

Module Code: ECEY5010/C

Student Number: 2503246

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How does outdoor play impact early childhood development ?

A literature review (903 words)

Outdoor play is widely recognised and encouraged for early childhood development as it contributes to children's physical, emotional, social , and the overall holistic development of children . Research indicates that the natural environments specifically outdoors provide dynamic and challenging playscapes which encourage children to develop their motor skills. (Fjortoft, 2004). Outdoor play also helps children with their social skills, confidence and building relationships, as it encourages children to use their imaginations and interact with each other. However, despite the many benefits outdoor play has there is a major decline in this as new technology has caused an increase in screen time , and children not wanting to be outdoors. This literature review aims to explore how outdoor play impacts early childhood development by looking at key themes within research already made, including children's holistic development and the barriers to outdoor play.

There is already a lot of research taken place to suggest that outdoor play has a significant impact on children's development during the early years. Outdoor play helps massively with children's cognitive development helping the way children think, learn, solve – problems and process information. Piaget's theory argues that children learn most effectively through active exploration and hands – on experiences, which outdoor environments naturally encourage. Also, that outdoor play is a powerful pedagogical tool that motivates children's sensory, intellectual, and motor growth. (Sigalingging et al. 2025). Climbing, den-building, and imaginative play are examples of activities that help children explore their environment on their own whilst strengthening problem solving and decision-making skills through exploration. Bilton (2010), similarly agrees that that outdoor environments provide children with greater freedom to express themselves and build confidence through exploration and imaginative play. She also says that the outdoors is a complete learning area that caters to all children's needs,

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and the outdoors should be available to children every day alongside the classroom. Outdoor play encourages children to be active helping to tackle childhood obesity by encouraging plenty of opportunities for movement such as running, climbing, jumping and much more. It promotes an active lifestyle and helps reduce the amount of time children are sat indoors, research suggests that plenty of physical activity is essential for maintaining a healthy weight and reducing the risk of obesity related issues later on in life. (Stone, M.R and Faulkner, G.E.J. 2014). This shows that outdoor play not only supports children's physical development but also contributes to their long-term health and wellbeing. Alongside physical development, outdoor play is beneficial for children's social and emotional development too. It encourages children to communicate, work together, and build relationships with others through shared play experiences. Activities such as den-building encourage children to work as a team to create the best dens and teaches them how to negotiate and solve conflicts independently without adult intervention. Outdoor play also helps children build confidence and manage risks during play, but most importantly it provides children the freedom to express themselves creatively through imaginative and child-led play.

However not all research agrees fully with these benefits, Whitebread (2012) argues that opportunities for outdoor and free play are declining due to factors such as increased screen time, urbanisation and parental safety concerns. This decline in outdoor play may negatively impact children's opportunities to develop important cognitive and social skills through exploration and interaction with others. Furthermore, children who spend increased amounts of time using technology may engage in less physical activity, which can affect both their physical health and overall wellbeing. Also, not all children have equal access to safe and stimulating outdoor areas. Children living in urban areas may have less access to parks, gardens, or any natural environments, reducing the opportunities for exploring the outdoors. This lack of access may have a negative impact on children's physical, social and emotional development, however in some cases it can't be helped (Loebach, J et al. 2021). Therefore, although outdoor play has a positive impact on early childhood development it only helps if children are lucky

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enough to have these spaces available to them. Outdoor play may also be affected by weather conditions, as many early years settings lack appropriate outdoor resources or sheltered areas. Therefore, during poor weather conditions children may be unable to participate in outdoor play activities. One of the main reasons for this lack of outdoor equipment is limited funding available for outdoor equipment and suitable learning environments. This may restrict children's opportunities to engage in active and exploratory play throughout the year, potentially impacting their physical activity levels and overall development. Some practitioners may avoid outdoor play during poor weather conditions due to health and safety concerns, reducing opportunities for consistent outdoor learning experiences.

In conclusion, this literature review strongly suggests that outdoor play has a positive impact on early childhood development. Research consistently highlights the importance of outdoor play in supporting children's cognitive, physical, social and emotional development through opportunities for exploration, creativity and interaction with others, supporting children's overall holistic development. However, the literature review also highlights the barriers of outdoor play such as increased screen time, urbanisation and unequal access to outdoor environments which may potentially limit children's opportunities to experience these developmental benefits. Therefore, it is important that early year's settings continue to prioritise accessible and high-quality outdoor play opportunities for all children. Future research may also be needed to explore how outdoor play can be made more inclusive and accessible for children from different socioeconomic backgrounds and communities.

