

10 top tips for developing your use of the outdoors within the Foundation Phase on a budget

Within the Foundation Phase, the outdoors is the ideal environment for experiential learning, because it offers unique opportunities to be creative, to move around, to be noisy and to take risks. The outdoors is full of special stimuli such as weather, sounds, smells and textures which can enrich and enhance a child's learning environment. Being outdoors enhances all aspects of children's development: social, physical, creative, cultural and personal. Children with these well-developed skills are better able to learn and to retain that learning. Placing greater emphasis on the use of the outdoor environment as a resource for learning benefits children in so many ways.

Outdoor learning is not just taking indoor activities and doing them outside. It is not letting children outside for play time. Understanding this difference is key to good practice. The outdoors is not an extra to the Foundation Phase, the Foundation Phase and the outdoors should be inseparable.

Thinking about what you want the children to be able to do rather than what you want them to have is a good starting point for provision. Planning, creating and providing a rich outdoor environment with suitable, engaging and challenging learning experiences for the children in your setting can include all practitioners and it does not have to be a costly endeavour. Parents/carers, grandparents and the wider community can be a valued asset when it comes to developing and maintaining outdoor environments and experiences.

There are many audit tools available online for you to review your current outdoor provision and create a development plan of what you would like to improve and when by. Ensure you include small targets as well as long term goals as these small improvements will give you the motivation and confidence to take further steps as and when you are ready. These first steps are important starting points. How you use what you already have can be more effective than making physical changes and there will always be an aspect of provision which can be developed immediately.

This factsheet includes 10 top tips with ideas on how to approach developing your outdoor provision within a few easy steps, involving all stakeholders within the process to secure ownership for the children, staff and families from your setting.

1. Car and tractor tyres

Car and tractor tyres make an excellent addition to any outdoor space, whether used as a space for planting and growing, or as part of your outdoor loose parts play. Used tyres are great for this! Approach local garages and tyre centres asking for availability of any unwanted tyres. If your setting is within or close to a farming community, be sure to contact the local farmers too. Consider taking some children to ask with you or for collection, however this would need to be planned for.

2. Old pots and pans

The mud kitchen has been an outdoor learning staple for a few years now. Ensure that your children are still getting the most of the learning environment by reviewing and updating the resources available. These do not need to cost anything; speak to staff and parents and ask that when they renew or replace their kitchen utensils, pots and pans, they consider donating the old ones to the setting. The great thing about this is due to the equipment being outdoors, it does not matter if they are not cooking worthy and you can really improve your range of resources, from mashers to woks to sieves etc.

3. Recyclable materials

Make the most of your recycling! The things we throw into recycling bins can experience a whole new life when re-used, sparking the children's imagination as well as supporting their understanding of recycling and its benefits on the environment. Keep yogurt pots for cups in water play or the mud kitchen, keep tin cans for planting and growing or making music, keep bottle lids for art or numeracy activities, keep boxes and tubes for loose parts play and so on.

4. Trees

Trees can provide a wealth of learning opportunities for children; describing trees, investigating food that grows on trees, sitting under trees, mabinogion/local stories that include trees, origins of Christmas trees counting and spotting trees etc. Fantastic if you have trees on site! However, don't worry if not - plan a visit to your local park or patch of green space or arrange visits with local schools/churches or community sites with trees that you can access. Natural Resources Wales has an entire page dedicated to trees and woodlands where you can find resources and activity plans for the Foundation Phase e.g. how to measure a tree's height: <https://bit.ly/2Qj9Zo7>

Curriculum links are included in the documents and all the activities will help you deliver many aspects of the National Literacy and Numeracy Framework (LNF) and Digital Competence Framework.

5. Natural resources

Natural resources stimulate children's creativity and imagination as they can be used in play in many ways. Not only do they support children in learning about nature and their local environment. Natural resources can have different textures, sizes, colours and smells. They are renewable and their creation and disposal has minimal harm to the environment. Natural resources are also easily accessible and free! They can be collected from gardens, parks, the settings grounds etc. Consider incorporating natural materials such as

twigs, stones, shells, fir cones etc. into your setting. They are especially suitable for investigation areas, creative areas, maths area and can be partnered with additional resources such plants pots with numbers on, weighing scales, empty frames etc. to help develop children's maths and creativity skills as well as their knowledge and understanding of the world.

6. Free outdoor learning ideas and lesson plans

Learning through Landscapes has a page on its website dedicated to sharing free outdoor learning ideas and outdoor lesson plans. The outdoor learning ideas have been developed and proven by early years educators and can be filtered by curricular area and age suitability, with almost 100 learning ideas for children aged 2 to 5 years: www.ltl.org.uk/free-resources/

7. Builders yards and merchants

Old disused crates, pallets, rope and tarpaulin make excellent additions to outdoor areas to support a host of uses; den or shelter building, loose parts play, construction areas, creation of mud kitchen areas, construction of stages etc. Do you have any family connections through the children to local builders, construction workers or yards where you can request some of the above resources? Again, this would make an excellent site visit with the children too.

8. Attracting wildlife

Consider creating areas to attract wildlife such as creating your own bug hotel using received/reclaimed materials e.g. broken plant pots, logs, branches, planks of wood and bricks etc. A bug hotel is a great resource for children to both design and build themselves but also re-visit again and again to see what creatures have set up home using magnifying glasses and making records or taking photographs. Plant wildflower seeds to attract bees and butterflies. Create bird feeders and tables to attract more diverse birds to your outdoor area. Have children record what they see and start discussions about what the bees/birds/butterflies might like best.

9. Local garden centres/supermarkets

Consider approaching your local garden centre or supermarket to enquire about any community schemes they have running. Many will support local groups by donating items and resources such as seeds, soil, trowels etc. without requesting anything in return. However you may wish to offer some free advertising in the way of a mention on social media, within setting newsletters, by contacting the local newspaper or placing a small sign within your outdoor area stating who has sponsored the plot/area.

10. Make the most of your community

Make the most of your community! Introduce children to the amazing outdoors outside of your setting. Plan walks and visits to parks, bridges, gardens, historical sites, allotments, garden centres, green spaces, nature reserves, beaches, rivers, ponds etc. Follow the children's interests and contact local outdoor groups and locations to partner up for activities. If your local school has a well-developed outdoor area or forest school location, contact them and ask if you would be able to access it. If you feed into the school reception class,

consider making the arrangement into a transition project. They may be a local gardening group that you could partner up with to tend to a local allotment. Canvas your staff, parents and carers for outdoor experts amongst the families and invite them in to talk and/or complete an activity with the children.

Please note that any adaptations to your outdoor provision and external site visits MUST be adequately risk assessed. Risk assessments must be shared with staff, and reviewed and updated regularly, especially when there is a change in circumstances. When completing risk assessments, ensure that you review the plants, natural materials and habitats that children will encounter to confirm they are not harmful or poisonous.

Further support and NDNA resources

- **NDNA publication - Outdoor Play:** <https://bit.ly/3mKeVOT>
- **NDNA publication - Nature Play - Inspiring Outdoor Approaches:** <https://bit.ly/3trRvAx>
- **myNDNA activities in outdoor play:** <https://bit.ly/3dXSrpJ>
- **myNDNA tips on suitable clothing for winter weather:** <https://bit.ly/3wU6S6T>

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