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Awe and Wonder: science, mathematics and the outdoors



RISK BENEFIT ASSESSMENT

Location / Activity:	Foundation Phase outdoor area	Date:	
Assessor:		Review date:	

The boxes in the table below will expand as you type into them; pre-entered text is simply for illustration. You should delete irrelevant items and replace with text relevant to your circumstances.
Your overall risk rating – Low, medium or high – is based on your judgement about whether the BENEFITS of the activity or opportunity outweigh the RISKS.

Experience exploring outdoor space in photograph	How will young people BENEFIT from this activity?	Hazards and associated risks	Who is at risk?	PRECAUTIONS in place to reduce the risk of injury	Overall risk after precautions RATING: L/M/H
	Scientific Thinking Development, through practical hands on play, children learn about concepts such as gravity, forces, flow rate, and fluid dynamics. These encounters help in gaining an understanding of cause and effect as well as in creating and conducting tests of ideas.	Hazard - Slipping on Wet Surfaces, water spills may make surfaces slippery which can cause falls or slips. Risk - Children may slip, fall, and sustain injuries like bruises or cuts.	Children - Participating in the activity. Staff - Ensuring children are safe while taking part in the activity.	Ensure the outdoor space is clear of any tripping hazards before the activity. Use a designated water play area with a suitable surface such as grass or non-slip mat to minimize slipping. Encourage children to walk, not run, in the play area.	L

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	Mathematical Learning, by repositioning buckets, children can discover about measuring, volume, estimating, and spatial awareness all of which are important for developing early mathematics abilities while having fun and unrestricted.	Hazard - Handling Heavy Buckets: Lifting and carrying water filled buckets can strain young children's muscles, leading to minor injuries. Risk - Children could drop buckets or strain themselves, possibly causing injury.	Children - Participating in the activity. Staff - Ensuring children are safe while taking part in the activity.	Use small, lightweight containers to minimize strain and encourage children to work together when lifting or moving heavier buckets. Adults or older children can assist in filling and carrying large buckets of water to avoid strain on younger children.	L

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	Critical Thinking and Problem-Solving, the difficulty of transferring water encourages learning through trial and error. Children must recognize issues and work collaboratively to find solutions, which promotes resilience, creativity, and collaboration.	Hazard - Sharp Edges on Guttering or Metal Pipes Some of the materials may have sharp edges or rough surfaces. Risk: Children may cut or scrape their hands while handling the equipment.	Children - Participating in the activity. Staff - Ensuring children are safe while taking part in the activity.	Check all materials beforehand for any sharp edges, rough surfaces. Sand down rough edges or cover with protective tape. Provide a demonstration on safe handling and ensure adult supervision during the activity.	L

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	Physical Development, pouring, moving objects, and adjusting equipment are examples of movements that enhance gross motor, fine motor, and coordination skill.	Hazard - Water Ingestion or Contact with Dirty Water, there is a risk of children drinking water or getting dirty water in their eyes or mouth. Risk - This could lead to minor health concerns, like stomach upset or eye irritation.	Children - Participating in the activity. Staff - Ensuring children are safe while taking part in the activity	Ensure clean water is used for the activity and remind children to be careful and not drink or splash water near their faces. Have children wash their hands before and after the activity to prevent any ingestion of dirt or germs.	L

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	Social and Emotional Growth, as shown in part 1 children like Child F take on problem-solving responsibilities, the collaborative nature of the work develops leadership, peer interaction, and communication skills. Children's confidence can also be strengthened by witnessing the success of their ideas and efforts.	Weather and sun exposure, excessive exposure to the elements may result from outdoor activities conducted in strong sunlight or severe weather. Risk - In hot weather, there's the possibility of sunburn or dehydration; in severe weather, children could be cold.	Children - Participating in the activity. Staff - Ensuring children are safe while taking part in the activity	Ensure children wear appropriate clothing for the weather, including sun hats and suncream in hot weather, or waterproof clothing in cold/wet weather. Provide regular breaks for water and shade in hot weather, and move the activity under shelter such as a tree or over covered area if the weather becomes too extreme such as too hot, cold, or wet.	L

Part 3

In the world of early childhood development, nurturing and fostering awe and wonder using science and math is essential to developing, ambitious, capable learners who are ready to learn throughout their lives. In Wales the curriculum aims to provide children with the opportunities to become Enterprising, creative contributors who are ready to play a full part in life and work.

