

The Nursery with No Toys



Spring 2019



Part 1

Why do we research?

“Research is to see what everybody else has seen, and to think what nobody else has thought.”

-Albert Szent-Gyorgyi

The idea of removing toys from a busy, bustling nursery might seem strange, but then we enjoy doing things a little differently at Ilminster Avenue Nursery School. This is research. It means ‘looking at things again’. We know there are a lot of nurseries that have few toys or a ‘curiosity approach’ and we also know that our colleagues who work with the Montessori or Steiner system use natural materials. Our take on a nursery with no toys though, was to ask a



specific question in each of our rooms and to think more deeply about what a toy actually is.

We decided that a toy is a miniature version of a real object, for instance a doll or a train or equipment in a home corner. We then started having debates about whether a wooden block is a toy (we decided it wasn't) or if Lego is a toy (we decided it was). The important thing wasn't whether something was definitely a toy or not, but that we were discussing it as researchers. Jigsaws were out, but books, pencils, paintbrushes and paper were in.

The idea for the project came from Germany, where since the 1990's, many Nurseries are toy free for a period of time. The project is called "Der Spielzeugfreie Kindergarten" (the nursery without toys) and was founded by Rainer Strick and Elke Schubert, public health officers who worked with adults suffering from various forms of addiction. They worried that addictive habits can start early in childhood and could be linked to a need for materialism. The researchers wanted to show that children can play socially and creatively when they are not being surrounded by toys.

Initially, some of the team were skeptical about our project (one practitioner admitted to being "horrified"!). After all, we are a very busy setting with two hundred children, carefully balanced staff ratios and always mindful of completing observations, paperwork and child safeguarding. I was reluctant to put strain on such a hard working staff who may well have seen research as being a luxury, or even worse,

pointless. My fears were unfounded though, and the week before February half term the team talked to the children and shared our plan with them. The children themselves helped pack away baskets of animals, dressing up clothes and toy garages which were then deposited in a store room.

I had also shared the idea of the project with the parents and families and the response ranged from blind faith in our educational ideas to uncertainty about what the children were going to do with no toys. One parent I spoke to even thought they would get bored and fight, and I assured her that my research aim wouldn't include either of those things! It was an interesting point to bring up, especially as our findings ended up as being the opposite of this.

However, some parents could see the potential in the project and when interviewed about using things other than toys to play with one parent commented "A box becomes a spaceship, a stick becomes a wand, they become a wizard." Another said, "I keep saying that kids have too much these days. We keep being told plastic is killing everything, yet manufacturers keep churning it out." It also helped that we shared our plans with them beforehand, not just with letters but also by using social media, which we used even more as the project developed. It was important to us to share ongoing research with our parents as well as sharing the finished product.

We also made sure that as well as clearing our rooms we had a good stock of materials and resources that would

