Awe and Wonder

(Source: The Empowered Educator, 2018)

This image represents an outdoor learning environment that uses both natural resources and loose parts that have been brought in by the practitioner. Through practical experiences, this setting promotes early scientific and math skills, creativity, problem-solving, social engagement, and sensory play. The children will be able to use their creativity and fine or gross motor skills to explore a variety of experiences through the natural materials in this environment, which include mud and soil, sticks and twigs, a water supply, pinecones, stones, flowers, and plants. As seen in the picture, the practitioner has brought in a variety of loose objects to stimulate the children's curiosity and aid in their learning and growth, such as, tires, buckets, pots and pans, tree stumps, and a wind charm constructed from natural materials. However, in addition, the practitioner also brought in other materials, examples of these are blocks, carboard boxes, tubes, watering cans and so on. Children have the flexibility of choice and challenge when they have access to a wide variety of outdoor play opportunities.

Moreover, when the children arrived at the setting that morning, a soft breeze rustled the leaves as the golden rays of sun slowly peaked through the light clouds and droplets clung to the trees. The ground was damp, puddles reflected the sky, and the air was scented with the aroma of flowering flowers and wet soil. The children that took part in the morning of outdoor play was a nursery class ages 3 and 4. At the age of 3 and 4, children's brains are developing quickly, and they are learning how to solve problems, interact with others, explore their environment,

and acquire basic language and mathematical abilities. For children, this is an exciting moment as they start to comprehend the world.

Ways in which the children will improve their holistic development when playing outdoors with loose parts was shown throughout this session. Firstly, when the children arrived at school that morning, each and every child was overwhelmed with excitement and eager to explore the area. During this period the children's curiosity was at peak, they asked questions such as, "Can we use the rainwater and dirt to make portions?", "Will there be lots of sticks, leaves and rocks to play with?", "What can we build today?". After the children got correctly ready to play outdoors, we made our way outside. During this experience, both children and adults asked each other many questions. To interact and be an enabling adult it means to play a key role in delivering possibilities to facilitate educational experiences and enhance ideas and in this case, to create a relationship with the children so that the children feel safe, comfortable and trustworthy of you. This means that the role of the adult also involves decision making, scaffolding the children's knowledge, adapting the environment to meet their needs and finding time to foster their confidence.

Children asked different questions at different areas, questions were asked based on materials, imagination, nature, science, math's and social play. For example, questions that were asked by the children included, "Why is this stick bent", "Why is this rock so smooth?". In return the effective practitioner responded with an answer, "Rock's become smooth when they rub against other materials such as sand or water", then onto asking the child a question, "Is the rock hot or cold?", which refers to temperature meaning it got the child thinking about science. When problem solving the children asked, "Can I dig a hole with this?", consequently the practitioner reinforced the child to try and find out and offered help if they needed it. The practitioner would ask questions as such when observing the children's problem-solving skills, "How many leaves can you put on top before it falls?" and "How can you make this taller?". While working with children, observing and helping to build on the child's knowledge is an aspect of being an enabling adult. While observing the practitioner became aware of the social interaction between the children, questions they would frequently ask one another were, "How do you do that?", "Can you help me?" and "Do you want to do this together?", as a result the children begin to learn from each other. Furthermore, in relation to science, "Will this float in the water?" and "Why do leaves change colour?" are questions that the practitioner asked the children. These types of questions reinforce the child to reflect and experiment with the solution on their own. Throughout this experience, math's was a factor that was used often, to illustrate, when walking along the tiers, climbing on the tree stumps, playing with stones and sticks and building with blocks, both the practitioner and children would count each object as they were going along, "One, two, three ...". Consequently, math education through play is an excellent method for young children to acquire early numeracy abilities in an entertaining and captivating form.

Not only this but when observing the children play, it is clear that they also become more familiar with different shapes, patterns, forces, weights, size, life cycles, why certain things happen and cause and effect, this is due to learning through doing. Children represented numerous examples of this throughout the morning of outdoor play, the first one being the recognition of how different seasons affect plant and animal life, for example, a group of children found a caterpillar and was eager to learn about their transformation into a butterfly, in result, after being told the life cycle of a caterpillar they began to use role play to act out the life cycle of caterpillar. Secondly, few of the children decided they wanted to roll the tires, in conclusion, they learnt that a push starts the motion and friction slows it down. Thirdly, when jumping from different heights, the practitioner helped them recognisie that they felt the impact of their weight more when jumping from something higher compared to when jumping from something lower, this is called metacognitive talk. Metacognitive talk is the term for discussions in which children reflect on and discuss their own thought processes. Finally, when the children were stacking objects such as rocks, blocks or sticks, they were observing how weight distribution affects balance.

