

OUTDOORS

Outdoor play is crucial for early development, offering a range of physical, cognitive and social-emotional benefits. It enables children to engage with the natural world, develop physical skills and foster social interactions in a way that promotes overall wellbeing and a lifelong love of learning.

Evidence shows a decline in safe outdoor spaces where children can play, making it all the more essential that settings offer outdoor, free-flow play opportunities.

Outdoor environments should be safe, inviting, stimulating and challenging for all learners. Ideally, children should be able to move from indoor to outdoor areas freely. However, due to building constraints, this may not always be possible. Therefore, it's important that staff ensure children have daily opportunities to access outdoor spaces.

Spending time outdoors can have a positive impact on both mental and physical health, therefore, it's important that this is encouraged from a young age. Participating in just ten minutes of physical activity can support the psychological and emotional wellbeing of children, boosting self-esteem, lowering anxiety and reducing stress.



Although every outdoor space is different and resources will vary from setting-to-setting, there are seven outdoor core provision experiences that should always be on offer:

- Discovery & Investigation
- Building
- Transport/Transportation
- Physical
- Imagination/Creativity
- Shelter
- Nature



CURRICULAR & DEVELOPMENTAL

Health & Wellbeing

Playing outside supports development of gross-motor skills, including agility, balance and coordination. Children who spend time outdoors are more likely to move in ways that challenge their muscles, bones and physical endurance.

There are many long-term health benefits to spending time outdoors, such as enhanced mood, improved immunity, reduced anxiety, mental relaxation, improved sleep quality, restored concentration and ability to focus.

Being outdoors supports children to explore energetic play and understand the impact this can have on their body, including heightened heart rate, increased temperature, or feeling energised and empowered. These activities promote healthy lifestyle habits and can help prevent childhood obesity.

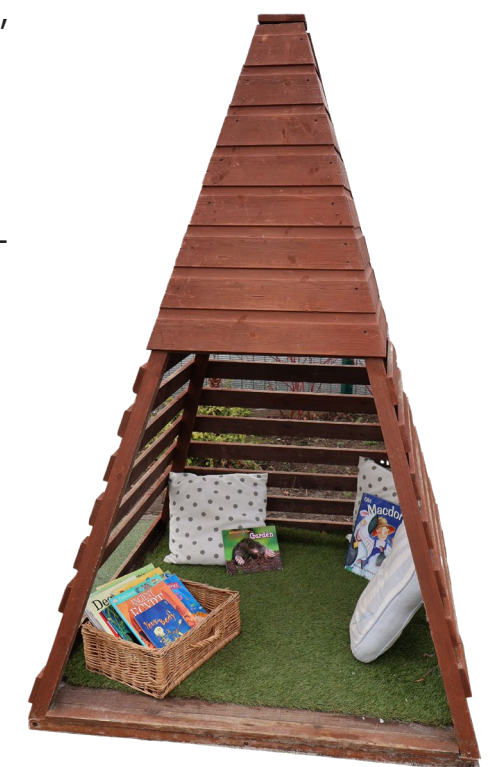
As children engage in potentially risky play, they can assess risk, challenge themselves and build awareness of their own developing abilities.

Literacy

The outdoor space affords opportunities to engage in activities such as stirring big pots in the mud kitchen, throwing bean bags, and making circles with streamers. These support the development of pre-writing skills including crossing the midline, shoulder and arm pivots, core strength and coordination.

Being outdoors offers a range of unique surfaces upon which children can explore mark-making and begin to communicate their ideas, thoughts and opinions. Outdoor mark-making surfaces have a range of textures, heights and levels, often vertical rather than horizontal. The tools children use to mark-make will also vary, such as sticks, feathers and shells.

Children can use books to gather information and make links to real-life experiences. For example, identifying birds, investigating weather and exploring their local community.



Maths & Numeracy

Children can experience the passing of time and seasons first hand as they observe seasonal changes in the environment and earlier or later sunrises and sunsets. This can support the development of new comparative vocabulary, such as: longer, shorter, darker, lighter, colder and warmer.

