Creating a good emotional environment

Introduction

Practitioners spend considerable time planning to ensure that the learning environment, both indoor and outdoor, meets the developmental needs of the children. However, the emotional environment is often overlooked. This article looks at the emotional environment, what it is, why it is important and how it can be planned for and provided.

What is an emotional environment?

An emotional environment is one that promotes emotional wellbeing and provides stability for the children according to their individual needs.

A good emotional environment will provide the children with:

- adults who will provide them with emotional support, understanding their feelings and showing empathy

- a sense of feeling safe and secure enabling them to learn and develop, giving them the confidence to explore and overcome any challenges they may face

- a safe place to explore their feelings, knowing they will be accepted by the adults around them and supported to develop how they express their feelings over a range of emotions, positive and negative

- warmth and a welcoming and accepting environment

- inclusivity, where everyone is valued, embracing all cultures, genders, ethnicity, language, religion, special educational needs and disabilities

- support to develop their independence and life skills.

A good emotional environment will "provide a secure base from which children grow into well-rounded, capable adults with robust mental health". DfE (2009) *Every Child Matters*.

Why is it important?

A child's social and emotional development is vital for their future if they are to achieve their full potential socially, academically and career-wise as an adult. With a positive emotional environment children will flourish across all areas of their development as they will have a positive disposition to learning, learn to share and work co-operatively with others, be well behaved and learn to become independent. They will be better able to deal with major transitions in their life, for example starting school, Year 6 to year 7, etc.

A child who has a poor emotional environment may struggle to develop positive relationships with their peers, fall behind academically and risk later involvement in crime. They may also develop physical health and mental health issues in their adult life. They are unlikely to reach their full potential.

What are the key contributions to a positive emotional environment?

Positive relationships with key adults

Research has shown that children with good bonds of attachment with their main caregivers are more likely to have good mental health as adults. Strong bonds — normally with their parent/carer but can also include their key person at school — help to develop a resilience to stress, an ability to balance emotions and enable the child to have meaningful interpersonal relationships in the future.

Practitioners need to develop strong bonds with their key person children. This will be enabled by developing good communication with the child's family, understanding the needs of the child, what helps to calm them, etc.

All staff should be aware of Bowlby's Attachment Theory https://www.simplypsychology.org/attachment.html and the important role they play as a key person.

Some children will require intense emotional support from their key person. The need for this can ebb and flow across the year. Some children may need continuous support, for example, children who have witnessed domestic violence between their parents or been abused, experienced trauma or loss. Hold in mind that what trauma means for a Year R child; it may range from losing a treasured toy to a parent leaving for a tour of duty. To ensure that the child is receiving the best support possible, staff should be aware of the policies and procedures for seeking support and guidance within school and with external agencies. Consider whether you have developed those relationships with parents that enable them to share their confidences and concerns with you.

Adults are free to spend time getting to know the children, playing with them and finding out about their interests.

Adults support children to learn new skills, such as whittling in Forest School.

Sharing fun and exciting experiences – toasting marshmallows over the fire.

The personal touch

Making the setting as personalised as possible helps children to feel valued. It can also help children to develop a sense of belonging and ownership. This can be achieved in a variety of ways.

The use of children's names is very important, but also learning and using parents' names and ensuring a warm welcome each day can have a positive impact on the whole family. Use activities and songs, for example the "hello" song to help the children learn each other's names.

Children feel very special when they see a photograph of themselves above their peg beside their name. This also helps them to identify their own peg/belongings and increases their independence.

Children who are starting school could bring in a drawing or piece of artwork that they have done at home. Displaying it prior to their arrival for their first session will help to provide a link to home and give support around transition which can be very distressing for some children.

Catherington Infant School have created very personal staff biographies on their website so that children and families can get to know them better http://www.catherington.hants.sch.uk/ Click on 'About Us' and then select 'Who's who'.

If possible, involve the children in the registration process when they arrive. This may be by having their own "signing in" sheet and a pen, or by having their photo and name on a board and having to find it and move it to another board. This will make them feel special and valued.

Family photos are taken during home visits and displayed in the classroom.

Children are given a scrapbook to make over the holidays which lives in school to be shared whenever they like with friends and adults.

Adults also make their own scrapbooks so children get to know them too.