In result, during the early years, outdoor play is crucial because it not only helps children learn science and mathematics but also supports their physical, cognitive, social, and emotional development in ways that indoor play cannot completely duplicate. It lowers the chance of childhood obesity, improves coordination, develops bones, muscles, and gross motor abilities (running, jumping, and climbing), and enhances general wellbeing. It fosters confidence and risk-taking as well as collaboration and teamwork and lastly, it can encourage children to appreciate nature, instilling a lasting respect for the environment.

(Source: Picklebums, 2024)

(Source: Pinterest, 2017)

(Source: Front Street Primary, 2019)

Risk Benefit Assessment

Location:	Nursery setting	**Date:**	01.03.2025

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**
Climbing	Climbing develops muscle strength and improves control of the body. It promotes full-body mobility and flexibility and gross and fine motor skills because it uses both major muscle movements and grip strength.	Head damage, fractures, and bruises can result from falling from climbing structures, rocks, or tree stumps. Underweight can be caused by loose rocks, dead tree branches, or badly	Children	Provide suitable structures, such as gentle landings, climbing frames, and trees. Be mindful of potential dangers by keeping an eye out for any sharp items, slippery surfaces, or loose branches. Encourage children to evaluate themselves by asking them questions like, "Do you feel steady there?". Supervise, however over-restrictive supervision should be	Medium

	Cognitive advantages as children use their problem-solving abilities to determine which path is best to take up. Climbing on trees, rocks, and play structures outside encourages children to interact with their surroundings. Overcoming obstacles in climbing fosters self-worth and after minor setbacks, they learn to keep trying. Climbing promotes conversation with others, cooperation, and taking turns.	maintained playground equipment. Slipping may occur on smooth, muddy, or wet surfaces. Falls or choking hazards may result from loose clothing, scarves, or shoelaces being tangled in trees or equipment. A child may trap a body part into playground equipment or tree branches when climbing. Trees or rocks may conceal bees, wasps, spiders, or small animals.		avoided to foster confidence. Help only when necessary. Discuss safe climbing practices, such as taking your time and being cautious because racing increases the chance of slipping. Understanding boundaries helps children evaluate their own skills and avoid climbing higher than they feel comfortable. Appropriate clothing. Clothing that will not catch on objects. Old clothing encase of dirt and damage. Inspect climbing areas for animal burrows, beehives, or wasp nests. Children should learn to be mindful of and considerate of wildlife.	

Sharp or Heavy Objects	Since it enables children to take reasonable risks and fosters their confidence, it increases resilience and independence. When they successfully complete difficult jobs, they are likely to feel a sense of accomplishment. Children can discover how to use safe tools under the correct supervision which equips them with practical skills that they can utilize in the real world. By carrying large objects, children can improve overall fine and	A range of injuries including: Failure of balance and accidents brought on by children stumbling over sharp or heavy items may result in fractures, sprains, or scratches. Punctures and Cuts may occur because sharp objects such as metal or sharp sticks can produce wounds that may result in infection. Younger children may swallow small or sharp objects, which	Children	A first aid package with bandages, antiseptic, and ice packs should always be kept close by, as should a first aid professional with first aid training. Active supervision involves always keeping a careful eye on children, particularly when they are handling heavy or potentially dangerous items. Consider selecting age-appropriate supplies and equipment including lightweight wooden blocks and rounded sticks. Asking children questions like "Is this object too heavy for you?" or "How can we use this safely?" may help them become more risk aware. Instruct students in safe handling practices such as, using both hands to lift big objects, carry sticks pointing downwards, and refraining from throwing heavy or pointy objects.	Medium

