All about...

Outdoor provision for under-threes

Babies, toddlers and two-year-olds and the outdoors are a natural combination, with endless benefits for learning and development. Jan White explains where to find them.

Photographs at Sandfield Natural Play Centre, Merseyside, by Pauline Neild

Digging with long-handled tools is an ideal way for younger children to explore the natural world, as well as learn about teamwork.
The outdoors boosts development of physical movements

Non-mobile babies need to be put in positions that give them plenty to look at, reach for, and grasps. Adults should carry them to interesting places or sit with them to share interest about the environment. Mobile babies should be given an interesting landscape with different views and perspectives. Watching older children and the natural world, such as dry leaves blown by the wind, can be fascinating.

Moving in different ways

Toddlers have an enormous need for movement, requiring spaces, adult support and clothing that encourage physical activity (such as appropriate footwear and trousers to allow movement). Like crawling babies, toddlers who are mastering locomotion and movement need several kinds of surfaces demanding a range of body positions and some sense of being ‘big’.

One-year-olds also revel in being higher up, where they get different perspectives and some sense of being ‘big’. Motor control and co-ordination are extremely important for success and independence, so supports and bruises have to be tolerated for toddlers to develop enough of this physical exploration.

CASE STUDY: SANDFIELD NATURAL PLAY CENTRE, MERSIDE

Sandfield Natural Play Centre, in Whiston, Merside, aims to offer all its children, aged from birth to 11, ‘curiosity, discovery, wonder, adventure, challenge and a strong sense of belonging’. Babies, toddlers and two-year-olds have their own garden, but often visit siblings and other older children.

Owner/manager Suzanne Scott says: ‘Our philosophy and commitment to outdoors is born out of a shared belief that an outdoor, flexible learning environment allows growth as individuals, strong relationships with others and attachment to the world, and encourages creative and lateral thinking.’ Robust recruitment procedures and ongoing expectations of staff, with close attention to their confidence and comfort and open-ended, non-committal commitment to being outside. The staff team have taken time to develop with parents a shared vision and values, and parents now choose this setting because of its emphasis on natural outdoor play. Life of ICT for home-shared records; learning stories and interpretive displays deepen start knowledge and parental engagement. Families are also involved with development and work in the garden. because of good transition areas and procedures, children move between outdoors and indoors whenever they wish. Children are given an insurance policy and always have appropriate clothing through the year, ensuring hygiene and safety. Issues are met, allowing children to access a wide range of play in the natural world. There is a focus on open-ended, transformative materials, especially sand, soil, water and plants.

Suzanne and parents and witness daily how being outdoors is good for children’s learning and thinking, supports their happiness and health and encourages both adults and children to take time to enjoy just being together.
Transporting, pushing and bouncing

The need to experience fast motion through space continues all through childhood, but toddlers especially seek out these sensations to work up the vestibular sensory system that will give them balance, co-ordination and body control throughout life. This age-group especially loves to experience motion through physical play with adults, but they also need lots of daily access to swings, slides and roundabouts. Look for ways to offer turning, swinging and falling sensations in lots of suitable challenge zones for toddlers (supported by attentive adults), at the park as well as in the setting.

Hiding and nurturing

Toddlers need small spaces that provide enclosure, softness and comfort. They enjoy playing hiding games or repeatedly getting in and out of little spaces and finding small places in among plants. Many outdoor areas lack the nurture that these nooks and crannies provide, being seen only as places for energy and ‘letting off steam’. As babies and toddlers move frequently and suddenly from an active state to a need for restoration, it is important to offer places where they can get inside or underneath, places to sit with adults, places where they can stand and watch others, and quiet places away from high activity.

Collecting, handling and transporting, pushing and pulling

Once they are walking, toddlers have their hands free for holding and moving objects, and this becomes a strong feature of their play. Toddlers typically collect and gather, handle and manipulate, fill and empty, lift and carry, push and pull, haul and dump, and move objects back and forth in the environment. Do they have a tricycle or a bike? A baby buggy? A cart? A trolley? A shoe box?

Sand and water - an ideal sensory, manipulable material

Sand is an ideal sensory, manipulable material. Sand and water lend themselves to the pretend play that emerges at this stage in a child’s life and develops so much more in two-year-olds. Outdoors, the child should be able to experience these materials in a whole body, multi-sensory way and be able to move them around and mix them. To enable this, sand needs to be in a large area so there is plenty of space for, and water should be flowing. An outdoor tap for running water is almost essential.

Cause, effect and agency

One-year-olds are intent on discovering how the world works and especially driven to find out what they can make happen in it. An effective outdoor environment must be rich in opportunities for children to experience ‘cause and effect’. Resources to provide include objects to make sounds on or with, and ways to make marks in sand or mud as well as with water, chalk and paint. Taps that turn to allow water to flow and stop and water to mix into sand and soil give satisfying results and provide a powerful sense of control and agency.

