

## **Children's centres equipment: What I really want for my centre is ...**

Children's centres are about more than multi-agency working; they should be safe and fun too, says Suzy Bashford.

For many early years professionals involved in the building and development of children's centres, life will consist of meetings, discussions and lists about blueprints, bricks, and construction deadlines.

So perhaps it's not surprising that toys and other play equipment haven't yet made it to the top of these lists. But for the children who attend these centres, the opportunities to play and have fun will be the setting's most important appeal.

According to Martin Rimes, design and marketing director at Community Playthings, which designs and manufactures furniture and toys and which has produced a number of guides for early years professionals on how to create effective spaces, the first issue to consider is the "mood" of a centre.

"It's most important to think through the flow of traffic from one space to another so that it is a natural flow and does not inhibit movement," he says. "The area needs to feel relaxed and not chaotic, because if there is a mass of not just equipment but materials a child's peace of mind is disturbed and it becomes too much for them."

As a result, Rimes believes centre staff need to create child-friendly environments where equipment and space work together to promote fun and learning. "We need to make environments where children are truly at home so they can relax and play, as research shows that only when a child feels safe and secure can he or she learn and explore," says Rimes.

From the traditional climbing frame to voice-controlled child-friendly computers, it's well worth spending some time picking products that will support this philosophy of a fun, safe learning space, while ensuring that they don't detract from the experience of the children that troop through the centre's doors on a regular basis.

So this feature takes a look at those products that children's centre managers and their local authority colleagues have already road tested to ensure their settings are not only fun, but are educational too.

### Parental Webcam

This is a secure webcam that allows parents to view live video images of their children in early years settings securely over the internet. Cameras are fitted in the nursery, are plugged into a video server then delivered via a high-speed internet connection. Available from: NurseryCam. Contact: 01344 751 688 or [www.nurserycam.co.uk](http://www.nurserycam.co.uk). Price: £2,990 for system with eight cameras. Interest-free option available

### Ballaby Play Table

Ballaby Play Tables encourage motor co-ordination, visual memory and patterning skills and are designed to go in a play corner. There are eight versions to choose from; this is a motor-racing

game featuring buildings, trees, mountains, lakes and tunnels. Available from: Instore Kidsplay  
Contact: 01202 890 500 or [www.instorekidsplay.co.uk](http://www.instorekidsplay.co.uk). Price: Range from £595.74+VAT; featured table £680+VAT

#### Yellowstone Play Computer

Designed for children aged three and over, this touch-screen computer offers five game groups including memory games, colouring, spot the difference and finger painting. The computer speaks and is voice controlled. Available from: Instore Kidsplay Contact: 01202 890 500 or [www.instorekidsplay.co.uk](http://www.instorekidsplay.co.uk). Price: £2,042 +VAT

#### Toddlerzone

This climbing frame range is modular so you can design your own frame or buy a standard unit. The range was designed with inclusion in mind and some units have built-in features to allow access for all. Available from: Sutcliffe Play. Contact: 01977 653 200 or [www.sutcliffeplay.co.uk](http://www.sutcliffeplay.co.uk)  
Price: Ranges from £2,000 for a basic fence panel to £12,000 for the largest unit

#### Kritter table and chairs

The colourful Kritter table and chairs feature animal cutouts on the back of the chairs, are easy to clean and are made of responsibly sourced rubberwood. Available from: Ikea. Contact: [www.ikea.com](http://www.ikea.com). Price: £24.99 for the table and £12.49 for each chair

#### Plasticine

Plasticine has had a complete makeover; it doesn't have to be kept air tight and will not dry out, so it can be used time and time again. Distributed by Flair, the organisation has developed kits that incorporate popular themes with easy-to-do projects, such as Plasticine Master Crafter, Jungle Fun, and 24 Stick Rainbow Packs. Available from: Flair. Contact: 020 8643 0320 or [www.flairplc.co.uk](http://www.flairplc.co.uk). Price: From 99p

#### Tiny Love Gymini Total Playground

As recommended by the Good Toy Guide, this baby-activated developmental toy features a kick-and-play pad, classical music and 17 activities. Suitable from birth. Available from: East Coast Nursery. Contact: 01692 408 802 or [www.eastcoastnursery.co.uk](http://www.eastcoastnursery.co.uk). Price: £54.99

#### Connex Modular Play Unit

These mix-and-match units are designed so they can be installed into centres without the need for additional equipment or training. A unit such as the one pictured, which costs approximately £7,500, should take no more than three hours to assemble. Available from: SPI Play Contact: 01978 668 067 or [www.spiplay.com](http://www.spiplay.com). Price: Varies depending on unit

#### Roomscapes

Roomscapes child-sized furniture from Community Playthings enables centres to be flexible with their room layouts through a system of joining shelves and panels. Available from: Community Playthings. Contact 0800 387 457 or [www.communityplaythings.co.uk](http://www.communityplaythings.co.uk). Price Varies depending on version

#### Playworks

Playworks furniture is designed to aid role play; the units can be adapted so that a single piece of furniture can change from being part of a restaurant to an office to a hairdresser to provide richer

play experiences for children. Available from: Community Playthings. Contact: 0800 387 457 or [www.communityplaythings.co.uk](http://www.communityplaythings.co.uk). Price: Varies depending on version

#### Tolo Tractor and Trailer with Cow

This award-winning product won gold in the National Association of Toy Lending Libraries Good Toy Awards and also in the Practical Pre-School Awards. This moving tractor comes complete with realistic sounds and has a removable driver and accompanying cow. Available from: John Crane Contact: 01604 774 949 or [www.johncranetoys.co.uk](http://www.johncranetoys.co.uk). Price: From £29.99

#### Weather Window and Number Rhymes Bag

Active Designs' Weather Window is a way of visually recording the day and weather using symbols and labels. Number Rhymes is a bag full of rhymes, numbers, green bottles, toy sausages, ducks and fish, and is designed to encourage group play, while improving numeracy and literacy skills. Available from: Active Designs Contact: 01327 858 522 or [www.activedesigns.co.uk](http://www.activedesigns.co.uk) Price: £29.95 +VAT (Weather Window), £27.50 +VAT (Number Rhymes Bag)

#### Lucky Grass

This all-weather turf looks and feels like grass but water goes straight through, it doesn't get muddy or slippery and babies can easily crawl on it. Available from: Lucky Grass. Contact: 020 7693 5073 or [www.luckygrass.net](http://www.luckygrass.net). Price: On application

#### Kitchen Combo

The Pintoy Kitchen Combo Unit is made out of environmentally friendly rubberwood and comes complete with refrigerator, washing machine and other realistic components. Available from: John Crane Contact: 01604 774 949 or [www.johncranetoys.co.uk](http://www.johncranetoys.co.uk). Price: From £90.