

# Effective practice: Outdoor Learning

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## Key messages

- The outdoor environment has unique characteristics and features.
- Outdoor learning has equal value to indoor learning.
- Outdoor learning has a positive impact on children's well-being and development.
- Children need the support of attentive and engaged adults who are enthusiastic about the outdoors and understand the importance of outdoor learning.
- Outdoor learning is enhanced by an environment that is richly resourced with play materials that can be adapted and used in different ways.
- An approach to outdoor learning that considers experiences rather than equipment places children at the centre of the provision being made.

## Introduction

Past generations of children benefited from extended amounts of unsupervised time outdoors, and as adults they look back fondly at these early experiences. Indeed it is widely recognised that such experiences make a positive impact and as adults we are aware that it shaped many aspects of our own development and health. Although the developmental needs of children have not changed, the current fears among adults about increased levels of traffic and the perceived increase in the threat of child abduction have led to a shift in society's attitudes towards children's access to and use of the outdoors. A growing interest in media equipment, such as television, videos and computer games has also contributed to the creation of a society where many children live sedentary lives with few, if any, opportunities to access outdoor spaces or benefit from being outside.

Despite this cultural shift away from outdoor play and learning, it remains essential to children's health, development and well-being. Consequently, it is vital that early years settings maximise children's opportunities to be outdoors: for some it may be their only opportunity to play freely and safely outside.

Outdoor learning complements indoor learning and is equally important. Play and learning that flow seamlessly between indoors and outdoors enable children to make the most of the resources and materials available to them and develop their ideas without unnecessary interruption. Outdoor learning encompasses all that children do, see, hear or feel in their outdoor space. This includes the experiences that practitioners create and plan for, the spontaneous activities that children initiate, and the naturally occurring cyclical opportunities linked to the seasons, weather and nature.

## Why Outdoor Learning is important

Outdoor learning in early years settings is important because it:

- supports the development of healthy and active lifestyles;
- offers children opportunities for physical activity, freedom and movement;

- promotes a sense of confidence and well-being;
- provides opportunities for developing harmonious relationships with others, through negotiation, taking turns and cooperation;
- supports those children who learn best through activity or movement;
- provides safe and supervised opportunities for children to experience new challenges, assess risk and develop the skills to manage difficult situations;
- supports children's developing creativity and problem-solving skills;
- provides rich opportunities for imagination, inventiveness and resourcefulness;
- gives children contact with the natural world and offers them unique experiences, such as direct contact with the weather and seasons.

## Effective practice in relation to Outdoor Learning

Outdoor learning environments are as varied and diverse as each setting and the children and adults that make use of the space. Each space, whether large or small, shared or segregated, sunny or shaded, will have unique features that affect the way it can be developed and used. Therefore identifying and overcoming any barriers to making good use of the outdoors is a vital first step towards effective practice in supporting outdoor learning. However, whatever the variation in the size and design of outdoor spaces, there are some identifiable common elements that are recognised to have a positive impact on children's outdoor learning.

### Physical features

- Outdoor learning will be more effectively supported if adults and children have good access to outdoors, and opportunities to move freely between the indoor and outdoor environment.
- Secure entrances, exits and boundaries are vital safety features and offer adults the peace of mind to let children roam and explore freely.
- Both adults and children need to have protection from extreme weather conditions through provision of shade and shelter.
- A supply of water outdoors enriches children's play and learning opportunities all year round and makes caring for plants easier during the hot weather.
- A variety of hard and soft surfaces and low-level slopes offer added interest, exciting new perspectives and often act as a catalyst for children's play ideas.

### Organisation and management of outdoors

- The attitude and behaviour of adults outdoors has a profound impact on what happens there and on children's learning. It is therefore vital that children have the support of attentive and engaged adults who are enthusiastic about the outdoors and understand the importance of outdoor learning. Similarly, the outdoor environment will be fully effective as a place for high-quality learning experiences only if the adults involved in the organisation and the use and maintenance of the space recognise the importance of risk assessing to enable rather than restrict children's experiences.