Science and math are commonly associated with concepts such as discovery, problem-solving, reasoning, patterns, themes and measuring (GOV.WALES, n.d.). These areas of learning encourage children to ask questions, observe their surroundings, and use critical thinking, investigation and experimentation to uncover the answers.

The photograph of water play, involving water channels, pipes, and guttering, offers an excellent opportunity for children to engage in hands on learning experiences of both mathematical and scientific principles. In this particular activity, children were challenged with building a water channel to transfer water from one bucket to another, which naturally led to an investigation of concepts like gravity, forces, volume, flow, and spatial awareness.

When the children began constructing the water channel, they were enthusiastic but didn't immediately consider factors such as gravity or the angle of the pipes. A vital part of early childhood education is this type of unstructured investigation, which lets children investigate ideas and learn from their mistakes. The children's attempt to create a functioning water channel without understanding that water cannot flow uphill represents their initial understanding of physics concepts like gravity and forces. The first attempt where water was spilt rather than successfully transferred between buckets provided a natural and important learning moment. In early years education, mistakes are crucial because they trigger reflective thinking and problem solving skills. In this case, the children had to revisit their approach and seek help when they encountered a problem.

This shows how the environment in this case, the outdoor space with pipes, channels, and water encouraged children to actively engage with scientific principles. The children worked collaboratively to test their ideas, even though their first

attempt did not succeed. They also learned that their actions had consequences, such as spilling water and needing to ask for more from the tap, which encouraged them to take responsibility for their work and create a collaborative approach to complete the challenge next time.

After observing the group of children finding the task set challenging many children were asking for help. My role was to facilitate learning without immediately providing solutions, encouraging the children to explore and problem solve independently and collaboratively. When the children initially encountered difficulty with their water channel, I refrained from stepping in to fix the problem. Instead, I asked reflective questions such as, "Why do you think the water isn't flowing into the bucket?" and "What could you do differently to help it work?" These questions were designed to prompt critical thinking and self-reflection, guiding the children to consider the impact of gravity and the angle of the pipes. With support from an enabling adult the children were discussing different ideas but still finding the task complex. I didn't want to impact on the task myself but decided the introduction of Child F, who was known for his practical and problem-solving skills, added an additional layer of learning was the next step. When Child F joined the group, I supported his leadership by acknowledging his skills, saying, "Child F is really good at solving these kinds of problems, let's see what ideas he has." By allowing the children to experiment, observe, and work collaboratively, I helped create a learning environment where they felt empowered to take ownership of their discoveries, fostering both independence and a deeper understanding of the scientific and mathematical concepts at play. When Child F arrived and declared, "Water won't pour uphill," he articulated a key concept gravity causes water to flow downward. Child F's role as a peer leader reflects the importance of collaborative learning in early years education, where children can learn from one another through observation and interaction.

At this stage, Child F began the process of deconstructing what the group had built. He demonstrated an understanding of the need to adjust the angles of the pipes to ensure that the water could flow smoothly from one bucket to another. This practical exploration encouraged the children to observe how the angle and height of the guttering influenced the speed and direction of the water's flow. Essentially, they were experimenting with forces and gradients. As the group worked through these challenges, they started learning key concepts about how the angle of the pipe affects the velocity and direction of the water.

Child F's observational skills became a critical part of the learning experience. He knelt down to observe why the water sometimes landed in the bucket and other times it shot over the top or failed to reach the bucket at all. He was doing scientific inquiry by keeping a careful eye on things. Scientific inquiry is the process of observing occurrences, developing theories, and testing those theories in order to gain insight.

