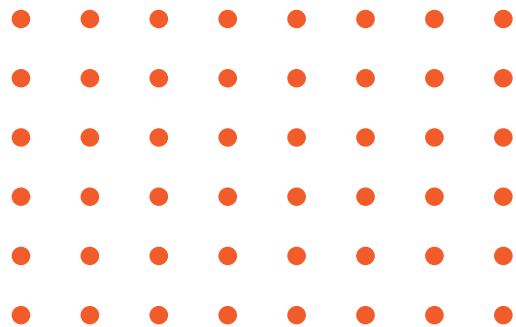


Developing

High-quality play environments – together with children



DANSK CENTER FOR
UNDERVISNINGSMILJØ
Viden til praksis



Foreword

The value of play and the importance of good play environments are topics high on both the political and educational agendas. Still, several studies show that many Danish kindergarten children spend their days in uninspiring play environments. According to a survey conducted by the Danish Evaluation Institute (EVA) in 2020, only a quarter of the country's early childhood education and care (ECEC) institutions are deemed to be of 'good quality' in terms of their physical environments, while none are of 'excellent quality'.

This could be an indication that the physical play environments have not kept pace with the political or pedagogical ambitions for Danish ECEC institutions. It may be down to a lack of knowledge about play environments and how to design them in a pedagogical context.

The Danish Centre of Educational Environment, DCUM, and the LEGO Foundation are publishing this material to disseminate knowledge about methods and ways for children and ECEC staff to design high-quality play environments together. The material is intended for ECEC staff and managers at ECEC institutions for children aged 3 to 6 years.



Structure

The material is divided into three parts:

In **Part 1**, we describe 10 concrete and practical examples of high-quality play environments. The examples illustrate different approaches and methods, and provide inspiration for working with the development and design of play environments at ECEC institutions.

In **Part 2**, we elaborate on the theoretical and methodological principles over a number of chapters, looking in more detail at the various steps and processes in the design guide (Part 3).

Part 3 contains a concrete guide for designing physical play environments. The design guide is a step-by-step guide to developing and designing high-quality physical play environments at ECEC institutions.

You can either dip into the sections, or read the material from start to finish. The first time the design guide in Part 3 is used, we recommend reading all the material from start to finish.



We also recommend watching the inspiration film, which provides an insight into the process of developing high-quality, physical play environments at three ECEC institutions.



Contents

	Introduction.	6
	Guide to leaders	8
<hr/>		
Part 1	10 examples of high-quality play environments	11
<hr/>		
Part 2	Background theory	33
	Play and understanding of play	34
	The children's perspective	36
	Adult participation	40
	The physical space	42
	Co-creation	46
	Link to the Strengthened Pedagogical Curriculum	48
	Bibliography	50
<hr/>		
Part 3	Design guide	53



Introduction – high-quality play environments

Introduction

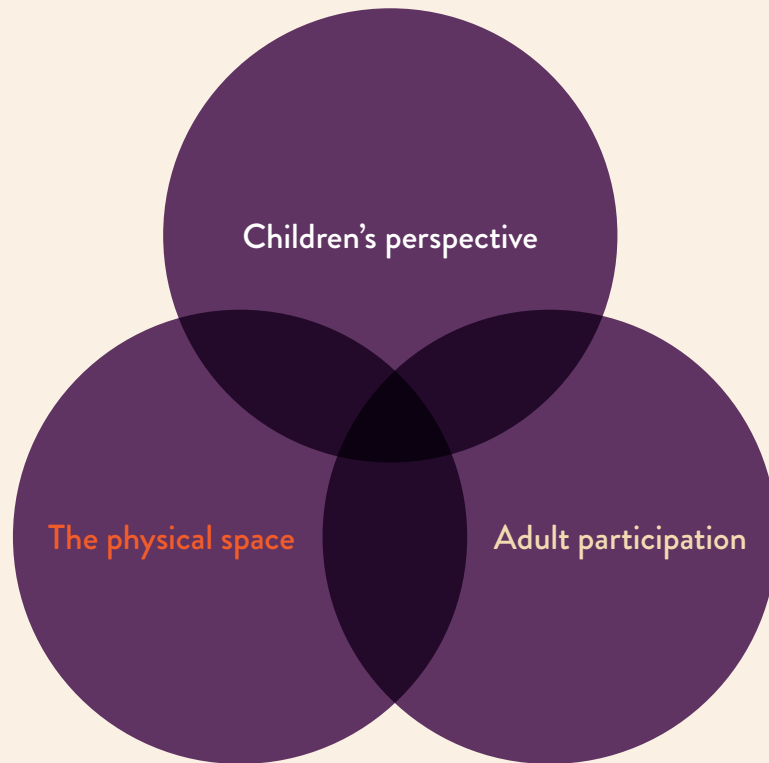
Play is crucial for children's social and personal learning and development, and a good play environment is therefore connected to everything we want to achieve at our ECEC institutions. A good play environment allows children to immerse themselves and engage in play activities with other children and adults. At the same time, the play environment must also give adults the opportunity to establish and maintain good contact through the play activities, and thus help to create a good foundation for the children's learning and development.

The physical environment and pedagogy are interlinked and create a sense of unity around children's play, learning and well-being, which places considerable demands on both the ECEC staff's play competences and the physical framework when developing good play environments. The physical layout can both limit and promote the dynamic interaction between behaviour, space and pedagogy. The design of the physical space, for example, supports the social rules for what children and adults can and may do in a room, but the design also determines how the room encourages and challenges play activities. The quality of the play environment also depends on how skilled the ECEC staff are at facilitating

play in the room. A high-quality play environment is characterised by a dynamic interaction between the children's play, the ECEC staff's play skills and the physical layout.

Children must be co-creators of their own learning. To facilitate that process, the ECEC staff must be able to organise and frame good and developmental play and learning environments for and together with children. The design of play environments must thus be based on the children's perspective, and the children must be involved in a co-creative process where the design of the physical surroundings meets relevant quality criteria and where the adults support and contribute positively to the play.





The play environment's three ingredients

In this material, we work with three primary ingredients in the development of high-quality play environments. It is a dynamic process, where the quality can improve/deteriorate depending on the dynamic relationship between the three ingredients and the extent to which one succeeds in creating, using and adapting the play environment with the children. The three ingredients:

Children's perspective

A strong children's perspective is important. Children possess unique knowledge of what it takes for playing to be good. So, if we want to create inspiring, stimulating and good-quality play environments, it is vital that the children's own perspectives in the form of their input, ideas and interests are taken into account and actively used.

Adult participation

It is through interacting with other children and adults that children learn to play. Therefore, it is important that the ECEC staff engage themselves in the children's play. It can make the children more engaged in their play, and it is a way of signalling to children that play is important. Therefore, it is crucial that each adult knows how to support meaningful and relevant play activities.

The physical space as co-player

The relationship between space and pedagogy is basically about the physical environment being conducive to and supporting children's play and the pedagogical intentions of the play environment. The play environment should be changeable to cater for children's changing interests and needs. In addition, the play environment should be designed to enable adults to participate actively in the play.

Guide to leaders

In connection with the development and design of high-quality physical play environments, it is important that, as a leader, you are always there to guide, help and provide support where needed.

It is also important to create a realistic framework for the process in terms of the allocated time, resources and finances.

Note that the process of designing and developing play environments together with children involves working with key elements of the Strengthened Pedagogical Curriculum. The material can therefore serve as a starting point for the ECEC work for a shorter or longer period, where it may be a good idea to allocate less time to other activities.

6

recommendations

Familiarise yourself with the material

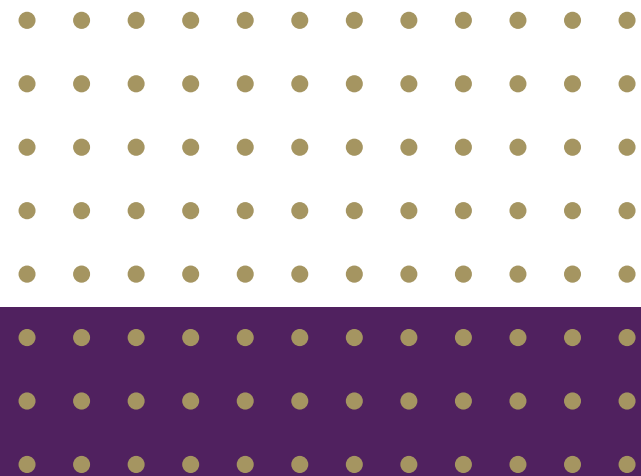
Learn about which process steps and tasks the staff and children have to go through, and what else the staff have to do, for example in relation to planning, practicalities etc. This provides the best conditions for allocating enough time and resources and for being able to provide qualified feedback along the way.

Think about the organisation of the process

The process can be organised in very different ways depending on whether a new play environment is being designed for a single group room or in a communal room where children and staff do different things. A successful design process calls for a higher degree of coordination by leaders as well as the necessary support being available.

Ensure continuity

The design guide assumes that uninterrupted time is allocated to the staff for the steps in the process. For the process of co-creation to succeed, time is needed to become immersed in the process with the children and without any distractions. Therefore, it may be necessary for colleagues to take over other tasks to free up time for those involved in the design process.



Set up a start-up meeting

Discuss and agree on time, resources and finances. Discuss how you will organise your work, as well as what will be needed in terms of feedback from the management. It may also be a good idea at the outset to decide on a maximum budget for your dreams. The 10 practice examples described in this material have been realised for DKK 5,000-25,000.

Inform staff and parents

Tell the entire staff group about the initiative, why you are doing it, and how it will be organised. Inform the parents as well. The more interest you can generate among the parents, the greater the chance you will be able to draw on them when you come to realising the project. Early on in process, you may want to find out what competences you can draw on in the parent group.

Allocate time to planning and follow-up

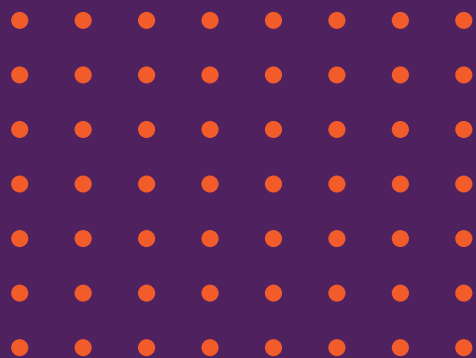
In the process, the staff will need to be given time for planning and follow-up. Help may also be needed with contacting experts or consultants, obtaining quotes from tradesmen, visiting second-hand shops, or finding suppliers of props or equipment etc.





