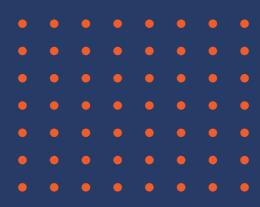


Part 3

Design guide – for developing physical play environments together with children







It is now time to design a new play environment together with the children

You must involve the children so that you find out about their play interest, and subsequently include their ideas and perspectives in the development of the actual play environment. Children are play experts, and can tell and show you what it takes for them to immerse themselves in the magic of play.

The design guide is based on co-creation methods that allow the children real influence on the decisions relating to the development of the play environment. Adults therefore need to adopt a child's perspective and the role of a detective, who curiously and respectfully involves the children, allowing them to express themselves through engaging activities.

Co-creation with children is both a method and an ideology, and is about children and adults creating something together, on equal terms and while being willing to take risks. In co-creation, the focus is on the 'case' in hand and on accommodating the participants' different perspectives, which at the same time creates a sense of shared ownership. The adults have an ethical responsibility for the children's well-being, and for enabling equality, equal rights of initiative, active engagement and meaningful involvement through the framing.

The design guide is intended for the development of play environments for and with children aged 3 to 6 years.



"The child's playful, experimental approach is intended to show adults something new, and knowledge and learning should be fun. This is perhaps where the child can give the adult something, and where their perspective on co-creation is crucial"

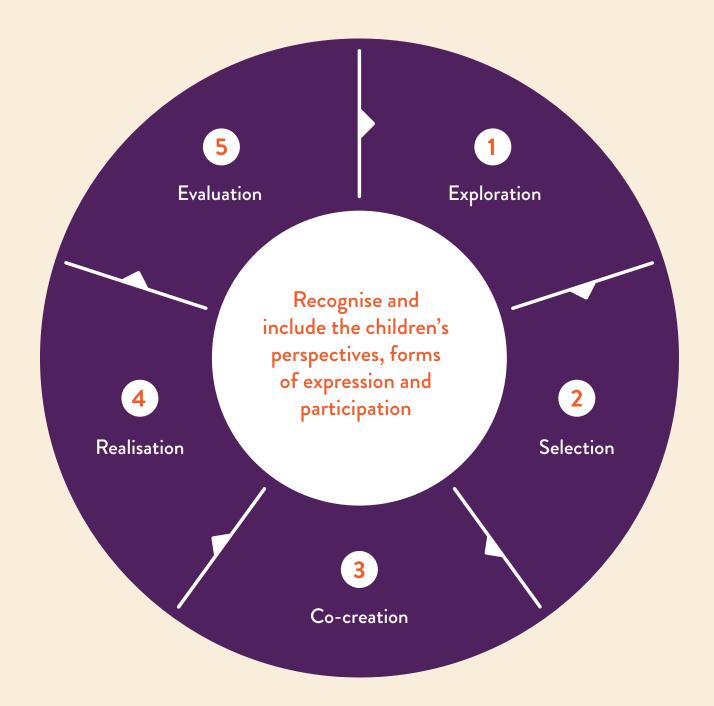
Lene Tanggaard & Josefine Dilling



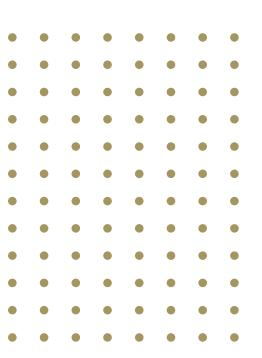
Introduction



The design of physical play environments consists of a start-up phase and five subsequent phases. The five phases basically involve (1) examining the children's play interests, (2) selecting which play environment you want to focus on, (3) assessing the current quality of the chosen play environment, (4) developing ideas and creating the new play environment, and (5) continually following up, evaluating and possibly making adjustments along the way. High-quality play environments are dynamic and adaptable to the children's changing play interests. Ensuring quality is a circular process, where the same play environment must be visited again and again to ensure that children experience good and inspiring play environments.



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The goal of working with the design guide is to co-create high-quality play environments with children. The entire process can take 1-5 months depending on the scope of the project. The timeline illustrates a three-month process. The timeline can help provide an overview of the entire process from start to finish. Use the forms at the back of the material to record your considerations along the way.

