The ELIZABETH JARMAN® award aims to recognise and share best practice when using The Communication Friendly Spaces™ Approach. It is given to the setting/school which demonstrates real impact from using the CFS™ Approach in terms of supporting children’s speaking and listening skills, physical development and emotional well-being.

The winning setting this year is **Kingsbury and Polesworth Children’s Centres, UK**.

I’m really looking forward to visiting the centres next month, when they will receive a full set of ELIZABETH JARMAN® publications and a day of consultancy input.

Enjoy looking through the selection of the entries from this year’s award and consider the reflection points in relation to your environments.

Thank you to everyone who took the time to share their ideas.

_Elizabeth Jarman_

The Communication Friendly Spaces™ (CFS™) Approach focuses on the role of the environment in supporting speaking and listening skills, emotional well-being, physical development and general engagement. Elizabeth Jarman conceptualised and developed this approach and now works internationally with partners as a consultant, delivering conference keynotes, training, publishing and also leading action research projects.

Elizabeth Jarman says, ‘it’s critical to understand how the physical space should connect with its intention. I think it’s essential to tune into the environment from the learner’s perspective. To do this, it is really important to observe, reflect and then make informed decisions about the way that children and families interact with the environment if a developmentally appropriate, personalised, responsive learning space is to develop, reflecting preferred contexts for learning.’

The CFS™ Approach involves a great deal more than merely altering the appearance of a learning space. Understanding the theoretical base for the work is essential. With a significant evidence base, so far over 100,000 delegates have accessed CFS™ training globally, with significant impact captured through hard and soft data. Feedback continues to be overwhelmingly positive.

‘This approach provides a framework for review and also begins to challenge some of the outdated historical stereotyped ideas about the way that environments are set up for children today,’ says Elizabeth Jarman.

The Communication Friendly Spaces Handbook provides more information. The award-winning ‘Place to Talk’ series also illustrates the theory in practice within a wide range of contexts. These publications are available via [www.elizabethjarmantraining.co.uk](http://www.elizabethjarmantraining.co.uk)
ELIZABETH JARMAN®
Award Winning Entries 2014
Kingsbury and Polesworth Children’s Centres
Hayley Burt, Early Years Outreach Worker

Before implementing the CFS™ Approach across our two Children’s Centres and outreach venues, our static spaces were colourful, busy and although exciting to children, did not inspire creativity or imagination. Areas were prescriptive and set up to do one thing. This was replicated in the delivery of pack-away sessions; spaces were created and ‘zoned’ to meet different learning objectives from the Early Years Foundation Stage. Our venues were not used to their potential and lighting was harsh, brash and artificial. Blinds offered restricted views only and for children and babies lying down, ceilings were vast empty spaces. Our outdoor area was a separate space that was very open, a blank canvas which was uninviting and rarely used.

Running services in local community and village halls posed different challenges; large open spaces and cold hard floors were softened with over stimulating mats, cushions and clutter. Adults were reluctant to engage at children’s level and favoured sitting in clusters of chairs as areas were uninviting for them.

When we established that our learning environments did not meet their potential we began to reflect, collectively discussing the ways in which the spaces were used, how they made us feel when working and how we believed families felt when they accessed our services. We reduced the amount of resources offered at any one time and created calm, soft, neutral spaces that supported children’s exploration of open-ended objects. In each venue we ensured there were opportunities and spaces for children to be social and interact in groups, complimented by cosy places to just ‘be’ and spaces to support communication through free, whole-body movement. Outside became a much more valued part of the centre, a mud kitchen was created, and the natural environment allowed to flourish. This approach promoted much exploration and supported families to have a greater understanding of the benefits of using what nature and the outdoors has to offer. At outreach venues this has been harder to adapt safely but staff are considering this challenge and beginning to use areas within the communities to reflect this approach across all services. Continued observations of the ways environments were used have led us to follow children’s interests and establish a dynamic, shared vision across the Centres.

