

When the environment makes sense: Creating a positive learning environment for under 3's in Early Childhood Education and Care

Barnardos



The National Childhood Network



Dr Geraldine French, 20th October 2026



Overview - *what surrounds us, shapes us...* (Center on the Developing Child, Harvard, 2026)

- Pedagogical framing/pedagogical organisation
- Key elements of quality professional practice with babies & toddlers broadly
- Low stress nurturing environments



Pedagogical organisation/ framing

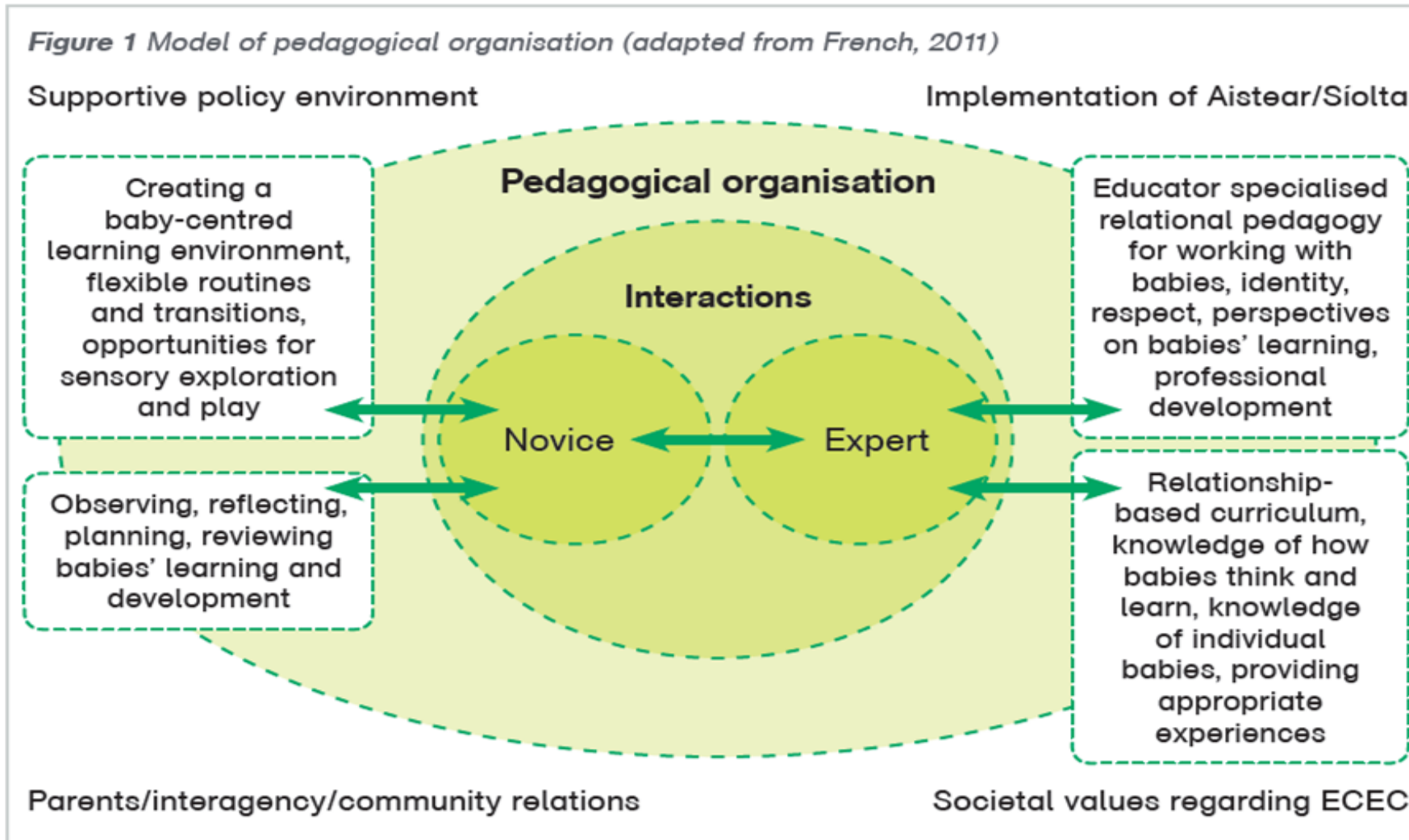
For babies and toddlers we are talking about pedagogy in the context of learning and **emotional nurturance** (French, 2018)

Distinction between pedagogical framing (**planning for play, providing resources and a routine**) on behalf of adults and pedagogical interactions (**specific behaviours in face to face encounters**) - both are required (Siraj-Blatchford et al, 2002, cited in French 2007).

Leads to the **intentional educator**, who creates the environments for optimal play and exploration, sees the learning/wellbeing opportunities as play unfolds and enables learning (French & McKenna, 2022).



Model of pedagogical organisation



In the chat function, very quickly, what do you think are the key elements of quality professional practice with babies and toddlers?

