



Celebrating Outdoor Play

What are the core values for young children's outdoor experiences? The shared *Vision and Values** for outdoor play, developed by leading early years organisations, states:

- All children have the right to experience and enjoy the essential and special nature of being outdoors.
- Young children thrive and their minds and bodies develop best when they have free access to stimulating outdoor environments for learning through play and real experiences.
- Knowledgeable and enthusiastic adults are crucial to unlocking the potential of outdoors.

This Playnotes provides just a few ideas about how you can put this vision into practice and suggests ways you could celebrate outdoor play in your setting. It looks at four themes with ideas for play activities in each one. Hopefully they will inspire you to follow your children's interests and create more new and stimulating outdoor experiences.

Why celebrate outdoor play?

Outdoor provision is an essential part of a child's daily life, offering valuable play and learning opportunities. But in busy routines it can be taken for granted so spending a day, or a week, focusing on the

special nature of outdoor play will remind us how valuable it is – whatever type of outdoor space is available. A celebration is also a good opportunity to think afresh and share ideas among colleagues and support those who are less experienced at providing outdoor play experiences. It's the perfect chance to share how much you value outdoor play with parents and carers and raise their understanding of its importance. Young children need all the adults around them to understand why outdoor play provision is essential for them.



How to plan your celebration

High quality outdoor play, with children deeply involved, only emerges when they know they have the freedom, space and time to engage in experiences and activities. Ideally, indoors and outdoors will be available simultaneously throughout your celebration, so children can follow through activities as and when they please. Plan for a time when outdoor play can be

available all day and let the children know that they can go outdoors as much as they want to.

Organise outdoor provision so that children are stimulated and able to follow their own interests and needs. Plan ahead for how resources will be available, and involve children in helping to manage them.

Discuss with colleagues the role of adults. Young children need practitioners who value and enjoy the outdoors themselves, see the potential and consequences it has for young children's well-being and development, and want to be outside with them. Look at how you can capture and share children's play experiences outdoors with parents and other people working with the child, so that they too become enthused. Create a great talking point with a photo wall positioned where parents come to collect their children. Bring it to life by adding speech bubbles, recording the children's reactions to outdoor experiences.

When you are organised inform parents of your plans. Clothing, for example, needs to be appropriate for the weather so you may need to ask parents to leave a raincoat or sunhat at the setting. Look for an opportunity to invite parents to take part, for instance plan a picnic as part of your celebration.



Celebrating space

Outdoors offers the freedom to explore different ways of being, feeling, behaving and interacting; and the space (physically, mentally and emotionally). Children can be active and work on a large scale and can feel less controlled by adults.

Explore dimensions Look up as well as around – the sky’s the limit! Find a comfortable spot to lie down and gaze at the clouds: talk about the shapes and patterns they make. Notice the effect of light and shadow as sunlight passes through the branches of a tree and across buildings. Blow bubbles, fly kites or balloons on string, or tie floaty fabric and

ribbons to tall bamboo canes and watch them blow around in the breeze. What can children do to be nearer to the sky? Where can they climb?

Encourage movement Have fun getting from A to B in as many different ways as you can while encouraging the mastery of new physical skills. The ability to arrive safely at a destination gives satisfaction and builds confidence. Encourage safe movement by talking about looking where you’re going, changing speed, avoiding other children. Make stretches of paving, tarmac or grass more interesting with chalk or cones to mark out runways and balancing lines. Set up an obstacle course with sturdy outdoor equipment such as crates, planks, tunnels, scramble nets, tyres and cones. Treasure hunts and trails are also a stimulating way of encouraging movement and discovery in the outdoor environment. Tie them into your celebration with a theme.

Get physical Read a favourite story, song or poem together that inspires movement in different ways – jumping, spinning, twisting, hopping. Can they twist using their whole bodies? Is it easier standing in one spot or is it better moving around? Can they shake hands, arms, shoulders etc.? Try doing it without laughing! Silky scarves and strips of ribbon are great for stimulating children to dance.



Celebrating creativity

Children can be active, noisy and messy on a grand scale outdoors. Enjoy the space, make sure they have access to a wide variety of resources, then stand back and watch where their creativity takes them.

Investigate natural resources Make the most of your theme by getting creative with natural resources such as mud, sand, clay and water. Provide different tools for digging, mixing, collecting and transporting. Get messy together and experience how it feels to scoop out great dollops of mud or wet sand to form pits, build mounds and create mini play worlds. Bury some

‘treasure’ and encourage the children to hunt for it and dig it up. Create a ‘treasure map’ to stimulate the hunt.

Think big Encourage large artwork by spreading a sheet, rolls of wallpaper or a tarpaulin on the ground. Provide ready mixed paint in small squirty bottles, powder paint in shakers, or encourage the children to make nature’s paint (runny mud with old buckets and spoons). Splash and sprinkle on water from buckets, hoses, spray bottles or watering cans. Move the paint around with different sized brushes, mops, loofahs, rollers, leaves or the children’s own bodies – hands, feet and more!