Process timeline

Before you start working with the five phases, you need to prepare a timeline for your process – including how often you hold collaboration meetings and how much time and how many resources you are intending to allocate to each phase. You should also ensure that you have enough time and resources to immerse yourself in the process with the children to avoid being interrupted or running out of time. Your work will be of the highest quality if you are able to immerse yourself in it – and co-creating with children takes time. Feel free to use the blank planner at the back of the design guide in your planning.

Documentation

Even at this early stage, consider when and how you will document the process so that the children and their parents can follow what is happening. It is a good idea to use pictures and videos. The documentation is especially important the longer the process lasts. In this way, it will be easier for you to help the children maintain their focus and interest in the project.

Choice of children's group

When deciding which children to involve in the process, it may be relevant to consider various pedagogical aspects with regard to the composition of the group. Use the process to strengthen/build relations in a play group, or see it as a chance to support a particular group of children's immersion in play or other pedagogical attention points. Consider the following:

- -O- Which children should participate? Age? Number?
- -O- Assess the children's prerequisites for participating in the process. Is there anything you need to take into account?

Exploration



You must now explore the children's play interest and what they are interested in playing right now. You need their experiences and inputs to create quality play environments, and it is by following the children's play interests that you can create play environments that motivate and inspire them.

Read more about following children's play interests on pages 38-39.



Step by step

Be an 'intern' in a group of children. You learn most about the children's play and how they use the play environment by switching between playing alongside the children and observing them. It is important that you take the time to study the children's play in order to understand its complexities and how it develops and what really interests the children. As part of the process, document by taking notes, photos and possibly making short videos.

- Ask the children to show you the places they play most or where they enjoy playing.
- Follow the children around, play with them and observe how they play, and how they use the props and the spatial properties of the play environment. Children are imaginative, and their actions and use of play media can mean something completely different to what you might assume. Through observations and playing with the children, you must find answers to the following questions:
 - Which play activities are the children most interested in, and how do they develop?
 - How immersed do the children become when playing?
 - How does the physical play environment function for the children? What are they lacking, and how suited do they think the space is for play?

Share your observations with relevant colleagues and tell them about your observations.

- -O- Where do the children like playing at the moment and with what?
- O How did they make use of the physical play environment?
- -O- What surprised you in connection with their play and how they use the play environment?

Note down your observations in the form for phase 1 at the back of this material.





Close to play

By following in the children's footsteps, you will acquire unique knowledge through stepping into the co-player role. By playing with the children on their terms, you get to experience the play and its dynamics first hand. Pay attention to, for example:

- The play atmosphere, i.e. the special way of being present when playing.
- Play media, i.e. all the tools, toys and object that are used when playing.
- Play practice, i.e. how you act to enter into the play mood.

Selection



Based on your observations and discussions in phase 1, you must now – together with the children – select the play interest for which you want to create a good play environment. Once you have agreed on which play interest you want to work with, you must select the physical environment which, following an upgrade, is going to support the selected play interest in the best possible way. The phase ends with an overall assessment (based on 14 quality criteria) of the physical play environment you have chosen to focus on.

You can read more about the quality of physical spaces on pages 42-45.



Step by step

Select the play interest

- O Gather the children, and tell them what play interests you have observed during your 'internship'. Visualise with photos from phase 1.
- -O- Agree together on which play interest you want to develop further, and establish whether you all understand the play interest in the same way.

Select the physical play environment

- O Based on your choice of play interest, choose 2-3 places which you think are best suited for letting the play interest unfold. It might, for example, be the current location and a couple of alternatives.
- Visit the selected places, and allow the children to help decide whether they might be good places to play. Let the children take pictures of each place with a tablet.
- -O Print out and hang up the pictures of the different play environments on a wall. The children and adults then stick one Post-it note each on the picture of the play environment that they want upgraded. Choose the physical play environment with the most Post-it notes.

