

Learning Unit 3

Set up the environment for ECD facilitation

After completing this Learning Unit, you will be able to set up the environment for ECD facilitation, by successfully completing the following:

- Understand how the environment impacts on child development.
- Set up the learning environment.
- Store materials and physical resources in an organised and accessible manner.

Set up the environment for ECD facilitation

As an ECD practitioner, you have to set up the learning environment for your playgroup. The learning environment includes the indoor environments where the babies, toddlers or young children will spend their time. A learning environment should help children to explore and make meaning of the world through their senses and through the way they move in the environment.

You need to make the most of the space you have and organise the learning environment so it caters for individual and group space. You also need to be able to rearrange the learning environment on a regular basis according to the needs of the children and the activities. Your learning environment must make provision for the organised storage of resources so that they are easily accessible. Of course, the learning environment must be safe and healthy and must take into account the ages and special needs of the children who use it. In this lesson you will learn all about setting up a learning environment.

In many instances, the areas you will have to work in may not be ideal. You will need to be creative when you organise these areas so that you maximise the space and learning opportunities while you still maintain the health and safety standards.

3.1 Understand how the environment impacts on child development

The learning environment is the physical space provided both indoors and outdoors for babies, toddlers and children to play.

Remember that **play = learning**

It is no coincidence that we refer to these areas as the *playroom* and *playground* because the way that you set up these areas will encourage children to play – and thus to learn.

The learning opportunities that can be created for children both indoors and outdoors are almost limitless. The only limiting factor is the ECD practitioner.

A well-structured learning environment where safety is considered, storage is organised and space is maximised, will facilitate learning and the achievement of developmental goals.

3.2 Set up the learning environment

Many ECD practitioners focus on planning the activities such as morning ring, art, movement, music and story and forget that children learn incidentally too. A well set-out indoor area with sufficient resources can stimulate learning opportunities, as children become actively involved in the type of learning that they choose. When humans are involved in activities they enjoy, they learn best.

Indoor areas

Many schools have limited space available and this in turn limits the areas that can be set up in the classroom. Book, block, fantasy and educational toys and games are essential for both toddlers and young children.

Numeracy, literacy, nature, science and social studies tables are very important to young children, as they are ready to learn more about the world and these activities

will provide these opportunities. If space is limited, rotate these tables – either numeracy or literacy and either nature, science or social studies. (The contents of the tables will be explained in the table that follows.) You will need to use your themes as a guideline in deciding which table is appropriate. For example:

- “People who help us” lends itself to a social studies table.
- “Under the sea” lends itself to a nature table.
- Other activity areas that can be presented are music, handcraft and listening areas.

Extensions are extra resources that are added or changed on a regular basis and often relate to the theme being presented. Extensions are a means of changing the environment slightly for the children and introducing new concepts. In this way, you are able to keep your environment stimulating for the children and move them from the familiar to the less familiar. The extensions do not necessarily need to be major



changes, changing the colour of the cushion covers in the book area or a different theme related poster, can be all that is needed to spark children’s interest. Children are very visual in nature (they respond to what they see) and are attracted by colours – use this characteristic wisely to create interest in the learning activities.

Area	Basic furniture	Resources	Some extension ideas (usually theme related)
Book	Carpeted area Bookshelf for displaying books – ideally standing up so that the covers attract the children. Best in the quietest area in the class.	Should be comfortable with chairs or cushions. Variety of books – both fiction and non-fiction and different languages if possible.	Posters Soft toys Different coloured, textured and shaped cushions Puppets, finger puppets Illustrations from stories you have told.
Block	Carpeted area best or it becomes very noisy. Large area needed (mat used for ring times is often best). Low shelves on which blocks are packed.	Blocks – best if they are not painted. Need various lengths as well as cylinders and arches.	Plastic animals, cars, etc Floor maps Simplified building plans Pieces of carpet, cardboard, etc that can be used as flooring, Roofs

