ADDITIONAL SUPPORT NEEDS OUTDOORS

Ideas, Suggestions and Activities

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Introduction
These notes accompany the ASN Outdoors workshop. The aims of the workshop are:

- To look at how learning outdoors can make a positive difference for most children
- To try some simple outdoor activities

For each of the experiences and outcomes, each of these considerations includes ideas and suggestions, to make relevant, meaningful connections to the children’s lives and previous experiences. However, science needs taught in context and not in isolation especially in the early years.

Why outdoors?
This section has been taken from The Centre for Confidence and Wellbeing website http://www.centreforconfidence.co.uk/flourishing-lives.php?p=cGlkPTE3MyZpZD02NjQ

During the past fifteen years there has been a growing body of research which indicates that direct, frequent experience with the natural world produces positive physical, mental and emotional benefits not only in adults but also children and young people.

However, while research is increasingly showing the benefits of the outdoors to children’s health, their access to nature and outdoor play has fallen dramatically. Today in our society, children spend less than half the amount of time playing outdoors that their parents did at the same age, and much of that time is restricted to built playgrounds and highly organised activities or sports.

Quite simply, a growing number of children no longer have opportunities for playing in nature and, as the following research studies show, this is not good for their health and well-being. We can, and must, improve children’s well-being through increasing the amount of time they spend outdoors.

Impact of nature and being outdoors on health and well being
ADD and ADHD
Research shows that contact with nature has a positive effect in reducing the impact of attention deficit disorder (ADD) in children (Taylor, A.F. et al. 2001). Also, children with ADHD demonstrated improved concentration skills when completing a task, after a twenty-minute walk. The preferred place for a walk was an urban park rather than a downtown, or residential area. Faber Taylor & Kuo (2009) suggested that “Doses of nature” might serve as a safe, inexpensive, widely accessible new tool in the tool kit for managing ADHD symptoms. The difference was comparable to what is achieved with standard ADHD medication.

Nature reduces stress levels
Even a view of nature – green plants and vistas – helps reduce stress among highly stressed children. The more plants, green views and access to natural play areas, the more positive the results. (Wells & Evans, 2003) The link between stress reduction and greenspace is strong, with robust evidence. Anders Szczepanski, Director National Centre for Outdoor Environmental Education, Linköping University noted that “Outdoor activities reduce the levels of stress hormones among children aged six in primary schools. High cortisol levels indicate stress, and stress has a documented bad influence on memory capacity. Outdoor activities give better learning in a pure logical sense.”
Aggression in urban areas linked to nearby nature
Kuo and Sullivan (2001) studied the inhabitants of an urban public housing complex in Chicago, and tested the hypothesis that nearby nature reduces the propensity for aggression. Long-term female residents of the apartment complex were interviewed. The authors found that levels of aggression and violence were significantly lower among individuals who had some nearby nature outside their apartments than among their counterparts who lived in barren conditions, and that residents living in greener settings demonstrated reliably better performance on measures of attentional functioning. The authors invoke the ‘attention restoration theory’ as providing the best explanation for the link between nature and aggression.

Nature has a restorative effective
‘Attention restoration theory’ was first developed by Stephen Kaplan (1995), a psychologist at the University of Michigan. He noticed that adults who were focusing hard on a task in the morning found it harder to focus in the afternoon. Kaplan hypothesized that immersion in nature might have a restorative effect. If children are working hard in the morning, having access to playgrounds which have plenty of plants, trees and shrubs might be helpful in terms of the benefits on their ability to focus in the afternoon.

Tree density linked to asthma in young children
Street trees may help prevent early childhood asthma in urban areas, suggests one study. Trees change local air quality. Lovasi et al (2008) examined the prevalence of asthma in 4-year old and 5-year old children, the density of street trees, pollution sources and census data. Based on these findings, the authors estimate that an increase in tree density of 343 trees per square kilometre would be associated with a 29% lower prevalence of early childhood asthma.

However this analysis does not demonstrate that trees cause or prevent asthma for an individual child. While the results of this study are encouraging, Lovasi et al suggest that additional research is needed to better understand the effects of trees on the prevalence of childhood asthma.