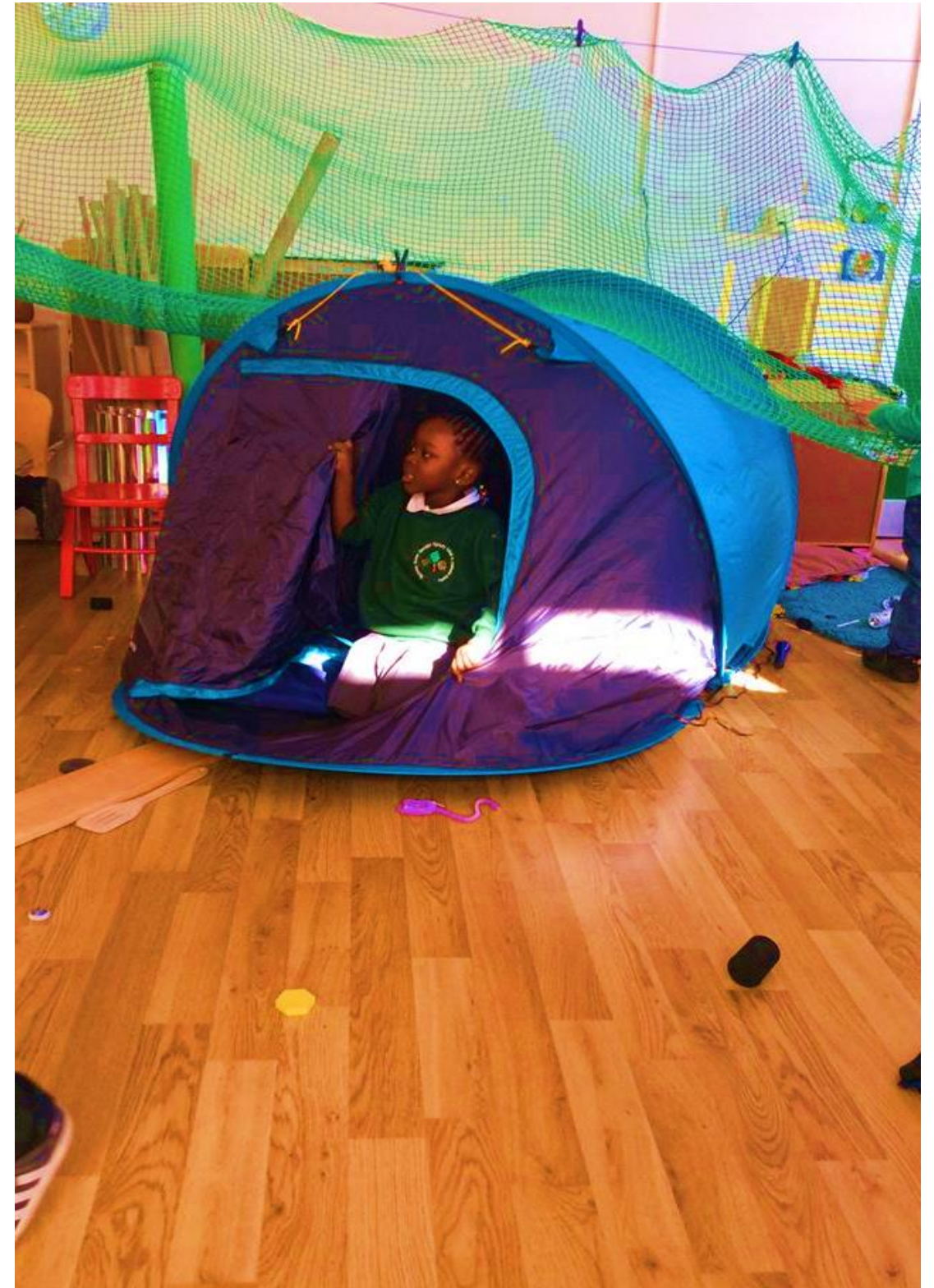


The parents all responded to our calls for cardboard, tubes, buttons, keys and a mountain of other items that were definitely not toys!

inspire creativity by being a) natural, b) as 'real' as they could be and c) open ended and ambiguous. The staff saved up their recycling and we made sure any cardboard boxes from school deliveries were kept to one side. We asked parents to help us collect objects and were thrilled to have cardboard tubes from rolls of carpet, scores of catering sized tins and even one parent who works in a train station lost property

office providing us with several hundred keys! This also showed us how much the parents understood our intent and how they supported the project.

Each of our rooms (we have three Nursery classes, a two year old room and a room for children with severe and complex learning difficulties) came up with their own



"The highest form of research is essentially play." -N.V. Scarfe

research question they wanted to explore and we used a staff meeting to come up with this as well as predict what we thought might happen. The staff team in our room for children with severe and complex learning difficulties even wondered whether it was *ethical* to remove toys from children with special educational needs and this became their initial question. It interested me that from a simple premise ('remove the toys') we were already discussing ethics and morals ('what right do we have to remove the toys?')

