



# Flexible Seating

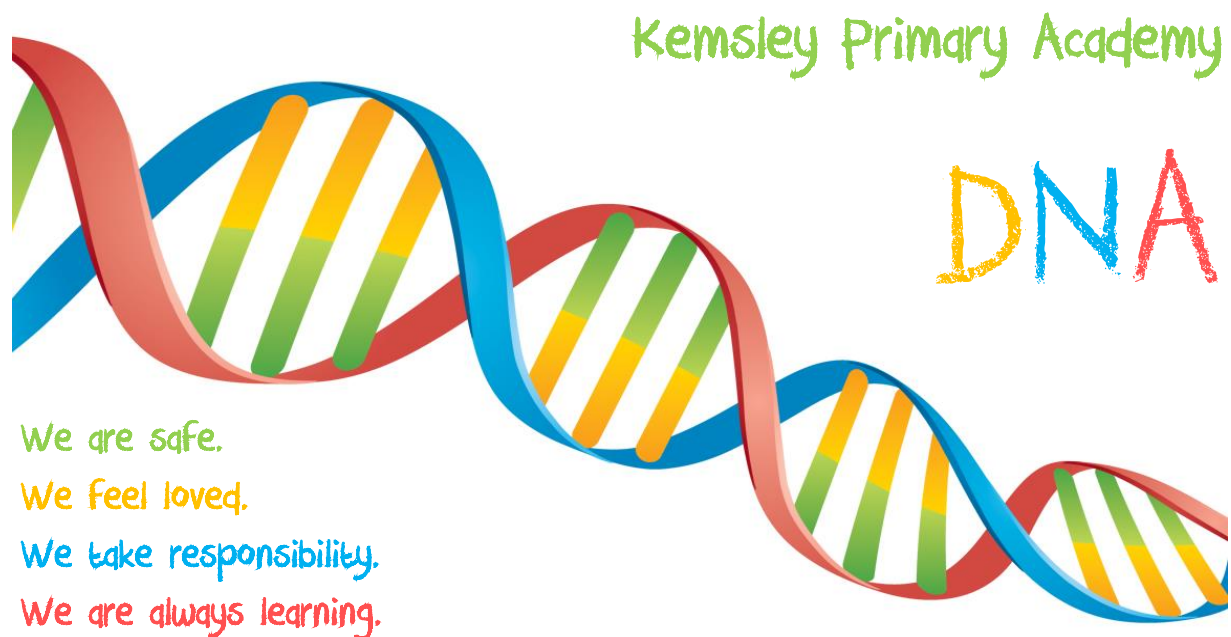
## Rationale

---

### Introduction

At Kemsley Primary Academy we are consistently striving to be the very best we can be for our children and the community that we are part of. While we will always prioritise our children's outcomes and progress, we believe that our Academy offers more than just academic focus. We want our children to be ready for all of life's challenges and to be able to grasp every opportunity that comes their way.

All our work is shaped by the four key strands that together make our 'Kemsley DNA':



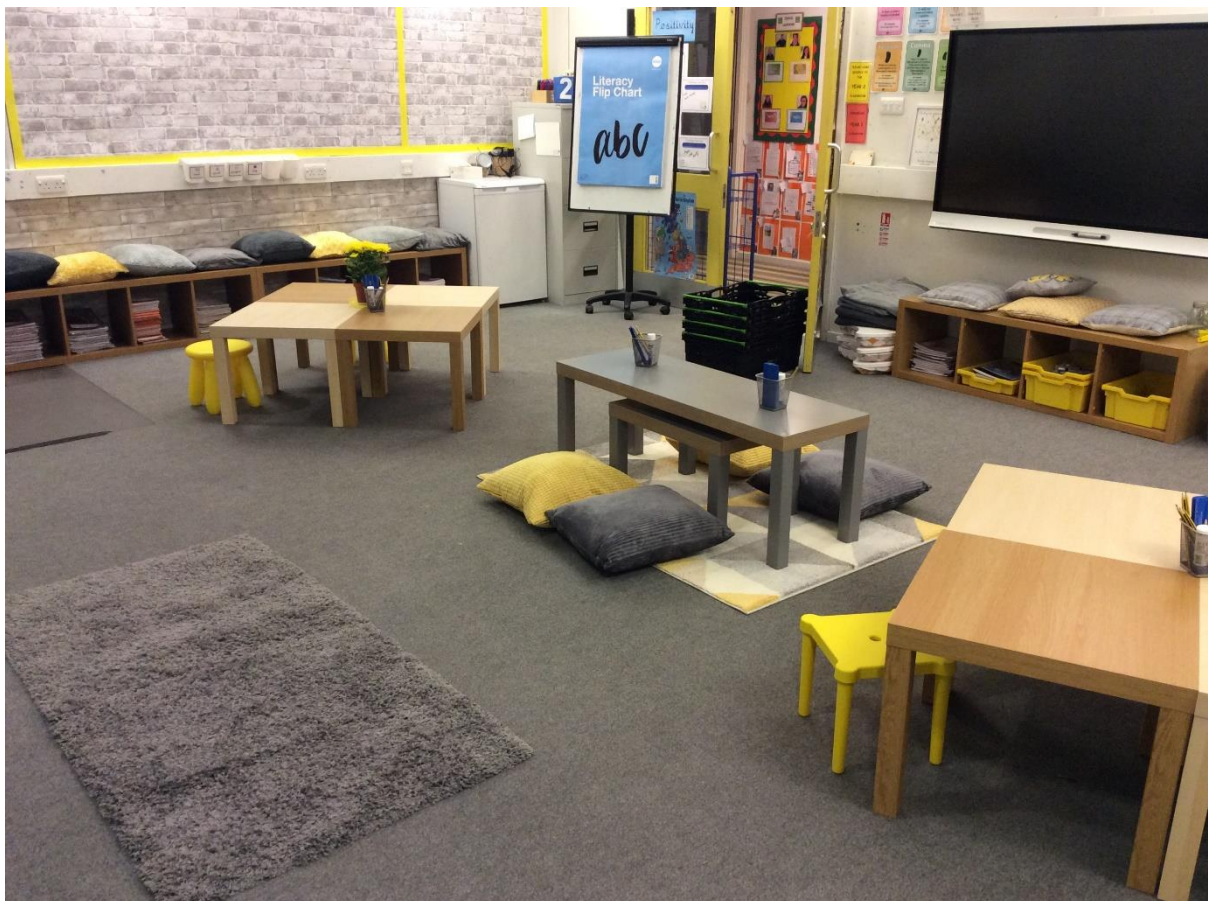
We believe that we need to weave each of the four strands through every minute of every day if we are to meet our vision of 'Eyes opened, Minds unlocked' and ensure that all of children are ready for all of life's opportunities and challenges. At the very heart of what we do is our drive to ensure that children know they are safe and feel loved. When we achieve this, we know that children will be confident to take responsibility and to learn effectively.

