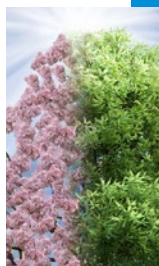
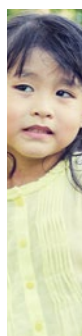




First
Discoverers



Defining the outdoor classroom



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Introduction

Once upon a time, traditional schooling decreed that education was conducted via indoor lessons and outdoor 'playtime' was a necessary respite from learning – to give the staff a break. Thankfully, those days are now mostly gone, and preschool settings in particular acknowledge the role the outdoors plays as a world of wonder which endlessly fascinates younger children. As chapter two explains, science conceptualises this innate love of the natural world as 'biophilia', and many observers fear that modern children's severely limited access to this experience, and all the benefits it brings, has created a 'nature deficit' which impoverishes 21st century living.

...many observers fear that modern children's severely limited access to this experience, and all the benefits it brings, has created a 'nature deficit' which impoverishes 21st century living

And what a unique resource it can be! Kellert's typology, discussed in chapter three, outlines nine dimensions of the natural domain ready and waiting to enthrall and engage holistic learners, regardless of their skills or stage of development. Such youthful drive in full flow can prompt parental anxiety too, and chapter four evaluates the need for practitioners to manage the outdoor context so that it offers the optimum blend of risk, challenge and adventure these youngsters crave.

With many stakeholders now advocating a rethink of our risk-aversion culture, it's tempting to believe attitudes towards the exposure of children to risk are changing. Chapter five considers the extent to which this is rhetoric or reality, Morland discusses the 'risk sweet spot', and Dweck illustrates the need for children to acquire a 'mastery disposition'. Meanwhile, chapter six outlines the expansive nature of outdoor play – an environment in which Vygotsky himself believed a child's powers will always be in the ascendant; a place where the child is free to explore spontaneous movement and creativity; a place where playfulness is always the default mode.

Chapter seven probes the interactive nature of the outdoor landscape – an evolving, boundless space in which change is the one constant element. All children flourish as creative social agents in this dynamic, versatile and ultra-flexible environment. Indeed, such flexibility is precisely what makes this the ideal naturally inclusive environment, and chapter eight notes how the outdoors can accommodate differences and support diverse play behaviours.

Unquestionably, the committed adult playworker has a key role in unlocking the full potential of outdoor play and learning. Accordingly, chapter nine lists the full range of personal attributes a reflective practitioner brings to the task of skilful facilitation – plus the occasional intervention. Multi-functional support is an ongoing feature and, even within one session, a playworker can expect to be called upon to act as playmate, interpreter, playmaker, peacemaker, teacher and more.



This discussion of outdoor play and learning concludes with an account of Plas Madoc, a junk playground which practices an uncompromisingly modern example of extreme childcare which has attracted global attention. Offering a brash antidote to modern life and aiming to play a part in refocussing attitudes, Plas Madoc's deceptively chaotic wasteland is at the same time a powerful, if not unavoidably nostalgic, reference to many bygone childhood freedoms we are in real danger of losing forever.

And why is that so precious and important?

Philosopher Alain de Botton (2015) suggests where we might look to find a meaningful answer:

'It would help if more of us went into old people's homes and asked the simple question: "What do you feel sorry you never tried?" The answers would frighten us ...'

Setting the Scene

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Setting the scene

'All my life through, the new sights of Nature made me rejoice like a child.'
– Marie Curie, scientist

Every parent knows that even the youngest children are 'born explorers' of the wide world and generally want to treat any environment as an unbounded resource. Arguably, this curiosity and fascination reaches its height with the lure of the outdoors, when tiny toddlers seem to experience a primeval urge to be outside whatever the weather, utterly convinced the unexplored grass will be greener, if only they could just get out there.

According to a study conducted by Dr William Bird, commissioned by the RSPB and Natural England, there is indeed a scientific explanation for such impulses. Scientists term this feeling 'biophilia', which is described as:

'an evolutionary theory defined as "the innately emotional affiliation of human beings to other living organisms ...". It is proposed to be a genetic sequence that has been programmed over one million years of evolution to respond positively to natural environments to help us survive and thrive. The theory proposes that even now we are attracted to these environments where we feel more content and function more effectively.' (Bird, 2007)

Bird also identifies two further 'restorative' factors to explain the positive, transformative effect exposure to natural green environments has on all human beings. These are: the brain benefits which stem from 'indirect attention' a phenomena which occurs when our fascination and wonder renders brain-focussing almost effortless; and the measurable, stress-reducing 'recovery reflex' which begins within moments of our exposure to nature. All three advantages, the survey suggests, are the result of our evolutionary history which means we are indeed genetically programmed to respond to nature and green spaces in this way.

Outdoor learning over time

[The beneficial effects of outdoor play and learning during childhood have been known for thousands of years.'](#)

The beneficial effects of outdoor play and learning during childhood have, of course, been known for thousands of years. However, as the timeline at Figure 2.1 shows, it has taken the determined efforts of many different campaigning theorists and educators to ensure many of today's early years children now enjoy regular access to an 'outdoor classroom'. Tracing the progress and contributions made over time, it's possible to see how modern outdoor play and learning has been shaped by, for instance, the emergence of Froebel's kindergartens with their child-sized play equipment and nature-garden focus; the development of Montessori's accent on child autonomy and structured materials; McMillan's full commitment to classrooms 'roofed only by the sky'; Isaacs' skilful development of children's curiosity as a learning tool; and Allen's trailblazing work on adventure play areas and disabled access.

The concept of a 'nature deficit'

Given that scientists, educationalists and modern parents clearly understand the gains to be had from letting children loose in natural landscapes, it is tempting to ask why there is any need at all to promote such activities. But regrettably, our enlightened understanding of the desirable effects of exposure to nature on child development is no guarantee we can avoid the constraints our modern society has managed to impose on those parents simply trying to allow their children to flourish and be the best they can be.

Richard Louv, American author of 'Last Child in the Woods' (Louv, 2005), used the phrase 'nature deficit' in his book to quantify the extent to which modern living has alienated humans from their natural-world heritage, and at what cost. This theme has become a recurring motif among green-education activists, with author and adventurer Ben Fogle noting that a 2014 survey showed 26% of UK children play outside for less than 30 minutes each week (Carter, 2014); and film-maker David Bond, whose documentary 'Project Wild Thing' tracks the declining influence of nature

in childhood experience, listing what he believes are the elements of a 'perfect storm stopping children roaming free':

'Irrational fears about risks, rational concerns about traffic, stricter policing of private land and loss of derelict spaces, the rise of computers and social media and the commercialisation of play.' (Barkham, 2013).

As a consequence, there are real concerns that this cultural shift means modern children who lack the opportunity to play freely outdoors (and sometimes unsupervised) may never learn to exercise self-control or grow to become risk-wise adults, and are unlikely to develop a respect for nature. Authors Laird & McFarland-Piazza (2014) spell out just what is at stake:

'By keeping our children locked up inside, we're basically conducting a large uncontrolled experiment on our own kids where the consequences are unclear.'

Year	Educator/ theorist	Focus
1592 - 1670	John Amos Comenius	Cleric and Czech philosopher – advocated sensory experience to replace rote learning in education
1712 - 1778	Jean-Jacques Rousseau	Supporter of free play for children in natural settings
1746 - 1827	Johann Heinrich Pestalozzi	Swiss promoter of nature and outdoor learning via government-funded school
1771 - 1858	Robert Owen	Set up Scottish nurse school for worker's children and promoted outdoor activity
1782 - 1852	Fredrich Froebel	German pedagogue who studied under Pestalozzi – founded kindergartens to meet the needs of preschool children. Valued and promoted outdoor settings
1860 - 1931	Margaret McMillan	English champion and pioneer of outdoor learning – influenced later development of forest schools
1861 - 1925	Rudolf Steiner	Important influence on nursery education – valued real life experiences
1870 - 1952	Maria Montessori	Italian educator who pioneered learning for young children via prepared environments in natural settings
1873 - 1965	Grace Owen	Emphasised living alongside nature and the importance of real life experiences
1885-1948	Susan Isaacs	Promoted children's curiosity, natural settings and relatively permissive educational atmosphere
1893-1979	Marjorie Allen	Took inspiration from Danish initiatives and developed first 'junkyard' adventure playgrounds in England

Figure 2.1 Outdoor play and learning: an historical perspective

What the outside does best

With human instinct, backed by scientific knowledge, helping us all to realise where our preschoolers seem most happy and healthy, many authors and institutions have sought to identify the primary benefits of an optimum early years outdoor setting. White (2008), for example, has offered an extensive description – from which the illustration in Figure 2.2 has been derived – which highlights the qualities and experiences available to early years children who have access to high-quality play and learning outdoors.



Figure 2.2 Potential benefits of outdoor play and learning (Inspired by White, 2008)

Offering his own personal outdoor-play recipe, playworker Adrian Voce, a respected consultant on public provision for children's play and a founding director of Play England, clearly shares White's priorities and feels that authentic children's play is 'about as vibrant and alive as humanity gets':

'I think children should be in supportive environments where they feel safe and secure enough to be themselves ... to explore, invent, manipulate and discover. [They should have] access to the elements, a wide range of loose parts and materials ... and opportunities to climb, hide, build, jump, balance, swing and all the other things a playful child wants to do ... their playful nature will do the rest.' (Voce, 2016).

The components of an outdoor classroom

According to Jennings (2014), the essential ingredients of an effective outdoor classroom can be reduced to the four fundamental elements shown in Figure 2.3. These are deceptively simple to jot down, but the secret – as always – is to understand their significance for outdoor play and learning, and organise them wisely:

Time here implies that, as far as possible, children must have enough time to explore and play in such a way that outcomes (planned or otherwise) occur naturally and never feel rushed or abandoned in full flow – a skilful management task.

Activities suggests there should be a range of suitable alternatives so every participant can find something which will absorb and engage them. No one should feel marginalised.

Child-directed play surely means the type of play activity where adults take a back seat, appearing only if, as and when a child decides there is some role they might undertake. Here, it's often best to just 'forget' you are an adult.

Nature specifically focuses on the child's connection with natural elements. It is, of course, important to note that the way a child responds to, and interacts with, novel elements of the natural world will often be a truly mesmerising experience which must never be diluted by unwarranted adult intervention.

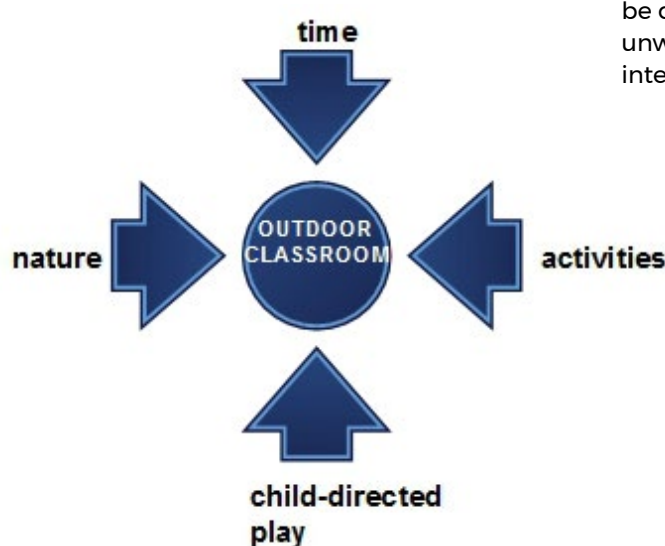


Figure 2.3 Outdoor classroom components (Inspired by Jennings, 2014)

Hosted by the national school grounds charity Learning through Landscapes (LTL), other practitioners and bodies have offered a more comprehensive description of ideal settings for outdoor play and learning in the collaborative Visions and Values document outlining what optimum early years outdoor provision might look like. In essence this statement details what LTL and its early years partners see as gold-standard, best-practice to realise and effect the transformation of children, spaces and learning. Figure 2.4 captures and condenses some of the key elements they advocate to achieve this aim:

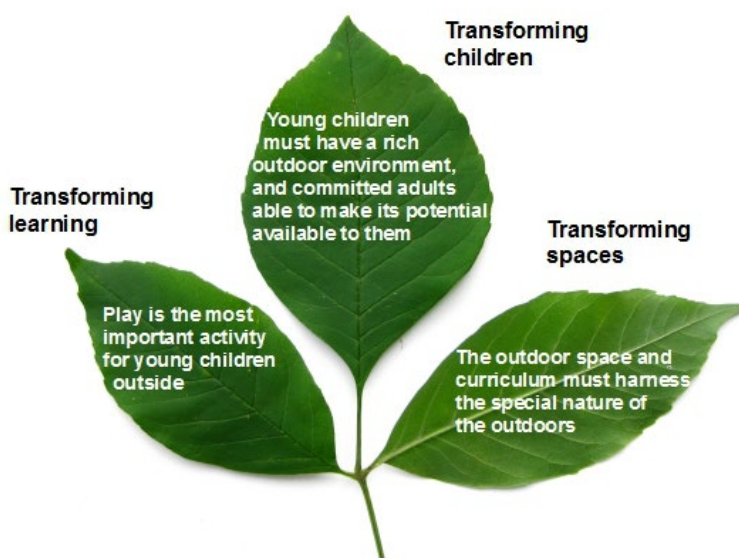


Figure 2.4 Visions & Values

(Inspired by Learning through Landscapes, 2004)

Why outdoor education matters

The well-being of future generations, and perhaps even the future of our planet, is daily influenced by the childcare practices we adopt now. So, for leading outdoor education consultant Juliet Robertson, the importance of the setting can never be overstated:

‘... the greatest benefits occur when children can spend significant amounts of time every day playing in a natural setting – woodlands, beaches and other places which have a feeling of wildness ... it is these outdoor learning environments which are really special.’ (Robertson, 2016)

Clearly, our children will need the maturity, flexibility and foresight to steer a course through a new world we cannot yet imagine, and solve problems not yet apparent. A closing comment from the RSPB’s Dr Bird shows why we cannot afford to be complacent:

‘As children are gradually separated from nature they will understand it less. A study from the University of Cambridge (Balmford et al., 2002) compared knowledge of Pokémon card characters with British wildlife (pictures of badgers, beetles, oak trees etc.). The study found that 53% of 8-year-olds were successful in identifying wildlife, but more children (78%) were able to identify Pokémon characters. The fact that children’s knowledge of fictional species is greater than natural species shows a huge capacity for learning in children, but a failure to offer children education about their own natural surroundings.’ (Bird, 2007).

Children should be where they feel safe ... their playful nature will do the rest



Natural born learners

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Natural born learners

'One touch of nature makes the whole world kin.'
– William Shakespeare: 'Troilus And Cressida'

From the moment they enter the world, young children are constantly engaged in the essential task of making sense of their environment, an activity we define as 'learning' in its broadest sense. Even tiny babies are naturally programmed to extract important clues from the swirl of sensory experiences to which they are perpetually exposed. This mechanism ensures they scan every available scrap of evidence in order to make their understanding of reality as accurate as possible. Therefore it's hardly surprising that, as they grow, young children develop and refine these holistic learning skills which have served them so well, and are thus naturally attracted to multi-sensory domains such as outdoor landscapes.