A combination of contributing factors led to the major development of the CFS™ Approach taken across the Centres. The establishment of a full, passionate team offering quality early years practice played a big part in this. The opportunity for the whole Early Years Team to attend the CFS™ seminar came at an ideal time, with the implementation of the revised EYFS and the introduction of the characteristics of effective learning, the team were keen to begin to make big changes! By attending the seminar as a whole team we were able to effectively reflect and plan, working together to use the approach to adapt our environments and create a shared vision.
During reflection and discussion about the CFST™ seminar we noticed that the CFST™ Approach complimented other approaches followed throughout the Centre; Time to Talk, Jabadão and Forest Schools. With a staff member championing each approach, connections were quickly established and our shared understanding of the ideas reflected in changes that were beginning to be made.

The interlinked changes in the environment and staff practice across the Centres and the outreach venues have impacted the children, families and staff immensely. We now observe calm, nurturing atmospheres, with children’s and adults’ focus, attention and involvement increasing as they become more confident and comfortable in exploring the new environments and materials. We observe an increasing level of confidence in children who spend time within our settings, with them showing creativity, imagination and ability to problem solve.

Parents and adults now demonstrate a greater understanding of the ways in which we support children’s learning and development, and often comment on things they have been doing at home and when out and about. We have noticed our environment prompts adults to think about their own childhood experiences, the places they most enjoyed playing in and their fondest memories. This then prompts them to think about the opportunities they provide for their own children.

As practitioners, from the CFST™ seminar and our own reflection, we have also observed that it is equally important that the environment in which we run various courses and programmes for adults (particularly antenatal and postnatal), is also supportive to communication, confidence and well-being.

As some families’ experiences of the Children’s Centre services begin with antenatal appointments our Communication Friendly Spaces™ Approach is shared at this first point of contact. Environments are warm, welcoming and nurturing and appointments run alongside Early Years groups, supporting expectant parents to feel comfortable to return when their baby arrives. Our postnatal classes continue to be offered in this warm,
welcoming environment. Our sessions include play, movement and speech and language. Within this the environment is used as a visual learning tool to give a practical insight to the approach. As families continue to access services within the Centre and relationships with staff members and other families are strengthened, opportunities for modelling and group discussion become more common, and the approach becomes embedded. Families are offered ‘Ideas for Home’ hand-outs; these extend on the session activities and suggest different environments to explore, interesting materials to investigate, and provide new ideas for learning when away from the Centre.

We believe that a fundamental part of being able to implement the CFS™ Approach effectively has been the shared vision and understanding of all of our staff members following the seminar. Through continuous discussion, reflection and critical evaluation of our environment and staff practice we have been able to trial how spaces work, and openly and honestly review and make changes to best meet the needs of the children and families that we work with. The CFS™ seminar, other training opportunities and the input from our Speech and Language Champion has provided the team with confidence to effectively support others. As we continuously work to this approach we believe our confidence to cascade ideas and information to other professionals and families has increased and our shared practice continuously develops.

Across the two Centres we continually look to develop our skills and abilities in supporting the families that we work with. Through continued professional development we hope to continue to provide families with rich learning experiences, enhancing services to meet the needs of the families we support. In partnership with Warwickshire Local Authority the Centres has been developing an Inspirational Learning Community that aims to support locality preschools with the development of their practice and in improving the quality of provision. This is currently being trialled over a 3 month period with settings within
the Centre Groups’ locality. Parents and practitioners from individual settings are already reporting on enhancements they have observed and the positive impact it has begun to make. With the initial successes of this, the Centre Group is keen to work towards developing this across a significantly larger geographical area. We currently work closely with some of our local community groups and look forward to continuing to share our knowledge and ideas with the families within these groups as part of the growing Inspirational Learning Community.

