



National Day Nurseries Association

**\*Brighter thinking  
for early years**

# Factsheet

A young child with blonde hair, wearing a pink knitted cardigan, a blue scarf, purple trousers, and blue rubber boots, is sitting on a tree branch in a forest. The child is looking up and smiling, holding a small stick. The background shows other trees and a soft, hazy light.

**Outdoor Play**

**England**

# Outdoor Play

Children's physical development is critical to their success through life. Physical activity helps children develop coordination and control of their large and small movements. Our understanding of its importance has increased in recent years along with our understanding of its impact on children's all-round well-being.

## Supporting physical development

Physical development is about the growth and development of both the brain and body in early childhood. It relies on the development of children's sensory systems. Children's physical development is not defined by their age but by their opportunity to acquire skills and control so young children need to be given lots of opportunities to practice and refine physical skills through being active.

Providing lots of opportunities for physical activity in the early years supports children to develop:

- Essential movement skills
- Core strength and stability
- Cognitive functions -Spatial awareness, problem-solving and decision making
- Maintain a healthy weight
- Strong bones and muscles
- Sensory integration to process and interpret sensory information from environment
- Co-ordination and control needed to develop other areas of learning such as using tools, writing implements etc.
- A strong heart.

It also supports children to:

- Feel good through the release of hormones such as endorphins and serotonin which help reduce symptoms of anxiety and depression
- Creates positive lifelong attitudes to physical movement and exercise
- Develop their confidence and imagination
- Improve sleep patterns
- Have lots of fun!

## Planning the outdoor spaces

Where possible children should be able to freely move between the indoor and outdoor spaces as they choose. Free flow play enables children to follow their interests and develop their play ideas. Outdoor areas must be safe, secure and risk assessed, daily checks should be completed prior to children going outdoors. Involve older children in the daily check so you can teach them about hazards and staying safe. You can do this by creating a visual checklist, for example, a sheet of paper with photographs of the different areas you check e.g. a photo of your entrance/exits to check they

are closed and secure. Resources and equipment should be regularly checked and maintained and any damaged items removed to prevent children from hurting themselves.

"There is no such thing as bad weather, only inappropriate clothing."- *Sir Ranulph Fiennes*

Ensuring children and staff have appropriate clothing for all weathers gives you access to the outdoors all year round. This may include, waterproof trousers and coats, wellington boots, hats, scarves, sun hats, etc.

Think about asking parents to donate old wellington boots and/or unused coats, scarves, hats, gloves and umbrellas. You could create a wellington boot shed or a box of outdoor coats and hats that can be easily accessed so all children can access the outdoors regardless of the weather.

When planning for the outdoors you should avoid thinking that you can 'just take indoor resources outside.' Try to think of the special nature of the outdoors and be creative with the planning and provision of your outdoor spaces, ensuring they are as considered and valued as much as your indoor spaces.

A good-sized outdoor space gives children more opportunities to use their whole bodies. If the space has natural, wild elements such as unpredictable surfaces, these help children face real challenges and develop balance, body awareness and coordination. A good outdoor space should provide areas where children can run freely, climb, build, jump, balance, negotiate space such as with wheeled toys, catch and throw. These all develop children's coordination and balance.

Your continuous provision should include your outdoor spaces and be considered against individual needs, current interests and fascinations. Ideas include paint brushes/rollers and water, different sized buckets, tyres and bread crates to build structures, mud kitchens/pits and digging areas, wormery, guttering, vegetable planting, planters, umbrellas, tents, bubbles, wheeled toys, traffic cones, windmills, wind chimes, balls, ribbons, parachutes, quoits, willow dens and confined spaces, natural/real materials, open-ended and recycled resources.