Over time with some hands on investigation and also observing from afar, Child F began to recognize that the size of the pouring container I provided. He started watching the pouring container and then the water flow down the guttering. A large bucket or a small bottle affected how quickly the water flowed. He articulated this by stating, "The water comes out faster from the big bucket and slower from the bottle." In doing so, he was recognizing the concept of volume and flow rate, as larger containers release more water at once, creating a faster flow, while smaller containers produce a slower flow. This understanding links directly to fluid dynamics, a concept that is fundamental to physics, and which Child F was able to grasp through practical engagement and observation.

This activity allowed the children to develop scientific reasoning by testing various materials and observing how these materials influenced the water flow. Such experiments help children understand cause and effect relationships, a critical component of both science and early mathematical thinking.

Towards the end of the activity, Child F adapted the environment further, moving the bucket depending on the container his peers used for pouring water. He discovered through trial and error that he need to adjust the position of the bucket relative to the water's flow rate and the height from which the water was being poured. This demonstrated his growing understanding of spatial awareness and measurement both of which are foundational mathematical concepts.

By moving the bucket closer or further away based on how fast the water was coming out of the container, Child F was making predictions and then testing them in real time. This action can be linked to estimating distances and measuring trajectories, both of which involve spatial reasoning. These skills are important for developing later mathematical abilities, including geometry and problem-solving.

The process of trial and error that Child F engaged in moving the bucket repeatedly based on different conditions demonstrated an understanding of proportional reasoning, the relationship between container size and water flow. Over the course of an hour of play, the group's collective efforts and Child F's observations transformed what began as a simple water play activity into a rich learning experience involving prediction, measurement, estimation, and collaboration.

Part 4

When evaluating how adults working with early years children support and encourage engagement with mathematical and scientific concepts in outdoor environments, it is essential to consider key theories of child development and pedagogy, alongside relevant research. Theories such as Piaget's constructivism and Vygotsky's social constructivism highlight the importance of hands-on learning and social interactions in fostering cognitive growth in children (Sprouts, 2020). Outdoor environments offer unique opportunities for children to engage in hands on play and first hand experiences, allowing them to explore, experiment, and problem-solve, which supports their understanding of foundational scientific and mathematical concepts (NAEYC, 2017).

Research shows that outdoor play encourages the development of critical thinking, spatial reasoning, and inquiry-based learning (TeachKloud, 2024). By scaffolding children's learning through open ended questions and facilitating collaborative problem-solving, enabling adults help children grasp key ideas such as gravity, measurement, and volume. Additionally, outdoor play-based learning promotes creativity and resilience while engaging children in physical activities that naturally incorporate mathematical and scientific principles (Scottish Government, 2020).

This essay will explore how enabling adults utilize outdoor environments and loose parts to promote young children's engagement with these concepts, theory and research evidence to demonstrate how play, exploration, and guided support contribute to the development of competent and confident learners.

In outdoor learning environments, adults serve as key facilitators, guiding children through experiences that promote mathematical and scientific understanding. One of the key responsibilities of an enabling adults is to provide scaffolding, a concept rooted in Vygotsky's social constructivism. According to Vygotsky (1978), children learn optimally within their Zone of Proximal Development, where they can achieve higher levels of understanding with appropriate support (Malik, 2017). For example during water play activities, an adult might ask reflective questions such as, "What do you think will happen if the pipe is higher?" This type of open ended question not only encourages children to think critically about their actions but also allows them to explore fundamental concepts of physics and engineering in a simple way. Through these type of questions, adults guide children toward deeper understanding while encouraging independent thought (Gov.wales, 2023).

Moreover, the enabling adult's role extends to creating collaborative play opportunities where children can engage with their peers under adult supervision. This aligns with Vygotsky's emphasis on social learning, where children benefit from observing and interacting with one another. For instance, when children work together to construct a water channel, they share ideas, test theory, and learn from each other's successes and failures (www.onlineplaygrounds.co.uk, n.d.).