Holistic learners in their element

Describing preschool learners, developmental psychologist Alison Gopnik (2005) notes that modern research has revealed:

'... [young] children are far, far smarter than we would ever have thought. Their brains are more connected, more flexible and more active than they will ever be again. They already think abstractly, reason and draw the right conclusions from data.'

This predisposition for '360-degree' learning is a compelling explanation for the excitement, enthusiasm and intense engagement early years children exhibit during outdoor play. Supporting this view, Fontana observes that 'practical experience ... serves as the raw material for their thinking', whilst Isaacs (1952) believed that:

'Words are at first merely a way of pointing to things, and but empty sounds until the children have had a rich contact with the things themselves, and explored them with hand and eye.'

Custom-made learning resource

Discussing the sheer diversity and scale of the outdoor environment, Kellert (2002) has identified nine categories of immersive, nature-derived experience depicted in Figure 3.1 below.

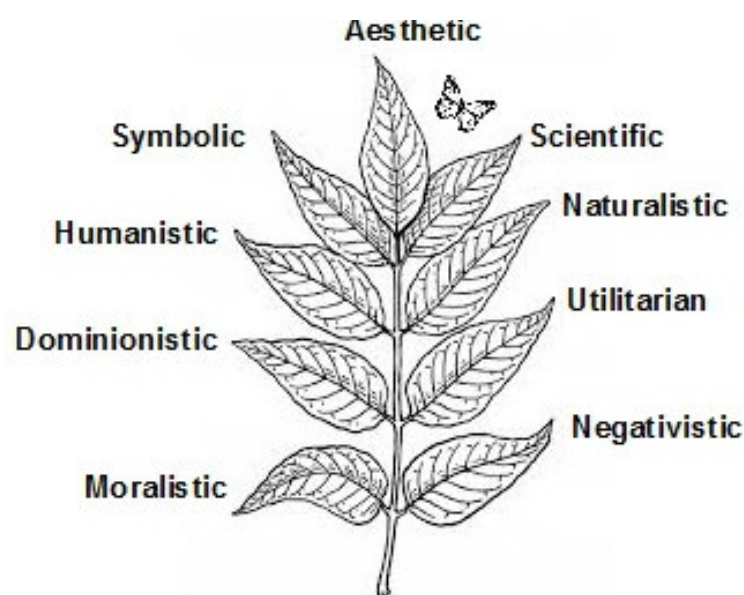


Figure 3.1 Typology for experiencing nature (Inspired by Kellert, 2002)

His 'aesthetic' dimension references the beauty of the natural world, 'humanistic' acknowledges our emotive commitment to nature and landscapes, 'moralistic' denotes our spiritual attachment and feelings of ethical responsibility for environmental conservation, and 'negativistic' describes our fear of nature's awesome power. 'Scientific' encompasses our primal need to understand the natural order, whilst 'dominionistic' relates to our innate drive to conquer and control natural forces. 'Utilitarian' expresses our human utilisation of those same forces and natural cycles, and 'symbolic' details our use of natural imagery in thought and language, whilst 'naturalistic' refers to our direct experience of natural phenomena.

Kellert's comprehensive catalogue of the natural outdoor world illustrates the breadth and depth of its wonderful capacity to fascinate young learners. This concept is echoed in Thomas & Harding's 'areas of development', a framework the authors use to discuss outdoor play and its role in learning. Listed in Figure 3.2 below, these headings provide a useful structure for thinking about key aspects of teaching and learning outdoors.

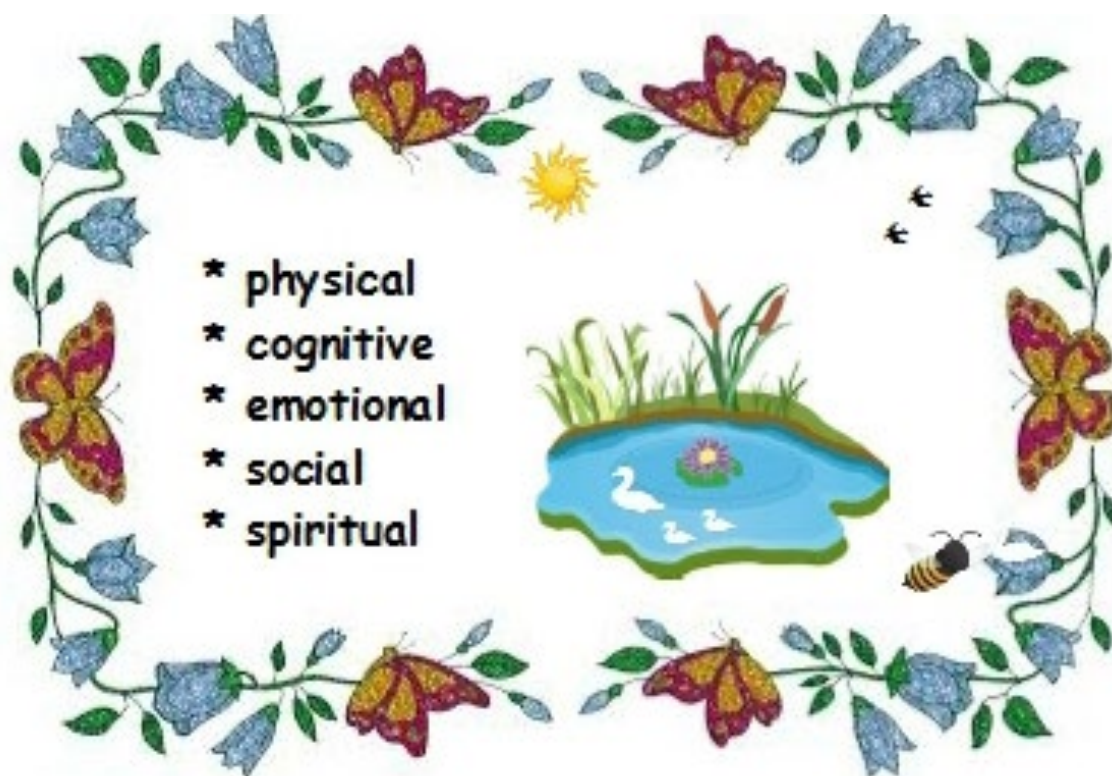


Figure 3.2 Learning and developing through play: 'areas of development' (Inspired by Thomas & Harding, 2011)

The physical domain

Free physical movement of every kind is undoubtedly best-supported by the outdoor environment and, Margaret McMillan believed, is 'almost as much wanted as food and air' by every child between 1 and 7 years of age:

'To move, to run, to find things out by new movement, to feel one's life in every limb, that is the life of early childhood.' (McMillan, 1919)

As McMillan clearly implies, and contemporary research has unquestionably established, physical movement not only promotes health and physical growth, it is also a vital precursor of cognitive development. Thomas & Harding detail its importance by explaining that:

'Children need to experience the world through their senses and movement before they can develop mental maps and abstract thought.'

The cognitive domain

The 'outdoor classroom' is crammed with real experiences: for example, growing and harvesting potatoes, baking them on an open fire, then eating them freshly cooked amidst an evocative aura of woodsmoke. Problem-solving activities also abound: 'They count, make up songs ... measure and experience flow, gravity, and forces', whilst enjoying 'discoveries, imaginary play, exploration ... big spaces that afford climbing, crouching, rolling, mixing, painting and building – all within a risk-assessed environment that allows children to be safe to do, rather than safe from doing.' (Woods, 2013)

Whilst exotic resources are not necessary for most of these activities, practitioners planning new equipment and experiences will find the suggestions offered by Kritchensky et al (1977) concerning the relative value and functions of resources which offer different levels of complexity are very helpful – see diagram below.

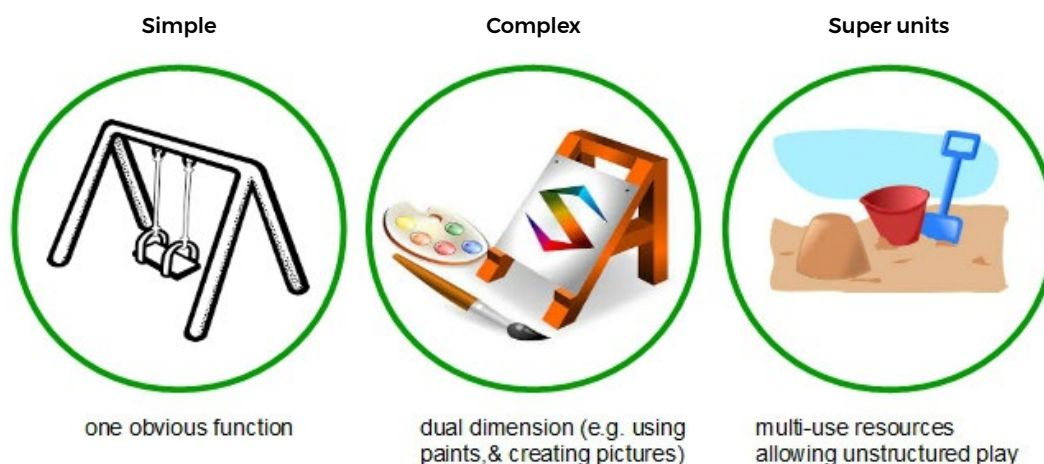


Figure 3.3 Classification of equipment (Inspired by Kritchensky et al, 1977)

Though each type of equipment is definitely required, super units offer children the most diverse and interactive functionality.

The emotional domain

'Rough and tumble' outdoor play defines relationships, opportunities for autonomy and responsibility promote confidence and self-esteem, and varied spaces allow children to encounter a mix of vibrant community together. Moments of quiet reflection are equally possible in landscapes where 'the colours change, the temperature changes, the feel of the outdoors changes all the time'. (Education Scotland, 2015)

The social domain

Different age groups can interact more naturally outdoors while taking on complementary roles in group play. Once again rough and tumble activity builds and tests friendships – and often demands tolerance and assertive responses in equal measure. Co-operative play mixes roles with children often directing adults in child-devised imaginary settings, and the large spaces and rich diversity of the outdoors allows those with additional needs to feel genuinely included while being able to participate at their own comfortable level.

The spiritual domain

Experiencing plants and animals helps children to understand life cycles, and develops the concept that the outdoors is home to our native wild species. This can be extended to include a gathering awareness that humans are also part of this natural eco system, that outdoor landscapes are special places, and that all living things deserve our respect.

Practical considerations

For early years children to gain full benefit from any 'outdoor classroom' setting, sensitive adults must always be involved in a capacity appropriate to the type of activities which are being promoted. Indeed, for meaningful learning to take place, Malone & Tranter (2003) consider 'the use and management of the outdoor space is as important as access itself.'

To inform this important perspective, lecturer in Early Years Education Helen Bilton has assembled 10 guiding principles. This distillation of outdoor educational experience offers important advice on practical considerations influencing the management of teaching and learning outdoors. The diagram in Figure 3.4 gives a flavour of the headline messages contained in the document, and is then followed by a more detailed summary touching on Bilton's major points of recommended best practice.

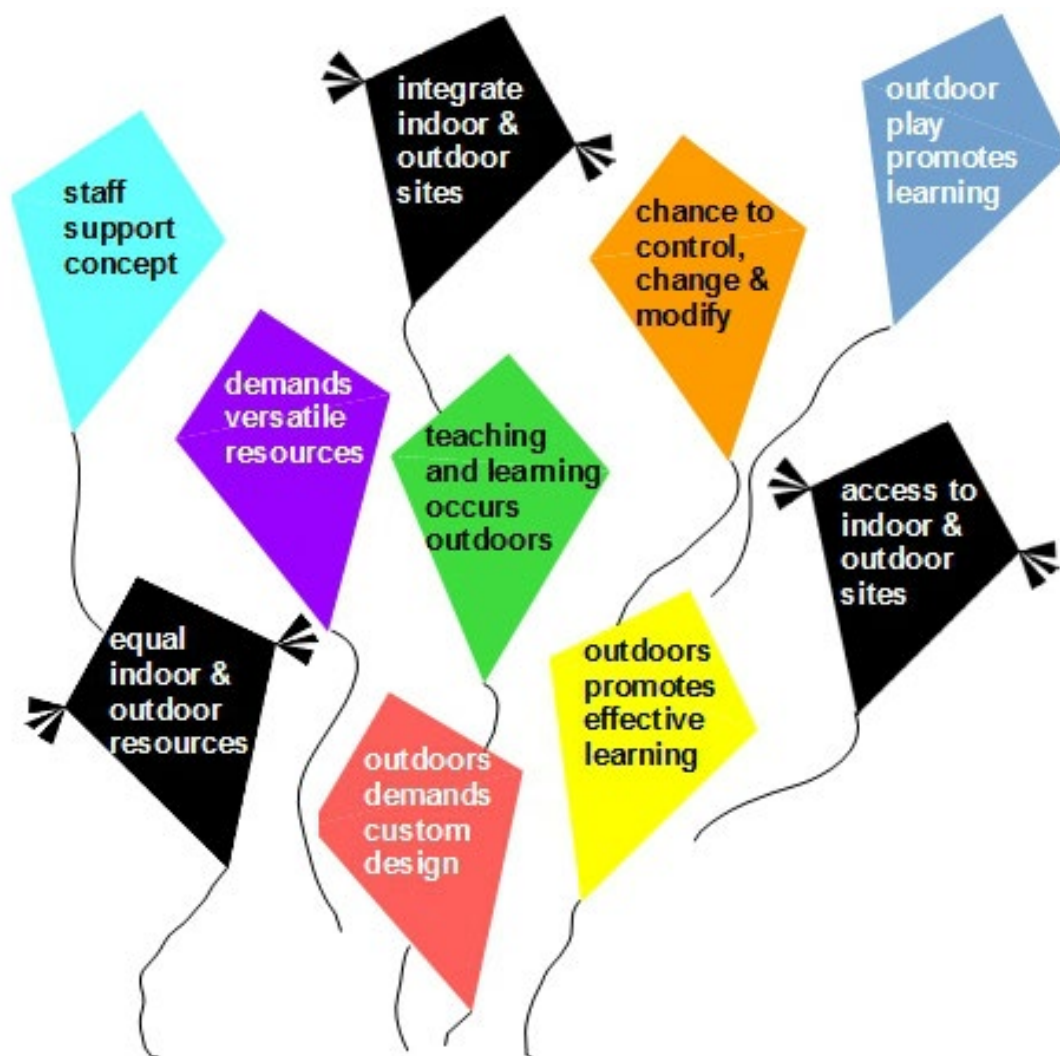


Figure 3.4 Ten guiding principles for outdoor teaching and learning (Inspired by Bilton, 2010)

- 1 Indoor provision should be combined with outdoor provision, with the aim of creating a coherent facility with essentially seamless transitions.
- 2 Children should preferably have simultaneous access to indoor and outdoor settings.
- 3 Both settings should be resourced and managed to the same standards, sending a message that both are recognised as important and equally valued.
- 4 An outdoor facility must always be used as a teaching and learning environment, otherwise much of the potential impact and benefit of the experience will be lost as it becomes just a 'playground' in the worst sense.
- 5 The effectiveness of an outdoor setting will be influenced by its layout and design.
- 6 For early years children, outdoor play is a core component of learning – they are simply 'wired' to reap the enormous benefits available.
- 7 An outdoor classroom optimises certain key learning modes which cannot be satisfactorily replicated indoors.
- 8 Learners need flexible resources and diverse environments to challenge and expand the range of opportunities and modes of response.
- 9 Learners must be able to control, adjust and rearrange their learning environment to maximise the possibilities available and avoid stereotypical patterns of play.
- 10 Staff must create an atmosphere which positively promotes outdoor play. They are essentially 'playworkers' and never just supervisors on duty.

