

The Benefits of Outdoor Play



“The worlds not such a bad place.....when you get out in it” *Calvin & Hobbs*

All early years providers have an outdoor space they can use – whether it’s their own garden or a community park. It gives children first hand experiences of their environment – the weather, the changing seasons, flowers, plants and animals. The space in the outdoors often gives children the opportunity to play more energetically and noisily than they might indoors. An outdoor area that is richly resourced with open ended and moveable resources will strongly enhance children’s learning outdoors, and this should be further supported by adults who are enthusiastic and attentive to the children’s needs within the outdoor environment.

Links with other documentation

The Early Years Foundation Stage:

Inclusive practice as the outdoor environment supports additional needs if sensory experiences are offered

Playing and Exploring as the outdoor environment is the perfect setting to learn about appropriate risk and challenge

A unique child - Risk taking, observing creativity and developing their knowledge of the living world

Positive Relationships - *Respecting each other.* Chances for sharing and turn taking,

Positive Relationships - The outdoors provides chances for children to respond to different experience

Enabling Environments - *Observation, assessment and planning.* Adults have a wide choice to make significant observations of all areas of learning and development

Enabling Environments - Ensuring that the environment is planned to meet each child's interests and stage of development will help to ensure that it supports every child's learning in a way that is appropriate to them

Enabling environments - With space and often less restrictions, the outdoors can give children more variety and a richer environment to support their learning within a secure and safe space

Learning and Development - The outdoors can give children the space, freedom and independence to extend their play and exploration onto a higher level

Learning and Development - The outdoors gives children an excellent opportunity for 'active learning' on a larger scale than indoors

Learning and Development - Children learn about cause and effect, problem solving, unrestricted access, they have time to develop ideas with supporting adults

Ofsted self-evaluation form

Links to **Part B, section 4** - *Quality of teaching, learning and assessment.* In the outdoors, children can make more mess, more noise more movement and have more space.

Outdoor play and how it links to the themes, principles and practice of the EYFS:

Enabling Environments: Promoting regular, sustained physical activity will give opportunities for large muscles to develop strength and co-ordination. Body movements outdoors will also help to develop smaller movement skills for future writing and pencil control. Playing outdoors can have a positive effect on mental health, including the re-establishing of functioning in children with attention deficit related disorders; and on emotional health, through wide ranging opportunities for exploration and learning about emotions.

Enabling Environments: Outdoor spaces offer children varied opportunities to use and develop risk management skills; as well as improve their confidence and self – esteem. They give children the chance to develop their imagination and create special places.

Learning and Developing: Outdoor spaces can offer rich, stimulating possibilities especially associated with feelings of well-being. Playful contact with plants and animals helps to promote a sense of wonderment and ‘magic moments.’ Children can investigate cause and effect, and problem solving skills can be identified.

Positive Relationships: Playing in natural spaces supports children in developing a sense of place and attachment to their local environment.

A Unique Child: Experiencing a sense of wonder through child friendly, natural areas links to the ability and use of creativity when they are adults

Effective Practice

Imaginative Play

Role play areas can feel more real and authentic when they are in the outdoors. For example a sandy ‘beach’ on a warm summer’s day, a ‘garage’ with a petrol station and car wash, a tent for ‘camping,’ having picnics or going on a ‘bear hunt’. All indoor play elements can be replicated outdoors. Too much fixed equipment and toys can limit children’s imagination. The outdoors should be a place where children can investigate, explore, use their imagination and senses and be physically active – often



on a much larger scale. *Mud kitchens* provide children with a rich, open-ended way to express and explore their own interests through using mud, water and other natural materials. By providing a range of commonplace, inexpensive tools and resources, children explore the natural world through their senses and follow their own fascinations whilst being supported by knowledgeable, engaging adults.

Creative Play

Children do not need a lot of expensive toys and equipment to play and enjoy themselves. For example found materials such as milk crates, drainpipes, guttering, bricks, bark chippings, sticks, shells and stones are known as open ended resources which encourage children to use imagination and develop fantastic ideas. The wonder of hunting for bugs, creepy crawlies and the discovery of plants and flowers excite children and develop their powers of observation. The open space of the outdoors can allow for creative activities such as painting to be experienced on a much larger scale than indoors.

