

# Research for Learning

## Contents:

Literature Review – Page 2

Methodology – Page 4

Ethics – Page 7

Reference List – Page 10

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## Literature Review

What are the beneficial differences between indoor and outdoor play for young children?

Play is widely recognised as a central element of early childhood development, influencing children's physical, cognitive, social and emotional growth. As children engage in both indoor and outdoor play, increasing attention has been paid to how these environments differentially support development. Indoor play often involves structured or imaginative activities within controlled environments, whereas outdoor play typically provides greater opportunities for physical exertion, risk-taking and interaction with nature, (Fjøltoft, 2004; Brussoni, Gibbons, Gray, Ishikawa and Sandseter, 2015). Understanding the distinct benefits of indoor versus outdoor play is fundamental for informing early years education and care practices. With trends in education leaning toward readiness and indoor academic tasks, it is important to assess what may be gained or lost through reduced outdoor playtime, (Gray, 2011). This literature review explores the beneficial differences between indoor and outdoor play in young children by incorporating research and theoretical perspectives, with the aim of informing balanced and developmentally appropriate play-based practices.

Children have become more absorbed with technology and because of this play cannot be spoken about enough. Indoor play offers young children a safe and inspiring environment where they can excel through physical and social tasks, (Off the Wall Kidz, 2024). A safe indoor play environment can enable children to take part in physical activities, this can advance a child's physical development. Creativity can also be enhanced when given the opportunity of indoor play. Indoor play can give young children a chance to engage with each other and can be disclosed to events that encourage them to develop their creativity. Children are more likely to express themselves with each other which can make it easier for them to learn off one another. Connecting with other children can also help with language development, forming friendships and sharing ideas, (St Peters Prep, 2021). Having a controlled environment can offer time for children to practice skills such as sharing, cooperating and communicating which will ultimately teach them teamwork and its importance, (Nido Early School, no date). Indoor play activities can also incorporate sensory elements which is beneficial to sensory development. Simple things such as, vibrant colours, a vary of sounds and different textures can create a multisensory environment, (Off the Wall Kidz, 2024).

Outdoor play is a fundamental part of a child's learning opportunities. As well as this it can also play a huge role in supporting and benefiting a child's mental and physical

wellbeing. Outdoor play is used as a strategy to keep young children fit and healthy, both mentally and physically. Activities such as climbing, jumping and running can help develop bone density and muscle development as well as physical fitness, (Early Years Alliance, 2022). Technology is advancing and becoming one of most popular activities that children like to enjoy, but playing on an iPad cannot teach young children the importance of the outdoors, spending time with others and how to engage with them or sensory engagement. As stated by Miracle, “watching television only requires the use of two senses, hearing and sight”. Children who regularly watch TV find it more difficult to respond to sensory situations compared to children who regularly play outdoors. This is because the children who have spent more time outside have also learnt and experienced more sensory engagement through experimentation and exploration, (Miracle, no date). Outdoor play is one of the only times where children are able to play freely. Despite the fact that parents/carers are usually close by, it still gives children the feeling of independence to explore and learn by themselves or in a group. The outdoors is unpredictable, something such as the weather cannot be controlled and can easily change. By being used to the outdoors it can give children the confidence in change and being comfortable with it, (Miracle, no date).

When comparing both indoor and outdoor play it is noticeable that outdoor play offers more opportunities for physical development. When given the physical activities such as running, dancing and jumping, children are more likely to improve on aspects of their physical development. This does not mean that indoor play does not offer the chance for physical activity, it is a more controlled environment compared to outdoors, (Fun Street, no date). When engaging in indoor play activities, young children can be reduced from harm and injuries. Soft play areas are designed to be safe for young children. They are filled with padded surfaces to reduce risk of injury unlike the outdoors which is unpredictable. Soft play for young children can also be used all year round and not dependent on the weather, (Fun Street, no date). In contrast to this, outdoor play in “wild” and “wooded” environments, like forest schools, gives children opportunities to explore and engage with nature and unpredictable surfaces. Children are also exposed to different sounds and textures outdoors compared to indoors. This allows young children to develop and learn about balance and coordination, (Early Movers, no date).