Experiment with sound Outdoors children can play with their own volume control, using their voices, clapping their hands and stamping their feet to create wonderful sounds. Keep a range of instruments available as well. Real ones like horns, whistles, bells, tambourines and homemade ones like buckets and saucepans with wooden sticks and spoons for beaters. Set up a musical story-trail by hiding bags with different instruments around your outdoor space. At appropriate points in the story pull out the instruments and find the best one for making a sound like rain / horses hooves / swishy grass etc.



Celebrating nature

Contact with the elements, seasons and the natural world is why young children love to be outside. Keep a supply of rainy day clothes available so you can go out whatever the weather. Being able to respond to whatever the climate brings adds surprise and excitement to outdoor play.

Explore different surfaces Go on a hunt around your setting touching and feeling different surfaces. Children could do this in pairs with one blindfolded whilst the other guides. Ask them to handle, smell and describe different natural resources such as herbs, leaves, sand and soil. Encourage children to use various parts of their bodies for touch: lie down and feel grass tickling your neck, take shoes and socks off and feel sand or puddles between your toes. Collect natural materials and make a 3-D, touchy feely collage or imprint them into clay.

Uncover wildlife Lifting things up to discover what is underneath is exciting. Look around your outdoor space for what can be moved to see what is hiding. Big logs take careful pushing and heaving. Turning over a leaf requires a delicate, sensitive touch. Offer new resources for exploring like magnifying glasses; soft paint brushes and plastic spoons for gently sweeping insects into a jar or on to a piece

of paper to view them more closely; a torch for looking under a hedge; a mirror to see something tucked round a corner.

Build dens Children love finding nooks and crannies outdoors where they can hide, enjoy some quiet or pretend. Create potential for dens by opening up an entrance into a cluster of bushes or clearing a neglected area beside a shed. Provide den building resources such as crates, large cardboard boxes, blankets, tablecloths and tarpaulins. Include 'joining' things such as string, masking tape, skipping ropes, clips, pegs and elastic bands. Add to their imaginative play by suggesting they create a home or setting for animals or storybook characters and explore what type of home would suit their needs.



Celebrating community

For many settings, the outdoor space is a window onto the local community. When we're outdoors we can see out and the local community can see in. Use your outdoor space to build links with the world around you and take your children into the community to see what is out there.



Get parents involved Ask for thoughts from parents for outdoor activities and games by giving them an ideas sheet to take away. Encourage children to bring in a photo of a fun time they had outdoors in the garden, the park or while on holiday. Invite parents to a picnic so that you can all enjoy the outdoors together.

Create a welcoming entrance Your gate, pathway or door is the first view that children and parents get when they arrive, as well as the face you present to the outside world. Is the view warm, friendly and inviting? Does it celebrate the children in your care? Create a special celebratory entrance with outdoor decorations. Collect ribbons, flags, beads and other oddments that could be hung from trees, or woven in and out of fences. Use poster paints or chalks to create patterns on the asphalt that will wash away in the rain.

Explore nearby parks and countryside Venture beyond your setting into your local park or woodland area. Encourage children to look for natural features in particular colours. Look for dandelions and see which are in flower and which have seed heads, then pick them and blow the seeds away. Use a

digital or disposable camera to take pictures of your finds. If natural resources are limited in your setting collect some on your outing. They could be gathered in baskets and containers or the children could make nature crowns - a paper crown with a strip of double sided tape for them to attach their natural treasure to.





Taking it further

Reflecting on how successful your activities have been will help you to identify ways you can make more of outdoor play in the future. Examine how you use your outdoor space in line with the *Vision and Values** and ask how can you change it? You might want to create different spaces, concentrating on what children want to be able **to do** outside rather than on what children might want to **have**.

For example, instead of restricting your plans to climbing frames and bikes, think about developing environments in which to dig, build, construct and destruct, to climb,

crawl and balance, to hide, explore and imagine, to investigate and plant, to sit and chat, to play games and run or splash and to engage with nature. The same space can be used for many different activities at different times and children will get used to being creative with space if they are supported in changing it to suit their requirements.

Build up resources for use outdoors and look at how they can best be stored so that children can access them and help take responsibility for keeping them tidy. Themed boxes, e.g. for different weather conditions, can help you respond quickly to different situations.

Early Years Outdoors members can access a range of advice on all aspects of using and improving their outdoor spaces, so you need never be on your own! The member-only online library is full of ideas to support outdoor play. Go to www.ltl.org.uk and log in using your membership number, then click on Member Services to start searching the library. Alternatively, just call 01962 845811 or email member@ltl.org.uk with your questions.

The LTL DVD *Outdoors for Everyone* is a good introduction to the importance of outdoor play for showing to staff or parents, and *Creating a Space to Grow*, written by Gail Ryder Richardson, provides down-to-earth ideas for improving your outdoor space, however small or large. Both these resources are available in the publications section of www.ltl.org.uk – where you can also download a copy of **Shared Vision and Values for Outdoor Play*.



© This resource was originally created as part of the Early Years Outdoors membership scheme from the national school grounds charity **Learning through Landscapes** operating in Scotland as **Grounds for Learning** (registered charity no. in England and Wales 803270 and in Scotland SCO38890).

To find out more about membership call 01962 845811 or visit www.ltl.org.uk

