



Case Study



Childminders

**Derbyshire and Nottinghamshire
Stronger Practice Hub**

Childminder Network – Outdoor Environment Sessions

**“These sessions changed the way I worked—
we definitely spent more time outdoors from then on”**

- Childminder 2025

INTRODUCTION

This case study examined the development and implementation of outdoor learning sessions for childminders and the children in their care, as led by the Derbyshire and Nottinghamshire Stronger Practice Hub. The initiative was carefully designed to align with the Early Years Foundation Stage (EYFS) framework, with a clear aim to encourage the use of local parks and woodlands as valuable learning environments. Central to the programme was the fostering of professional reflection, enhancing practitioner skills, and promoting collaborative practice, all with the ultimate goal of improving outcomes for both children and practitioners.



Emma Haywood, Hub Lead

BACKGROUND

Building on a previously successful phase that had established a robust network of childminders, growing interest emerged in outdoor learning opportunities. In response, the hub shifted its focus to sessions held in local woodland and park settings. This approach significantly increased opportunities for children to interact with nature, develop the characteristics of effective learning and build skills in the prime areas as well as the wider curriculum.

As one participant described, “It was absolutely brilliant. The choice of outdoor activity stations was great. The children were focused and engaged throughout. Hot chocolate was a lovely touch. Thank you so much.” Effective communication strategies—such as newsletters, direct information sharing, a WhatsApp group, Padlet of resources, and an active network of Childminder Champions—helped sustain engagement and enthusiasm for childminders beyond the sessions. Engagement was further enhanced through social media promotion, local forums, and personal recommendations, which ensured broad reach and participation.

PROGRAMME DESIGN AND DELIVERY

The programme featured two tailored reflective strands: one for Nottingham City and Nottinghamshire, and another for Derby City and Derbyshire. Each session was facilitated by two experienced childminders to ensure a high-quality offer, with tailored support, as well as ensuring consistent health and safety. Sessions were scheduled in the mornings to fit around the working patterns of childminders and the routines of their children. Venues included Corbar Woods in Buxton and a variety of other prominent green spaces.

CONTEXT AND RATIONALE

Feedback from previous open day sessions for childminders had highlighted both enthusiasm for outdoor learning and notable gaps in practitioner knowledge and confidence. Many attendees expressed a desire for practical, locally relevant continuing professional development (CPD) opportunities, with particular emphasis on strategies for managing outdoor activities and maximising learning in natural environments. Participants identified a lack of access to high-quality, evidence-based training and limited opportunities to share best practice with peers. This demand for accessible CPD was echoed by childminder focus groups, conference feedback, and liaison with local authority (LA) early years teams, who consistently reported that networking and ongoing professional learning opportunities for childminders were fragmented or difficult to access.



National data underscored the urgency of this work: recent studies indicated that a significant proportion of children entered early years settings with developmental delays, particularly in language, communication, and social-emotional skills. Early intervention was widely recognised as critical for closing attainment gaps and supporting long-term outcomes. In this context, empowering childminders with up-to-date knowledge, practical strategies, and peer support was essential for delivering high-quality early years provision and responding to the needs of all children.

PLANNED CPD ACTIVITY: DESCRIPTION AND STRUCTURE

To address these needs, the programme delivered 18 half-day professional development sessions across six locations, ensuring broad geographic reach and accessibility. Each session followed a consistent structure: an initial welcome and networking opportunity, a hands-on outdoor learning experience led by experienced childminders, and a reflective discussion to consolidate learning and share ideas. Activities were intentionally developed and extended over the course of the sessions; for example, initial activities such as creating prints of leaves evolved into more complex tasks, like using natural objects to produce artistic natural sculptures. This progression allowed participants to build on foundational skills, encouraging creative thinking and deeper engagement with the environment. Activities included structured play, guided exploration, and evidence-based approaches to supporting communication, language, physical development, and social-emotional learning in outdoor settings. Downloadable resources and planning templates, alongside information about where to source cost-effective outdoor kit, were provided for all participants, enabling childminders to adapt and implement activities in their own contexts. Attendees were also asked to provide feedback after each session, informing ongoing improvement and the development of future resources.