Reflection Point
Does your environment warmly welcome and encourage parents and carers to become meaningfully involved in their children’s play, learning and development? What do parents and carers see and experience in your setting that makes them know they are welcome? How do you encourage dialogue with parents to enable them to share their knowledge about their child?
Our setting is a nursery attached to a Children’s Centre and there are two rooms. When we looked at our environment we realised it was really busy, disorganised and full of resources which did not meet the needs of our children. The areas were not defined and the resources were mixed together in storage spaces. Children did not have any areas to hide, to explore quietly or to really relax. Although the outdoor area was big enough for play, it looked like a grey, concrete playground with plastic furniture scattered all around.

We wanted to create an environment that was rich, stimulating and suitable for the age range and needs of the children. We felt that being full of bright colours, the setting felt very hectic. Children and adults found it difficult to concentrate and be focused. We also realised that the children had too many choices and were overwhelmed with resources. They found it difficult to choose what to play with and how. Children showed little awareness about what the resources were for, they didn’t show respect for them and didn’t put them away after using them.

We started by moving the furniture around to create more defined and enclosed areas, such as the home corner, the reading and sleeping areas, and some big and spacious areas where the children could play freely. We removed some chairs from the classroom and created space for children to play and enjoy activities on the floor so they wouldn’t feel restricted. This use of the floor also promotes gross motor, upper and mid body development. We painted the doors around the setting, using a light beige colour to replace the bright orange and tone the colours down. We moved the display board down to the children’s level to make it more interactive. We also removed all the bright paper from the displays and used natural hessian as a base, creating a much more relaxed and calm environment. We put ‘the talk sofa’ in the home corner to encourage children to talk and we also removed some of the plastic resources and used more familiar objects and more natural materials.

The children have noticed the changes in the setting and have been talking about them with a lot of enthusiasm. They seem to be excited by the new arrangements and have been exploring every corner and space. By displaying resources (like rugs and baskets) in visible places, children notice what is available and engage in play and learning activities much more quickly. They have also become more creative in the way they are playing and exploring the resources. We have found that children are more relaxed and are engaged in healthy communicative activities and interactions. Children are also taking more care with the resources. Children have been active participants in creating Communication Friendly Spaces™ and on numerous occasions they have enjoyed creating their
own spaces, using the resources from the CFS™ Bags for Families which were displayed in the home corner. We have noticed that communication with parents has improved and in turn, this has helped us in supporting the development of children’s communication skills.

In order to help everyone understand and work with the CFS™ Approach, various meetings have been organised to discuss and embed it. We came across the CFS™ Approach at one of our inset days, organised by our leader in the Early Years. We all agreed that our environment needed some changes and were all looking at new ways to improve the nursery space and to promote rich opportunities to develop the children’s communication and listening skills by providing the children with a stimulating environment. Now, we have organised an inset day to make some changes and we are using the CFS™ Approach as part of our continuous professional and creative development. One team member also decided to do an action research project, looking at CFST™ Bags for Families to investigate how using them can contribute to building partnership between practitioners and parents.

We made a display of CFST™ Bags for Families at the entrance of the setting to inform and introduce parents to the scheme and the action research project. The display was left for a month and changed regularly to show the different contents of each bag and we talked to parents about the CFS™ Approach. Parents were invited to take the bags home and another display was done to show parents and children how the bags were used in different homes. We are aiming to continue engaging parents with
the CFS™ Approach and to observe how using it supports children in the development of their communication and listening skills.

The CFS™ Approach has been a great source of information and inspiration for our practice. It has been a creative and fun experience for the children and practitioners. We are still evaluating and reflecting on the impact of the changes we have made as this is the first stage of introducing the approach. We are currently working on how we can define and de-clutter all our areas. We are also developing our outdoor space using a lot of recycled and natural materials and we are looking at how to improve the lighting and storage.

