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An innovative approach to observing and assessing children's learning and development: Highbridge Children's Centre

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Brief description

Over 70 children may access the Early Years Foundation Stage provision at Highbridge Children's Centre at any given time. The centre's ethos is to encourage children to be highly independent, selecting activities for themselves and taking responsibility for day-to-day nursery tasks. At the same time, each child has a member of staff who takes responsibility for observing, assessing and planning for their learning and development, working in partnership with the child's parents or carers.

Overview – the provider's message

'Our current practice stems from an agreement at management level to develop a free-flow approach to the Nursery. This began from the small idea of removing baby gates to allow children to move freely between areas of the nursery, and grew as walls were knocked down and we visited other providers to look at their practice. We now offer a rich and stimulating environment with free access to indoors and outdoors and a wide range of resources to encourage children to take responsibility and make their own decisions about their learning. The addition of the 'loft' as a platform adds an extra dimension to our observations of children and to the way in which staff assess and plan. We often capture aspects of their learning and development which may have previously gone unnoticed'.

Claire Howell, Nursery Teacher, and Emma Packer, Children's Centre Teacher

The good practice in detail

From small beginnings

The aim is that children and families 'care, share and learn together'. Key to this has been establishing an environment where children freely choose to be involved in activities which interest them. It is based on the [Reggio Emilia](#) approach which the managers developed in the first instance with the support and training of a local privately owned day nursery. Inspectors [reported](#) that 'the extremely enabling, inclusive environment provides excellent access to resources, which has a direct impact on all children making excellent progress towards the early learning goals.'

Cultivating independence and responsibility

Children move freely between indoor and outdoor activities at all times, selecting activities for themselves and taking responsibility for the day-to-day tasks and duties, such as preparing snacks and tidying up. The removal of doors, gates and furniture has created lots of space and there are plenty of resources close at hand to support their learning.



Mealtimes are a very important part of the day. Each day, a local supplier brings healthy hot meals to the centre and the children help to prepare by laying the tables with china plates, real glasses and metal cutlery. They serve themselves from serving dishes wherever possible, taking responsibility for what they are eating and are encouraged to do their own washing up afterwards. As well as nurturing their confidence, independence and responsibility for themselves, the nursery's

approach develops children's sense of responsibility for others. It is not unusual for a child to fill a jug with water and pour all the children a drink at teatime.

Activities are purposeful. Children make their own bread, pizzas and cake, and wash and prepare fruit and vegetables to be eaten raw or to go in soups. One mum worried that her child would not eat any vegetables, but once he became involved in food preparation and putting vegetables into the pot he was hooked on soup. His mum could not believe that he had eaten it and asked for the recipe!



A bird's eye view



Staff were so pleased with the way a two-storey loft construction was used to support the children's learning in another nursery they visited that they decided to buy a similar structure for the children's centre. The downstairs section of the loft has seen many uses so far, including as a bird hide, nature area, a stable for the nativity, for role play and as a quiet library area. The children like the cosier feel to the area which is sited within the large, open plan environment.

Because not all children are able to independently access the upper floor of the loft, a unique way of using this space has been found. Staff work in this area during non-contact time or when they are timetabled for a short break and this has led to major developments in the way in which they plan, observe and evaluate practice. The bird's eye view enables staff to see which areas the children use most often, to consider why this might be and think how to develop the provision in specific areas. For example, an observation of children in the construction area enjoying building and balancing activities led

to the development of similar opportunities within the indoor role-play area, including a cement mixer being brought in from the garden.

Observations from the loft area enable staff to focus on individual children, observing their particular interests and patterns of play, and supporting the planning and development of the environment and provision. These observations also support the staff's knowledge of [schemas](#) which in turn have influenced the planning for the children, especially in developing their emotional well-being.



In addition to being an excellent vantage point for observations, the upper level promotes children's learning and development. Children ask what their key workers are doing in the loft and then imitate the writing that takes place in the loft area. Children have special opportunities to visit the loft to look at and talk about the scrapbooks and learning diaries that record their learning. Their comments during these discussions provide useful insight about the activities they enjoy and would like to revisit.

The spin-offs

An organisational benefit is that staff remain in the nursery during their non-contact time. This means that they know what is happening and hear conversations between their colleagues and the children which enables all adults to implement a consistent approach. For example, a child is upset when their own key worker goes on a lunch break can be reassured by another member of staff returning from the loft who has heard the exchange between the key worker and child.

An important development in the way staff observe, assess and plan has been the introduction of communication books for each child. Key workers use their observations to keep parents and carers well informed and encourage them to be fully involved by suggesting activities which will develop their child's interests and support their learning. As a result, parents and carers have spent an increasing amount of time supporting their child's learning at home.

Provider background

[Highbridge Children's Centre](#) is managed by Somerset County Council and works with key partners including Churchfields Primary School, local Early Years Foundation Stage providers, health professionals and Barnardos. It offers a variety of family support services, including a nursery.



Are you thinking of putting these ideas into practice; or already doing something similar that could help other providers; or just interested? We'd welcome your views and ideas. Get in touch [here](#).

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