

# Out of the box

One child's disability and another's distress led to a surprisingly simple nursery resource with proven benefits for children's well-being and language development. *Michael Jones* explains how

For some young children, the process of settling in to an early years setting can be prolonged, and sometimes traumatic. Parents and practitioners can also feel distress. As an Early Language Consultant for the Every Child a Talker (ECaT) projects in Thurrock and Bedford, I often talked to nursery staff about their various strategies for easing the settling-in process. We have found that all you need is a shoebox!

The idea started at Horndon Village Playgroup in Thurrock with Ruby, a three-year-old with a sensory impairment that reduces her mobility. Practitioners were concerned that Ruby might become a bit isolated, as other children were whizzing around and making friends while she was moving more slowly or preferring to stay in one place.

After discussions with Ruby's parents, her father suggested making a 'Ruby' box and filling it with her favourite toys and books. The hope was that the other children, attracted by the box, might gravitate towards Ruby, rather than her having to go to them.

Ruby's box was a huge success – a shoebox covered in silver wrapping paper, stickers and photographs of animals. Inside was an animal puzzle, a copy of *Dear Zoo* by Rod Campbell, some small plastic animal toys and a little yellow bucket with a picture of Peppa Pig on it. Children were fascinated by Ruby's box, and this activity certainly helped with her social development.

I then passed on the idea to Maria Mulholland, ECaT Early Language Lead Practitioner at St Joseph's Pre-school in Stanford-le-Hope. A few weeks later I returned to find a pile of boxes that their children's parents had made. These had become known as 'All About Me' boxes, and were being used to support all the children's well-being and language development.

Each box reflected the children's particular interests. One that was



Nursery children are fascinated by each other's boxes

particularly popular was covered in Disney Princess wrapping paper and contained a Snow White doll, a book, and seven dwarf characters.

Clara, who called the boxes 'presents', was particularly keen to show me the contents of this box and talk clearly and in detail about her love of Snow White. Usually she can be quite difficult to understand.

Playaway Pre-school in Stifford Clays provided each child with a shoebox and helped them to decorate their box in the setting. Staff asked parents to choose with their child a few items to bring in to show the adults and other children, before taking them back home at the end of each session.

Sharing them, either individually with an adult, or with a group of children, is proving valuable for building children's confidence, and particularly for those who are generally quiet.

The processes at work here seem to be simple, but very powerful. The boxes provide connections with what is most valuable and meaningful to children – namely, their family and play – and so encourage children to relax and communicate at length.

By making something together at home, the parents are communicating positive messages to their child about experiencing something separate from them. When the children report back on other children's and adults' reactions, this can add to the message that 'it is OK to do things away from the family, and we want to find out what you do while you are away from us'.

## ALL ABOUT ME

Practitioners at Smarteez Neighbourhood Nursery in Bedford have taken the concept of 'All About Me' boxes further, in response to the distress of one of their children.

Lewis, then aged two, was initially upset at separating from his mother. While this subsided, he then showed extreme distress whenever the room leader, Katherine Roberts, left the room, even for a short while.

The nursery took up my suggestion of making an 'All about Katherine' box to share with Lewis whenever she was not in the room. The box, containing some of Katherine's favourite items and a photograph of herself, was made when Lewis was calm and when they could chat about what the box was for. It was then put on a shelf, so that children could ask for it when they wanted and an adult could make time to share it with them.

Lewis enjoyed the process of making the box. Gradually he started to relax, though he could still become distressed. Katherine says, 'The box was helpful, and perhaps the most important thing was the process of spending time with him, when he was more relaxed, and talking about how he felt when he was upset.'

Katherine, Emma Owen and colleagues extended the concept of 'All About Me' boxes to include all of the children in their two-to-threes room and their families. One by one, they asked parents to decorate a shoebox and fill it with photos and items from home that had meaning for the children.

**'Children can talk about their family without being distressed at being separated from them'**

Emma says, 'We were astonished by the responses. Lewis returned with a red box. On the underside of the lid is his parents' favourite photo of him jumping on a bouncy castle. Lewis loves dinosaurs and his Uncle Jim, so wanted to include a photo of his uncle and some paper dinosaur shapes that they had cut out together. Other photos included his grandparents, who he is very close to.'

