



- the unique value of the outdoors in stimulating communication skills
- the best outdoor activities and resources for motivating and supporting children's use of language
- your role in supporting communication skills.

How the outdoors can help

All children benefit from having extended opportunities for learning out of doors and the outdoor environment provides particularly good opportunities for children to develop their communication and language skills. There is even good evidence to show that some children learn better outside (Bilton, 2002; Edgington 2002; Ouvry 2003 – see 'Further resources') than they do indoors. The outdoor environment can be a highly motivational place for the development of communication skills – and motivation is key: to stimulate the use and development of communication skills, children must first experience the desire to express their thoughts, feelings, ideas and intentions. There is also more space to stretch, both physically and imaginatively.

Outdoors, in a peaceful area of the garden where there is less background noise or distraction, you may well find that a child who is normally shy and withdrawn will suddenly speak out. Many boys in particular seem to find their voice when they are engaged in more physical, active learning outdoors – issuing instructions in a large building project, for example, or shouting out encouragement during a lively ball game.

Children can fine tune their listening skills outside, and develop confidence in projecting their voice across space. Everything can be done on a larger scale outdoors, and there are more opportunities to experiment and be messy, which is great for early mark-making and emergent writing.

The changing nature of the outdoor environment also gives a very rich context for exploration and developing vocabulary – from the weather to the changing seasons, from the elements of earth, water, air and even fire to growing things and discovering wildlife and mini-beasts.

Children learn best through activities and experiences that engage all the senses, and the outdoor environment can provide more freedom and space to engage in creative activities – such as music, dance, rhymes and songs – that also support language development.

Taking it outdoors: communication, language and literacy

'The ability to communicate is an essential life skill for all children and young people in the 21st century. It is at the core of all social interaction. With strong communication skills, children can engage and thrive. Without them children will struggle to learn, achieve, make friends and interact with the world around them.' *Bercow Review, 2008*

Young children need to be able to communicate and use language – whatever its form – for learning and socialising. And part of the role of pre-schools is to develop young children's use of language, laying the foundations for their future well-being and learning. Communication, language and literacy is therefore rightly placed at the centre of all early years curricula.

Education policy and curriculum documents in England, Scotland and

Wales all highlight the importance of the development of communication skills in the early years, and the recently published *Bercow Review* (see 'Further resources') gives key recommendations to government, while also highlighting the importance of using early opportunities for children to develop these skills.

In part, this is because of the current concern in children's services nationwide about both the rise in the number of children starting school without being able to communicate to the expected level, and the rise in identified speech and language difficulties. Many reasons have been put forward to explain this, including the fact that families are leading more sedentary and indoor lifestyles and spending less time doing things together out of doors. The electronic entertainment industry (TV, radio and computer games) has increased the level of background noise. At the same time, opportunities for families to engage in conversation – for example, at mealtimes – have been reduced.

This Playnotes looks at:



Children need varied opportunities to interact with others and to use a wide variety of resources for expressing their understanding, including mark-making, drawing, modelling, reading and writing. Once again the outdoor environment provides a larger and more varied canvas for these activities.

In some cases, the outdoor environment may even be the only time when children can really hear and focus, without the background noise of traffic, electronic media, or the conversation and play of other children and adults in the indoor classroom.

Focusing on imaginative play

A focus on imaginative play in your outdoor provision will pay great dividends in supporting children's language development in a wide range of highly motivating ways. Review how well your current outdoor provision offers:

- places and props for **role play scenarios** and **imaginative play** (see 'Further resources').
- places for **telling stories** and **acting out stories**. A 'magic carpet' can transport a small group with an adult to imaginary or real places, using the environment as a stimulus.
- landscapes for **small world play**, such as a gravel surface for dinosaurs, and long grass in a tractor tyre for jungle animals.
- reading outdoors and using stories



as starting points for play or activities. Well-known children's books that focus on the outdoors include *We're going on a Bear Hunt* and *The Lighthouse Keeper's Lunch*. Keep a list of books that you have found to work well. Consider which spots in your outdoor area work best for using storybooks, and how to enhance others. This can be done on a small scale with room for just one or two children and a particular book in mind (see also 'Further resources').