In conclusion both indoor and outdoor play provide distinct and fundamental benefits for young children’s development. Indoor play fosters creativity, social skills and cognitive growth in a safe, controlled environment, while outdoor play encourages physical activity and sensory engagement and independence through unstructured exploration. Each environment supports different aspects of development with indoor play offering a structured space for learning and outdoor play providing opportunities for risk-taking and connection with nature. A balanced approach that incorporates both indoor and outdoor play is important for well-rounded growth. Since indoor play activities are becoming more popular it is important to ensure that young children still

have the opportunity to engage in outdoor play for its unique developmental benefits. By valuing both types of play, educators and caregivers can help children excel in their physical, social and cognitive development.

## Methodology

This essay aims to explore the research methods used to investigate the beneficial differences between indoor and outdoor play for young children, notably analysing their physical, cognitive and social development. Qualitative and quantitative research paradigms will be focused upon to provide different insights into this area of study. Although there will be difference between the two, they can complement each other. As well as mentioning qualitative and quantitative research, triangulation will also be explored as to how it can combine data from different sources. Understanding how each environment can support a child's physical, cognitive and social develop is important for providing an understanding and interest in practices in the early years.

Methodology is a framework researchers use to design and support their studies. It is seen as fundamental for creating a clear structure and ensuring that the research that is collected is factually accurate. According to Paperpal (2023), having a solid methodology in place ensures that the findings are both reliable and consistent. Without a good methodology, the results of a study could be untrustworthy. Mehtodology ensures credibility and consistency in the research, (indeed, 2025).

In this research proposal, a mixed methods approach has been chosen. A mixed methods approach is a way of combining both qualitative and quantitative research and data and can also be described as triangulation. This has been chosen because each approach offers different insights. Together, both research methods provide accurate information as to how outdoor and indoor play can influence a child's development. Using both methods will give an accurate, detailed and descriptive analysis. By using qualitative research and supporting the findings with quantitative research, it will give a detailed and descriptive analysis. Triangulation is important for this to ensure that the resulted are reliable. For example, if qualitative data shows children engaging more socially indoors, and quantitative counts reveal more peer interaction indoors, the consistency strengthens the conclusion that indoor play supports social development.

Similarly, higher physical activity measured outdoors would coordinate with observed energetic behaviours. Triangulation helps strengthen the overall findings, (Leavy, 2020).

Qualitative data is seen and described as a way that is able to explore the depth of a research topic. Its aim is to look for the deeper answers and insights, (Brennan et al., 2022). Since quantitative data is based upon numerical data, it cannot give you the answer as to why, whereas qualitative data can give that answer. To compare, quantitative research is mainly focused on number data. It is a method that is used to collect data that can be measure and compared. Quantitative data is ideal for identifying patterns and trends in a more objective way, (Scribbr, 2022). This type of research can demonstrate whether outdoor play leads to significantly higher physical activity levels compared to indoor play, (Early Years Alliance, 2022).

For this project qualitative research will be used to investigate how children interact socially. Observing how problems are solved or how they express their thoughts and feelings to each other will give a detailed results unlike quantitative. Observations will be used both indoors and outdoors for a fully accurate result. Children indoors may be more prone to use imaginative or cooperative play, whereas children that play outdoors may be more likely to engage in physically active and exploratory play, (Off the Wall Kidz, 2024). These observations will help uncover the ways that each environment supports different areas of development and their benefits.

Also, for this project, qualitative research and data will be collected through structures observations to count how often children participate in certain activities, such as running, climbing and interacting with other children. This data collected will provide a measurable amount of evidence of the extent to which physical activity or social engagement occurs in each environment.

The research will focus on a small sample of children aged 3 to 5 years of a age. This age group has been chosen as it is a key developmental stage where play significantly supports learning and growth. Between the ages of 3 and 4, the social element of play is enlarged and focused on peer relationships. It is also an age where school comes into focus, (Lurie Children's, no date). Young children will be selected from a local early years setting that incorporates regular indoor and outdoor play within their daily routine. A sample size of 8 to 12 children will be researched. This relatively small group allows for detailed, individualised observations while remaining manageable for one researcher to collect consistent and meaningful data. The group will include a mix of genders and abilities to ensure a variety of play styles and developmental responses are recorded. This diversity allows the researcher to consider how indoor and outdoor environments may benefit children differently based on their individual needs and preferences.