### **No access to, or limited, outdoor space**

If you do not have access to your own outdoor space, or your outdoor space is limited you should think about ways that you can expand children's physical activity and time in nature, outside of your own provision. This might include:

- Contact your local schools to discuss sharing their amenities such as the school field, a swimming pool or their indoor gym space
- Contact your local allotment provider to discuss visits for the children to learn about plants and growing or ask if they would be open to dedicating a space to the setting. Children could use real tools to prepare the soil and care for the plants



- Source a forest school provider and book children in for sessions
- Visit your local park or outdoor spaces for children to explore. Utilise the available equipment/space for children to run, roll, climb and swing and observe the seasonal changes. Take some lightweight equipment with you, e.g. a bag of balls
- Take children on nature walks or sight/sound walks
- Grow your own vegetables using window boxes and small containers
- Organise lots of outings and trips in and around your local community
- Use walls/fences to hang objects or use blackboard paint or magnetic paint for children to utilise in their play.

Try to think creatively about your available spaces and involve the children's ideas when you can.

### Benefits of play in a natural environment

- Improvements in attention
- Learning ability
- Creativity
- Emotional well-being
- Problem-solving
- Co-operation/teamwork
- Focus and self-discipline
- Health
- Increased confidence/competence
- Identifying and managing risks.

### Supporting risks in play

Risky play can require children to challenge themselves on many levels. These include:

- Physically e.g. by climbing a little higher, running a little faster, jumping a little further
- Emotionally e.g. feeling out of control or overcoming fear
- Mentally e.g. learning to get out of trouble, learning your own boundaries and that of the environment around you.

Risk allows children to push themselves to the limits of their capabilities and opportunities to progress. Risky play allows children to feel in control of their actions, learning and play, take risks, and learn about boundaries, in a safe, secure environment where they can be supported directly or indirectly by childcare professionals.

Creating a positive approach to risk is essential to provide meaningful learning opportunities for children, with staff who support and understand the benefits of risk in play. You can do this by creating a risk-benefit assessment for your activities to support you in facilitating exciting activities, rather than preventing them. This enables you to identify any potential risks, how they can be minimised and importantly, the benefits of taking part in the activity.

Forest school is a specialised outdoor education approach where children learn personal, social and technical skills in outdoor environments such as woodlands and forests. It aims for children to take supported risks appropriate to themselves and the environment. The process offers all children regular opportunities to achieve and develop confidence and self-esteem through hands-on learning experiences in a natural environment. There are many different types of outdoor learning which provide exciting, stimulating experiences for children. However, The Forest School Association believe that the name, forest school, should be preserved for the purpose that it was intended - to run sessions in the woodland following the forest school philosophy, with a Level 3-trained leader, on a long-term, ongoing basis.

There are many Forest Schools around the country that are led by fully qualified practitioners and some settings have their own fully qualified forest school staff to deliver a forest school programme. If you are unable to offer a forest experience in your own setting, look around for your local forest school providers, to provide children with a range of activities and experiences a forest school can provide.

### Talking to parents about risks in play

Parents may have concerns about children taking risks in their play, so think about how you are going to explain the benefits and important future life skills, children are going to be developing:

- Share your ethos with parents during their initial visit so they understand your approach
- Provide information or explain about the importance of taking risks in play and in life
- Talk through any individual concerns and share your risk-benefit assessments
- Share photographs or videos of children safely taking part and enjoying the activities
- Invite parents to come into the setting and take part in the activities so they can interact with their child and see the benefits and the skills their child is learning.

### Ideas for outdoor activities and experiences

The activities and experiences below are not a complete list, or to be used as a tick list to achieve, they are a collection of ideas and experiences for you to consider against your own environment and your children's individual needs, development stage and access within your local community.

