



# Embracing the Outdoors post Lockdown

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# Student Outcomes & Natural Schooling

- Clear research which includes UK and international examples.
- Makes a strong case and foundation for outdoor learning substantiated with lots of research.
- Provides the evidence for Vitamin G – physical and mental health, wellbeing, cognitive, character attributes, and ecological connections.



# Foundations

## **Froebelian principles**

- Play is the foundation of learning.
- Children should be given freedom with responsibility.
- Everything is inter-connected not compartmentalised.
- Children learn self-discipline.
- Children are capable and competent learners.
- A learning environment rich in natural resources is important for learning.

## **Forest school principles**

- Play is the foundation of learning.
- Outdoor play gives children freedom to learn in self-directed ways.
- Children and the environment are strongly connected.
- Self-regulation is learnt through risky play.
- Children are capable and competent learners.
- Outdoors is ideal as it is rich in natural resources.



# What do children need?

**Time:** develop at their own pace and explore their own interests.

**Agency:** influence over what they do and some choices.

**Belonging:** be cared for as part of a community.

**Competence:** the feeling of being successful.



# What else helps?

Children playing and learning outdoors need:

- **Time to explore**, observe and make sense of things before they start to experiment, discover and form their own ideas.
- **Freedom from stress** about getting cold, wet or dirty.
- **Easily accessible equipment and clothing.**
- **As much context and meaning** as possible via interaction, repetition and consistency so they learn appropriate boundaries.
- **Adults who really interact with them**, value their ideas and extend their play and who enjoy being outside.



# Before lockdown

- 70% of the world's children are expected to grow up in cities by 2050 Unicef, 2019.
- Higher prevalence of mental disorders in urban populations (Kovess-Masfety *et al*, 2005)
- In 2017, 1 in every 8 children (aged 5-19) had at least one mental disorder. (Government statistical service, 2019.)
- 12% of children had not visited a natural environment such as a park, forest or beach and lower income households were least likely to visit them. (Hunt *et al*, 2016)
- In Britain children spend an average of 17 hours a week watching TV and 20 hours a week online. (Moss, 2012)
- Playtimes have decreased over the last 25 years. Children spend an hour less per week outside compared to 1995. (Baines & Blatchford, 2019)
- Children's self-reported well-being has declined over the last decade. (DfE, 2019.)



# Impacts

- Toxic stress disrupts brain cells.
- Whilst behaviour can be modified you cannot rewire brains.
- Nature stimulates learning and reduces negative stresses.
- It builds self-regulation, resilience, confidence and 'can do' attitudes.
- It can boost intelligence and lower levels of difficult behaviour particularly for the most vulnerable.
- Practical, active learning suits young children. It allows them to be sensorial and transfer their learning.



# Why increase outdoor play access now?

- Covid 19 spreads more easily indoors. Of 1245 cases in China only 2 individual cases occurred outdoors. (Quian *et al*, 2020.)
- Breezes disperse the virus particles more quickly outside. (Morowaska & Plume, 2020)
- Children have more space to social distance outside, and there are fewer shared objects and hard surfaces.
- UV from sunlight kills viruses more quickly on surfaces.





# Nurturing resilience

Resilience is about bouncing back.

It can be nurtured in ALL children.

When children are resilient they are:

- Braver
- More curious
- More adaptable
- Able to reach out and learn about the world around them.

**It's not about never falling down, but about getting back up again.**



# The evidence for outdoor learning

- It has a very positive effect on both adults and children's mental wellbeing. (Waite *et al*, 2016)
- It has been shown to have a positive impact on cognition, learning and engagement. (McCormick, 2017, Largo-Wight *et al* 2018, Ernst *et al*, 2006)
- Children from challenging circumstances gain most benefit from outdoor experiences. (McArdle *et al*, 2013, Maynard *et al* 2012, Roe *et al*, 2011.)



# Other evidence

- Children have **higher achievement in reading, maths, science, PE, drama and greater motivation to study science** when given longer term experiences outdoors. Dillon & Dickie (2012), Blakesley, Rickinson & Dillon (2013), Fiennes (2015).
- **Lower achievers, SEN, minority ethnic groups showed the greatest benefits.** Fiennes et al (2015), Hunt et al (2016)
- **Some children and adults gain social capital** by fostering pride, belonging and involvement in the community.  
Dillon & Dickie (2012)
- Studies have shown **improved attendance and behaviour as a result of outdoor focus.** Price (2015)
- **Adventure learning increases progress by 3 months.** Education Endowment Foundation (2016)
- **More positive attitudes to physical activity.** Mitchell & Shaw (2015)



# The science behind outdoors

- Sunlight allows our bodies to produce Vitamin D, which releases serotonin in the brain. This helps to regulate emotion and mood.
- Vitamin D isn't in many of our foods, so a lack of time spent outdoors puts children at risk of Vitamin D deficiency.
- Research with older children shows that those with higher levels of serotonin experience more positive emotions with their family members in comparison those with lower serotonin who have a greater likelihood of responding to negative emotions with self-destructive behaviour.
- Children are regularly exposed to stressful environments such as busy urban areas, traffic, screens and pressure in the classroom.
- Being allowed to play outdoors offers an escape and can help to bring stress and anxiety levels down by reducing levels of the stress hormone cortisol in the brain.



