

With the technology-driven world we now live in, it's now more important than ever to emphasise outdoor play for children. Here's a parent's guide to learning outdoors:

Wherever you lived as a child, village, town or city, in a flat, on an estate or terraced house, your childhood experiences of playing outdoors would probably be very different from those of your own child today. Today's world certainly presents increased risks for children - fast, heavy traffic in the streets and the risk of approaches by strangers. On the other hand, today's children have televisions, videos, computer games and all kinds of toys that entertain them indoors. So why bother with the hassle of getting messy or the worry of your child's safety?

Why should my child play outdoors?

At the heart of this consideration is your child's healthy development and effective, happy learning. Many children are physically unfit because they spend a lot of time sitting indoors, they have unhealthy, fatty diets and they are driven to places rather than walking, even short distances.

Obesity and early signs of potential heart disease are now common medical concerns among the under-fives.

Overprotecting children from all possible risks has led some of them to a lack of immunity to common ailments. Contrary to common opinion, children are much healthier playing outside on a cold day, wrapped up warmly, than they are sitting in a centrally heated room watching television.

Your child also needs to be active. Movement is vital for children's learning. There is a very strong link between the growth and development of the body and the brain.



How and what can my child learn outside?

Outdoors, children can choose to be very active, running, jumping, climbing, shouting, or they can enjoy watching others, reflecting, hiding, playing in a world of their own. Each individual can move and develop in their own way.

Some children have a more active style of learning than others, and find it difficult to concentrate on doing things inside. Offer them active outdoor opportunities which suit them and their play is more focused and meaningful.

Of course, there are many learning opportunities that are only possible outdoors because they relate to the weather, to nature, the soil and living things. Many wonderfully sensory learning experiences like splashing in puddles, making sloppy sand 'cement', and mixing mud pies with sticks are activities that children engage in naturally. Finding a worm or a slug under a stone, watching a spider or a snail are fascinating opportunities that transfix children for hours and lead to unique understanding about the natural world. What about windy days and the thrill of flying a paper kite, or snowy days with no limit to children's imagination for using the amazing stuff?

How can I support my child's development through outdoor play?

The most important factor is you! If you are enthusiastic about sharing your child's experiences, putting on that extra fleece to brave the elements, holding back your squeamish feelings towards their precious worm or slug, then your child will develop more confidence and feel free to develop their own interests. If you have confidence in a child and allow measured risk taking, then their self-esteem and skill will grow.

What equipment do I need?

It is not necessary to buy expensive equipment for outdoor play. Time and space are vital commodities that are free - they just need your dedication and commitment. A place to hide, be secret and indulge the imagination can easily be created with a clothes horse or table and blanket.

Children's natural drive to dig and poke, to put things into containers, to collect things and make piles, can all be satisfied with the cheapest of resources - boxes, pots, containers, sticks, string, tape. Natural materials such as water, sand and mud offer valuable learning opportunities. A bowl or bucket of water with a variety of containers, including some with holes, will fulfil your child's desire to explore water for hours. Play can be a messy business. Providing old clothes, wellies and suitable shoes will save you from nagging unfairly over getting dirty.

What if I don't have a garden?

Making opportunities for trips to local parks, recreation grounds, woodland or the seaside offers your child valuable learning experiences not possible at home or in an early years setting.

Science activities such as planting seeds don't even require a garden. A tub or bucket is perfect for growing flowers or even vegetables such as carrots, potatoes, tomatoes. Caring for your own plants, as your child will find, is a very responsible commitment.

The world is so full of possible discoveries waiting for you to share with your children. Never lose the urge that compels you to roll over that huge stone in anticipation of what it may reveal!

The Play Strategy for Scotland 2013 says: ‘Open space allows children to be physically active and challenge themselves so they sleep and eat well and form healthy habits that will stay with them for life.’