

What makes an **outdoor learning environment?**



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Creating an Outdoor Learning Environment

Play is a major component of the pre-school environment, and from the child's perspective, outdoor play is always the most engrossing and enjoyable kind – as even casual observers will quickly discern. Yet there is still disagreement about what an 'ideal' outdoor learning facility might look like. Moreover, the uninitiated are often inclined to see little more than a group of children allowed to rampage around doing whatever they please under the watchful eye of a teacher whose sole responsibility is to keep them from sustaining, or causing, actual bodily harm and/or property damage.

The scenario outlined above would in any event be subject to a further range of contrasting interpretations by those with disparate perspectives on early years education. To some overloaded educators perhaps, the children will be more receptive

to indoor learning once they have 'let off steam' outside, though other colleagues may believe the most vivid and meaningful learning experiences were probably those which occurred outdoors. Even the views of pragmatists from the business community may sharply conflict: with some insisting an early start on 'formal education basics' delivers a competitive edge over rivals later on, and others declaring there's no better way to promote the innovative 'blue-sky' thinking so vital to 21st-century commerce than with pre-schoolers freely exploring their environment under blue skies.

Contemporary outdoor learning initiatives are, of course, underpinned by similarly differing concepts and philosophies, with many influenced to some degree by past attempts to utilise the outdoor environment as a catalyst for learning.

Early Outdoor Learning Initiatives

Though formal indoor classroom education is well-established throughout the world, it is by no means universal and, in the history of mankind, must be considered a relatively recent, and often privileged development supplementing the customary and practical open-air learning. Baden-Powell's Scout Movement, for example, founded in 1907 and based upon his own education and military training, utilised the power of the outdoors to inspire young people. Loosely influenced by several ideologies, it taught youngsters informally through 'hands-on' activities closely linked to the natural environment. Kurt Hahn's Outward Bound Trust, launched in 1941, took a slightly different tack, using demanding natural environments to enable the young to develop the tenacity and perseverance required to overcome challenging situations, boosting their confidence and self-esteem in the process. Hahn's thinking also informed the later Duke Of Edinburgh's Award Scheme which has broadly similar aims.

Elsewhere, the rise of environmental and conservation organisations within the UK began with the founding of the National Trust (1895) and the RSPB (1897). Though initially concerned with protection and conservation, these and similar organisations became increasingly involved in outdoor education initiatives over the course of the 20th century. These gradually evolved into the present-day partnership model whereby the 'front-end' nature/environmental experience is controlled by the custodial organisation – who often deliver the resource knowledge too – whilst educators handle the supervision and practical administrative tasks.



Perhaps best considered hybrid organisations, US Forest Schools came into being in 1927, though the first UK schemes did not emerge until the 1990s. The UK scheme is supported by various agencies, such as the Forestry Commission, and requires children to visit natural environments to experience inspirational practical learning which characteristically follows a cross-curricular model. This approach promotes independence and self-esteem, and focuses upon personal skills, team-working and overcoming barriers.

The views of American author and educator, John Holt, and others are representative of extreme educational philosophies of the 1960s and 1970s, such as the 'unschooling' movement. Holt's influential tenets advocated self-directed learning in a natural environment. Meanwhile, another equally significant development was launched in post-war Italy by teacher Loris Malaguzzi. Now known as the Reggio Emilia Approach, this inspiring early years programme espouses values of respect and community, and utilises a self-guided curriculum to explore enriching natural environments.

Theoretical Perspectives on Outdoor Learning

A passionate advocate of children's play, Vygotsky would view the highly stimulating nature of early years outdoor learning as creating conditions in which 'the child functions above his average age, (and) above his usual everyday behaviour'. He would also recognise social and cultural associations emerging through play – such as when a child pretends to be a firefighter – and doubtless also agree with Bruner that really rich outdoor discovery-learning contexts demand finely nuanced teaching skills in which there is:

'a vast amount of skilled activity required of a "teacher" to get a learner to discover on his own – scaffolding the task in a way that assures that only those parts of the task within the child's reach are left unresolved, and knowing what elements of a solution the child will recognise though he cannot yet perform them.'

