

NATURE KINDERGARTEN

Nature Kindergarten is rooted in the belief that children have an innate tendency to connect with the natural world. Spending time immersed in a natural environment, such as a beach or forest, supports children's physical, cognitive, emotional and social development.

Rather than following a fixed curriculum, learning is guided by children's interests and interactions with their surrounding environment, with practitioners observing, supporting and extending learning based on what children are naturally drawn to.

The outdoor environment provides unique learning opportunities, ranging from physical and sensory experiences to complex social interactions and problem-solving that can help enhance children's resilience, independence, creativity and wellbeing.

Positive experiences within natural environments are fundamental to learning for sustainability, the development of progressive attitudes towards being outdoors, and the nurturing of children's sense of responsibility towards the natural environment.

Within Scotland, there is an expectation that Early Years settings facilitate opportunities for children to have contact with nature on a daily basis, to experience almost all weathers throughout different seasons, and to engage in manageable risk, appropriate challenge and free play.

A more thorough insight into Nature Kindergarten can be found in the dedicated *Nature Kindergarten in Fife* document.



CURRICULAR & DEVELOPMENTAL



Health & Wellbeing

Regular contact with nature helps to reduce stress, anxiety and illness whilst enhancing physical health, immunity, cognition and wellbeing through exposure to natural light, organic life, structures, textures and colours.

Through engaging with distinct challenges and play opportunities, children develop greater resilience, independence, self-esteem and confidence.

Negotiating features of the outdoor environment challenges children to run, jump, climb, balance and crawl.

Climbing trees, treading through sand, ascending slopes and navigating muddy paths supports development of gross-motor skills, coordination, balance and spatial awareness.

When supported to explore unpredictable environments and physical challenges, children learn to risk assess, consider their movements, judge distances, recognise hazards and assess their own capabilities, promoting greater independence and resilience.

Literacy

Using various natural materials and surfaces, children can engage in and experiment with mark-making. For example, using sticks or their fingers to write in sand or mud.



Through engaging with natural materials and environmental features, children can enhance their vocabulary, learning new words and phrases, such as pinecone, crustacean and fungus.

Collaborative activities like hanging hammocks, help children develop their communication skills and learn to follow and provide simple instructions. Children further develop their language and communication skills as they describe their creations and share experiences and ideas.



Maths & Numeracy

Natural environments provide opportunities to explore size, shape, symmetry and pattern. Children can identify and describe naturally occurring patterns and use natural resources to create their own.

Nature Kindergarten supports understanding of 'measure', analysing the height, weight, size and thickness of natural resources and features of the landscape, including the thickness of trees or the weight of logs, rocks, and pebbles.

As children explore, experiment and create within nature, building structures, bridges and dens, they have excellent opportunities to problem-solve. This can include adding more water to sand creations to make a more robust consistency or finding ways to construct a den that doesn't fall over.

Children can categorise, group and sort different items and materials, such as pinecones, leaves or shells according to size, shape, colour and texture.



Other

Children can observe, experience and discuss the transformation of natural spaces throughout different seasons. Exploration of why leaves fall in autumn and flowers bloom in spring supports understanding of nature's life cycles.

Immersed in environments abundant in plants, animals, insects and sea creatures, children can identify, engage with, and gain knowledge about the variety of living things found within nature and how these interact with the environment.

Positive experiences in nature support learning for sustainability, fostering children's appreciation for outdoor spaces and recognition of their environmental responsibility.

Natural environments provide unique opportunities for art, drama and creative expression, inspired by a range of stimuli and natural materials.

Nature Kindergarten enables children to explore technology that extends learning and curiosity, such as using magnifying glasses to examine leaf structures or investigate insects and sea creatures closely.



ROLE OF THE ADULT

It is essential that staff plan thoroughly for sessions, visiting the site beforehand. For beach specifically, it's vital to understand and ensure tide times are appropriate for the duration of the visit.

Practitioners must plan for the practicalities of Nature Kindergarten, including the journey to and from the site, risk assessments, toileting/handwashing arrangements, first-aid, and medication. A thorough list of considerations can be found within the *Nature Kindergarten in Fife* resource.

Nature Kindergarten may be the first time that a child experiences these environments and is therefore unfamiliar with the surroundings and play opportunities. Practitioners should scaffold learning and support children by modelling ways to engage with nature and its resources.

Some visits may include the use of fire bowls. Before providing these, staff must receive Nature Kindergarten training or dedicated fire bowl training. These courses provide necessary knowledge and information for starting and maintaining fires, safe practice, safety considerations, and insights into the different purposes for fire and the associated learning opportunities.

ROOM STRUCTURE & LAYOUT

Prior to visiting with children, practitioners must ensure the site is a safe, suitable space and conduct a dynamic risk assessment. Ensure there is a designated space that can provide children with privacy and maintain their dignity when toileting.

Consider how the groups presence may impact others. Equally, consider how sessions may be impacted by the public.

When appraising the site, consider if it is within reasonable walking distance or whether parent helpers/additional staff are required to meet ratios.

It is advisable to have shelter where children can find respite from the elements, for example, a tarpaulin. Likewise, children should be provided with a way to warm themselves on cold days: shelter, mats, hot drinks or a fire.



RESOURCE IDEAS

Backpack – First Aid kit, spare clothes, emergency contacts, risk-assessment, evolve

Den Building – Tarpaulin, metal pegs, spring pegs, rope, hammer/mallet, twine, scissors, hammock, knots guide, rigger gloves, vegetable peeler

Binoculars, magnifying glasses, camera, talking pegs, torches

Information/reference books and guides, paper, clip boards

Sieves, clear tubs for rock pooling, buckets, spades, nets

Water for handwashing, tissues, wipes and nappy sacks

Resources for fire making: kindling, flint and steel, cotton balls, Vaseline, fire gloves, fire blanket, kneeling mats, rope for setting boundaries, ceramic fire bowl

Snack, water, forest phone for emergencies

REFLECTION POINTS

- When planning visits, do staff reflect on how to ensure quality experiences and rich learning opportunities? Is consideration given to group size, ratios and group dynamics? Do the number of children afford staff the necessary capacity to interact and extend learning in the moment? Remember, larger groups can sometimes result in 'crowd control' rather than engagement in quality interactions.
- Do practitioners possess an awareness and understanding of the learning opportunities and potential benefits inherent within Nature Kindergarten? In what ways can they use this knowledge to extend children's learning and provide appropriate challenge, supporting them to build and further develop their skills?
- Do staff adopt a risk-benefit approach to ensure that activities are safe without the removal of opportunities? It's important that practitioners remain mindful that the language they use is supportive rather than preventative. Staff should reflect on their own attitudes, biases and apprehensions surrounding risky play, considering how these may impact children.
- Are children afforded the opportunity to engage in Nature Kindergarten experiences over the course of the year, experiencing different types of weather and seasonal changes?
- In what way does the setting promote children's independence and personal responsibility? For example, do children carry their own backpack with spare clothing, a water bottle, and a piece of fruit?



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Using natural resources found in the woods to make a den.



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