



Nature is an important surrounding element of the spaces at Grandpont

purpose, not originally intended for play.

If you had to describe the character of your outdoor space in one (short-ish) sentence, what would you say? Does your garden reflect the ethos and approach of your setting, or the knowledge and experience of your staff? Do the features, resources and landscaping outdoors support children's developmental milestones?

Character is affected by a multitude of physical factors such as the size of the space, the number of children using it, the prevalence of natural materials and the location of fixed features. However, it is important to point out here that the adult role is vital in any early childhood environment, indoors or out. Adults have a pivotal effect on children's perceptions about the character of their space and where they have worked collaboratively to accurately identify needs of young children – and gaps in the provision of these – the character of the resulting play spaces is seen to be deeply engaging and compelling.

In her book, *Playing and Learning Outdoors* (2014), outdoor play advocate Jan White suggests that the adult role is 'critical' to the provision of high-quality outdoor play, and while the 7Cs guidance is very much focused on how the physical environment affects the quality of play, it clearly supports the widely held view that 'knowledgeable and enthusiastic adults are crucial to unlocking the potential of outdoors'<sup>3</sup>.

## CASE STUDY: IN PRACTICE

While the building itself is undoubtedly modern, the 'character' of the outdoor spaces at Grandpont Nursery School and Children's Centre would be described by the 7Cs team as 'organic'. That definition states that 'the design highlights the changing outdoor environment and includes materials children can manipulate'.

Close to Oxford city centre and serving a richly diverse local population, Grandpont nevertheless benefits from open land on three sides, meaning that trees and shrubs border the outdoor spaces.

A small 'woodland', known as The Hundred Acre Wood, and the combination of built and natural features provides privacy for play, but also adds a much-valued natural landscape to the lives of the children and families using the centre.

When children are outdoors, the space feels 'busy' and 'purposeful', but not 'hectic' or 'cramped'. This is primarily because the available space isn't dominated by fixed play equipment. There are climbing structures, but the main one is tucked away towards the perimeter of the site and instead the focus of the three-to-fives area is a large, multi-level sandpit.

In the birth-to-threes area, the key features are a covered sand and gravel area and grassy mounds. Here, children have plenty of space to move freely and are able to manipulate and build, be noisy, be messy and be independent.

## MORE INFORMATION

- Each article in this series is accompanied by a guidance note, aimed at helping settings apply the 7Cs principles to their own circumstances. Visit [www.nurseryworld.co.uk](http://www.nurseryworld.co.uk) for each article to download the corresponding guidance. The guidance for this feature focuses on helping you assess the character of your outdoor space.
- The 7Cs guide, by Susan Herrington, Chandra Lesmeister, Jamie Nicholls and Kate Stefiuk, can be downloaded at [www.wstcoast.org/playspaces/outsidecriteria/7Cs.pdf](http://www.wstcoast.org/playspaces/outsidecriteria/7Cs.pdf)

## FOOTNOTES

- 1 Research includes *Special Places, Special People* by Wendy Titman (1996); *Childhood's Domain: Play and Place in Child Development* by Robin Moore (1986)
- 2 Research includes *Sowing the Seeds: Reconnecting London's Children with Nature* by Tim Gill (2011); *Learning in the Outdoor Environment: a missed opportunity?* by Jane Waters and Trisha Maynard (2006)
- 3 *Shared Vision and Values for Outdoor Play in the Early Years*, Vision and Values Partnership (2004),

Circulation around the space has been carefully considered and children are able to manoeuvre themselves, and any awkward or wheeled objects, into almost every nook and cranny – of which there are many. The space can be manipulated and changed by children and the 'character' of the outdoors speaks strongly of the child-centred, Reggio inspired philosophy that drives the work at Grandpont.

Annie Davy was early years lead for Oxfordshire County Council for many years and has worked extensively with the staff team at Grandpont. She notes that, 'A very respectful ethos is apparent there. Staff are respectful of children and of parents and it's clear that change is in response to children's needs.'

While loose parts resources abound outdoors at Grandpont, Ms Davy points out that 'staff choose high-quality resources and help children learn how to value and care for them.' Quality of resources is as important as quantity and has as great an impact on the 'character' of a space as its fixed features and landscaping do.

Staff have worked on their own attitudes to risk and challenge, recognising that they could offer more; there is an understanding that no space should remain static and that it should be possible to 're-invent' outdoor provision to meet the needs of changing cohorts of children.

These revisions and alterations are allowed for by the key features of the outdoor space at Grandpont: nature is present and changes daily, weekly, seasonally; there are elements that children will always want to experience – water, mud, prospect and seclusion; and there are fixed features around which other activities can take place – the sandpit, climbing frame, storage shed, mud kitchen and agility trail.

Headteacher Anna Gillespie explains, 'Our spacious garden is structured as larger open areas and smaller spaces and enables children's exploratory play. It is full of winding paths, a variety of surfaces and levels with natural and man-made materials. It is organised for open-ended play, with open-ended resources and a huge sandpit at the centre.'

The combination of abundant, high-quality resources, thoughtful landscape design and passionate outdoor practice characterises the outdoor space at Grandpont Nursery and Children's Centre. ■