

October 2026 - Week 1

The Power of the Pause: More Than Putting Things Away

Pause. Notice. Extend. Finding more learning in the everyday



Over the last four weeks, we have been looking at the ordinary moments of an early years day through a slightly different lens.

We have asked **where is the learning hiding?**

We have considered what happens **before we do it for them.**

We have explored why everyday care is **more than a routine.**

And last week, we looked at transitions and considered whether **the journey is learning too.**

This week, I want to look at something that happens in almost every early years setting, often several times a day.

Right Everyone, Tidy Up!

Walk into almost any early years setting and you will hear it.

"Right everyone, tidy up!"

It sounds harmless.

Routine.

Necessary.

There is, of course, nothing wrong with children learning to care for their environment, return resources and contribute to keeping a shared space organised.

But perhaps we sometimes need to pause before we tidy.

Because what looks like a mess to an adult can sometimes be evidence of deep thinking.

A construction spread across the floor.

A collection of objects carefully arranged on a table.

A role-play scene that has taken three days to develop.

A small world landscape that has gradually expanded.

A pile of books beside a child who has been returning to the same story.

A collection of loose parts that someone is clearly using for something.

When we tidy those things away, we may be doing more than putting resources back on shelves.

We may be interrupting learning.

What Does “Away” Mean?

We use the word “away” as though it has an obvious meaning.

Put the blocks away.

Put the cars away.

Put the paint away.

Put the books away.

But where exactly is “away”?

And more importantly:

Who decided?

Adults often see resources in terms of categories.

Blocks belong here.

Cars belong there.

Puzzles go on that shelf.

Mark-making materials go in this tray.

It makes sense.

It keeps environments manageable.

It helps everyone find things.

It supports organisation.

But children's thinking doesn't always follow our categories.

A child might combine blocks, animals, fabric, cardboard tubes and a collection of stones to create something that makes perfect sense to them.

To an adult?

It might simply look like a lot of things that need putting away.

Tidying Is Part of the Curriculum

There is an important distinction here.

I am not suggesting that children shouldn't tidy.

Quite the opposite.

Tidying can involve enormous amounts of learning.

Sorting.

Categorising.

Matching.
Counting.
Negotiating.
Remembering.
Planning.
Physical coordination.
Responsibility.
Working together.
“Where does this go?”
“That belongs over here.”
“I think this one goes with these.”
“That's mine.”
“We need to put these away first.”
All of those moments matter.
The question is not:
Should children tidy?
The question is:
When should we tidy?
And perhaps even more importantly:
What are we tidying away?

The Construction That Isn't Finished

Imagine a child has spent most of the morning building a complicated structure.
They have been moving blocks around.
Testing different shapes.
Taking things apart.
Rebuilding.
Adding small-world figures.
Changing the layout.
They finally stop.
An adult looks at the construction.
“It's been there all morning.”
“We need the space.”
“Let's tidy this away now.”
But has the child actually finished?
Stopping isn't necessarily finishing.
Sometimes children pause because they need to think.
Sometimes they leave something because they intend to return.
Sometimes they are mentally working on the next stage while doing something else.
And sometimes they come back hours later and continue exactly where they left off.
If we tidy the construction away, we may remove more than the blocks.
We may remove the possibility of continuation.

The Right to Return

This is something worth thinking about carefully.

Do children have a right to leave their thinking visible?

Not indefinitely.

Not everywhere.

Not without boundaries.

But perhaps more often than we currently allow.

In many early years environments, children are expected to reset the space at regular intervals.

But learning doesn't always work to our timetable.

A child may need to walk away from something before they understand what comes next.

They may need to observe.

Talk to someone.

Get a different resource.

Have lunch.

Go outside.

Have a rest.

And then return.

That return can be incredibly significant.

"I've changed it."

"I'm going to make it taller."

"Now it needs a door."

"Yesterday it was a house. Today it's a shop."

The learning continues because the thinking has been allowed to continue.

Whose Environment Is It?

This leads us into a bigger question.

Who is the environment actually for?

Is it primarily for adults to manage?

Or is it a place for children to think, explore, experiment and create?

Of course, it needs to work for everyone.

But if our environments are designed around adult convenience, we should perhaps notice that.

A perfectly organised room can sometimes be less useful to children than a slightly untidy one.

Because children's environments need to communicate something.

They need to say:

You can explore here.

You can change things.

You can combine resources.

You can leave something and come back.

You can make a mess.

You can try something.

You can take something apart.

You can start again.

You belong here.

Does Everything Need a Label?

Labels can be incredibly useful.

They help children find resources.

They support independence.

They help adults maintain organisation.

But perhaps we need to be careful that labels don't become instructions about what children are allowed to do with resources.

Blocks aren't only for building towers.

Fabric isn't only for dressing up.

Boxes aren't only for storing things.