**Reflection Point**

Have you experienced your environment from the child’s viewpoint or just from the adult’s perspective? Do you know how your setting looks and feels to the children? Are there any smaller, enclosed spaces which offer comfort and security? How are children’s home environments and experiences reflected in your setting?
Before we introduced the CFS™ Approach our environment had cluttered shelves with mismatched toys, harsh artificial lights on the ceiling, many hanging decorations obstructing the view of the different parts of the play room, lots of displays and intense colours on the walls. That was the picture of our Nursery before we all attended CFS™ training back in 2011. We have been trying to introduce this approach in small steps from that time on and all of the changes we made have had positive feedback from both children and parents. As practitioners we knew that children’s needs, which we aim to cater for, change just as children’s ages and interests do. We started to feel that we needed bigger changes to make the environment interesting again. We noticed that children were spending more time running around than engaging in play, and even staff admitted that the room was getting boring!

As a result of these observations, we moved most of the areas into more suitable spaces, making them more defined and accessible. We opened up the entrance space so the children could see what was prepared for them straight away from the door. We lowered most of the furniture to the children’s level so they would be able to see more of the room, to find new play ideas or friends to talk to in an easy way. Most of the selected resources were stored in labelled drawers or on the shelf tops in baskets. In the pre-school room, we turned a dressing-up unit into a small cosy area, as we noticed children like to sit and talk quietly in pairs or look at books individually inside it. By providing a small sofa in the baby room we created a new inviting space for under 2’s to chat, look through books or have a cuddle. We change the themes in different areas on a weekly basis to stimulate and extend children’s interests. Every week we focus on a chosen story at Story Time for which we provide props at the story table. Children can also explore other stories in quieter book areas both inside and outside.

We wanted to improve the environment because we knew we were going to have many more younger children coming to the pre-school room from September 2013. Also, as an inclusive nursery, we were preparing for new children with additional needs. It was clear to us that the old layout wasn’t defined well enough for two year olds and not spacious enough for children using walking aids or for those who needed more adult support. At the end of summer our setting was closed for wall painting which gave us a brilliant opportunity to try different furniture combinations without interfering with children’s play. When we re-opened a week later, we could observe how all the changes worked in practice and where to make necessary adjustments.

The impact of the changes has been that the children have rediscovered their old nursery again. With clearly visible toys they weren’t feeling lost, but more adventurous in play, creating different scenarios and new ideas with old toys. All the interest tables are busy for most of the free play time. The kitchen area, which we recently added, is often visited for all sorts of tea parties and food focused conversations. We can see lots of positive changes on a daily basis, but probably the most significant changes we observed were when looking at the progress tracking forms. We compared numbers from the end of Summer term 2013 with the recent Spring term 2014. We noticed a drop from 15 to 6 children below the average for their chronological age in Communication and Language, and from 11 to 6 in Literacy. We also have noticed better results in Physical Development, Mathematics and Personal, Social and Emotional Development.
Helping colleagues to understand the CFS™ Approach has been easy as we all attended the training a few years ago and we don’t have much staff fluctuation so a significant part of our team knows the approach already. For each new staff member we explain the main principles during their induction training and through everyday practice, we strive to be role models for both children and new team members. There are always opportunities to discuss unclear matters during staff meetings or during the day. We remind ourselves to try to always be on the children’s level to better understand their individual needs and to look at the world from their perspective, modelling communication but at the same time giving enough freedom for the children to express their thoughts in their own way.

Our children’s families often make comments about what they like in the rooms or what their children are talking about at home. When we introduced the CFS™ Approach the families knew that we were going to be closed for the week, so they were expecting some changes, but most of them were very positively surprised by the completely new way the environment was arranged. We heard many warm comments about it. We talk with parents on a daily basis at drop off and pick up time when we tell them about their child’s day. We also have key person meetings for parents where we discuss individual needs and strategies for each of our children. From those meetings we know that parents are very positive about all the changes, they like the more open plan and more defined layout. Parents make comments about the inviting atmosphere and good routine together with the balance of free choice play time and various group activities like story time, storytelling sessions, dance time, singing time and focused group times in varied age groups. Most significantly, parents also noticed improvement in children’s communication skills and attitude.