Short-sightedness in children affected by time spent outside
Myopia, or short sightedness, in children appears to be affected by the amount of time spent outside, according to research for the Australian government. Rose et al (2008) compared the vision of six and seven-year-olds of Chinese ethnicity in Singapore and Australia. Thirty per cent of the Singaporean children were short sighted compared with ten per cent of the Australian children. The researchers found that all the children spent a similar amount of time reading, watching TV and playing computer games, but the Australian children spent on average two hours a day outdoors - 90 minutes more than the Singaporean children.

Self-discipline in girls linked to nearby greenspace
The proximity of greenspace to children appears to be gender related when it comes to self-discipline in 7-12 year old children. Taylor et al. (2002) discovered that for girls, greenspace immediately outside the home can help them lead more effective, self-disciplined lives but suggest that perhaps more distant greenspaces are equally important for boys. Again this has implications for schools in that ensuring there is plenty of natural greenspace within the school grounds could particularly benefit girls.

Benefits of forest schools and nature kindergartens - spending time in nature during the school day
Grahn et al (1997) studied children’s behaviour as a whole (how they play, how often they are outside, their play routines, etc.), development of motor function and powers of concentration during the course of a year. The study was carried out at two day nurseries, one outdoor “I Ur och Skur” kindergarten, and the other a traditional nursery in new, spacious premises. “When it comes to concentration capacity, the children within I Ur och Skur pre-schools are more than twice as focused as children within a normal pre-school. Their motor skills are better, they are less frustrated, restless and sick.”

One key reason for statistically significant differences being observed was attributed to the uneven surfaces and trees children encountered in the outdoor nursery. This study also monitored the role of adults working with the children through the use of diaries. The entries from the traditional nursery staff showed that staff often felt inadequate and the staff had to intervene more to manage conflicts which arose, usually to do with the dominant activity which was cycling.
**Time in nature helps physical coordination, social skills and knowledge about the natural world**

Fjørtoft and Sageie (2001) built upon the research by Grahn et al. They compared two groups of pre-school children during a nine-month period. All these children attended the same nursery. One group had daily access to natural landscape for at least two hours, the other group only occasional access. Significant differences were found in coordination, balance skills, and agility. The researchers concluded, “Nature affords possibilities and challenges for the children to explore their own abilities. The children feel more comfortable being in the natural environment and their knowledge about nature increases.”

In England and Wales, forest schools activities have been matched up to the Key Stage attainment targets, thus allowing schools to incorporate this approach as one way of covering all the curriculum expectations. Murray and O’Brien (2005) found that forest school programmes had increased children’s confidence levels, social skills, language and communication, motivation and concentration, physical skills and knowledge, and understanding of their natural surroundings.

**Impact of nature and being outdoors on attainment and meeting children’s needs**

**Being “Nature Smart” is a recognised intelligence**

Howard Gardener (2006) who developed the theory of multiple intelligences, designated “naturalist” or “nature smart” as the eighth intelligence after further consideration, stating “the evidence for the existence of a naturalist intelligence is surprisingly persuasive” and “On the eight criteria for an intelligence, the naturalist intelligence scores well.” This is the only addition ever made to the original list since its publication in 1983. The naturalist intelligence includes abilities such as:

- Excelling at identifying and distinguishing one species from another
- Being keenly aware of how to distinguish the diversity of organisms in their ecological niche
- Capacities which involve using multiple senses
- Noticing subtle differences and details about objects.

This has immediate application for teachers when considering curriculum planning and activities to meet all children’s needs. Use of natural materials, our senses, being outside and learning in, about, through and for the natural world is necessary to accommodate the nature-smart intelligence within each child. Furthermore such abilities are important in many jobs from science research to practical forestry and agricultural activities.

**Residential programmes have a positive impact on children**

At-risk children who attended a week-long residential outdoor education programme increased their test scores compared with children who did not have this experience. There was a 27% increase in measured mastery of science concepts; enhanced cooperation and conflict resolution skills; gains in self-esteem; gains in positive environmental behaviour; and gains in problem-solving, motivation to learn, and classroom behaviour. (American Institutes for Research, 2005)

**Environment-based programmes help basic skills**

Children who are in environment-based instructional programmes score as well or better on standardized measures in reading, maths, language and spelling. The environment-based programmes also foster cooperative learning and civic responsibility, using the natural characteristics of the school grounds and local community as the foundational framework for the curricula. (Lieberman, G.A. et al, 2005)

**Improving school grounds helps children’s health and well-being**

Children who experience school grounds with diverse natural settings are more physically active, more aware of nutrition, more civil to one another, and more creative. One of the major benefits of green school grounds is increased involvement by adults and members of the nearby community, from helping with gardens to enriching the lifescape of the school grounds. (Bell, A. and Dyment, J., 2006).