Part 1

10 examples of high-quality play environments



Example 1

Designing for risky play creates huge excitement

Børneambassaden, Copenhagen

Play environment: Roof terrace

At Børneambassaden, a nursery and kindergarten in Copenhagen, the children were interested in being able to hop, crawl and being physically active while challenging their motor skills. Across six groups of children, the staff followed the children's play interests, which resulted in the transformation of an uninspiring roof terrace into a motor skills space where the children can be physically active and engage in rough-and-tumble play.

As part of the co-creation process, the staff gathered the children on the roof terrace, where they looked at inspirational images and made drawings of their ideas for the new play environment. The suggestions included a trampoline, hammock, climbing wall, motor skills obstacle course, merry-go-rounds and much more. The staff noticed that the children were attracted to different physical activities – some wanted to climb high up, while others wanted to run fast or test their balance.

before



after



● A large cupboard was moved, the doors were taken off so the toys etc. were accessible, and cosy corners and climbing walls were made. The play environment was furnished with large cushions, a trampoline, AirTracks and motor skills cushions.

Inspiration trip to sports kindergarten

They took the children on an inspiration trip to a sports kindergarten. Here, the children and staff were inspired by seeing different environments, which they were then able to try out for themselves through play. During the trip, it became clear to the staff how important a clearly themed play environment and the right props are for children and their play, and that toys and props reflect the interests of children.

“You should be able to jump all the way up to the ceiling”

Boy (aged 4), Børneambassaden



Quality in the play environment

In developing the play environment, the staff decided to focus on quality criteria in terms of clear play themes and inspiring interiors. They were keen to create a space that the children could decode in several ways. The staff also focused on stimulating the children's gross motor skills in particular, and on ensuring that, after playing, the children could leave things as they were so they could resume playing later. Accordingly, a design for the roof terrace was arrived at which also incorporated the experience gained during the co-creation process.

It subsequently became clear that the process of designing the new play environment had given the children positive experiences of participating in new play communities, with new friendships being established. Therefore, the shared pedagogical intention with the play environment became:

... to support the children's possibilities for rough-and-tumble and risky play, and enable them to experiment with and experience what they are capable of physically. The play environment must be a place where the children can come together, where they can join new play communities across the institution, and where they can together inspire each other when playing.



Scan and watch the inspiration film



Selected themes from the curriculum:

- Body, senses and movement
- Social development

Goals for the children

- That the children actively use their bodies.
- That the children experiment with their physical abilities (risky play).
- That the children make new friends across the institution.

Goals for the staff

- Work consciously with their own role in the play activities and participate as a co-player.
- Support the children's risky play and give them the space they need to test their own limits.
- Make sure the children are able to participate in the play across the groups.

Example 2

Levels and play zones allow parallel play

Børnehuset Solstrålen,
Gjerlev

Play environment:
Vehicles

At Børnehuset Solstrålen, a nursery and kindergarten outside Randers in Jutland, the youngest children loved playing with cars and tractors, and their play often filled the entire room. This became the starting point for transforming the communal room into a play environment with vehicles.



Furniture was moved to create open walkways, and a reading corner was established with movable play tables at different heights. Finally, the play environment was equipped with toy vehicles, books and large sections of roadway for making roads.

Joint plans and drawings give
children a voice

Kamilla became an 'intern' in the group of children to find out what the children liked playing with, and it soon became clear that they enjoyed playing with cars, tractors and other vehicles. It also became clear that playing with cars required space for the children to use the vehicles' functionalities to the full. For example, the fire trucks drove all over the room putting out fires. The communal room, which serves as an assembly area and hub for the entire building, was subsequently chosen as the place where the children would be able to pursue their interest in playing with vehicles.

Working together, the children made a large drawing of the existing elements in the room. Afterwards, the drawing was supplemented with pictures and drawings of what the children wanted to have in the room. Based on the drawing, Kamilla and the children redesigned the communal room together to create various stations with vehicles, reading nooks with books about vehicles, mobile tables for cars and trucks, a farm with agricultural machinery and a table for making puzzles on or for playing underneath. Together with the children, large sections of roadways were produced which the children could use to build roads.

Quality in the play environment

In assessing the quality of the play environment, Kamil-la chose to focus on the available space, the creation of different levels and zones as well as the requirement that the layout and materials should inspire the children's imagination. It made it possible for the children to play more parallel games and to find areas where they could play without being disturbed. Through working with the entire communal area, creating different levels and involving construction materials such as the sections of roadway, the play environment developed into a varied landscape. The shared starting point – the pedagogical intention – was:

... that the play environment should be organised so that it invited and inspired play and immersion while creating space for being active and using one's senses. In addition, the children's social play skills had to be supported through play in the environment.



“We don't have a place where we can fill up with petrol”

Girl (aged 3), Solstrålen



Selected themes from the curriculum:

- Body, senses and movement
- Social development
- Comprehensive personal development

Goals for the children

- That the children can play undisturbed.
- That the children use their bodies and senses actively.
- That the children develop play skills, e.g. for role-play.
- To develop participation competences.

Goals for the staff

- To provide the children with possibilities for immersion.
- To support the children's possibilities for being able to actively use their bodies and senses.
- To encourage play by adopting different positions in play.
- To provide the children with possibilities for participating in the play.

Example 3

Recycling inspires children's imagination and stimulates their senses

Børnehuset Sneglehuset, Copenhagen

Play environment: Play kitchen

At Børnehuset Sneglehuset, a nursery and kindergarten in Copenhagen, the children often played in a play kitchen, where they lacked materials and props for playing family role-play. By building models with the children and using recycled materials, the play kitchen took shape based on input from the children. The two ECEC staff Annette and Tine observed the children playing in the play kitchen, and then facilitated activities which involved the children making prototypes of how the play environment might look.



Helped by children and parents, new furniture was built and painted, and play props were collected according to the children's play interest.

Painting and wallpapering walls proved a fun and educational co-creation process

Anette and Tine prioritised hands-on and creative activities, and together with the children made prototypes of what the room might look like. Each child designed a new play kitchen in a shoebox, which they painted and filled with recycled materials. The children then looked at each other's ideas, and a democratic vote was held to decide which ideas should be realised in the new play environment.

With an ambition of using recycled materials, cleaned food packaging and other relevant items were collected in collaboration with the parents. The staff added various elements and colours to make the materials sensuous, vibrant and experimental to play with. It was a priority that the children themselves should paint and wallpaper the play kitchen, and it was clear to the staff that co-creating the final product meant a lot to the children.

Quality in the play environment

Anette and Tine chose to focus on inspiring the children's imagination and stimulating their senses through using a variety of materials, and on it being possible for the children to leave items lying around if they want to continue playing with it later. By partitioning off the play environment with shelving with a hole in the middle, the kitchen environment was clearly defined without the children losing visual contact with the rest of the room. Signs were made which the children could hang on the shelving, and in this way introduce scene changes as part of their play.

By using empty packaging from the children's own kitchens at home, the children were naturally encouraged to use it as part of their play activities. The children copied what they had seen adults doing. They did the washing-up, laid the table, made sandwiches for lunch etc. The different materials and props were thus a central part of the play while supporting the children in their play as well as their play skills. Subsequently, Anette and Tine formulated a shared pedagogical intention for the room:

... The play environment should inspire play and the children's imagination and support different play options. The play environment should support the children in both forming and participating in play communities.



“Oh, I’m painting a pink wall, it’s like strawberry ice cream”

Girl (aged 4), Sneglehuset



Selected themes from the curriculum:

- Social development
- Culture, aesthetics and community
- Communication and language

Goals for the children

- That the children expand their play relationships and play communities.
- That the children practise negotiating, making compromises and resolving conflicts.

Goals for the staff

- To ensure that the children have an opportunity for immersive play.
- To support the children's play by adopting different positions in play.
- To be available for and attentive to the children – this supports their conflict management.

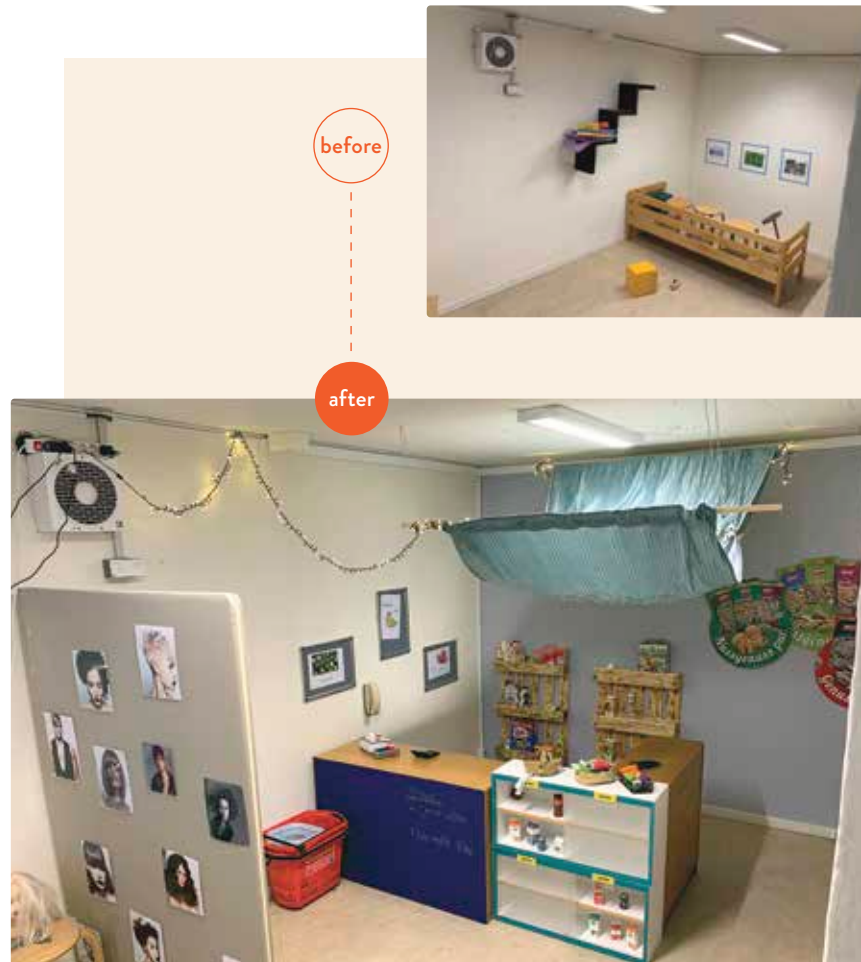
Example 4

Lighting, colours and acoustics – three paths to immersive play

Børnehuset Hørhaven, Randers

Play environment: The shops

At Børnehuset Hørhaven, a nursery and kindergarten in Randers in Jutland, the children liked playing different shop games. Tanja, one of the ECEC staff, observed, spoke to and played with the children to discover their play interests. Afterwards, a co-creation process involving various activities, such as looking at pictures, drawing and testing on a 1:1 scale, became the starting point for developing unused space into a street with different shops. Recycled furniture and play things which were relevant to the children's play interest were painted, decorated and collected.



