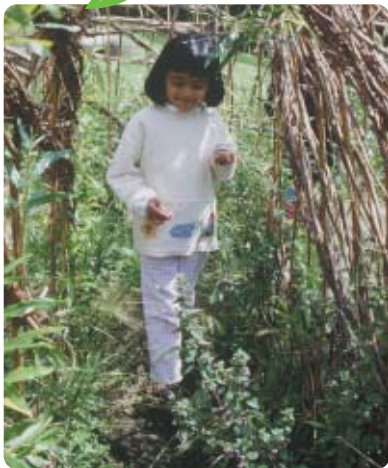


Early Years Outdoors

First steps



All children have the right to experience and enjoy the essential and special nature of being outdoors. Young children thrive and their minds and bodies develop best when they have free access to stimulating outdoor environments for learning through play and real experiences. Knowledgeable and enthusiastic adults are crucial to unlocking the potential of outdoors.

So says the Vision for outdoor play in the early years shared by all the main early years organisations in the UK. Frameworks across the UK for the care and education of young children from birth to five recognise the importance of providing a stimulating environment outside as well as indoors, and making the most of what these environments have to offer children. For example the Foundation Stage Curriculum Guidance for England states,

“Well-planned play, both indoors and outdoors, is a key way in which young children learn with enjoyment and challenge”¹ and that practitioners “provide rich and stimulating experiences [when they] make good use of outdoor space so that children are enabled to

learn by working on a larger, more active scale than is possible indoors”².

The outdoor environment is a special place for all children and contributes enormously, from birth onwards, to children’s happiness, health, stimulation, and development. Plenty of time outdoors should be considered a necessary part of an early years environment, and yet many settings still face difficulties in providing the outdoor play they aspire to.

This Groundnotes addresses some of the first and most effective steps you can take to make outdoor play work well in your setting. Each of the following points will be examined in more detail in future Groundnotes and their accompanying Playnotes.

Make a start! Small improvements will give you the motivation and confidence to take further steps as you are ready.

These first steps are important starting points: as the Chinese proverb says, “a journey of a thousand miles begins with a single step”. Don’t let the need to fundraise prevent you from starting to enhance what you offer and do outside because change isn’t just about physical improvements. Developing how you use what you have already can be more effective than making physical changes and there will always be an aspect of provision which you can begin to develop straight away. Examples from other settings include:

- Providing opportunities for children to explore sound-making outside with tins, pans, wooden spoons and plastic or metal piping – string them up from washing line to make them accessible from all sides.
- Offering big water play with guttering, pipes and a hose for running water – installing a convenient outdoor tap if you don’t already have one might be your first and most valuable investment of cash.



¹ page 25 ² page 15



- Developing bike play into role-play contexts – see below.
- Organising the storage shed and containers to make resources easier for adults and children to access and use.

Not only will these achievable steps give you enthusiasm to do more, they will also clarify where you want to go (your vision) and bring others on board. Settings with the most wonderful outdoor provision all began with small steps and developed over several years – and they see their outdoor spaces as works in progress.

Organise the 'transition zone' so that it is easy for children to come and go between indoors and outside.



The transition zone is the area between indoors and out, a space where children and adults can contemplate or review activity, observe others and make choices – without being 'in the way'. It is an essential and often neglected space in settings and schools and getting it right will make an enormous difference to the success of the outdoor spaces your children have access to.

A low-level coat/raingear rack and a wellington boot shelf near the door to the outside space can make such a difference to the effort involved and will support children's independence and 'free-flow' movement between the indoor and outdoor halves of your provision. Wellies can be organised on dowelling rods or pegged in pairs.

A device to slowly close the main door(s) is easily fitted to prevent slamming and prevents a door

remaining open in cold weather.

Teach children how to clean their footwear on a mat or change into indoor slippers to avoid outdoors coming inside.

A canopy over the outdoor part of the transition zone will provide more circulation and observation space, and could also offer sheltered outdoor play on less clement days.

Have a supply of warm clothing, rainwear and sunhats so that children (and adults) can go outside and be comfortable whatever the weather.



Children need warm coats and rainwear available so that they can go out everyday, and **enjoy** all the various types of British weather. However it's not just about wet or cold weather gear - as we become increasingly aware of the dangers from overexposure to sunshine, it's important to teach the 'cover up' lesson early – bright, attractive sunhats in a variety of styles will encourage children to cover their heads and shoulders and shade their eyes.