- The organisation and design of the outdoors should include safe places where children can observe events without having to get involved unless they choose to, as well as active places where children can be boisterous and noisy.
- The availability of appropriate clothing and protection enables adults and children to go outside all year round, whatever the weather! In practice this means providing everyone with good protection against extreme heat and cold, and muddy, wet, windy or snowy weather conditions.
- Independent access to well-organised storage facilities enables children to select and return resources as and when they need them. Play and learning experiences outdoors are improved, and setting up and clearing away becomes a shared responsibility in which both adults and children can participate.

### Children's play and learning

Children's outdoor learning is enhanced by an environment that is richly resourced with exciting play materials and open-ended flexible resources that can be adapted and used in different ways, according to the needs and interests of individual children.

Outdoor learning is more effective when adults focus on what children need to be able to do there rather than identifying what children need to have. An approach that considers experiences rather than equipment places children at the centre of the provision for outdoor learning and ensures that individual children's learning and developmental needs are taken account of and met effectively.

Effective practice outdoors involves providing opportunities for children in meaningful, engaging experiences that support their development in all areas of the curriculum. This will include opportunities for children to:

- be excited, energetic, adventurous, noisy, messy;
- talk, listen, interact, make friends;
- imagine, dream, invent, fantasise;
- create, invent, construct, deconstruct;
- investigate, explore, discover, experiment with their own ideas and theories;
- make sounds and music, express ideas and feelings;
- find patterns, make marks, explore different media and materials;
- investigate concepts and ideas;
- be active, run, climb, pedal, jump, throw;
- dig, grow, nurture, cultivate;
- hide, relax, find calm, reflect;
- have responsibility, be independent, collaborate with others.

How these experiences are offered to children will be influenced by space, budget, the age range of the children, or the needs of other users of the space. The priority given to specific types of experiences needs ongoing review and adaptation to reflect the changing interests and enthusiasms of the children currently using the outdoor space.

Provided sensible precautions are taken and appropriate risk assessments made, public spaces, such as parks, can be used to extend and support the learning environment for young children. Taking advantage of the local area in this way is useful for all settings, but especially those sited in tower blocks or built-up areas which do not have their own dedicated outdoor space.

Even the smallest parks will provide spaces in which children, who are well supervised, can explore freely. In addition, many will also provide a variety of trees and plants to look at, talk about and touch or smell, as well as opportunities to see at first hand new growth, or birds, squirrels and other life forms such as worms or insects, as well as ponds, or a pets corner. Some will also offer play areas with shock-absorbing surfaces containing small fixed play equipment such as slides, rockers and climbing frames.

It is important to help children to care for the environment by helping them to understand the need to take litter away with them, not to damage or remove plants or trees or wildlife and to respect other people's rights to enjoy the space as well. When children are encouraged to use the open spaces in the locality they can be helped to respect the environment and to feel a sense of ownership and pride in it.

In the absence of parks it may be necessary to visit spaces, such as a pedestrian area, or a green space in an urban setting for outdoor access. Walking to such an area will in itself provide much-needed exercise for children and, if safe and free from hazards, may hold possibilities for wider opportunities for exploration and investigation, given the usual risk assessments have been carried out satisfactorily.

## How Outdoor Learning relates to children

### Birth–11 months

The outdoors is full of rich stimulus and sources of learning for very young babies and even the very youngest will respond to the difference in the outdoor environment. The sights, smells and sounds of outdoors will interest and intrigue them. As their head and body control develops they will turn towards what they see or hear and reach out to whatever catches their attention. Being placed safely outside for sleep or rest periods gives babies and young children fresh air and an environment filled with new things to look at when they are awake.

### 8–20 months

The outdoors is a place where babies and toddlers can begin to find out about the world around them, the things that happen in that world and the opportunities for them to get involved. As they become more mobile babies and toddlers want to thoroughly explore everything they see outdoors. They will express their interests outdoors through their emerging language and communication skills and will rapidly absorb new words, signs and concepts relating to outdoor experiences. Outdoor learning provides a different perspective on the indoor world and extends their interests to its distinctive features such as leaves, trees, butterflies, birds and natural objects such as stones, rocks and logs.