Given uncompromised access, structured and unstructured play, and skilled, light-touch support, young children will be stimulated to learn, grow and flourish in outdoor settings. Of all the reasons why this should be so, perhaps the most important, as Bilton again reminds us, is that they are doing what comes naturally to them in the best possible environment:

'... children learn to talk, and talk to learn, they learn to move and move to learn, they learn to play and play to learn, learn about their senses and they learn through their senses. All of these are vehicles by which they can learn, and all are more easily accessed outside.' (Bilton, 2010)

The outdoor classroom is crammed with real experiences



Outdoor adventures: The benefits of risk & challenge

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Outdoor adventures: The benefits of risk & challenge

"I am not afraid of storms, for I am learning to sail my ship."
— Louisa May Alcott

Anyone who has had the privilege of observing young children totally absorbed in outdoor play will surely agree with Voce's assertion that 'children playing are as vibrant and alive as humanity gets.' (Voce, 2016). When children are outdoors, this 'play drive', as Fontana (1981) describes it, often takes the form of adventurous play which Spinka, Newberry and Bekoff (2001) believe shares many of the features of the characteristic play enjoyed by of the young of many species. They propose that it functions as 'training for the unexpected' and suggest that, at times during this activity, players wilfully place themselves in 'disadvantageous positions' in order to savour the 'novelty and risk'. This, the authors suggest, 'adds to the intensity and pleasure of the play.'



Figure 4.1 Adventurous play is common to most young mammals

However, Gill (2007) and others note that, like many other aspects of childhood, in modern times this natural type of play is too often 'undermined by risk aversion.'

Outdoor play in previous generations

As all grandparents, and most parents, will attest, regular opportunities for adventure play outdoors were once an important part of growing up. In fact, as Figure 4.2 illustrates, many of the nursery rhymes our early years children are still taught to chant hark back to real childhood adventures from bygone days of a kind most will rarely, if ever, be allowed to experience:



Figure 4.2 Children's adventure play and experiences captured in nursery rhymes and folk tales

Though few, if any, parents and childcare professionals actually believe outdoor play is detrimental to a child's natural development, a significant number feel pressured on all sides to spare no effort to keep children totally safe at all costs. As Cowley and many other authors comment, when adults try to 'eliminate all the potential risks' it denies children the chance to 'learn to keep themselves safe'. (Cowley, 2016). And taking a broader and longer-term view, philosopher Alain de Botton goes on to point out why such well-intentioned preventative action can be disastrous in adulthood:

'... the most fulfilling human projects appear inseparable from a degree of danger and torment, the sources of our greatest joys lying awkwardly close to those of our greatest challenges. We must strive to correct the belief that fulfilment must come easily or not at all, a belief ruinous in its effects.' (de Botton, 2015).

Movement underpins development

For early years children, access to unconstrained movement is the key to all aspects of learning and development, and the outdoor landscape is the perfect setting to accommodate and promote this natural process. Figure 4.3 shows the logical sequence of events which occur as a young child continuously practises and perfects both gross- and fine motor skills in order to acquire and control ever more sophisticated actions.

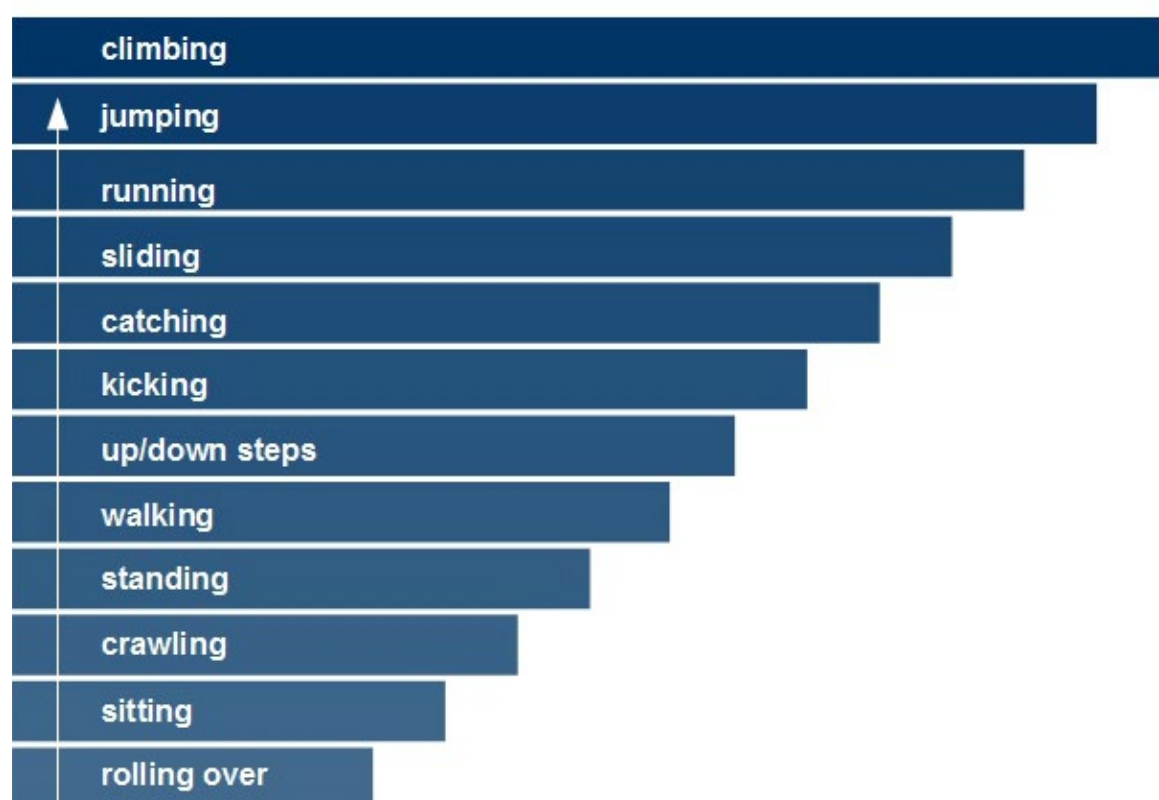


Figure 4.3 The emergence of motor skills

This continuum of learned actions involves many points at which the young child is likely to risk failure, fears and brief setbacks in progressing from one phase to the next. Each child's experience is unique and, as Solly (2015) explains, he or she will develop their own 'internal risk assessment process' to get through individual difficulties. Temporary problems can occur, for example, when toddlers who have learned to walk inside encounter the less predictable gradients and unevenness of outdoor surfaces. They will become unsteady at first as they gradually learn to adapt to the demands of walking outside.

The advantages of outdoor play

Clearly children are able to move freely in both indoor and outdoor environments but, as Solly (2015) identifies, it is primarily outdoor play which affords younger children the most expansive opportunities to learn and grow. Figure 4.4 summarises seven core features of the outdoor play environment which are then described below in greater detail.



Figure 4.4 The important benefits of outdoor play (Inspired by Solly, 2015)

Priorities

- Natural environments can offer great diversity and flexibility which supports a broad range of play and learning opportunities.
- Unlike a teacher-controlled classroom, or a parent-regulated home atmosphere, the outdoors feels free from such governing influences and therefore far more suitable as a context for play and creative adaptation.
- Outside play allows more variety – construction, manipulation, modes of movement, control and refinement of body actions. Furthermore, being closer to nature stimulates a sense of awe and wonder, and its capacity to fire the imagination prompts rich creative and symbolic play.
- Any child can play outdoors in their own way, at an appropriate level, and enjoy the experience to the full.
- The outdoor landscape can support both individual and group play and its abundant resources offer important benefits for physical, mental and emotional health and wellbeing.
- When outside, children naturally learn, communicate, recall and discuss everything under the sun while simply having fun in the fresh air.
- Every child's natural curiosity is excited by playing outdoors and will encourage them to explore and extend any kind of boundary. (Solly, 2015).

Supporting practitioners

No matter how life-enhancing outdoor experience may be, the quality of adult participation is absolutely critical to successful outcomes, with Stephenson, for example making it clear that ‘despite the importance of a challenging environment, children’s hunger for physical challenge was satisfied more through the practitioners’ attitudes than the provision itself.’ (Stephenson, 2003). And considering the issue from the alternative perspective of childcare professionals, Sandseter emphasises that ‘finding the balance between allowing children to explore and take risks in their play while also avoiding serious injuries is not an easy exercise.’ (Sandseter, 2011). For those managing childcare settings, the implications are clear: not only must children be supervised by enthusiastic and experienced practitioners, staff in turn must also receive unequivocal gold-standard encouragement, assistance and approval. Tovey explains just how much this can influence the provision:

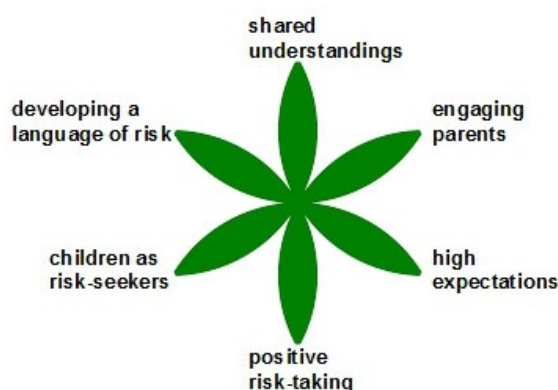


Figure 4.5 A framework for supporting inspirational outdoor play (Inspired by Tovey, 2011)

‘... where practitioners felt supported within their teams and understood the benefits of risk-taking, they were confident to offer experiences which included some element of risk and challenge. Where practitioners felt unsupported by senior staff and anxious about blame and possible litigation, they were less likely to make provision for adventurous play.’ (Tovey, 2010).

The professional risks for practitioners are real and must be fully addressed to unlock the potential enhancements they alone can contribute by their wholehearted commitment to challenging play. Tovey has offered some practical suggestions by which this could be achieved. These are conceptualised in Figure 4.5 and then outlined below.

Priorities

- Shared understandings concerning safety and risk allow staff to operate in an environment where expectations are made clear in a shared approach which extends well beyond procedural risk assessments.
- Engaging parents is essential. They must be allowed to become partners in outdoor play initiatives rather than marginalised to be converted into critics or potential litigators.
- Adopting realistically high expectations of what children can achieve is central to the success of outdoor play projects. This demands that everyone is well-informed about each child’s capabilities and will thus be able to judge when, and when not, to intervene.
- Forest Schools have shown the way with positive risk-taking: Three-year-olds join in climbing trees, building dens and fires, using sharp tools, and much more. Safety is built-in at every stage, for example, by teaching children to whittle wood using only knife strokes moving away from the body.
- Children must be accepted as the natural risk-seekers and risk-takers they are. The task is to determine their intentions and then supporting them to discover a safe means of achieving the desired outcomes.
- Practitioners should develop a common language of risk and safety which safely facilitates play objectives (e.g. “coming down backwards would be a safer way”) and is prepared to limit or curtail a proposed venture on the rare occasions it may be necessary (e.g. “no, that’s dangerous because ...”). Children will be encouraged to remain adventurous where they can rely upon secure and reasonable boundaries which are clearly expressed. (Tovey, 2011)

Encouraging adventurous play in the early years is all about initiating the development of risk wise adults with a ‘go for it’ mentality. Though no one knows what the future holds, most UK families can recall the strong spirit which sustained their forebears through times of war and harsh conditions until better times returned. Accepting a challenge, rather than feeling crushed by it, will always be an essential part of such resilience, causing author Polly Morland to ask:

‘Given that a world without risk is unthinkable and that hyper-caution may prove as undesirable, and as hazardous, as mindless thrill-seeking, consider this: ... Where is the Risk Wise sweet spot?’ (Morland, 2015).

It is surely the core task of high-quality outdoor play provision to equip every early years child with the means to answer that question.

Accepting a challenge is an essential part of resilience



A modern paranoia: Perspectives on risk

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A modern paranoia: Perspectives on risk

"A ship is always safe at the shore - but that is NOT what it is built for."
— Albert Einstein

Just like generations of skilful mariners, modern childcare professionals are keenly aware of risk, especially as risk assessments probably govern many aspects of their daily practice. And should they ever become the slightest bit complacent, the media elements in our modern society will continue to regularly drip-feed stories of accidents, dangers and abuse of every kind which, theoretically at least, have the potential to threaten the well-being of every child. All too soon this can lead to the growth of a stultifying 'risk-aversion culture' which can have a devastating effect on the growth and development of children.

The risk concept

Acknowledging that tragedies do occur, there are many who nevertheless feel the term 'risk' has acquired inappropriate overtones – as for example in the phrase 'a child at risk' – which can all too easily skew our perceptions. In the experienced opinion of insurance-industry risk professionals:

'Risk per se is neither good nor bad; rather it is an expression of probability – the likelihood of a particular outcome, positive or negative.' (Corley & Utermann, 2015).

Thus our society's current fears are often needlessly raised, and sometimes shamelessly exploited, by the casual, everyday distortions of this concept. In reality, it is often far more accurate and helpful to visualise the word 'risk' at the mid-point of a continuum in which hazard and challenge reflect negative and positive extremes:



Figure 5.1 The concept of a risk continuum

This view is supported by Morland (2015) who has noted the 'delusional zeal to stamp out ... the neutral idea of uncertainty [and replace it] with the negative one of hazard'. 'Indeed, your thesaurus will tell you,' she warns, 'that "hazard" and "risk" are one and the same, but do not be fooled; they are not.'

Risk assessments

It is never easy to think rationally when we become unreasoningly fearful about risk, and as *Corley & Utermann* again observe, '[when] profound risk aversion becomes a habit [it] can undermine good decision making'. This truth was exposed by the psychologist Gerd Gigerenzer (2006) who carefully researched US travel habits in the wake of the 9/11 disaster in 2001. Predictably, the US public mostly abandoned air travel during the year following those terrorist attacks. Gigerenzer's data, summarised in Figure 5.2 below, shows that the collective switch from planes to cars resulted in 1,595 extra road deaths over the 12-month period (after which, figures then fell back to the previous normal levels).

Statistically, air travel is dramatically safer than car travel, so in effect, each of these unfortunate people made a decision they imagined was 'safe and wise', with lethal results. Gardner calculates that 1,595 fatalities is 'over 50% of the 3,000 death toll caused by the 9/11 atrocity', and 'six times higher' than the 266 victims aboard the hijacked aircraft, and comments:

'[the families] still think they lost husbands, wives, fathers, mothers, and children to ... traffic accidents we accept as the regrettable cost of living in the modern world ... They didn't ... It was fear that stole their loved ones.' (Gardner, 2009).