In the end, these were the research questions from each of the teams:

- Will there will be a change in children's social skills?
- What impact will having no toys have on the children?
- Will children use their imagination differently?
- Will the children communicate more?
- Will it inspire children's creativity?

Before and during February half term the staff all worked hard to find all of their toys and put them into storerooms, cover up cupboards or turn them round to face the wall. The rooms took on a different atmosphere. They felt emptier and they felt more peaceful as the primary plastic colours of lego

and dinosaurs and dolls gave way to more muted colours of wood, cork, sand and metal. We had primed the parents through Facebook, newsletters and general conversation. The scene was set.

The day after half term saw a very different looking nursery and the rooms looked very minimal. It was noticeable that the role play areas were gone, shelving units turned round and equipment and resources that we would normally use outside (nets, tents, a stage made of wooden blocks) had been relocated in much emptier classrooms. One of the children coming back into their room said "This is like Star class, but not like Star class." Precisely. Something was very different.

We had anticipated a few puzzled faces or a little disapproval over where the trains were, but the first day passed relatively peacefully as children looked at the new resources. But very quickly and very definitely we all began to notice a change.

Part 2

What happened when the toys went?

“Necessity is the mother of invention”

- Plato

The first thing the staff noticed was that the children they were initially worried about missing toys didn't seem to notice too much. One child with a diagnosis of autism and an attraction to trains wasn't upset that they had gone, he simply changed his object of attraction to a giant cardboard box that he enjoyed climbing into and out of until it eventually fell apart! The children in our room with severe and complex special needs also adjusted very quickly and the staff in there reflected whether their children had previously been



interacting with the toys or whether the toys themselves were habits or objects of reference.

There were also many cause and effect toys that children with special needs had particular affection for, but these were also removed, after a discussion with the parents. One child who would enjoy toys that lit up and produce spinning lights made the transition very easily and the family of this child also experimented by removing these toys at home. In the first few days of the project the fears of the staff didn't materialise.

So what were the children doing? Looking at observations from that first week there were children playing with some specific objects. The large catering sized tins were being stacked, rolled, used as musical instruments, filled, emptied and balanced on heads. Cardboard boxes were being built into towers and knocked down, hidden in, driven like cars or aeroplanes. A stage was set up in one of the classrooms where before toys had spread out over the floor and the children inhabited it as lead singers, acrobats and musicians.

Staff noticed other things too: there was more talking, more sociable moments. We discussed the importance of boredom and how having less 'stuff' can inspire an imagination and force children to use their communication and each other instead of relying on an object or toy. We also noticed there were children embracing reading, mark making and art a little

more, as they experimented and experienced other parts of the environment which they may otherwise have avoided.

The effects on the staff were quite interesting to observe. There was a little worry initially of what might happen in their very empty room environments. Some staff became quite obsessed with the odd toy that appeared from under a cupboard and might pounce on it with a cry of "Toy!!" like it was contraband. Other members of the team embraced the minimalist look of the room and noted how little plastic or bright, distracting colours there were. I certainly noticed a less cluttered and calmer feel as I spent the first week going in and out of the rooms.

Reflections from the rooms were taken at a staff meeting and the comments were:

"No children have asked about the toys."

"Children have coped well with the change."

"The children seem willing to try new experiences."

"Children are using the outside environment more."

"Children are going out of their own comfort zones and developing new friendships."

"We have not missed having toys!"



The two year old room was already used to a heuristic approach but found the Nursery with No Toys made them think really hard about what their environment offered.

“It prevented repetitive play.”

“More interactions. Watching and copying peers.”

“The children have been communicating ideas better, and it has been encouraging conversation, social interaction and collaboration.”

The only slightly negative observation was that “some children have been asking for toys.”