Gov.wales, 2023 indicate that adult interaction significantly fosters critical thinking and problem-solving skills in outdoor settings. These studies highlight that when adults facilitate discussions and encourage collaboration, children are more likely to develop essential cognitive skills that will serve them throughout their lives. The adult's role as a facilitator in outdoor learning is crucial for nurturing an environment where children can thrive through guided exploration and social interaction.

Creating an environment that fosters mathematical and scientific exploration is essential for encouraging children's learning in outdoor spaces. Gibson's affordance theory (1979) suggests that the environment presents numerous opportunities for children to act and explore, which is particularly relevant in outdoor settings where nature offers diverse affordances

(Sandseter, Storli and Sando, 2020). These can include trees to climb, water to splash in, and rocks to measure or stack. Such elements enable children to engage directly with real-world scientific and mathematical principles, promoting hands-on learning experiences.

Adults play a crucial role in designing outdoor spaces to maximize these affordances. By providing a variety of loose parts, such as pipes, buckets, sticks, and stones, children are encouraged to engage in open-ended play (Williams, 2022).

Nicholson's loose parts theory (1972) provides us with the knowledge that environments rich in loose parts stimulate children's creativity, problem-solving abilities, and critical thinking skills all essential for understanding mathematical and scientific concepts. For instance, when children have access to pipes and water during outdoor play, they can explore how water flows through different channels, experiment with volume, and observe how changing the angle of a pipe affects the speed of water flow. These experiences lay the groundwork for fundamental scientific inquiry and mathematical reasoning (Montessori Academy, 2023).

Research supports the idea that rich outdoor environments enhance children's learning in both mathematics and science. When children are provided with a variety of materials in outdoor settings, they naturally engage in scientific inquiry and mathematical thinking. For example, children might measure the height of a tree using non-standard units like sticks or explore spatial relationships by constructing structures with stones or blocks. Such activities not only reinforce mathematical concepts but also encourage scientific observation and experimentation (Ranheim, 2020)

By offering these materials and guiding children's explorations, adults facilitate rich learning experiences that foster curiosity and the development of foundational mathematical and scientific skills. Moreover, outdoor environments support multi-sensory learning, allowing children to use touch, sight, and sound to explore concepts such as balance, weight, gravity, and geometry. The physical space itself encourages movement and experimentation, crucial for developing a deeper understanding of abstract concepts in a sensory hands on way (Edwards, M. 2024).

Outdoor environments are well suited for teaching mathematical concepts through play. Outdoor play gives children the space to freely explore their concepts. Piaget's theory of constructivism (1954) emphasizes that children learn best through direct interaction with their environment, building their knowledge step by step as they engage in hands on activities. Adults can support this process by introducing materials and activities that lend themselves to mathematical exploration (Media (2000), n.d.).

For example, when children are playing with water or building structures with natural materials, they are exploring concepts like volume, weight, and balance. Adults can guide this exploration by asking reflective questions that prompt children to think about the relationships between objects and quantities. A common activity might involve children estimating how much water a bucket can hold or comparing the lengths of sticks, which introduces them to the mathematical concepts of comparison and estimation.

Outdoor play also supports the development of spatial awareness, as children navigate through the environment, arrange objects, and build structures. Vygotsky's theory of social constructivism is relevant here, as children often work together in these activities, learning from each other as well as from the guidance provided by adults. This collaborative play fosters a deeper understanding of spatial relationships and encourages children to use mathematical reasoning in a social context (The Early Years Network, n.d.).

In addition to mathematics, outdoor environments provide opportunities for children to engage with scientific concepts. Activities such as moving water through pipes, building ramps, or observing the growth of plants introduce children to fundamental ideas in physics, biology, and earth and our environment and the importance of caring for our world. By interacting with the natural world, children can explore complex concepts such as gravity, force, and volume in a way that is concrete and understandable (Edwards, 2024).