Physical Play

Fine and gross motor skills can be developed in the garden or the outside area. Small apparatus can be used by children of all ages. All children enjoy handling, throwing, kicking, catching, balancing, swinging. Having a trolley with a variety of resources that are labelled so that children can choose and put away will be practical. This can include bats and balls, cones, Frisbees, ribbons, streamers, brushes/rollers, spray bottles, chunky chalks/ pens, clip boards, skittles, footprints, number lines and long ropes/ string



Reflecting on practice:

It's worth recollecting the time you spent outdoors as a child and how these experiences often stay in your memory. Time spent planning and gathering resources in advance will pay dividends and provide good opportunities for observations and next steps of learning.

Questions for practitioners

Do children enjoy playing outdoors?		
<p>When did you last audit your outdoor space? <i>For instance you could keep a record of popular activities and re-introduce things as new children come to the setting. All areas of learning should be catered for.</i></p>	<p>Do you plan for the outdoor area; is there a clear link with your planning for these activities? <i>For instance your observations may reveal that you need to provide more artefacts and natural resources, you may need to watch children's reactions and look for the 'wow' moments that you can record and plan the next steps of learning</i></p>	<p>How could we make it even better?</p>
Do the resources you provide targeted areas of learning?		
<p>Do you encourage children to use resources brought from indoors? <i>Is there plenty of equipment and a variety of resources that are not typically outdoor toys? For example a shop, an office, a garage a railway station. Anything that children are interested in can be transported outdoors.</i></p>	<p>Are there enough resources relevant to children's interests? <i>Do you continually make sure when you set up outdoors, that there is a wide variety of choice even when the weather is not so good? Children sometimes require a selection of toys to extend their game or build on an idea; this can result in a great learning opportunity and gaining of knowledge. E.g. Individual back packs with a map, binoculars, camera, pen and pad, sunglasses, waterproof. This 'explorers equipment pack' will add to imaginative play.</i></p>	<p>How could we make it even better?</p>

Is there a good balance of child initiated and adult initiated available?		
<p>What is the level of adult interaction when they are supervising outdoor play?</p> <p><i>For instance when adults are outdoors you could monitor how much they join in children's play, and if they know when to get involved and when to stand back. This is a good time to carry out peer observations.</i></p>	<p>How do you enable children to initiate their own activities?</p> <p><i>For example ensure that you are tuned in to children's learning styles and interests, listen to their verbal exchanges with each other and adults and act upon them by providing the necessary resources.</i></p>	<p>How could we make it even better?</p>
Do you watch and listen to children playing with the resources and use your observations to extend the activity?		
<p>Do you differentiate between age groups and ages and stages of development?</p> <p><i>For instance you could have different areas arranged with equipment for babies and toddlers that include sensory items, wheeled toys, soft play and smaller scale equipment to develop gross motor skills.</i></p>	<p>Are you aware of how children play?</p> <p><i>For example is their play solitary, co-operative or parallel? Once you have identified play styles you can provide a wider range of resources to meet this need.</i></p>	<p>How could we make it even better?</p>
Do you encourage children to add their own ideas for resources?		
<p>Do adults discourage children from bringing 'indoor toys' 'outdoors' if yes why?</p> <p><i>Where ever possible it is good practice to allow toys that are often classed as indoor toys to be taken outdoors. For example dolls to go in prams, small world toys, small scale construction, crayons and pencils, dressing up clothes to go with outdoor plans and games, small tables and chairs, story books and painting easels. When children bring indoor toys outside, there is usually a very good reason!</i></p>	<p>Do you give consideration to the task of tidying away equipment and resources?</p> <p><i>For instance tidy up time can be made more manageable by providing photo labelled boxes, containers, baskets and crates that are easy to transport and store. If toys are to be taken back indoors make sure that a cleaning routine is established in order to reduce any risk of poor hygiene practices.</i></p>	<p>How could we make it even better?</p>

