



Creating an enabling environment: Outdoors

Introduction

Access to a well-resourced, stimulating outdoor environment is now widely accepted as a fundamental right for babies, toddlers and pre-school children. The quality of the outdoor spaces available in early years settings has improved considerably over the last ten years, and in the new EYFS Framework Physical Development is identified as one of the prime areas of learning for all children, but particularly for the under threes.

Being outdoors has a positive impact on children's sense of well-being and helps all aspects of children's development. It offers opportunities for doing things in different ways and on different scales than when indoors. Playing outside gives children first-hand contact with weather, seasons, and the natural world, and outdoor environments offer children freedom to explore, use their senses, and be physically active and exuberant.

The natural and built environment outside your setting is a hugely valuable asset which should be fully exploited. The outdoors provides all children, but especially boys with opportunities to explore and investigate on a larger scale than is normally possible indoors –they can make large constructions, build dens, and explore sand and water on a more ambitious scale.

Even the smallest outdoor area has the space for creating a habitat for living things. Snails, ants, worms and woodlice need only a small pile of logs and leaf litter, or even just an upturned flowerpot. A small area of ground for digging will develop physical co-ordination and gross motor skills. Planters and tubs can be used for growing flowers, vegetables or herbs and bird feeders and nest boxes can be fixed to walls or trees. Provide child sized trowels, buckets, spades and wheelbarrows, as well as boots and waterproof clothing.

As well as learning more about their local community, exploring the immediate environment – the roads, houses, gardens, shops, parks, and pedestrian crossings in the neighbourhood – gives children real experiences of many aspects of science and design technology including weather, forces, materials, structures, energy, and control. Looking at, and, where possible, investigating the different materials used to make up the walls, doors, windows, drainpipes, and roof of your setting makes the building itself a valuable teaching tool.

Core values for high quality outdoor experiences for young children

All early years settings differ in terms of the amount and quality of the outdoor space they have, but there are certain key principles that have been identified as applicable to all high quality outdoor spaces for young children. These can be used as a basis for reviewing and reinvigorating a setting's outdoor provision to make sure it complies with the new EYFS Framework.

- Young children should be outdoors as much as indoors and need a well designed, well organised, integrated indoor-outdoor environment, preferably with indoors and outdoors available simultaneously.
- Play is the most important activity for young children outside.
- Outdoor provision can, and must, offer young children experiences which have a lot of meaning to them and are led by the child.
- Young children need to understand why outdoor play provision is essential for them, and should be surrounded by adults who are committed and able to make its potential available to them.
- The outdoor space and curriculum must harness the special nature of the outdoors, to offer children what the indoors cannot. This should be the focus for outdoor provision, complementing and extending provision indoors.

- Outdoors should be a dynamic, flexible and versatile place where children can choose, create, change and be in charge of their play environment.
- Young children must have a rich outdoor environment full of irresistible stimuli, contexts for play, exploration and talk, as well as plenty of real experiences, and contact with the natural world and with the community.
- Young children should have long periods of time outside. They need to know that they can be outside every day, when they want to, and that they can develop their ideas for play over time.
- Young children need challenge and risk within a framework of security and safety. The outdoor environment lends itself to offering challenge, helping children to learn how to be safe and aware of others.
- Outdoor provision must support inclusion and meet the needs of individuals, offering a diverse range of play-based experiences. Young children should participate in decisions and actions affecting their outdoor play.

This set of *Vision and Values for Outdoor Play* was drawn up by the Vision and Values Partnership, an umbrella group convened by Learning through Landscapes (www.ltl.org.uk) for use by all early years practitioners to inspire their outdoor play.

EYFS space and premises requirements

The space and premises requirements for group settings set out in the EYFS Framework state that:

- The provider must ensure that, so far as is reasonable, the facilities, equipment and access to the premises are suitable for children with disabilities. Providers must provide access to an outdoor play area or, if that is not possible, ensure that outdoor activities are planned and taken on a daily basis (unless circumstances make this inappropriate, for example unsafe weather conditions).
- Providers must have a clear and well-understood policy, and procedures, for assessing any risks to children's safety, and review risk assessments regularly. Providers must determine where it is helpful to make some written risk assessments in relation to specific issues, to inform staff practice, and to demonstrate how they are managing risks if asked by parents and/or carers or inspectors. Risk assessments should identify aspects of the environment that need to be checked on a regular basis, when and by whom those aspects will be checked, and how the risk will be removed or minimised.
- Children must be kept safe while on outings, and providers must obtain written parental permission for children to take part in outings. Providers must assess the risks or hazards which may arise for the children, and must identify the steps to be taken to remove, minimise and manage those risks and hazards. The assessment must include consideration of adult to child ratios. The risk assessment does not necessarily need to be in writing; this is for providers to judge.
- Vehicles in which children are being transported, and the driver of those vehicles, must be adequately insured.

Practical ideas for developing an enabling outdoor environment

Although the outdoor environment of every early years setting is different, there are many practical ideas that you can use to enhance both the physical space and the experiences you provide for young children.