By observing and following the children's play interests and by actively involving the local community, an indeterminate space with only a few play materials and items of furniture was transformed into a play environment with a hair salon, veterinary clinic and grocery store.

Inspiration trip

As part of the co-creation process, Tanja and the children together looked at pictures of shops, hair salons and veterinary clinics, and came up with ideas for what their space might contain. Tanja found that the pictures made it very concrete for the children, because they could point to the things they liked. Not all children had words to describe their own experiences or what they found exciting and fun. Tanja found, for example, that not all the children had been to a hairdresser, or knew what a shop counter was.

The children and Tanja also visited a local grocery store, where, in addition to seeing what a counter was, they were also given shopping baskets and other grocery items to take back to their own shop. They also visited a second-hand shop, where the children found items and materials which they could use in their new play environment. Before deciding on the final arrangement of the space, they experimented with moving things around to get a feel for whether their ideas made sense.

Quality in the play environment

Tanja decided to focus on the quality criteria regarding: a clear identity in the play environment, stimulation of the children's imagination, and the aesthetic and sensual design of the play environment in terms of lighting, colours and acoustics. By arranging the play environment into three clearly defined areas – shop, hairdresser and vet – a natural order emerged in relation to the layout. The clear overview and arrangement of the play environments made it easier for the children to decode and use each of them.

The lighting, acoustics and colours helped to create a calm and immersive atmosphere in the play environments. A fluorescent tube in the ceiling was replaced with three subdued light sources – one in each of the three areas. An acoustic panel was installed as a partition, fabric was hung from the ceiling, and wall colours were chosen by the children themselves to match the play environments.

Based on Tanja's combined experience, she formulated the pedagogical intention for the play environment:

... that the play environment should support the children's desire to play and inspire their imagination and enthusiasm. The play environment should support the children in feeling part of a small community, and make it possible for the children to gain experience through play and play relationships. The play environment should support the children's language development by expanding their vocabulary and possibilities for participation.



“What is a shop counter?”

Girl (aged 4), Hørhaven



Selected themes from the curriculum:

- Social development
- Comprehensive personal development
- Communication and language

Goals for the children

- That the children can immerse themselves in play without being disturbed.
- That the children practise expressing themselves linguistically when playing – for example by providing input to the play and its development.

Goals for the staff

- To give more of the children the opportunity to participate in small play communities (practising this in the defined areas).
- To create opportunities for immersive play, so that the children continue to play and are thus able to develop and come up with new ideas and thoughts.
- To support the children in developing their language skills through play.



Scan and watch the inspiration film



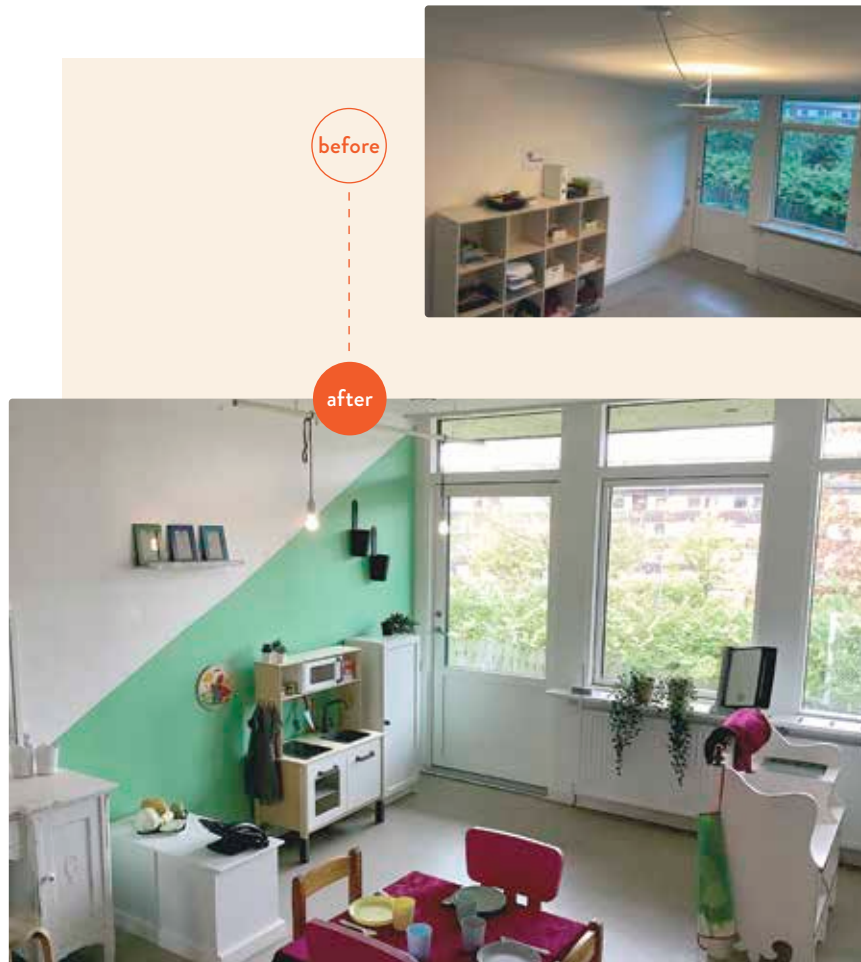
Example 5

Well-defined play zones support play skills

Børnehuset Hørhaven,
Randers

Play environment:
Restaurant Bøllebob

At Børnehuset Hørhaven, a nursery and kindergarten in Randers on Jutland, a group of girls were interested in role-play that revolved around restaurant play. Guided by the children's play interest, the existing play kitchen was moved to a relatively empty group room and supplemented with a restaurant, a make-up table and made to feel more homely.



A group room was divided into play zones with a kitchen, restaurant, make-up table, dining area and a changing table for the dolls.

Doing an 'internship' among the children reveals the diversity of play

Anja joined the children's group as an 'intern', and became aware of what interested the children, who the children tended to play with, and what they felt they were lacking during their play. The children were interested in playing with dolls, but it was also important for them to be able to put on make-up at a make-up table, prepare food in a play kitchen, go out to eat and to play around a dining table. Based on Anja's observations and dialogue with the children, it was clear that the play environment needed to include different play zones.

During the co-creation process, the children were each given a shoebox in which to model their ideas. Along the way, Anja and the children talked about what was important in the room, which resulted in positive dialogues and gave Anja plenty of food for thought. During the process, the children were delighted that they were listened to and involved in designing the play environment.

Quality in the play environment

Anja chose to focus on quality criteria in terms of the available space, a clear identity for the play environment, and the children being able to play undisturbed. Therefore, the new play environment was organised in a large room with plenty of space for different activities and clearly themed play zones. The play zones indicated clear roles and activities that supported the children's play skills.



The arrangement of the play environment into themed play zones proved to have a significant bearing on the duration of the play and how immersed the children became. The children were continually inspired to engage in new activities that expanded and developed the shared play narrative, with the children building on each other's ideas. At the same time, it was possible for everyone to participate legitimately and harmoniously, despite the fact that not everyone had equally strong play skills, and even though some were on the periphery of the play community. Therefore, Anja's pedagogical intention with the play environment became:

... to support the children's social interaction and connection with each other, where all children feel part of the community, and where the play environment supports their desire to play. The play environment should also support the children's language development.

“Why is there a tree in our kitchen?”

Girl (aged 5), Horhaven



Selected themes from the curriculum:

- Social development
- Comprehensive personal development
- Communication and language

Goals for the children

- To develop participation competences, where new play relationships are formed across ages and genders.
- That the children practise decoding and building on each other's intentions with the play.
- That the children who are playing enter into dialogues and conversations with each other and the adults.

Goals for the staff

- To provide children with possibilities for participating in the play across ages and genders.
- To practise different play positions to support the children's development.
- To communicate with the children during the play (listening, telling, asking questions etc.).



Example 6

From poor acoustics to attractive play area

Børnehuset Andedammen, Vorbasse Play environment: The castle

At Børnehuset Andedammen, a nursery and kindergarten south of Billund in Jutland, the children enjoyed role-play involving fairies, princesses and animals. The two ECEC staff Anja and Kristinna observed the children, and collected the children's own ideas, drawings and pictures as the starting point for a co-creation process which saw an empty playhouse being transformed into a knight's castle. The walls were decorated, a hole was cut to create a new entrance, and lookout positions were established. Finally, the castle was equipped with dressing-up clothes and other items which the children could use in their play.



An empty 'space within a space' became a knight's castle inhabited by dragons and princes/princesses.

Aage the puppet was a hit

The process of choosing the play environment and finding out what the children enjoyed playing with was a top priority for Anja and Kristinna. They observed how the children's role-play centred on animals, dinosaurs, witches, fairies and princesses. They then talked to the children about which were the best places to play. The children took pictures of the rooms where they often played, and also of the rooms that they rarely used. The pictures were used in connection with the democratic process that followed, where the children voted on which room should house the new play environment.

During the co-creation process, the idea of the hand puppet Aage arose. Anja and Kristinna used Aage to playfully catch the children's attention. Aage made some crazy and quirky suggestions, and asked the children what they thought. Along the way, it became clear where the children's interests lay, and how the children's thoughts started coming together around a single idea for the layout.