	gross motor skills as well as their strength, balance, and coordination. Children learn to recognise threats and make safer decisions, increasing confidence and critical thinking abilities. It fosters innovative problem-solving while determining how to lift or balance big objects.	could cause internal harm or choking. Large stones, blocks, and other outdoor equipment can cause injuries to the head, body or eyes. if thrown, resulting in bruises or concussions.		Create a safe play space by clearing out potential dangers and promote play in places which are not dangerous.	
Weather Conditions	Since natural sunlight raises serotonin levels, a sunny morning can lift a child's spirits and give them more energy. It may decrease anxiety and tension because natural light and fresh air minimises stress.	Overexposure to the sun can result in sunburn, which raises the risk of skin damage and long-term health problems. Heat exhaustion, heatstroke, and dehydration can also result from higher temperatures,	Children	After severe winds or storms, clean the play area of any fallen objects and secure it by looking for potential risks like as loose branches, slippery surfaces, or unstable equipment. Make weather-appropriate choices by avoiding playing outside during severe weather events like storms, intense heat, or freezing temperatures. To avoid dehydration and overheating, make sure children	Low

	Sunshine aids in the body's production of vitamin D, which is necessary for strong bones, a robust immune system, and general well-being. Morning exposure to natural light promotes healthier sleep patterns by assisting in the regulation of the body's internal clock, which in turn improves the quality of sleep at night.	particularly if children fail to drink enough water or are not taking moments in the shade. In addition to posing a risk of fallen branches or unstable playground equipment, windy conditions can blast sand or dust into children's eyes. The likelihood of falls and injuries might be increased by rain and damp surfaces.		have access to drinking water and encourage them to take breaks in areas with shade. Depending on the weather conditions, provide appropriate attire and items. Regarding hot weather, plan outdoor activities for cooler times (morning or late afternoon) and remind children to wear sunscreen and to reapply it as necessary.	
Wildlife	Firsthand encounters with wildlife teach children the value of conserving species and their habitats.	Insects, such as wasps and bees can cause problems since they can sting or bite if disturbed.	Children	Be aware of what to do if someone bites or stings a child and for severe reactions or unidentified bites, seek medical help.	Low

	Promotes physical activity that increases fitness, such as exploring in the outdoors. Which in turn improves the immune system and increases immunity. Since nature has a relaxing influence that lowers cortisol levels, it helps individuals feel less anxious. It elevates spirits since sunlight and fresh air are good for mental wellness. Lastly, it improves focus since spending time in nature lengthens attention spans. Studying wildlife promotes scientific thinking and stimulates	Hazardous plants like poison oak and poison ivy can irritate skin or cause poisoning if consumed. Children may be exposed to allergens that cause allergy responses when they play outside. For example, trees and grass can cause pollen allergies, also known as hay fever, particularly in the spring and fall.		Children should be taught not to poke or disturb burrows, hives, or nests. Washing hands after playing outside can help reduce health risks by getting rid of dirt, bacteria, and certain allergies. Make sure children have the vaccines they need in case they get bitten or scratched. When young children are interacting with nature, always supervise them. Remind children that wild animals should not be chased or disturbed to instil a respect for them. Finally, inform children which animals are appropriate to watch and which ones they should stay away from.	

	creativity and curiosity. It fosters empathy because interacting with animals teaches responsibility and kindness.				

Academic Evaluation

According to Ouvry and Furtado (2020) an environment that truly engages children is not filled with plastic toys and glossy catalogs but instead features natural elements like sandpits, muddy puddles, greenery, and opportunities for climbing and exploring nature. Ouvry and Furtado (2020) to believe that instead of rushing through external and artificial demands, children should play outside in all weather conditions and seasons to experience all the learning opportunities that are essential to their development. Cheng *et al* (2023) says that children can freely explore, create, and learn as they play outside in a natural setting. Numerous advantages for children's physical, mental, and emotional well-being are being shown by expanding study. Children can cultivate resilience, creative thinking, and social and risk management abilities through outdoor play, all of which lay the groundwork for constructive problem resolution and positive social interactions. In result, lack of outdoor play opportunities for children may result in chronic illnesses linked to inactivity. As stated by UNICEF (No Date), article 31 implies that children are entitled to play as it is crucial for their growth, well-being, and creativity. It is the responsibility of the authorities to provide safe, inclusive, and accessible spaces for recreational activities. This article emphasizes the value of play and cultural interaction in a child's development and stresses that they are essential rights rather than advantages. Moreover, Ashbrook (2017) maintains that playing outside helps children improve their math and science abilities. For example, gathering natural objects like rocks, pinecones, or flowers can serve as the foundation for a collection that can instruct children in a variety of subjects. The items teach children that arithmetic is present in the classroom, at home, and on the route to and from school. To illustrate, children learn about the living and nonliving components of a play area or landscape through object collection and play, which also encourages them to ponder and express their thoughts regarding numbers. To expand on this, Piaget’s theory on cognitive development suggested four phases of cognitive development that extend from infancy to adolescence and are distinguished by unique ways of thinking. Instead of passively taking in information, Piaget thought that young children actively construct understanding by investigating their surroundings like "little scientists." Additionally, he thought that children's