As politicians and the media are well aware, the impact of bad news is mostly personal and cultural, and as such it regularly colours and distorts our thinking. What is more, (as fund-raising advertisers for international aid agencies know very well) most of us respond emotionally to a depiction of one distressed child, whereas we find it harder to grasp the full tragic implications of large-scale death tolls to the same degree, leading some to describe such statistical reports as 'people with the tears dried off'.

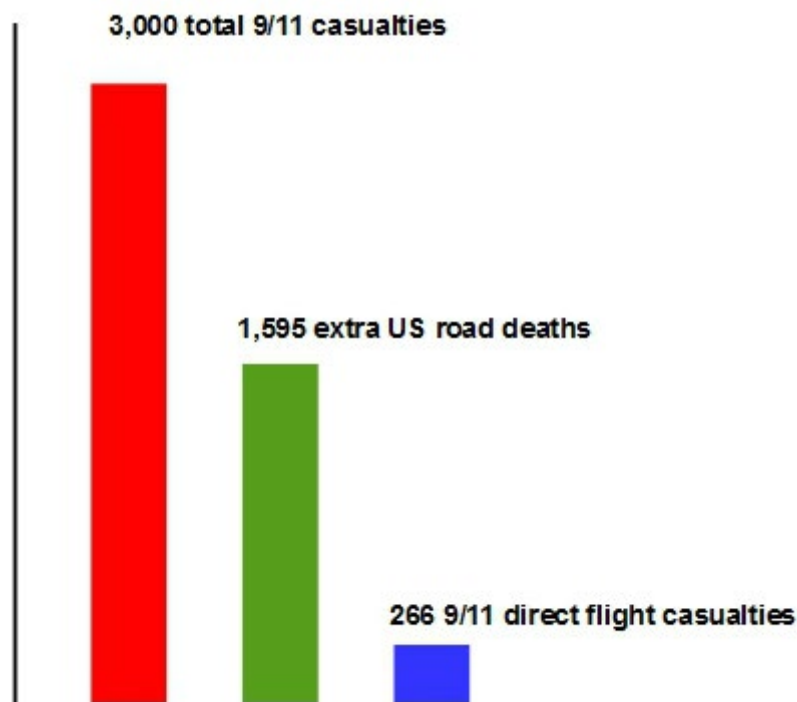


Figure 5.2 Aftermath of the 9/11 atrocity (Inspired by Gigerenzer, 2006)

Contemporary exposure to risk

Similar comparisons have been made about the risks children now face in the modern world. Guldberg, for instance, made a 'positive correlation' which explored the relationship between child pedestrian fatalities and the amount of parents unwilling to allow their children to cross a road alone. Figure 5.3 shows that, over the same four-year period, totals for pedestrian road deaths among seven-to-ten-year-olds and the growing number of overly-protected children each increased by 8%. One implication of these figures is that, having little practical experience of road hazards, this group of child pedestrians therefore became more accident-prone.

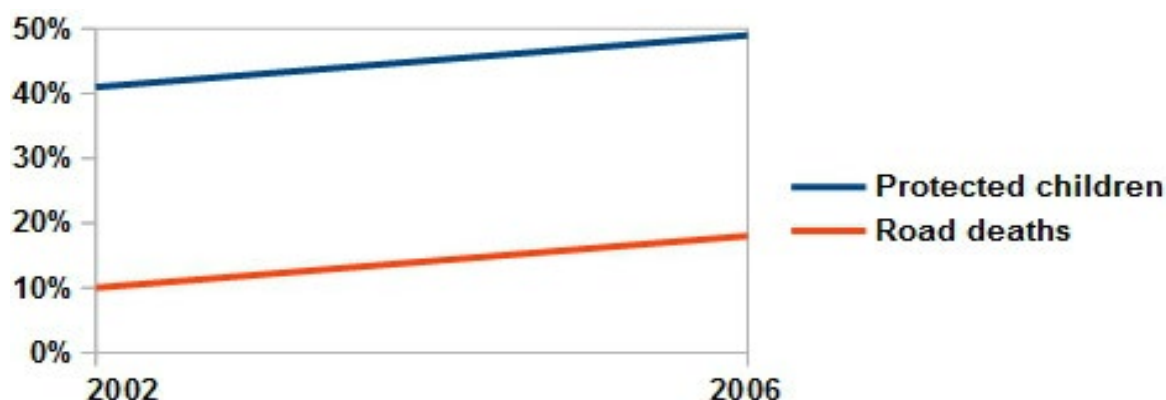


Figure 5.3 Positive correlation of road deaths and protected children (Inspired by Guldberg, 2009)

Well-intentioned parental anxiety and fear, many now believe, is denying children opportunities to become risk-wise through learning to refine and trust their own judgements. As de Botton puts it:

'An age obsessed by safety has opened up a collective new danger: the sclerosis that comes from putting security above all other virtues.' (de Botton, 2015).

The withering effect this doom-laden atmosphere is having on the 'risk muscles' of a today's young children has been documented by Moss (see Figure 5.4) who compares some of our present watchful, stringent attitudes to children's outdoor play with the freedoms children enjoyed in the past:

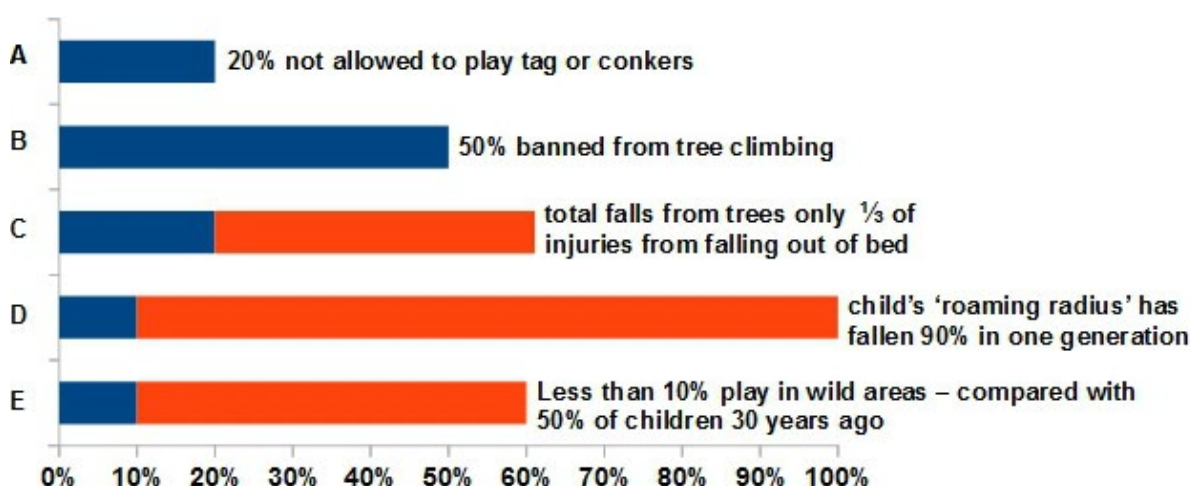


Figure 5.4 How children's outdoor play has become restricted (Inspired by Moss, 2012)

Challenge as a catalyst for risk awareness

As all parents and those delivering early years care will know, younger children are naturally wired to flourish via endless cycles of 'risk – grow – repeat' activity. Explaining some of the many benefits this brings, Tovey reminds us:

'Babies would never learn to crawl, negotiate steps, stand up, or children learn to run, ride a bike and so on without being prepared to take a risk, to tumble and to learn from the consequences. Learning to navigate space, people and objects requires risk and a willingness to try things, have a go and make mistakes.' (Tovey, 2011).

One particular aspect of this play world of discovery is the high-octane exposure to challenge and adventure which is termed *ilynx* or 'dizzy play' - and which, for many, continues into adult life. The Greek word *ilynx* literally translates as 'whirling water' and relates to the swirling sensory rush young children are drawn to enjoy and constantly explore through activities such as being tossed in the air, balancing precariously, and many others where the boundaries between joy and fear, success and failure, risk and reward are blurred - or even temporarily suspended - pending a safe outcome and a heightened sense of satisfaction, well-being and self-worth.

Dweck (2000) has described this early-childhood behaviour as building the core components of a 'mastery disposition' which will support a lifetime of learning. If this facility is not allowed to develop, Dweck believes, it is soon replaced by an acquired 'helplessness'. This, she claims, is often made far worse by the persistent communication of parental anxieties. Rather than pursuing the impossible goal of absolute safety, Dweck argues that enjoyable challenge is by far the best response because:

'It doesn't help a child to tackle a difficult task if they succeed constantly on an easy one. It doesn't teach them to persist in the face of obstacles, if obstacles are always eliminated.'

Risk and safety in practice

'To rule out age-appropriate challenge is effectively to deny children opportunities to develop and become risk-wise. Many therefore believe such actions could be deemed to act against a child's best interests...'

The legal doctrine of 'in loco parentis' (i.e. behaving like a responsible parent) is often taken by childcare workers to mean they must attempt to make every outdoor environment and play experience 100% safe. Whilst it would be reckless to suggest they should be unsafe, the crux of the matter is: what is expected of professionals is that they understand the dangers and have properly assessed and adjusted the balance between challenge and benefits. This entirely fulfils their 'duty of care' - which simply means acting in the same responsible manner as any reasonable adult would. To rule out age-appropriate challenge is effectively to deny children opportunities to develop and become risk-wise. Many therefore believe such actions could be deemed to act against a child's best interests, and thus would constitute a direct breach of the duty of care. As Solly points out:

'Offering opportunities for risk, challenge and adventure which have been suitably risk assessed and considered as purposeful by the setting is far safer than children seeking out those not designed for them in places which are far from ideal and may lead to serious harm.' (Solly, 2015).

Proactive policy

Childcare professionals cannot afford to remain neutral where risk is concerned. Ofsted for one will expect to see this feature positively addressed and effectively put into practice. Though many parents will, understandably, have their own perspectives and priorities, it is surely the duty of any responsible institution to provide leadership by fostering a 'best interests' culture. Demonstrating to parents that there is always a 360-degree assessment of challenge and adventure, as well as highlighting the longer-term benefits, is the best way to win support for such life-enhancing initiatives which are deservedly at the very heart of playing and learning outdoors.

Young children
enjoy the swirl-
ing, sensory rush
of dizzy play



Play and the nature of play

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Play and the nature of play

"Now in myth and ritual the great instinctive forces of civilized life have their origin: law and order, commerce and profit, craft and art, poetry, wisdom and science. All are rooted in the primeval soil of play."

— Johan Huizinga, Dutch historian

For the vast majority of children, play is a constant and defining feature of their childhood experience. Almost nothing comes easier or more naturally to the growing child, yet play remains a core developmental tool of inestimable value. Though all children mimic many aspects of the frolicsome behaviour of the young of other species, they also develop an early interest in objects. This increasingly complex and playful manipulation of objects is one key element which takes human play well beyond the realms of play activity recorded elsewhere in the animal kingdom.

Playfulness

Young children's physical and mental predisposition towards such behaviour is consistently described in literature as 'playful'. As early as 360 BC, Greek philosopher Plato refers to children as 'overflowing with playfulness and pleasure', and Voce (2016) has more recently reminded us of the child's 'playful instincts to explore, manipulate and discover'. Developing this concept, Figure 6.1 outlines features which Thomas and Harding (2011) believe are the common traits shared by playful children.

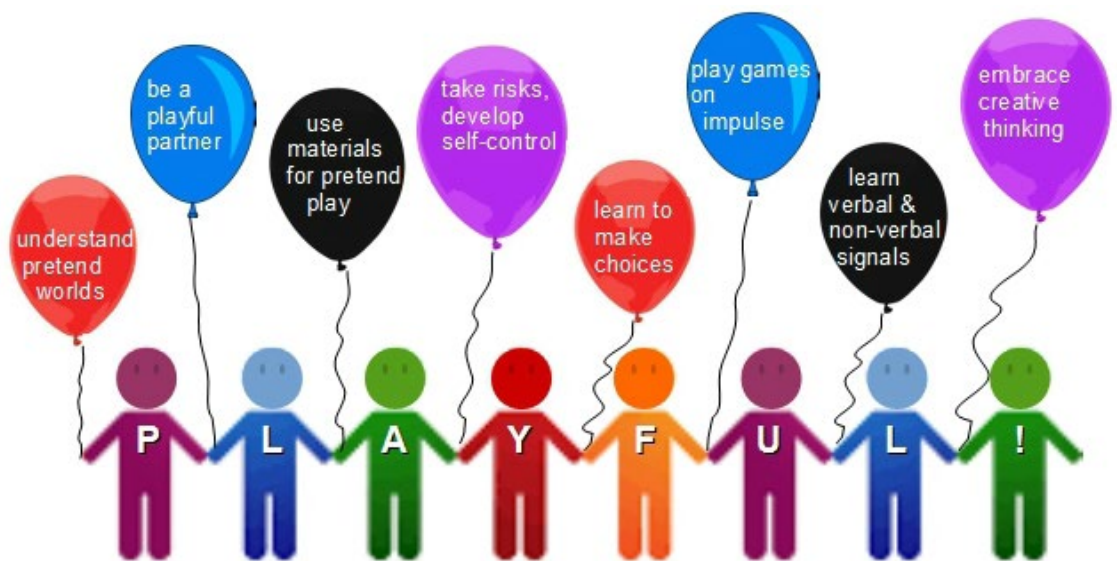


Figure 6.1 Attributes of playfulness (Inspired by Thomas and Harding, 2011)

This 'important disposition', often enjoyed in the company of like-minded others, demands the exercise of imagination and the use of objects and materials – which are usually meant to symbolise other things. Choosing the flow of the activity can be random and impulsive, thus requiring the participants to exercise a degree of tolerance and self-regulation, but the play focus is always important. Communication is continuous and informed by a shared understanding of both verbal and non-verbal signals, and when performed under optimum conditions, the whole process of acting playfully becomes an intensely enjoyable spiral of creativity.

Spontaneous play

An early pioneer of the modern era, Isaacs valued outdoor settings and was one of the first to comment upon the rich learning outcomes which children often achieved through engagement in such spontaneous play. Regarding children as natural explorers capable of reason and reflection, Isaacs was struck by the types of content which occurred during play episodes. Figure 6.2 below illustrates her observation that these activities were of three distinct types. The first of these, she noted, was an abiding enthusiasm for movement – coupled with a desire to secure mastery of its many aspects. Secondly, she observed children exhibited an insatiable curiosity concerning the material world they encountered, which they again sought to explore and master. Lastly, this all-consuming engagement with the ‘world without’ was balanced by an equal fascination with the ‘world within’, which allowed unlimited access to anything their emerging creativity could devise.