Are children able to play with the activities individually, in small groups and in larger groups?		
<p>Do children play co-operatively in the groups? <i>Do children interact and work together towards common goals? Do they share resources and discuss what they are doing?</i></p>	<p>Are there always enough resources for children to follow their own lines of play? <i>Are children able to play with equipment on their own or do they need to share?</i></p>	<p>How could we make it even better?</p>

In action

Petrol station

A fuel pump can be made from a large cardboard carton with dials and numbers drawn on. Add buckets, sponges, maps, a cash register, credit cards, hose-pipe, L plates, an air pump, real tools ramps & jacks, comics, magazines, bunches of flowers, watering/oil can, trikes, pedal cars and high visibility jackets. You can extend this further by drawing a road on the floor to direct the cars.

Replicating a beach

Sand tray with pebbles, shells, buckets and spades, fishing nets, picnic basket, sun hats, rugs, towels, camera, sun glasses, binoculars, water tray, parachute, windy sticks/ windmills, ice cream kiosk (can be made from large cardboard carton,) and a pop up tent or make your own. Add some 'rock pools' in washing up bowls, buckets or storage boxes and fill with toy crabs, fish, star fish etc.

Camping in the woods

Pop up tent or make your own, you could use a large cardboard carton for a cave or blankets and sheets hung from a tree or over a frame. Add some binoculars, a magnifying glass, bug bottle, sticks (to make pretend fire) rugs, cups, plates etc, camouflage net. You could use 'We're Going on a Bear Hunt' book to support the children's play.

Construction area

A corner of the garden could be cordoned off with tape or sleepers. Add some large scale diggers, spades and garden forks, gravel, high visibility jackets, gloves and hard hats. Trowels, tape measures, utility belts, 'blue prints' and architectural drawings will also support their play. Signs such as "Hard Hat Area" can be bought or made by the children. Adding some sand and water and a cement mixer (or just a bucket or builders' tray and a trowel) will give children the opportunity to mix their own cement for building with some old bricks.



General ideas for the outdoors

- Use baskets containing just one or two role play items each day for example a hat, badge, a tabard, a whistle, a bird book, a clip board and binoculars. Changing the contents according to the children's interests will support children in their imaginative play
- Painting the floor and walls with water and big brushes or rollers can be great fun
- Fill carrying baskets with mark making tools such as a clip board, notepad, graph paper, pencils, pens etc and place around the outdoor area so that children can help themselves if they want to use them
- Have an exploration kit which the children can easily access outdoors – binoculars, magnifying glasses, bug viewers, insect books, a camera, paper and crayons for rubbings etc
- A storage shed can make an excellent scene for role play once it's emptied out. You can change the area regularly according to the children's interests or use it as an ever-changing space which the children can fill with fabrics and their own pictures
- Some relevant non-fiction books in the outdoors can encourage children to find out more about their environment
- Clothes horses, bamboo canes, blankets, sheets, camouflage netting, dolly pegs make versatile dens which the children can build and change to suit their needs
- Involving children in assessing their own risks in the outdoor area helps to develop an awareness of safety as well as problem solving skills. Ask questions such as "What do you think will happen if...?" or "How can we make that safer?"



- Numbering the cars/bikes as well as numbering the ground for 'car parking spaces' will not only help with number recognition and matching skills, but will also help make tidying up more fun! Alternatively use photographs of the cars and bikes, or silhouettes

One final word – Whilst using the outdoor environment must be encouraged and supported at every opportunity, practitioners must ensure that all activities and resources remain safe and 'stage appropriate' for all children (and adults too). Risk assessments must be undertaken, completed and regularly reviewed to ensure that the outdoors can be enjoyed safely and with appropriate levels of risk.

Useful Information and Links

The Little Book of Outdoor Play – Sally Featherstone

The Little Book of Outside in all Weathers – Sally Featherstone

Outdoor Learning in the Early Years – Helen Bilton

Play in the EYFS: Outdoor Play – Sue Durant

Improving your Outdoor Play: Good Practice Guide – Early Years and Childcare, North Yorkshire County Council

Further information about Mud Kitchens - http://www.muddyfaces.co.uk/mud_kitchens.php/#Just_Do_It