Key elements of quality professional practice with babies and toddlers (French, 2019)

1. **A slow relational pedagogy**
2. Supporting attachments
3. **Individualised routines**
4. Family involvement
5. **Low-stress-facilitating environments**
6. Play-based curriculum and assessment
7. Communication and language
8. Knowledgeable + committed staff in early education and care (with a focus on birth to three in their education) (French, 2018)

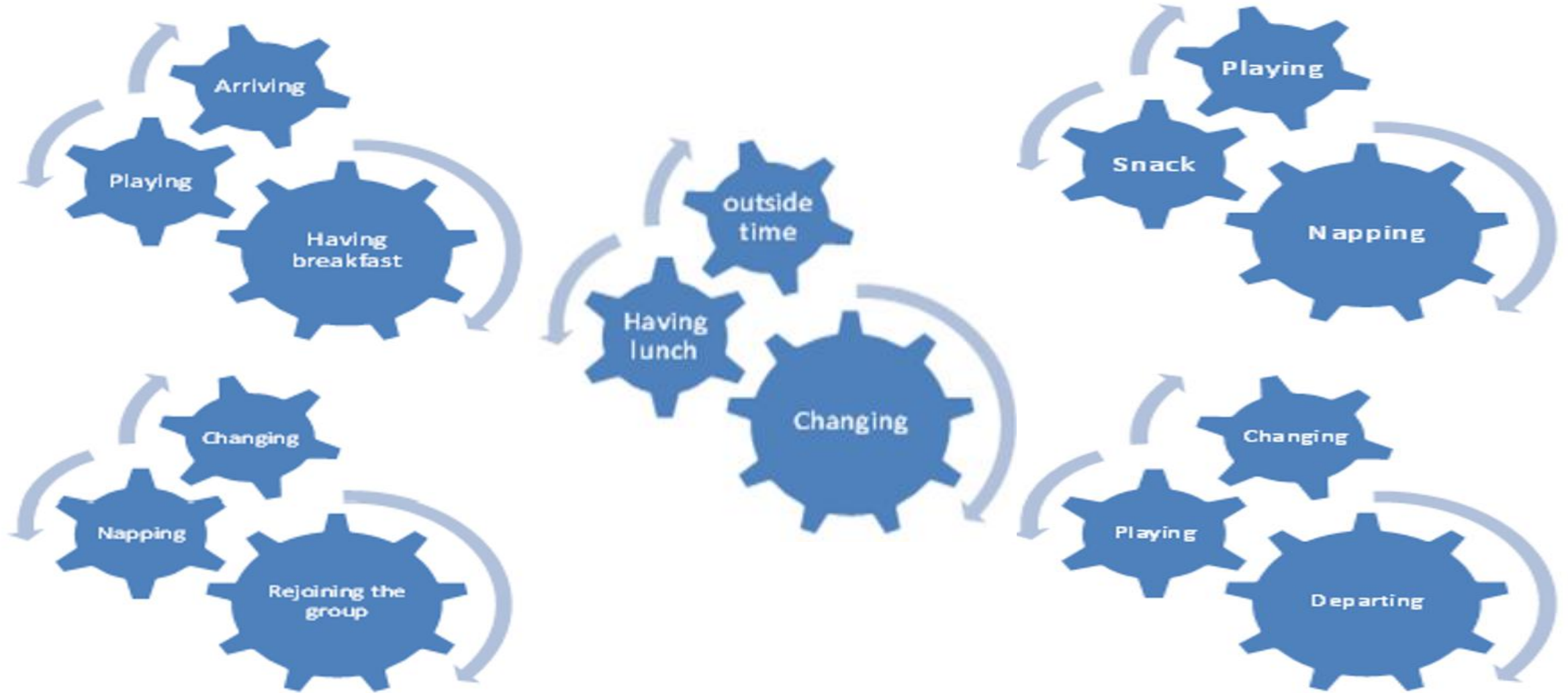


Key elements of quality practice with babies and toddlers – slow relational pedagogy (French, 2021)

- Touch
- Sensitivity and attunement
- Responsive communication with babies & toddlers
- Supporting babies' & toddlers' intentions
- Being an 'interesting companion'
- Emotional and physical presence
- Co - to self-regulation through interactions (French, 2018)



Key elements of quality...individualised routines through daily transitions



Using the chat function what is your assessment of these physical learning environments environment?

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=C0zIDuKb7Ik>

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=3eS517UkRJ4>

How do you describe/articulate the differences between the two centres/approaches?

Organising an low stress nurturing physical learning environment for babies and toddlers

Attention to:

- Acoustics
- Grouping babies
- Smells
- Tastes
- Sensorial Materials to touch
- Space indoors and outdoors
- Light and temperature
- Visual support systems
- Aesthetics

sand area



The light machine



Brenda Latimore's ECEC setting, called Busy Bees

Appealing sensorial materials for babies and toddlers



Appealing sensorial materials for babies and toddlers Rian painting



Low-stress-nurturing learning environments that support physical movement & play

- Organised literally from the babies and toddler's perspective
- Comfortable spaces to meet routine care needs
- Space and resources which promote physical activity
- Movement experiences and play integrated throughout day indoors and...
- critically **outdoors**. Babies & toddlers love earth (soil), sticks, leaves, puddles and are 'nurtured through nature'



The three classrooms... (Dr Claire Warden)

- Giving babies, toddlers and young children an opportunity to learn in and with the natural world;
 - inside the classroom,
 - outside the classroom and
 - into the wild beyond
- In gardens, courtyards, log seating areas, and weather-protected outdoor pavilions.
- Explore, touch, manipulate and experiment with different materials (French, 2007)
- Benefits: Improved focus, reduced stress, higher physical activity levels, and better emotional well-being.



Key messages

Remember '*what surrounds us, shapes us*'. The key aspects of early childhood education and care that promote 'secure' attachment organisation and development of positive baby & toddlers' mental health are:

- An enabling learning environment in an early childhood setting which provides a physical structure for babies' optimal learning and development through playful experiences where human connection are made and relationships are built.
- Attention to: acoustics; grouping babies and toddlers; smells; tastes; materials that are sensorially satisfying, tactile and natural; space indoors and outdoors; light and temperature; visual support systems; aesthetics – beauty

Such environments are essential for promoting babies' sensory exploration, agency, independence and ability to form relationships.





References

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