We know there is always something to improve, like labels or backgrounds needing revision or replacement. We still need to make-over our garden area which will probably have an impact on the inside as well. We try new ideas all the time to simply check what is working best for the children. We are also in process of setting up a new sensory room which we are going to provide with natural light through a big window together with side lamps, different tactile materials and soft furniture for a calm communication friendly environment.

Reflection Point
In your setting, consider the range of children’s developmental levels, ages, abilities, needs and fascinations. Does the layout, the resourcing and adults’ interactions with children cater to these individual needs and support all areas of development? Are you making full use of the outdoor space? Are there individual children who would benefit from a space created with them specifically in mind?
Before introducing the CFS™ Approach our classrooms were very busy and disorganised. Displays were very bright and children’s work wasn’t the highlight of displays as the colourful clashing backgrounds took over. We didn’t have natural resources to use in the classroom as we preferred colourful Compare Bears to count with instead of natural everyday objects. The furniture was brightly coloured as we had red tables and chairs. The classrooms were noisy and resources were not accessible for children to use. Stereotypical play was taking place and boys were not accessing the reading facilities in the classroom.

The Foundation Stage Leader went on CFS™ training as she wasn’t happy with how things were. After returning from the training, we decided to implement some ideas. Our aim was to ensure we were providing a comfortable, welcoming and homely environment for the children. We purchased wooden, neutral furniture in order to establish a calm environment. We also made sure the classrooms looked minimal and clutter free. We changed our approach on displays and decided to use neutral and calming colours such as beige, light brown and different shades of blue. We also made it a big focus point to ensure that classrooms have a comfortable, cosy, Communication Friendly Space™, so the children feel at home. We made sure we had visual prompts around the classroom such as a visual timetable, photographs and symbols to support routines and promote independence.

We ensured learning was more active by having role play areas, small world areas to make stories come to life and enrich the children’s experiences. We bought natural resources that the children could access for counting and constructing. Resources were labelled and displayed in baskets for children to choose what they would like to use. Overall we ensured that we established a good acoustic and calm environment for the children.

We were prompted to change the environment because 85% of children were at risk of delayed speaking and listening skills on entry. In order to ensure no children were at risk when they left nursery we conducted a review of the environment and the Foundation Stage Leader went to the CFS™ training event in Derby and on her return a plan of action was drawn up to see how we were going to implement it.

After making changes to the environment, we noticed a huge change in the children’s behaviour and in retaining what they had been taught. The classrooms had small, well defined quiet areas which the children used to talk and build good relationships with their peers. Having these areas in the classroom, helped maintain a calm environment and promotes our ethos of the foundation stage. We made sure we had just a small selection of books in the reading area and we noticed more children were accessing the books and treating them with respect. Resources were labelled so children could access what they wanted to use independently. Pictures and information were taken off the windows to let in natural light. The boys were accessing small world tough spots, role play areas and Communication Friendly Spaces™ instead of stereotypical play, which has also had a positive effect on attainment.

The thing that has worked best in terms of helping others to understand this approach is being a good role model and turning your classroom into a calm, communication friendly environment. In our setting this enabled other staff members to observe the impact it was having on the children’s behaviour which gave them the confidence to implement it into their own classrooms. Training was also given by the Foundation Stage team to new staff members.
To share the ideas with families, parents were able to come in during sessions to see how we teach and were encouraged to use natural resources at home with their children. Little Acorns (a transition group) was formed to help new children settle in and for parents to see the strategies we use in school to sustain learning.

To sustain the approach we are sending new staff members on CFS™ training as well as the Key Stage 1 Leader/Assistant Head in order for them implement the CFS™ Approach completely. We will be sustaining the good practice that is taking place as learning walks are made by our Senior Management Team and the School Governors.