Diversity

It is important that different cultures, religions and languages are reflected within the environment. It helps children feel that their home life is acknowledged and respected and that they are valued within the provision. This can be done in a variety of ways, such as adding welcome signs in different languages, using flags from around the world, or images that reflect the diversity of the children, families and staff within school and by toys and resources. These resources should be part of their everyday experience e.g. role play, dual language books or social stories that reflect the children and their families.

A school with a large military catchment has familiar role play and small world resources to help children settle.

Often parents are working away. Children are given a Mummy/Daddy doll in uniform and the parent takes a child doll away with them. Each knows the other is holding them in mind.

Skype sessions with family members who are away and live in different countries.

Behaviour

Planning for the emotional environment can be a real support for managing behaviour. Helping the children understand the "rules" or boundaries of the provision can be done by using visual displays. Encourage them to think of their own "rules" and add them to the display. This will give them some ownership of them and they are more likely to stick within the boundaries. Include the children in risk assessing together and involve adults in modelling how to use resources and the environment appropriately.

Choices

As adults we are continually faced with choices and decisions to be made. If children are encouraged to make choices when they are young they will find it much easier as adults. Design the environment to allow children to independently access and choose from a range of resources.

Children also benefit from being able to go back to an activity and complete it later. Consider setting up a 'holding area' for uncompleted work so that the children can choose when to return to complete it or make 'work in progress' signs for things that can't be moved.

The responsibility of choosing their lunch.

Setting up resources in a way that enables children to easily access a range of materials.

Children have the choice of being outside in all weathers because they have the appropriate clothing.

Routines

Routines are really important to children. They help children to feel secure, knowing what is going to be happening next. Timetables and routines need to have some flexibility to allow children to complete tasks and to follow their particular interest. Using visual timetables will enable the children to check for themselves and anticipate what is happening next. These can be easily made by using photographs of the children themselves undertaking regular activities, for example discovery time, eating snack or lunch, listening to a story, etc. Laminate the photographs and display them in the right sequence in a place that is accessible to the children. Using pegs or Velcro means the sequence can easily be changed. Children can help to plan the daily routine at the start of each session, adding the photographs in the right order and then removing them as activities are completed.

Celebrating achievements and effort

It is really important that the environment helps children to celebrate what they have achieved and the effort they have made. This gives them self-confidence and a greater determination when attempting future tasks, knowing that their efforts are recognised and valued. It is also important to encourage children to be more self evaluative and allow them to make their own decisions about what they are proud of or where they feel they have been successful. Annotate displays and evidence with speech bubbles showing a record of the child's thoughts, feelings and ideas using direct speech.

Children can move their name onto the 'Star of Pride' to celebrate their achievements.

Children's work displayed whenever they would like in frames around the environment.

Using iPads to record work they are proud of and independently upload to Tapestry.

Parents using Tapestry to celebrate achievements which are then shared in class.

Supporting feelings

Helping children to understand feelings and developing their vocabulary to include emotional language is an important step in enabling children to express themselves. This can be supported with a variety of resources, such as puppets, persona dolls, emotion cushions and dice. You can use large photographs with faces depicting different emotions or make your own resources with the children and a digital camera to take photos of themselves pulling faces to show different feelings. Adults model how they articulate and deal with their own feelings. The library service has a comprehensive range of books that are available to borrow. https://www.hants.gov.uk/librariesandarchives/library/resources/whenabookmighthelp

Opportunities to work together help children to support each other. If a child finds a challenge frustrating another child may be able to help co-regulate.

Spaces to encourage children to be sociable such as stools around the table at the snack bar.

Cosy spaces to encourage shy children to form relationships, a space to calm down or be alone.

Developing independence

Practitioners need to plan how to support independence and the learning of life skills for each child within their care. This may mean looking at what resources need to be used to provide an enabling environment for them to develop new skills. Adults should make conscious decisions about when to intervene and when to stand back and leave children to resolve the situation independently.

Visual supports enable children to make independent choices about which tools are most suited to their needs.

A simple recipe enables children to make their own playdough.

Opportunities to dress/undress independently – not over helping.

Planning for the emotional environment should be part of the general cycle of planning, observing the children, noting their interests, needs and abilities and planning accordingly. This will help to ensure that the children within the provision have a sound and secure foundation to their emotional development, physical and mental health.

Opportunities for collaborative working support children in developing co-operation skills.

Creating a safe environment where children feel they can take risks.

It's not just about the 'big stuff'. Encouraging experimentation, such as mixing their own paints, also supports children's ability to take risks.