

Summer fun



Top tips on how to encourage outdoor play at your nursery, by late Editor, Alison Gordon

One of the Early Years Foundation Stage (EYFS) framework themes is Enabling Environments, recognising the importance that indoor and outdoor environments offer for supporting and extending children's learning and development.

For many of us, it is easy to focus on the indoor environment, as we spend so much of our time there, but the EYFS framework rightly places equal emphasis on the outdoors. So as summer is upon us, now is an ideal time to make the most of what being outside has to offer.

Outdoor play provides tremendous opportunities for parents and carers to stimulate young minds and unleash some extra creativity, as well as energy. In this article, we'll look at some of those benefits and share practical ideas and tips for successful outdoor play.

Benefits of outdoor play

The outdoors gives children a chance to learn some important lessons as

well as to improve their skills. First, a different environment creates different opportunities – the opportunity to try new things, do something in a different way or on a different scale.

For example, building a model house indoors may involve groups of children using cardboard boxes, paper, glue and paint to make several houses. Outdoors, you could encourage all the children to participate and make one 'real' house, using different materials such as sticks, rope, branches, leaves, as well as plenty of imagination.

Activities like this give children the chance to learn how to work as a bigger team and develop their problem-solving skills. For example, deciding what they can use to make the path to the front doorway needs imagination. Then fetching the stones

and laying them down allows for creativity and problem-solving development.

Second, the outdoors is not just a good environment for older children. Babies and toddlers also have much to gain from being outside. The experience of new sights and sounds will stimulate babies' senses and encourage curiosity. This in turn will help their emerging communication skills as they express interest in what they see and do. Those who are more mobile can also busy themselves finding and carrying objects, such as interesting stones and gardening tools. The energetic ones can also see just how far and fast their wheeled toys will go!

Finally, being outdoors teaches children the importance of respect. This can be respect for the environment, such as how to prepare



for being outdoors, come rain or shine. It can also be learning respect for their personal safety and wellbeing. For example, they can learn how to play safely using sticks, stones and tools, or even how to climb trees well. All of these lessons should have a positive and lasting effect on their sense of well-being, boost their knowledge of the outdoors and help to develop their fine and gross motor skills.

If you are looking for some further inspiration on how to make the most of the outdoors, then the following tips and ideas may come in handy.

Top 10 Tips on outdoor play

Remember that soap and water can easily wash away the dirt after the fun - but not the experiences and memories.

- 1 Consider risk benefits as well as Health & Safety. Climb trees, build fires or look for monsters. It's just so much fun.
- 2 Have spare clothing - not everyone understands the term 'appropriate clothing'. In the correct clothes, children and young people can climb, run, relax and concentrate on their play.
- 3 Involve nature and natural resources. These resources are recyclable and cost nothing. Use your environment wisely.
- 4 Build a den or base as a place to meet and a place to shelter from the elements.
- 5 Try something new - make a water slide, a bird hide, or a beach. Be creative.
- 6 Use your imagination. You can be a Native American Indian, Robin Hood, an elf or just invisible.

7 Take time to contemplate. Playing outside does not have to involve physical activities: chill out; eat out; lie back and watch the world go by.

8 Use your space wisely. Involve children and parents when planning and improving the outside space.

9 Build on children's and young people's skills. Have a gardening area, and use it all year round; use tools to make interesting items and gifts, for example plant boxes, bird and bat boxes and go-karts.

10 Get down and dirty. Have fun and see the feel-good factor emerge when playing outside.

Of course, not everyone is always positive, so it's worth including some suggestions about how to overcome potential barriers. Faced with challenges such as 'It's raining' or 'My child doesn't like to get dirty', promoting outdoor play may seem daunting. However, experience has shown that engaging parents can help to overcome this. You can invite parents into the setting to see outdoor play in practice for example; involve them in practical workshops or even ask them to reflect on their own memories of play. In fact, organisations who cover the outdoor learning environment in their

policies, procedures and induction information often find they are well prepared for sensitive issues and negative attitudes.

Further support

The EYFS framework places equal importance on the potential to learn from both outdoor and indoor environments. It also recognises the importance of adults' enthusiasm and engagement with the outdoors and how this shapes children's experiences and attitudes. Their publication, *Effective Practice: Outdoor Learning*, is a good place to start for more information on the general benefits of outdoor play, how it relates to children in different ages groups (from birth to five years) and to the different areas of learning and development.

Further support is also available from training organisations. For example, *Crêchendo*, one of the UK's most respected training organisations within the early years, childcare and playwork sectors, runs inset day workshops on how to make the most of outdoor play. The popular *Bees, Trees and Dirty Knees!* workshop enables participants to find out how to make the most of their own outdoor environment throughout the year, in a practical and inspiring way. Further details about the courses *Crêchendo* provides can be found at www.crechendo.com. ■