Methodological considerations (1,403 words)

The aim of this research is to explore how outdoor play impacts early childhood development. A qualitative research approach would be best for this research, this focuses on people's experiences, opinions, and feelings rather than numbers or

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statistics. (Creswell, J.W & Creswell J.D (2024). This will allow for a deeper understanding of how children interact, their behaviours, and developmental experiences specifically in forest school sessions. A qualitative approach will be used for this research as it enables the researcher to gain a deeper understanding of children's experiences and behaviours within a natural outdoor environment instead of concentrating only on number results. This approach may provide more detailed information about how outdoor play can support children's social, emotional, physical, and communication development during forest school sessions.

The sample for this research would include forest school practitioners, parents, and most importantly the children who regularly attend forest school sessions. Practitioners would be asked to share their own experiences of how outdoor play has benefited the children's development in forest school settings. Parents would be asked to complete a questionnaire based on their experiences and opinions, an example of a questions that could be asked are ' how has your child's behaviour changed since attending forest school sessions?' and ' have you noticed any changes in you're child's confidence, social skills, and development?'. Questionnaires have many advantages due to how flexible they can be, they can be customised to meet the criteria for nearly all research projects. Questionnaires are great for finding out how people feel , what they know, and their opinions. (McNabb. D.E. (2019). P.N.135.) The most important part of my research would come from the children themselves; they would discuss their favourite parts of forest school sessions and why they love being outdoors. By doing this it helps to provide a range of different perspectives and experiences on the impact playing outdoors has on childrens development.

Research methods that will be used for this would be questionnaires, informal discussions, and observations. Questionnaires would be handed out to parents of children who regularly attend forest school sessions, these could either be emailed over or printed out depending on parent's preferences. These questionnaires will help us collect data on children's behaviours, confidence, and children's overall holistic

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development after time outdoors. In addition to this we would also have informal discussions with the children to see what their favourite part of forest school is, why they enjoy being outdoors, and how they feel whilst playing outside. We will also do an activity for children to draw or write their favourite things about the outdoors too.

Observing these sessions will also be very useful to see how children behave, interact, and communicate with each other. This method is best as children will feel much more comfortable being observed in the natural environment rather than in a structured classroom setting. Delve, (2022) says that observations can also be known as 'observational research' this is a technique where you observe participants in their natural environments. This allows the researchers to see them make choices and see their behaviours where they are most comfortable rather than in a research lab. Having multiple research methods helps to gather plenty of data , viewpoints, and more reliable findings as all information can be compared. Triangulation will be a method used for this research which basically means using multiple methods and sources so that different viewpoints and opinions are given on the topic, helping to identify similar themes and experiences. (Olsen, W. (2004).

Ethical considerations are extremely important within this research as children are involved, and before any research takes place consent needs to be given from parents/guardians and practitioners. It's important to make sure they are fully aware of the purpose of the research and how information will be collected and stored. Children will also be asked if they are happy and comfortable to participate in activities and discussions, the main aim would be to ensure it doesn't feel like a quiz. Confidentiality will always be at the top of our minds throughout the research, to ensure this is done properly participants identities will be kept private and no real names will be used. Alongside this safeguarding procedures would need to be followed throughout all research to make sure all children are safe and protected during all observations and discussions. All participants will have the right to withdraw from the research at any point if they no longer want to take part. Ensuring to follow ethical guidelines is essential

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for the research to be done fairly, equally and respectful for everyone involved. UKRI, (2023) says that during all research to follow ethical guidelines all researchers should seek to create positive outcomes for individuals, society, and the environment while reducing any potential risks or harm. It is important that the rights, dignity, and wellbeing of all individuals and groups are respected throughout the process. Participation in research should, wherever possible, be voluntary and based on clear and informed consent. In addition, research partnerships should be open, respectful, and beneficial to everyone involved. Researchers should also ensure that equality, diversity, and inclusion are considered in every aspect of their work.