Assess the quality of the physical play environment

- Based on the children's input and your own observations, now assess the overall quality of the play environment.
- O Complete the questionnaire on the following pages. The questionnaire asks you to assess the selected play environment according to 14 quality criteria, which to a greater or lesser extent must be fulfilled, depending on which play experiences the environment needs to support.
- O Hold a planning meeting where you look at the quality criteria that need improving. Based on your responses, you need to decide which of the 14 quality criteria you want to improve in the play environment in question. Note down which criteria you have chosen in the questionnaire for phase 2 at the back of the material.

Discuss the task in general, and what kind of task it is that you want to co-create with the children. Agree on time and resources, as well as who is responsible for the process.



Based on the inputs from the initial phases, mark field 1, 2 or 3 for each quality criterion.

1 = the criterion is not, or only partially, met. 2 = the criterion is met to some extent, 3 = the criterion is met.

To what extent is the necessary space available for the play activities and the children's opportunities for immersion and engagement?



Not a lot of space is available for the play activities and the children's opportunities for immersion and engagement



Some space is available for the play activities and the children's opportunities for immersion and engagement



A lot of space is available for the play activities and the children's opportunities for immersion and engagement

To what extent is the necessary space available for an adult to join in the play?



The space needed for an adult to join in the play activity is available to a small extent



The space needed for an adult to join in the play activity is available to some extent



The space needed for an adult to join in the play activity is available to a great extent

Selection (continued)

To what extent do the layout, materials and toys in the play environment inspire children to decode the many different ways in which the physical play environment can be used?



The layout, materials and toys inspire the children to a small extent



The layout, materials and toys inspire the children to some extent



The layout, materials and toys inspire the children to a great extent

To what extent can children decode what the play environment is to be used for (play type or theme) by means of a clear identity and demarcation of the play environment?



The children can to a small extent decode what the space is to be used for



The children can to some extent decode what the space is to be used for



The children can to a great extent decode what the space is to be used for

To what extent can the children explore and shape their physical surroundings using available and abundant materials, props etc. corresponding to their age group?



The children can to a small extent explore and shape their physical surroundings using the available materials



The children can to some extent explore and shape their physical surroundings using the available materials



The children can to a great extent explore and shape their physical surroundings using the available materials



To what extent does the location or spatial shielding of the play environment allow the children to play undisturbed?



The children can play undisturbed to a small extent



The children can play undisturbed to some extent



The children can play undisturbed to a great extent

To what extent can children leave things out if they want to continue playing later or the next day?



If they want to continue playing later, the children can to a small extent leave things out



If they want to continue playing later, the children can to some extent leave things out



If they want to continue playing later, the children can to a great extent leave things out

To what extent are the children's senses stimulated by encountering a variety of different surfaces and materials, such as rough, smooth, knobbly, hot, cold etc.?



The children's senses are to a small extent stimulated and do not encounter a variety of different materials



The children's senses are to some extent stimulated by encountering different materials



The children's senses are to a great extent stimulated by encountering different materials

Selection (continued)

To what extent are the children's gross or fine motor skills stimulated?



The children's gross or fine motor skills are stimulated to a small extent



The children's gross or fine motor skills are stimulated to some extent



The children's gross or fine motor skills are stimulated to a great extent

To what extent can the children change the physical play environment over time because of a flexible layout, toys and materials that can be moved or reshaped depending on how the play develops?



The children can to a small extent change the physical play environment as part of their play and over time



The children can to some extent change the physical play environment as part of their play over time



The children can to a great extent change the physical play environment as part of their play and over time

To what extent is the play environment designed with different levels and demarcated play zones?



The play environment is to a small extent designed with different levels and play zones



The play environment is to some extent designed with different levels and play zones



The play environment is to a great extent designed with different levels and play zones



To what extent has the play environment deliberately been designed using colours that are suited to the children's play activities and the atmosphere of the play environment?



The play environment has deliberately been designed using suitable colours to a small extent



The play environment has deliberately been designed using suitable colours to some extent



The play environment has deliberately been designed using suitable colours to a great extent

To what extent does the design of the play environment contribute to minimising noise?



The design of the play environment minimises noise to a small extent



The design of the play environment minimises noise to some extent



The design of the play environment minimises noise to a great extent

To what extent is the lighting designed to provide focused lighting (at the play activity) and ambient lighting (throughout the play environment) so the lighting can be adapted to the children's play activities?



