is only one magic ingredient for encouraging children to engage with books: if an adult is in the area, then children will be there too. So it is vital to plan for adults to spend enough time there for children to be able to share books and chats.’ ■

With special thanks to the staff at Jumping Jacks Nursery in Bedford, whose work on their book area inspired this project



MORE INFORMATION

Michael Jones is an early years trainer and writer. For detailed information about book corner makeovers, including creating inviting spaces for younger children, visit Michael’s website www.talk4meaning.co.uk