

QUICK READ: SUPPORTING PRE-WRITING SKILLS IN THE GREAT OUTDOORS



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OF KAYTE'S HOUSE**

I'm a great believer that anything you can do indoors with the children, you can also do outside. In recent years I have challenged myself to set up intelligent play spaces in a range of natural settings to enhance my provision. Recent locations have included the garden, park, woods, riverbank, local farm, nature reserve, and smack bang in the middle of a pumpkin field!



In doing so, I have noticed that activities offered in the fresh air boosts children's engagement, and that they are far more focussed, and are able to embed new skills and information more effectively when play and learning moves outside.

As knowledgeable early educators, we all know that gross motor development underpins children's ability to write successfully. Before they can hold a pencil, they need to develop their proprioceptive and vestibular senses, core strength, and their arm, wrist, hand and finger muscles. Activities such as; running, climbing, stomping in puddles, kicking or throwing a ball, digging in mud, balancing on a log, or swinging on a rope all support these.

It is often these high energy activities that spring to mind when we think about what outdoor play looks like. But what if our outdoor spaces also became calm, focussed, dedicated areas for further pre-writing skills to unfurl?



'The educator supports children with the mechanics of mark-making and letter formation before focusing on the more formal formation of letter shapes and numbers.' Education Endowment Foundation 2025

FREEDOM TO BE CREATIVE

This might be an unpopular opinion, but I am more than happy for our indoor resources to be moved outside. I often set up invitations in the garden using our small world figures, loose parts, STEM materials, or arts and crafts, and love positioning cushions, blankets and baskets of books amongst the foliage to create little quiet spaces to draw, read or tell stories.

Just being outside sparks so many interesting mark making opportunities, for example; using feathers in place of a paintbrush, mixing mud with water to paint onto concrete, hammering a foraged flower onto some cloth, threading yarn through leaves, or chalking directly onto the brick walls instead of a blackboard. Other media such as charcoal, oil pastels, inks, watercolour, poster paints and marker pens can also be used freely outside without fear of ruining the carpets, which can only be a bonus!

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I am always so in awe of the different ways children naturally extend their play when we change up the environment, and nature has such a brilliant way of adding to what we offer without me having to pre-plan it.

MORE THAN A MUD KITCHEN

Supercharging your mud kitchen by adding a wide range of authentic tools can also create a learning environment that gives those pre-writing muscles a really good work out!

Wooden and metal spoons of varying weights and sizes, whisks, rolling pins, mashers, basters, pipettes, pasta rollers, ricers, scoops and child-safe blunt knives, provide a range of different hand grips and movements to develop muscle strength holistically, and by adding malleable resources we can change up the complexity of how these can be used.



For younger children, sand, water or mud are a natural go-to for digging, pouring, scooping and transporting. For older children, clay provides a brilliant hand and finger work out, as it takes more strength to cut and manipulate. Clay also forms a brilliant canvas for mark making, especially when additional utensils such as sculpting and carving tools are added.

PRE-WRITING ON THE MOVE



Considering that everyone's set up is different, there is some flexibility here as to how you can adapt your provision to take your learning further afield.

My personal limitation is that I don't drive, and so when we venture out, we must carry everything with us. Using our large trusty rucksack, and sometimes a wagon, we always have books, watercolours, pencils, pastels, paper and mini clipboards with us, and we set up camp wherever takes our fancy; you can often find us sitting somewhere around the village painting, snipping away at leaves and grasses with our scissors, or making something out of playdough down at the park. We love linking a book to a location, such as reading *The Gruffalo* in the depths of the deep, dark, woods. This gives enhanced understanding, helping children to make the connection that words carry meaning.

"Language comprehension (necessary for both reading and writing) starts from birth. It only develops when adults talk with children about the world around them and the books (stories and non-fiction) they read with them, and enjoy rhymes, poems and songs together."

Early Years Foundation Stage 2024

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OPTIMISED LEARNING

Pre-writing is not just about physical development. It's about cultivating children's interest, their imagination, and confidence. We need to encourage them to connect with the marks they make, and to be able to spend sustained periods of time engrossed in their own creativity. We need to nurture their love of literacy and spoken word.

When we take the walls away, and offer a dynamic environment out in the fresh air for children to move their bodies and be freely creative, we optimise their ability to absorb and embed these skills more effectively - what a brilliant foundation for our capable little pre-writers!



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