Piaget likewise would spot the 'concrete and active' responses of young outdoor learners at the sensory-motor stage, and notice the tendency towards more-sophisticated pretend play exhibited by those who had progressed to his second, 'representational' stage. For Kolb, whose detailed theory is couched in terms of 'experiential learning', an early years outdoor education context would furnish multiple examples of children at different phases of his four-stage experiential learning cycle: some encountering a new experience [for example, a bouncy castle] for the first time, (concrete experience); others pausing to reflect on that experience (reflective observation); a further group engaged in planning new ideas based on their experience (abstract conceptualisation); and a few children ready once more to try out what they have learned (active experimentation).



Contemporary Facilitators

A range of sources promoting the concept of outdoor learning from a practical perspective are listed below:

Highlighting examples of good practice in the creation and management of stimulating outdoor learning environments, the Department for Education have produced a series of 17 videos outlining possible themes which could be employed in early years settings, and the child responses and interactions which may well result. Titles from the range include 'Children play firefighters', 'Children construct a beanstalk', and 'Children build a vehicle'.

Other organisations championing outdoor education and offering key advice and resources detailing how to incorporate and deliver outdoor learning initiatives include:

'LEARNING THROUGH LANDSCAPES'

which has been actively endorsed by naturalists and outdoor campaigners (including David Attenborough) as well as educators, operates a well-established resource for assisting childcare professionals with outdoor learning approaches.

'GROWING SCHOOLS' provides another library of resources, arranged according to National Curriculum key stages. This site has a collaborative ethos and includes an option for those who have developed outdoor learning resources of their own to upload and share them online.

'PLAY ENGLAND' have a website full of resources and information focusing on free play in outdoor environments. They actively support the use of outdoor environments to promote healthy child development.





Early Years Reflections

When asked to bullet-point their top priorities for an outdoor environment, childcare professionals and others with practical early-years experience raised a variety of topics. Some emphasised a sensory experience with the key components being sand, grass, nature, a mock home – and, of course, a mud kitchen!

Beyond these core materials, others wanted safe surfaces and ‘piping for creating water spectaculars’, or else a ‘jungle gym’ where imaginative play inspires physical movement, and some would hope to feature almost a full range of learning entirely outdoors.

The role of adult facilitators and scaffolders was frequently mentioned, especially ‘mindful and vigilant teachers’, ‘adults who love being in nature with children’, and a timely reminder of the need for ‘a conversation (about) the observations made’.

Kathleen L. Muse, a US education worker for 19 years, wanted to ‘bring the outdoors inside’, with Early Learning Center Director Judith Behrens, also from the US, echoing this and reminding everyone you can also ‘take indoor learning outdoors’, whilst observing too that ‘the conversations that come out of the outdoor environment are amazing’.

Amplifying this important point about continuity of the learning experience, Melissa Lunn, a US pre-school and school worker, said: ‘Bringing the outdoor aspects of play inside, can open up more questions and open dialogue between educators and children....curiosity will increase and they will have the opportunity to relate to nature whether ... indoors or outdoors. At the same time, you can bring indoor play/activities outside. Children need fresh air and time (for) ... more active play opportunities.’

Outdoor Learning Advocates

Asking prominent advocates of early years outdoor education to comment on the essentials for a perfect learning outdoors experience predictably yielded some thought-provoking comments:

ADRIAN VOCE from **'POLICY FOR PLAY'** is concerned about the 'dominant discourse of childhood being a time primarily of development towards adulthood', and believes we should let the children play, and they will do the rest. Thus, he makes a distinction between children 'enjoying' space and being compelled to acquire 'learning' from it. Adrian, of course, accepts that learning will take place but warns that such focus cannot be allowed to diminish the 'sheer pleasure' of the experience. A supervised setting, he feels, should not feature adult-directed play but should adopt 'an approach that places children's own agendas ... often spontaneous, random and anarchic, the antithesis of what they are generally allowed at school, at the heart of the provision'.

TIM GILL, a leading thinker on childhood, said: 'Children have a natural impulse to explore, discover and find out about themselves, each other and the plants and animals who we share the planet with. While every outdoor space is different, we can best feed these learning instincts through creating real challenges, secret places where the imagination can run wild, and myriad opportunities for hands-on contact with nature.'