- battery powered **CD** or **cassette players** so that children can listen to music, rhymes and stories, and record their own voices outdoors, in places they select themselves.
- **puppet shows** and **performance**

spaces. These can be very easily constructed using a wooden pallet or upturned bread crates tied together as simple, flexible platforms.

Working on a grand scale

The extra space available in the outdoor area gives children the chance to play with big equipment and to work on a grand scale. This kind of play is very engaging and encourages collaboration, since children need to help each other in order to manipulate large equipment, and they need to communicate ideas and work together to achieve their plans. Motivation to communicate is high, with many and varied opportunities for adults to support the development of language for thinking. Review how well your current outdoor provision offers opportunities for:

- **moving water** play with large containers, hoses, pipes and guttering. Working out how to get water from the tap and across the outdoor space to water the plants can be a demanding and satisfying experience involving a huge amount and range of talk.
- **construction** and **den building** with large items, such as wooden blocks, planks and big cardboard boxes. Playing with these requires plenty of sharing of ideas and talk to realise the plans.
- creating large-scale **murals** on walls

and fences and **sculptures** using found or recycled materials. These can involve children helping each other to achieve their aims.

- **digging** and **transporting** soil, sand or gravel in wheelbarrows. This is often a shared activity where much negotiation can take place.

Getting active

Young children love to move. Indeed, they need to move in order to learn, as their brains and bodies grow together. Capitalise upon the freedom of movement the outdoors offers to support communication and language development by:

- linking language with physical movement in **action rhymes, ring games** and **songs**. Play 'follow my leader' type games and get children to give the instructions. Collect and laminate a list of games and rhymes and keep them outside as a prompt.
- playing with **movement, music** and **sound making** and introducing the language of movement alongside actions, giving children opportunities to practise and experiment with new vocabulary. Introduce a range of imaginative movements – perhaps based on insects they observe outdoors – such as slither, wiggle, scuttle, hop and pounce. Children will love the words and their own interpretations.
- creating **obstacle courses** that let children determine and describe the route they will follow.
- making sure that wheeled toys are the kind that encourage co-operation and communication, such as tandem bikes or cars with room for passengers. The outdoor area can create new and interesting role play areas such as a garage or police station.



Speaking out and speaking up

Being outside allows children to make noise without the restraints they usually experience indoors. They can explore using their voice in a variety of ways, from quiet conversation to shouting. Encourage children to find their voices by:

- exploring **pitch** and **volume** of voices, such as shouting from the climbing frame or going from high to low as they descend the slide.
- experimenting with **loudspeakers** and **megaphones** – provide materials such as cones, cylinders made from card, and large plastic bottles with the bottoms cut off.

- investigating **speaking tubes** made from cardboard, plastic and metal (different diameters and lengths), hose pipes with funnels at each end and other homemade devices.
- providing **telephones** outside for private or shared conversations. Position some together and spread others around the area. Bear in mind that young children are now more familiar with mobile phones than they are with walkie-talkies (which take some skill to use successfully).
- making the most of children's enthusiasm for **treasure hunts**, using descriptive verbal clues, and then encouraging them to create their own trails.



Introducing new experiences

There is little to compare with the power of real experiences for motivating children to share their delight and fascination and for providing them with incentives to learn new vocabulary. It is very hard to stay quiet when you find your first ladybird! You can capture the stimuli of the outdoor environment through a great variety of discovery experiences including:

- **playing with bubbles** on a sunny day, from hundreds of tiny ones to huge, iridescent, tube-shaped ones.
- **umbrella** and **puddle play** in the rain.
- uncovering **worms, snails** and **woodlice**, or finding **aphids** and **ladybirds** on the runner beans.
- **growing plants**: thinning out the carrots, discovering miniature baby carrots and taking them home to show parents; growing a sunflower or pumpkin from tiny seed to giant bloom.