### 16–26 months

Curious toddlers can make sense of their world and explore how one experience links to another while they are outdoors. They will delight in opportunities to experiment and combine materials, such as sand or soil and water. They are often enthusiastic transporters, endlessly carrying objects from one place to another, for example, using small wheelbarrows to move conkers or leaves. The expanded space offers opportunities for greater physical challenges such as clambering up or rolling down a small hummock, using wheeled toys, digging in soil or collecting leaves.

## 22–36 months

Children can learn to make decisions, solve problems and grow in confidence in their own abilities outdoors and they need plenty of time to investigate their outdoor environment purposefully. They will make predictions about what may happen based on their previous play experiences and test out these ideas and theories. Two-year-olds are exploratory by nature and are testing their skills and keen to find out about everything they encounter, including grass, stones, different levels of ground, sand, soil, twigs and leaves. They are also interested in finding out through observing sounds or movement in the landscape and love to dig and move matter such as leaves by sweeping, lifting with a spade or kicking them along. All these activities help them to discover the properties of materials and what they will do.

## 30–50 months

Children can discover new experiences and revisit favourite ones outdoors. Their mobility and enjoyment of the company of others means investigations include using less obvious areas to play, such as a path running behind a low line of plants. Children need opportunities for sustained outdoor play with familiar materials as well as with less familiar resources such as a parachute, which can be used in collaboration with other children and adults. Enhanced communication skills support social and cooperative play and collaborative endeavours such as this. Mounting and dismounting from fixed and mobile equipment forms an interest in itself as children try out ways of travelling across a low bench on a safe surface or crawling along a suitably safe makeshift 'assault course'.

## 40–60+ months

The outdoors is a place where children can continue to learn by doing. They carry on building on the knowledge, skills and understanding that they have already acquired to make sense of the world around them. They are active learners, seeking information and continuing to question and explore. Being outdoors provides a focus for different types of experiences which support young children's growing sense of confidence and autonomy. This is enhanced by the enjoyment of new challenges, such as seeking and finding treasure on a treasure hunt. Their enthusiasm to participate in outdoor experiences is expanded as their social and communication skills develop and they seek out and enjoy the company of adults and other children.

## How Outdoor Learning relates to specific areas of Learning and Development

### Personal, Social and Emotional Development

The outdoors is a place that children of all ages can get pleasure from being in and can act on their strong impulse to investigate. They can be curious, inventive, and interested. They can concentrate and persevere at activities they have chosen. This in turn supports the development of positive attitudes towards new opportunities, challenges and responsibilities. The unique and special nature of the outdoors brings opportunities to experience beauty, joy, wonder and exuberance into children's everyday lives.

Gardening, in containers or other spaces, and growing activities outdoors, as well as seasonal maintenance tasks, such as weeding or sweeping leaves, provide valuable ways for children to develop care and concern for living things and their immediate environment. Outdoors can provide a safe supervised place for children to explore new challenges, learn to manage risk and to cope with change and adversity. Social relationships can be developed in a space that offers scope for communication through action, movement and language. Shared enterprises can be undertaken and emerging problems can be discussed and resolved. Negotiating for equipment or turns offers children situations where they can learn to consider the needs of others. Outdoors supports children's confidence, self-esteem and developing independence as they make choices and select resources. It also offers meaningful opportunities for personal independence as children learn to manage themselves in a different environment and in the putting on and taking off of outdoor clothes.

## **Communication, Language and Literacy**

Outdoors, children can hear and respond to a different range of sounds, beginning to recognise and distinguish between noises in the outdoor environment. They can use action and movement alongside words and sounds to convey their ideas and meanings. The outdoors is a place where stories, songs and poems can be shared and enacted. Mark-making opportunities outdoors can every bit as valuable as those that are planned indoors; babies and toddlers will enjoy making handprints in damp sand, while older children can set a trail of sticks round the outdoor area leading to their den. The outdoors offers children exciting opportunities for developing upper body and limb strength through physical activity and movement. These experiences will have a positive impact on the development of control and coordination of small muscles needed later for successful handwriting.