As they engage with natural environments and landscapes, children can develop understanding regarding the size of the world around them, including the depth of the sea, the height of a tree, or the tininess of an ant, further supporting development of comparative language. *"It's as big as a tree!"*

The natural environment is filled with opportunities to identify and explore patterns, such as the structures of leaves or tree bark and the symmetry of butterfly or ladybird wings.



Other

Through technology like a rain gauge, children can use the information they gather to record and identify different weathers over time and make links to the seasons.

Spending time outdoors throughout the year supports children to explore and differentiate between seasons. Here, they can investigate why trees lose their leaves, why the weather gets colder or warmer, and what happens to plants and wildlife as the seasons change.



The outdoor environment can provide unique stimulus for expressive arts, this can include transient art, role play, loose part play, exploration of sounds and the creative use of spaces and resources.

As children engage with outdoors, they develop a love for nature, fostering respect for and a sense of responsibility over natural environments. This can be supported through simple acts such as learning how to care for plants in the nursery garden.

ROLE OF THE ADULT

Reading and hearing stories outdoors can be a highly sensory experience that supports children to become more fully immersed. Practitioners should give careful consideration to the stories they select in order to enhance this experience, making links to the outdoors that enable children to make connections.

When outdoors, children are often drawn to engage in risky play that may involve moving at speed, playing at heights, and engaging in rough and tumble play. Whilst this play requires supervision, practitioners should remain supportive in their interactions and questioning rather than preventative, for example *"do you think that branch is strong enough to hold your weight?"* or *"have you asked Lucas if they want to play this game?"*

It's important that staff seek to make activities as safe as possible without the removal of opportunities, striving to ensure that the provision works in a manner that promotes challenge and equity for all children. Staff should have a consistent shared vision regarding a risk-benefit approach and expectations for children.

Practitioners should encourage handwashing and promote good hygiene routines upon returning from outdoors.

ROOM STRUCTURE & LAYOUT

There are 7 outdoor core provision areas that should be provided: Discovery and Investigation, Building, Transport/Transportation, Physical, Imagination/Creativity, Shelter, and Nature.

Ideally, children should have free-flow access from indoors to outdoors. Whilst this may not always be possible due to the limitations of the building, children must have daily opportunities to access outdoors.

In order to ensure maintenance of outdoor resources, appropriate weather resistant storage is advised.



RESOURCE IDEAS

Discovery & Investigation - Natural materials, spades, trowels, buckets, pulleys, pipes, guttering, compasses, material, binoculars, magnifying glasses, metal detector, camera, microscope, reference books, paper, pencils

Building - Large and small blocks, wood, bricks, different length planks, pipes, hoses, guttering, bread crates, ropes, tyres (different sizes), recycled seats, wheels, clipboard, pencil, measuring tape

Transport/Transportation - 2 or 3 wheeled vehicles, trugs/pails/buckets, wheelbarrow, pram/buggy, watering can, some registration plates

Physical - Space for running, climbing, wheeled vehicles, trees, tyres, barrels, ropes, boxes, hills/slopes, balls, cones, traditional games

Imagination/Creativity - Leaves, sticks, brushes, mud, materials, scarves, paper, natural sounds, pots, pans, loose parts

Shelter - Dens, tarpaulin, pegs, tent, wigwam, hut, tree, willow, pallets, bread crates, material, big boxes

Nature - Water, ice, sticks, leaves, mud, stones, puddles, birds, bugs/bug hotel, sand/mud, planting/growing - plants, seeds

REFLECTION POINTS

- For settings unable to offer free flow access into a nursery garden, how are daily opportunities to access outdoors ensured?
- Do practitioners take a shared responsibility for outdoors? Can staff rotate, especially during extremes of weather?
- Are garden areas inviting, inspiring and well maintained? How are children encouraged to take responsibility over this area?
- Do staff conduct robust daily risk assessments prior to children arriving? Are children involved in age-appropriate risk assessments following this?
- Are outdoor observations recorded within Daily Responsive Planning? It's important to consider the valuable learning opportunities that can be captured within the outdoor space.



Did You Know?

Pre-schoolers should spend at least 3 hours per day participating in a variety of physical activity, including active and outdoor play.