**Nature improves cognitive abilities**

Proximity to, and views of, and daily exposure to natural settings increases children’s ability to focus and therefore enhances cognitive abilities. (Wells, N.M., 2000)
References


The outdoor space
Make your outdoor space or school grounds a place for explorations and discoveries and a springboard for literacy and numeracy activities outside. There are many ways to improve your outdoor space that makes learning an incidental part of being there. It also means that specific concepts can be taught more easily outside. A good example here is Inveraray Primary School (http://www.inveraray.argyll.bute.sch.uk/) where the grounds have been sufficiently developed to be able to run effective Forest School sessions on-site owing to the extensive planting of native trees and shrubs and establishment of different habitats on-site. Appendix 1 is a literacy audit.

Playground markings
Careful decisions about what markings to be put where can make a big difference to learning and teaching outdoors. Do not be afraid to experiment with ordinary classroom paint or chalk until you know what you need and where. Some possibilities include:

- Concentric rings of different colours. Basically a target design without numbers (these can be chalked on top for different activities. This is a useful gathering place.
- A blank 10x10 grid for directions, position and movement work
- A compass showing directions. Some have a large clock face too!

When and if you decide to put down playground markings to increase the area’s learning value, it is worth spending time creating activities that use them. This can be done in consultation with children.

Consider joining Grounds for Learning, the Scottish school grounds charity, to access their resources and support www.gfl.org.uk

In North America a huge ‘Leave No Child Inside’ movement has grown, following the publication of Last Child in the Woods” by Richard Louv in 2005. This book brings together a body of research that cites the need for children to have access to unstructured play in natural spaces. Schools and local authorities have an important role to play here, in ensuring that break and lunchtimes are not cut back, or removed altogether, from the school day.

By greening the grounds and providing lots of plants and natural surfaces on a variety of levels, children will have the opportunity to re-establish a daily connection with nature. A PhD study completed in 2009 by Kathleen Bagot at Melbourne University found a direct correlation between the quantity of vegetation in the school ground, children’s concentration levels in class and children’s attainment levels in standardized tests primary schools.

Provision of suitable resources
Provide a range of loose parts (See p17)) and resources that encourage explorations and discoveries. Many of these objects are unwanted household materials and natural materials rather than expensive purchases. Open ended resources such as sticks, tubes and other objects have a high play affordance. Children have to use them in creative and imaginative ways that increases high order thinking and promotes talking and listening. Remember that resources used outside will get worn and weathered.

As well as resources, children need to be adequately dressed for playing outside all year round in all weathers. When choosing the style of waterproof that you purchase, it is important to think about the ease with which children can put on and remove the clothing, and the flexibility of the style. It is also worth considering whether the waterproofs should have reflective strips for added safety value. If your school is skint, buy just trousers or dungarees. Remember children need warm feet. Woolly and/or extra socks are needed for welly boots in winter. Raindrops http://www.raindrops.co.uk/ do all sizes from babies to adults and are used by many Forest Schools. Remember to ask for trade prices which are cheaper than those listed on the website.
Health and Safety
Remember to follow your school or setting’s health and safety policy. Undertake risk benefits assessments (RBAs) as needed in accordance with this policy. If a matter arises that needs clarification then the first place to check is your local authority health and safety team. If you are undertaking adventurous activities follow guidance issued by the outdoor education team or department.

Next visit the Learning & Teaching Scotland Outdoor Learning website http://www.ltscotland.org.uk/outdoorlearning/index.asp This has comprehensive guidance on health and safety outdoors.

Learning how to be outdoors requires frequent practice over a period of time. It is easy when discussing safety matters to focus on the “don’ts”. Instead focus on what children can do, the benefits of the resource or toy and the activities which need practice.

At a young age children need to do rather than discuss. A Tell, Show, Do approach works well, with an adult on hand to offer help by:

- Giving firm suggestions in simple, explicit and respectful ways
- Offering words of encouragement and constructive feedback which acknowledges a child’s efforts
- Helping them to persevere
- Using compliments to confirm things they have done well.