## **Problem Solving, Reasoning and Numeracy**

Babies and toddlers can enjoy number rhymes and act out number games outdoors. Their awareness of counting and the significance of numbers can be demonstrated there too, as they count how many beans have grown on the beanstalk and work out whether there are enough for everyone to try one. Natural materials that are found outdoors, such as twigs, conkers, chestnuts and pebbles can be sorted and graded according to size or shape. Imaginative games offer meaningful opportunities for children to learn to correspond objects, for example, giving each teddy a leaf plate and conker cake for an outdoor picnic. The outdoors is a place where children are able to explore and develop understanding of mathematical language and concepts in real life situations, for example, deciding how many more umbrellas or Wellington boots are needed if another two children want to go out on a rainy day. Perceptions and theories about shape, space and measure can be tried and tested as babies crawl between bushes, toddlers fill buckets with stones, or older children create patterns with fir cones.

## **Knowledge and Understanding of the World**

The outdoors is a place where children of all ages can explore and investigate a wide range of materials that cannot be found indoors. Babies and toddlers can have first-hand experience of nature through touching plants, smelling flowers, crawling on earth, and watching the movements of insects, spiders or beetles. Older children can note and record patterns in the natural and made environment, for example, through photographing leaves, or brickwork. The impact of wind, weather and seasons can be experienced directly and the effect on the environment noted. The cycle of plant growth and the seasonal changes outdoors give children context and meaning to the concept of time. Outdoors, all children can satisfy their curiosity in how things work through practical investigations, for example, what happens when a tower of logs falls down, or why balls only roll downhill. They can work out how materials can be joined to achieve a pre-planned purpose, for example, creating a structure on which they can balance. The outdoors offers a meaningful context for using simple ICT, for example a walkie talkie to contact a friend hidden in the den, or a camera to photograph a spider's web, or a pattern of stones and leaves. Use of the outdoors widens children's sense of place as they move between indoors and outdoors, watch passing people or cars, and note the features of their immediate and wider environment. The outdoors is a place for developing children's awareness of themselves and the important people in their lives, and for affirming and reflecting the events and traditions that contribute to children's growing awareness of their culture and society.

## **Physical Development**

Outdoors children can be physically active on a scale that is less possible indoors. This offers babies and toddlers exciting opportunities for purposeful movement over large areas, exploration of different levels, negotiation along pathways and around objects, and changes in direction and speed. As children progress in their own learning journey the introduction of further challenges will ensure their existing skills can be expanded. Outdoors is a place where children can experience the effect of physical activity on their bodies, as their hearts beat faster and they breathe more deeply after vigorous movement such as running, speeding along on a wheeled vehicle or pushing themselves along the floor.

They can experience the reverse effect as they lie quietly on a rug outdoors. The outdoors supports children's developing awareness of personal health and safety. They can begin to understand how to maintain personal health and safety, for example through 'sun safe' routines in hot weather, and hygiene routines after handling earth. The outdoors is a place where children can develop control and dexterity with tools and small equipment, for example, through digging and gardening, or using bats and balls, hammers and nails, and sand play equipment.

### **Creative Development**

The outdoors is full of creative opportunities and is rich with sensory stimuli. Children can explore and respond in a variety of ways to what they see, hear, feel, touch and smell. Through language and music, dance and movement, art and role-play props they can express and communicate their ideas and feelings. Outdoors, children can experiment with materials and repeat patterns of play. They can apply existing knowledge to new situations and become questioning and inventive thinkers. They can explore different materials in two and three dimensions, and begin to make connections and see the relationships between events and objects. Provision of resources such as pans, ladles and colanders strung safely on a line and spoons to bang against them offer opportunities for creating sounds and rhythms while a box containing role-play materials allows opportunities for making a traditional story such as 'Goldilocks and the Three Bears' come to life. Netting fixed to a fence can become a weaving frame bigger than the child, encouraging weaving and threading movements.

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