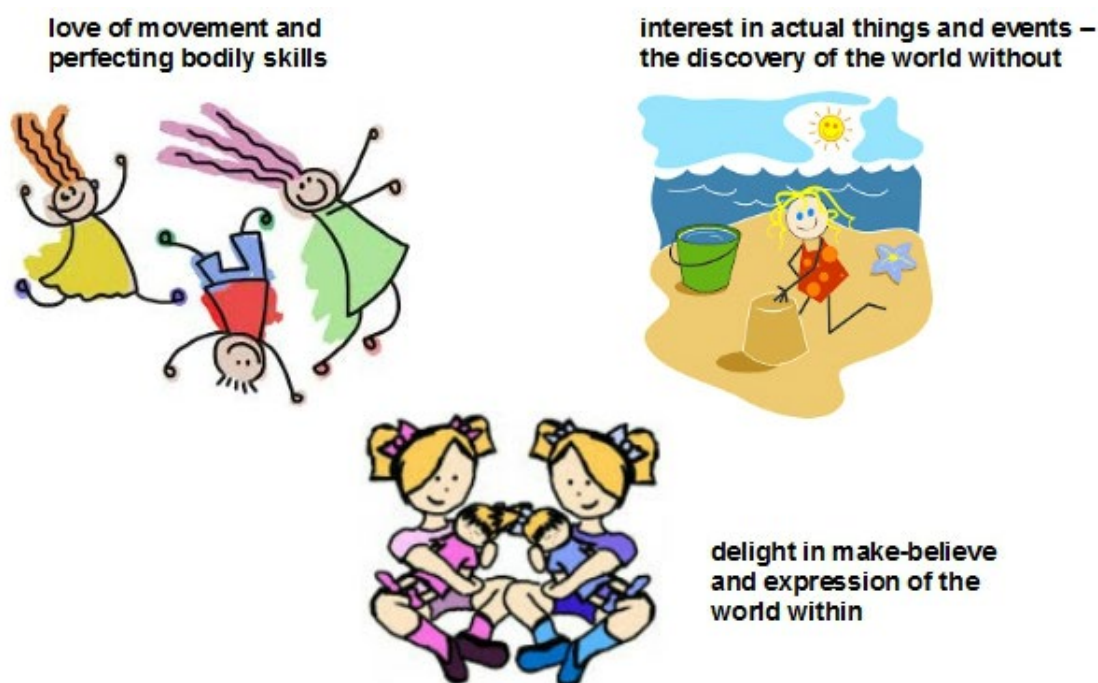


Figure 6.2 Spontaneous play (Inspired by Isaacs, 1932)

Hutt's taxonomy

In a later analysis of the play context, Hutt's taxonomy of play (Hutt, 1979) splits playful behaviour into three particular kinds of activity:

- *epistemic play* – which children use to satisfy their curiosity, and learn about their environment;
- *ludic play* – when children use their imaginations to create fantasy and amusement;
- *games with rules* – which comprise structured activities usually governed by negotiated rules.

Shown in graphic form below (Figure 6.3), Hutt divides these major groups into many sub-categories, with problem solving and skill development falling within epistemic play; symbolic and repetitive behaviour considered a part of ludic play; and games with rules broken down to distinguish between cooperative and competitive contests, and games of chance juxtaposed with games of skill. As in many adult sports and pastimes, games with rules are cloaked in rituals and conventions intricately associated with the game itself.

Vygotsky's proximal zone

Whilst both Hutt and Isaacs acknowledge the critical importance of play in supporting and shaping the young child's interior and exterior existence, Vygotsky focused on its inherent implications for learning and saw one of the most powerful benefits of children's play-oriented disposition as being its unfailing ability to drive maturity and advancement:

'In play a child is always above his average age, above his daily behaviour; in play it is as though he were a head taller than himself. As in the focus of a magnifying glass, play contains all developmental tendencies in a condensed form; in play it is as though the child were trying to jump above the level of his normal behaviour.'
(Vygotsky, 1967).

Interpreting this state of heightened awareness in terms of his theory of proximal development, Vygotsky believed that:

'A child's greatest achievements are possible in play, achievements that will tomorrow become his basic level of real action and morality. It is the essence of play that a new relation is created... between situations in thought and real situations'. (Vygotsky, 1978)

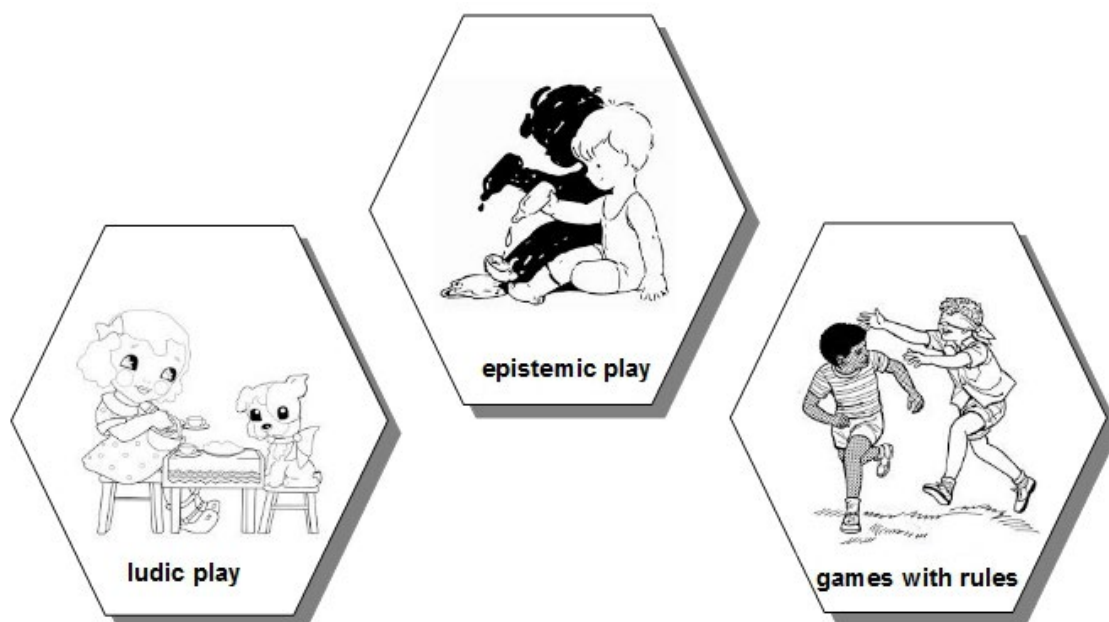


Figure 6.3 Hutt's taxonomy of play (Inspired by Hutt, 1979)

The outdoor perspective

The outdoor world abounds in stimulation and opportunities for free-flowing play and learning. And from the child's perspective, it also brings the added bonus of being relatively free of close adult regulation. Apart from being 'the brain's favourite way of learning' (Ackerman, 1999), the authors of a play literature review (jointly commissioned by the National Children's Bureau and Play England) explain that: 'All aspects of development and learning are related in play, particularly the affective and cognitive domains'; adding the further observation that: 'When children have time to play, their play grows in complexity and becomes more cognitively and socially demanding'. (Santer, Griffiths and Goodall, 2007).

Consequently, the reviewing authors recommend outdoor play as the optimum vehicle for the development of young children, offering their own compilation of its many advantages, summarised in the diagram below:



Figure 6.4 Developmental benefits of outdoor free play (Inspired by Santer, Griffiths & Goodall 1979)

Outdoor play and holistic development

Whilst highlighting the essential 'holistic nature of play' which occurs outside, it will be helpful to consider the nuanced detail of playing and learning outdoors, and its impact on child development, by looking once again through the lens of Thomas and Harding's five developmental domains, as depicted in Figure 6.5 below:

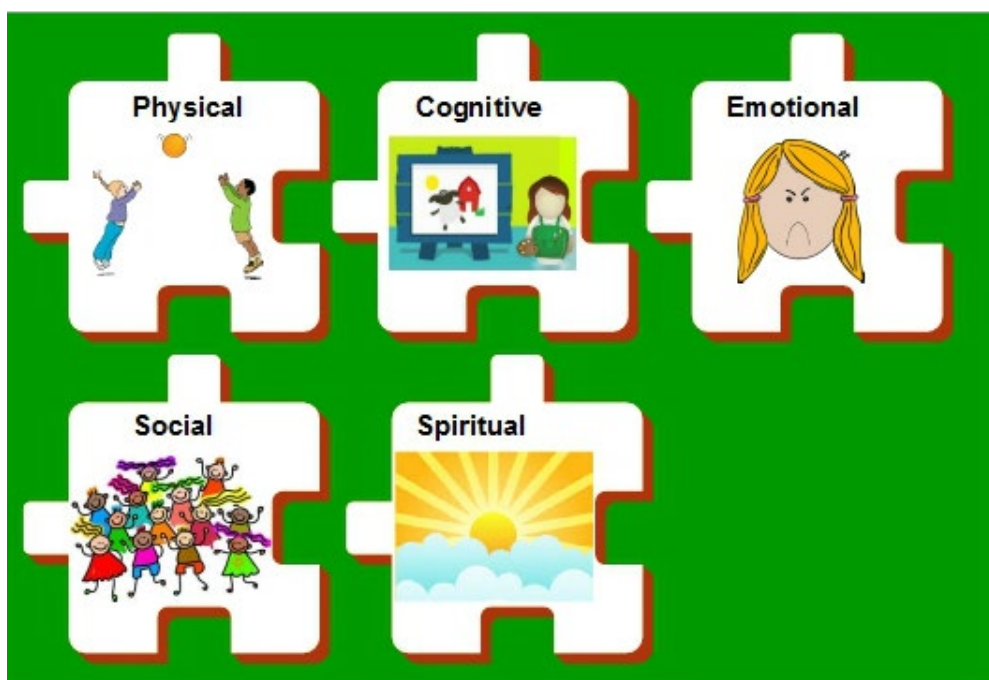


Figure 6.5 Playing and learning outdoors (Inspired by Thomas and Harding, 2011)

Physical

Even though young children may not have developed all of the capabilities required for formal learning, learning through physical activity out in the fresh air is still a vibrant means of discovering their world. Opportunities for unrestricted movement and multiple sources of sensory stimulation develop motor skills and allow children to accumulate vivid layers of practical experience they will later draw upon as they begin to acquire abstract thought.

Cognitive

Real experiences and an environment which offers real problems to solve are vital elements guaranteed to spark a child's cognitive functioning. Hot sun, windblown leaves, birdsong, rainbows and countless more seminal events and sensory encounters develop a child's first-hand understandings at deeper and more meaningful levels than the best indoor tuition could hope to achieve. Furthermore, as outdoor landscapes endlessly change and evolve in response to seasons and weather patterns, this also helps children to gain a practical sense of time and place.

Emotional

For children, the outdoors is a much more autonomous environment in which they enjoy a greater degree of freedom to learn and play. Given that these same freedoms apply equally to others, outdoor play also challenges and develops a child's ability to assess and take risks, appropriately regulate their behaviour, and develop personal attributes such as perseverance and resilience.

Social

The outdoors is an ideal environment for children to explore together. Activities such as building a den, constructing a mud dam, or working out how best to sow seeds and harvest fruit provide ample opportunity for sharing experience, resolving inevitable conflicts, providing peer support for the very youngest novices and much more. For many children, this also represents their very first chance to take part in non-family communal enterprises.

Spiritual

Within a generation or two, spending time in the natural world has ceased to be the commonplace childhood experience it once was. Thus opportunities for today's children to engage with landscapes, weather, the lives of wild creatures, nature's moods and seasons are now more precious than ever. It is only through direct experience of these immense life forces that children can be encouraged to develop a respectful relationship with the natural world, a sense of connection with our planet, and an understanding of the scale and context of their own being within this universe. Above all, they need the chance to be at one with nature and know a life enriched by the awe and wonder such experience can evoke.

This present discussion concludes with a compelling description of the nature of a typical outdoor play episode by child play expert Tim Gill, which provides powerful evidence of its unique ability to capture the soul of our young children:

'Climbing a tree – working out how to start, testing for strength, feeling how the breeze in your face also sways the branches underfoot, glimpsing the changing vista through the leaves, dreaming about being king or queen of the jungle, shouting to your friends below once you've got as high as you dare – is an immersive, 360-degree experience that virtual or indoor settings simply cannot compare with.' (Gill, 2009)

'opportunities for today's children to engage with landscapes, weather, the lives of wild creatures, nature's moods and seasons are now more precious than ever'

Queen of the jungle



The outdoor landscape: An interactive environment

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The outdoor landscape: An interactive environment

For early years children, the outdoor environment appears permanent yet flexible, reassuringly familiar yet brimming over with exciting new possibilities. In such a place the young child can enjoy living and playing wholly in the moment whilst building and reinforcing strong memories of events and experiences. As this personal data accumulates and starts to become broadly cyclical, so a gentle learning journey begins to move the child towards a gradual understanding and appreciation of time and place, and so much more besides.

A diverse environment

For childcare professionals, the outdoors represents the ultimate playing and learning resource offering an endlessly shifting kaleidoscope of engaging experiences which attract, fascinate and accommodate children at every phase of their development. Figure 7.1 explores just some of the freely accessible options a natural outdoor landscape area can provide:



Figure 7.1 The outdoor landscape: a diverse matrix of options and events

The natural world constantly evolves and each element interactively influences the rest: the seasons bring longer-term adjustments throughout the advancing year; weather patterns are reflected in the skies, whilst also touching the landscape and all its inhabitants; flora and fauna of all descriptions appear and disappear according to natural rhythms of their own.

One implication of this changing outdoor context is that conscious anticipation and planning for these naturally occurring events and phenomena is absolutely essential to ensure children gain the most from time spent playing and learning outside. Whilst that obviously includes suitable clothing and protection against the prevailing weather, other toys, tools and play-equipment must also be on hand and ready for action. To be truly effective, curriculum planning for the exterior classroom must be on par with the play and learning opportunities provided for any interior space.

Outdoors, children will naturally seek to interact with all that their play space has to offer. However, though that desire is constant, a moment's thought will determine that the landscape itself is always in a state of transition, and a brief analysis of its shifting state underlines why it is such a richly diverse environment full of child-friendly rewards and challenges.

Outdoor changes can be:

- Gradual —————> Spring changing into Summer
- Sudden —————> Unexpected rain shower or hailstorm
- Temporary —————> Snowfall > lying snow > thaw > flood
- Permanent —————> Mature tree felled by storm
- Predictable —————> Nesting birds > fledglings; falling leaves
- Unpredictable —————> Rainbows!
- Managed interactions —————> Sowing seeds > growing plants > harvest
- Chance outcomes —————> Local appearance of butterflies, bees and other wild creatures

Garrick (2011) describes these interactive options as examples of 'children learning from first-hand experience in responsive environments', and notes many others strongly supportive of this perspective: Montessori (1912) whose typical child was 'a little explorer'; McMillan (1919) who encouraged children 'to move, to run, to find things out'; and De Lissa (1939) who observed children's delight in 'experimental play' with flexible resources.

Advocating early years outdoor provision in environments which are 'dynamic, versatile and flexible', Garrick cites three modern theory concepts – learning dispositions, a new sociology of childhood, and possibility thinking – which support this characterisation of an ideal outdoor learning space as an interactive, responsive environment.

