

Learning Environments: Inside and Outside

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Component 1 – Experience Plan

Experience Plan		
Experience: Use natural resources to create an Autumn Crown.		
Number of children: Six	Age of children: Six to seven	Number of adults: Two
Location: Local wooded area	Preparation time: Five minutes	Activity time: Ninety minutes
Resources: Six pairs of scissors. Two rolls of double sided sticky tape. Six small baskets. Six pairs of small size/children's cut resistant gloves. Six pairs of children's wellington boots. The children will be free to use the natural materials that they find in the wooded area such as sticks and leaves.		
Activity and aims: Six children will participate in an outdoor experience in a local wooded area in which they will hunt for appropriate items and resources with which to style and create an Autumn Crown. There will be two adults that each take a group of three children, thus adhering to the Care Inspectorate Wales mandate (Welsh Government, 2019) – which states that the ratio of children to adults will be no greater than 10:1. The children will have ninety minutes to explore the wooded area, collect items and resources and ultimately create an Autumn Crown. The wooded area is a public domain and considerations must be made for that. Within the wooded area are numerous species of tree, bush and general foliage. The children will be encouraged to explore these areas to search for resources for the Autumn Crown but will be supervised by the respective adults.		

One of the aims of this outdoor experience is to contribute to the children's holistic development, and to support their social, emotional and physical development. There will be many opportunities for each of the children to socialise – both sharing ideas and helping each other to reach the goal of a completed Autumn Crown. This outdoor experience also aspires to comply with the requirements of the Education for Sustainable Development and Global Citizenship (ESDGC). The ESDGC prioritises the protection and care of the environment (Welsh Assembly Government, 2008). This outdoor experience respects the emphasis of this by utilising natural resources found in the environment. This allows us to not leave any synthetic constructions or designs in the natural environment which could have negative consequences for the immediate area. We will respect and care for the environment further by hunting the natural items from the ground and not forcibly remove them from trees shrubbery.

The Foundation Phase Handbook specifies that opportunities must be afforded to children that allow them to experience environments in which they can engage with new ways of expression (Welsh Government, 2015). This is also detailed in the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child (UNCRC), specifically article 31 (Unicef, 2019). This experience provides the platform for children to express and develop themselves in a creative and artistic manner as there is not a correct way of reaching the end goal within the experience. The children are encouraged to do what they feel like doing with the prospect of self-learning.

The children will be encouraged to explore foliage to search for items with which to create their Autumn Crowns. This is supported within the Foundation Phase Framework which details that opportunities should be allowed for the children to develop their knowledge and understanding of the world around them (Welsh Government, 2015).

This activity will be child led. Adults will be present to supervise with regards to safety and to give one example of an Autumn Crown, but the children will lead the activity with minimal input from the adults. Child-initiated activities that are play based is emphasised within the Foundation Phase Framework (Welsh Government, 2015).

This outdoor experience will also offer a range of opportunities for the children to further their physical development. Crouching under tree branches or reaching

under shrubbery will help develop the children's coordination and also aid in the improvement of gross motor skills.

Links to outcomes:

Once the activity has been completed, the children can discuss with each other and with the adults what they enjoyed about the experience, how they would like to do it differently in the future and whether they had fun overall. This links to several outcomes in the Foundation Phase Framework:

Oracy

- "Talk in detail about things they have made or done, explaining the process."
- "Speak clearly to a range of audiences."
- "Retell narratives or information that they have heard, sequencing events correctly."

(Welsh Government, 2015.)

Health and safety:

A risk assessment will be conducted in the designated area of the local woodland. Both adults must utilise a risk assessment and agree on it, and either adult should take one last walk around the designated area with the aim of seeking out any litter or foreign object that has the possibility of inviting danger unto the children.

Prior to the children being allowed into the designated woodland area, the adults will set out an area near the edge, so that the children do not wander too far into the woodland.

It is important for the adults to also be in possession of a First Aid Kit to help with any potential minor injuries such as scrapes from branches, bushes and foliage. The adults must also be in possession of an information sheet with relevant medical issues potentially suffered by any of the children. This information will allow the adults to keep particular children away from areas that may be specifically dangerous to them.

Role of adult:

The adults in charge of this experience will perform a final risk assessment by patrolling the designated area that will be used for the purpose of the experience before the children have access to it. This allows the adults to do a final check for any litter or potential recent changes to the environment which may be harmful to the participating children.

Once the children have access to the designated woodland area, the adult will brief them on the experience, what resources will have been provided for them to use and to give them ideas with which they can create their Autumn Crown. Throughout the experience the adults must be careful not to give specific instructions on what constitutes a “good” Autumn Crown. This is for the purpose of keeping the activity open ended and child led.