Reflection Point
Have you considered how the indoor and outdoor environment in your setting affects children’s behaviour? Are there times and places which are noisy and over busy? Is the lighting affecting the way the space feels because it is too harsh? Is the layout of the environment causing children’s play to be disrupted or restricted? Are there any cosy, calming spaces which children can access to reflect and relax?
When we first learned about the CFS™ Approach we were a pack-away setting based in a church hall. We had one large space which was set up daily with tables and chairs arranged around a central carpet. Activities were set out on the tables. We also had a home corner and a reading corner. The hall had small, high, opaque windows which meant we had to have the fluorescent lighting on constantly. The tables, chairs and carpet were all bright, primary colours and we had little in the way of natural materials for children to explore. Everything was bright, bold and busy and the children sat at the tables to do most of the activities.

After attending a CFS™ seminar in Newcastle in February 2011, we reviewed our practice and began by making small changes. We made a den using blankets and material over a clothes airer, we placed cushions in the story corner and bought a large dog bed. We covered our bright blue display boards with hessian. We monitored these changes and observed how the children interacted and used the spaces. In July we evaluated the whole environment and decided to adapt our space to introduce the CFS™ Approach throughout our provision. Over the Summer holidays we acquired some storage units to act as dividers to form smaller areas for the children to play in. We put castors on the units to help us with our daily packing away. We also put dowelling rods onto the sides of the units so that we could attach canopies. We softened these areas with neutral coloured rugs and cushions.

Although it was possible to implement the CFS™ Approach as a pack away setting, we found it difficult to maintain the areas to the standard we wanted. When we were given the opportunity to have our own building we readily agreed and enthusiastically embarked on planning our new environment.

I came across the CFS™ seminar when I was researching for my Degree course. I was doing a project on developing children’s communication skills and thought the seminar sounded interesting. I had not heard of Elizabeth Jarman or the CFS™ Approach before. I found the evening inspirational and particularly liked the very simple ideas that could be introduced quickly and cheaply. My next project was developing our outdoor area and this resulted in me taking part in the Action Research Project on developing places to talk outside.

The main impact for us as Early Years Practitioners has been how we have designed our new building. We now understand the importance of the environment in children’s learning and have used the CFS™ Approach as our foundation. We have used natural colours, homely soft furnishings, subdued or natural lighting and plants and have arranged the room to provide cosy spaces for the children to explore. The impact for our children is evident by how quickly they have settled into the new building and how eager they are to explore the resources. They readily
engage in their chosen activities and we have observed an increase in their social interaction. Our recent Ofsted report in January 2014 highlighted the learning environment saying, ‘the well-organised environment supports children’s learning and independence well’ and ‘they make good progress in their language and communication skills because staff skilfully engage in meaningful discussions with them’. We believe that our environment supports children and allows them to feel confident and secure thus enabling these ‘meaningful discussions’. The report also states ‘very good use is made of the learning environment both indoors and outdoors to provide children with good opportunities to discover and learn’.

When we were designing our new environment we asked for suggestions from our colleagues. We explained the CFS™ Approach and shared the literature that we have with them. We have regular staff meetings and encourage staff to borrow copies of the CFS™ magazine. We have found this often inspires staff members to put forward their own ideas based on the CFS™ Approach.

Before we opened our new setting we held an information evening for parents. We explained the CFSTM Approach and how we were designing our space around this philosophy. When prospective families visit they are shown around the setting and we always explain why the space is divided into small cosy areas, why we choose calm, neutral colours and so on. Our website is under construction but we plan to have information on it regarding the CFS™ Approach and how we have used it in our setting.

We believe regular evaluation is very important to maintain the setting as we planned it. It is very easy for spaces to become cluttered. Just filling in this form has made us realise that we have too many resources out at the moment. We have looked back at the photographs that we took just prior to opening the setting and we were surprised at the difference. When we were planning the interior design of the setting, I made a mood board and this is now displayed in the staff toilet! This is a constant reminder of our initial vision. We have decided to use termly action plans to help us focus and identify our next steps, for example putting up drapes to further soften some areas.
We believe our example is unusual in that we actually took the huge step of moving premises so that we could implement the CFS™ Approach fully. It has been a long and challenging journey for us but we are very proud of our new setting and have been delighted with the many positive comments we have received from parents, other childcare professionals and Ofsted. Just today a visiting childminder commented on the lovely atmosphere as soon as she entered the main room.

