

# Outdoor activities – plan for success



Being outdoors can transform learning and play for children. Find out how to provide the best possible experiences and be inspired to go out even more!

There are so many great reasons for taking learning and play outdoors. Seasonal and weather changes help develop children holistically and encourage specific areas of learning, such as knowledge and understanding of the world. With places to relax and daydream in, and places to be loud and creative, feelings and emotions can be explored. Numeracy and problem-solving can be supported with hands-on experiences and the chance to work on a larger scale.

It is a great place to tell stories, sing songs and support role play. Outdoors children can manage physical risks and test their boundaries. They can create dens and hiding places and engage in experiences that help develop life skills such as confidence, creativity and decision-making. And last, but not least, fresh air and activity are essential for children's wellbeing and health. The more children's muscles and senses are exercised, the more the brain develops its capacity for learning.

## Whatever the weather

Put off by the great British weather? Don't be. Remind yourself and your colleagues that there is no such thing as bad weather, just bad clothing! Making sure children – and adults – are dressed appropriately all year round will help make the most of your outdoor environment. Ask for donations from parents/carers, visit charity shops or fundraise so every child who wants to outside has easy access to the correct clothing, including wellies, umbrellas and sun hats.



## A space to thrive in

Well-designed outdoor spaces can transform a child's experience outdoors. The best outdoor spaces take children's physical, social, emotional and learning needs into account. Aim to:

- provide a safe and secure area that offers shade and shelter. This will help you embrace the weather as an asset rather than viewing it as a problem.
- make sure, however small your space, that it contains growing and living things. Access to trees and plants – especially sensory plants – can have a huge impact on a child's wellbeing. Herbs, fruit and vegetables, for example, can feed all the senses and teach children a lot more besides.
- plan specific areas for different types of play – for example, quiet zones for reflection, physical areas that promote challenge, investigation and creativity, and seating where children and adults can naturally and comfortably socialise.

To find out more about developing your outdoor space see 'Further resources'.



## Activities to inspire

The best outdoor activities are those that can help support children's sense of wellbeing – and therefore their potential to learn – by building confidence, encouraging a sense of achievement and promoting cooperative play.

- **Feed the senses** Children need lots of contact with the living world and the chance to use all of their senses to find out about the environment around them. However big or small your outdoor area, fill it with as many growing, living and natural things as possible. Include features that allow exploration of all the elements – earth, air, water and even fire (providing you take the right safety measures). Sensory gardens especially enhance the use of all faculties, and have a huge beneficial effect on wellbeing.
- **Get growing** Planting, growing, maintaining and eating fruit and vegetables help children feel responsible and gives them a great sense of achievement (see also 'Further resources'). Associate activities range from caring for the plants, taste tests, storytime linked to growing projects, learning about lifecycles and looking at the colours and shapes of different crops.
- **Den building** Children are naturally drawn to nooks, crannies and child-sized spaces and love to make their own dens (see 'Further resources'). When they engage closely with their physical environment, and turn places into spaces that have meaning to them, children gain a sense of belonging. If you are

lucky enough to have bushes that can be pruned for hiding in then take advantage of these as they will provide the children with direct contact with nature. Provide crates, cardboard boxes, sheets, pegs, clips and elastic bands to promote den creativity. Building dens also allows children to make choices, work together and learn about safety and managing risk. Associated activities range from role play, fantasy play, storytelling, camping out and decorating dens.

- **Think big** Being outdoors allows children to create large art projects that they can work on cooperatively. Working collectively in this way not only helps develop social interaction and expression, but also allows the children to respect each other and their individual contributions to the group project.
- **Get physical** It is a well known fact that feeling fit is good for the mind as well as the body. Encouraging movement in outdoor games also enhances the mastery of new physical skills which boosts children's sense of achievement. Activities to try include making stretches of pavement, tarmac or grass more interesting with chalk or cones to mark out runways and paths or use them as balance lines; encouraging children to make their own trails and to add obstacles using sturdy outdoor equipment such as crates, planks, tunnels, scramble nets, tyres and cones; laying out treasure hunts to stimulate healthy activity, movement and discovery.



### Your role – helping children learn outdoors

Outdoors children seem to learn more intensely, following their own lines of enquiry more freely, but they still need adult support when working through their thought processes. For instance, children who are not able to vocalise their thoughts and feelings on the subject of their explorations need to be supported with a rich vocabulary from adults.

There is a fine line, however, between intervention and interference. It has been noted by a number of published educators that while adult interaction is crucial in supporting and extending play, any adult intervention in child-initiated play causes that play to change to focus on the adult. It is important, therefore, that practitioners are able to build on children's interests – without imposing an adult-led agenda.

In an action-research project carried out by Learning through Landscapes and Oxfordshire County Council ('Why are the leaves yellow', see 'Further resources') it was found that finding the right balance between child-initiated and adult-led play depended on:

- listening more and intervening less
- waiting to be asked sometimes instead of always doing the asking
- modelling ways of working, playing and behaving outside – such as using tools, managing risks and safety, and respecting the living world, its plant and creatures
- building on the children's own interests and what they are engaged in at that precise moment.

Learning through Landscapes has developed a training module based on research from this project. To find out more see 'Further resources'.

‘The best resources can be used in more than one way’



## Resources that really make a difference

The best resources are those that offer the greatest play value. These are usually items that are open-ended. This means they can be used in more than one way for playing and learning. Often described as ‘loose parts’, this type of resource has a high number of ‘affordances’ - a term that refers to the number of potential uses that an object can have. Children naturally use their imagination and curiosity when using this type of resource – often in a way we would never think of ourselves.