A theory of learning dispositions

Developed by Margaret Carr (2001) for assessment purposes, the concept of 'learning dispositions' is summarised as patterns of behaviour, thinking, and interaction which help to 'turn abilities into action' and thus improve intelligent performance. Learning dispositions can be visualised as powerful learning tools which are optimised to support the holistic learning approaches of early years learners. As Figure 7.2 illustrates, a young child's natural interest in 'people, places and things' and innate human inclination to develop 'reciprocal and responsive relationships' are tendencies which initially drive the development and refinement of learning dispositions.



Figure 7.2 Drivers which promote learning dispositions

For all learners, attitudes towards learning are closely associated with the acquisition of knowledge and skills. But for young learners in particular, this triad of features (attitudes, knowledge & skills) together form an initial, functional theory of learning which promotes five types of learning disposition. Shown in diagram form in Figure 7.3 – where they are listed as 'taking an interest', 'being involved', 'persisting with difficulty or uncertainty', 'communicating with others' and 'taking responsibility' - these traits are regarded as critical attributes which both encourage and influence the outcomes of early learning. Garrick identifies interactive playing and learning outdoors as a prime context for developing such learning dispositions.



Figure 7.3 Five learning dispositions (Inspired by Carr, 2001)

A new sociology of childhood

Most social theories consider young children to be 'relatively passive' absorbers and receivers of sociological influences. However, James and Prout (1997), and especially Corsaro (2011), have criticised this standpoint, not only on grounds of 'generational inequality', but because a significant body of research demonstrates that children are 'social actors' in their own right. Evidence for this view, Corsaro believes, shows that:

'... children are active, creative social agents who produce their own children's cultures.'
(Corsaro, 2011)

Most childcare professionals will be aware of the tendency of groups of children playing together to develop their own elaborate rules, rituals, chants and conventions. Such peer cultures have been shown to be persistent features of children's social behaviour with a very long history. Furthermore, Corsaro argues that 'childhood' must also be considered a permanent rather than temporary/transitional phase and thus a societal sub-group, which continues to exist even though its membership changes as individuals mature and move on.



Figure 7.4 Children playing together are creative, social agents (Inspired by Corsaro, 2011)

This new sociological perspective, illustrated in Figure 7.4, is a useful way to explore and value a key aspect of the world of young children, and a reminder that the outdoor playing and learning environment is a place where such creative interactivity can be regularly observed, and deserves to be fully supported.

Creative possibility thinking

The third concept which is highly relevant to interactive engagement in outdoor contexts is Craft's notion of 'possibility thinking'. This is a supportive means of encouraging children's creativity (see Figure 7.5) which the author explains thus:

'Possibility thinking ... essentially involves a transition in understanding; in other words, the shift from "What is this?" to exploration – i.e. "What can I/we do with this?"' (Craft, 2002)

Anxious to clarify precisely where, and how, the core focus of this initiative must be directed, Craft goes on to comment:

'It is important to distinguish between creative practice and practice which fosters creativity. In developing creative practice, we are nurturing imaginative approaches to how we work with children. In practice which fosters creativity, by contrast, our focus is mainly on ensuring that we encourage children's ideas and possibilities, and that these are not suffocated.' (Craft, 2002)

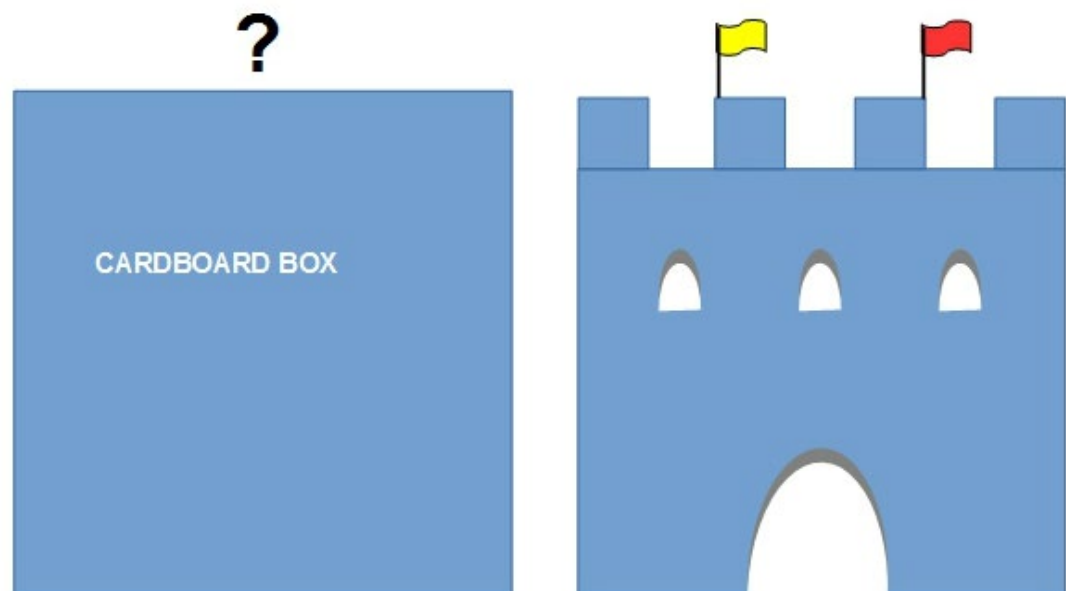


Figure 7.5 What does this do? (Inspired by Craft, 2002)

Professional childcare practice which truly fosters creativity is regarded as being inherently more valuable in that it is overtly 'learner inclusive'. This feature is important because it clearly demonstrates that a child's ideas are being taken seriously. As such, behaviour which involves 'children and teachers co-participating in the learning context' potentially has the highest motivational impact on child learners.

Possibility thinking in an outdoor setting can thrive in environments where flexible resources such as loose parts, PVC pipes, tyres, fabrics and similar are available to enhance the natural materials already on site. However, Craft believes that other features of the provision are considerably more important:

Posing questions – both those voiced by children, and implied by their behaviours, shows staff have ‘respect and interest’ and makes an essential contribution to imaginative outcomes.

Extended play – allows children time to become highly engaged in their play, sends a message about the real importance of their activities, and yields rich learning experiences for all.

Immersion – the extent to which children are supported to become deeply immersed in their play impacts upon the quality of experiential learning which occurs. Once again, staff attitudes are key to supporting and validating deep involvement.

Innovation – guiding children in their attempts to make playful connections, especially as regards the exploration and development of an initial stimulus, helps them towards a more fluent understanding of the process.

Being imaginative – when children are encouraged to be imaginative, they become more discerning about the quality of ideas, and also begin to influence the design of the task.

Self-determination and risk-taking – when children are encouraged to think independently, given plenty of time, encouraged to take risks in a secure setting and involved in decision making, the experience becomes ‘empowering and generative’.

‘It is hard to imagine a richer or more suitable context ... to nurture 21st century citizens than a diverse outdoor landscape where children can choose, create, change and be in charge of their play environment’

Whilst no theories ever attempt to cover the totality of professional childcare settings, they do provide an authoritative means of evaluating some key aspects of early years provision. The three concepts of learning dispositions, a new sociology of childhood, and possibility thinking which Garrick has identified can contribute much to equipping children with tools for a lifetime of learning, giving children a sense they are valued stakeholders in society, and providing an experience with creative thinking at its core. It is hard to imagine a richer or more suitable context in which to deploy these interactive approaches to nurture 21st century citizens than a diverse outdoor landscape where children can ‘choose, create, change and be in charge of their play environment’ (Garrick, 2011).

Nature:
the ultimate
playing and
learning resource



Inclusive outdoor play: A special place for everyone

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Inclusive outdoor play: A special place for everyone

The outdoors is a special playing and learning environment for all children: a place of unrestricted choice of movement and immersive sensory experience where aesthetic qualities are more vivid in a natural world of infinite space. And childcare professionals report that, for those children with individual needs and complex disabilities, contact with the outdoors is almost guaranteed to produce stronger responses than the levels normally exhibited during indoor play.

As Bilton observes, a well-designed outdoor landscape offers the perfect place to accommodate inclusive play:

‘... there is lots of space, mess and noise are not a problem and there are lots of loose parts which children can use at their own level of ability ... Outside one can practise over and over and over again. In play everyone can be included and it is simply easier to follow the gist of what is going on.’ (Bilton, 2010)

A child’s right to inclusive play

This outdoor model of provision clearly seeks to fulfil the requirements of article 23 of the United Nations Committee’s Rights of the Child (UNCRC) document which sets out the right of all disabled children to ‘enjoy a full and decent life’. However, as Casey (2011) has shown and Figure 8.1 illustrates, the UNCRC notion of inclusive play can itself be subject to a range of nuanced interpretations both in legislative documents and guidance issued by different organisations, and in different childcare settings. Sometimes opportunities for access and participation are prioritised, whilst elsewhere the focus may shift to removing exclusive barriers or providing the fullest possible inclusive play experience.

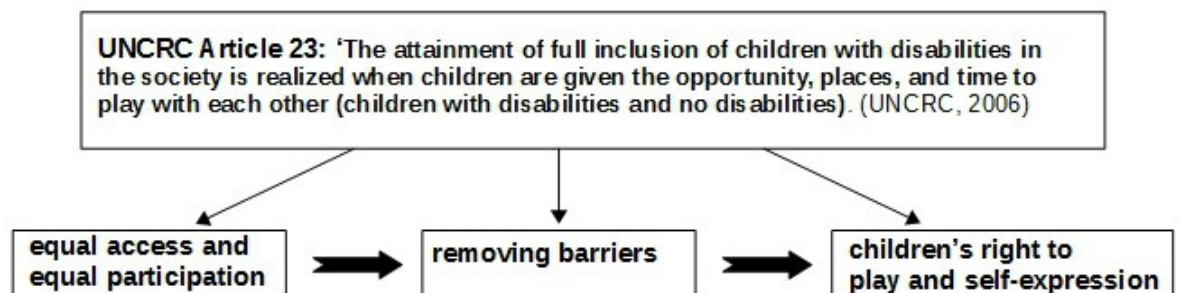


Figure 8.1 Interpretations of the right to be included (Inspired by Casey, 2011)

Play and inclusion: a potential paradox

One result of this variety of emphasis, clearly highlighted in the Barnardo's 'Lets play together' report (Barnardo's, 2005), is that even the best inclusive play provision 'where diversity is respected and valued' and which enables 'all children of all abilities, ethnic backgrounds, ages and other differences, to play together' will have 'barriers which must be overcome'. As the report's authors point out and summarise in graphic form (see Figure 8.2), there can be many practical reasons why 'inclusive play is not merely about inclusion' – their research evidence encompassed some settings which fell short of this ideal and 'provided high-quality play, but were not inclusive (in terms of children playing together)', while others were 'inclusive, but did not necessarily enable children to play'.



Figure 8.2 Inclusion and inclusive play (Barnardo's, 2005)

Nevertheless, according to the Barnardo's data, 60% of their surveyed project settings (a total of 39 locations) were successful in increasing the numbers of disabled and non-disabled children playing together. But where such efforts failed to achieve this outcome the primary reasons were practical/administrative issues related to transport and staffing (see Figure 8.3).

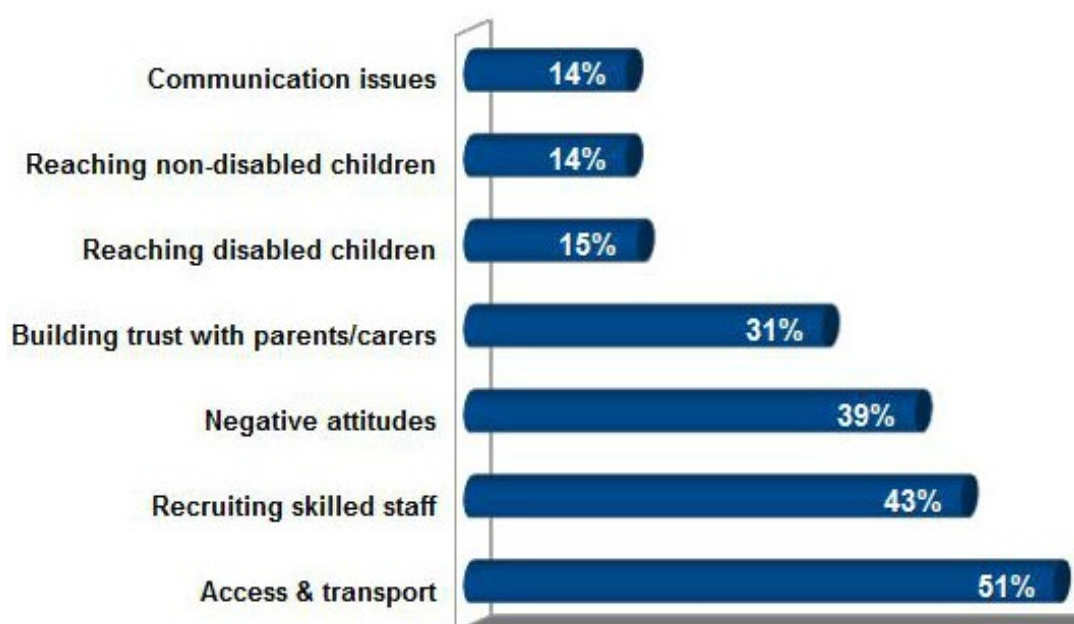


Figure 8.3 Reported difficulties restricting the provision of inclusive play (Barnardo's, 2005)

Disabling barriers

Whilst outdoor play is beneficial for all children, as Ploughman (2008) has established, any lack of such experience for children with impairments carries a double disadvantage in that they are thus deprived of healthy exercise and activity which is known to boost cognitive functioning. In addition, a further array of disabling barriers identified in the 'Free play in early childhood' literature review (National Children's Bureau, 2007), may further impede these children's participation in enjoyable play and lead to deprivation via 'an aggregation of social, emotional and psychological challenges':

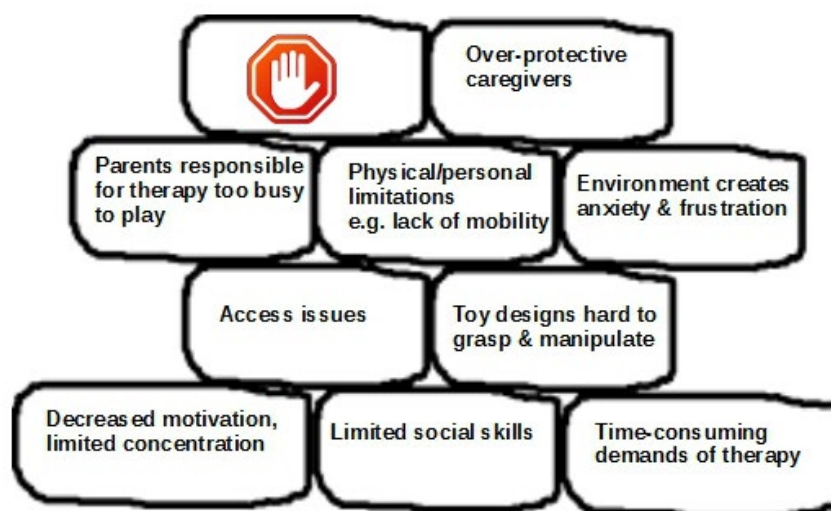


Figure 8.4 Barriers to free play (National Children's Bureau, 2007)

Making friends and more

Despite these disturbing limitations, the 'potential of play as a tool for inclusion' (PLEYIn, 2011) is impossible to deny when research uncovers such rich and compelling evidence as the following qualitative account:

'A little boy [John who has special needs] is trying to cycle on a low, hand-pedalled bike. He keeps rolling backwards into the wall. He is very determined and keeps going for a long while, moving the bike away from the wall with his feet, but he cannot cycle forward because the ground is uneven. After a while an older boy cycles past, he signals to John if he wants to sit on the back of his tricycle, which John does. They ride back and forward in the playground a couple of times together.' (Observation notes – Barnardo's, 2005)

Furthermore, study evidence from the Barnardo's project also mapped the number of children able to make new friends (see Figure 8.5) as a direct consequence of inclusive play opportunities, and reported that 'the longer disabled and non-disabled children spent getting to know each other ... the more likely they were to interact and play together'.

