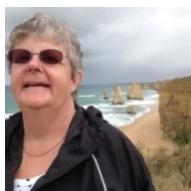


LEADING LIQUID LEARNING OUTSIDE - GROWING OUTDOOR CHAMPIONS

By Kathryn Solly



I started life as a teacher on Voluntary Service Overseas in Papua New Guinea. Since then, I have taught across all the phases of education including a short time in an Albanian kindergarten. I was also the Head teacher of Chelsea Open Air Nursery School and Children's Centre for 17 years. Having travelled widely, I have witnessed a many different approaches to quality outdoor play and learning.

My first book 'Adventure, Risk and Challenge in the Early Years' is being followed by 'Leading Learning Outdoors from Birth to Seven' shortly. I now concentrate on specialist early years consulting and training about outdoors across the whole sector both here in the UK and around the world. I continue providing training and consultancy, alongside helping to nurture my three grandchildren now aged 8, 5 and 3.

I am Early Education Associate and a member of Keeping Early Years Unique.

Introduction

This blog is about you, your essential leadership and outdoors. It is a chance for you to reflect upon opportunities to be a bolder and braver leader in what you provide, to gain ideas and consider how you give the best you can outdoors. We will:

- Consider the benefits of learning outdoors.
- Look at how outdoor environments can support the whole of the EYFS.
- Learn about some of the common issues about outdoor learning.
- Encourage aspects of challenge, adventure, risk and their links to learning.
- Gain ideas about the possibilities of play and learning outdoors.

Children have played outdoors throughout time. Now in our settings and schools, play and learning opportunities are maximised through adults who use **careful observation, positive interactions based upon a sound understanding of child development by championing outdoors**. Ideally your outdoor environment should **value all children and families** by offering stimulating resources relevant to all cultures and communities via **rich, playful and sensitive leadership**.

Children must be given:

- **real choices**
- **chances to take risks and rise to appropriate challenges.**
- **the means to extend their independence**
- **genuine value for their ideas, critical thinking, problem-solving and solutions**
- **opportunities to concentrate for long periods on interests**
- **time to consolidate their skills and wellbeing.**

Being there:

Being outside provides immense value in simply just being. Taking the time to be still, listen, look, feel and wholeheartedly experience it is crucial. For many staff, having the opportunity to do this is a powerful beginning as we all lead such hectic, noisy and time-short lives. So start as you mean to go on with the adults. Once they are equipped with the best possible footwear and clothing for the weather, and if they have good perching places around your outside area, they can start to wallow and bathe in simply just being there.

Start with adults:

Get them to recall their own childhoods and any experiences outdoors. This may reveal much about why they either love or hate it. Babies remember, may simply need to lay down, roll over or sit watching the world around them, so an area set aside from the business of older toddlers is very valuable at helping them feel at ease outdoors. Also consider the textures, the shade and possibilities for investigation and mouthing outside too.

Be a child:

Start by considering what your children actually experience outdoors by getting down to their level so you can see the area from their perspectives. Reflect upon their actual access to clothing, footwear, toilets etc outside. Babies often are the most restricted as they are dependent upon the adults and the physical layout of the building. Without free-flow access, the children will find this barrier to transition a real challenge. Older children who can walk can often help adults by leading the way and starting to be more independent.



Practical concerns:

Clothing and dressing can be another hurdle, whether its splash suits or hats and sun-cream, so being prepared and agreeing as a team beforehand is essential. This is where policies and procedures ensure a sound foundation to daily practice which everyone understands, plus practical and accessible storage is really helpful. Children are 100% washable and dryable!

Widening possibilities:

Consider an audit of provision (what actually exists outside be it natural or human-made) as well as the extra added resources, equipment and seasonable possibilities that you may add to extend the continuous provision. Remember, these extras are not permanent or necessary and will vary from place to place and with the needs of your unique children. The seasons provide many play and learning opportunities for children. Think of the fascinating possibilities of spring blossoms, leaves providing shade on a sunny day, autumn leaves, frosty vegetation, windy branch movements or finding a worm or a snail. For some children, this may be their very first time of experiencing such rich opportunities, so let them wallow, interact sensitively and explore together. Many 'free' resources come from nature such as sticks, stones, shells, feathers, leaves, logs and other loose parts. The sensitive interaction of an adult who display a genuine interest and respect for the child's curiosity is immensely powerful as children are engaged, motivated and thinking.

Sometimes adults tell me that they cannot go outside or the space is too small. Then our professional creativity and drive to provide what is a child's right must take over.

Particular experiences such as den making for fairies or themselves; creating kites; weaving; using loose parts to create patterns, pictures, sculptures; gardening; sowing a flower meadow using seed bombs they have created or adding bird boxes and minibeast hotels will all add purposeful learning to their exploratory play.

Risks and challenges:

There will be adults who really worry about the possibilities of harm outdoors. So we need to be prepared as leaders with quality risk-benefit assessments (RBA) suited to the developmental phase of the children. As children develop their experience and language their involvement in understanding RBA can also assist you. The problem-solving of such tricky but possible learning is a very powerful learning opportunity. So take a teddy outside with a small group and talk about the possibilities for beneficial learning and potentially harmful learning so they are involved. As adults we should give children the opportunities to learn how to be safe. We must resist the temptation to do everything ourselves but go as with them as learning guides to slowly access and learn about the world around them at their pace, not ours. Remember nature gives time for mistakes, for us to catch our breath and restore our image of ourselves. Bumps, grazes and scrapes give vivid feedback to a child so next time they need to improve their judgement, skills and understanding.

Engaging everyone:

Often, the children are not the issue outside. The adults as parents and practitioners are the wary ones who actually give spoken and unspoken messages that outside is not worthwhile, not valued or downright dangerous. This may go back to their own life experience or to a genuine fear of the unknown, so it needs sensitive handling and discussion. Often partnership working alongside adults gives them confidence and courage. Sometimes the children themselves will lead parents naturally into the great outdoors driven by their own intense curiosity. The more you involve families and the community in your practice, the stronger and more effective your



provision will be.

Ultimately, no blog can actually help you get outside and provide the best opportunities for young children. Just “do it” to coin a phrase and go with the flow of your children’s responses. Following up outdoor experiences indoors or under cover on very bad weather days can also add value with such as gardening by sowing seeds, planting potatoes; puddle science; feeding the birds; observing a tree through the seasons; reading fictional and factual books about outdoors to then discuss weather, seasons, minibests, patterns etc.

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Please see references in short introduction too.

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