LINKS TO RESEARCH EVIDENCE

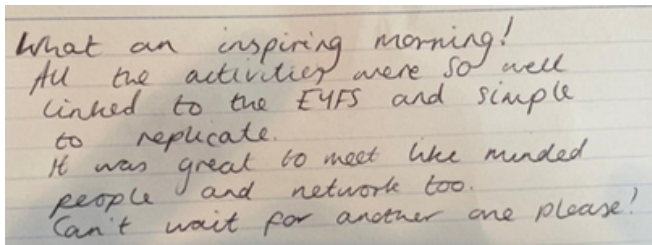
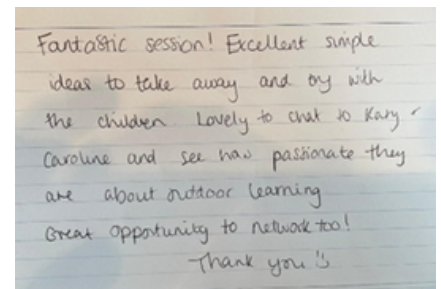
The design and delivery of the sessions were firmly rooted in Education Endowment Foundation (EEF) guidance and the wider evidence base for effective early years practice. The focus on outdoor learning drew on EEF findings that high-quality interactions, sustained shared thinking, and play-based, child-led activities are key drivers of early development.

Strategies to support metacognition, oral language, and social-emotional learning (SEL) were embedded throughout, reflecting EEF recommendations for professional development and the importance of contextual adaptation to meet local needs. The outdoor sessions also provided an outstanding context for cross-curricular learning, particularly emphasising the Characteristics of Effective Learning (CoEL) and the prime areas of the Early Years Foundation Stage. Activities naturally encouraged children to develop self-regulation and executive function, as they engaged in purposeful play, navigated group tasks, and responded to real-life challenges in nature. This holistic approach not only supported cognitive and emotional growth but also enabled childminders to foster key skills such as perseverance, creative thinking, and independent decision-making in a meaningful, child-led environment.

The collaborative, reflective model was supported by research showing that peer learning and ongoing professional dialogue enhance practitioner confidence and improve outcomes for children.

POLICY ALIGNMENT

The programme was meticulously designed to ensure alignment with the Early Years Foundation Stage (EYFS) Statutory Framework, Ofsted guidance, and the Department for Education (DfE) Manifesto for Learning Outside the Classroom, all of which stress the significance of play, communication, and high-quality outdoor learning experiences. Informed by research and recommendations from the Education Endowment Foundation (EEF), the sessions championed collaborative professional reflection, peer support, and evidence-based approaches to enhance practice. Notably, the programme incorporated the EEF's guidance on executive function and self-regulation (SR), embedding all five recommended strategies throughout the outdoor learning activities (creating and navigating challenge, teaching monitoring and self-awareness, creating a community of collaborative learners, promoting physical activity and promoting talk about learning). By doing so, childminders were able to foster key skills such as working memory, cognitive flexibility, and self-control in children, with the structure and activities of each session directly supporting these developmental priorities. The outdoor learning format provided an ideal context for implementing these strategies, ensuring every element from play-based exploration to reflective discussion actively contributed to children's executive function and self-regulation development.



The structure and delivery of these sessions were informed by EEF findings, which highlight the importance of high-quality practitioner interactions, sustained shared thinking, and play-based, child-led activities for early development. The professional development also embedded strategies for metacognition, oral language, and social-emotional learning, with a strong emphasis on collaborative reflection and peer learning, shown by research to boost practitioner confidence and improve outcomes for children.

PARTICIPANT EXPERIENCE AND PROFESSIONAL DEVELOPMENT

Feedback from the 'Childminder Outdoor Sessions Evaluation' demonstrated that participants found the outdoor sessions both valuable and transformative for their practice. One participant reflected, "I felt so much more confident taking the children out then, knowing that every trip could be a learning experience." Another commented, "The support from other childminders and sharing ideas was fantastic. I picked up so many new activities to try." Quantitative feedback showed that 92% of respondents rated the sessions as 'very beneficial' to their professional development, while 87% reported feeling more prepared to deliver outdoor learning activities as a result.