We have worked hard to adapt our curriculum to ensure that we are meeting the demands of our DNA strands. As part of this work, we have looked carefully at learning environments carefully assessing what stimuli should be available to the children, how to ensure children can feel secure in their environments and how to enable them to feel that they are empowered. This work, however, has highlighted the possibility that we need to think differently with regard to our learning spaces. Everything we do is to try and ensure that

children are equipped to be effective citizens in a rapidly changing and evolving world but we are doing this inside classrooms that have, in their basic format, changed little from the classrooms of Victorian times that were organised to mould children for desk based, paperwork driven jobs. This is encapsulated by the work of Delzer (2016) who states (with reference to the classroom environment):

“Outside the windows of our classrooms is a dynamic, fast paced and ever-changing world full of choices. How can we expect our students to solve problems and make choices independently if we constantly solve their problems and make choices for them? ... The students we share our classrooms with don't know life without connectivity, wi-fi and a global audience. Our classroom environments should be open, collaborative, enable communication, creativity and critical thinking. This simply cannot be done when kids are sitting in rows of desks all day.”

Our response to this is the consideration of flexible seating within the classroom so that, as in Victorian times, the learning environment reflects the environment of the real world with children having choice within the defined space in which they belong. The year 2 classroom was adapted in December 2018 to provide a flexible seating environment (as shown below).





### Potential benefits to learning

While flexible seating may well more accurately mirror the choices of the current ‘outside’ world, we are very aware of the primary need to ensure that it benefits our children in the here and now, during their primary years. Research into flexible seating remains relatively sparse, however, a review of available literature leads us to believe that there are a number of significant advantages to flexible seating for our children that we have categorised within our four DNA strands as follows:

#### We are safe

- **Trust** – To feel safe we ultimately need to trust in others and to sense that they trust in us. Giving children the opportunity to find their best learning position indicates a level of trust being transferred from the class teacher to the child. Study undertaken by Cymerman (2016) concludes that, “...desks promote compliance while ‘coffee-shop style seating encourages community-building through increased and intentional emphasis on communication and collaboration.” The shared ownership of the classroom and the removal of compliance around seating arrangements inherently implies that the children are trusted.
- **Community** – Flexible seating does not allow children to be territorial about their classroom chair or desk. This in turn promotes the notion of a shared community space that offers a safe working environment regardless of the position that is taken. Over time, the flexible seating classroom enables and encourages children to take

turns, work in different locations and different seating positions knowing that this is done safely and without risk. In addition, children can make the decision to move away from a space if it is not working for them in terms of comfort or if they feel they are being distracted by an individual near them.