**Resources for construction** These allow children to construct and change their environment, and might include blocks, ropes, crates, tarpaulins, boxes, tyres and blankets. Resources like these can be used to support all areas of the curriculum, with children combining them in different ways to create new learning opportunities.

**Natural resources** As researchers on the LTL-supported research project ‘Why are the leaves yellow?’ (see ‘Further resources’) found, natural materials have more affordances than most manufactured toys. So while a plastic car is likely to largely determine how a

child will play with it and may have limited learning and language potential, a stick can have a thousand possibilities and uses. Natural resources to have in your setting might include stones, shells, sticks, bark pieces, pine cones and conkers.

**Everyday objects** This type of resource includes items like kitchen utensils, pots and pans, brooms and dustpans, buckets, pegs and flowerpots. They are familiar, and having opportunities to play with them enables children to explore their physical world and discover the social aspects of their lives. They also have a multitude of purposes.

**Resources to support the curriculum** Look at how different areas of your provision can be enhanced with resources that offer opportunities for the children to explore, independently, all areas of the curriculum. For example, in a construction area, add in resources such as cardboard boxes, clip boards, rulers, glue, glue spreaders, straws, wooden blocks and stickle bricks. Provision in this area could be further enhanced with items such as maps, plans, trolleys, hard hats, tape measures and real builders’ bricks.



### FAQ How can I tell if the children are engaged or not?

Positive outdoor experiences are vital for helping children reach their full learning potential. The happier, more spontaneous, relaxed, lively and open a child is the more likely they will have a strong sense of wellbeing, and that their social, emotional, physical and intellectual development will thrive.

But how do you know that the experiences you are offering children outdoors are impacting positively on

them? A recent practitioner-led action research project facilitated by LTL, which used the ‘Wellbeing and involvement scale’ (see ‘Further resources’) to measure the children’s levels of wellbeing and involvement found that observation is key.

Practitioners on the project were encouraged to look for indicators of wellbeing. These include, for example:

- being happy – acting cheerful, smiling beaming
- being spontaneous – being oneself and being expressive
- talking to oneself – playing with sounds humming, singing

- being relaxed – not showing any signals of stress
- being open – by being approachable to teachers and other children
- being lively – by radiating and reacting energetically
- expressing self-confidence.

Where such indicators are not present, practitioners are encouraged to look for explanations, and to change the physical spaces and resources, the adult/child interactions, the routines etc to improve the experience for the child and create a more enabling and enjoyable environment for deeper level learning.

**'Look at how you can... encourage active involvement outdoors'**



## Getting staff and parents on board

For children to appreciate outdoors they need adults – staff and parents – as partners who also understand and appreciate the wealth of experiences available. Adults that have enjoyed outdoors from childhood are, of course, at a distinct advantage. Even then, some will need to reawaken their appreciation.

### Staff

If staff are disengaged, inattentive or paying lip service to outdoor practice then children will assume that the outdoors is not of value to adults. To help them develop a positive attitude to themselves as learners outdoors the attitude of the staff may be the biggest challenge for your setting. For some staff it may just be a case of making a few simple changes; for others it takes longer.

Factors you need to consider can be physical (clothing, resources, comfort), administrative (timetabling that allows for engagement rather than time watching) and developmental (giving responsibilities, ownership, understanding and enjoyment).

Allowing children independent access to the outdoors with 'free-flow' can help promote the benefits of being outdoors. It also:

- supports children's levels of concentration and flow of ideas – especially important as children's activity levels naturally fluctuate as they seek out resources, change partners and develop ideas

- allows children the chance to have uninterrupted time to see through an activity without waiting for a specified 'outside time'.
- affords them a degree of self-determination, giving them the chance to grow their decision-making skills and future as independent learners.
- helps deal with overcrowded spaces, improving the feel of both indoor and outdoor environments.

For more ideas see 'Further resources'.

### Parents

Promoting awareness of the value of outdoors and its important place in their family life is not to be underestimated, as children value what parents value. And research has shown that success in this area is a key influence in improving children's overall attainment.

Sometimes, however, getting parents to see the value of being outdoors can be a challenge. They are anxious about their child's welfare and safety outdoors. Their understanding of the term 'play' may even be at odds with what is really happening, as their memories of 'playtime' may be as time out from 'learning'.

Whatever your current level of parental involvement, look at how you can better support your parents and explore more possibilities to encourage active involvement outdoors (for more ideas see 'Further resources').

## Further resources

- Playnotes *Getting best value from your resources*, *Wellbeing outdoors*, *Learning through nature – the role of the practitioner*, *Get growing!*, *Developing positive attitudes*, *Observation and assessment*, *Families outdoors*, *Involving parents*, *Nooks and crannies*, *Outdoors in all seasons*, *Exhibition mission*, *Developing your outdoors*, *Enabling free-flow*. All available to download from the member services pages of our website [www.ltl.org.uk](http://www.ltl.org.uk).
- *PlayOut* is an early years toolkit designed to help early years settings improve their outdoor environments for play and learning, available to buy from the publication page of our website (as above).
- LTL offers an inset half-day, full day or twilight session: 'Making the most of your outdoor play' and 'Why are the leaves yellow?'. Visit the training pages of our website (as above) or contact [training@ltl.org.uk](mailto:training@ltl.org.uk).



© This resource was originally created as part of the membership scheme from the national school grounds charity **Learning through Landscapes** operating in Scotland as **Grounds for Learning**

Registered charity no. in England and Wales 803270, in Scotland SC038890

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