So the first week had gone better than any of us expected and the momentum of ideas from the children gained pace. Cardboard boxes seemed to multiply and one of the rooms converted their art room into a performance art space with holographic paper from our local scrapstore over the entire

floor. The staff team took many observations during the first few weeks and the words that come up time and time again centre around 'exploring', 'involvement' and 'investigation'. It was a good focus for the developing work we had undertaken around the 'Characteristics of Effective Learning' as staff looked for the pure learning that was taking place in these very busy but lightly resourced spaces. I discuss their findings in the next chapter.

There was also a very real effects on parents. Talking to them about the project every morning and afternoon as they dropped off and collected their children I picked up an undercurrent of disaffection with our culture of materialism. One of the fathers summed it up as:

"I think they get a little too much these days and it's all overwhelming so bringing things back down to basics does help them out a lot."

The Nursery with No Toys project got parents talking about children having too much, about plastic going into landfill sites, about children on screens too much and there was also mentions of innocence and simplicity which their own children seem to embody.

There was also an unexpected media ripple which happened as the month long project was coming to an end. First there was the local BBC news that ran the attention grabbing headline 'Nursery locks toys away for a month' which in turn alerted other media outlets such as ITV and Channel 5 news,

the Daily Mail (who wrote a two thousand word article) and a trip to Bristol Broadcasting House by myself, a father and one of our children to be heard by seven million listeners on the Jeremy Vine Show on Radio 2! The crowning moment was having an interview published in Nursery World which has brought interest from practitioners from Sheffield to the Isle of Wight. I tried to make the point to everyone who inquired that we were not doing anything revolutionary, but that what we were committed to reflecting on making our own practice better.

My main take away from the media snowball was that if you are trying to do something for impact, make it novel or unusual. It will grab the attention of children, staff, families, and, as we found out, the rest of the world!





The project seemed to strike a chord with the wider public and we began to experience media interest from television, radio and newspapers.

Part 3

What has changed?

“The best toys are 90 per cent child, 10 per cent toy, with play fueled largely by the child's imagination.”

-Josh Golin, New Scientist

Sitting in the staff room on a wet INSET day in June, the staff reflected on the project and what had happened since. Here are the main findings:

- Staff considered 75% of the two year old children used “more language and imagination in their play” compared to before the project
- In one three year old class more than half of the children “used their imaginations differently”



- In another three year old class between a quarter and a half of boys “communicated more imaginatively”

Apart from the sociability, creativity, language and imagination improvements that were noted in the children, there was also a change within teams who said they enjoyed “finding out things you didn’t expect to!” Another staff member commented, “It’s good to have a new challenge to make me think outside the box!! (pun intended!)” and yet another said “it keeps us open minded to new ideas to put into practice.”

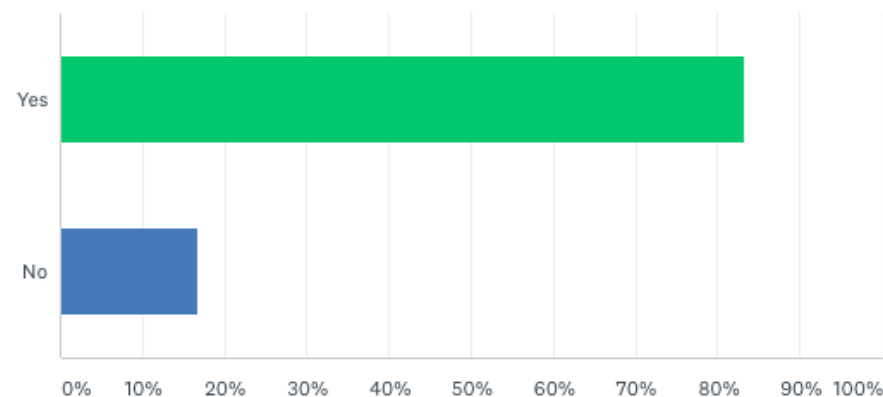
The two year old room went further than I expected, they decided that they did not want the toys back. Instead they have kept a shelf of recycled tins, containers and milk bottle tops, trays of keys, old kettles and deconstructed car stereos and a basket of glasses frames (lenses removed). Their

resources change often but you will not see a train track or dolls house in sight. The three year old rooms introduced less toys and did it gradually. Some of the older children were actively asking for trains and play figures, and our intention had never been to actively deprive children, but it made us all consider the type and amount of ‘stuff’ available in the rooms. Less is more, as they say.