SEATING

Seating is an important element of a good environment for very young children, since these are the best placed to be attentive, engaged and available when they are comfortably sitting down. This will bring the adult’s face to the right height and provide that all-important lap.

Several shuttered and comfortable seats, positioned near to where children want to play, helps to mix ages, gives plenty of space and interest and means that adults who are providing the secure base needed for attachment here, adults can observe closely to tune into children’s play and show their interest in the child’s activity. A climber-covered swing seat is the perfect place to enjoy being outdoors together.

TWO-YEAR-OLDS

A child’s third year is one of emerging imagination, language and friendship that is greatly supported by spending plenty of time each day in rich outdoor environments. Two-year-old find many things to be fascinated by outdoors and can now express themselves verbally, using sounds for thinking, communication and influencing people.

They are still highly movement-oriented and action-oriented, with great needs for space and freedom, for ‘doing’ and for first-hand experience. Through these, they construct complex ideas and understandings about the world and the world work. Increasing imagination deriving from real experiences, alongside a growing ability to regulate feelings and behaviour, enables two-year-olds to engage in satisfying pretend play together.

A wide range of movement experiences

Having mastered locomotion, two-year-olds now need an outdoor environment that invites them to engage in skipping, running, climbing, jumping and landing, rolling, sliding, bouncing and balancing.

Parking emotional and physical boundaries gives children the independence of achievement and capability, helps them join in with others or limitations in their setting. Two-year-olds need to feel confident and comfortable in their role as ‘have a go’ dispositional.

They also love to sing, dance and play simple games, so practitioners should have a good repertoire of these to draw on whenever the mood is right.

Sand and water – mixing and making

Sand and water are essential ingredients of outdoor provision for this age group. Outdoors, these can be used with the whole body, dug in with long-handled tools, transferred into containers, watering cans, buckets and wheelbarrows, transported from place to place, mixed and stirred with other materials, and transformed into ‘food’ and many other imaginary things.

Running water and rain add hugely to the opportunities for exploration and action that are available in a water tray indoors. Jumping in puddles and standing under leaking gutters are also essential outdoor experiences.

Gathering, organising, placing and representing

Two-year-olds still love to collect, fill and transport, so stones, sticks, shells, wood pieces, plant materials and other natural materials make highly effective resources, along with a range of containers and transporters. However, they will increasingly be used to make lines and simple patterns and to represent other things, such as a face with eyes and nose or a plate of food.

The open-ended nature of these materials makes them versatile so that they can be whatever the child’s imagination wants them to be. Large and heavy resources, such as logs or small trees, are excellent for children of this age, especially if they have a fascination for things that turn and roll.

Dens and hidey holes

As friendship develops over this year, two-year-olds really enjoy being able to find small, semi-hidden spaces where they can spend time together away from adults. These little space support conversations and emerging pretend ‘home’ play.

Practitioners will give children the time and space to sort out the conflicts that inevitably arise when two-year-olds are together, allowing the desire to play together to drive the development of self-control and social skills. However, children of this age still have a strong need to know that adults are available and have no reservations about their well-being and safety.

Growing things and natural phenomena

Two-year-olds are intensely interested in the natural world, such as hunting for minibeasts, experiencing wind and rain or experimenting with shadows. Their outdoor space needs to be full of curiosity-rich and problem-rich situations, where they can continue to explore how things respond to them and how they can have an influence on their world.

At this age, children will have lots to talk about in such a place, especially with genuinely interested adults who give them time to think and speak. To be part of ‘real’ situations can also be used to help two-year-olds learn how to keep themselves safe and healthy.

Real tasks and the world beyond the setting

Two-year-olds thrive on feeling capable and responsible, and love to ‘help’ the adult role – not just the outdoor environment. Practitioners should take time to consider how children within this age group could be involved – such as by tidying up, washing windows, and putting away and growing vegetables – and build in the time for this to happen on a routine basis.

While the outdoor area should be a rich sensory and exploratory place, nothing can beat the world of real things, real people and real life beyond this. Another fantastic layer of outdoor provision can be harnessed through taking very small groups on frequent short trips by foot into the nearby locality and community. This works especially well when walks are taken at the child’s pace, pausing to look at and use the myriad things that interest them.

THE ADULT ROLE

The most important component of outdoor provision is the group of committed and enthusiastic adults, who fully appreciate what the outdoors offers, are dedicated to getting very young children outdoors for plenty of time, every day, throughout the year, and who understand the importance of carers or limitations in their setting.

They enjoy being outside with these children, striving to understand what they are doing and how they are benefiting from being there, and taking pleasure in being with them in this fabulous journey of discovery.

Two thoughtful practitioners, raising and enhancing the expectations that enable them to discover everything the outdoors has to offer.