Preparing children to acquire new skills requires an awareness of what these skills involve. Be ready to break a task down into simple steps, and explain why you choose to work in a particular way. Be specific about safety rules:

- Tell the children what you are going to do.
- Let children watch you as you explain the safety aspects.
- Answer questions and show pictures or written instructions for the activity, sharing tips such as how to move around with equipment and how to cross uneven ground
- Let them try the activity with your support in the outdoor area and school grounds.
- Gradually allow as much independence as the children can manage safely.
- If some activities are just for adults then give the children clear reasons for this.

If you are worried about a specific issue outside, then consider putting in place a risk benefit assessment to manage these concerns. For example (and this list is neither prescriptive nor exhaustive):

- Children running away
- An unwanted visitor
- Dogs in the playground
- Poisonous plants

What is important is to have agreed procedures and routines around going outside so staff and children know what to expect and what to do.

Key Points about Specific Activities
1) Plan literacy and numeracy opportunities outdoors whenever possible. The outdoor environment is a super stimulus for all aspects of these subjects, particularly for active children who may not choose to mark make, write or read indoors. When you plan your week, it’s useful to consider where you could make your links between the planning for other activities indoors and the opportunities that exist for learning outside.

2) For literacy (along with numeracy) to be offered in a cross-curricular way with a mix of child-initiated and child-orientated activities, the planning and assessment by staff needs to be thorough to demonstrate the experiences and outcomes are being covered and achieved.
3) Outdoor activities need to be modelled by adults outdoors. Show the children different ways of using materials and how to use clipboards, score charts, etc. Encourage children to replace items in the place from which they have been taken.

4) Many research documents point to the vital importance of the “literate and/or numerate environment”. There are three conditions necessary for supporting literacy and numeracy:
- Children must have access to a literate/numerate-rich environment
- Children must have access to literate/numerate adults
- Children must have opportunities to practise literacy and numeracy.

The success of the activities suggested depends on the extent to which children feel ownership of their environment, on the positive response of adults and on children having many opportunities to practise, develop and refine what they know.

Remember
Outdoor items will get worn much more quickly. If certain books are important or precious or you have some expensive resources, the outdoor area may not be the best place for children to use with them. Thus the best resources are those which are cheap or free to replace such as food packaging, plastic bottles and natural materials. Have soft toys which can be washed from time to time if they get muddy outside. Join a local Freecycle group on the Internet http://www.freecycle.org/ and ask for items you want or need.

Specific activities

Visual Discrimination.

This is the ability to find similarities and differences between objects or written symbols e.g. letters or shapes. At pre-school level, this may present as difficulties matching shapes, letter, objects. At school, this may be seen in difficulties discriminating between letters and words that look similar e.g. p and q, has and had. Activities for visual discrimination outdoors may include:

Matching games
Have a selection of objects. For 5 children you will need up to 10 of each object, e.g. 10 shells, 10 pieces of lego, 10 conkers, etc. Hide half of the objects around a defined area within the school grounds. Give each child a bag containing one of each object. His challenge is to find each of the objects in the bag (so he has 2 of each object). You may want them to be bigger and brighter for very young or less able children. Use common classroom objects.

On a piece of light coloured material, each child has to find and put down 5 objects from around the grounds. Let them make a row with their objects. Each child in the group then has to go and find the objects to match a different child’s row and put these underneath each one.

Spot the difference
Put out a row of objects collected by the children on a piece of light coloured material. You could give them a theme, e.g. “Find something as big as your thumb.” Ask the children to turn away or cover their eyes. Remove one object and put it under the material. The children have to work out which one is missing. There are many variations on this theme

Dominoes
Make a set of stone dominoes using deco pens or paint and varnish. Decide whether you want the dots to be all one colour or whether you want a colour coded system, e.g. 1=yellow, 2=green, etc. Use these for playing dominoes indoors and out. They can also be used for matching games.
Lotto
Lotto can be played with natural objects as well as pictures and numbers. Children can make their own temporary lotto board using sticks or a whiteboard with marker pens.

Visual Sequential Memory.
This is the ability to remember sequences of forms or objects. A child with problems in this area may have difficulties with reading and spelling.

Stone scrabble
Children play “scrabble” using letter stones and a dictionary. Can be done indoors as well as out!