Quality in the play environment

In assessing the quality of the play environment, Anja and Kristinna decided to focus on acoustics and noise reduction as well as the availability of a sufficient and varied range of materials that could stimulate the children's senses and imagination. Removing the acrylic glass and large wall sections improved the acoustics of the play environment while visually opening it up to the communal room. By adding small figures, dressing-up clothes, props and materials, the play



environment unfolded as a place for immersive role-play that stimulated their senses and imagination.

While realising the play environment, it became clear how the adults could support the children's play and development. When playing, the children adopted different roles and exchanged thoughts and ideas to create a shared play narrative. Therefore, the shared starting point – the pedagogical intention – was:

... that the play environment should make it possible to support imaginative and immersive play activities. The play environment should support the children's language development and enable inputs and experience with role-play.

“Aage is a bit crazy”

Boy (aged 4), Børnehuset Andedammen



Scan and watch the inspiration film



Selected themes from the curriculum:

- Social development
- Communication and language

Goals for the children

- That the children immerse themselves in play.
- That the children unfold their play interests and that their imagination is stimulated.
- That the children gain role-play experience.

Goals for the staff

- Be a co-player.
- To unfold and support the children's play interests.
- Make sure that the children are able to participate in and provide input for role-play.

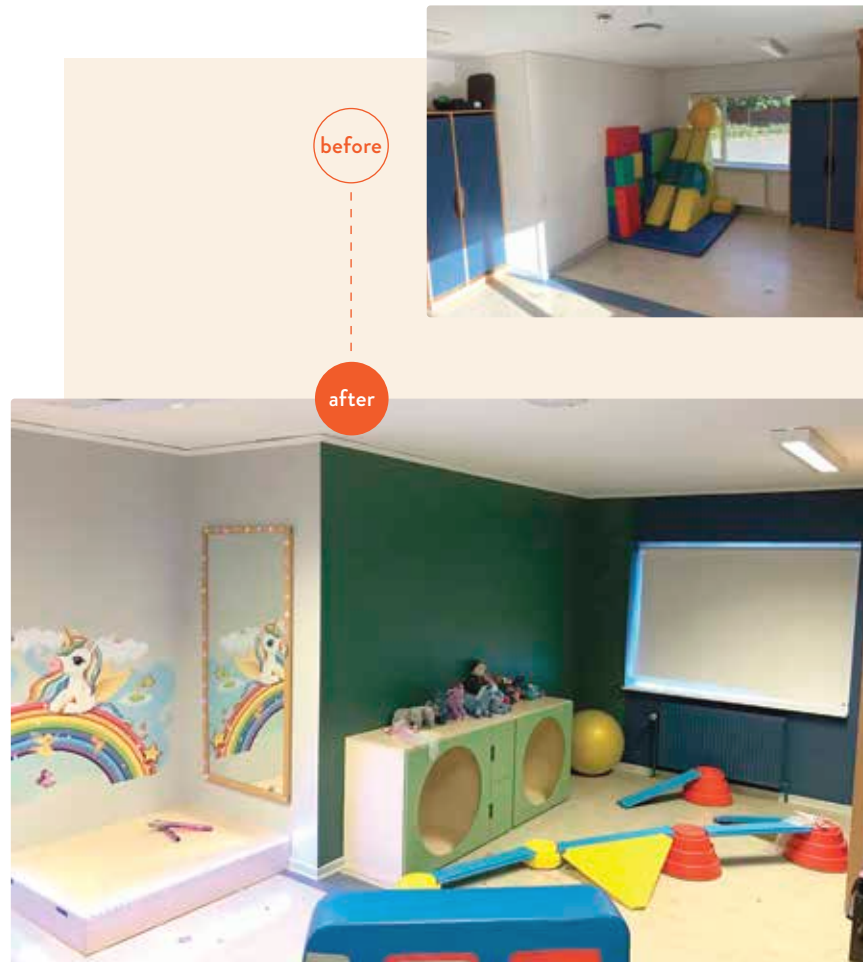
Example 7

Choice of colours and lighting support playful atmosphere

Børnehaven Stenderup,
Billund

Play environment:
The fantasy room

At Børnehaven Stenderup, the children spent a lot of time engaged in fantasy play. They built fairy caves and engaged in different types of role-play. Guided by the children's play interests and by combining construction play and role-play, a tumble room was transformed into an attractive fantasy space with caves, dressing-up clothes, a stage and subdued lighting. The two ECEC staff Heidi and Anette started by observing and exploring the children's play interest by participating as co-players. After the children and staff had explored which play activities were fun, a co-creation process began where the children modelled their ideas in shoeboxes and tested them out 1:1. In this way, the existing tumble room was transformed into a fantasy space.



The room was painted and decorated, directional lighting was installed, and playthings were purchased to support the children's play interest.

Play narratives generated ideas

Anette and Heidi began the co-creation process by finding out what were the children's favourite play areas. The children took pictures of where they enjoyed playing most, and after a democratic vote, the tumble room was chosen. The tumble room was already an attractive play area, and to inspire its transformation, Heidi and Anette created a joint play narrative with the children. They brought various props into the room and engaged in the children's favourite play activities. The play narrative became the starting point for the next step in the process, which involved children and adults making models of their new play environment. What Heidi and Anette saw was that elements from the play narrative were incorporated. The children presented and shared their ideas, and after the presentation, the children and staff talked about which ideas should then be realised.

By creating a play environment with dens, a stage, a projector aimed at one wall and large movable cushions, the play environment can be adapted as the play activities unfold. The dens are perfect for playing fairies, while the stage can be used for building houses – as well as for performing, singing and storytelling. The projector supports the scenography of the play environment, and is adaptable according to the children's preferred play universe.

Quality in the play environment

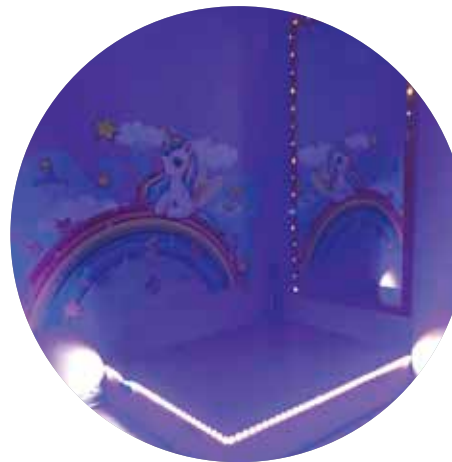
In assessing the quality of the play environment, Anette and Heidi decided to focus on having an abundance of readily accessible props and materials and on ensuring that the play environment could be adapted depending on how the play developed. They also sought to ensure that the colours and lighting supported the play activities and atmosphere. Therefore, the shared pedagogical intention became:

... that the children should be able to immerse themselves in role-play and be offered more play opportunities. The pedagogical framework should take into account the interaction between all children and support children in building relationships with other children.



“Wow, can we play now?”

Boy (aged 5) on seeing the finished room



Selected themes from the curriculum:

- Social development
- Comprehensive personal development
- Culture, aesthetics and community

Goals for the children

- That the children develop the ability to immerse themselves in play.
- That the children develop play skills and participate in role-play.
- That the children develop participation competences through playing.

Goals for the staff

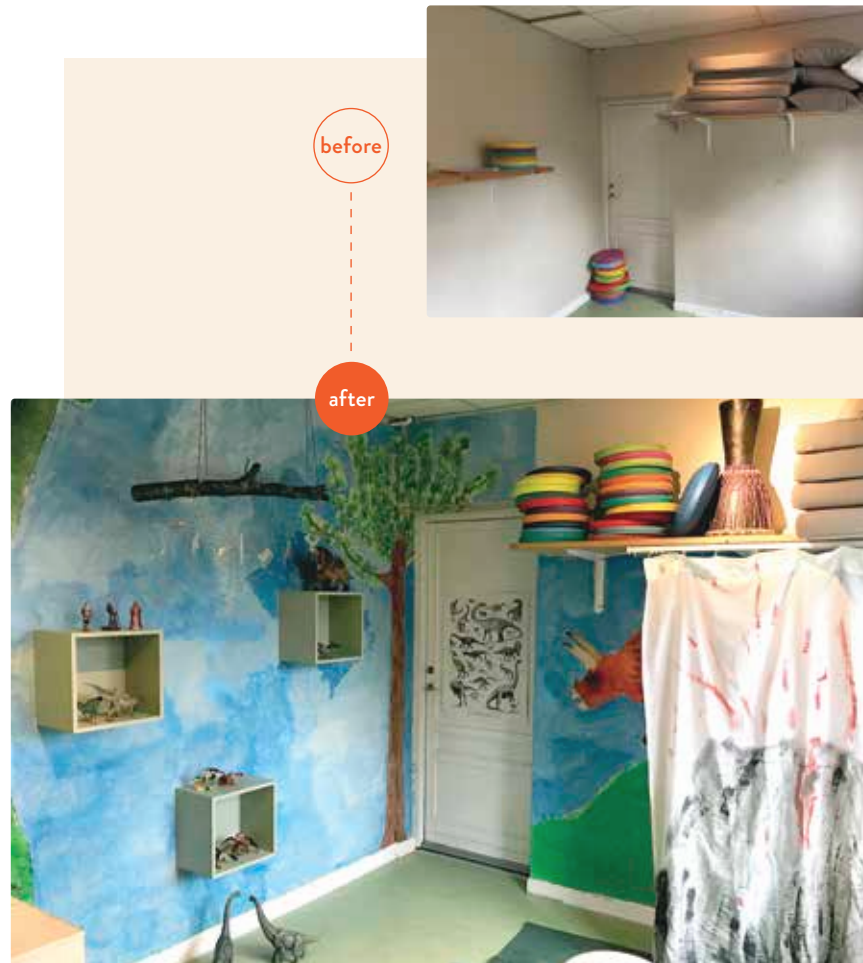
- To participate in the play (different play positions).
- To immerse themselves in and support the children's play interests.
- To pay special attention to the children's possibilities for being able to immerse themselves and participate in different ways in role-play.

Example 8

Available materials pique the children's curiosity

Sankt Markus Sogns Børnehus, Copenhagen Play environment: The dino jungle

At Sankt Markus Sogns Børnehus, a nursery and kindergarten in Copenhagen, a group of boys were showing a lot of interest in dinosaurs. Guided by the children's play interests through observation, inspiration trips and reading and collecting the children's ideas and drawings, it was possible to initiate a co-creation process which saw a white group room being transformed into a 'dino jungle'. Walls were painted from floor to ceiling, and the space was filled with play props such as building materials, natural materials and various dinosaur figures.