The adults will also have the responsibility of cautioning the children on the potential hazards they can encounter in the wooded area, which can include the irregular terrain of the designated wooded area, the surface and weather conditions, tree branches and insect bites. The adults are also responsible for ensuring the children respect the resources they are afforded to reach their goal and to take care not to injure themselves or each other.

It is also important that the children are made aware of different habitats in the wooded area and that they are to be respected and left undisturbed. In addition to respecting habitats, the children will be reminded that they are to use items such as sticks, twigs and leaves that they find on the ground and not to pull anything from trees or bushes. This helps to develop the children’s respect for the environment.

After the children have been briefed and have begun their experience, it is the role of the adults to observe the children and document any learning they believe to be taking place. A great way for the adults to be involved in the experience without directing it can be to engage in sustained shared thinking. This is a key way to help develop the children’s knowledge. Asking the children questions about the experience and listen to their responses, allowing them to think about the ways in which they will create their Autumn Crown.

Component 2 – Risk Benefit Assessment

Location / Activity:	Local woodland area – outdoor experience
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Risk	How will young people BENEFIT from this activity?	Possible hazards	Who is at risk?	PRECAUTIONS in place to reduce the risk of injury	Overall risk RATING: L/M/H
Public interruption.		Members of the public entering the wooded area.	Children, adults.	Ensure small groups with multiple adults to be able to supervise at all times.	Medium.
Weather.	The children will learn how to traverse uneven terrain when the weather is not optimal for the experience.	Slips, falls.	Children, adults.	Adults should check the weather forecast in advance. Children should be reminded to take care when walking over extremely muddy and/or slippery areas.	Low.
Litter.	Potentially hazardous objects may be found on the ground due to the area being accessible to the public.	Children may pick up objects that are hazardous to touch.	Children.	Adults should take a final walk around the intended area to ensure the experience space is free of litter and hazardous foreign objects.	Low.

Risk	How will young people BENEFIT from this activity?	Possible hazards	Who is at risk?	PRECAUTIONS in place to reduce the risk of injury	Overall risk RATING: L/M/H
Uneven terrain.	Children develop proprioception and balance when walking on uneven ground.	Falling over, causing minor injury.	Children.	Ensure the children are aware they will be completing the experience on ground that is not flat or even, and extra care should be taken when traversing the terrain.	Low.
Medical conditions.		Children potentially experiencing allergic reactions to the environment.	Children.	Adults should be prepared with knowledge beforehand and also have an information sheet on their person. Children should be kept away from areas that may exacerbate their condition (hayfever etc.).	Low.
Children with Additional Learning Needs.	Children of all abilities should be afforded the same opportunities to develop themselves and experience nature and the environment.	Child may become distressed to new area and the open-endedness of the experience with no structure.	Children.	The child will be made aware of the experience beforehand and it will be emphasised that the adult is there for unconditional support should it be needed.	Low.

Component 3 – Environmental Audit

Issue / environmental feature	Damage that could occur	How to lessen negative impact	Resources needed	Who is responsible
Trees.	Potential for children to snap small branches or remove leaves.	Explain to children that the items they use for the creation of their Autumn Crown are to be taken from the ground only, and not forcibly removed from trees, foliage.		Children, Adults.
Habitats.	Children could accidentally disturb or destroy habitats when hunting for resources.	Explain to children that they must take care when navigating the wooded area and to be		Children, adults.

		careful not to disturb or destroy habitats.		
Land.	Dropping and leaving litter.	The adults should remind the children to leave the environment as they found it.		Children, adults.
Flowers.	Trampling over flowers and other soft foliage.	Adults should remind children to stick to designated areas and not to wander off to areas that have not been approved.		Children, adults.

Area/Land.	Leaving synthetic resources behind that were taken to the site.	Adults should count all resources before arriving at the designated area and before leaving to ensure all resources are returned and not left littered in the wooded area.	All resources brought to the area.	Adults.
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Component 4 – Evaluation

This experience was arranged specifically to occur in, and make use of, the outdoors. The importance of utilising the outdoors for the purpose of learning should not be lost on early years practitioners who, through research, will be able to effectively implement this type of learning in early years settings. Tovey (2007) expresses that the outdoors is a space that is always mutating and changing and has the capacity to provide children with the platform to explore their curiosity and allow them to explore and utilise their creative and imaginative thinking. Children are able to explore alone, or with peers and adults, and construct their own learning. As children explore the outdoors, they will begin to feel a sense of empowerment as they experience the world through different senses. Touching different parts of the environment to feel different textures, the smell of the trees and grass – the children will learn the environment as they shape it. The outdoors offers children health benefits also. Fresh oxygen breathed in from the outdoors helps children, and adults, to stay healthy and alert (Bilton, 2010). This is in stark contrast to children who spend too much time indoors – with rises in CO₂ levels that has been proven to cause a lack of function, particularly within children. These findings are corroborated by the National Health Service (NHS) (2017) who agree that the outdoors provides children with positive health benefits as well as aid in the development of emotional and physical health. An outdoor child is a social child. Children who are afforded meaningful engagement in the outdoors are statistically more likely to forge positive relationships with peers and adults.