mental models aid in the organization of their knowledge, becoming more advanced as they acquire and adapt to their surroundings (Pakpahan and Saragih, 2022).

The Welsh Government (2023) Curriculum for Wales strongly highlights the importance of outdoor play and learning as essential parts of children's education. It promotes the use of outdoor environments to create meaningful learning experiences. Recognised as a fundamental teaching approach, outdoor learning helps nurture confident and capable learners who can apply their knowledge in different situations. Through outdoor activities, children bridge the gap between theory and practice, deepening their understanding, improving retention, and fostering overall development.

However, for children to have the correct opportunities to play outdoors, the practitioner and/or parent, caregiver, must play the role of being an enabling adult by providing opportunities that offer opportunities that take into account forces, energy, light, life cycles, and similar concepts. Watts (2020) implies that the most valuable resource is a group of supportive and attentive adults who appreciate the outdoors and actively engage in experiences with children. The attitudes of adults have a greater influence on children's learning than one might expect and when adults demonstrate genuine enthusiasm and interact positively with the environment, they create an inspiring atmosphere that fosters learning. When providing an enabling environment for the early years, Burnham (2016) points out that an effective practitioner will remember that since each child is unique, they all learn differently and at various rates. Building on this idea, children thrive and grow in supportive environments where their experiences are tailored to their individual needs, and there is a strong collaboration between educators and parents or caregivers. To facilitate learning, an outdoor setting for young children should offer a variety of activities in an engaging and educational setting. To illustrate, The Empowered Educator (2018) suggests that an outdoor environment that inspires and supports a child's holistic development is one that includes areas such as, a mud kitchen to promote role play, sensory invitations (materials) to offer the chance to experiment with various senses, climbing objects to enhance gross motor skills, and loose parts to encourage curiosity and discovery.

Another important aspect when it comes to being an effective practitioner is to be able to support children through metacognitive talk and sustained shared thinking. As mentioned formerly, metacognitive talk is generally defined as the awareness and strategies people use to monitor and regulate their own thinking and learning processes (Geurten and Léonard, 2023). An example of this would be where an adult asks a child ‘What would happen if I pushed it faster?’. The advantages of metacognitive talk are that, before children begin practicing independently, it draws on their past knowledge and offers a suitable degree of difficulty to encourage discipline and metacognition (EEE, 2023). On the other hand, McLaughlin et al (2022) suggests that sustained shared thinking is an episode where two or more people "cooperate" intellectually to solve an issue, make an idea clear, assess an activity, or develop a story. To illustrate, where a practitioner says to the child ‘You rolled it slowly that time, what might we do to speed it up next time?’. Long-term collaborative thinking fosters critical thinking abilities, linking concepts, and problem-

solving techniques. It implies that children will be doing more than just playing; they will be exploring and paying attention, but they will also be playing at a higher level. Children will play with greater curiosity and inquiry (Brodie, 2014).