●
A neutral group room becomes a dino jungle.

From children's drawing to mural

As part of the co-creation process, Hanne teamed up with her colleagues Annette, Susanne and Mette to go on an inspiration trip with the children to pick up good ideas for the new physical play environment. They made two trips to Copenhagen Zoo to see an exhibition about dinosaurs. Following the inspirational trips, the adults talked to the children about their experiences, what they thought was exciting and which dinosaurs they liked best. This was followed by an ideation phase, during which the children – together with the staff – made a large drawing to illustrate all the children's ideas.

As part of the drawing process, the idea of painting the walls from floor to ceiling arose. The children were interested in both herbivorous and carnivorous dinosaurs as well as their different sizes and functions. Hanne and the children democratically agreed on which dinosaurs should feature on the walls, and it was a key priority that the children should help paint them. Hanne found that the boys were very engaged in realising the project, and that it was important for them to be involved in this part of the process.

Quality in the play environment

In assessing the quality of the play environment, Hanne and her colleagues decided to focus on having plenty of props and materials available, both to inspire the children and to enable them to clearly decode the themes in the room. The room was thus given a clear identity, with props and wall decorations indicating the sort of play that was intended for the play environment.

On the floor, a rug was placed on top of cushions to create a landscape for the dinosaurs, and where construction materials could be used to experiment and build dens for the figures. Because of the large number of dinosaurs, it was possible for several children to play at the same time. In this way, the clear identity and arrangement of the play environment with construction materials supported the staff's pedagogical intention:

... that the play environment should support the children's play skills and participation in the play community. The play environment should also support the children's desire to experiment with, explore and immerse themselves in play.



“Can we really paint on the wall?”

Boy (aged 5), Sankt Markus Børnehus



Selected themes from the curriculum:

- Comprehensive personal development
- Nature, outdoor life and natural phenomena

Goals for the children

- To develop participation competences through playing.
- Expand play relationships and establish new play communities.
- That the children experiment and explore (gain experience with cause/effect – relationships).

Goals for the staff

- Participate in play – assume different play positions.
- Provide the children with different possibilities for participating in play.
- Articulate and expand the children's understanding of connections; their ability to categorise and systematise.

Example 9

Permanent play zones with a flexible layout combine play interests

Hejnsvig Børnehave,
Billund

Play environment:
The dens

At Hejnsvig Børnehave, the children engaged in various role-play activities, and built dens using blankets, chairs and furniture. By participating as co-players and testing the children's ideas, a pedagogical planning area was transformed into a play area with five different dens. Across the groups, the ECEC staff, Gitte, Annette and Malene, all joined forces to observe the children's play in the communal room. Testing on a 1:1 scale of the children's ideas and scale models of the play area transformed the pedagogical planning area into a play area with dens and space for wilder play. Finally, props were added based on the children's play interests.



Five dens were built and then painted, and mattresses were made for the new play area, where the children can play both inside and above the dens.

1:1 test inspired joint decision

Gitte, Annette and Malene's observations of the children's play revealed that the children were interested in role-play and rough-and-tumble play, for example, climbing up and leaping out into the room. The children also used chairs, blankets and furniture to hide and protect their play space in the communal room. An ideation phase involving both staff and children made it clear that the children wanted dens and a slide to the sky.

Together with the children, Gitte, Annette and Malene decided to test and try out their ideas on a 1:1 scale. A table was placed where the children and adults had talked about placing the new play environment, and this kicked off construction play. A large play track with dens was then built in the institution's multi-functional room. The staff participated as co-players, and props were brought in as required to develop the play activities. During the process, the staff chatted with the children and observed their play. By testing the idea out on a 1:1 scale, it became clear that several different dens would be needed which the children could play both inside and on top of.

Quality in the play environment

In assessing the quality of the play environment, the ECEC staff chose to focus on ensuring sufficient space as well as the availability of different props and materials. In addition, they focused on the need to be able to adapt the play environment in line with the children's changing play interests. The entrances to the dens were large enough for the



adults to join in, and they were themed in different ways to match the children's play interests. Lots of props were then added so the interiors of the dens could take shape as the children played. The flexible layout allowed the children to combine their play interests across the various themes, which in turn inspired their play and possibilities for participation. The dens were placed to form a demarcated play area, allowing for immersive play in and around the dens.

The staff observed that the children were engaged in several different play activities simultaneously in the new environment. Monster play took place in parallel with family play, with a mix of the two taking place in some of the dens. Through the various play activities, several children made new acquaintances across the groups, which was something the staff wanted to support. The pedagogical intention was thus:

... that the play environment should give the children the opportunity to immerse themselves in role-play and offer them more play options. The pedagogical framework should take into account the interaction between all children and support children in building relationships with other children.

“In a cosy den for all the family, shouldn't there be a dream-catcher?”

Girl (aged 5), Hejnsvig



Selected themes from the curriculum:

- Body, senses and movement
- Comprehensive personal development
- Social development

Goals for the children

- That the children develop the ability to immerse themselves in play.
- That the children develop play skills.
- That the children develop participatory skills when playing.

Goals for the staff

- To participate in the play (different play positions).
- To immerse themselves in and support the children's play interests.
- To pay special attention to the children's possibilities for being able to immerse themselves and participate in different ways in role-play.

Example 10

Undisturbedness fosters immersive play

Børnehuset Planeten, Copenhagen

Play environment: The sky house

At Børnehuset Planeten, a nursery and kindergarten in Copenhagen, the children often gravitated towards the large communal room where they enjoyed playing as they could create dens in the corners. Guided by the children's play interests and their ideas for the physical layout, a communal room with limited space for immersive play was transformed into a large 'sky house' where the children could play undisturbed.

Through observations and drawings made by the children, the staff gathered the children's ideas and thoughts for the new play environment. By building dens and testing out ideas on a 1:1 scale followed by a democratic vote, a sound basis was created for designing a space for immersive play in the large, open communal room.



● A spacious indoor playhouse was built, painted and furnished with lighting, materials and props.

Drawings, disco balls and democracy

In connection with the design of the new play environment, the staff chose to mix the children across three group rooms. The co-creation process therefore started with the children being introduced to each other. The children were then introduced to a drawing activity involving drawing dens. One child drew a ladder for climbing up into a den that was so high up that it had a view. During the drawing activity, the staff noticed that various elements cropped up again and again in the children's drawings. They included stairs, living rooms and windows as well as things that the ECEC staff themselves had not thought about at all.

Once the children had finished drawing, the ECEC staff gathered a lot of materials such as rugs, cushions/boards etc. to test out the children's ideas on a 1:1 scale. The staff observed that during this process the children were very concentrated, engaged and creative. A dialogue with the children revealed what they wanted in terms of furnishings and props. For example, they wanted windows, disco balls, curtains and special colours. A democratic process, where the ECEC staff asked the children questions such as "how many would like this colour?", paved the way for making some of the children's wishes come true.

A two-storey playhouse was subsequently built. It was to be surrounded by movable boxes containing different construction materials, which the children could take into the house depending on how the play was developing. On top, there was a large soft mattress and mounted binoculars for stargazing. There were also books about the universe to arouse the children's curiosity, and small pictures of stars were hung

around the communal room for the children to zoom in on with the binoculars.

Quality in the play environment

In assessing the quality of the play environment, the ECEC staff decided to focus on the children being able to play without being disturbed, and to develop their play by having access to plenty of stimulating materials. It was important that the play environment partitioned off the children, enabling them to immerse themselves in their play without being disturbed by other activities in the communal room. The playhouse had to be big enough to accommodate both children and adults, and it also had to have two storeys.

The pedagogical intention was therefore:

... that the play environment should support a sense of community across the child groups and be a place for immersive and imaginative play. The arrangement of the play environment was to support adults being able to attract and maintain good contact via the play activities and help create a sound basis for the children's play.



Selected themes from the curriculum:

- Social development
- Comprehensive personal development
- Language development

Goals for the children

- Establish new relations across the child groups.
- Have the opportunity for immersive play.
- Use their imagination when playing.

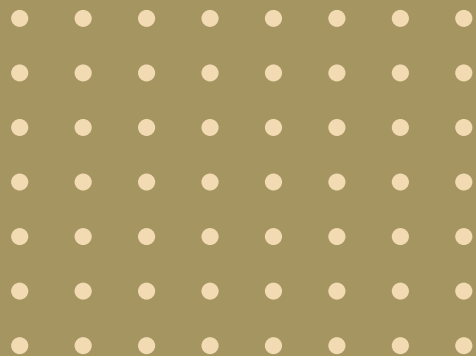
Goals for the staff

- Organise the play environment to enable the children to play with other children across the different child groups.
- Provide opportunities for children to immerse themselves in play activities.
- Support the children's imagination by participating actively in the play activities.



Part 2

Background theory



Play and understanding of play

In this material, we have taken as our starting point the concept of play in its broadest sense. Play is understood as a child's natural way of learning, of forming ideas about things, and of trying to understand the world. Play is enjoyable and is intrinsically valuable, and at the same time playful experiences help children to develop holistic skills which are important for their well-being and ability to navigate a complex world.

Research shows that when children have playful experiences in the presence of the following five characteristics, the play is of a high quality, and a deeper form of learning also occurs. By the concept of 'high-quality play environments', we mean environments conducive to these five characteristics.

- **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.

Playful activities of high quality

One way to find out whether high-quality play activities occur is by observing whether the above five characteristics are present. All five do not need to be present at the same time for the play to be defined as high quality. Rather, quality is about the degree to which and how consistently the characteristics are present during the children's play. In this way, the characteristics help the ECEC staff to illustrate what and when children's play can be said to be of high quality.



The characteristics can thus appear to varying degrees when children engage in high-quality play activities, but over time they will experience excitement and surprises, meaningful contexts, and the engagement and immersion needed to experiment and collaborate with others. Please note that the five characteristics are not designed for assessing the children's competences, but to familiarise the ECEC staff with what playful and high-quality play activities look like.



The children's perspective

In the work to create new play environments, a strong children's perspective is important. Children possess unique insights into what makes their play activities good, fun and meaningful. Children also know better than anyone how play environments work in practice. So, when we want to create inspiring and stimulating play environments, it is crucial that the children's inputs, ideas and interests are actively used.