Movement sequences.
Child looks, remembers and copies e.g. Jump, jump, clap, touch your head, jump. Outside, add in actions that require greater movement, e.g. running to a bench, sitting down, standing up. The number of movements given in sequence can be increased. It can also be treated as a group game along the lines of “My teacher woke this morning and...” Children can say each action as they do this.

Miming
You act out a sequenced event e.g. digging the garden, planting a bulb, watering the soil. Child watches, remembers and copies.

Objects on the ground
Children should select several objects from around the grounds. You point to the objects in a slow clear order. The child points to the objects in the same order.

Ball Sequences
Get a ball. The child watches, remembers and does the same e.g. bounce, catch, bounce, throw up in the air, catch, pass under your leg. Children can copy each other here.

Cloze Technique
Child supplies missing item in series presented orally or visually, words, letters, numbers, shapes etc. So natural objects can be used for pattern work. Or patterns can be chalked on the school grounds.

Following directions
(increasing number of steps to follow).

Sequences
Make a sequence of objects. Child looks at it. Cover it up. Child must make it from memory. Variations:
• Use natural materials such as those available outside
• Begin with very different objects and just 3 in number. Build up length of sequence
• Build up similarity of objects, e.g. all stones instead of different objects.
• Use a painted number grid to help with pattern work by placing the objects on the squares
• Give the children the sequence, then muddle it up and let the children re-organise the order

Story and Sentence Completion
Use story stones or chalk the beginning, middle or end on the playground

Spell Help
To help with the spelling, try writing partial words and getting the child to fill in (or use a letter stone) e.g., elephant _ph_nt. Try making the words with playdough or paper. Some children find that singing their spelling helps them to remember.
**Visual Closure.**

This is the ability to identify objects or forms when only partially visible, e.g.

- Recognising a shape or object that is partially obscured,
- Reading writing done in dots or recognising dot to dot pictures

Difficulties with visual closure may hamper a child’s reading ability as in reading we need to be able to recognise a word or group of words without actually orienting to each individual letter.

Outdoor activities for visual closure:

- What’s missing? Word games with missing letters. The letters can be put around the grounds for children to collect.
- Reassembling cut-up laminated magazine pictures and postcards or jigsaws. The children can collect these from around the grounds
- Half-a-shape, half-a-letter, half-a-number - guess complete form.

**Spatial Relationships.**

This is the ability of a person to perceive the position of two or more objects in relation to himself and in relation to each other. For example when a child is stringing beads, he has to perceive the position of the string and the bead in relation to himself and also the position of the bead and string in relation to each other.

At home this may be seen by difficulties with:

- Beading, construction blocks, sewing
- Tasks such as pouring, manipulation of utensils, ironing and buttoning.

At school this may be seen by difficulties with:

- Craft activities
- Some sports such as quoits, bowling, obstacle courses
- Sorting out order of letters on a board
- Prewriting skills - planning direction of lines.

**Obstacle courses**

Going under, over, through, around. These can be done walking or crawling on one’s tummy or using a scooter board.

**Mazes**

Draw simple mazes on the ground. Use chalk or on the beach a stick will do. Start with a simple line to follow and make increasingly complex designs.

**Line Patterns**

With a watering can, chalk or other means make line patterns for a child to follow beside – copying what you have done.

**Visual Memory.**

This is the ability to remember visual items. In the home this may be seen by difficulties with:

- Locating items
- Following instructions that require the child to remember how object looks

At pre-school and school, this may be seen by difficulties with:

- Learning shapes and colours
- Learning letters and numbers
- Copying
Activities for Visual Memory

Kim’s Game.
Children find and place about 5 natural objects on a light coloured cloth. Ask the children to close their eyes and then hide one object under the cloth. The children open their eyes and guess which item has been removed. The children can take it in turns to be the leader. Variations include:
- Hide more than one object
- Let a child feel the object through the cloth
- Start with more items on the cloth
- Add objects rather than remove them
- Change the orientation of the objects, e.g. move a stick one quarter turn clockwise
- Change the position of an item
- Add interference. Get the children to jump up and down or run and hug a tree before coming back to guess the change
- Get the children to test the adult
- Add in key words which match each object.

Hide ‘n’ Seek Games
Using pairs of postcards, hide one of each pair around the grounds. Children have to look at one card at a time then go and see if they can find the card that is located near by. This can also be undertaken with objects such as pair of cars or natural objects.

