**[Karen Hope]:** So, young children are born with a strong drive to make sense of their world. And you've touched on that a little bit with babies, noticing things and how they learn and that they're always learning. And their unique experiences and where they fit in the world. What conditions do you think are necessary in an early learning space to promote creativity or theory making and curiosity? What do you need to have in your room to have children that do this?

**[Sandra Cheeseman]:**

Yeah look, I think the environment is so important in setting the tone and enabling the invitations. And so, if there's the right materials around, you'll see the invitations. And if it's just a chaotic environment and children just ramble from one thing to the next, to the next, to the next. They're not encountering that statistical learning. It's quite random and it becomes quite chaotic, and you'll see it play out in their behaviour.

So, I think about the basics of a baby's room environment and try and look at it from the baby's perspective. And so, again, we never know what is their perspective but it's good to speculate and think what would a baby think about this room? And probably many of you have done that exercise where you actually crawl into the room and lay on the floor and have a look around. If you haven't done it before, do it tomorrow because it's absolutely eye opening what the baby experiences.

And a part of a larger research project that I was part of, the babies, we actually put a small camera on a band on the child's head almost near their eye to capture what almost babies were seeing. And I cannot tell you how many floral skirts flashed by these baby's eyes. And when they looked into a bucket of toys, how big the Lego looks, or the Mobilo. The world looks quite different from the baby's perspective. So, I know a lot of infant educators spend a lot of time on the floor. But actually, lay on the floor tomorrow and have a good look.

I think, most important is predictability. So, a baby can say, I own this space, I know where to find things, it's organised and it's tidy enough that I can find my favourite things and I can get to them. And if I'm not yet mobile, there are people around me who are thoughtful, and care about what I'm looking at and where I'm positioned and how long I'm positioned there.

So, someone's in the head of the baby thinking, "Yeah, they've been looking at that cushion for quite a while, let's move, let's come over to the window." There's someone who's doing that and enabling children to have access to the materials that they like. Of course, the importance of calmness, and I know the instant I walk into a room, the level of calm, you can just feel it in your bones. And that doesn't mean that it's always quiet or it's slow and passive because babies are very active, and we want them to be active. But there's a calmness about that activity that you can actually sense when you walk into a room. So, focusing on the aesthetics and the calmness, the acoustics, really thinking about what does this sound like for a baby to be here? What does it smell like? What are those really?

Because babies have a really heightened senses and so, we really want to take notice of that. We've learned, as adults, to filter a lot of that out. But the baby's still really actively working with all their senses. And then, this point about being interesting. So, an interesting environment for me is one that's really predictable but has interesting materials in it. And that I can actually get to and access the stuff that I really want to, and I can use it in really interesting ways and that the materials that are there are valuable enough that I can elaborate myself with those materials. So, the old open-ended materials or the loose parts sort of stuff that I can take control of, I can experiment for myself, and I can work out how crayons go into a tube. And I can change things and see what is possible with my thinking and theorising.

So, an environment that has a lot of closed toys, close-ended toys, colourful, they only pop up, they only do one thing. They're going to become really boring after a while. Some of that is quite novel and quite interesting for children. But really beautiful environments are ones that have the same things just about every day. Children know exactly where to go and get them. They're interested in them, they can do all the things that they love, we just scattered them around, or pop them into containers. They can carry them. All of those behaviours that we see so often in infants and toddlers, we want the environment to really lend itself to that. And then I have this real love of embodied learning, and it's so much evidence of children really wanting to fit their bodies into places to really discover something with all of their senses.

And so, places where children can tuck themselves away, where they can pull a rug over their head and hide, where they can crawl into a space, climb over a space. Where they can really have that embodied experience of understanding what their body can do and what they really enjoy doing. And I could say rich and interesting things to explore, but I think it's really important with babies, that the most extraordinary things are often the most ordinary things to us. And so, your example of the tube and the crayons, really ordinary materials, but they lend themselves to this magic of discovery. And so, I think let's not get too carried away with, it has to be a really sophisticated environment because it can be really quite ordinary. There's so much interest in those ordinary objects. And I was at an infant room the other day, and there was a basket of beads and I'd have to say a safety caution here, but they were very specially designed beads that weren't going to fall off so that they wouldn't choke on them.

So, there were baby beads. There were baskets of, I don't know, 20 or 30 strings of beads. And one baby went up and crawled up and sat down and started to put them over his head, and he struggled. He knew that this was what you did, but he couldn't actually get the action right. So, some of them went right over his head and some of them fell in his lap. And then, hallelujah, five or six attempts later, one went over his head. And he was so pleased with himself. And then he set about, and he repeated this activity over and over. And we see these schemas in children, where they catch on to an action and they really want to explore it and master it.

