

Creating accessible nursery environments for children with cerebral palsy

Eddie Jones explores the steps that nurseries can take to adapt environments to better serve children with cerebral palsy, helping them to thrive in these early learning spaces.

Cerebral palsy is a condition marked by impaired muscle coordination. Often attributed to brain damage before or at birth, it significantly impacts a child's ability to interact comfortably and effectively in many typical nursery environments. Recognising and addressing the unique needs of children with cerebral palsy in these settings is not just about accessibility; it's about fostering an inclusive atmosphere that supports every aspect of their development.

UNDERSTANDING THE NEEDS OF CHILDREN WITH CEREBRAL PALSY

Cerebral palsy manifests in various forms, each of which affects children differently. The most common symptoms include difficulties with movement, muscle tone and posture. Children with this condition may use assistive devices such as wheelchairs, walkers or braces.

In a nursery setting, their needs extend beyond simple mobility; sensory sensitivities, communication barriers and cognitive challenges are also prevalent, requiring a tailored approach to their learning and interaction environments.

For instance, some children with cerebral palsy might find noisy, brightly lit or visually cluttered rooms overwhelming. Likewise, standard furniture and play equipment might not cater to their physical abilities. Simple activities such as moving between different areas of a nursery or participating in group activities can become challenging. All of this highlights the need for a well-considered adaptive environment.

DESIGN PRINCIPLES FOR ACCESSIBLE NURSERY SPACES

Adapting a nursery to be more accessible begins with thoughtful design principles that accommodate a wide range of needs, particularly for children with cerebral palsy. This involves creating environments that support mobility, sensory needs and overall safety to ensure that all children can learn and play without barriers.

Key considerations include:

- ▶ **Spatial layout:** Create wide pathways and open spaces to accommodate wheelchairs and walkers. Learning and play areas should allow free movement, without clutter and obstacles that can hinder mobility or create unsafe



BIO

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conditions. Design floor plans that allow easy transitions between different areas, such as from the playroom to the washroom, and ensure that doorways are wide enough to accommodate mobility aids.

- ▶ **Sensory-friendly design:** Children with cerebral palsy may experience heightened or reduced sensory sensitivity. Opting for neutral colours and soft, natural lighting can help to prevent sensory overload and make the environment more comfortable for all children. Incorporate quiet zones where children can retreat to feel safe and calm, away from the bustling activity of the main play areas. These zones can be equipped with sensory-friendly toys and materials that help to soothe and relax.
- ▶ **Accessibility features:** Choose adjustable furniture to accommodate children of different sizes and abilities so that every child can participate fully in activities. This includes tables that can be adjusted for height and chairs that provide necessary support. Ensure that storage areas are accessible, with shelves and hooks at appropriate heights so children can reach their belongings independently. Specialised play

equipment should be inclusive, such as swings with harnesses or tactile panels for sensory exploration. Bathrooms and sinks must also be adapted with considerations such as grab bars and lower fixtures to ensure children with physical disabilities can use them.

- ▶ **Safety considerations:** Install non-slip floors in all areas to prevent falls, especially in zones prone to wetness. Add handrails along walkways and ramps to aid those who need support while walking. Install padding on sharp corners and edges to protect all children from potential harm during their daily activities. Regular safety audits can help to identify potential hazards and ensure that the nursery remains a safe space for every child.

With these design principles, nurseries can create spaces that are not just physically accessible but also welcoming and conducive to the wellbeing and development of children with cerebral palsy. These principles will also benefit a wide range of children with different needs.

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IMPLEMENTING INCLUSIVE PRACTICES WITHIN NURSERIES

Inclusion extends beyond physical adaptations to involve the nursery's educational and social practices. Creating an environment that fosters inclusion requires a holistic approach that integrates both structural and cultural changes within the nursery. Effective strategies include:

- ◊ **Staff training:** Comprehensive training is essential to ensure staff understand the specifics of cerebral palsy so they can effectively support children. Training should focus on the unique communication needs, physical requirements and learning styles associated with cerebral palsy. Additionally, staff should learn inclusive teaching strategies that allow them to modify activities and interactions according to individual needs.
- ◊ **Inclusive curriculum:** Developing an inclusive curriculum is crucial. This involves planning activities that are adaptable to children with

various abilities so that all children can participate fully and engage meaningfully with the curriculum.

- ◊ **Communication strategies:** Effective communication is key to inclusion. Nurseries should employ a range of tools and technologies to assist non-verbal children or those with speech difficulties. This may include picture exchange systems, communication boards or digital devices that facilitate speech.
- ◊ **Peer interaction:** Fostering an environment of inclusion and understanding among all children is fundamental. Activities should be designed to promote teamwork and empathy, and to encourage children to interact and collaborate with peers who have different abilities.

By using these inclusive practices, nurseries can create a supportive, engaging and accessible environment for all children, and foster a diverse and inclusive community.

THE IMPORTANCE OF COLLABORATION BETWEEN PARENTS AND STAFF

Effective collaboration between nursery staff and the parents of children with cerebral palsy is not just beneficial; it is crucial for creating an environment that fully supports the child's developmental and educational needs. Parents often rely on an interdisciplinary team to support their child's wellbeing. This team can include doctors, physiotherapists, occupational therapists and even cerebral palsy solicitors to provide legal support and secure funding for their care needs. Integrating nursery staff into this team enhances the support network around the child and helps to cohesively address all facets of their development.

Parents are typically the first experts on their child's specific needs, preferences and potential triggers. Regular and structured communication between parents and nursery staff ensures that the nursery environment evolves in response to the child's ongoing developmental progress and changing needs. These could include scheduled meetings, progress reports and adaptation planning sessions.

Incorporating feedback from the wider professional team that supports the child also brings additional layers of expertise into the nursery setting. For instance, physiotherapists can provide critical advice on the layout of classrooms to aid mobility or suggest specific types of play that promote motor skills development. Similarly, occupational therapists can help to design sensory-friendly areas that mitigate sensory overload, a common challenge for many children with cerebral palsy.

Adapting nursery environments for children with cerebral palsy is essential for their active and enjoyable participation in early years education. It requires a commitment to ongoing learning and adaptation from nursery staff and collaboration with families. By embracing these changes, nurseries not only improve the experience for children with cerebral palsy, but also enrich the environment for all children.



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