Cardboard tubes aren't only for craft.

A resource can become something entirely different in the hands of a child.

Sometimes the most interesting play begins when children ignore our categories.

Everyone Needs to Help

There is another part of tidying that deserves attention.

The adults.

If children are expected to care for the environment, adults need to model that too.

But modelling isn't the same as doing everything for them.

If an adult constantly moves around the room putting things away while children are playing, something else can happen.

Children learn that adults manage the environment.

Adults decide what stays.

Adults decide what goes.

Adults decide when the room is finished.

Perhaps we need to think about tidying as shared responsibility rather than adult-controlled maintenance.

"When do we need to clear this?"

"What needs to stay?"

"What can we move?"

"Where could we keep this so you can come back to it?"

Those conversations are much more powerful than:

"Right. Everyone tidy up."

When Adults Tidy Around Children

This is another subtle point.

Sometimes adults tidy while children are still deeply engaged in play.

A practitioner walks around collecting resources.

Moving things.

Putting things back.

Clearing surfaces.

It can feel productive.
The room looks better.
But what message does that send?
That the adult's version of order matters more than the child's thinking?
That play has an invisible expiry time?
That resources must always be returned immediately?
Or that the adult can change the environment without the child's involvement?
Perhaps sometimes we need to ask:
What is the child doing right now?
Are they finished?
Could I leave this?
Could I wait?

A Perfectly Tidy Nursery

Imagine two rooms.
Room A is immaculate.
Every resource has a place.
Every shelf is perfectly organised.
Nothing is left out.
Tables are clear.
Floors are spotless.
It looks fantastic.
Room B is slightly different.
There are constructions left on the floor.
A collection of shells sits beside a magnifying glass.
Someone has created a road using masking tape.
There are books open on the carpet.
A tray of loose parts is still being used.
A small world scene has expanded onto the floor.
Room B might look less impressive in a photograph.
But which room tells you more about what children are thinking?
Which room shows you what they are interested in?
Which room shows you where their learning is going?
Perhaps the mess is actually information.

Pause. Notice. Extend.

So what might we do differently?
Pause.
Before tidying something away, stop.
Notice.
Look carefully.
What has the child been doing?
Is the play finished?
Is the construction complete?

Could this be something they intend to return to?

Is there evidence of thinking here?

Extend.

Instead of immediately removing the resource, could we:

Take a photograph so the child can return to the idea later?

Create a designated space for unfinished work?

Use a shelf, table or tray for ongoing projects?

Talk to the child about what they are doing?

Invite them to explain their thinking?

Protect a construction for another day?

Or simply leave it alone?

Try Not to Tidy

Here is a small challenge.

For one session, try not to tidy.

Not forever.

Not recklessly.

Just for a short period.

Leave the resources where children have used them.

Watch what happens.

Do children return?

Do they extend their play?

Do they combine resources differently?

Do they talk about what they have made?

Do they notice something they hadn't noticed before?

Does the environment begin to tell you more about children's thinking?

You might be surprised.

And perhaps you might also notice something else.

The room may not look quite as perfect.

But the learning may be much easier to see.

More Than Putting Things Away

Tidying isn't the problem.

Automatic tidying might be.

Tidying because the timetable says so.

Tidying because the room should look nice.

Tidying because adults feel uncomfortable with mess.

Tidying because the next activity is about to start.

Sometimes those things are necessary.

But sometimes they aren't.

And perhaps this is where the pause becomes important.

Because when we stop and look, we can ask a better question.

Not:

"How quickly can we get this room tidy?"

But:

“What might we be removing if we tidy this away?”

That question changes everything.

It moves us from managing the environment to understanding it.

From seeing mess as a problem to seeing it as information.

From asking children to clear away their thinking to considering whether we can protect it.

So the next time we look across the room and think:

“We need to get this place tidy...”

Perhaps we could pause.

Look again.

And ask:

What are we actually tidying away?

Because it might be more than resources.

It might be an idea that isn't finished yet.

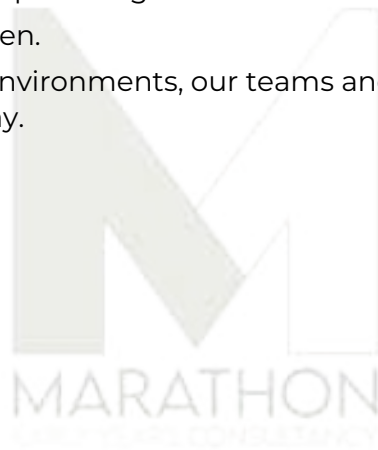
Pause. Notice. Extend.

Next week, we bring The Power of the Pause together and ask the bigger question behind this entire series:

What happens when we stop rushing?

Not just to individual children.

But to our pedagogy, our environments, our teams and ultimately the culture we create for children every day.



Steps for Early Years 5