

Part 3:

Blog: Outdoor Play in Early Childhood: Empowering Learning through Exploration

Early childhood education is a crucial stage where children learn and develop various skills. Play is the center of early childhood education, and it allows children to learn and grow. Outdoor play, in particular, offers unique benefits for children's physical, cognitive, and social-emotional development (Lund, Ruser and LøndalK, 2023; Welsh Government, n.d). When children engage in outdoor play, they have a chance to explore and learn about their surroundings, build their creativity and imagination, and improve their physical health and well-being.

The Welsh Government (2015) states that the foundation phase should encourage children's discovery, independence, and increased use of the outdoor environment as a learning resource. Moreover, outdoor play supports children's rights under the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child. Article 31 of the convention recognizes the importance of play, leisure, and recreation for children's holistic development. Furthermore, when children engage in outdoor play, they exercise their right to play, enjoy the outdoors, and connect with nature. Over time, outdoor play can help children become more environmentally aware and responsible.

It is essential to recognize that both indoor and outdoor play areas are valuable learning settings in early childhood education. Indoor play areas can offer children opportunities to engage in imaginative and creative play, develop their social skills, and enhance their problem-solving abilities (Sandseter, Storli and Sando, 2022). However, outdoor play areas provide a unique and stimulating environment for children to learn and grow (Maynard and Waters, 2014). As such, early childhood education should ensure that children have access to indoor and outdoor play spaces to learn and develop holistically.

As practitioners who care about children's development, they want to ensure they have the best possible start in life. Outdoor activities can be vital in developing your child's

motor skills, especially during early childhood (White, 2013). However, some practitioners put barriers to children's outdoor movements because they believe there are risks involved during outdoor play (Sandseter, Kleppe, and Sando, 2021). As practitioners, they should allow children to be capable learners and be their support system. For instance, if a child wants to walk over an uneven balance beam, the practitioner should guide the child across instead of saying, "Come down from there, you can get hurt." Adults have the power to inspire children's learning beyond the confines of the classroom. By fostering an environment responsive to children's interests while allowing them to maintain control of their activities, adults may help them discover the joy of learning outdoors (Waters and Rekers, 2019). Several studies have revealed that physical exploration and movement through outdoor play can make a significant difference in enhancing children's motor skills (Archer and Siraj, 2015; Lindon, 2015). Running, jumping, climbing, and playing with balls are outdoor activities that help children develop balance, coordination, and spatial awareness. Furthermore, outdoor play encourages the development of gross motor skills (Duncombe, 2019), which are essential for everyday activities such as walking, running, and jumping. Adults can help children flourish and achieve their maximum potential by encouraging them to engage in outdoor activities.

On the other hand, Johnson and Watts (2018) believe that playing outdoors in all kinds of weather sparks children's natural curiosity, encourages their love for learning, and ignites a lifelong passion for exploration. It is essential to provide young children with opportunities beyond the confines of a classroom to enhance their abilities, including emotional regulation, critical thinking, problem-solving, and self-esteem (Wilson, 2012). Encouraging children to connect with nature and cultivate their spirituality can be highly beneficial, as recent research has indicated that dedicating time to nature can significantly impact all aspects of a child's growth and development (Bilton *et al.* 2005; White, 2020). Apart from promoting relaxation, concentration, and environmental awareness, it may also help children develop better communication skills and instill a sense of responsibility towards the world around them (Bilton, 2002). Therefore,

introducing children to nature can inspire them to lead a wholesome life while nurturing their overall well-being and development.

Furthermore, Froebel (1782-1852 cited in Pound, 2006) believed in teaching children about all aspects of nature, not just plants and animals. He thought that letting children play outside in gardens and other outdoor spaces was one of the best ways for them to learn about nature (Garrick, 2004; Garrick, 2009). Outdoor environments would provide a rich and immersive learning experience, allowing children to observe and interact with nature firsthand (Tovey, 2013). Children need to have the presence of capable and driven practitioners, which is paramount in harnessing the full potential of the great outdoors and adapting to the unique requirements of those who partake in it. The natural world offers a wealth of stimuli that spark curiosity, foster exploration, fuel creativity, and encourage a healthy dose of disorder that is impossible to recreate indoors. With practitioners who genuinely appreciate nature and inspire children to learn by following their lead, optimal learning outcomes are achieved.

One effective way of improving children's learning experience during outdoor play is by practitioners providing them with loose parts. Loose parts refer to materials that can be moved, carried, combined, redesigned, lined up, taken apart, and put back together in various ways. These materials could include sticks, stones, cardboard boxes, fabric, and other natural and man-made resources. By incorporating loose parts into children's play, practitioners can encourage creativity, problem-solving, and critical thinking skills (Daly and Beloglovsky, 2015). Additionally, loose parts can help children develop social skills such as cooperation and communication as they work together to build and design structures. Therefore, providing loose parts during outdoor play can significantly enhance children's overall experience and promote holistic development.

Our cherished memories of outdoor experiences as adults remind us of the power of connection and discovery they offer. Unfortunately, many children today are missing out on this magic, overburdened by indoor activities like computer games and movies. Let's do our best to inspire the next generation to embrace the outdoors and all the joy it

brings. The great outdoors holds the key to unlocking a world of possibilities for children in their early years of learning. By providing them with ample space to explore, experiment, imagine, and participate, we can genuinely ignite their curiosity and passion for knowledge. So, what are you waiting for? Take your child outdoors and watch them grow and develop in ways you never thought possible.

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