The play environment is to a small extent designed with both focused lighting and ambient lighting



The play environment is to some extent designed with both focused lighting and ambient lighting



The play environment is to a great extent designed with both focused lighting and ambient lighting

Co-creation



You are now going to co-create with the children and together decide what is going to happen with the physical play environment. You need to create a space and creative process with the children in which you will be inspired, develop ideas and decide jointly on how to arrange and equip the space and which props and materials are needed.

Facilitating co-creation is about creating a trusting space where children dare to express their views and build on each other's ideas, make joint decisions and thereby achieve joint ownership of the new play environment you are all going to design. Co-creating with children often takes surprising turns, so it is important that you are open and flexible in terms of time and planning, but at the same time it is important to have a clear framework to ensure that everything is as concrete and as clear as possible for the children.

Read more about co-creation on pages 46-47.

Step by step

A co-creative process consists of four steps:

- -O- Create a shared play narrative.
- -O- Seek inspiration for layout and props.
- -O- Create ideas for possible solutions.
- -O- Make a joint decision.

Create a shared play narrative

You and the children must now immerse yourselves in the play activity that you are designing for. This is done by creating a common play narrative which both develops the play itself and gives you inspiration for which activities and needs the play environment should be designed for.

- Place yourselves in the play environment you have chosen with the children.
- Find play props and equipment to suit the play activity.

- Start the play narrative by allocating roles together with the children. Involve the children by getting them to make suggestions for the play narrative.
- O Join in the play activity for a while and see where it goes. Allow the children to contribute to the play activity, and to use the space and the other props.
- -O- When the children start playing and using the space and the props, it will gradually become apparent which props and materials they need for their play as well as what it will take for the room to support the children's play interest.

Seek inspiration

Good ideas are often based on inspiration. Before developing ideas together with the children, you can start by gathering inspiration. Define a clear, safe and inspiring framework for the task. Make it clear that together you are going to find out how the new play environment should be arranged, and that it is all about collecting and building on each other's ideas. You can find inspiration on the next page:



- Go on an inspiration trip. If you want to build a play environment with cars, you can, for example, visit the local car repair shop. Or if you want to create a shop environment, you might want to visit a local store. Get a guided tour, and talk to the children about how, for example, a car repair shop or store is arranged and equipped.
- Inspirational images, books or films: Together with the children, you can look at inspiring pictures, books or films that link to the play environment you are intending to design. Talk about what you can see in the pictures, and whether they provide ideas for the new play environment.

Develop ideas for possible solutions.

Children express their thoughts and ideas differently. When planning the creative process with the children, the next page lists three methods (A, B and C), which you might draw inspiration from. All three methods involve brainstorming and engaging with the children about their ideas. Consider which method is best suited for your particular group of children.

The methods for co-creation with kindergarten-age children have, as a supplement to the verbal dialogue, a special focus on the children's visual and non-verbal communication and the importance of working with different forms of expression.

During the creative process, talk about what you are doing while allowing yourselves to be inspired by each other. During the process, the most important thing is the narrative about the ideas that are taking shape rather than whether it exactly resembles what the children have in mind. It is therefore a question of getting the children to put their ideas and what they want to create into words. You can mix the three methods depending on the task, the age of the children and your preferences. For all three methods, consider using music as part of the creative process. Music can create a conducive environment for creative immersion.



Co-creation (continued)



Drawing and painting

Let the children draw or paint their ideas. Choose age-appropriate materials. For the youngest children, it could be flooring paper and chalks, while older children can be given A3 paper at a table with felt tip pens and pencils or paints and brushes. The older children might find it inspiring to work at easels, if you have them.



Selection

Let the children build models out of different materials. In addition to cardboard and paper, these may include felt, foam, corrugated cardboard, yarn, fabric, beads etc. Ideally you should have a good mix of different types of materials. Each child could be given a shoebox, for example, in which to build their play environment. Older children can work on the same box together, while the younger children will need an adult to work with them and help them. For the youngest, plasticine, Silk Clay or papier mâché may be suitable.