Area	Basic furniture	Resources	Some extension ideas (usually theme related)
Educational toys and games	Shelf area where they can be displayed and laid out flat (especially puzzles) Ideally should not be on top of each other but if space is an issue, only two games deep Can be near tables and chairs so that they can sit comfortably or otherwise a carpeted area	Variety of games will depend on age suitability Construction – duplo or Lego, stickle bricks, mechanic Educational – lotto, dominoes, heads and tails Puzzles – different numbers of pieces, jig saw, knob puzzles Fine motor – threading, daisy counters	Made resources that relate to the theme being discussed. This can include resources that the children have assisted in making.
Fantasy area	Toddlers and younger children need home-based furniture such as a bed, cupboard, stove, wash up area, mirror. These can also be provided but their uses can be changed to create other contexts such as a shop, doctor's surgery, etc.	Dress up clothes, hats, shoes Dolls and clothes Kitchen equipment like pots, pans, plastic plates and cutlery Empty food containers and plastic fruit/food items Empty self-care products e.g. powder, cream	Doctor's surgery : bandages, doctor's coat, stethoscope, syringes without the needles Bakery: playdough, bowls, chef's hats, cookie cutters, cookie cups, muffin pans, baking trays, aprons Hairdresser; brushes, broken hairdryer, soft curlers, mirrors, plastic aprons
Numeracy		Calculators, abacus, counters, paper, kokis Chairbags to store some of the resources like the kokis	Simple worksheets, number stamps, cut out numbers to trace, number stencils.
Literacy	Table and at least two chairs	Paper, different kokis, crayons, pencils, etc. Chairbags to store some of the resources like the Kokis	Simple worksheets, stamps, word flashcards that can be traced, cut out letters to trace, large stencils, rulers, scissors Punch, stapler (5 years and up) Highlighters, sticky tape, envelopes, postbox, glue sticks, stickers

Area	Basic furniture	Resources	Some extension ideas (usually theme related)
Nature	Table against a wall so that there is a space for a poster. Nature tables with cupboard space underneath are available commercially but quite expensive.	<p>Magnifying glass</p> <p>Items on this table MUST be natural – NO plastic animals, etc</p> <p>Labels for items – in different languages if need be (depends on class)</p> <p>Poster with theme printed on it and relevant picture to attract children's attention</p> <p>Relevant puzzles, games, worksheets, books</p>	<p>Pets: goldfish in a bowl, fish food, rabbit pellets, budgie feathers, dog food can, perhaps a rat or hamster in a cage</p> <p>Spring: seeds, flowers, growing beans in cottonwool so children can see roots, etc, fruit that is available.</p>
Science		<p>Science experiments – example of floating or sinking. Different objects, bowl of water, children place objects in the water and see if they sink or float, can have trays where they can sort items into sinking or floating.</p> <p>Water theme – can put coloured ice blocks into water and see them melt.</p> <p>Colour theme – different colours of paint or playdough to mix and see what colours they create</p> <p>Relevant puzzles, games, worksheets, books</p>	
Social studies		<p>Relates to people – can be combined with fantasy area.</p> <p>E.g. "people who help us" – fireman – get hat, boots, jacket, etc from fire department.</p> <p>Winter – have wellington boots, scarves, hats, etc – all items of winter clothing.</p> <p>Relevant puzzles, games, worksheets, books</p>	
Handcraft	Can be at a table, kneeling at a sturdy box or on the floor.	<p>Typically sewing, threading, gluing.</p> <p>It is a takeaway table – i.e. children will make things to take home.</p> <p>May be an art activity that you have presented to teach them the particular skills.</p>	<p>Under the sea – sturdy cardboard fish for children to thread wool around</p> <p>My family – basic puppet shapes that children can glue together with wool, buttons, etc for eyes, mouths, etc</p> <p>Reptiles: stockings to stuff with newspaper to make snakes</p>