The networking and end-of-session reflection opportunities were highlighted as particularly impactful. As one childminder noted, "Being able to chat and reflect at the end of each session helped me see how much the children were getting out of it, and it gave me ideas for next time." Another participant shared, "I loved being able to network with other minders and we shared ideas/approaches in an inspiring setting." Access to a shared Padlet for evidence-based activity ideas was also praised, with a participant stating, "Having all the resources in one place made planning much less stressful and helped keep things fresh for the children." This collaborative, reflective model fostered a sense of professional pride and encouraged ongoing development.



One attendee observed, "This was such a lovely friendly session. Now I've been to one, I'll be much more confident to bring along childminded children to future sessions. This session gave some great ideas for nature activities, which I shared with my local childminder friends. Thank you x" Organisers also received praise: "The organisers were absolutely inspiring. Their passion for early years outdoor learning just shone through."

IMPACT ON CHILDREN



Practitioners consistently observed that children benefitted greatly from the outdoor sessions. According to the evaluation, 89% of childminders reported noticeable improvements in children's focus, curiosity, and teamwork. One respondent shared, "The children's language really blossomed, they were naming plants and insects I didn't even know they knew." Another remarked, "It was amazing to see the quieter children come out of their shells when we were outdoors. They were more willing to join in and try new things."

Activities were closely aligned with EYFS learning objectives, supporting everything from communication skills to understanding the world. A childminder commented, "Outdoor learning made the curriculum come alive and helped children who struggled indoors to really shine." Such feedback reinforced the value of these sessions in supporting diverse developmental needs.

Additionally, a participant noted, "I saw ideas of extending things we already did. I often found the children focused more when outdoors and were more relaxed after an outdoor session."



EXAMPLES OF ACTIVITIES

- **Den building:** Encouraged teamwork and problem-solving using natural materials. As one participant said, “The children loved working together to make dens—they were so proud of what they built.”
- **Nature scavenger hunts:** Stimulated scientific curiosity and language skills. A childminder noted, “Scavenger hunts were always a hit, they got the children talking, asking questions, and looking closely at their surroundings.”
- **Natural art:** Fostered creativity and fine motor skills. As one attendee simply put it, “Loved it, the rollers were great and the clay.”
- **Storytelling circles:** Improved listening and communication. “Telling stories outside made them feel more real and magical,” reported one childminder.
- **Seasonal observations:** Enhanced understanding of natural changes. “We started noticing little things, like the leaves changing or birds visiting children became more observant,” shared a participant.



ADDRESSING CHALLENGES

The outdoor format presented challenges such as unpredictable weather and the need for adaptable, inclusive activities. Childminders addressed these issues with practical solutions, including portable shelters and suitable clothing. One participant reflected, “We learned to be prepared for all weathers, having waterproofs and a shelter meant we rarely had to cancel.” Sessions were also adapted to suit different age groups and abilities, with reflection time used to share strategies for managing diverse needs. As a respondent put it, “It was reassuring to know others faced the same challenges, and we could swap tips on what worked.”

CONCLUSION AND FUTURE IMPACT

The outdoor learning sessions delivered by the Derbyshire and Nottinghamshire Early Years Stronger Practice Hub demonstrated the importance of targeted, evidence-based professional development for childminders. By encouraging regular use of local natural resources, embedding reflective practice, and fostering a supportive professional community, the initiative measurably enhanced both practitioner confidence and child outcomes. Ongoing feedback continued to shape future practice. As one participant concluded, “These sessions changed the way I worked, we definitely spent more time outdoors from then on.” One minder commented, “I was so inspired by your sessions that I have decided to rent some woodland from a local farmer so I can use forest school approaches more often.” The programme stood as a sustainable model for high-quality outdoor learning, rooted in the EYFS framework and responsive to the needs of both practitioners and children.