Ask for donations from parents, visit charity shops and jumble sales, or fundraise so that every child who wants to be outside has easy access to the right clothing, including wellies and umbrellas – puddle jumping is every child's joy!

Place baskets of spare warm hats, rain hats and sunhats, gloves and scarves in your transition zone and ensure all staff have and wear appropriate clothing too!

Purchase sun block sticks in bright neon colours – show children how and where to use them.

Outdoor play is about a lot more than 'letting off steam' and physical play, although this area of development is very important.

Think about how all areas of learning can be experienced outside. You need to give as much thought to your basic provision and planning for outside as you do for activities indoors. A well planned and resourced environment can support child-led activity; try to offer a mix of first-hand experiences (such as growing) and plenty of play opportunities (such as creating a building site); develop bike play into all sorts of pretend scenarios like car repair, delivering parcels and going on journeys.

Think also about the roles of adults outdoors. Just as indoors, there is far more to the adult's role outside than supervision alone. Effective provision requires clear understanding of this role in the outdoor context and professional development for staff in outdoor play is a valuable investment.

Make sure equipment and resources easy to use. If they are difficult to get to or in a poor condition, they will not get used!

You need to be able to get equipment in and out without a lot of effort and put it away in an organised fashion. The best place for it is near to where it will be used, so outdoor storage is essential to a well-planned outdoor play area. Think about having more than one storage unit (for example a separated storage space for wheely toys only and one for smaller resources can make things much easier) and organise the space so that children can get things out themselves, as they are needed – and put them away again.

The right container will make it easier to transport resources from storage to place of use and children may be able to use resources directly from this container:

Boxes with wheels, bags and tubs with handles, crates with lids and trolleys with trays can all provide the easy-to-move container to suit your children's play needs and your storage requirements.

Backpacks can help you move resources around your site, or take them off-site on a visit to the park or local shops. Children will love to take responsibility for the equipment.

Labelling storage containers, especially with photographs of the contents, helps to ensure things are easy to find and are returned to the right place. Use this as a meaningful way to



develop children's independence and their understanding of the purpose of writing.

Don't be tempted to accept toys or equipment in poor condition just because they are being donated – children are less likely to respect and care for damaged or out of date toys, plus they may represent an unnecessary health risk.

The best resources are open-ended and versatile to support a wide variety of play and exploration.

Your choice of resources can have a significant impact on what children do and how they play. Open ended, versatile resources support children's creativity and imagination, and mean you need to provide less!



Fixed equipment may limit the use of space and often has limited 'play value'. Look for equipment that can be used flexibly, in a number of ways and by a number of children. Resources certainly don't have to be expensive; the time spent researching and selecting items that can suggest and represent many things in a child's mind will be time well spent.

Items such as old sheets or lengths of fabric along with string and clips can provide a vast range of play activities, for example sun shelters, dens under trees, magic carpet, 'seaside' play, picnicking or creating fantastical clothing for role play.

Be ready to make use of spontaneous opportunities (the weather offers plenty!) by having boxes or bags with appropriate resources already gathered, or having a list of ideas to hand (such as ring games and action rhymes on laminated card). Be aware of any risks equipment or materials present and manage their maintenance and use to minimise the risks.



Be clear about what you want children to be able to do (rather than what you want them to 'have') outdoors and what you want your outdoor provision to offer your children.

Spending time reading, thinking and talking about this with colleagues and parents is a valuable exercise in order to establish a shared vision of what you want to achieve outdoors. Try to ensure every member of staff understands the rationale behind your vision for outdoor provision at your setting, so that everyone is fully able to implement the type of experiences agreed for your children. For example: "all areas of learning will be provided outdoors" or "children will have access to the outdoors even when the weather is wet or cold".

Start from what you want your children to be able to *do* outdoors rather than what you want them to *have* there. You can then come up with a wide range of ways to offer each of these experiences and keep on expanding this provision year on year.



Climbing and balancing do *not* require a fixed climbing frame – this is just **one way** of offering these opportunities. Flexibility in the use of your space is valuable, especially in small areas, so consider low level items such as logs, blocks, bench seats, aerobic 'steps'

or large scale chalk 'murals' on the tarmac to represent tightropes across canyons or stepping stones across shark infested waters (chalk rather than paint means you can do it differently the next day, and children can enjoy designing the scenes themselves).

Capture and utilize the special nature of the outdoors. It is different and that is why it matters to children.