ECEC institutions are already working actively to include children's perspectives. Both the Danish Act on Day Care Facilities (*Dagtilbudsloven*) and the Strengthened Pedagogical Curriculum state that children's perspectives must be considered when organising the pedagogical learning environments and generally assessing the children's environment. It is a question of acknowledging children's right to be seen, heard and understood, i.e. giving children a say in issues that affect them. It is also a question of being able to distinguish between the children's own perspectives and the adults' perspective of the children. This is necessary for being able to reflect on how and when it is possible to follow and include the children's perspectives so that they have a real influence on and add value to the pedagogical practice.



Three pairs of glasses

This material's understanding of the 'children's perspective' is inspired by research conducted by Hanne Warming, a professor at the Department of Social Sciences and Business at Roskilde University. Hanne Warming distinguishes between three different understandings of the concept, as seen through three different pairs of glasses. Depending entirely on which glasses you are wearing, the children's perspective will look different. It is not about finding the 'right' pair of glasses, but about being aware of when you switch between the different pairs in the development work.

1

The perspective through the first pair of glasses is from the outside. Through these glasses, the adults see the children based on their professional understanding and knowledge of the

children's situation, needs and/or challenges. These glasses help you see and identify how to support children's development and learning in the best possible way based on generalised knowledge about children's lives.

2

The second pair of glasses provides access to a desired inside-out perspective. The adults try to imagine themselves in the individual child's or group of children's situation and to understand the world through the children's eyes. The glasses help to provide an insight into how a certain situation feels and what it is like for the children.

3

The third pair of glasses takes an inside-out view based on how the children themselves express their perspectives (in the form of verbal communication, body language, communication through drawings etc.). This perspective is based on the children's own experiences, wishes, ideas and views, as expressed by them.

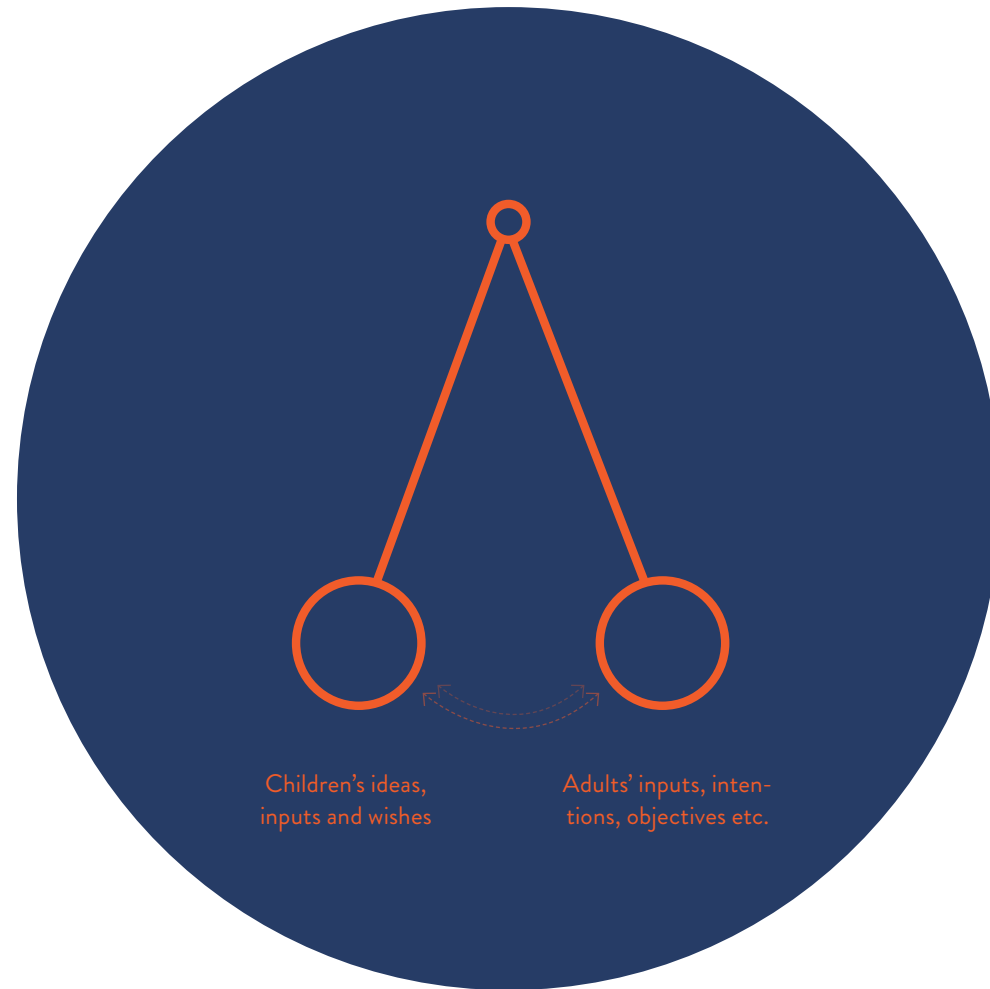
ECEC staff are usually good at using the first and second pairs of glasses, because the perspectives come naturally by virtue of both their expertise and experience. However, that is precisely why it is important to remind yourself (and each other) about the third pair of glasses, which is needed in order to incorporate the children's own perspectives into the development work.



Swinging between children's and adults' input

Part 3 of the design guide describes different methods for involving the children's perspectives. In the development work, it is important that the children's perspectives are considered and used as a necessary counterweight to purely adult-led development work. It is important to create a relationship in which children and adults are considered and act as co-players (read more about this in the section on co-creation).

Here, the development work swings like a pendulum back and forth between the children's and the adults' inputs, intentions and objectives. This pendulum action is seen as a prerequisite for equal collaboration between children and adults.



The children's perspective (continued)

Case

On the trail of play interests

On the way home from an excursion to the woods, where the ECEC staff member Maibritt and a group of children have been birdwatching, Maibritt discovers that Ellen and Maria have gathered around a small, dark hole in the ground.

The girls seem to be very preoccupied with the hole, and Maibritt is curious to know whether they might have spotted a mouse in the hole. After listening to the children talking, and asking them what they are doing, Maibritt gradually realises that the girls have not spotted a mouse. Instead, they are having a lively conversation about fantasy creatures and underground monsters living deep down the dark hole.

Children's play interests

Play interests are expressions of children's feelings, thoughts and motives and say something about what children are interested in as well as where they are heading in terms of their learning and development. It is about what is important, meaningful and relevant to them, which makes children's play interests a pedagogically interesting and important aspect to focus on when developing play environments. So when play environments are designed based on the children's interests, the children are motivated and inspired to initiate and continue the play activities they enjoy, thereby improving the chances of involvement, enthusiasm and commitment and thus deeper learning occurring.

To identify the children's play interests, it is necessary to spend time tracking their interests. The situation in the woods is a good example of how the ECEC staff member Maibritt notices that Ellen and Maria's play interest is a reflection of something different to what she initially assumed. It was not until she got close to the children and the way they were interacting with each other and the hole in the ground in the woods that their play interest became clear.

Spotting children's play interests is sometimes easy – and sometimes difficult. For example, as ECEC staff, you will quickly be able to identify the play interest of a group of children who often want to play superheroes. However, a play interest is not always that obvious. Whether it is easy or difficult to identify the play interest, it is important to investigate it thoroughly. You could say that the ECEC staff must track down the play interest. The clues can be very concrete,

for example when the children are playing and/or drawing. They can also be expressed when the children keep talking enthusiastically about something (such as an experience, situation or desire). Two ways in which the ECEC staff can detect a play interest are described on the following page.



— **Observation and dialogue.** The ECEC staff can get a sense of what the children are interested in by observing their play activities. Play is usually characterised by surprising content, shifts in time and place as well as jumps backwards and forwards in the play narrative. In order to investigate the play interest in depth, it may be necessary to observe play situations several times. By observing, you can keep an eye on which ‘play media’ (i.e. toys, artefacts and stories) the children use, what the children ‘do’ in their play (i.e. the way they play), and how the children are ‘present’ in the play activities (special atmosphere, immersion, excitement, silliness, wildness etc.). Children are imaginative, and their actions and use of play media can mean something completely different to what you might assume. Therefore, when observing, it is important to ask in a curious and open way what the children are doing. The advantage of asking about a particular play activity is that it is a chance to have your understanding of what you think it involves confirmed, rejected or clarified.

— **Participation.** By participating as a ‘co-player’ in the children’s play, the ECEC staff gain access to children’s play interests in a deep and insightful way, as they engage closely with the dynamics and subtleties of the play activity. As a co-player, you must assume a minor role, (e.g. as a passenger on the bus, a customer in the shop etc.) and thereby participate on the children’s and the play experience’s terms, so that the children’s interactions and initiatives stay central to what is happening. Being a co-player thus enables you to pursue the children’s play interest and gain insights into which qualities and characteristics a possible new play environment should possess to best support the children’s play. For many adults, stepping into the position of co-player can be challenging, and it takes time and practice to be able to relinquish control and immerse oneself in the play.

The exploration of children’s play interests can be qualified and made more tangible through ongoing documentation and discussions with colleagues. The documentation can take the form of small notes or specific statements from the children, but it can also be video recordings of play situations where you try out the co-player approach. When observations are documented, it is easier for the pedagogical staff to remember and retrace the play interest at a later date.

Armed with documentation, it is also easier to discuss your findings with others (for example colleagues, who have their own experiences of children’s play and interests). Discussions with colleagues are also relevant, as they allow different perspectives and interpretations to be expressed, which qualifies the identification of the children’s play interest. It can also help in assessing which clues are the most significant and where the children’s main interests seem to lie.

Adult participation

Children can certainly have playful experiences without the participation of ECEC staff, but positive play facilitation can support and promote quality play experiences – see the previous section about play and understanding of play.

A good play environment allows children to immerse themselves and participate in play activities with other children and adults. However, all play environments – no matter how good they are – must be supported by ECEC staff.

Why is adult participation important?

Good physical surroundings, play materials and toys etc. can help play situations to develop and unfold, but children need to be helped along the way. ‘Playing together’ presupposes that you are able to decode and understand each other’s play signals, and that you can engage in dialogue, coordinate and cooperate. Moreover, play often requires abstract thinking and prior knowledge, because it is usually associated with a particular theme (for example superheroes, family constellations, cooking, dinosaurs etc.).