**Reflection Point**

Have you observed recently how the resources you provide both indoors and outdoors are used in your setting? Are children overwhelmed with choice or is there a limited variety of resources? Do you offer open-ended, natural and everyday resources which excite children’s interest and provoke exploration and creativity? Do the resources you provide extend children’s view of the world and offer different experiences?
Before we started introducing the CFS™ Approach our large nursery classroom had lots of high displays with brightly coloured backing and there was work displayed from the ceiling. Many of our resources were tired and needed replacing. In addition there was too much choice on offer to the children. There were lots of cluttered areas with bright cloths covering large tubs of resources. There were very few quiet spaces or spaces to be alone. Large open areas which were not clearly defined made up the main indoor environment. Group rooms stored resources in large tubs, with lots of displays. The home corner was a small, sectioned area with just enough space for a few children to move around in. The units were wooden with bright red doors. Outside, there was a natural area, with a forest, hill and climbing structure together with a large concrete area with a sandpit, growing area and covered area.

In order to change our environment we firstly combined the space to include the F2 class of children. The whole area was then repainted in a neutral cream colour. We removed several large notice boards which were high up and added sectioned wooden furniture which incorporates low level displays. We covered all display areas with cream backing. We created sections of space using furniture to define areas and using canopies to create secluded spaces. Next, we observed how the children used the areas and we used the Mosaic Approach to gather evidence and children’s views on the environment. This led to further changes to the home corner by making it bigger but still secluded so that is wasn’t overcrowded or noisy. We added cushions, mats and drapes to create softness in the environment. In the outside area we added seating and displayed resources in baskets. We used den making materials to create spaces in the forest to offer Forest School
sessions. The three group rooms for small group or whole class teaching sessions were made less visually distracting, limiting displays and other visual clutter. We replaced the curtains that sectioned these rooms from the main room with walls to reduce the noise.

The creation of a Foundation Unit and a new team was a starting point for thinking about a theoretical underpinning for learning environments. For us, it was based upon the low starting points in terms of speech, language and communication development that children had on arrival to the nursery. We needed to ensure the environment supported this aspect of development. We also needed to enhance the environment in terms of the provision for emotional aspects of learning, and wanted to create places for children to feel secure. Rather than making changes based on what we liked or thought the environment should be like, we took a research based approach and looked at research to inform our plans. When we interviewed the children about ‘quiet spaces’ outside, many said there weren’t any or simply said ‘inside’. The children also said the home corner was a favourite space, but it was too small and noisy.

The home corner is now a more purposeful area, with higher quality interactions happening, both between children and children and adults. Children’s attention is improved in the group rooms, with the visual and noise distractions now limited. Outside, the organisation of resources has enabled higher levels of involvement. Den like spaces have attracted children to different areas and there have been more conversations outside. Four weeks after the initial changes we had a visit from Ofsted who said, “there is a calm and purposeful learning climate” and also “children make good progress, especially in communication, language and literacy”.

We have found that showing visual examples of the approach coupled with research to support it has worked best in terms of helping others to understand and work with the CFS™ Approach. In addition, there has to be an action research ethos, where all practitioners are involved in reflecting and making adaptations to the environment based upon what the children are doing and what they need.

Inviting in other professionals such as the Head of Early Years for Nottinghamshire and a number of speech and language therapists, also gave recognition to the value of the CFS™ Approach. All of the team now feel they couldn’t go back to the previous environment and recognise the effect the changes have made on children’s behaviour.

In order to share our ideas with families, we have included information in newsletters and parents are asked their opinions on questionnaires and informally. All new parents have the CFS™ Approach explained as they look round or attend meetings. There is a Speech and Language Research display in the classroom, which is updated as
we listen to children and update our findings. Photos of children using the learning environment are shown to parents when they attend a ‘Starting School’ meeting. During home visits a booklet, with photos of the learning environment, is shown to parents and children.