Area	Basic furniture	Resources	Some extension ideas (usually theme related)
Music	Can be on the floor with cushions Shelf to display instruments (Can be very noisy – good to have in passage or on a veranda outside the class)	Musical instruments e.g. shaker, xylophone, drum , triangle Children can experiment with various instruments. Can have very basic musical scores for children to copy – colour coded – e.g. play “Mary had a little lamb” by following the colours on the xylophone.	
Listening	Can be on the floor with cushions.	Tape recorder/CD player Earphones	Stories to listen to – provide book so that they can try and follow. Songs to listen to. Games to play – follow instructions

Outdoor learning areas

The outdoor learning areas is often the most neglected area as many ECD practitioners do not specifically set up learning activities outdoors. In many instances, there is basic equipment such as jungle gyms and a sandpit and only a few resources, that seldom change. ECD practitioners often complain that the children are destructive outside but it is mostly because they are not being stimulated enough. The outdoor or garden area should be an extension of the classroom and should provide as many learning opportunities as the classroom itself.

The essential elements for young children are sand, water, adventure play and movement exploration. If there is space you may include woodwork, a pet corner and a vegetable garden, that all offer fantastic learning opportunities.

Important considerations:

Age of the children

Babies need a safe, grassed area with minimal equipment so that they can lie and enjoy fresh air and crawl around. It should not be too sunny and hot.

Toddlers need low climbing equipment, paved area for pushbikes, sand and water play.

In the table that follows, we will focus on the specific areas for young children.

Safety

The area should be fenced in; you should check that there are no poisonous plants; ensure there is soft ground-covering under equipment and make sure there is no broken or rusting equipment. Large equipment needs to be firmly anchored in the ground and there needs to be constant supervision.

Rules

Children need to know how to use equipment safely e.g. no wheel toys are allowed on the jungle gym, they are not allowed to throw sand.

Space

There needs to be enough space around equipment like swings, so that children do not get hurt when walking past.

Light

The area should not be too sunny and hot, there must be shady areas (may be under a gazebo).

Variety of surfaces

There should be paved or tarred pathways or areas for wheel toys and grass.



Stimulation/noise

Not only is the outdoor area an active area where children are running around but there should also be quieter areas where children can relax.

Toilets

Need to be easily accessible as children often get engrossed (absorbed) in playing and only realise at the last minute that they need to go.





The outdoor area should include a variety of surfaces including grass and paved areas

The following table give some ideas for outdoor learning areas, furniture, resources and possible extensions:

Area	Basic furniture	Resources	Some extension ideas (usually theme related)
Water	Water trough or large basin that is not placed on the ground as this poses a drowning risk.	Plastic items such as bottles, scoops, pipes, measuring cups, funnels, sponges, etc. Items should ideally be colour-coded with yellow, red, green and blue tape. They should also have holes on the bottom and sides in series from none to five. (This is such an important opportunity for children to learn maths skills) Waterproof aprons - can be made from plastic bags. Water must be emptied out daily and fresh water provided.	Sinking and floating – add boats Colours – use dye or food colouring in the water Add bubbles with nice smelling bubble bath or even dishwashing liquid Add warm water in winter

Area	Basic furniture	Resources	Some extension ideas (usually theme related)
Sand	Sandpit or container of sand, which is covered at night to prevent animals from soiling it. Must be large enough for children to climb into. Needs to have drainage if it is built in.	Metal items such as tins, colanders, baking trays, etc, must be painted, have no sharp edges and not be rusting. They should pose no danger to the children. Plastic items: bottles, scoops, pipes, measuring cups, funnels, spades, buckets, sieves, rakes, etc. Balancing scale As with water – they should have holes in them to provide opportunity for maths Skills. Hardboard or plastic combs	Cars, plastic animals Sea theme: hide shells for children to dig out Water: wet sand is different to dry sand
Adventure play	Grassed space Paved area for wheel toys	Wheel toys –scooters, tricycles, bicycles, wheelbarrows, carts Boxes, crates, drag boxes, blankets, shade cloth, pots, pans, hats, etc (items for outdoor fantasy play)	Picnic: cooler bag with plastic plates, cups, etc. Camping: sleeping bag, mattress Beach: set up umbrella, towels, buckets, hats
Movement exploration	Fixed equipment such as swings, slides, jungle gym (wood preferably as it does not rust) – monkey bars, fireman’s pole, bridge, commando net, trapeze rings.	Balance beam, balls, beanbags, bats, tyres, rope ladders, hula hoops, balance boards, punch bag, stilts, kick boards, tennequoit rings, swing ball, hopscotch	Set up a “tennis match” – hit ball over a net or piece of string. Spider’s web – use elastic around poles to create a web that they climb over and under.
Wood	Woodwork bench or solid table	Real but miniature hammers and saws Nails, glue, soft wood, wool, material, wood chips, sand paper, leather, pliers This area needs CONSTANT supervision as the potential for a child to hurt himself is very high.	Collage: glue different materials to wood pieces