Although there are many benefits to this form of research methods, there are some limitations to take into consideration. One of these limitations being what's known as the 'Hawthorne effect', this is where people may act differently and change their behaviours as they know they are being watched. (Spencer, E and Mahtani, K. 2017). Due to this some findings could become less reliable as children may act differently to how they typically would in other sessions. Another limitation could be that the questionnaire completed by parents may not provide accurate results. The reason behind this is that some parents may unintentionally exaggerate or even underestimate the impact the outdoors and forest schools have had on their children. You could also consider the age of the children as some children aged 3-5 years may struggle to communicate their feelings during discussions. Speech and Language UK, (2026) suggests that some children around this age may struggle to communicate and are unable to have long conversations due to not understanding the words. This has the potential to limit the amount of detailed information we are able to collect from the children themselves. Lastly, as only a small number of practitioners, parents, and children would take part in the research it may become hard to generalise the answers. This means the findings may not be accurate for all early year's settings/ families , especially ones that do not use forest school or have limited access to the outdoors. Forest School environments may also provide different experiences compared to other

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nursery settings, meaning the results may not apply to every child. However, using different research methods and perspectives may help make the findings more reliable, as information can be compared from different participants. In conclusion, the research methods chosen for this study are suitable for exploring how outdoor play impacts early childhood development within Forest School settings. Using a qualitative research approach allows for a deeper and better understanding of children's behaviours, interactions and developmental experiences through the views of practitioners, parents and the children themselves. Methods such as observations, questionnaires and informal discussions help provide a range of different perspectives, whilst triangulation may improve the reliability of the findings by comparing information from multiple sources. Although there are limitations such as the Hawthorne effect, small group sizes and the possibility of unintentional biased responses, the research methods chosen are still appropriate for gaining detailed insight into the benefits and challenges of outdoor play. Ensuring ethical guidelines are followed throughout the research is also essential in order to protect all participants and create a safe and respectful research space.

In conclusion, the methods chosen for this study are suitable for exploring how outdoor play affects children's early development. Using a qualitative approach allows for a deeper understanding of children's experiences, behaviours, and interactions through the perspectives of practitioners, parents, and the children themselves. Methods such as questionnaires, observations, and informal discussions help gather a range of information, while triangulation strengthens the findings by comparing different viewpoints and sources of data. Although there are some limitations, including small sample sizes and the possibility of behavioural changes during observations, the study still provides valuable and important insight into the benefits of outdoor play.

Ethical Considerations (1525 words)

Ethical considerations play an important role within this research because young children are involved in the study. When carrying out research with children it is

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important to make sure all participants are treated fairly, safely and with respect throughout the entire research process. Children are considered a vulnerable group, meaning extra care must be taken to protect their wellbeing, privacy and rights during data collection for the research.(UNICEF, (2013) explains that regardless of the setting every research project must protect children's rights and well-being and respect their human dignity. This research would follow ethical guidelines such as the British Educational Research Association (BERA, 2018), as well as the Data Protection Act (2018) and GDPR regulations when collecting, storing and using information. The British Educational Research Association (BERA) 2018, states that educational researchers should work within a framework of respect for everyone involved in or affected by their research, including themselves. Researchers are expected to treat individuals with fairness, sensitivity, and dignity, while avoiding prejudice or discrimination. This approach recognises people's rights and values diversity across factors such as age, gender, sexuality, ethnicity, social class, nationality, cultural background, relationship status, religion, disability, political views, and other important personal characteristics. Legislation relating to data protection determines how organisations, such as companies and government agencies, are permitted to process and manage personal information. Within the UK, the main legal frameworks governing data protection are the UK General Data Protection Regulation (UK GDPR) and the Data Protection Act 2018. Those who are responsible for processing personal data are required to comply to a number of key principles designed to protect individual information unless a recognised exemption applies. (UK. Government, (2025). Following ethical procedures throughout the study will help ensure the research is carried out responsibly whilst protecting everyone involved.

Before any research takes place, informed consent would need to be gained from parents/guardians and practitioners involved within the study. Participants would be provided with an information sheet explaining the purpose of the research, how information will be collected, how the data will be used and their right to withdraw from

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the research at any time. As young children are involved within the study, assent would also need to be gained from the children themselves in an age-appropriate way. This means children would be asked if they are happy and comfortable to participate in activities, observations and informal discussions throughout the forest school sessions. It is important that children do not feel pressured or forced to take part, and researchers must respect a child's decision if they no longer wish to participate. Palaiologu, I (2026), explains that when carrying out research, it is important to recognise that even very young children can take part meaningfully, express their views, and contribute valuable insights. However, simply recognising this is not enough. Researchers have a major responsibility to make sure the child's wellbeing and best interests always come before the needs of the research itself. Ensuring consent and assent are gained helps make sure the research is conducted ethically and respectfully for all participants involved. However, a child agreeing to participate on their own is not always enough because children may not fully understand all risks involved. Therefore, researchers must make sure there is still adult support or protection to keep the child safe. (Cotrim, H et al. (2021).

