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The Benefits of Outdoor Play

Sisters Margaret and Rachel MacMillan were pioneers in nursery education in recognising the importance of physical education and active learning on children's health and emotional well-being. The sisters were social reformists in England, tackling the problems of poverty at the time of the Industrial Revolution. They believed that children should be in the open air as much as possible and set up the first open air nursery in 1914. Their philosophy was that children learned by exploring and through first-hand experiences. They recognised the importance of free play with craft and water activities, particularly in the outdoor environment. Their philosophy has had an important influence on today's practice.

“Outdoor play in particular can also be a major contributor to outcomes around physical activity and healthy weight. Developing play spaces, and play opportunities for children and removing barriers to play is therefore a priority.” (Scottish Government 2008d, p18)

Outdoor learning in early years settings is vital in supporting and extending children's development. It promotes development across all areas of learning in different ways to learning indoors and carries its own unique resources. Outdoor learning encompasses all that children do, see, hear or feel in their outdoor space. It helps children to be healthy, safe and learn in differing landscapes through adult-led and child-initiated activities and experiences. It offers naturally occurring learning opportunities linked to the seasons, weather and nature.

The outdoor environment plays a key role in supporting the development of healthy and active lifestyles and is an ideal setting in which children's physical development can be fostered and enjoyed. Having the opportunity and space to be free to move in different ways promotes children's confidence and well-being. Remember, some children will learn more successfully in an outdoor environment and for some children it may be their only opportunity to play freely and safely outside.

Did you know that air outside has a higher concentration of oxygen, 25% more than indoors, even with all the windows and doors open? Oxygen is vital for all cells to respire in the body, but particularly for brain function to aid the process of learning. Therefore, encouraging children to be active outdoors is vital for their health and well-being.

Benefits of outdoor play

- Access to space with opportunities to be their natural, exuberant, physical and noisy self
- Fresh air and direct experience of how the elements of the weather feel

- Contact with natural and living things to maintain their inborn affinity, curiosity and fascination with all things belonging to the natural world
- Freedom to be inquisitive, exploratory, adventurous, innovative and messy
- A vast range of real experiences that are relevant and meaningful and that make sense
- Endless opportunities for discovery play and talk so that new experiences can be processed, understood and used
- An environment that feeds information into all the senses at the same time
- Involvement with the whole body giving deeply felt meanings and all-round physical health
- Movement experiences that develop essential structures within the brain and nervous system
- Emotional and mental well-being, where self-image and esteem grow
- Social interactions that build relationships, communication, social skills, and the enjoyment of being with others
- Lots of opportunities to set themselves challenges and to learn how to keep themselves safe
- A place that meets the way they learn best and allows them to express feelings, thoughts and ideas in a way most suited to them.

(White, 2008)

Time to reflect

Think back to when you were young. What sort of things did you play with or do? What memories do you have of play? What made you smile? Do you think about being indoors playing games or watching television? Or do you recall running around in the fresh air, collecting leaves, digging in mud with sticks, making rose petal perfume and jumping in puddles? Reflect on how you felt and try and put yourself in the shoes of a young child when evaluating your outdoor provision.



Photo courtesy of Arbor Green Nursery