1:1 test

You can do a temporary arrangement with the furniture and props you already have, and try out different layouts with the children. The test can run for a day, several days or weeks, and during that time you can talk to the children about how the temporary play environment is functioning. If, for example, the new play environment has dens, test various prototypes to get an idea of the size and number etc. you need. You can also clear the space completely and then let the children bring back what they would like to play with.

Make a joint decision

Jointly decide what is going to happen in the play environment. You have to reach an agreement, and this can happen, for example, by making a democratic decision in the children's group, or by discussing what ideas to pursue. Inevitably, not all of the children's ideas will be used in the final design, so it is necessary to explain why this is the case should the children ask. It might be because of the cost, time or because there was insufficient support for the idea.



When co-creating

Avoid manipulation – as adults we are good at influencing children, but try to remain open to what they have to say.

Listen, listen and listen. As adults, we often have our own agenda, but try putting this to one side and remain curious about what is being said and where the process is going.

As a facilitator of the co-creation process, you play an important role. Your focus is always to facilitate a joint process and to enter into an equal dialogue with the children. You set a clear framework and provide the materials, but the creative process is steered by the children, which you can then guide along the way.

- \odot Be curious and ask questions, enquire about the children's ideas, but also make your own suggestions
- Make materials and props available during the process which you think may benefit the creative process
 Observe how they are received.
- -O- Expand the children's thoughts and ideas through inspiration.

Realisation



Based on your joint decision about the new play environment, you now need to realise your ideas. The realisation process can take some time, and it may be necessary to make adjustments as you go along. In parallel with realising the new play environment, you need to align the children's needs and play interest in the new environment with the pedagogical curriculum themes, and establish how to support the children's play, learning and development.

Read more about the link to the pedagogical curriculum on pages 48-49.

Finally, you must introduce the children to the new play environment.



Step by step

Realisation comprises three steps:

- -O- Complete and execute the action plan.
- -O- Link to the pedagogical curriculum themes.
- -O- Introducing the new play environment.

Complete and execute the action plan

Before starting to realise your new play environment, you need to consider which tasks need to be carried out and who should be involved in performing them. Remember that the play environment must be adaptable to the children's changing play interests. Incorporate materials, sound, lighting, colours and 'scenography' that can easily be replaced or rethought. Decide whether you need to bring in tradesmen or to ask the children's parents to help with some of the tasks. The parents can be involved as active co-creators of the children's play environment, for example as important contributors to specific tasks such as painting, sewing and collecting recycled furniture or other materials.

Also, consider how the children can be involved in helping to realise the new play environment. By involving the children in the realisation of the new play environment, it provides an

opportunity for them to gain new experiences with their own potentials. By actively involving the children in designing the physical play environment and collecting materials for the play environment, you are supporting them in their experience of being key co-creators.

When doing the action plan, it is important to align time and resources and the distribution of the tasks that need doing. Might there be delivery times etc. that you need to bear in mind when preparing a realistic timeline? Divide the tasks between you to ensure that several of you are involved in realising the play environment – and getting shared ownership.



Remember

As regards any permanently installed fixtures and fittings, you must contact the local authority to find out whether a building permit or fire approval is required.



Link to the pedagogical curriculum themes

In parallel with realising the new physical play environment, you need to clarify how the children's needs and play interest in the new play environment are linked to the pedagogical curriculum themes. In this way, the children's play can be a natural source of inspiration for the curriculum work.

Formulate the pedagogical intention for the play environment, and describe what aspects of the children's play, learning and development you want to support. Afterwards, set goals for the children and adults that will visualise and provide direction for your pedagogical intention. The goals must convey what you want to promote in the play environment and reflect a joint decision about what to focus on.

Complete the action plan for phase 4.

Introducing the new play environment

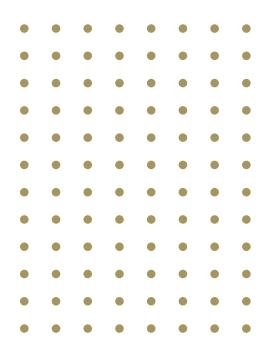
Once the play environment has been realised, it is a good idea to introduce it properly to ensure the best possible start-up to using the play environment. Even if you have developed the play environment together with the children, it may be necessary to reintroduce the thoughts and ideas from the design process to the children to help them get the best start playing in the new play environment.