Another part of the environment that has changed is our outside area. It was definitely busier during our month long project and we had also decided to put the bikes and trikes away as they were classified by us as ‘toys’. The bikes have only come back on a Wednesday (after staff discussion and a vote) and the type of play that we observe on other days involves less individual children and sees more small groups of play and exploration. We had donations of wooden pallets and use these to create platforms and assault courses and

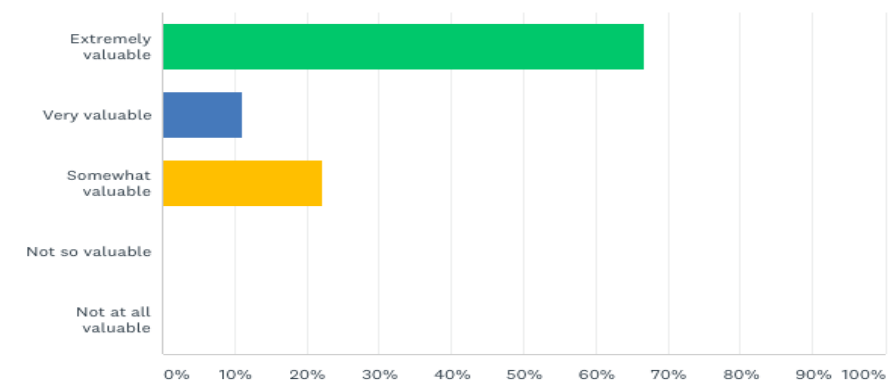
Did your child talk to you about the nursery with no toys?

Answered: 18 Skipped: 0



What do you think about the Nursery with No Toys project?

Answered: 18 Skipped: 0



We conducted a Survey Monkey questionnaire for family feedback and the results showed positive impact from their point of view.



"In play, a child is always above his average age, above his daily behavior; in play, it is as though he were a head taller than himself." Vygotsky

the children love the risk taking play that results.

The spiral of research that we have followed has made us continue to think and reflect; there were questions such as whether we repeat the project next year, or do something else, such as 'The Nursery with No Plastic'. But I suspect the teams will find their own ways of extending research and self reflection, and in the future I would love to see them doing their own individual action research and feeding back to each other to create a rich professional learning environment.

The Characteristics of Effective Learning have really come through as part of this project, and there has been a mutual deepening of understanding between conducting research and thinking deeply about learning. 'creating and thinking critically' as a characteristic comes through very strongly as we have moved through the project. The way that a child uses a simple object like a cardboard box or a tin, or has to interact with a friend because there is nothing else to distract them, is making links and being forced to engage more and be less passive.

And so we reach the end of the project. Our Nursery has toys again in some rooms, although they are fewer. Although the month is over, the impact has not ended and we are still talking about it at the end of the academic year. I am sure we will remember it as we move forwards and there will be small lessons learned that help us realise the benefits of being life long learners.

I'd like to finish on a quote from Friedrich Froebel, an educator who coined the word 'kindergarten' in 1840 and whose words sound very familiar a hundred and ninety years later:

"Let us protect our children; and let us not allow them to grow up into emptiness and nothingness... Let us steer them away from the harmful chase after material things and the damaging passion for distractions... Let us educate them to stand with their feet rooted in...earth, but with their heads reaching even into heaven, there to behold truth."

For anyone who would like to find out more, please contact Ilminster Avenue Nursery School, Ilminster Avenue, Knowle West, Bristol BS4 1NN (0117 903 0255)