

QUICK READ: BREAKING DOWN BARRIERS TO OUTDOOR PLAY IN THE EARLY YEARS SETTING



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Embracing an outdoor ethos can be tricky when our wonderful British weather throws so much at us. Even the most seasoned outdoor enthusiasts can find certain parts of the year challenging; our long, grey winters can really take their toll. However, making some simple changes to our mindset, equipment and pedagogy can really help to ease some of the stress, so that the process of moving play outside is easier and more enjoyable for everyone.



BREAKING DOWN BARRIERS IN OUTDOOR PLAY

The EYFS and EEF both highlight the importance and necessity of children having daily access to the outdoors, whether with direct access to a play area or planned activities within the local environment to support both emotional and physical development.

POSITIVE LANGUAGE AND A POSITIVE MINDSET



Firstly, it's important to think about how we model our own response to being outdoors and our inclement weather. This often starts with the language we use around the children and thinking about how we can talk about the positives rather than the negatives of, say, a grey drizzly day. "Oh no, it's raining; what a horrible day!" can become, "Wow, it's a puddle day, how exciting! I bet the trees are having a big drink!" It's helpful to encourage parents to do the same, embracing the idea that all weather has its own unique and exciting opportunities for learning.

ALL THE GEAR

Because we have such varied seasons, being comfortable is a priority, both for ourselves and our children. There's nothing worse than having to cut an activity short because the children are wet and cold, or the sun has come out unexpectedly and one of them hasn't brought a sun hat.

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Our 'enabling environment' stretches to the equipment that we use to create the ideal conditions for learning to take place.

We're not only thinking about how to keep children warm and dry, but we also want to make sure that they can get down on the ground in their natural play positions, just as they would indoors.

Layering clothing and making sure that everyone has good quality outerwear is really important. For me, it has been easier to source my own coats, over-trousers, hats, gloves, sunsuits and boots quite cheaply using free or second-hand selling sites. This way I can be sure that every child has what they need, and that it's going to stand up to some serious water and mud. Alternatively, providing parents with a comprehensive equipment list can also work. I also make sure that I myself have everything I need to stay warm and dry, and I don't mind admitting that my most treasured piece of clothing is a battery-heated bodywarmer!

We often focus on the cold and damp in the UK, but due to a changing climate we must also consider the hotter summers. Freezing drinks to take out with us, lots of water play, hanging out in the woods or making parts of the garden shaded can all help; making sure that every child has high quality sun protection is vital.



UTILISE YOUR INDOOR RESOURCES



Nature provides so much for us in terms of loose parts, but it's also important to consider how our intelligent indoor resources can enrich our outdoor play. In my setting, we provide these in moveable baskets where everything indoors is free to be taken outside.

I also find it helpful to pack playroom resources into our big rucksack to take with us on our adventures out and about. I always have watercolours, crayons, chalk, scissors, magnifying glasses and books in our bag; it's so interesting to see how children extend their play and find innovative ways to use these in new and interesting outdoor spaces.

MAKING SURE TIME IS ON YOUR SIDE

Stripping back schedules and timetables can open up more opportunity for outdoor play. When we slow our days down, we create more time for children to really connect to their natural world; usually the days with the simplest outdoor plans end up being the ones where we learn the most.

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We all know that dressing and undressing for outdoor play can take time, especially when it involves cajoling thirty tiny fingers into 3 pairs of gloves, but when we make space for that, it no longer feels like a rushed chore; it becomes part of the natural rhythm of the day and provides many learning prospects for the children.



ENHANCED WELLBEING

When we embrace the benefits of outdoor play, we really do open up a whole new world of incredible opportunities. For me, spending time outside just existing in natural spaces with the children, takes so much pressure off my need to pre-plan; nature becomes the third teacher. There is something so wonderful about the simplicity of insect spotting, jumping in puddles or sliding up and down a muddy slope; and there's no better feeling than sitting amongst the autumn leaves, with a thermos of hot chocolate and a warm pouch of cinnamon porridge!



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