The development of the environment for us is a continual process. Next we plan to make further changes to our outdoor environment. There is continued reflection on resources and the care taken of them and de-cluttering and sorting is part of the routine, as is replacing tired resources and further developing areas of learning. We adopt an action research approach, as previously mentioned, in order to achieve this. We are also looking at different ways of reflecting on our interactions with the children and as part of this all staff are trained in ECAT (Every Child a Talker) or Let’s Interact and we plan to embed this learning through group reflection, further support and peer observation.

**Reflection point**

Is the environment in your setting visually over-stimulating with an abundance of bright colours, displays, equipment and resources? Are stored resources and adults’ possessions cluttering the children’s space? Consider how colour can be used effectively to create calmer, purposeful spaces. How could you make use of natural light to enhance the environment?
Before we started implementing the CFS™ Approach our environment at Bright Stars was cluttered with tables and chairs with no definition of specific inviting areas or spaces for children to really focus and ‘talk’ about. We have strip lights within the building and this seemed to highlight these issues when they were on as the room seemed to be illuminated too brightly. Our environment is one purpose built room with children aged from birth to five years, so we knew we had a challenge on our hands to differentiate resources which challenged both our younger and older children. We had a vision that we wanted to create an open, inviting, calm and natural environment which children and parents could come into and feel comfortable, safe and excited about playing and exploring.

To begin with we sat down as a team and went through what we wanted to achieve in our setting and how we wanted to do it. We knew we wanted to go down the natural route so we brain-stormed the different resources we needed to source. After careful thinking we went out and bought the essentials, came back and began to organize and change the room. We took away the tables and chairs to open up the room, created lots of inspirational, exciting and Communication Friendly Spaces™. We used lamps to soften the atmosphere and to create a calming environment. Once we had changed our area and created the mood we wanted we had immense feedback from parents about how the setting was really looking beautiful and inviting.
We decided to change our environment because we felt the children were using the space to run from activity to activity and did not seem to become focused within many of the areas of provision. We wanted the children to feel safe, secure and to create a warming atmosphere where children could relax, investigate and explore an exciting natural environment.

We have observed an immense impact on the way our children are playing, learning, exploring and developing. We have found the children really become engrossed within their new environment and are taking lots of new information in due to the fact our learning environment has become the third teacher. Staff are gaining more knowledge and becoming more skilled when using natural materials and learning resources. Our parents are now reading children’s learning stories, which are displayed to highlight the learning captured within all areas, and are asking about the different kinds of activities we are providing for the children.

To help our team work as a whole and to understand the natural ethos approach which we wanted to take has been an exciting journey for all of us. We have been to many other settings to look around and to seek ideas from, we have attended network meetings with other settings to discuss the natural approach and what it looks like and we have done lots of in-house training to help all staff members understand how we need to develop skills and knowledge. We have a creative team whose members can use recycled materials and make them into practical and exciting resources with the help from our children. Our team and setting has come a long way and we are really proud of what we have achieved together.
When we began to make our changes we decided to tell our parents about what was going on through our monthly newsletter. We also asked parents if they had any natural materials they were planning on throwing out which we could have. Our parents started to bring in items to help build and stock up our developing areas. As parents were then coming into the setting we talked to them about the changes and why we were doing it. Our parents were impressed and excited by the new changes.
Elizabeth Jarman is an internationally recognised education professional who specialises in developing Communication Friendly Spaces™. She supports a range of professionals, educators to architects in developing effective learning environments. She is an award winning author. Her company is the sole provider of the Communication Friendly Spaces™ Approach.

Elizabeth’s work is widely recognised and respected. Her thinking is professionally challenging the way that environments for children and young people are viewed. She is currently leading a range of projects across the UK, in Malta, the States, the UAE and Thailand.

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