The designated woodland area, in which the experience was set, provided a free choice environment for the children. They were able to use the resources they were provided to hunt and collect items with which to design and construct their Autumn Crown. According to Tovey (2007), this environment constitutes a provocative environment as it invites the children to explore their curiosity. In environments such as these, children can seek their own challenges and begin to construct their very own learning – and it is the constructions of one's own learning that engagement with peers and adults is more likely to occur (Bayley, Featherstone and Featherstone, 2008).

According to child psychologist and philosopher Jean Piaget, what children learn about nature and the environment has a direct correlation with the amount of time children physically spend in the outdoors (Mooney, 2000). Through children's continued engagement with nature and the outdoors, they learn empathy for what is known as the nonhuman world – the environment. This is supported by Friedrich Froebel's musing that children will never

come to care for nature and the environment if they are not afforded the opportunities to directly experience the natural world (Tovey, 2007).

Tovey (2007) also remarks that the outdoors provides children with a multitude of sensory experiences. When children experience the world first-hand, they are able to learn through their different senses. Margaret and Rachel McMillan, renowned for their work with children and active learning, state that a child's learning is improved by the sensory experiences provided to children in the outdoors (Conkbayir and Pascal, 2015). In the Autumn Crown experience, children are afforded opportunities to explore different sensory experiences – feeling the mud on the floor as they crouch, feeling the branches brush against them as they walk by trees and bushes and smelling the natural aroma of a wooded area. These experiences help to enrich the activity and provide children with a learning platform that is fun as well as illuminating.

This outdoor experience is designed to occur in a relatively small but intimate wooded area. The small size of the area allows the supervising adults to closely monitor the children and to ensure they do not wander too far, but is filled with enough greenery so as not to feel cramped and like the children are in one another's way. The children will have ample opportunity to explore the wooded area and will be encouraged to safely interact with the natural elements. This movement within the outdoor environment offers children the opportunities to discover different things about the environment on their own and to also learn about themselves – what they like and dislike about particular parts of the outdoors (Bilton, 2010). White (2011) concurs, noting that children's mental development is enhanced when children undertake movement in learning. This idea is supported by Gabbard and Rodrigues (2008) who also pose that practitioners should endeavour to acquaint children with experiences of learning through movement within early years settings.

Jean Piaget advocated the theory of learning by doing – a form of learning through movement – and likened learning to an active process (MacLeod-Brudenell, 2004). According to Piaget, it is direct interaction with the environment that allows children to shape their knowledge and not by being given explicit instructions (Mooney, 2002).

If this experience were to be carried out again, it may be more beneficial to find a larger, more spaced out area of woodland in which to allow the children even more freedom. This may require additional supervising adults who can extend the surveillance and ensure the safety of the children in the public space. Building on that, it may also be beneficial to find private property located in a wooded area and gain express permission to use it for the

purpose of the experience. This will add a layer of security as there will be no spontaneous appearance from members of the public. A definite positive of the Autumn Crown experience is that the children were afforded the opportunity to experience freedom and exploration was encouraged. Conkbayir and Pascal (2014) remark that this exploration, which allows children to learn in their own way and construct their own model of learning, enables them to learn effectively via their very own first hand experiences.

This experience was deliberately arranged to take place outdoors as it allowed for the possibility of what Stephenson (2002) interprets as open-endedness. The open ended nature of the outdoor environment means that it has copious amounts of possibilities and opportunities for learning as it is a less controlled environment than a classroom or school yard. The children were afforded opportunities to explore and use their imagination to use natural elements to design and create something unique to them and their creative ability.

The items that the children use to create their Autumn Crowns can be considered to be Loose Parts.

“The pedagogical approach for loose parts is to enable children to undertake their own learning using everyday objects rather than ‘toys’. The concept originates from architect Simon Nicholson who wrote about the benefits of a loose parts environment to child development.”

(Professional Association for Childcare and Early Years, 2019).

