

Nurture in Early Years

Nurture groups are evidence based interventions that seek to facilitate the development of social, emotional and behavioral skills. The intervention is based on the theory of attachment developed by Bowlby (1969) and Ainsworth (1978). Attachment theory describes the importance of emotional bonds and connectedness with another person. Bowlby described the importance of the relationship between the primary caregiver on babies and very young children and how this then becomes the blueprint for future interactions and relationships. Children who have experienced secure attachments are much more likely to have a secure base from where they can explore the world and learn.

Nurture groups, as a concept, were based on effective early years practice. They were designed by Marjorie Boxall and Marion Bennathan in the 1970s in response to an increasing amount of children presenting with social, emotional and behavioural difficulties. Boxall attributed this to inconsistent caregiving and a lack of developmentally appropriate support. The aims of nurture were to provide children with attuned interactions and a developmentally appropriate curriculum, which facilitates the development of language and communication within a safe space.

Nurture has never been more important to develop. Within the context of the COVID-19 pandemic, educational settings play a vital role to support children develop their well-being and resilience.

Linking Development Matters and Nurture Together

The revised Development Matters Framework¹ stresses the importance of seven key features of effective practice. Nurture practice and principles complement this framework as shown in the table below:

Development Matters Key Features of Effective Practice	Nurture Principles
The importance of high quality, consistent care where practitioners are responsive to children and babies. It asks practitioners to recognise that, 'babies, toddler and children thrive when they are loved and well-cared for'	Importance of nurture for the development of well-being The classroom offering a safe base
Starting school and other transitions are significant experiences in children's lives	Transitions are important in the lives of children
Children's learning is 'like a spider's web with many strands, not a straight line.'	Children's learning is best understood developmentally
'Effective practice means that practitioner's understand that toddlers are not able to regulate their emotions effectively'	All behaviour is communication
By providing language rich experiences, this helps the development of language	Language is a vital means of communication

¹ DfE (2020) Development Matters: Non-statutory curriculum guidance for the early years foundation stage

Leadership in Nurturing Settings

Research shows that for nurture to be developed effectively in a setting, it requires all staff to understand and embrace nurture principles. This works best when a member of the senior leadership team or management is able to drive nurture forward in that institution. It helps to promote consistency of approach and ensures that nurture is fully embraced. **Halton recommends that one member of staff is given the role of Nurture Lead in the setting.** This should be a member of staff with leadership responsibility. The role of this member of staff is to help cascade training and support individuals in developing nurturing approaches across the setting.

What a nurture practitioner understands

Nurture practitioners understand the importance of supporting children to develop secure attachments to trusted, predictable adults. These adults should be emotionally attuned to the children in their care. Practitioners are committed to and are invested in developing these relationships with children and understand that all behaviour is communication.



Home-like experiences such as sitting down to eat and talk are valued as an opportunity to model appropriate social skills and language. Sharing experiences and ideas in situations such as circle time are also valued by nurture practitioners as they help them to understand the child's perspective and promote the development of language.



Supporting children in a nurturing setting is crucial in supporting children to feel safe in their educational setting. It helps them to feel secure and therefore to take risks and explore the learning environment. Through experience of secure and warm attachment relationships, neural pathways in the brain fire increasing capacity for learning and developing new skills.

Use of assessment in a nurturing setting

Nurturing practitioners also have a good understanding of where children are working at developmentally. They plan rich curriculum opportunities that are based on developmental stage rather than age. They understand that language is a vital means of communication and support the development of this. Using tools such as the WellComm screening toolkit routinely helps plan effective support and target intervention. Using this assessment can help with tracking progress and bridging gaps in children's language development.



The Boxall Profile is a standardised assessment tool designed to support practitioners identify social, emotional and behavioural difficulties and set appropriate strategies. It can also be used to help track progress. (See Nurture Strategy). Practitioners may wish to consider using this to help them better understand children's needs.

What a nurturing environment includes

Creating a safe learning environment is crucial in the development of nurture provision. Ensuring the children have access to a well organised, clutter free, and communication friendly environment helps to create consistency and security. It ensures the classroom is a safe base for learning. The nurturing early years setting should try to replicate a home environment with dedicated zones and spaces.



It is important that staff show the environment is valued. Discarding broken and faulty toys for example, shows the environment is cared for and valued. Using a muted colour palate and displaying photographs of children in the same way as you would expect to see in a home are also things to consider.

Having a dedicated role play area and home corner is important to support children develop their language and communication skills. It also helps to facilitate modelling of appropriate interactions between adults and children.



Some examples of role play developed based on the children's interests at Warrington Road and Ditton Nursery

Access to quiet spaces and corners to allow children reflection time is also important within a nurturing setting. Consideration of children's sensory needs and providing curriculum experiences to develop this are also important characteristics of effective nurture practice.



Effective use of staffing

Use the Key Person role within the setting to act as a link for the child and their family. Ensure there is dedicated time for feedback with the family about what the child has been doing in nursery. By fostering positive attachments with one key member of staff it will help the child to feel secure in the setting.

Consideration of the child's journey into nursery and their transition from parents to the setting is also important. Where possible, the child should be greeted by the same member of staff, ideally their Key Person, and in a consistent way. Share with the child some of the positive things that are going to happen that day and stress what will be the same. This helps to reassure and promote consistency of approach.



Visual timetables and self-registration can be helpful in supporting this consistency.