Area	Basic furniture	Resources	Some extension ideas (usually theme related)
Pet area	Depends on pet – must be secure so that pet cannot escape or be taken out without Supervision.	Tortoise, ducks, rabbits, hens Area must be kept clean or they will attract rats and other vermin.	Children can bring food for the pets. Petting time: under supervision of an adult.
Vegetable garden	Quieter area of the garden where the risk of damage from balls and children running through is minimised.	You can grow flowers, vegetables and herbs. Small spades Trellises for beans	Use vegetable in foods presented to the children at lunch or snack. Use vegetables in make and bake activities.

3.2.1 Ensure that the environment is conducive to sensory and motor exploration

The indoor as well as the outdoor environment needs to be carefully considered to provide as much as possible opportunity for the development of sensory and motor exploration. Here are some things to consider:

- Are there well-supplied dramatic play areas?
- Is there a large block area?
- What about sand and water activities, manipulative, art areas, and reading corners?
- Is the space arranged in such a way that children can make noise while playing without disturbing children in other activities?
- Can children make a mess in the art area without destroying the books in the reading area?

Environments should provide children with many suitable physical activities. Young children are naturally physical and learn most effectively through total physical involvement. They need a high level of physical activity, variety, and stimulus change (Hale, 1994).

Allow for many hands-on activities. Young children need this — playing in water, building mud pies, making things out of play dough. Include ways to practise and integrate new experiences into existing mental structures — dramatic play, drawing, using language, and building with blocks.

Make use of change and variety. Children seek out a constant change of stimuli — scenery, textures, colours, group play, sounds, and smells.

Early Childhood Environments should be functional for both children and teachers.

3.2.2 Ensure that the environment is organised

You have to make the most of the space you have available and organise the learning environment so it provides individual and group space. You also need to be able to rearrange the learning environment on a regular basis according to the needs of the children and the activities.

Maximising available space

You should plan your activities bearing in mind the space available to you as well as the needs of each particular activity. You should consider the following:

- Is it a group or individual activity? Is it indoors or outdoors? The garden should have a variety of trees, flowers, and shrubs with space for the children to grow seeds, flowers and vegetables, investigate bugs and collect rocks, leaves or other natural objects. It also needs space for climbing equipment, open areas to run and space for wheel toys. Remember that the outdoor area can also be used to set up art activities – particularly those that are very messy or need more space. You can also read a story in the shade of a tree on a hot day.
- Wheel toys such as tricycles, karts, etc. need a paved or hard surface for it to be used effectively.
- It is vital that items are stored as close as possible to where they will be used.
- Book areas need to be in a quieter area of the class and not right next to noisy play.
- Block areas should have lots of space for children to build imaginative structures.
- Levels available – sitting on the floor, kneeling at a box or sitting at table and chairs. Some activities like literacy and numeracy activities need tables to work at, while blocks should be built on a flat surface such as the floor or carpet. Some art activities like box construction can be done on a plastic mat, which can be packed away when not in use.



Creative activities are often messy and thus they should be planned for areas that are tiled and easy to clean. They should be close to a source of water to facilitate preparation of paints etc. and for cleaning up.