When initiating a play activity in the new environment, it is important that you participate as play facilitators to make the children aware of the possibilities and ideas on which the play environment is 'based'. The play must follow the children's lead, and be based on their ideas, experiences and knowledge. The play facilitator frames the play, but the children choose what they want to do and how.

Through play, you will discover where it may be necessary to adapt the play environment. It may be that props are missing, that the layout needs adjusting, or that the children are asking for something that was not mentioned during the co-creation process. You may also need to adjust your pedagogical intention as well as the goals for children and adults.

- Gather the children and do a recap of the process you have been through.
- Tell them again which of their ideas and inputs have been realised.
- Describe what you have all done and why the space/ place/toys are now organised as they are.
- Initiate a play experience based on your shared thoughts and ideas.

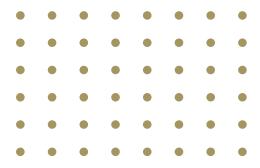
- If necessary, adjust the arrangement of the play environment, the props etc.
- Celebrate that you have finished.



Evaluation



After a while, you need to assess whether you have achieved the goal of developing and designing a high-quality play environment. To do so, evaluate the children's perspective, adult participation and the physical space, which are the three ingredients needed to create high-quality play environments. You must assess whether the quality criteria and goals that you focused on in phase 2 have been fulfilled, evaluate your work with the pedagogical intention and the children's experience of their play.



Step by step

The evaluation comprises four steps:

- -O- Evaluate the work with the selected quality criteria.
- -O- Evaluate the work with the pedagogical intention and goals.
- -O- Evaluate how the children experience playing.
- -O- Overall assessment of the play environment.

Evaluate the quality criteria

After a while, based on the quality criteria you focused on in phase 2, you need to assess whether the quality of the play environment has been raised. Consider whether adjustments are needed. Or whether you need to focus on other quality criteria than the ones you originally selected.

Evaluation of pedagogical intention and goals

You must now evaluate your work with the pedagogical intention, including the goals for children and adults. Consider whether your pedagogical work in the play environment accommodates the children's perspectives and developmental needs, or whether you need to do more of something or possibly change something. It may also be necessary to set

new or different goals to ensure that you cater for all the children's play, learning and development.

Evaluate children's experience of play

The purpose of creating quality play environments is for the children to experience playful activities of a high quality. You can evaluate the children's experiences of playing by conducting observations based on the five characteristics of playful experiences.

Research shows that when children have playful experiences that are meaningful to them and which are joyful, actively engaging, socially interactive and experimental, a deeper form of learning occurs. The five characteristics are present to varying degrees when children engage in high-quality play activities. All five are not necessarily present all the time, but can be observed over a period.



The five characteristics of a playful experience

Joyful:

The children have the experience of enjoying a task, of success and of overcoming challenges.

Actively engaging:

The children experience being totally consumed by a thing, a situation or an activity.

Meaningful:

The children experience something as being meaningful, and can associate experiences with something they already know.

Iterative:

The children try things out, formulate hypotheses and discover new questions.

Socially interactive

The children express their thoughts, develop an understanding of each other and form strong relationships.

In the staff group, discuss whether more is required to support and promote children's playful experiences in the play environment.

