Evidence indicates that stimulating early childhood learning environments provide a sound base to build knowledge and skills that are educationally significant and pave the way for smooth transitions to school and early academic progress. Quality early learning and developmental programs help children maximise their developmental potential and also help narrow the socioeconomic achievement gaps evident at school entry.

Rich learning experiences benefit all children, but high-quality programs are especially important for children from socially vulnerable families who may need special support to nurture educational growth. However, early childhood programs cannot assume sole responsibility for learning. If children are to have a strong start at school, the home environment also matters. Stimulating learning environments at home are linked to both short and long-term learning gains. Recent research from the Effective Pre-school and Primary Education Project (EPPE) team in the UK confirms previous findings that higher levels of parents' education predict children's positive academic attainment and social behaviour at school.

In reality, the factors affecting learning are complex and interwoven. Quality home, early childhood and, later, primary school environments operate in concert to provide positive learning outcomes for children. The EPPE research has also confirmed earlier findings that academic and social learning gains can be lost if primary schools provide less than optimal learning environments.

The links between quality early learning environments and children's learning outcomes demonstrate the importance of strong investment in the years before school, including supporting community and education programs that build parenting capacity. That families and children from socially and economically vulnerable backgrounds are likely to benefit most from rich learning programs should be at the front and centre of policy and practice at both a systemic and local level.

Clearly, findings about the importance of quality early learning environments have significant implications for early childhood policy agendas, and we're witnessing their translation into practice in the Early Years Learning Framework and other quality improvement initiatives at a national level.

While acknowledging the key role of early childhood centres and schools to create personalised and culturally responsive learning environments for children, there is also a clear obligation for early childhood programs to engage children and families on a one-to-one basis and ensure that each child develops a repertoire of competencies that smooth the transition to school and underpin school learning. The building blocks for literacy and cognitive development must be laid from birth, and early childhood educators have a moral as well as a pedagogical mandate to make these foundations strong. Given the clear relationship between early language and cognition and later academic outcomes, we cannot afford to leave it to chance.

In this edition of Every Child we explore a range of ways to improve and enrich learning environments. Our articles focus on developing adult-child relationships that are nurturing, responsive, and language-rich - building thinking and problem-solving skills through meaningful and enjoyable activities.

Teresa Hutchins, Carmel Richardson and Deb Moore's articles on creating quality learning environments are especially insightful as they highlight the limited importance of expensive materials and resources over rich, nurturing relationships and special, 'secret' places. Alice Brown's report on 'bubble wrapping' children reminds us that many children are probably more supervised around their homes than ever before, and their early childhood centres may be the one place where they are free to explore.

Reading across our articles it becomes apparent that building quality learning environments is a multi-dimensional and complex process. As Rose Drury reminds us, supporting young bilingual children's learning requires special planning. This prompt, together with Deb Watson's piece on promoting sustainable environments, pinpoints the need to create relevant and culturally responsive environments. Finally, our writers indicate the importance of building staff capacity and team skills to create appropriate learning environments that will make a difference in children's lives.

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