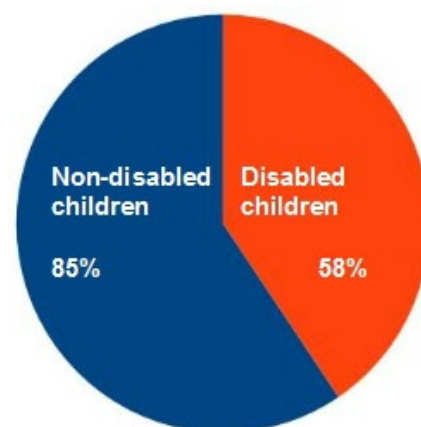


Figure 8.5 Proportion of children observed making new friends (Barnardo's, 2005)

The ideal outdoor space

Outdoor spaces which set out to encourage inclusive play must accommodate not only those who are active, outgoing and perhaps revel in rough and tumble play, but also those who are more tentative and wish to observe, test the water, and then gently begin to participate as their courage grows. Casey believes this means that:

‘... the wider the variety of play and ways of playing the environment supports, the more inclusive it is of children with a wide range of abilities and needs’. (Casey, 2011)

Juno Hollyhock, executive director of Learning Through Landscapes, has also addressed the issue of inclusive outdoor spaces and suggests six contrasting environmental parameters (see Figure 8.6) she considers necessary to ‘create spaces that have opportunity and potential for all children regardless of their ability’.



Figure 8.6 An outdoor play space for everyone (Inspired by Hollyhock, undated)

In this model, choice is the essential feature: those with cognitive or sensory impairment may sometimes prefer quiet sheltered areas with contrasting light and textures; a range of different surfaces and levels can facilitate participation for those who need mobility assistance; children with hearing impairments will appreciate quieter spots with face-to-face seating which makes communication with others so much easier; and a variety of fixed equipment and seating can also double as ‘traffic management’ devices, creating calmer backwaters as a welcome contrast to the ‘all-action’ open spaces.

Two useful additions to Hollyhock’s model play space might be:

- a commitment to include some areas, resources and activities which can be easily accessed by children whose social competence, language and play skills may well be at a much lower levels than most others in the group
- the inclusion and identification of areas, resources and activities which can offer a controllable measure of risk and challenge and which can be enjoyed by any child, with or without impairments – bearing in mind, of course, that an impairment can significantly alter the degree of challenge such features may present.

Play preferences

Considering the types of play favoured by different children, a small-scale study by Hestenes and Carroll (Figure 8.7), involving both typically developing children and those with delayed development or visual impairment, indicates that each of these groups showed a clear preference for similar types of play activity. However, as the diagram shows, there was nevertheless a distinct divergence in engagement with solitary and cooperative modes of play. As regards playing together and mutual understandings, researchers noted that the extent to which the typically developing children recognised, or could predict, the needs and difficulties of the children with disabilities influenced their efforts to engage in playing together.

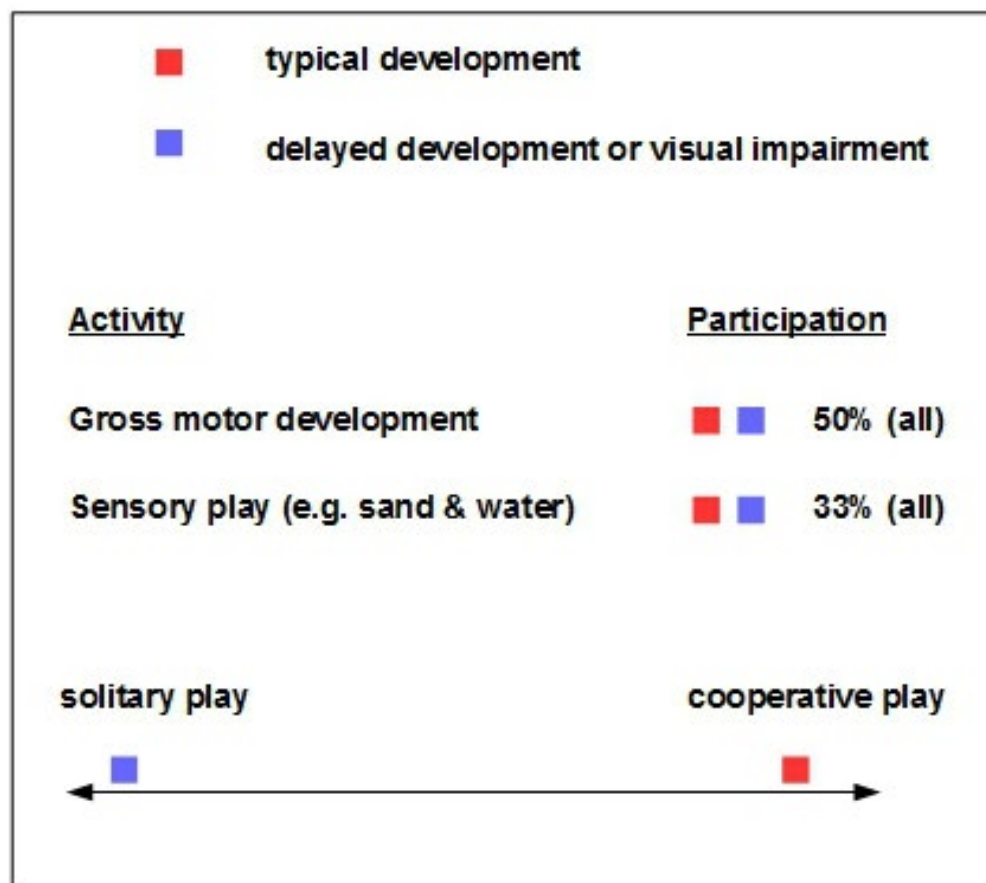


Figure 8.7 Children's play preferences (Inspired by Hestenes and Carroll, 2000)

Whilst interactive play can be a challenge for children with many types of impairment, Thomas and Smith note that it becomes even more difficult for those with an autistic spectrum disorder (ASD). For these children, patterns of play are often:

'... repetitive, sensory, isolated, concrete and lacking in imagination. Often there is only a limited range of toys used. These factors do not facilitate these children in playing with others, hence their social contact is limited, as are their play skills.' (Thomas and Smith, 2004)

Though such considerations may inhibit some aspects of participation, the tactful support of skilled playworkers and childcare professionals can do much to ensure those with ASD impairments are still able to access and positively experience many of the important benefits of outdoor play.

Stressing the inherent value of the outdoors as an enriching environment for everyone, Casey's comment offers an important message to conclude this current discussion:

'Instead of highlighting differences between children in a negative way, a good outdoor play environment can absorb and support diverse play behaviours. Inclusive environments are those in which it is possible to play in varied ways that ... can accommodate children's different ways of being and expressing themselves.' (Casey, 2011)

In play everyone
can be included



Playworker: The adult role in outdoor play and learning

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Playworker: The adult role in outdoor play and learning

"Play is not an easy game."

— Helen Bilton, author and Associate Professor, University of Reading

For many, the idea of playwork suggests little more than enlightened childminding, but Waller (2011) notes that, in reality, adults have a crucial role to play in enhancing the quality of children's outdoor experiences. This view is endorsed in the EYFS documentation which insists that:

'The attitude and behaviour of adults outdoors has a profound impact on what happens there and on children's learning. It is therefore vital that children have the support of attentive and engaged adults who are enthusiastic about the outdoors and understand the importance of outdoor learning.' (DCSF, 2008)

What makes an adult presence essential?

To be truly effective, outdoor play and learning for pre-school children must be given the same priority and resources as indoor learning. If this is to be achieved, then staff must also approach outdoor activities with the same professionalism as they routinely bring to the indoor classroom. Anything less, Bilton warns, is simply unacceptable, reminding us that 'viewing outdoor play as [the time] when staff have a break is about the needs of staff, not the children.' (Bilton, 2010)

If meaningful learning and development is to take place outdoors, Vygotsky's model of social learning suggests that the quality, frequency and timing of interactions between children and facilitating adults are central to the development of higher order functioning. Diagram 9.1 conceptualises this process as a child's journey towards functional competence on any particular task. Among many important developmental features which occur, the principal change which is promoted during such child/adult interaction is the gradual movement towards the interdependence of thought and action. Once achieved, this higher order functioning equips the child with a vital tool for a lifetime of learning. Practitioners should particularly note that the skilful deployment of language plays a prominent role at each phase, indeed the bulk of adult 'scaffolding' will take this form.

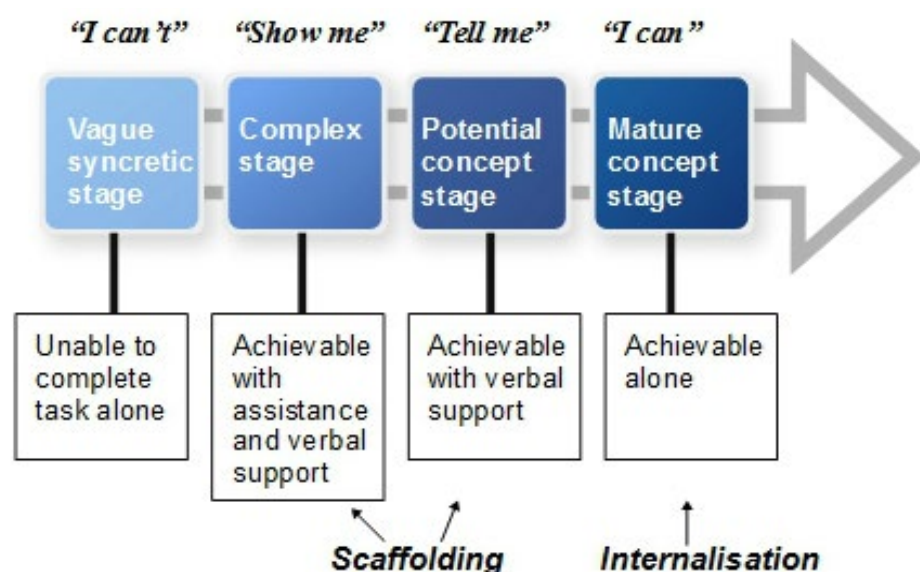


Figure 9.1 Vygotsky's phases of social learning (Inspired by Vygotsky, 1978)

Commenting on the acquisition of higher order skills, Bilton describes the process as being:

‘... about the development of intellectual self-control and leads to the development of thinking which is characteristic of logic, perseverance and concentrated thought.’ (Bilton, 2010)

Recent findings by Richland and Burchinal support Bilton’s assertions and indicate that ‘teachers may be able to help encourage development of executive function by having youngsters help plan activities, learn to stop, think, and then take action, or engage in pretend play,’ (Richland and Burchinal, 2013)

Outlining staff roles

If children’s outdoor experiences are to consistently contribute to their learning and development, then staff must adopt professional roles and practices which positively contribute to this aim. In terms of daily routines and outdoor activities, Figure 9.2 outlines the actions staff will regularly undertake to effectively prepare, execute and develop any programme of outdoor play and learning.

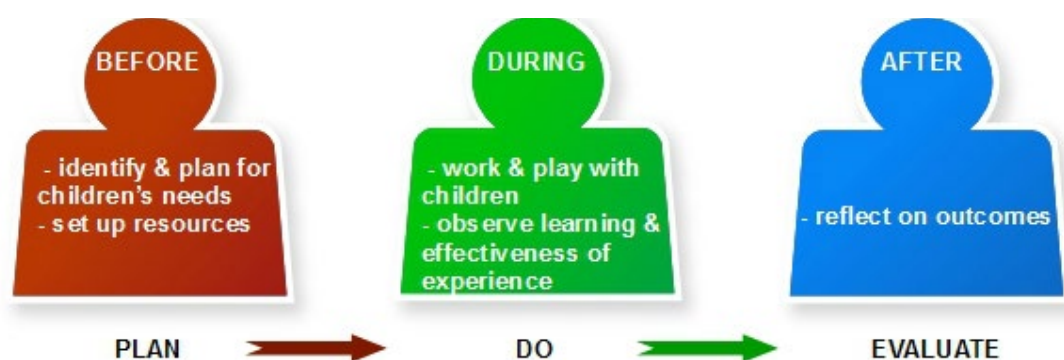


Figure 9.2 Staff roles in outdoor play & learning (Inspired by Bilton, 2010)

Whilst the need for pre-planning and organisation is obvious and cannot be avoided, careful observation of what children do and say during the activity is an essential professional discipline which informs both present practice and future planning. Solly suggests that observation feedback provides essential data on child development which enables practitioners to answer questions such as:

- ‘What do we need to change, extend or develop to build and/or challenge this child’s interests, needs, development, skills, knowledge and understanding?’
- How can we ensure that this child and others access the learning opportunities provided through challenging play?’ (Solly, 2015)

Taking Bilton’s model a stage further, like all education professionals, staff will find their most effective practice will be achieved if they can operate as reflective practitioners. This four-phase mode of critical reflection which continuously informs the delivery of learning programmes is presented in diagram form. (see Figure 9.3)

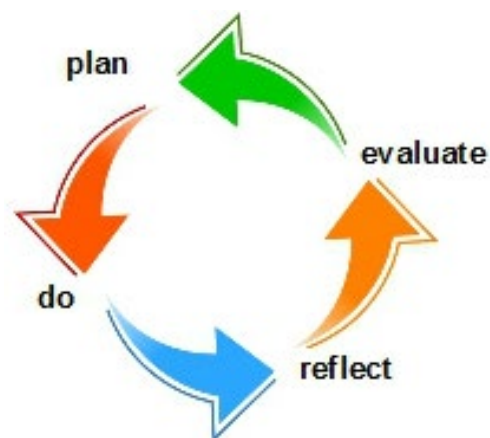


Figure 9.3 The cycle of reflective practice

Learning interventions

Whilst it is true that the majority of outdoor play is frequently child-led, this should never imply that adults are merely passive observers. In fact, the essence of skilful practice dictates that adults will at times function interactively or become collaborators, and be fully prepared to interpret and facilitate play situations where such interventions will benefit the child. These kinds of adjustment or refinement will always require careful judgement as regards the timing and extent of adult prompts, and should never become the primary mode of interaction. However, when sensitively executed, these forms of scaffolding have the potential to advance young children's thinking and learning.

