

CASE STUDY:

When a Shed Became a Studio: A Journey to Continuous Creativity in a Childminding Setting



WHEN SPACE LIMITS CREATIVITY

I have been a registered childminder for twenty-five years, caring for children from three months to eleven years. I have always been a reflective practitioner, but after completing a degree in Childhood Studies and becoming a Curiosity Approach accredited setting several years ago, I began to place greater emphasis on enabling children to have agency over their lives.

Sometimes this is relatively easy to achieve, allowing children to choose which colour cup they would like or which story they would like to read. However, in a small home setting, other aspects can be more challenging.

I had always felt slightly frustrated by my creative provision. I live in a small Victorian terraced house with a conservatory that serves as my main childminding space.

Although it is a valuable area, the limited space meant that activities such as painting, clay work and large-scale construction had to be set up and packed away each day, rather than forming part of the continuous provision.

Birth to 5 Matters (Early Years Coalition, 2021) highlights the importance of children having regular opportunities to engage with a wide range of media and materials.



By Kim Barnetson MBE

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'WHAT A GREAT ART STUDIO THIS WOULD MAKE'.

While I worked hard to provide these opportunities, I never felt creativity was fully embedded within the environment. I also strongly support a process-over-product approach, where children are free to create in their own way, but I struggled to find space for children to store unfinished projects and return to them later.

Everything changed when we purchased a new shed for our bikes. It was large, bright and immediately made me think, "What a great art studio this would make!"



A PLAN EMERGES

Like many practitioners, I do not have unlimited space. My small garden must function both as a family garden and as an enabling environment for the children in my setting.

To decide whether an art studio was realistic, I began by observing how the children used the outdoor space.

My observations showed that some areas were highly valued and should remain unchanged:

- The mud kitchen was used daily.
- The multi-level climbing frame provided opportunities for role play, den building and sand play.

However, one area was noticeably underused: a small wooden playhouse. It was difficult to maintain, beginning to look neglected and no longer appealed to the children. My observations showed that they preferred creating role-play spaces within the climbing frame, which was lighter, more flexible and more inviting.

I decided to remove the playhouse and replace it with a small summerhouse with full-length windows. The children helped my husband prepare the base and were excited to be involved in the project. Over the course of a weekend, we assembled the summerhouse and transformed it into what would become the art cabin.

I deliberately kept the interior simple. Rather than creating a highly designed space, I wanted the children to make it their own. The cabin contained a long workbench, shelving, a portable hand-washing system and a range of accessible creative materials. Once everything was in place, I stepped back and allowed the children to take ownership of the space.

THE IMPACT ON CHILDREN'S DEVELOPMENT



The impact was immediate. Children who previously spent only a few minutes painting began selecting and combining materials independently.

Many would spend twenty to thirty minutes deeply engaged in creative exploration before returning later to continue their work.

I use the word work deliberately because creative exploration involves significant learning. Children were developing problem-solving skills, critical thinking, communication, physical skills and self-care skills simultaneously.

One of the most noticeable changes was in children's language. They began talking more about colours, textures and creative intentions, often narrating their actions as they worked. On one occasion, a child spoke to a unicorn ornament while painting it, carefully explaining each colour choice and asking whether the unicorn liked its new appearance.

I also observed a reduction in tension around sharing resources. Because there was a wide range of materials available, children were less likely to compete for resources and more likely to share them with one another. The atmosphere became noticeably calmer and more collaborative.

The benefits extended beyond expressive arts and design. The cabin supported learning across multiple areas of development, including:

- Personal, Social and Emotional Development (PSED)
- Communication and Language
- Physical Development
- Understanding the World
- Expressive Arts and Design

'ONE OF THE MOST NOTICEABLE CHANGES WAS IN CHILDREN'S LANGUAGE'.

Perhaps most importantly, the cabin gave children the time and space to revisit their ideas. Having somewhere to leave unfinished work respected children's agency and enabled repetition, reflection and deeper exploration.

A particularly good example is a large lump of clay that has remained in the cabin for three years. Initially used for sculpting, it gradually became a painting surface and later an object for gluing, taping and washing. It continues to be revisited and explored by children today.

The cabin also provides space for a wide range of open-ended materials. Rather than relying on expensive art resources, I collect boxes, tubes and interesting packaging, while families donate unusual objects and charity-shop finds.

'THERE WAS NO EXPECTATION TO PRODUCE A PARTICULAR OUTCOME; THE EMPHASIS WAS ENTIRELY ON EXPLORATION AND CREATIVITY'.

These materials encourage children to combine, transform and repurpose resources in imaginative ways, supporting creative thinking and problem-solving.

ENABLING THE VOICE OF THE CHILD

The children's responses to the cabin have been overwhelmingly positive. One child refers to creative exploration as "science", enthusiastically declaring, "I love science!" Another asked me to photograph him standing behind a painted window because, as he explained, "They will think I'm invisible."

These moments demonstrate how the cabin enables children's voices and ideas. Because they are free to choose resources and use them however they wish, there is no need to ask permission or follow instructions. The space belongs to them.



Families have also embraced the change. I have always encouraged parents to expect messy play and provide suitable clothing, and I keep a selection of spare "painty clothes" on hand.

One of the strongest endorsements of the cabin has been its popularity for children's birthday parties. At a recent party, children spent the afternoon mixing potions, painting boxes and creating their own unique projects.

There was no expectation to produce a particular outcome; the emphasis was entirely on exploration and creativity.

REFLECTING ON THE CHANGE TO MY SETTING

Looking back, the art cabin has been a significant success. It has enabled me to provide creative experiences that genuinely reflect the ethos of my setting, with children leading their own learning while I support from the background.

The cabin has:

- Made creative experiences part of continuous provision.
- Increased children's engagement and independence.
- Supported learning across multiple areas of development.
- Allowed children to revisit and extend their ideas over time.
- Created a calm and inspiring environment for exploration.

It has also made large-scale and messy art possible throughout the year. During winter, the cabin becomes a particularly cosy space, illuminated by fairy lights and accompanied by the gentle sound of rain on the windows.

'MY ONLY REGRET IS THAT I DID NOT DO IT TWENTY-FIVE YEARS AGO'.

I recognise how fortunate I am to have had the space and resources to create this environment. However, I would encourage other practitioners to consider how they might enhance their own creative provision, whether through a gazebo, a covered area or the conversion of an existing shed.

Whatever form it takes, creating dedicated space for creativity can help children make the transition from occasional art experiences to continuous creative exploration.

My only regret is that I did not do it twenty-five years ago.



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