Time sampling will be a method used. This involves observing and recording children's behaviours at different times for a certain amount of time. For example, every minute or every 5 minutes, (Study.com, 2023). This method is useful for tracking how much time children spend in different types of play outdoors versus indoors. It is a reliable way to gather quantitative data on the duration and frequency of behaviours. Time sampling is a beneficial research method because it allows for a more effective use of time. This type of observation may seem brief, but it allows the researcher to focus on specific behaviours and activities, (Teach, no date). Since the data collected from this method is numerical, this is a quantitative research method.

When conducting research on the beneficial differences between indoor and outdoor play for young children, the mosaic approach can be used alongside other methods like observation and time sampling to collect a broad range of data. The mosaic approach involves combining multiple methods to capture children's experiences and voices. These multi-methods can be children's interviews or conversations, contributions from parents and educators and children's own creations, (Sevón, Mustola, Siippainen and Vlasov, 2023).

Another quantitative method that can be used are questionnaires with the parents/teachers. Questionnaires can be seen as another beneficial quantitative research method because it can result in quality usable data and can achieve high response rates. Since questionnaires are answered with anonymity, they are more likely to generate honest answers, (Marshall, 2005).

An example of a qualitative research method that will be used is a focus group. The sample size of children will be gathered and formed into a focus group. The main goal of a focus group is to answer the "why, what and how" questions. It is a highly successful way in finding out people's thoughts and feelings, (Omnicore, 2023). Since they will be focused on young children, simple and open-ended interviews will be carried out. Asking simple questions about how they feel about indoor versus outdoor play and ask what they enjoy about each.

Ethnographic research can be described as one of the most detailed qualitative research methods. It is mainly used in social settings and involves an in-depth study of people and cultures in their natural environments, (Reeves, Jenner, Goldman and Kitto, 2013). Ethnography research is an appropriate method for this study as it allows for an in-depth exploration of young children's play behaviours in their natural environments, both indoors and outdoors. Through observations and interaction, this research method will provide the researcher with detailed and accurate insights into social, cultural and developmental aspects of play that may not be captured through quantitative research solely. By immersing in the children's natural play setting, the researcher can observe how different environments influence the ways children interact, solve problems and express creativity. This will provide an understanding of

the benefits associated with indoor and outdoor play. Although interviews are also used for ethnographic research, an observation will show more information. (Simply Psychology, 2024).

In conclusion, looking at the benefits of indoor versus outdoor play in young children calls for a thoughtful mix of research methods. Qualitative and quantitative approaches give a useful insight into how these different environments support young children's physical, cognitive, and social growth. Combining these methods through triangulation helps make sure the results are as accurate as possible. Methods such as observations, time sampling, questionnaires, and focus groups give a wider understanding of children's play, showing what they do, how they experience it and how they enjoy it. By using a mix of approaches, the research can identify the true beneficial differences between indoor and outdoor play for young children.

## Ethics

This essay will explore the ethical considerations involved in conducting research with young children, focusing on a proposed research study that investigates the beneficial differences between indoor and outdoor play in early years settings. The aim of the research is to examine how these environments support children's physical, cognitive and social development. While the methodology of this research project relies on a mixed methods approach, including observations, time sampling and questionnaires, the ethical dimensions of working with children must be considered with particular care.

Research involving children, especially in the early years age group of 3 to 5, offers the researcher unique ethical challenges. Young children may not fully understand the purpose of the study or their rights within it. This means that careful planning is required to ensure that the children feel safe, treated fairly and with decency, (BERA, 2018). Ethical research is much more than following rules. It requires a commitment to protecting the wellbeing, dignity and voices of those involved, (BERA, 2018). This essay will examine key ethical principles and how they apply to this project, as well as the practical steps needed to carry out this research responsibly.

Seeking out consent from the child and/or parent or carer is one of the most important aspects of an ethical approach for research. According to ERIC (2024), the children must have an understanding of the research top and what their role would be in getting the results, the consent must be obtained by the children, parents/carers and even the institution they are involved in if necessary and the consent must be voluntary and renegotiable. As the research project will evolve slightly over time it is important that the participants have an understanding of what is to come and feel safe enough to change their mind if necessary. Manti and Licari (2018) suggest that when gaining consent from the participants, the information provided must be the details of what research will be conducted and how, the expected time that the participant will be researched and a statement that proves that the research is voluntary and can be taken back at any time. All of this information can be put into a consent form which can then be presented to the participant or to the parent/carers when appropriate. According to the UNCRC (2016), children have the right to preserve their identity. This means that if they consider changing their mind on the research project, it is within their right to do so. Relating to that, withdrawn consent is the process in which someone decides to revoke their consent. Withdrawn consent allows the participant to part ways with their agreement freely, (Enzuzo 2023). As stated by the UNCRC (United Nations, 1989, Art 12), children have the right to express their views freely within all matters that concern and affect them. This means that it is important for the researcher to actively listen to the children's opinions and preferences. If a child says that they do not want to participate or change their mind at any point in the process that is their right and must be respected by the researcher. Body language should also be taken into consideration.