Loose parts are materials that children can move, manipulate and control within their play. There are endless possibilities with regards to how Loose Parts can be played with and represent a significant degree of choice and especially creativity in children and within the early years (Oxfordshire Play Association, 2010). The Autumn Crown experience allows for the interaction with these loose parts: the children will collect natural elements from the wooded area with which to create their Autumn Crowns, using sticks to create the structure, with leaves and pinecones providing decoration. Tovey (2007) stresses the benefits of outdoor learning, remarking that it offers a significant supply of open-endedness potential that affords children the opportunities to develop their creativity and proficiency in the symbolic use of natural, everyday items.

Daly and Beloglovsky (2015) remark that the open-endedness and countless possibilities that loose parts offer is the main reason young children prefer them to toys that are single function. Jean Piaget’s theory that children create their own learning by doing is supported by the concept of loose parts. This is because the loose parts can become anything a child

wants them to become and are only limited by their own creativity and imagination, which will develop and improve with continued use of loose parts and learning by doing. In the Autumn Crown experience, the children could use mud to create the illusion of leaves being different colours and stick other small twigs onto it to create decoration. If this experience were to be repeated it would perhaps be beneficial to choose an area with a more diverse variation of loose parts.

The experience was designed with the idea that the children would collaborate and offer ideas to one another as well as share the resources that were given to them and the items they found. For instance, if a child had picked up a natural item that they had not used that another child wanted, the first child would share and cooperate with the second child, perhaps in return for something that the second child had collected but also not used. It was also designed in such a way so as to afford the children with opportunities to help each other traverse the terrain and navigate the foliage, as well as help each other assemble the Autumn Crown and to give ideas on what could be done to make it "better." This, in part, is what Soviet psychologist Lev Vygotsky refers to as scaffolding and social interaction (Mooney, 2000). Vygotsky suggested that, in addition to learning by doing, children also learn by interacting with one another and aiding in each other's learning. In the experience, if one child had helped another child to change their thought process or to consider a new way of designing their Autumn Crown, this would be a prime example of Scaffolding. Vygotsky also believed that children learn a considerable amount from a More Knowledgeable Other, which can take the form of peers or adults. Although the adults in child led activities must take care not to intrude too much, there is always scope for adults to help and give a child minor direction if they find themselves truly unable to take the next step in a given activity or experience. It may also be prudent for adults to pair together two children of differing abilities at any given activity. The more knowledgeable child can help the other child in the activity and provide comfort and support as a peer who is also a More Knowledgeable Other. Primarily, in child led activities, the main role of the adult is to engage in what is known as Sustained Shared Thinking. Sustained Shared Thinking is when two or more children or adults work together to solve a problem. When each party contribute to the reasoning and development of problem-solving, that is Sustained Shared Thinking (Siraj-Blatchford et al., 2000).

When an adult shares a legitimate interest with a child in any given subject, they may encourage the child to share views and to urge the child not to rush through an activity so as to better enjoy it (Bilton, 2010). It is the role of the adult in this experience to meaningfully

interact with the children by asking questions and supporting them through the activity to find ways of reaching the child's end goal of creating an Autumn Crown, thus developing the child's creative thinking and knowledge. This is easier to do with small groups where the adults can spend more time with each child, which is a benefit of this experience. The most engaging settings more often than not regularly employ Sustained Shared Thinking. This is something that can be done at home between children and their parents as well as in settings between children and practitioners.

Sustained Shared Thinking thrives on open ended questions – questions that do not necessarily have a definitive yes or no answer but instead lead the child to wonder about the outcome and experience curiosity (Tovey, 2007). Jean Piaget advocated the use of open ended questions, remarking that they support the cognitive development in children because they encourage children to think for themselves (Mooney, 2000).

The experience was deliberately designed to take place in an area of woodland with bumpy and irregular terrain, with the aim of providing children with the opportunities to develop their gross motor skills and greater physical abilities. A child's balance and coordination can be improved simply by walking, running and playing on uneven terrain (Fjortoft, 2004). This is supported by Voloshina (2013) who states that movement over uneven ground requires the body to work harder to regain and retain its centre of gravity due to the nature of the structure of the human foot. The children were encouraged to move up to higher parts of the terrain and to crouch to see and reach under foliage to retrieve resources with which to design and construct their Autumn Crown. As the children explore the wooded area and begin to traverse the different heights and terrains, they will develop their proprioception – described by Williams (2018) as “the body's ability to perceive its own position in space.” Woodfield (2014) offers a similar explanation of proprioception, describing it as knowing where one's body is without the need to look. In relation to the Autumn Crown experience, the children will be crouching and ducking to ensure they do not bump their heads into overhead branches.

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