Confidentiality and anonymity are important considerations within this research to ensure all participants personal information remains private and protected. No real names would be used throughout the research process, and participants would instead be given pseudonyms (fake names) to protect their identities. Any information collected from questionnaires, observations or discussions would remain confidential and only be accessed by the researchers that are involved in the study. In addition, all data would be stored securely using password protected devices or files in line with GDPR and the Data Protection Act (2018). Maintaining confidentiality and anonymity is important in helping participants feel comfortable, respected and safe whilst taking part in the research. Participants are also more likely to take part knowing that their confidentiality and anonymity are being taken into consideration and things are in place to protect this.

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Safeguarding and reducing risk are very important within this research because young children and outdoor environments are involved. The NSPCC, (2025) states that all children have the right to be protected from harm, and any organisation that works with or supports children should have safeguarding policies and procedures in place to help ensure their safety and wellbeing.

During all observations, discussions and activities, children's safety and wellbeing would always be the main priority. The researcher would be expected to follow the safeguarding policies and procedures already used within the forest school setting and make sure appropriate supervision is provided at all times. (Furey, R et al. (2010). Risk assessments would also need to be completed before outdoor activities take place in order to reduce the chance of accidents or injuries happening. Additionally, the researcher must ensure children feel comfortable, supported and not pressured during the research process. Any activities or discussions used within the study should be age-appropriate and designed to avoid causing distress or discomfort to the children. If any safeguarding concerns arose during the research, they would need to be reported following the setting's safeguarding procedures. Following safeguarding procedures correctly helps ensure the research is carried out safely, responsibly and respectfully for everyone involved.

Data collection and storage are important within this research to make sure all participants' information is kept safe and private. Secure data storage is important in protecting participants' confidentiality and privacy throughout the research process (BERA, 2018). Any information collected from questionnaires, observations and discussions would be stored on password protected devices or files that only the researcher can access. Paper copies of questionnaires or notes would also be kept in a safe and secure place when not being used. All information collected during the research would follow GDPR and the Data Protection Act (2018) to ensure personal information is handled properly. Participants would also be told how their information

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will be stored, how long it will be kept for and when it will be deleted after the research is complete. Keeping information safe and secure is important to protect participants' privacy and help them feel comfortable taking part in the research. This would be more appropriate for the questionnaires as they are the only research we collect that can be online. No matter what researchers must ensure personal data is handled securely and confidentially in line with UK GDPR principles. (Information Commissioners Office, (2023).

There are several risks that need to be considered within this research for the participants, researcher and university. One possible risk for participants is that children may feel uncomfortable or shy during observations or discussions, especially if they are aware they are being watched. To reduce this risk, activities would be kept informal, age-appropriate and carried out within familiar Forest School environments where children feel relaxed and comfortable. There is also a small risk of accidents or injuries occurring during outdoor activities due to the natural outdoor environment. To reduce this risk, all activities would follow the setting's health and safety procedures, and appropriate supervision would be provided at all times. (UCEA, (2025) also known as Universities and Colleges Employers Association says that health and safety legislation are equally as important within research as it is in any other professional setting. Although research can involve uncertainty and unexpected situations researchers should still ensure that unnecessary risks to themselves and others are avoided. Effective management procedures alongside appropriate training for everyone involved are important in creating a safe working environment throughout the research process. There may also be risks for the researcher, such as managing safeguarding concerns or ensuring confidentiality is maintained throughout the study. The researcher would need to follow safeguarding procedures carefully and store all information securely. In addition, the university's reputation could be affected if ethical guidelines are not followed correctly. Therefore, it is important that the research is carried out

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professionally, respectfully and in line with ethical policies and procedures throughout the entire study.

To conclude, ethical considerations play a very important role within this research because children are involved throughout the study. It is essential to make sure all participants feel safe, comfortable and respected during observations, discussions and activities within the Forest School sessions. Gaining informed consent from parents, practitioners and assent from the children themselves helps ensure that participation is voluntary and that everyone understands the purpose of the research. Maintaining confidentiality and securely storing all information collected also helps protect participants' privacy and personal details throughout the study. In addition, following safeguarding procedures and carrying out risk assessments are important in helping reduce any potential risks within the outdoor environment. Researchers also have a responsibility to ensure children are not made to feel pressured, uncomfortable or distressed whilst taking part in the research. Following ethical guidelines throughout the study helps ensure the research is carried out fairly, responsibly and professionally. Overall, strong ethical practice is essential in protecting participants, building trust and ensuring the research findings are collected in a safe and respectful way.

Overall word count: 3846 words

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