Early Years Outdoor Play in Autumn and Winter

Outdoor play is important for early years development, so Linda Thornton and Pat Brunton discuss ways that you can encourage playing outdoors even in the colder seasons.

With the onset of winter approaching, November may not be the obvious month to focus on the importance of children playing out of doors. However as the weather changes and temperatures drop it is even more important that we plan appropriate activities for children, to enjoy in the fresh air.

During the colder months children are often restricted to playing indoors at home, so it is essential that they are provided with plenty of opportunities for outdoor play when they are in their early years setting. Playing outdoors on a windy or snowy day will present its own challenges and opportunities for risky freedom. Using a torch outside as dusk falls is a safe and exciting way to enjoy the gratuitous fear on which many children, especially boys, thrive.

Playing outside cannot be restricted to warm, dry weather - late autumn, winter and early spring each present their own unique opportunities for learning. Making the most of your outdoor space, whatever its size and whatever the weather, will give young children the opportunities they need to explore and discover, to express themselves and to relive their experiences through their natural language of movement.

Whilst many early years settings have long-established systems and routines for ensuring that children have access to the outdoors throughout the year, there are still instances of practitioners who are not willing to take a positive view on children spending time out of doors in all weathers.

The reasons given vary from 'It is too cold, wet, windy, slippery for the children' to 'It takes too much time to get ready and parents don't like their children wet, cold or dirty.' More often than not it is the practitioners not the children who don't want to be out in all weathers. Practitioners who have a positive attitude to being out of doors will not only enjoy the experience themselves, but will foster a sense of pleasure in the children as they explore and play together. Providing the right clothing and footwear for children to wear will not only keep children safe and warm but will also allay parents' concerns.

Practical ideas

As well as ensuring that young children can enjoy free play out of doors, you can use the opportunities presented by the different seasons to enhance all areas of learning and development.

During the late Autumn encourage the children to collect natural materials such as conkers, twigs and leaves to use as permanent or semi-permanent mathematical resources in your outdoor area.

You can use these resources by:

- Setting up an investigation area out of doors where the natural resources are stored in transparent sweet jars, labelled with pictures and words, to help the children make independent choices.
- Provide containers, trays or baskets to encourage the children to sort the natural resources.
- Set up a bucket balance in the investigation area alongside the containers of natural materials (a bucket balance is a beam balance with large containers on either end so children can put things in to the buckets and try to balance them against one another). Make clipboards, paper and pencils available for them to record their findings.
- Introduce the children to the idea of transient art. Show them photographs of the work of the artist Andy Goldsworthy - you should be able to borrow a book of his work from the local library or on the internet. Encourage the children to make their own versions of transient art using the natural materials they have collected.

Organising a winter walk will provide an opportunity to see how your local environment changes during the winter and to look at the ways we use ICT to keep people and traffic safe in cold, dull weather.

- Check the weather forecast and choose a day when it will be dull and overcast, but not too wet, too cold or too windy. Take extra care on foggy or misty days.
- Plan a route for your walk that will take you past different examples of signs of winter - bare branches on trees and hedges, gardens without flowers, shop windows full of winter clothes, 'winter sales' posters in shop windows. When you are planning your route think about all the different examples of lights you will see on your outing - lights in houses, street lights, security lights, car headlights, traffic lights, advertising signs, shop windows and if it is on the run up to Christmas there will be many Christmas lights.
- Follow your pre-planned route and stop from time to time to allow the children to look around them for signs of winter. Make a note of all the different ideas they come up with to talk about later.
- Look out for examples of different types of lights being used in the environment. Talk to the children about the lights they have seen and what they are used for.

Links with EYPS Standards: S2, S8, S9, S11, S12, S19, S24, S27, S28, S31, S34

Links with Ofsted SEF: Section 3, 4b,c,f, 5i,j, 6n

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