- Free play activities allow children to choose an area to play in. Areas such as the book area, block area, etc. should cater for about four children at a time.
- Take into consideration the traffic patterns in the classroom. Children and adults should be able to move freely from one area to another. There should no furniture blocking doorways. Children should not be bumping into each other or equipment when they move around.

Toilets should be easily accessible from both indoor and outdoor areas. Children often need to get to the toilet in a hurry and should not have to move around structures.

There should be display space on the walls for artwork and things that are relevant to the weekly theme. These art works and other objects must all be at the children's eye-level.

Storage space is needed so that all the resources and equipment are well-organised (have their place) and both the ECD practitioner and the children have easy access to it.



The indoor area should be well lit and airy. Windows must let in enough light, be low enough for the children to see out and have curtains or blinds that close tightly for sleep time.

Each child needs a storage area for his/her personal items.

Furniture that can be stacked on top of each other and moved around is ideal as it allows for flexible use of space. Chairs and tables can be stored out of the way when an area is needed for music, movement or other large group activities.

Adapting to change according to the needs of the children and activities

If you have children with special needs in your class, they will also need to be comfortable and to move around freely. This is particularly relevant to children with physical disabilities who rely on crutches or wheelchairs for mobility (movement).

You can assist the children by making sure that the following are in place:

- Ramps are available to enter the indoor area and so that the child has access to the outdoor area.
- Pathways are wide enough outdoors for a wheelchair to be pushed on them.
- Toilet doors are wide enough to allow wheelchair access and that there are bars on the walls of the toilet for them to hold onto.
- There are “pathways” in the class for the children to move without bumping into furniture.
- Resources and equipment are stored at a height that they can access so they are not dependent in all situations.
- Resources are adapted where need be to accommodate their needs.

You will have to be very sensitive to the physical needs of all children with special needs so that the environment does not hinder their learning opportunities even more.

3.2.3 Ensure that the environment is set up for individual and group space

Group activities obviously require more space than individual activities but it depends on the group size. Large group activities such as music or morning ring will need more space than smaller groups and you may have to move furniture to accommodate all the children.

3.2.4 Ensure that the environment is safe and healthy

The ECD practitioner in a class should be able to see into all the play areas so that she can supervise the children effectively. Cupboards and shelves should be low enough so that an adult can see over them.

Carpets and mats should not be loose to prevent people from slipping. They should also not have corners that are sticking up that could result in someone tripping.

Plugs should be covered or blocked by heavy furniture so that children cannot easily access them and shock themselves. Do not overload plugs or use electrical equipment with frayed cords. Children should not be able to pull on electrical cords.

Wall-mounted heaters that are high enough to be above the reach of the children are the best choice.

The younger the child, the more supervision they need.

- *Babies* should never be left alone. They put everything into their mouths, so avoid resources that can be choking hazards or toxic. Also ensure that each baby's bottles, dummies and personal toys are clearly marked to avoid spreading infection. There must be no sharp edges on furniture to protect babies who are learning to crawl.
- *Toddlers* like climbing and get into dangerous situations if they are not constantly supervised. Once they are mobile (able to move around), gates are needed at the top and bottom of stairs. Storage boxes must either have lightweight lids, no lids or self-closing hinges. Cupboards that contain potentially hazardous items such as the first-aid kit or cleaning products must have safety latches or locks.
- *Young children* can manage certain activities on their own but you still need to be vigilant and keep an eye on them. Teach young children to put the resources away after an activity so that the resources do not get broken and so that no one trips over them and falls.

Clean up liquid spillages on tiled floors immediately as children and adults could slip on them.

Provide enough space for activities so that children can move without bumping into equipment. When children feel overcrowded they begin to argue and fight with their peers.

Provide enough resources so that children are stimulated and do not have to fight over equipment or wait too long for a turn.

Scissors and other potentially dangerous items must to be stored properly so that they are used only under supervision.

Equipment needs to be secure and well-balanced so that it does not fall onto a child if the child pulls on it.