As previously mentioned, the loose parts that the practitioner decided to use for this research were tires, buckets, pots and pans, tree stumps, and a wind charm constructed from natural materials, as well as, blocks, carboard boxes, tubes, watering cans and so on. According to Gibson *et al* (2017), unstructured, child-led play is facilitated by incorporating loose parts into children's play. It highlights how crucial it is for growth to strike a balance between the various kinds of learning opportunities offered during the school day. The abilities children acquire through this kind of play have subsequently been linked to enhanced academic performance and child well-being. Adding to this, Spencer *et al* (2019) maintains that new play experiences can be created by introducing loose parts into areas for play. As opposed to having a single set of materials dictating how children play, loose parts play enables children to design their own play experiences according to their ideas and objectives. Children can explore their surroundings, take chances during play, and gain confidence and motivation by using loose pieces. Numerous research has looked into the advantages of outdoor loose parts play in early childhood settings, and they have found a variety of cognitive and socioemotional benefits, such as improved exploratory and creative play, social benefits, and school happiness. Others have pointed out that loose components can also foster physical development by fostering active play, the growth of physical literacy, and the acquisition of basic movement abilities. The importance of loose parts play in children's development is emphasized in (The New Curriculum for Wales, 2023). Materials that are movable, combinable, and redesigned are known as loose parts, they promote physical abilities, creativity, and problem-solving. The usage of these flexible tools is encouraged by the curriculum in order to promote experiential learning and holistic growth.

Although there may be enabling adults that provide opportunity for outdoor play in the early years, outdoor play also faces many barriers. Sandseter (2019) says that cautious attitudes and practices among early childhood education and care practitioners and parents have significantly contributed to the reduction of young children's opportunities for unstructured outdoor play. Not only this but Loebach *et al* (2021) conveys that in recent decades, outdoor play has drastically decreased within Western children. As a result, Loebach *et al* (2021) investigated the ways in which social, cultural, and environmental elements may limit children's outdoor and collective play. They begin with discussing that engaging in outdoor activities, like unstructured play, has been connected to health and wellbeing outcomes and has been demonstrated to be a main amplifier of young people's cognitive, social, physical, and psychological development. Healthy physical, social, and emotional development in children can be supported by outdoor settings that provide a variety of unstructured play opportunities. By promoting building and exploration, unstructured, outdoor play that is surrounded by nature also promotes healthy brain development.

However, due to the decrease in outdoor play for children in western areas, it means less opportunity for physical activity and learning aspects such as math's and science through play, this can result in health problems such as obesity and developmental delay. As a result, the significant decline in Western children's outdoor playtime and freedom restricts their chances to develop essential skills and abilities. Furthermore, another barrier to outdoor play is that numerous adults lack confidence due to the worry of risk. A study pointed out that in particular, parents play a crucial influence in allowing or preventing children from engaging in adventurous play. Children's time spent playing adventurously was positively correlated with parents' risk tolerance and attitudes toward their children's risk-taking. Additionally, there is growing evidence that parenting styles—particularly overprotective parenting styles—have an impact on children's risk-taking behavior during play which in turn, restricts the child's opportunity to experience thrill, passion and look past anxiety. Building on Vygotsky's theories, Prospero Teaching (2025) points out that Bruner's scaffolding theory extends the idea of scaffolding in educational settings. According to Bruner, when students actively create their own knowledge through interactions with the environment, learning takes place effectively.

Although interacting with children is important during play, it is just as important to stand back and observe. Luff (2023) states that a crucial component of successful early childhood pedagogy is child observation, which centers on attentive looking and listening. Flewitt and Cowan (2019) discuss that to stand back and watch a child demonstrates the individuality of each child's potential and ability as well as their holistic development. Care Learning (2025) suggests that observing children during play allows the practitioner to recognise individual needs to ensure the environment is tailored to their requirements, identifying different forms of play, recognising developmental stages by better understanding the child, observing how children form relationships and whether the environment is supporting emotional well-being and fostering equal opportunities. Namely, Froebel believed that educators gain valuable understanding by watching children, especially during self-directed play. These observations offer insights that help in designing a learning environment that responds to and builds upon children's activities (Louis, 2022).

To conclude, when a child is playing outdoors it is important that they are surrounded by an environment that supports their learning in a variety of ways including, physically, mentally, mathematically and scientifically. It is the practitioner's responsibility to foster the correct opportunities while in a school setting, to illustrate, by providing loose parts allows for child-led play, enhancing the freedom to explore, experiment, and develop essential life skills. To be an effective practitioner means being aware of barriers but also following The New Curriculum for Wales to ensure all needs are being met. Finally, to know it is appropriate to not always be interacting in the child's play but to frequently stand back and observe.

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