Your role

To become skilful communicators, babies and young children need to be with people with whom they have **warm and loving relationships**, and they need to feel emotionally secure. In addition, adults who spend time in conversation with children – working and learning alongside them, genuinely sharing interests and ‘scaffolding’ children’s

thinking – provide them with the greatest resource for language development.

It is important also, because of the deep connections between culture and language, to ensure all **relevant languages and cultures** are as fully represented in your provision for outdoor play as they are in your indoor provision.

Observation and recording each individual’s developing communication competencies outdoors as well as indoors is vital in order to establish the child’s abilities and to properly assess their speech and language needs. And **speech interventions**, where needed, must happen outdoors as well as indoors.

Practitioners should also ask themselves:

- does our planning for communication, language and literacy include the outdoor environment and resources found outdoors?
- do our observations of children show differences in the way individual children use language outdoors?
- is there a gender difference in the way boys and girls express themselves through speaking, gestures, mark-making or in their play?

Making use of cameras

Cameras give young children a ‘voice’ with which to express their ideas and feelings and can be a powerful aid to stimulating the use and development of language outdoors. Here’s how:

- **take photographs** of children involved in play or deeply engaged with an outdoor experience. Share these with the children and invite them to talk about what was going on. Children can also talk these over with their parents and this can be a good way to help parents understand the value of play outdoors for their child, and the role the outdoors is playing in their child’s learning and language development.
- give children a robust **digital camera** (or a **single-use camera** while they are learning to handle a digital camera) to take photographs of things that have meaning for them. Discussions that follow about the things children have chosen to record will provide meaningful contexts for talk, and provide you with new perspectives on your outdoor provision.

Solving problems

There are a great many meaningful, problem-solving situations that can be introduced by adults or captured by observing children at play outdoors, all of which offer contexts for developing language for thinking, including:

- **open-ended experiences** such as experimenting with natural and recycled materials.
- encouraging children to **describe, explain, sequence** their ideas, give **reasons, predict** and **hypothesise**.
- creating **questions** or ‘provocations’ in the outdoor area to present a challenge. For example, ‘Can you build a house for the three bears?’ ‘Can you help teddy get down from the tree?’
- **talking** to children **about problems** they have encountered – for example, how can we make the walls of the den stronger? When appropriate, encourage children to evaluate and modify their ideas.
- asking children to **help in decisions** about what to do and have out, and how to manage the tidying up process!
- helping children **talk through conflicts** and to **negotiate**: give children opportunities to talk and listen to each other, modelling appropriate language and verbal strategies for them.
- **involving children**, even the youngest, **in planning and implementing changes** to your outdoor provision. Make the most of every opportunity to encourage talk as you do so.
- creating a climate that encourages children to talk about what they are doing and to **discuss and plan** what they can do.
- having a discussion time in small

groups after the outdoor session, preferably while still outside, to **talk over and comment** upon what everyone has been doing.



Further resources

- Playnotes *Pretend Play* (May 2005); *Storytelling and storymaking* (September 2007)
- Curriculum support *Let’s talk!* (September 2009)

All the above are available to download from the member services pages of our website.

- *Bercow Review* (2008) www.dcsf.gov.uk/bercowreview
- *The great outdoors: developing children’s learning through outdoor provision* by Margaret Edgington (The British Association for Early Childhood Education, 2002) ISBN -13 978-0904187284
- *Supporting language and literacy development in the early years* by Marian Whitehead (Open University Press, 2009) ISBN-13 928-0335 234271
- *Outdoor Play in the Early Years* H Bilton (David Fulton Publishers, 2009) ISBN-13 978 1843124573
- *Exercising Muscles and Minds: Outdoor Play and the Early Years Curriculum* by Marjorie Ouvry (National Early Years Network 2000) ISBN-13: 9781870985512
- *Making My Own Mark* by Helen Bromley (Early Education, 2006) ISBN-13 978-0904187335
- *Language and Literacy* by Jeni Riley (Paul Chapman Educational Publishing, 2006) ISBN-13:978-1412919869
- National Literacy Trust www.literacytrust.org.uk

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