Supporting outdoor play & learning

The richness of the outdoor environment generates endless opportunities for learning, and the adult supportive role which unlocks this potential must thus take a variety of forms. Waller, for example, believes staff are often called upon to act as 'reflective practitioners, thinkers, researchers and co-constructors of knowledge with children.' (Waller, 2007). His taxonomy of key supporting functions which adults will encounter in childcare settings is outlined in Figure 9.4, and gives a flavour of the diverse range of skills a childcare professional is expected to acquire and regularly deploy.

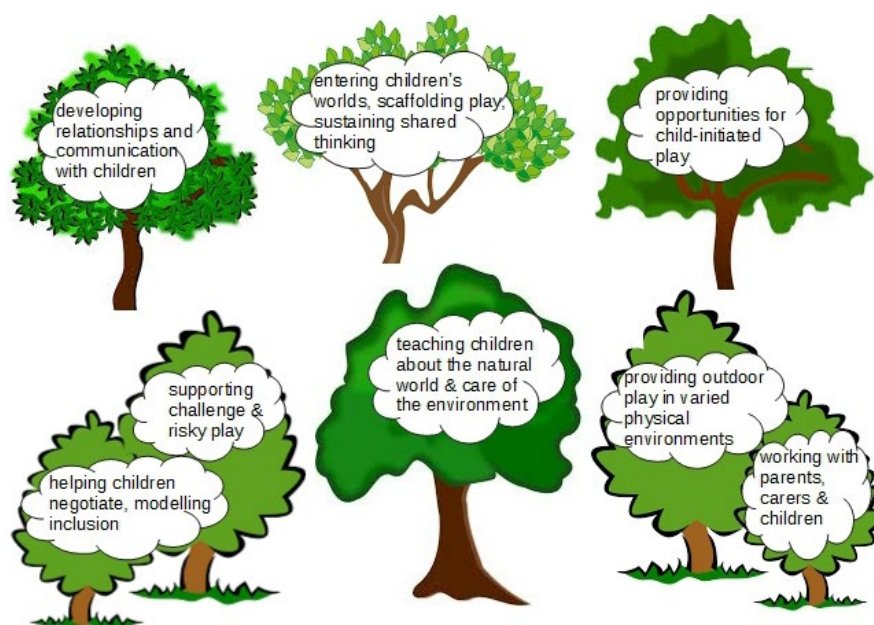


Figure 9.4 Supporting children's outdoor play & learning (Inspired by Waller, 2011)

Practitioner qualities

In addition to a range of sector-related skills, a successful adult practitioner needs a rounded disposition and a broad range of personal qualities (summarised in Figure 9.5). Whilst some of these traits identified by Solly (2015), such as flexibility, compromise and pragmatism, can be acquired and developed through practice and experience, other qualities are perhaps more innate characteristics. This latter category would perhaps be more likely to apply to qualities such as creativity, patience and perseverance.

As is the case with many personal attributes listed as 'career essentials', there is a natural tendency to feel intimidated by the scope of the theoretical requirement. However, the practical reality is that it is profoundly more important to understand and recognise how these qualities contribute to a quality learning experience for young children. For reflective practitioners aware of this perspective, the refinement of one's personal profile then becomes a career matter addressed via continuing professional development.

Bilton summarises how many of these practitioner qualities might combine and interact when she describes the typical adult role as:

‘... keeping a watchful eye, observing, scanning, anticipating problems, knowing who may need help, but at the same time giving children a degree of privacy.’ (Bilton, 2002).



Figure 9.5 Practitioner qualities (Inspired by Solly, 2015)

Gender-influenced adult behaviour

It has often been noted that early years provision is a female-dominated environment. Whilst this may be factually so, it should never be the case that this introduces a gender bias into the types of experience girls and boys are allowed to access. Bilton (2010) has observed that the outdoors is ‘not necessarily a natural environment for many [female staff]’ who are often ‘keener to be involved in sedentary activities, which usually take place indoors’. Nevertheless, many outdoor activities do naturally have a DIY element, and involve games or heavy, active work.

Broadening this discussion further, there are certain distinctive tendencies which research has generally associated with the play activities of girls and boys – as outlined in Figure 9.6 below:



Figure 9.6 Distinctive features of girls' and boys' play

Further research also suggests that the following trends were frequently observed when staff worked with children outdoors:

- Less time was spent talking with children
- Tasks generally had a lower cognitive content
- More negative statements occurred (e.g. don't do that)
- Levels of monitoring were lower

This evidence seems to imply that staff need to be aware that their own preferences for indoor/outdoor work and activities can exert a detrimental influence if they are unconsciously allowed to dominate curriculum planning. Thorne has listed eight measures which staff can employ to help counteract the development of such tendencies by modelling gender-neutral or remedial behaviours, as indicated in Figure 9.7 below:

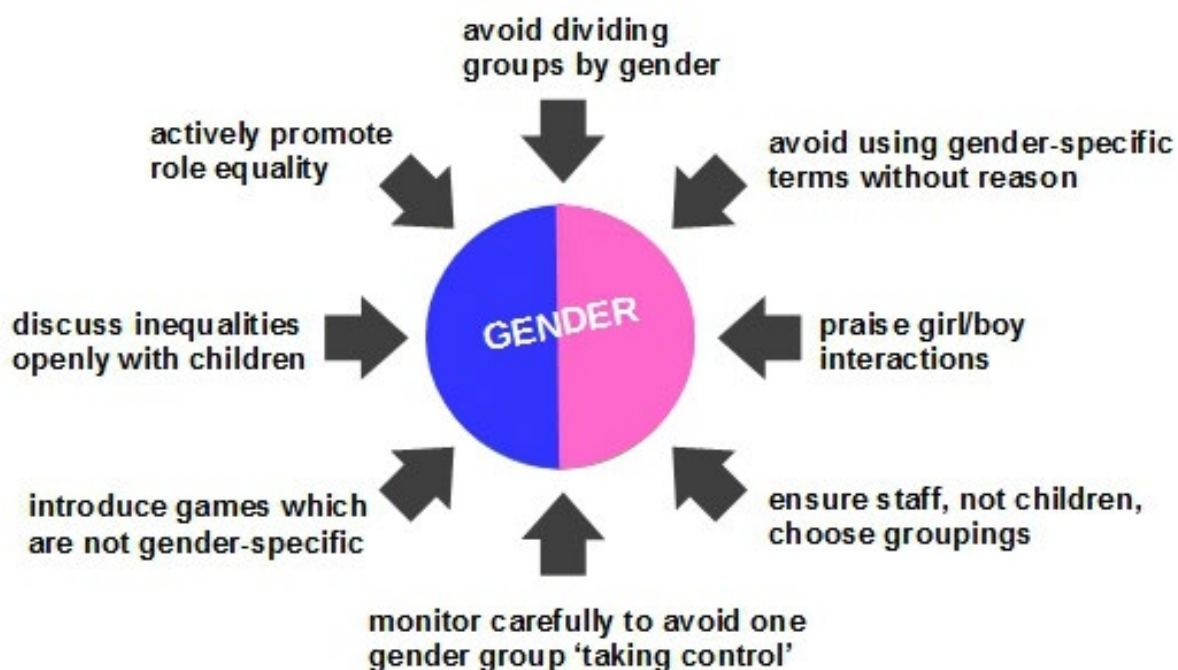


Figure 9.7 Measures to limit gender bias during outdoor play (Inspired by Thorne, 2002)

Summing up the core elements of a balanced approach, Bilton comments:

'... differences between people have to be recognised; men and women are different, they do take on different roles, but no one is better than another by virtue of gender.' (Bilton, 2010)

The adult practitioner's ultimate goal in supporting children's play is the subtle and sophisticated development of child-initiated 'mature play' (Elkonin, 2005a). Far from being an adult attempt to hijack children's play, or the mere insertion of 'playful' elements designed to disguise the advent of formal learning, mature play, according to Zaporozhets (a student of Vygotsky), is a dedicated process of enhancement:

'Optimal educational opportunities for a young child to reach his or her potential and to develop in a harmonious fashion are not created by accelerated ultra-early instruction aimed at shortening the childhood period—that would prematurely turn a toddler into a pre-schooler and a pre-schooler into a first-grader. What is needed is just the opposite—expansion and enrichment of the content in the activities that are uniquely "pre-school": from play to painting to interactions with peers and adults.' (Zaporozhets, 1986).



Entering a
child's world

Extreme childcare: Wild play in Plas Madoc

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Extreme childcare:

Wild play in Plas Madoc

'She [Claire Griffiths, play manager] explains how the place works ... how there are always three play workers present, but how rarely they intervene, leaving the kids to graze their knees, hammer their thumbs, singe their eyebrows, get stuck up trees, have quarrels and make mistakes, largely unmediated by the common sense of adults.' (Morland, 2015, 'Playing with Fire')

The junk playground in Plas Madoc, North Wales, is known by everyone in the community as 'The Land'. This fenced-off wasteland area of more than an acre, rarely visited by adults, is a space reserved for children to make their own by playing as they choose. Apart from the freedom this gives them, their potential play experience is constantly enhanced and revitalised by a stimulating carousel of bric-a-brac, old tyres, wooden pallets and other surplus materials, as well as sundry donated items. This junk material is further supplemented by sharp tools (knives and saws), hammers, ladders, ropes and much more. Play workers remain a low-key peripheral presence, seemingly disengaged, but actually fully alert to the evolving kaleidoscope of play activities developing all around them. Consequently, today's children playing on The Land can enjoy something approaching the freedoms once enjoyed by generations of boys and girls:

'It's a playground,
but not as we know it.'

'... you may notice the pallets have been organised into mini walkways with entrances and exits way too small for adults. (It's called the Shanty Town ... and it's temporary. Any child is more than welcome to come along with a hammer and smash it to smithereens.) There's a small, red-headed boy swinging from a tree on a rope across the brook. In a far corner, children are sawing and banging, building a den around a tree. Another girl has a hose - she's filling a canoe with water, just for the hell of it. A teenage boy sits in a shopping trolley, which two mates push precariously up an incline. Some other boys are ripping sheets of wallpaper to build a fire. It's a playground, but not as we know it.' (Moore, 2014)

Post-war pioneers

The observation that children much preferred playing on derelict war-damaged sites rather than sterile playgrounds led Danish architect C.Th Sorensen to design adventure playgrounds where, according to Sorensen's analysis:

'The imagination at play should be that of the child rather than the architect'. (Kozlovsky, 2007)

Inspired by seeing Sorensen's Emdrup playsite in action during a childcare research visit to Denmark, Lady Allen of Hurtwood, a British architect and a lifelong advocate for children's play, immediately saw rich potential in this alternative approach:

'In a flash of understanding I realised that I was looking at something quite new and full of possibilities. There was a wealth of waste material on it and no man-made fixtures. The children could dig, build houses, experiment with sand, water or fire and play games of adventure and make believe.' (Hurtwood, 1968)

Her professional colleagues noted that Marjory Allen, as she preferred to be known, regarded this new concept 'not just as a framework for more empowering and democratic play, but as an alternative model for London's post-war reconstruction' (Froud, 2015). And, as Rosin observes, it is this post-war mindset which is the fundamental difference between these early experiments and The Land's radical childcare initiative:

'The playgrounds were novel, but they were in tune with the cultural expectations of London in the aftermath of World War II. Children who might grow up to fight wars were not shielded from danger; they were expected to meet it with assertiveness and even bravado.' (Rosin, 2014)

A 21st-century childhood

In today's very different society, Bilton and many others deeply regret what they regard as misguided attitudes shown towards pre-school children:

'Children are not mini adults, they do not need to wear adult clothing, nor know everything that adults do ...' (Bilton, 2010)

And as early as 1982, Neil Postman was warning that such action would lead to children being effectively 'expelled from the garden of childhood'. (Postman, 1982). Taking a slightly different tack, Cunningham believes modern children are viewed as 'potential victims in need of protection' and argues:

'So fixated are we on giving our children a long and happy childhood that we downplay their abilities and their resilience.' (Cunningham, 2006)

Many see the results of modern, fearful parenting attitudes as a serious dilution of the unique culture of childhood, and some believe too that parents who regard child-raising as a 'project' are part of the problem. Rosin, for instance, warns:

'... the real cultural shift has to come from parents. There is a big difference between avoiding major hazards and making every decision with the primary goal of optimizing child safety (or enrichment, or happiness). We can no more create the perfect environment for our children than we can create perfect children. To believe otherwise is a delusion, and a harmful one ...' (Rosin, 2014)

No regrets?

Lady Allen captured the essence of what today's children risk losing in her oft-quoted remark: 'Better a broken bone than a broken spirit' (Hurtwood, 1968). It was her belief that children must be given 'freedom to explore and experiment, and find out what the world is all about' (Gill, 2013). As a result of personally confronting and learning to deal with the dangers and risks they encountered, they would gain the opportunity to grow and develop – a view which aligns with the above criticisms of contemporary childhood experience. Offering a modern philosopher's perspective on our present-day perceptions of risk, Alain de Botton suggests:

'It is only by reminding ourselves that the ultimate risk has already been written into the contract of life that we can stop being so precious about our own safety ... It would help if more of us went into old people's homes and asked the simple question: "What do you feel sorry you never tried?" The answers would frighten us ...' (de Botton, 2015)

Sparking ambition

The Land's obvious appeal to children from five years and upwards has helped to attract international media interest, and Polly Morland's book, 'Risk Wise', includes a detailed account of its features. Eager participants, such as nine-year-old James, have been keen to share their experiences with the author:

'What I do, jumping off something like that over there, that's my favourite' – [James points out a makeshift construction of ply, pallets, two oil drums and an old ladder] – and it's scary when you're on top, but I just think to myself, "Is that safe? Will I be able to make a perfect landing?" And if I don't, then, well, I don't do it.'

[James suddenly changes focus] 'But this summer I want to climb up that tree.' [He points] 'That one. Because there's not much branches up there, so it's going to be hard.' (Morland, 2015)

Refocusing attitudes and priorities

Fractured families bring just one more element to the complex mix of circumstances which leave modern children feeling under almost constant supervision. Following a bruising custody process, Wayne is now raising his own six-year-old son along with James mentioned above – to whom he is stepfather. Fearing possible abduction attempts, Wayne admits that, at first, he kept the boys far too close and had to be ‘converted’ before he could see things differently:

‘I wouldn’t let them play out. I wouldn’t even let them play in the garden ... but the decisions I was making were incredibly unsafe for our long-term plans ... it took me coming down here to understand how we can all become better people by playing a bit more and by learning to take a few more risks in life. The Land is probably the one place where James feels at home. It’s a haven really. It’s given him freedom.’ (Morland, 2015)

Manager Claire Griffiths, a lifelong inhabitant of Plas Madoc, summarises her own philosophy as regards this joyful and vibrant, if terminally shambolic, maelstrom of a play facility she endlessly monitors in this message:

‘Play should be everywhere – a natural part of life,’ she says, adding: ‘The Land is fantastic – but in an ideal world, there wouldn’t be a fence round it. Children would be able to do all the things they do there – without having to open and close a gate.’ (Moore, 2014)

A playground largely unmediated by the common sense of adults



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