Under three

- Create a sheltered area – a gazebo or awning – for sleep time, as babies often seem to settle more easily when out of doors.
- A small patch of grass will provide an interesting surface for a baby to touch, roll over, or crawl on.
- Wooden planters or sturdy rails will encourage older babies to pull themselves up and ‘cruise around’.
- Gentle slopes and a variety of different surfaces to walk on all help to develop muscle control as toddlers become more confident on their feet.
- Toys to push and pull and things to climb on all help to encourage movement and develop muscle control.
- Look for ways to create ‘places to hide’, an activity which most toddlers enjoy. This could be a permanent fixture, such as a large bush or tree, or a movable structure, such as a small tent, a den or even a large cardboard box.
- Make small collections of natural materials – leaves, twigs, stones – for children to explore with all their senses.
- Outdoor is a great place to explore sand, water, and mud. Help children to enjoy these experiences by providing the appropriate tools and equipment – improvise with natural materials rather than using lots of plastic scoops, spades and rakes.
- Toddlers are fascinated by small things – worms, beetles, ladybirds and woodlice. Help them to enjoy these experiences by being positive and enthusiastic about them yourself.
- Find opportunities for babies and toddlers to go on short expeditions beyond the setting so they can build up their awareness of, and connection with, people and places in their local neighbourhood.

Three- to five-year-olds

- Look at how you could adapt your outdoor space, to offer shade and shelter, and to give children opportunities to experience changing seasons and the passing of time.
- Put together a collection of materials for creating a den – lengths of plastic piping, broom handles, fabric, rope, clothes pegs – which the children can use in different places in your outdoor area.
- Teach children the skills they need to handle tools and equipment safely – using a spade for example – and then provide lots of opportunities to practise and consolidate these skills.
- Designate an area for just digging, rather than for planting and growing fruit and vegetables. This will give children an enjoyable opportunity to develop their upper body and arm muscles and their ability to control their movements.
- Growing plants, including fruit and vegetables, is a very satisfying experience which many children will enjoy. It is an ideal opportunity to talk about the importance of caring for living things as well as to enjoy the experience of eating home grown produce.
- When planning any changes to your outdoor area, think about how you could incorporate a range of multisensory experiences – things to look at, to listen to, to smell, to touch, and to taste.
- Think about how you could encourage water play on a larger scale than just a water tray. This could include buckets and containers, tuff spot tray, funnels and tubing.
- Instead of just saying ‘no’ to some activities, help children to learn how to assess risk for themselves by talking to them about why some activities are potentially dangerous. This will help them to think about what they need to do to keep themselves safe.
- Many settings are looking at how to provide children with Forest School experiences as a way of building their self-esteem, encouraging their communication skills, helping them to learn new practical skills and enabling them to feel more connected with the natural world. Forest School training for practitioners is available in most parts of the country.
- Make the most of the natural and built environment around your setting by organising regular outings in the neighbourhood. This will enhance children’s awareness of the world around them and increase their understanding of the community they live in.

How to create an enabling outdoor environment

Use these reflective questions to think about how you might organise and resource your outdoor environment to make it an exciting place to be for babies, toddlers, and pre-school children.

Under threes

- Do we all share a common understanding of why it is important for babies and toddlers to be out of doors every day?
- How well do we act as good role models who are enthusiastic about the outdoors and understand the importance of outdoor learning?
- Do we need to review our routines to make it possible for the babies and toddlers to be outdoors daily?
- How could we improve the way we support outdoor activities for babies and toddlers – additional staffing, wet weather gear, boots, waterproof mats and cushions, rain/sun shelters?
- How could we adapt our outdoor spaces to make them more suitable for babies and younger toddlers?
- Where could we go for help in redesigning our outdoor spaces to make them more baby/toddler friendly?
- Are our risk assessment procedures practical and do they support outdoor play?
- Do we need to look at our policies/procedures in order to facilitate babies and toddlers going out on expeditions into the local neighbourhood?
- How could we do more to celebrate outdoor learning and make it a more obvious feature of our provision?
- How effective are we at explaining the value of outdoor play to parents?

Three- to five-year-olds

- Are we all fully committed to the value of children playing and learning out of doors, whatever the weather?
- Do we all appreciate the many learning opportunities which are available out of doors, particularly some of the more boisterous activities which many boys enjoy?
- Do we know how children currently use our outdoor space, and are we aware which places they like and which they don't like?
- How could we adapt our outdoor environment to make it a more interesting and exciting place for children and adults to be?
- How could we change our routines to make our outdoor spaces available all the time so children can choose their own activities and follow their interests?
- Are children able to move things around, build shelters and large constructions, and adapt the environment to suit their current interests?
- Do we all share the same approach to encouraging children to challenge themselves and build their physical skills?
- Do we need to review our risk assessment procedures to make sure they support children's active outdoor play?
- How well do we demonstrate to parents and visitors that we value learning that takes place out of doors as indoor learning, by celebrating it with displays around the setting?
- How could we do more to encourage parents to be enthusiastic about helping their children engage with the natural world around them?