Adults can support children's engagement with these scientific concepts by fostering experience based learning. Bruner's theory of discovery learning (1961) supports our understanding of the importance of children's learning, as it emphasizes the importance of allowing children to learn through discovery and experimentation. When adults provide materials like sand, water, or natural objects, children can engage in scientific inquiry by making predictions, testing their ideas, and drawing conclusions based on their observations (Thecuriosityapproach.com, 2024)

For example, in a water play activity, children might experiment with the flow of water by adjusting the height of a ramp. Through this process, they begin to understand how the angle of the ramp affects the speed of the water, introducing them to the concept of force and gravity. Adults can support this process by asking reflective questions like, "What happens when the ramp is steeper?" or "Why do you think the water flows faster when the ramp is high?"

Research supports the idea that outdoor play fosters scientific thinking. Children who engage in outdoor play are more likely to develop an understanding of cause and effect relationships, which are critical for scientific reasoning. By interacting with the environment, children can explore concepts such as energy, motion, and ecosystems in a hands-on, meaningful way (Bento and Dias, 2017).

Finally outdoor play involving mathematic and scientific experiences is shown throughout the Curriculum for Wales 2022 and other relevant policies that emphasize the importance of outdoor learning. The Curriculum for Wales prioritizes STEM (Science, Technology, Engineering, and Mathematics) education from an early age, recognizing the value of inquiry-based learning in outdoor environments. The curriculum encourages teachers to create learning experiences that allow children to explore, experiment, and ask questions, fostering their creativity and critical thinking (hwb.gov.wales, n.d.).

Outdoor play is highlighted in the curriculum as a key area for promoting mathematical and scientific understanding. By integrating these principles into everyday learning, the curriculum aligns with the theories of Piaget, Vygotsky, and Bruner, who advocate for hands-on, experiential learning that supports children's cognitive development (Tinney, 2023)

Government policies also emphasize the role of adults in facilitating learning through outdoor play, encouraging teachers and caregivers to create environments that stimulate curiosity and foster a love of learning.

In summary, the role of adults in supporting early years children's engagement with mathematical and scientific concepts in outdoor environments is pivotal. Key theories such as Piaget's constructivism, Vygotsky's social constructivism, Gibson's affordance theory, and Nicholson's loose parts theory, we can see how adult facilitation transforms outdoor spaces into rich learning environments. Piaget's focus on hands on learning is reflected in outdoor play, where children interact directly with their environment to build foundational knowledge. Similarly, Vygotsky's concept of the Zone of Proximal Development highlights how adults can scaffold children's learning, guiding them through exploration and discovery by asking reflective questions and creating collaborative opportunities.

Through carefully crafted outdoor spaces that offer affordances and loose parts, adults enable children to engage in critical thinking, problem-solving, and inquiry-based learning. Research has shown that outdoor play not only encourages physical engagement but also deepens children's understanding of complex mathematical and scientific principles, such as measurement, gravity, and spatial relationships. Loose parts, like pipes and buckets, offer opportunities for children to experiment with volume and flow, laying the groundwork for scientific reasoning.

In outdoor environments, the adult's role extends beyond simply providing materials it involves creating meaningful interactions that prompt children to reflect on their experiences and connect their observations to broader concepts. Moreover, adults encourage social learning by fostering collaborative play, where children learn from each other while guided by adult supervision. Theories and research, as well as curriculum frameworks like the Curriculum for Wales, support the idea that outdoor learning is essential for developing confident, competent learners with strong foundations in STEM subjects. In conclusion, by creating enabling environments and offering guided support, adults play a crucial role in facilitating young children's mathematical and scientific development in outdoor settings.

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Basic Acknowledgement format of AI tool use

I acknowledge the use of spell and punctuation check on 29/09/24. I used

the prompt(s):

1. spell check word

2. punctuation check word

I confirm that I have not presented any AI generated text as my own work. I confirm I

have copies of my drafts, notes, and other resources I used before, and after the use of AI tools which I may be asked to provide in evidence.