As an OSHC staff member, you are the architect and designer of the spaces that children will spend significant amounts of time in. Creating a successful OSHC environment isn't just a matter of getting together some equipment and materials and putting it in a space. The environment is more than where the service operates and it plays a significant role in determining the quality of the service and the children's behaviour.

The suggestions below will help you think about creating a successful environment.

• Create spaces within spaces. Place equipment within the space to create semi-enclosed spaces for individual or small group play. One of the most boring and unhelpful arrangements possible is to arrange shelving and other equipment around the walls facing inwards, so there is one big open space left. Big open spaces encourage big open space behaviour: running around, flitting from one thing to the other, being distracted. This can lead to materials getting mixed up and general clutter. Creating smaller spaces encourages children to be in smaller groups and helps them to concentrate and focus.

• Think carefully about how much space is needed for particular activities and materials, and try to allow enough space for whatever is expected to take place. For example, there is nothing more frustrating than a small table overflowing with blocks or a block area with a wonderful array of blocks and props and not enough floor space to use them. Sometimes it will be necessary to put in place a system, in discussion with children, for limiting the number of children in a particular area or doing a particular activity. This may be for safety reasons or to minimise frustration and interference.

  • Put stuff together that belongs together. Keep stuff apart that needs to be apart. For example craft materials belong together, blocks belong with or near props, books belong with comfortable seating or cushions, dress-ups and dramatic play props belong near each other. The placement and arrangement of materials can suggest possibilities to children.

  • Put messy activities in places where the mess can be contained and where the effect on other spaces will be minimal. Obviously activities involving water should be near a water source and take place on a floorsurface that can cope with the water.

• Arrange the environment so that it invites engagement and encourages participation. Dumping everything into plastic crates is a quick way to pack up, but it doesn’t invite children to engage. It encourages rummaging and tossing things around. Displaying materials and equipment appropriately on shelves in an organised way encourages children to make selections. It also demonstrates caring for and valuing the equipment and encourages children to do the same.

• Think about aesthetics. It’s easy in a busy OSHC service to forget about the importance of including beauty in the environment. A plant, a beautiful piece of fabric, a vase of flowers, some natural objects such as shells and stones, a print, a sun catcher that casts rainbows on the walls, or a basket can provide inspiration for art, a stimulus for conversation, and source of joy to both staff and children alike.

Overcrowding contributes directly to behaviour problems. It can be challenging to get it right for a group of children of diverse ages and with diverse interests, especially when you are committed to giving choices, but too much to choose from creates as many problems as too little. Children's behaviour is a good guide. If they are mostly settled and engaged, then you have probably got it about right.

• Think about pathways when arranging spaces. Observe carefully the pathways children use to move around, into and out of spaces. Ensure pathways remain clear and do not dissect activity spaces.

• Ensure diversity and choice. Make available a variety of materials and equipment. However, too much equipment, too many materials can cause confusion and over-stimulation, and can be a safety hazard.
• Take care with displays. It may be tempting to take the course of least resistance and display just about everything children produce in their art and craft activities. This serves little purpose except to fill up the walls. While a competitive system of choosing the ‘best’ to display would be inappropriate, it is worth deciding on a fair and sensible way of displaying children’s work that highlights effort and calls deserved attention to the work. Other displays, particularly pictures on the walls, need regular attention and will cease to be looked at if left up for too long.

• Strike a balance between organisation and a lived-in feeling. Organisation in the environment is important in order for the service to function. There needs to be rules about the use of materials, replacing them after use, and children’s responsibilities to look after the environment. However, the most important factor is not that the environment is always tidy and orderly. In fact, that would be a sign that children were not really engaging and learning. What is most important is just that – that children get involved with materials, equipment, each other and adults. In the process, the environment will become messy. It is inevitable that staff will be required to restore order and clean up messes, while at the same time supporting children’s play and engagement.

• Balance the new and novel and the loved and familiar. Familiar things and activities prompt feelings of security, of being ‘at home’. However, too much sameness can become boring and lead to behaviour problems. Too many changes are frustrating and confusing. It’s not sensible to suggest a formula such as ‘one new thing or activity a day, or a week’. Let children’s behaviour be the guide to whether there’s too much or too little that’s new.

• Set up the environment so that it reflects the children’s lives, their communities, their culture and their families. Tangible signs that this space belongs to us, through photographs, children’s work and banners they have made give ownership and help to establish a sense of belonging.

• Pay attention to touch, sounds, smells, temperature and light. Think about noise levels, both in terms of loudness and the quality of the sounds. These dimensions of the environment impact greatly on the quality of the children’s experience.

• When you make a change, give it a chance before deciding whether or not it was a good change. Most importantly, when you are thinking about the environment, try to see it through the eyes of the children. Ask yourself, ‘How would it feel to be a child here?’ Ask children to comment on the environment and make suggestions for improvement.

Links to Shared visions
Chapter 7: The environment

Questions and reflections
1. Think about group environments you have spent time in. What made you feel comfortable? What helped you to concentrate?

2. Are there any obstacles in the OSHC environment that you work in preventing it working really well for staff and children? How can these obstacles be overcome?

3. What is one change you can make to the physical environment that would improve the quality of the service?