Children must be supervised when using water. Empty all basins, troughs, etc, immediately after use.

Make sure that equipment is used for the intended purpose only as misuse might be a potential hazard.



Class Activity 5: Set up the learning environment

Please follow the instructions from the facilitator to complete the formative activity in your Learner Workbook.

3.3 Store materials and physical resources

You will need both indoor and outdoor storage areas, as resources should be stored close to where they will be used.

If there is enough space, it is ideal to have shared storeroom indoors for all ECD facilitators where the following can be stored:

- “junk” that is collected for art like boxes, polystyrene chips, etc.
- paint, glue, etc.
- paintbrushes, rollers, etc.
- theme boxes: photo copy paper lids or boxes are ideal for storing items that belong to a particular theme. They can be labelled and thus become easily accessible when needed. Extra puzzles, games, toys that are not being used can also be stored in these boxes.



An art trolley can be used to pack away art resources and then rolled out of the way when it is not being used

3.3.1 Ensure that the environment is set up to cater for storage of resources

Storage can be maximised in the classroom in many ways:

- Babies’ cots may have drawers underneath where toys or personal items can be stored.
- You can install high shelves within your reach but out of the children’s reach. This is ideal for items that are not needed on a daily basis.
- Drag boxes, boxes or crates used for children to kneel at can have lids fitted so that items can be stored inside.
- Art trolleys are available on castors where day-to-day items can be neatly packed and wheeled out of the way when needed.

It is very important for children’s sense of security that they know where things are and that the environment is well ordered. Teaching them that to sort and store items neatly and logically is an important life skill.

Boxes, tins and other items can be recycled and used to store items in the class. Here are some very basic ideas:

- Ice-cream tubs with lids can be stacked with items like crayons or kokis in them.



- Larger tins can be used for storing paintbrushes so that they can dry. Make sure that the bristles are stored upwards. A4 paper can also be rolled up and packed upright in a tin on the literacy table. The tins can be painted or covered with coloured paper to make them more attractive. Keep the plastic lid and put it on the bottom of the tin to prevent it from slipping or marking surfaces.
- A magazine or paper storage box can be created by cutting off the top of a large cereal box. Then draw a line from the top left-hand corner of the box to the middle of the right-hand side of the box. Making an identical line on the opposite side of the box. Once you have cut along these lines, you will have an upright storage box.
- Stacking paper trays can also easily be made. Take three or four cereal boxes and cut the top flaps off each of the cereal boxes. Stack the boxes on top of each other and stick them together with tape. Then cover the outside of the stack neatly with a large sheet of wrapping paper, brown paper, newsprint or newspaper. You can store your paper in this paper filing system. If your boxes start to bend, you can stick a piece of thin wood (for example, an ice cream stick) on each side to add extra support.
- A multi-sized storage unit or giant sorting tray can also be made to store a variety of things like wool, tinfoil or shiny paper, shells, fabric scraps, buttons, small machine parts and seedpods. Take a large cardboard box and cut off the top flaps. Turn the box on its side. Find smaller boxes that can fit neatly inside the bigger box like shoe boxes, porridge boxes or tea boxes. Arrange these small boxes inside the big box.

Children need personal storage space for their bags and snacks if they bring them to school, as well as for their art aprons, message books, change of clothes, sun screen, etc. It is ideal if this personal storage space is in a passage just outside the class so that the items can be accessed quickly. They will also need hooks in the toilet area for their personal face cloths.

The outdoor storeroom would be used for items such as the wheel toys, balls, sand and water play that cannot be left outside overnight. It should also be neat and cleaned out regularly as it can be the ideal nesting place for rats, spiders and other creatures. It is a good idea to use plastic crates as cardboard boxes rot easily – especially if it is damp.



Always remember that safety is crucial and that any poisonous or cleaning substances and medicines

should be securely locked away out of the reach of curious young children.



Class Activity 6: Store materials and physical resources

Please follow the instructions from the facilitator to complete the formative activity in your Learner Workbook.