### We feel loved

- **Physical and mental health** – Breithecker (2016) identifies that, ‘static-passive sitting and a lack of physical activity during lessons leaves the neuromuscular system unchallenged and leads to degeneration.’ He goes on to note that, “[a] child’s healthy brain will signal its need for a dynamic move leading to shifting unconsciously by rocking or fidgeting on conventional chairs.” Furthermore, Miller (2008) states that, “[g]iving people some control over their surroundings add to their sense of wellbeing.”
- **Core strength** - Children need to be able to move. Flexible seating allows movement through leaning, standing, bending, shifting position without the fear of non-compliance. This in turn increases oxygen to the brain, blood flow and core strength. Over time this will inevitably burn more calories and increase metabolism which helps growing minds stay more alert and focused.
- **Wellbeing and involvement** – The Research Centre for Experiential Education (RCEE) has produced a list of 10 action points that helps practitioners focus on the learning environment on the wellbeing and involvement of pupils; four of these directly link to the proposed advantages of the flexible classroom:
  - Rearrangement of the classroom into appealing corners or areas
  - Introduction of new and unconventional materials and activities
  - Widening of the possibilities for free initiative and support them with sound agreements
  - Improvement of the quality of the relationships amongst children and between children and teacher(s)

### We take responsibility

- **Choice** – Children are empowered by having some degree of choice and control over their environment. They can work in a way that they want and where they want and are allowed to change position as needed in order to optimise their learning.
- **Responsibility** – The balance of ‘control’ is readjusted with children gaining more control over their learning and their teacher relinquishing some control. The classroom environment becomes more ‘ours’ and less ‘mine’ in relation to the teacher. Children have the option to move to somewhere that enables them to work to the best of their ability at any time hence giving them a physical option and opportunity to manage their distractions. Professor Ferre Laevers (director of the Research Centre for Experiential Education) also highlights that effective practice in the learning environment should:

“...respect children’s sense for initiative by acknowledging their interests, giving them room for experimentation, letting them decide upon the way an activity is

performed and when a product is finished, implicate them in the setting of rules and the solution of conflicts.”

### **We are always learning**

- **Investment in learning** – Having more control over your working environment generally leads to individuals feeling more ownership of their work and therefore being more invested in their learning.
- **Anchoring information** – Research undertaken (Hannaford et al) shows that when children move around a classroom, they are more engaged and are able to better, ‘anchor new information and experience in neural networks’ ie effectively establishing new learning with the position in which the learning took place.
- **Impact on outcomes** – It is difficult to scientifically evidence the direct impact of flexible learning upon children’s outcomes as isolating the seating variable is almost impossible. Barrett et al (2015) carried out a study that attempted to control variables to the extent that the impact of flexible spaces could be identified. The study concluded that flexible welcoming spaces had a startlingly large effect on learning in maths (their focus subject); 73% (of the impact of the environment) of the student’s progress was attributed to classroom design and this, in turn was traced to flexibility and the student’s feeling of ownership in their room. Their further work determined a potential link between the positive higher impact of flexible seating upon subjects that traditionally invoke anxiety (eg maths) as children felt more comfortable when they could control elements of their learning environment thus reducing anxiety and increasing engagement.

### Potential barriers to effectiveness

Undoubtedly, there are potentially barriers to the implementation of any new system. We have taken considerable time to look at those identified by literature in order to enable us to consider ways of negating the possible impacts.

- **Off-task behaviour** – With choice and flexibility comes the opportunity to be off-task and not focused on learning. The traditional seating style of classrooms often enables this to be rapidly identified and chastised by the teaching staff. The flexible seating environment can offer more opportunity for this and potentially take longer to identify it. To address this we have ensured that there is a very clear agreement in class that with the choice of flexible seating comes personal responsibility upon the child to make informed decisions. Ultimately children know that they need to find a space that enables them to be their ‘best learning self’. The class teacher retains the right to ask a child to move to a certain space if they are not working as needed.
- **Time to ‘get it right’** – An effective flexible classroom environment is unlikely to ‘just happen’. The physical alteration of the room is just one step to making it work effectively. For children to operate at an optimum level in the environment they are required to use higher order thinking skills, problem solving and develop emotional maturity with regard to sharing and conflict resolution. These skills are not easy to foster, particularly for a generation of children who are more used to immediate gratification. As a result, there is a need to invest in the environment change knowing that it may take a little time to produce optimum impacts.

- **Teacher mindset** – Teachers need to be on board with the project. They need to plan for it and consider how changes to the classroom will necessarily change the format of lessons. While there is a little research showing the benefits of flexible seating there is also some identifying that classroom management and the level of academic provision may suffer or worsen if the class teacher has concerns. Undoubtedly the pedagogy changes in a flexible classroom. Barrett et al (2015) make significant observations around this. They conclude that ultimately flexible classrooms will be successful if they go hand in hand with a specific change in pedagogy. Flexible seating alters the fundamental dynamics of teaching and learning giving children more control and responsibility, improving academic engagement and undermining the typical face-forward orientation of the traditional learning environment. It is not the change of furniture, but the dynamic use of the space by the teacher and the children that pays off in the end. Changing the layout of a classroom is likely to have little impact at all (or even a negative impact) if teaching itself is not adapted as well.

## Conclusion

Ultimately, if it is to be successful, there is an undoubtable requirement to maintain flexibility in flexible classrooms. The classroom needs to become a complex, living system that works with the teacher and children to optimise engagement and learning opportunities.

Our change to the year 2 classroom indicates the start of our own research into the possibilities of flexible classroom environments. We will closely monitor the impact of the environment upon children's wellbeing, approach to school, thinking skills and ultimately progress and outcomes. We are committed to the need to flex the system as we become more familiar with how it operates and to recognise that there is no 'one size fits all' for our staff and pupil community.