

What's so special about 'the outdoors'?

- Being outside improves mental health and wellbeing.
- Children make connections with the real world and their learning becomes meaningful.
- Outdoor learning develops skills needed to be a lifelong learner – problem solving, creative thinking, enquiry, reflection.
- It meets the needs of different learners in different ways.
- It offers a large scale, multisensory experience which helps children remember and recall their learning.

How does that work?

This is a great question to ask when you're at the park. Look at the swing. How does it work? How does it move backwards and forwards? Is it just your legs? Or is the swing built in a way that means it will move? Look closely together. What about the roundabout? Why does it spin? Can you get close so you can see how it works? Then the slide. How come you woosh down it? Would the same thing happen if the slide was straight and not a slope? Can you find things to roll down the slide – do some go faster/further than others? Why could that be?

Puddles

Try these puddle investigations: Can you build a bridge over the puddle? For a toy car? Or stepping stones for a person? How far does your splash go? You'll need wellies for this one! Jump in the puddle and measure the distance of the splash. You might be able to see it. Or you could mark it with chalk/a stick or stone. Perhaps different people can have a go. Who's splash goes further? Does it make a difference if they are a grown up or a child? Can you move the puddle? Where would be a good place to move it to? What do you need? Will it be easier to try moving a big puddle or a little one? Where do puddles go when the sun comes out? Visit the same puddle a few times as the weather brightens. What does your child notice?

There's no such thing as the wrong weather, just the wrong clothes!

Together with your child, think about the different kinds of weather and what they might need to wear. Any old collection of things will do (they will probably get muddy/wet/dusty anyway!) but have you got the basic weather conditions covered: sunny, rainy, windy, cold? Think about the words you use when you're talking about the weather – 'Horrible rain'/'Amazing sunshine'. We all do it! Can you use positive words for windy and rainy days to keep your child motivated to go outside whatever the weather?

Outdoor Learning

Whether you live in the city or in the countryside, 'the outdoors' is waiting for you and your child to learn in. Here are some ideas you can try with your child at any age. Remember to plant the seed and then follow their lead.

Walk the other way

Is there a walk you do often that leads round in a circle back to your home? Do you always start in the same direction? What happens if you walk the other way? Turn left instead of right? Do you notice different things? Does it look unusual? Your child could make a map of the walk and the things they see/directions they go. Or if you have a mobile device you could make a photo map as you walk along. Give someone else the map – can they follow it?

Just imagine

The outdoors is full of places for your imagination to run wild. What tiny magic creature lives in the crack in the wall? Can you leave them a message? It could be in secret code. Are there elves in the hole in the ground? Can you make them a miniature garden? What wish will you make on the leaves of the Wishing Tree? Look at that archway of bricks/branches – it's a gateway to another world, shall we go through? Who might we meet there? Can you make a map of this other land? These moments can start stories, perhaps told or maybe written down. They will support language development and vocabulary. Let your child take the lead.

Blowing in the wind

On a windy day, collect some things that a) will blow away in the wind (leaf, feather, blade of grass); b) won't blow away (stone, stick, bit of brick); c) something that might or might not blow away (a twig, a glove). Pick a sheltered spot and talk with your child about what they think will happen to each item in the wind. Can they sort them into things they think will blow away, things that won't and things that might? Out in the open, hold each item up in the air and let go. What happens? Was that what you expected? Does it make a difference which way you face/how high you hold the item up? Depending on your child's stage of development they might want to record what they discover – on paper, or using chalk on the ground they could draw circles to sort the items in.

Measure it

With your child, pick something to measure. Maybe all the way round a big tree trunk, or how tall is that wall, or how long is the path? Next you need to decide what to measure with: your hands, feet, a bit of string? Does it matter if you use different things? Is there a difference between the number of grown up hands round the tree and the number of child hands? Perhaps the wall has bricks – can you measure it in how many bricks tall it is, then how many string lengths? Are they the same? You might need to do a bit of teamwork!