

# Another world

Being outdoors provides children with developmental benefits that cannot be replicated indoors. *Kathryn Solly* reveals how to get it right



**T**he outdoors, with its rich possibilities, is much more than a means for children to 'let off steam' or simply a change of environment for promoting narrow curriculum outcomes. Children are biologically programmed to move, explore and experiment, making outdoor experiences essential for their all-round development, health, well-being and learning.

Such experiences are all the more important in the light of societal changes in lifestyles, reduced play spaces, increasing technology and schooling at younger ages, which together are limiting children's chances to play outside.

The outdoors is a unique, deeply engaging and special place for children. So, the child will not be the same outside as when they are within four walls. Quiet children may speak more, while others may become

calmer and more focused, especially in a natural space. Less structured outdoors provides a more relaxing – and often more valuable – learning environment for many children than the classroom.

Outdoor play can deliver elements of learning that cannot be achieved indoors, and educationalists have for centuries highlighted its unique contribution to early learning and development – arguments that are backed up by recent research.

The potential benefits of outdoor play span a child's physical, cognitive and emotional development – though only developmentally appropriate provision that is both well planned and supported by enthusiastic and engaged practitioners will deliver the full range, and provide for the uniqueness of children.

Experience of the outdoors is not sufficient in itself. Making a big difference to what is learned outdoors

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depends on the aims and focus of the experience and how it is facilitated. Thus the quality of learning and teaching is of paramount importance.

Developmentally appropriate planning allows children to move freely in order to respond to their needs for physical activity as well as following their interests.

By capitalising on the potential of outdoor learning experiences using multi-sensory approaches to engage children through their interests, practitioners can act as facilitators. This encourages children to become involved in emotional, physical, aesthetic, spiritual and cognitive experiences as part of their learning.

## BENEFITS

Within such an environment, the physical and related aspects of a child's development can flourish when they are able to practise and master skills within their drive for movement-rich lives.

Physicality is also central to well-being by nurturing positive attitudes towards the world and dispositions to explore, discover, enquire and interact, which are at the centre of effective brain functioning and learning.

In addition, physical development is about the emergence of many sensory systems, a robust sense of self, and an awareness of others, objects and things around them. This involves learning to co-ordinate the body in both large and small ways safely and confidently in a very wide range of possibilities. Through spontaneous movement, the body feeds the brain, ensuring good mental health while helping thinking, imagination and cognitive abilities.

There are health benefits too, with outdoor play building children's immune systems and making them fitter. Research shows that there is a direct correlation between obesity





and lack of time spent outside, while movement through exercise helps to prevent obesity and type-2 diabetes in later life.

The outdoors is particularly powerful in developing elements of Personal, Social and Emotional Development such as friendship, co-operation, calm and a sense of 'being', while children who play outside are better able to self-regulate, have fewer behavioural problems and stronger language skills. Communication skills can also flourish outdoors, with research showing that children use five times as many words when they play outdoors.

Equally significant is the extent to which a well-planned outdoor environment can act as a rich stimulus for creative thinking and learning, affording opportunities for challenge, enquiry, critical thinking, reflection and problem-solving.

The multi-sensory experience outdoors helps children to gain and retain knowledge more effectively, while making connections experientially with the real world outside the classroom helps to develop children's skills, knowledge and understanding of the natural and man-made worlds.

Research demonstrates that missed learning opportunities during 'sensitive' periods of a child's development can to some extent be reversed by the outdoors. There is no proof, however, that 'hot housing' helps development.

## PLANNING

However well designed a building is, it cannot deliver all these multi-dimensional and sensory benefits. Thus outdoors requires similar resources and planning to the indoors.

## Complementary

Outdoor play is most significant when complementary to indoor provision. Ideally, both environments are

available simultaneously to children so they choose between the spaces via free-flow provision.

Outdoor learning experiences should also complement each other and form a progressive and coherent range of experiences.

## The adult role

To plan and support outdoor learning effectively, practitioners need to understand fully:

- child development, interests, schemas, dispositions, strengths and individual pace
- how outdoor experiences will benefit the child
- the need for children to have long periods of time outside, knowing that they can be outside every day, when they want to, and that they can develop their play over time.

Teaching outside is a balancing act as practitioners must value its diversity, and its novel, experiential and holistic qualities. Outside has to be organised to allow it to impact differently on each child.

A high level of child involvement will occur if the children's needs and interests are met. This provides practitioners time for longer interactions, careful observation and future planning for children.

Practitioners need to consider:

- what they want children to learn
- what words and questions they might use
- what reactions/responses they might get
- what resources they will provide.

## WHAT TO PLAN FOR Core elements

While the provision of such core elements as a home corner, sand, water, mud and places to climb, swing, run and balance outside are crucial, it is not important to have mathematics/literacy areas outside as these aspects of learning can be covered wherever they are most applicable.

## Larger-scale provision

The outdoors area must be well designed and organised, giving opportunities on a larger scale and the allowance for creative untidiness. So, the outdoors should:

- offer children what indoors cannot by complementing and extending provision indoors on a larger scale
- be dynamic, flexible and versatile, allowing children to choose, create, change and be in charge of their play



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- be rich and full of irresistible stimuli, contexts for play, exploration, talk, plenty of real experiences, and contact with the natural world and the community
- offer challenge and risk within a framework of security and safety
- support inclusion by meeting the needs of individuals, through a range of play-based experiences.

## Movement experiences

Neuromotor maturity happens when the brain successfully integrates the senses of motion, vision and hearing via the unified experiences of the head, hand and body through movement, control, touch and exploration.

So, it is essential to provide outdoor experiences for children that enable them to:

- ✓ swing ✓ turn ✓ spin ✓ roll ✓ rock
- ✓ bounce ✓ slide ✓ move fast ✓ push
- ✓ pull ✓ lift ✓ carry ✓ stretch ✓ hang
- ✓ throw.

## Play-based real experiences

With play-based real experiences, children learn through their senses. Thus they thrive when given plentiful access to stimulating outdoor environments and learn best through involvement in experiences that are open-ended, while adhering to the principles of the EYFS. Practitioners should build on children's current curiosity and interests via:

- experiences that practitioners create and plan for
- spontaneous activities initiated by children
- natural cyclical opportunities, such as the seasons, weather and nature.

The scope of children's play will be enhanced by adaptable, non-prescriptive resources that can be used in imaginative ways. These open-ended resources, found in the natural world or sourced fairly cheaply, include:

- ✓ various logs, poles, sticks ✓ blocks, crates, tyres ✓ sand, water, leaves, stones, bark, earth, mud, clay, rock, shells ✓ ropes ✓ different coloured, textured and sized fabric, tarpaulins ✓ mallets, pegs ✓ pulleys ✓ baskets, bags, buckets, containers ✓ pipes ✓ chalks, charcoal, pencils, paints, rollers ✓ gardening/woodworking tools ✓ nets, bug pots, magnifiers. ■

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