## Babies

- Rugs or blankets for the floor to encourage babies to roll, kick, wave and let babies feel the breeze, see leaves, and hear different sounds
- A safe space for tummy time - away from busier activities so babies will be undisturbed
- Natural or made items for babies to reach out for, grasp and explore such as shells, wooden pegs, old keys, wooden spoons, loofahs, large smooth pebbles, fir cones, a small whisk, a bean bag, different textured fabrics
- Scarves and materials so babies can watch how they move in the wind when tied to trees/railings/fence posts
- Large cardboard boxes that they can use as tunnels to crawl through and explore
- Malleable play
- Wheeled toys to push and to aid balance
- Objects that enable babies to pull themselves up
- Balls to roll and a chute to post balls into
- Windmills in the ground
- Sensory garden or sensory plants in pots
- A sandbox for babies to dig freely, add natural resources such as shells and cones
- Small wheelbarrows and tools
- Take babies on outdoor walks around your local community, including your local park.

## Toddlers

- Things for them to explore such as sand, water, hollow blocks, puddles
- Areas for children to move freely, running, jumping, rolling
- Uneven surfaces to aid their growing balance, including steps and different surfaces
- Things to climb on, into or through
- Things to swing on and slide down like strong branches, monkey bars
- Wheeled toys including ride-on toys, scooters, and ones with pedals
- Items for use in sand, mud, water etc., such as brushes, sponges, containers for pouring, spades, watering cans
- Painting on hard surfaces with water and large brushes
- Dropping paint in puddles to see patterns
- Simple counting with twigs, leaves, conkers, shells, pine cones etc.
- Chunky chinks, spray bottles, paints and brushes (including making your own natural paintbrushes), a range of surfaces to paint/draw on e.g. snow
- A practitioner to support, encourage, offer action rhymes and model movements
- Walks in and around your local community, including your local parks to play on swings, climb on equipment and run, climb and roll down hills or inclines.

## Pre-school

- Providing opportunities for children to run, climb, jump, balance, crawl, hop, skip, use bikes and ride-on toys
- Areas in which children can plant and grow seeds, plus other areas in which they can dig freely

- An area in which children can relax, rest and reflect or read books and tell stories
- Resources that are safe but allow children to take risks, e.g. climbing frames, trees that are safe to climb, dens
- Developing natural homes for a variety of minibeasts and insect life.
- How to care for and protect the environment
- Opportunities for the children to go out into the community with purpose i.e. to extend their learning
- Providing resources for children to explore, investigate and learn about the outdoors and all it offers
- Large-scale equipment for climbing, sliding, and swinging – natural trees, logs and ropes are better than purchased equipment
- Construction materials, large and small
- Woodwork tools and materials
- Den making materials
- Sand, water, and mud kitchen with a range of items to explore the properties of each
- Items for collecting and sorting such as conkers, shells, pinecones
- Writing materials, clipboards
- Interesting and unusual reclaimed and found materials (large and small) such as cable drums, large cardboard boxes
- Balls, bats, and hoops
- Open-ended resources for lifting, carrying, pushing, pulling, constructing, climbing, jumping
- Discovering how water affects properties like soil, snow melts, water turns to ice and so on
- Role play such as acting out action heroes in large spaces
- Building channels for water to flow, understanding that you need slopes for it to flow
- A practitioner to provide regular ideas about different ways to move, challenge children to climb higher, run faster and encourage children to select from the range of skills they have acquired.

#### Outdoor Play V0.3 – 24 July 2024



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# Factsheet

Our factsheets are written by early years experts for the early years workforce. Most NDNA factsheets are free to our members.

NDNA is the national charity and membership association representing children's nurseries across the UK. We are a charity that believes in quality and sustainability, so we put our members' businesses at the very heart of ours.

We are the voice of the 21,000-strong nursery sector, an integral part of the lives of more than a million young children and their families. We provide information, training and advice to support nurseries and the 250,000 people who work in them to deliver world-class early learning and childcare.

See the full range of NDNA factsheets at [www.ndna.org.uk/factsheets](http://www.ndna.org.uk/factsheets)

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## National Day Nurseries Association

National Early Years Enterprise Centre, Longbow Close, Huddersfield HD2 1GQ  
tel: 01484 407070 fax: 01484 407060 info@ndna.org.uk www.ndna.org.uk