

Introduction

Why do we need to play and learn outside?

Think for a moment about how you feel when you have been for a brisk walk in the fresh air. You feel better, more relaxed and ready for the next task ahead. Children are just the same. Being outside enables them to move more freely, breathe more easily, think more clearly and learn more readily. Play, movement and a range of sensory experiences are essential features of learning for young children.

We live in a culture where it is increasingly difficult for parents and carers, childminders, teachers and practitioners to allow their young children to use the outdoors as a teaching and learning resource. This is a great shame because it limits children's capacity to learn. Where better for them to become aware of risk by taking responsible risks while learning to manage their own safety? And where better to have fun and set challenges? Where better to take meaningful exercise and stay healthy while learning about themselves and their environment? Where better also, to take time to work through and solve basic life problems as they develop skills and confidence for later life? To work with others in different age groups, to collaborate and confer in a vast range of activities, where better to do this than in the great outdoors?

To allay fears about health and safety, educational settings must have clear guidelines about using outdoor spaces, just as they have indoors – for example, 'You must walk in the corridors'. It is essential that a thorough risk assessment is done of the area used and that this is reviewed regularly. If you go further afield – to the park or the woods – go there first with colleagues and undertake a risk assessment. You might find the suggestions in Chapter 7 useful when doing this, along with the photocopyable risk assessment form on page 56.

In addition to all of this, it is now a requirement of all registered settings to include outdoor play in their provision. Government thinking has realised that young people need more than a five- or ten-minute run in the playground each day. To become healthy, broad-based learners, they need frequent access to the outdoors as part of their curriculum across all areas of learning. The environment outdoors offers stimulation with many challenges and opportunities.

It does not matter what type of space you have, its size or accessibility. What is really important is that you understand the relevance and necessity of outdoor play in a young child's life. Can you provide a space for children to dig, plant and grow? Can you harvest their produce and enjoy it together? Is there space for children to run, jump, twirl around? You may say, 'But I only have a small yard and my class is on the first floor.' Even those children can enjoy their small outdoor space if the time is thought through and carefully planned.

As you turn the pages in this book I hope you will begin to understand, or confirm your own belief, that outdoor learning offers so much to our young children.

About this book

This book is designed for all practitioners working with children aged three to seven.

For the purpose of clarity I have used the term 'practitioner' to mean anyone working with three- to seven-year-olds, whether that is a childminder, an after-school club worker, a teacher or a nursery nurse. For the same reason, the term 'setting' covers all provision in the maintained, private, voluntary or independent sectors, whether that is a playgroup in a community centre or a Reception/Year 1 class in a school.

How to use this book

My advice is first to dip into a chapter that interests you and move out from there to other chapters and topics that appeal. If you can find the time, try to follow up some of the book and website references given at the end of some 'Tips, ideas and activities' sections. The more you can learn and widen your own understanding of the subject, the more you will have to offer the children. Try out some of the ideas and activities and jot down the outcomes, including how you feel about working in this way. You can do this in the book itself, particularly if it is your own copy, and use it as a working tool.