The box has become very important for Lewis and his family. 'He loves to get it down from the shelf and talk lovingly about its contents,' explains Katherine. 'Other children were very impressed, and enjoyed gathering round to hear all about the contents and the story behind each object.'

Other families have now made boxes, and these too generate great interest among the children. Louise Bambury, manager of Smarteez, is delighted with the boxes and how they are used. 'This process has contributed hugely to the children's sense of well-being. They can talk about their family and fun times that they share together, without becoming distressed at the thought that they are separated from them while in nursery. Sharing the boxes has developed their language too, as we are able to spend a long time together, talking in detail about the one thing that they are total experts in – their family.'

'There are also benefits for the parents, who thoroughly enjoy making up the boxes. This supports them in knowing that their children's well-being is being nurtured. Making the boxes also helps us build a bond with the family, and helps the practitioners bond with the children. Everyone benefits!'

Recently I described the boxes idea to a conference for ECaT practitioners in Bracknell. When I planned a return visit to explain the process on a training day for childminders, I asked the organiser to supply me with 30 shoeboxes. She replied, 'There has been a run on shoeboxes here – I will have to try another town!' It seems the idea really has caught on. ■

*Michael Jones is an early years trainer and writer. For more information about Michael's work visit his website [www.talk4meaning.co.uk](http://www.talk4meaning.co.uk)*

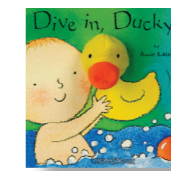
*With special thanks to Catherine Croft, head of Arlesdene Nursery School and Children's Centre in Cheshunt, Herts, whose work on children's well-being inspired these projects*



**FURTHER READING**  
*People Under Three: Young children in day care* by Sonia Jackson & Elinor Goldschmied (Routledge)

## UNDER-THREES

# First books



**DIVE IN, DUCKY!**  
BY ANNIE KUBLER  
Child's Play, Chatterbox series, board book, £5.99

enjoy Bunny Blue's search for his Granny. The text is minimal and there is a clear format with repeat phrases that encourage lively storytelling and joining in.



**NO MORE BLANKET FOR LAMBKIN!**  
BY BERNETTE FORD AND SAM WILLIAMS  
Boxer books, boardbook, £4.99

Now available with a touch-and-feel blanket on the cover, this gentle story tells of how Ducky helps her friend Lambkin to part with her comfort blanket. Other titles in this excellent transitions series are *Nappy Duck* and *Potty Piggy*, *No More Bottles for Bunny!* and *No More Dummy for Piggy!*

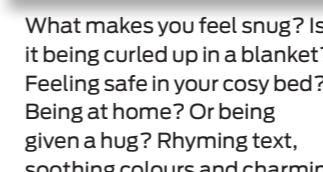


**SNUG**  
BY CAROL THOMPSON  
Child's Play, tough card format, £5.99



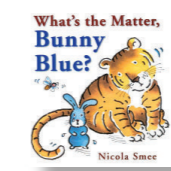
**WHEN THE WORLD IS READY FOR BED**  
BY GILLIAN SHIELDS AND ANNA CURREY  
Bloomsbury, boardbook, £5.99

As the sky darkens, the sun glows red and the night birds sing, a family of rabbits start their bedtime routines – tidying up, folding their clothes, a bedtime story, a kiss from their mother.



**SAFFY, OLLIE AND PERRY**  
BY PAOLA OPAL  
Simply read books, board books, £4.99 each

Saffy the baby giraffe isn't happy to accept a leaf from mum; she wants to stretch up and reach the leaves herself. Ollie the elephant isn't strong enough to help his mum make a path through the forest but he can help cool her down. Perry the polar bear cub is scared of water but takes the plunge when the ice breaks and he is separated from his mother. All the titles have minimal text and simple illustrations.



**WHAT'S THE MATTER, BUNNY BLUE?**  
BY NICOLA SMEE  
Boxer books, hardback, £11.99

Although recommended for children from the age of three, some two-year-olds should



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