This means that children come with different prerequisites for participating in play. It is not unusual, for example, for some children to end up outside or on the periphery of a play activity, while others may need help to initiate new play activities. In other situations, the play activity simply comes to a standstill, because the children run out of inspiration and new ideas. A good play environment thus depends on the ECEC staff working actively to involve, attract and maintain good contact through play. It is therefore important that the

adults play with the children if learning and development are to be promoted through play.

Play expertise

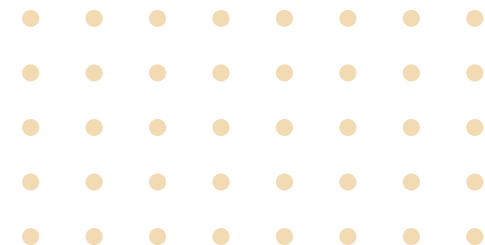
In general, play expertise is all about framing, facilitating and guiding play. Facilitating play is largely about creating a pedagogical space for the children’s playful experiences. To start facilitating play, the ECEC staff must first and foremost practise ‘tactfulness’. This means that we, as adult co-players, must ensure that the children’s sense of ownership of the play situation is not compromised, as it will put a stop to the playful part of the activity. Therefore, as adults, we must be careful to:

1. **Adapt.** Listen actively to the children, and be aware of their wishes and needs and, based on this, adapt our actions accordingly.
2. **Relate.** Be caring, and make sure that the children feel accommodated and acknowledged. This creates close bonds and helps each child to feel they have an important role to play.
3. **Support.** Support the children by encouraging and helping them to achieve their goals. This gives the children a sense of being competent and creative, while at the same time feeling in control of their own learning.

4. **Reprimand gently.** Guide and explain to the children in a supportive way why one way of behaving is acceptable while another is not.

Navigating within the context of play

In pedagogical practice, it can be difficult to start working with play facilitation. This is due, among other things, to the different approaches taken to play in pedagogical practice. On the one hand, we have the idea of ‘free play’, where play is an aim in itself, and where adults should not interfere too much. On the other hand, play is seen as holding important learning and development potential which adults can help to support. As a consequence of these different understandings, the ECEC staff may either choose to stay clear of the play activity (so as not to disturb the children’s flow), or start setting specific goals for the activity and thus control how it unfolds.



It is about striking a balance between the children's and the adults' initiatives and participation, illustrated as the green overlapping field in the figure below.



* Developed by the LEGO Foundation

As ECEC staff, you must also strike a balance between the two approaches of 'co-created play' and 'guided play', respectively. Both approaches are about how – in a facilitating role – you can navigate within the play context in active and co-creational ways.

○ **In co-created play**, the focus is on play, and the children choose what they want to play with and how. The adult participates as an equal partner who does not instruct or take control. In co-created play, the adult assumes a supporting role (e.g. as a dog or restaurant guest), leaving the children to practise the more important roles. Participating in this way also makes it possible to involve those children who are outside or on the periphery of the play activity.

○ **In guided play**, the focus is on learning. In other words, the ECEC staff participate in the children's play in order to inspire and support their learning and development, but without instructing or taking control. In guided play, the adult can suggest new themes and/or actions, and thus play a slightly more prominent role than is the case in co-created play.

In practice, it is not always possible to participate actively as a co-player in children's play. However, even if the ECEC staff were to stand on the sidelines, it is still possible to play an active and facilitating role in the play situation. From the sidelines, the ECEC staff can encourage the children through appreciative nods and small comments that do not in themselves disturb the flow.

In addition, it is possible to assist with practicalities so that the play activity does not grind to a halt (for example by finding props or new places to play).



The physical space

Space and pedagogy are inextricably linked. Recent studies show that the physical design of play environments is very important for children's opportunities for immersion and engagement and the extent to which the ECEC staff can bring their expertise to bear. The physical design is both about the functional elements of the room, framing the possibilities offered by the room, and the aesthetic elements, which are about creating a calm environment and one where the individual child can feel safe.

Children meet the world with all their senses, and different environments create different sensory experiences and play opportunities: Colours, contrasts, light/dark, sounds, smells and surfaces that are soft, hard, smooth help define the qualities and moods of rooms. Props, materials and toys that can be lifted up, put on, sat on, used to contain or build things etc. have a decisive influence on children's play. On top of which, the interior design and choice of props, as well as rules on how the children are allowed to physically explore the room, can either inhibit or stimulate both fine and gross motor skills.

A changing play environment

The layout, toys and props set the scene for how play develops and the children's possibilities for becoming immersed in play. The richer, more diverse and adaptable a play environment is, the greater the chance that the children will be inspired, develop their play and thereby become engaged in immersive play.



Being able to adapt and develop the play environment over time ensures that it develops as the children's play interests change. Adults need to be alert to signs that a physical play environment ceases to interest the children. This is often the case when a play environment is no longer used by the children, or when it is difficult for them to start playing.

Research shows that well-designed and adaptable play environments have a positive effect on children's play, both in terms of the length of time that children remain engaged in play and also how immersed they

become. That is why, among other things, the Reggio Emilia approach sees the physical environment as an integrated part of the pedagogy and the didactics.

Allowing time to organise and put out, replace and maintain and introduce the things to the children pays off in several ways.

Toys and props

The nature of toys influences the content of children's play and its qualities. Ambiguity in the toys (i.e. they can be used for many different scenarios) stimulates creativity, imagination, negotiation and social interaction, while high-structure toys are more conducive to individual exploration.

Children also play differently with toys/props that are interesting because they are new. Their play becomes more exploratory and creative than with toys that are familiar and have been played with before. Where new play interests need to be encouraged, it is important to support the play activities with new props, toys, layout etc.

It is important that toys and props are developed, replaced, changed and qualified over time in line with the children's changing interests and needs. Put toys and props away that the children are not playing with, and take out those that support the play activity they are currently engaged in.

It is important how each toy is handed over and presented for the next play situation. Once the play activity is over, it is therefore a good idea to tidy up and ensure that the play environment is inviting for those who will be using it next. However, it should also be possible to leave things out so the children can continue playing later or the following day.

For the youngest children, the way in which toys are presented to them has been shown to be particularly important for how they play and interact with one another. The toys can either simply be made 'available', or you can present and



introduce them in a way that enables the children to see how they can start playing. For example, dolls could be seated on chairs rather than lying on the floor, bricks could be set out and stacked rather than being left in their box, and cars could be lined up instead of sitting in a pile etc.

The ECEC staff play a key role in organising a qualified, rich, varied and age-appropriate play environment. If the child steps into a play environment that is 'ready to use', the child will play for longer and become more immersed in play.

Space for the adult

In order to fully engage as co-players, there must be sufficient space for the ECEC staff in the play environment. There must be room to be close to the children when they are playing, and props (e.g. dressing-up clothes) that the adult can use. The goal is to create opportunities for the adult to be in close dialogue with the children when they are playing and at the same time interact with the play environment.

For the adult, the props and the play environment can be used to initiate a development in the play situation, for example by pointing at or handing props to the children. The wallet can be used to suggest going to the shop to buy things, or the treasure chest could be relevant if you play being rich and want to buy a castle. During the play session, the adult can also suggest making new props, for example money, if the play develops into a buy-shop activity.

The physical space (continued)

Levels, demarcation and shielding

It is important that the play environment is shielded from disturbances. Therefore, consider the location of the play environment and how it can be demarcated and shielded.

When playing, children often need to establish their own space for the role or play activity in which they are engaged. It might be a dog basket, for example, if you are a dog, a parking space if you have a car, a bed if you are going to sleep etc. Zoning the play like this is easier for the children to do themselves if different levels and walls/upright surfaces etc. are available for them to use. Therefore, it is a good idea to create levels at different heights relative to the floor. This might be steps, platforms or built-in dens, or more flexible and multifunctional furniture that can be moved around, and which is appropriately sized for the children to build their own zones. Small round or square rugs or mattresses are simple ways of creating demarcated play areas on the floor.



Colours

Research shows that children's attention and focus are influenced by the colours around them. Children are more concentrated when playing and experience fewer frustrations in a visually subdued environment compared to brightly decorated surroundings.

A calm environment with muted colours and fewer contrasts has a positive impact and makes it easier for the children to immerse themselves, while visual overstimulation can have a negative effect on children's attention spans. Overstimulation happens when a room is decorated in strong primary colours and with lots of colour contrasts between the walls, toys, furnishings etc. Such an environment will feel agitated, and your eyes have to work overtime in trying to process all the contrasts. Therefore, it is important that you make conscious choices about the colour scheme for the play environment, and aim for a harmonious feel. Children love colours, but not all colours are equally harmonious.

Acoustics

Most of the noise produced at ECEC institutions stems from the children's and adults' voices. A room with hard surfaces and many children will usually always have excessive noise levels due to long reverberation times. The rooms therefore need to be designed with soft surfaces that can absorb sound and thus reduce noise levels in the play environment. Soft surfaces need to be a certain depth to absorb sound. Light curtains do not help a great deal compared to mattresses, cushions, heavy curtains or sound-absorbing panels fitted to the walls. It is important that the chosen sound absorbers are situated as close to the sound sources as possible. In ECEC institutions, this will usually be at child height near the floor and close to where the children play. Remember that when children and adults enter the room, their bodies also help to dampen the sound. You can check the acoustics by clapping your hands, and if the sound is harsh and lingers in your ears, you should install sound-dampening materials.

Light

In many ECEC institutions, most of the lighting is installed to provide the required amount of light for cleaning. This results in cold, uniform light and over-lit rooms which do not necessarily support the given play situation. A well-lit room is always good for activities that involve movement, but if the children have created a den for themselves or are playing families, focused lighting near the play environment is also needed.

Studies show that focused lighting creates a calmer atmosphere around the play activity. It therefore makes sense to supplement the existing lighting with spot lighting close to the play environment as well as atmospheric lighting such as fairy lights, torches etc., as this makes it possible to light separate parts of the play environment.

It is also a good idea to install lighting so it is possible to choose lots of light, but which can be dimmed or switched off depending on the activity. Daylight is also important, so try to establish play environments close to the windows to ensure plenty of natural light and views.