Nursery teacher **KIERNA CORR** passionately promotes outdoor play but notes it requires the same preparation, saying: 'Outdoor play needs to be planned for just as much if not more than indoor play but the adults need to learn to stand back & observe rather than direct.' Passing on great advice from Margaret Edgington – 'If you can't think of three good reasons why children shouldn't do something, don't stop them' – she insists 'it'll be messy to tidy up' is just inexcusable.

JULIET ROBERTSON from Creative Star Learning is 'interested in designs and participative approaches to developing outdoor spaces which are sustainable in every sense of the word: environmentally, economically, socially and culturally.' From this perspective, she identifies two pieces of significant outdoor-learning environment research: work by Fjørtoft, I and Sageie, J (2001) about the benefits of daily access to natural landscapes; and a study by Grahn, P, et. al. (1997) outlining the physical development gains from play on uneven surfaces. Juliet notes that 'access to nature' is essential and that a 'wilderness for children really matters'. Nevertheless she is also conscious of the possible implications of children having 'time on their own' and engaging in risky play, and details a





Two Key Considerations for Outdoor Learning

superb Barnardos' Training and Resource Service library resource which deals comprehensively with this vitally important aspect of learning outdoors.

In most conversations about outdoor learning environments, two contentious issues arise sooner or later: health and safety, and robust evidence of educational outcomes.

Educational Outcomes

Exploring the latter issue first, moving classrooms outdoors does not absolve educators of their classroom responsibilities, and a National England report, published in 2012, flagged up evidence that the benefits of Learning in a Natural Environment (LINE) were often undermined 'remarkably easily by a lack of adequate preparation, weak pedagogy and inadequate follow-up back in school.' Furthermore, the report reveals, whilst 'qualitative evidence linking LINE to ... benefits is compelling, quantitative evidence linking LINE and changes in these benefits is lacking.'

Even though the report further acknowledges that 'relatively few studies have looked at the experience of early years education', it also gives an example of the type of convincing evidence which does exist:

'Possick reported on a ... month-long project (which) culminated in turning their school hall into a "forest" ... Based on observing,

questioning ... field trips, conducting library research (including the Internet) and asking experts ... the children ... developed skills in forming questions about what they thought they knew, wanted to know, and had learned.'

Whatever the reasons for the present reticence in this area, the relative imbalance between avowed high-profile benefits of learning outdoors and hard supporting evidence needs to be addressed at all levels.

Risk Perception

Turning finally to the remaining issue of risk management, one has to feel for providers and their staff caught in a maelstrom of calls for naturalistic environments, and non-prescriptive play with sharp tools and fires. Firstly, it must be spelt out that the virtual elimination of all risk can only happen in an environment where there is total control – and how many contributors to the debate would subject our children to such inhumanity? Nevertheless, as the excellent Play England report on Managing Risk in Play tellingly observes:

'... (although) compliance with standards is not mandatory ... some institutions, courts, and insurance companies tend to use compliance with standards as the sole evidence of good practice. As a result, non-compliance may be used against duty holders as evidence of failure to manage risk.'



to risk. Putting the present situation in a nutshell, she says within the report:

‘If the next generation enter the workplace having been protected from all risk, they will not be so much risk averse as completely risk naïve – creating an enormous dilemma for their employers – how to start that health and safety education process or to continue to try to protect them from all risk, which is of course impractical and impossible.’ (Judith Hackett, Chair of the Health and Safety Executive)

Concluding that enlightened frontier-moving innovation may never happen if providers are called to account even where risk-benefit assessments are overwhelmingly favourable, Play England argue for ‘a more forgiving society ... that admits that the health and welfare of children and young people is not synonymous with injury prevention’. Inevitably, they say, ‘a reasonable balance is exceedingly difficult to forecast with any

degree of certainty.’ Nevertheless, they believe that if as adults and parents we can find a way forward ‘children ... will have happier and more satisfying experiences of childhood with richer opportunities for ... development into competent and confident adults.’

This account suggests that the perfect learning environment can actually take many forms, but that each must be limitlessly inspiring yet firmly grounded on the principle that the child must always be placed at the centre of the learning experience. Given this pre-requisite, innovative practitioners and eager child learners can reap innumerable benefits from just about any state-of-the-art adventure equipment designers can produce, but with equal ease, they can still conjure magical worlds from old tyres, sheets and wild areas that will forge a store of enduring memories and experiences to last a lifetime.

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