Overall assessment of the play environment

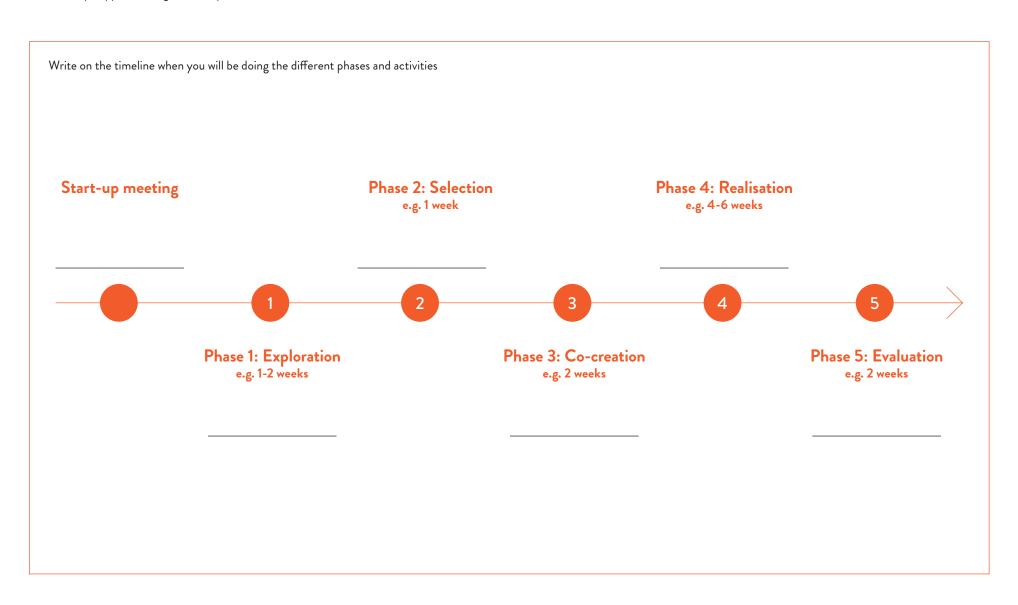
Based on the above evaluations, assess the dynamic relationship between the children's perspective, adult participation and the physical space. Consider whether you need more or less of one or more of the three main ingredients for creating high-quality play environments. Do the children get to experience playful activities of a high quality? Do the adults need to play alongside the children and support the play to a greater extent? And is there a connection between space and pedagogy, or does the physical environment need adjusting?

Remember that children's play interests constantly change, so it will be necessary to continually adjust and develop the environment and, for example, add new and exciting props. High-quality play environments are dynamic and adaptable to children's changing interests and needs.



Form – start-up

The start-up happens during the time period:





Process timeline

Decide how often to hold collaboration meetings, as well as how much time and resources to allocate for each phase. Note that your timeline for the realisation phase may depend on tradesmen, parents or other contributors. Therefore, make sure to allocate plenty of time for this phase.

Choice of children's group

Which children should participate, and what are their prerequisites for participating?

Documentation

Consider when and how you will document the process so that the children and their parents can follow what is happening. It is a good idea to use pictures and videos.

Form - phase 1 (exploration)

Phase 1 will be implemented during the period:

Which play activities are the children most interested in, and how do they develop?

How does the physical play environment function for the children? What are they lacking, and how suited do they think the space is for play?

How immersed do the children become when playing?

What surprised you in connection with their play and how they use the play environment?

Form - phase 2 (selection)

Phase 2 will be implemented during the period:

Which play interest have you chosen as the starting point for your new play environment?

Which location have you chosen for the new play environment?

Which quality criteria from pages 63-67 have you decided to work on in the play environment in question?

Write what is required to raise the quality in relation to the selected criteria?

Criteria:

Criteria:

Criteria:

Formulate the task that you will solve in co-creation with the children.

7

Form - phase 3 (co-creation)

Phase 3 will be implemented during the period:

Briefly describe your shared play narrative and which props and materials the children need for their play:

How will you and the children find inspiration for developing the new play environment?

Which method will you use to co-create the new play environment with the children?

Plan the process as well as how you will reach agreement on which ideas to pursue.

Action plan - phase 4 (realisation)

Phase 4 will be implemented during the period:

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Phase 4 (continued) - important pedagogical considerations

Formulate the pedagogical intentions for the new play environment.

Which curriculum themes link to the children's play interests and the new play environment?

Goals for the children:

Goals for the adults:

Does revisiting the ideas and the implemented play process give rise to any

considerations/adjustments?

Form - phase 5 (evaluation)

Phase 5 will be implemented during the period:

Have you achieved your goals for the selected quality criteria, and if not, what is missing?

Is there anything you need to do to support the children's playful experiences?

Now assess your work with the pedagogical intention, including the goals for children and adults. Is there anything more you need to do? Is there anything that needs to be adjusted?

What is your overall assessment of the play environment?

8

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