Co-creation

In addition to seeing and hearing things that adults don't necessarily notice, children possess a unique insight into what it takes to create good play environments. Children are very good at identifying the possible uses of a given room or environment. This means that children see the possibilities and potential for play offered by the room, and they intuitively create a space to suit their play activity. This is evident, for example, when children suddenly start playing at the supermarket, on a walk, in the woods or under the table at a 60th birthday party.

ECEC staff witness this every day. Long corridors are turned into running tracks, lined-up chairs become a bus, and the big puddle out in the playground is a fishing lake etc. In other words, children are experts in how a room or space can be transformed into a good play environment – which is one of the reasons why it makes sense to develop play environments in a process of co-creation with children. In practice, this means that the ECEC staff must be open and listen to what the children feel and think about the design of ECEC institutions.

What is co-creation? And how is it facilitated?

Co-creation essentially refers to the phenomenon of creating something together with others. In pedagogical contexts, co-creation can be very similar to 'cooperation', but co-creation differs in this context in that children are allowed to take the initiative and are able to co-create the physical play environment. Co-creation processes therefore go deeper than collaborative processes, because co-creation

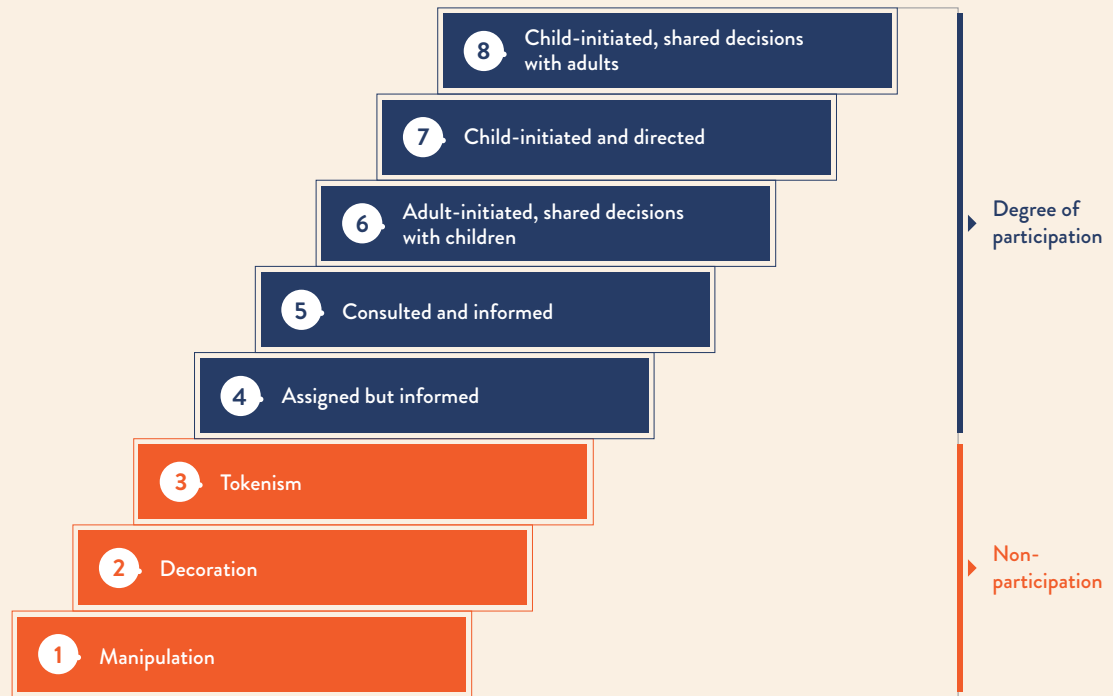
requires that children and adults are treated as equals. Thus, in co-creation processes, we find ourselves on the top rungs of the sociologist Roger Hart's 'Ladder of Children's Participation'.

Although adults possess more knowledge and experience, this does not prevent children and adults from playing equally important roles in facilitating the co-creation process. You could say that the facilitation of co-creation with children starts with an awareness that, as ECEC staff, you have to focus on understanding children's perspectives, as

described previously. In addition, there are a number of factors that must be taken into account for children and adults to create something together. These include:

- accepting that the co-creation process with children is an open and unpredictable process where the end goal is not necessarily known in advance. So, there is no one right direction to take or one right way to solve the task. It may seem chaotic – maybe even scary – especially if you find it difficult to relinquish control as an adult. But it is important that you do, because the direction is

Roger Hart's Ladder of Children's Participation





established during the actual process. This can be seen, for example, when one of the participating children articulates an idea or thought that resonates with the other children.

- bringing children's perspectives into play. As ECEC staff, you make every effort to bring the children's perspectives into play, for example by asking open questions (What if? How can we do that? Why/why not?). So, it is about listening and being curious towards the children. In addition, the adult must try to motivate the children to participate so they feel like taking the initiative. This can be done by listening to the children's inputs, by helping them to express themselves, by involving them in decision-making and by giving them power and responsibility on a par with the adults.



- turning the co-creation process into child's play. Usually, children do not consciously reflect on how things can be designed and/or improved. A play-based approach to co-creation can therefore be valuable, because play makes it easier for children to experiment, explore, solve problems and develop ideas. The adult must therefore ensure that the co-creation process becomes a fun and engaging experience for all participating children.
- being very clear about your role as co-creator. In addition to ensuring that the children's perspectives are included, the adult must contribute creatively and constructively to the process, because they are co-creators on an equal footing with the children. The adult is therefore welcome to come up with their own ideas and suggestions, but it is important that the inputs are inspiring and not perceived as being manipulative by the children (see the bottom rung of Hart's Ladder of Children's Participation).

Ethical reflection

Even though the ECEC staff must work actively to assume an equal position in relation to the children, their ethical responsibility towards the children should not be forgotten. Therefore, co-creation with children requires ongoing ethical reflections such as:

- What can be expected from the children's group in the co-creation process (in relation to their age, development, surroundings as well as pre-requisites and limitations)?
- Do the children find that the process works well? Do the children find it fun and educational? Here, it makes sense to have an open talk with the children about what could be improved or done differently so that the process becomes meaningful for everyone.
- Is the child-adult relationship balanced? If the adults act too protectively towards an individual child, there is a risk of upsetting the equal relationship between children and adults. An imbalance can cause the child to start waiting for answers and decisions from the adults, which is contrary to the whole idea of co-creation.

Link to the Strengthened Pedagogical Curriculum

Our work to develop high-quality physical play environments is based on key elements from the Strengthened Pedagogical Curriculum. Here, some of the key elements are play, children's play communities and children's curiosity as guiding elements that provide a direction for the ECEC work.

The development and design of play environments requires that the ECEC staff continually draw on their professional expertise to consider and reflect on what and how they want to support the children's play, learning and development in the individual situations. And thus their pedagogical intentions and goals for working with play environments.

Goals set the direction for the pedagogical intention

It is by following the children's play interests that the ECEC staff find out where the children's interests lie from a developmental and learning point of view (see the section on the children's perspective). The children's play interest thus becomes key to the ECEC staff knowing how to ideally support the children's play, learning and development within and across the six areas of the curriculum.

If, for example, the children are into playing superheroes, pushing their limits by running fast, climbing up or jumping down, the staff can, among other things, support the children's comprehensive personal development. If, on the other hand, the children are absorbed in playing shop, where they assume different roles with lots of verbal interaction, the staff can support the children's social and language development.

The approach to the curriculum work therefore becomes dynamic, as during the design process you find out and coordinate which curriculum themes can be realised in association with the play interest. It thus becomes clear what the children's play is about, how the adults can support the play and development, and thus also what pedagogical intention it makes sense to work with in the play environment.

To maintain focus on the pedagogical intentions, it is important to continue working with goals and objectives for the play environment. Goals must provide a direction for what the ECEC staff intentionally and consciously want to promote through the ECEC work in the individual play environment.

The practice example on the right illustrates the connection between pedagogical intention and goals for children and staff in connection with developing a play environment. Note that the goals are formulated individually, are bulleted and are descriptive. This helps to ensure that the goals provide direction and are useful in everyday life, and that the adults are more likely to remember and act on the goals on a daily basis.

Børnehuset Hørhaven, Restaurant Bøllebob

The play environment is divided into a number of play zones, including a restaurant and make-up table, and with homely surroundings where children can assume different roles. In connection with the development of the play environment, the ECEC staff have established the following pedagogical direction (intention and goals) for the pedagogical practice to do with playing in the play environment.

Pedagogical intention

... To support the children's social interaction and connection with each other, where all children feel part of the community, and where the play environment supports their desire to play. The play environment must support the children's language development.

Goals for the children

- To develop participation competences, where new play relationships are formed across ages and genders.
- That the children practise decoding and building on each other's intentions with the play.
- That the children who are playing enter into dialogues and conversations with each other and the adults.

Goals for the staff

- To provide children with possibilities for participating in the play across ages and genders.
- To practise different play positions to support the children's development.
- To communicate with the children during their play (listening, telling, asking questions etc.).

See the rest of Hørhaven's example in the section with the 10 practice examples on page 17.

Goals and objectives for the play environment

When working with goals and objectives, it is important to be critical, reflective and child-oriented. Søren Smidt and Suzanne Krogh (2019) describe it in the following way:

- Goals express what the entire staff group wants to select, prioritise and promote in the individual play environment.
- Goals are determined by the composition of the current group of children and their need for participation and influence. It takes insight into the children's group and into what they are interested in in the context of their development and learning, as well as an understanding that it may be necessary to adjust the goals along the way as the children develop or the group changes.
- Goals include elements that are unique to the selected play environment. And it is a good idea to reflect on what it makes sense to work with in terms of the children's play and development. In the example from Hørhaven, the focus was on the children's participation competences, on them forming new play relationships and practising decoding and building on each other's ideas in their play. This has been an obvious developmental focus for several of the children.

- Goals are dynamic, and must set a direction for the activities. This means that the goals should change in step with the play interest of the children's group while also providing specific proposals for activities and actions. Here, Smidt and Krogh recommend that the ECEC staff draw up three to five goals to ensure clarity and intensity in their work.

Formulating goals can be a complex and difficult process. In order to make the process more accessible, it is also relevant to formulate goals aimed at developing the staff's pedagogical practice and their professional competences.

As in the example from Hørhaven, the goals provide a framework for what the staff should work with and encourage in terms of their own competences. But also what they want to focus on in order for the goals for the children to set a direction for their pedagogical practice. Therefore, the goals that are formulated for the children also help to define the goals for the staff.



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