And so, this opportunity to revisit this basket of beads, it's not that the basket of beads are out for a day or a morning and then they're put away, but they're there.

Sandra Cheeseman:

That child can find those beads and come back and revisit that mastery. Getting such a thrill out of getting those beads over his head. I think those are the sort of things that we want to think about in the environment. That it's interesting, it's rich in potential but it's really stable and predictable.

**[Karen Hope]:** I have to say, when you were speaking at the start of that, I'd maybe want to go out and find a baby and get a GoPro camera just to test that out because I'm sure that would yield some fascinating video. What I really liked about your responses, Sandra, was in your kind of things that need to be in environments or should be in environments to support these, is it perhaps they need someone in the baby's head. And I think if you were an educator, that to me would be useful to think about tomorrow. Is there, "Am I in these babies' heads? Am I looking at the world as they may see it? Am I providing experiences and opportunities for them that invites multiple possibilities?" .And I know sometimes I've talked to staff groups about going around and playing with the equipment. Do you ever sit down and play with the Mobilo or the Duplo? Because when you do that, and you might've been putting it out for 25 years, but when you actually sit down and play with it, you can sometimes see what children see in those experiences.

**[Sandra Cheeseman]:** Yeah I think playfulness is really important for educators and we don't want to play for children, but we certainly want to play alongside children, and we should play when children are not there. And really, as you say, get to know that the materials that we're offering to children and what their potentials are in our minds as well.

**[Karen Hope]:** I think if you had a staff meeting and you bought some new equipment, it might be useful to bring that into the staff room, whatever that is, and all have a bit of a go at it and see what you think and what are the opportunities here and why might children like this?

**[Sandra Cheeseman]:** Yeah. And I think really the simple things, lovely footage of two babies crawling under a home corner table that had a tablecloth on it and everyone else was asleep. There's just two babies in the room they're crawling, and one crawled under then poked his head out and goes... Like this. And then another child notices and crawls out, but he's actually not brave enough to go under the table. So, he's a bit cautious and sits back. And, then the other baby goes back under the table and comes back out and, 'BOO' again, and this beautiful interaction took less than a minute. But so much happened in that minute. There was inter-subjectivity. They were really understanding each other's abilities and wants and needs to play this game. They were playing a game with rules. They were setting up the rules for themselves.

I go in, I come out, I say, 'BOO', you squeal. I go back in, I come out, you squeal. And then you go over there and then we both squeal at each other. And what was happening in this episode was not really noticed by the educators. Although one educator was over along the side of the room. And she was sort of tuned into what was going on, but not really thinking that much was happening. After they got a bit tired by the experience, they both crawled over to her, and she sat down on the floor and they both clawed up onto her lap. It just felt like they seemed so chuffed with themselves for being able to play this game on their own, make up their own rules and their own game and learn about each other. And it was all with the use of a home corner type table with a tablecloth on it. So, they are really ingenious at turning the materials that we think are for another purpose into their own purpose. And yeah, if we've got environments that enable this, then we'll see this behaviour more and more.

**[Karen Hope]:** I was lucky last week I think, to be in an early learning centre in the sleep room. And the educator was in there patting a child and she said, "Oh, they're all asleep." And when I turned my attention down the end, two little people, perhaps maybe 12 months old were not asleep, what they were doing though, they had their feet outside the bars of the cot, and they could touch each other's feet. Was lots of little bits of rubbing each other's feet. And I said, "I don't think they're asleep." And again, just a beautiful connection between two small humans. And perhaps it was some theory going, well, my foot fit through the bar, let's see if your foot fits through the bar. Let's see if we can reach each other's feet. It's those not necessarily set up, and you have to pay attention to notice that.

**[Sandra Cheeseman]:** Yeah, absolutely. And that is the social side of babies' lives is also one that's underestimated because we're told that they're not social beings, they're egocentric and they're not interested in others. They are absolutely interested in each other. And this connection, this desire to connect, I think is very profound and they find ways of doing it and sneaky ways of doing it when they think we're not watching. I once had on video, a child being bitten and it was awful at the time this child crawled past, grabbed, bit, and everybody went into biting mode. Of course, there was, lets, into action.

But actually, when we looked at the video two hours before, so we went two hours back and we watched that video, the biter had been pursuing that child for that two hours. And so, watching her move, gesturing, trying to get across to her, he was not mobile. And then all of a sudden, she came across his path and I'm sure there was nothing malicious in it. It was, "I've got her." And so, if we're able to see that the events and really notice what's going on, we interpret all of that behaviour in quite a different way. But this desire to connect, I think is very strong.

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