Respecting a young child's privacy and anonymity involves close consideration and awareness during the planning for the research project and the project itself. Children may wish to disclose certain aspects of themselves and that is their right, (ERIC, 2022). The UNCRC (United Nations, 1989, Art 16), states that privacy and the right to free of intrusion is a basic human right. The NSPCC (2023), states that in order to protect children when involved with research is by assessing all of the risks and express clear benefits. Young children may find that taking part in a research project to be stressful. The researcher should aim to make the children feel as safe and at ease as possible. The researcher must also be aware of the sensitivity of the children as the research

project may bring back unwanted memories or give the children unwanted feelings. Confidentiality is a central and fundamental part of good care. Without a strong understanding of confidentiality, the participant may not want to participate in the research. Respecting the value and importance of confidentiality is important when associated with young children and their protection, (General Medical Council, no date).

The first step in protecting the children and reducing them from risk is by providing the children/parent with an informed consent form. On the consent form will be clear information stating what the research project is about, why it is being performed and all of the activities that will be carried out in order to gain the knowledge and information needed. It is important that any and all details are provided within the informed consent form. It is also important that it is made aware that participation is voluntary and at any point withdrawal is allowed, linking back to the UNCRC (2016). Observations should be thought out and planned efficiently. The children should not be able to notice that the observation is taken place. Observations should cause no interrupt to the children and should be child-led, (Teach Early Years, no date). A risk assessment will be carried out before the research project has begun. A risk assessment is a process for identifying any potential risks. If any risks have been identified, reasonable measures will be implemented in order to reduce the risk of any harm from the young children, (British Safety Council, no date). Not only will risk assessments be used to protect the children, but they will also be used to protect the researcher. The risk assessment will be used to identify all risks for all that are involved, including the researcher. It is also important for the researcher to consider any potential risks to themselves, (Joint Research Management Office, no date).

According to the General Data Protection Regulation (2018), all personal data must be processed lawfully and fairly and requires any incorrect personal data to be edited, however the GDPR does not state how long you are able to store the personal information. The researcher must be able to justify why the information, and details need to be collected and how long for. This should be stated in the consent form. If the personal names and ages of the young children is not necessary or appropriate to use, then that data should be made anonymous so that the identification of the child is not possible, (ico, 2018). One strategy in protecting the University is by collecting a written policy that will state to the participant how long different areas of the research will be held for. This policy given by the University will ensure that the researcher will follow it with care and responsibility, (ico, 2018). University Of Wales Trinity St Davids (2025), states that everyone has a right to choose how their personal information and data is stored and handled. The researcher will have to work according to the UWTSD policy and also follow the legal basis for protecting data, under the General Data Protection Regulation (2018) and the Data Protection Act (2018). The researcher must be aware of the policies put in place by the institution that are related to the storage of personal

data on a lawful basis, how to share data appropriately, keeping data when necessary and how to report incidents. The researcher must only collect the data that they need and avoid collecting sensitive information. By ensuring that these frameworks are honoured will minimise risk to the researcher as well as the University.

In conclusion, conducting any research with children requires a high level of ethical awareness and responsibility. Children aged 3 to 5 are a vulnerable age group, as this is a key developmental age, and they rely on the adults. It is the researcher's responsibility to safeguard their wellbeing and protect and honour their rights throughout the research process. The ethical principles set out by BERA (2018), ERIC (2024), and the UNCRC (1989), identify and highlight the importance of informed consent and also voluntary consent. It also focuses on the respect of confidentiality and the researcher's responsibility to reduce the risk of harm to the child. Compliance with the General Data Protection Regulation (2018) and the Data Protection Act (2018), and the institutional policies such as the UWTSD Data Protection Policy (2025), ensures that personal information is handled lawfully, fairly and securely. By carefully planning and assessing risks, the researcher can create a research project that highlights valuable information on indoor and outdoor play, but also that protects and honours the rights of the children involved.

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