# An important reflection

*'All aspects of the curriculum can be explored outside. The sights, sounds and smells of the outdoors, the closeness of nature, the excitement children feel, the wonder and curiosity all serve to enhance and stimulate learning.'*

Building the Curriculum 2: Active learning in the early years, 2007.



**The greatest obstacle?**

**YOU or your  
team?**



# A natural curriculum

- **Smarter** – outdoors encourages learners to understand relationships and connections developing critical thinking.
- **Healthier** – outdoors can lead to lifelong recreation, physical and emotional wellbeing.
- **Safer & stronger** – can build stronger communities and developing skills to RBA.
- **Greener** – frequent experiences outdoors help children engage with nature, sustainability and the built world.
- **Fairer** – outdoors provides excellent opportunities to develop a wide range of skills, knowledge and understanding which can lead to profound changes in life expectations.



# The why of outdoors

We need to consider what our true beliefs about outdoors are and how we can turn them into principles for teaching and learning outdoors.

- How we behave and intend to act outdoors?
- What we do in practice?
- What do we provide?
- How we teach?
- How children learn?
- Which experiences have more impact on learning if done outside?
- How is indoor learning enhanced by outdoors?
- Do our policies/procedures support our pedagogy?





# What has to change?

- Leaders need to be outdoor role-models.
- Staff need more high quality training about outdoors.
- New staff appointments should include the criteria of working outdoors year round.
- Staff rotas need to be flexible to accommodate children's free-flow.
- Outdoor spaces need to be accessible and prioritised in terms of layout, resources for different stages of development.
- Don't wait! Just get on with what you've got and build your vision. Even a square of tarmac is different to indoors.
- Be prepared to spend a significant proportion of your first few sessions on sorting out things like handwashing, coats and wellies. It will improve. These are life skills.



# Taking families with you

- **Talk with parents, give examples and evidence** from your experience, involve them and be patient.
- **Do not promise what you cannot guarantee.**
- **Understand the different cultures, backgrounds and previous experiences and start from there.**
- **Let the child lead** you and their family.
- Create an **Outdoor Play Policy.**
- **Avoid saying “Be careful’ and ‘Don’t worry!’**
- **Lead by example.**
- **Celebrate and share children’s progress** via photos and video material.



# Ways forward

Mindset matters:

- See outdoors as a positive challenge.
- See stressful situations as ways to learn and adapt.
- See opportunities rather than threats.
- See ways to cope actively.
- See the aspects of winter we enjoy....



# Wise words

*“We grant space and time to young plants and animals because we know they will develop properly and grow well.”*

*“Young plants and animals are given rest, and arbitrary interference with their growth is avoided, because it is known that the opposite practice would disturb their pure, unfolding and sound development.”*

Froebel, (1826:8) The Education of Man.



# Session A questions

- Did you understand that nature is a critical factor for health and wellbeing before reading the research?
- Were you surprised about the impact of outdoors on test scores, improved memory and cognitive abilities especially for vulnerable children?
- How important do you think motivation and fascination are in children's outdoor learning?



# Risk, challenge and resilience

- Building resilience is a process and the foundations come from warm relationships.
- In an outdoor space, children have the opportunity to take healthy risks and establish a purpose over time, which in turn, allows them to gain perspective and rise to challenges.
- Children need support, nurturing and a positive role-model to lead by example and to encourage them to persevere when they reach the point of giving up or to support them when they struggle.
- Outdoor play provides children with a sense of belonging, alongside the freedom to be adventurous or to seek a solitary and calming space.



# What is risky play?

- A risk is a challenge a child can see....
- A hazard is something a child does not see..
- Eliminating risk leads to a child's inability to assess danger for themselves.



# What should be available?

There are certain opportunities which attract children worldwide as Ellen Sandseter, (2011) a Norwegian Professor has identified:

- Height
- Speed
- Tools
- Elements
- Rough and tumble
- Hiding and privacy





# How to help

- Not holding hands during movements, climbing, jumping off, or balancing unless asked.
- Never pick up and put a child somewhere they cannot get to themselves.
- Provide lots of physical development, motor control in different scales to build self confidence.
- Never pressurise a child to try a challenge they are not yet ready for.
- Physically timid and cautious children need more time to explore as they see fit.
- Use phrases such as “How about you watch whilst ...” or “I’ll stay right by you whilst you choose...”



# Session B questions

- Do you see outdoor play and learning differently since lockdown?
- What are your particular concerns outdoors?
- How can you plan to move ahead to 'slower' learning outdoors based upon children's real interests?