

The Access to Nature Project

A guide for educators interested
in supporting young children's
access to nature in the UK.



Introduction



Between October 2021 and January 2022 we asked children, their parents, carers and early years educators to tell us about their access to nature and being outside together.

The findings of this project tell us about how young children value nature, play and being active outside. However, the research also reveals the growing inequalities experienced by some families with young children and the challenges they face in accessing natural spaces.

This guide is for all those who work with and support young children. It gives suggestions for effective practice in relation to young children and outdoor experiences.

This guide was first published in April 2022.

What do children tell us is important about access to nature?

Children talked about valuing:

- being active (they mentioned activities supporting both fine and gross motor skills)
- a social aspect, or companionship with peers or adults
- specific nature activities
- the natural habitat
- play resources available to them at home and in their early years setting, sometimes playing with toys.

Key adults in children's lives, including parents and grandparents, had an impact on the types of experiences children were exposed to outdoors. For example, camping in the back garden with a campfire and looking through binoculars to see the moon and stars at night.

**"Mud kitchen.
We make pies in it
– strawberry pies."**

Child



**"Grass, leaves.
Run around."**

Child

In children's own words and photos

We gave children cameras so that they could show us what was important to them.



**"Climb on the stile.
Catching worms in
woodland. Find worms
under the logs. Not
to hurt our legs on
brambles."**

Child

**"Play there
[points to
woodland area
of nursery].
Bird table.
Look bugs."**

Child



**"The sky.
I like looking
at the clouds."**

Child



What benefits do practitioners see in outdoor learning?

Practitioners talked about children's access to nature in terms of key aspects of teaching and learning:

- building children's curiosity and creativity
- the open-endedness of the resources
- opening up lots of lines of enquiry
- exploration
- awe and wonder
- listening
- space and freedom to be physically and emotionally independent
- free flow
- promoting all areas of learning (including personal, social and emotional, physical, communication and language, mathematical).

"It's so open-ended when you're out there and so much you can do. When you're in the woods there is no right and wrong way to play there. So much to do, so much to learn, so much to explore."

Early years practitioner



What pedagogical strategies do practitioners recommend?

1. Be a role model

- Demonstrate positive attitudes to children, parents and other practitioners about being outdoors – whatever the weather.
- Support children and families to understand the importance of appropriate outdoor clothing.
- Show parents the learning involved in being outdoors in different weathers.

“It’s really important that we have that environment accessible at all times for our children, regardless of the weather... they need to experience the different seasonal changes.”

Early years practitioner



2. Support reluctant children

- Take favourite activities outside. For example, creative activities.
- Build up children's interest in the outdoors through related activities indoors.
- Find things outdoors children are interested in – “Look, you can see your breath”.
- Alternate whether a child's key person is indoors or outdoors, or where children need to sign in when they arrive.
- Provide partially covered transition spaces as a bridge between indoors and outdoors.



3. Support families

- Understand cultural perspectives of families and why they might be reluctant for their children to be out in the cold/wet/ heat.
- Build parents' confidence through understanding the benefits of learning outdoors and the role of appropriate clothing in keeping children comfortable in all weathers.
- Promote opportunities to be outdoors. For example, the benefits of children walking at least some of the way to nursery rather than coming by car.
- Involve families in nursery walks and outings (e.g. forest school) to build confidence.
- Provide “take home” projects such as growing plants – especially activities that don't require a garden at home.



Image published here with thanks to NECA Community Garden, South Shields.



4. Signpost families

- Use newsletters and social media to signpost possibilities of being outdoors as a family, often linked to potential learning opportunities (e.g. local events).
- Set holiday tasks that involve going outdoors.
- Encourage children to bring natural objects in to share (e.g. seasonal treasures).
- Link being outdoors to core books (e.g. *The Gruffalo*, *Going on a Bear Hunt* etc.).
- Create nature groups for parents, including virtual groups, to share ideas and activities.

“A lot of families don’t have gardens and it is important to let those children access nature.”

Early years practitioner

What might you do next?



- Which strategies could your setting adopt to enhance current provision?
- Think about children's current interests and their home life. How can you make greater links between home and the setting in relation to individual children's wider community or real-life outdoor experiences?
- Take your children outside with a camera and let them show you what their preferences are!

“It’s such a rich variety of learning outside, so it does bring along their personal, social and emotional [development], it does bring on the physical, it does bring on their maths and that kind of thing. So it’s not just let’s go out and run to get the physical side of things.

It’s educating the children that they don’t just have to run around – why don’t we listen to the sounds we can hear, why don’t we look at what we can see, what colours we see, why don’t we count the balls we can kick into a goal. Things like that so encourages all kinds of learning.”

Early years practitioner

Further information

Early Education

The British Association for Early Childhood Education

Early Education has practical suggestions for supporting children's learning outdoors including:

Exploring the Wider World project resources (<https://early-education.org.uk/exploring-the-wider-world-project/>)

Outdoors and Active project resources (<https://early-education.org.uk/outdoors-and-active/>)

Babies and toddlers outdoors (<https://early-education.org.uk/babies-and-toddlers-outdoors/>)

The Great Outdoors by Margaret Edgington (<https://early-education.org.uk/product/the-great-outdoors-developing-childrens-learning-through-outdoor-provision/>)

Early Education is a charity and membership organisation for individuals and organisations working in early childhood education across the UK. Find out more at early-education.org.uk/



The Froebel Trust produces a wide range of free to download resources which explore themes and activities closely associated with Froebelian practice today, including:

Outdoor play and exploration by Helen Tovey (<https://www.froebel.org.uk/training-and-resources/pamphlets>)

An introduction to Froebel, children and nature by Helen Tovey (<https://www.froebel.org.uk/training-and-resources/pamphlets>)

Children and nature – an online collection of articles, research and free resources (<https://www.froebel.org.uk/children-and-nature>)



The Froebel Trust funds research onto children's learning from birth to eight years and champions early childhood education. Find out more at froebel.org.uk