It provides the 'other half' of the learning environment and allows children to be more active learners. Contact with the natural world

(plants, rocks, sticks and worms), weather, space, freedom and the sounds and sights of the real world are

just some of the potential – don't lose out on this difference! Make the most of the daily change, uncertainty, surprise and excitement that weather, seasons and nature provide for free.

Children engage strongly with soil and growing and this can be done on a small scale if space is limited – car tyres make useful growing beds. Parents also find a growing theme an easy way to get involved with nursery life and can link



home with setting. Try to give children the opportunity to dig with long-handled implements in sand or soil, so that their whole body is involved.

Use the environment and natural world to inspire creative activity, from painting on large boards attached to the fence to using wood, stones and leaves as play items to 'painting' with water and yard brushes.

Many role-play contexts derive from the local community and are best developed outside, often bringing cultural diversity meaningfully into children's play – a car wash or garage for the bikes; street market or gardening centre; camping or cooking outdoors.

Make good use of all the space and features within it, such as walls and fences.

There will be a lot of elements already in your space which you can make use of, for example, large boards or wallpaper can be attached to a fence or wall to offer big painting surfaces; ropes can be tied to fences, trees and play equipment to allow dens to be built. In fact walls and fences are a valuable and often under-used resource.

Do you have shrubs which could be opened up or thinned out for children to use as an environment for play?



Can children chalk on hard surfaced areas or walls? If not, why not? Don't forget, chalk will wash off in the next rainfall!

Have an outside water supply so that you can have running water outside for children to experience water differently than indoors – i.e. moving water, water on a grander scale. Install a water butt for watering indoor and outdoor plants.



It can be helpful to zone areas to separate different and potentially conflicting types of activity, for example creating spaces for active play and quiet play. However where experiences are brought together – sand and water, or sand and construction for example – new opportunities can be found, often leading to deeper play and learning. Plants within a play space can add to the feel for imaginative play or help the movement and adventure of bikes.

In the small areas many settings have, large fixed equipment can limit experiences. Flexibility is a key planning point for any space, especially small ones, so that the space can be used in a variety of ways during the day / week / season / year. Any new physical features should be planned to offer multiple ways for children to use and enjoy them.

Observe, observe, observe!

This is one of the most important roles you as an adult have outside. Observe children playing to see what they do, what interests them and how to support their play, immediately and for longer term planning. Observe to find out what learning is already happening and identify children's competencies. Your short and long term planning can emerge from these insights.

Making observation and evaluation a 'habit of mind' will help you develop your role as the adult in outdoor play.

Observe to find out each child's perspective *before* making any changes to the space – both as an individual and as part of the larger group.



This will help to establish what features and areas to keep the same because they are already offering what children need and are important to them. It will also suggest where you need to increase or improve facilities and begin to help you identify gaps in provision that you could begin to develop.

Observing play and finding out children's views by talking with them about the outdoor space (ask them to take you to places that are important to them or to make photographs of these features) is a vital preparation for thinking about making physical changes to your outdoor space. It would be easy to lose significant elements and it will guide your thinking about what to develop. Child participation has always been an over-riding principle for Learning through Landscapes and years of research around the world prove that there are long term benefits to this approach, both for children and for the spaces they use.

Help parents see the value of outdoor play for *their* child, so that they understand why you place importance on it and why you want to develop it.

Talk to parents about what their child did (and learned or achieved) outside today when they collect them. Some settings are now ending their day or session outside so that parents can see what their child is doing and how much they get from it. Photographs are also a very powerful (and appreciated) way to show parents the value of outdoors for their child. This will help them to support your efforts and they'll not only remember to help their child dress appropriately for cold, rain and messy activity, they'll also understand when their child comes home a bit mucky or tired from a day outdoors.

Involve parents in the development of your

thinking as a setting about your outdoor provision. Seek their views, attitudes and feelings and include parents in the agreement about the setting's beliefs and approach to outdoor play. Again, this approach has proven benefits, and many parents will want their children to have experiences they had as children and will be only too aware of the difficulties in children's access to these in modern society. It is important to 'take parents with you' as you develop your outdoor provision and practice to give children the environment for learning and development they should have.



How you can help Learning through Landscapes help other settings:

Share your developing practice and outdoor spaces with us. Routinely take photographs of your children at play, and use these images to discuss, review and share activities, not only with your colleagues, but with the children themselves, and with other settings to help them make the most of the lessons you've learned outdoors.

Let parents know that you do this – we can provide you with a sample 'photographic permission form' or photograph policy – call the Early Years Outdoors Advice Line on 01962 845811.