Auditory Training.
Record or make familiar sounds outside. Encourage the children to explore what makes interesting and different sounds. Child must guess what they are without looking or when sound is replayed e.g.
- Running a stick along a fence
- Pouring water out of a watering can
- Walking on gravel
- Climbing steps
- Bouncing a ball, etc.

Tap out children’s names or nursery rhymes and children must guess them. Outside this can be done with sticks and on different surfaces.

Bounce a ball or clap. Child counts bounces without looking.

Tap out a rhythm and at the same time talk to the child and have him pay attention to one or the other.

Give the child a series of commands to carry out such as:
- Clap your hands three times
- Write number 4 on the ground
- Knock on the door twice
- Run and touch a wall

Children close their eyes. Make a sound e.g. keys rattling, and the child points in the direction of the sound.

Play sound hide ‘n’ seek. This involves children hiding but making a quiet noise such as clinking keys together to help the seeker find them.

Play Brr! Have 5 natural objects placed on a sheet. Point to each one in turn and say the name of the objects as you do this. Get the children to join in. Keep pointing at the objects until the names are remembered. Then one child turns away and one object is quietly chosen to be “Brr”. The child then uses the stick to touch each object.
The other children say the name of the objects as before. EXCEPT when the chosen object is touched, all the group say “Brr!”

**Fine Motor Activities.**

These activities will help the child to coordinate their hands for the fine tasks required at school and in everyday life. By encouraging the child to do these activities they are exercising and stretching their hand and finger muscles.

- Make shapes in wet sand or mud with fingers. Make 3D shapes too.
- Play with large scale construction toys outside, including planks of wood, tyres, bread crates, milk crates, etc.
- Play shadow games – use fingers to make characters, e.g. butterflies. Draw round other children’s shadows.
- Make dandelion chains (slightly easier than daisy chains)
- Make miniature worlds from tiny natural objects. For example create a home for a fairy under a bush or in the crack of a wall (clay can help here)
- Do mosaic work for the outdoor space.
- Thread beads onto wire for outdoor fence art (Thank you, Inverallochy School)
- Make a sticky nature bracelet or clay ball

**Introducing letters and associated sounds**

Follow ‘The Phonics Handbook’ advice. However before completing written work, start with practical outdoor work. Get the children to create the new letter by:

- Using pebbles, stones, shells, sticks or other natural materials including daisies and dandelions to make sounds and letters
- Drawing the letter in mud, sand or on a piece of paper with a paint brush. In sand or snow the children can make 3D letters. This is very good for the more able children to try.
- Use the stone letters outside for various matching games and activities. Ask the children to invent a game that uses them.
- Bury plastic letters in the outdoor sandpit for each other to find
- Play alphabet hide ‘n’ seek where children hide and hunt for letters
- Have alphabet tiles outside and use them for large scale printing or pouring water over to see the imprint left behind
- Have sponge letters in the water area
- Children lay alphabet trails over the playground for others to follow
- Spell simple CVC words, by jumping from letter to letter on a tile mat or on letters chalked on tarmac
- Create hopscotch and other jumping games but use letters instead of numbers
Nature Play Themes

According to Sobel (2008) there are 7 play themes – common to children anywhere – any country, any background, any climate or culture, when children have safe free time in nature:

Making forts and dens
Special places to hide away – home from home in nature, a bridge to the wider world and a place to bond with the natural world, allowing children to feel comfortable in the landscape, connected to it and eventually committed to acting as stewards to it.

Playing hunting and gathering games: fishing, capturing animals, collecting treasures, scouting, climbing, throwing activities, capture the flag, kick the can, hide ‘n’ seek, bushcraft skills. A lot of this is about developing practical skills in a social context.

Shaping small worlds – Miniature worlds, etc. Helps lead onto understanding sustainability. As impact can be monitored, makes the abstract more concrete, e.g. climate change

Developing friendships with animals – pick them up, hold them close, care for them, become them: have animal costumes, masks, opportunities to stumble across and find life

Constructing adventures – following streams, exploring the world, taking risks!

Descending into fantasies –having an imaginary friend (or several), acting out scenarios with play figures or through becoming these people/creatures, role play, using stories or films to inspire

Map making, following paths– way finding activities, figuring out short cuts, developing an awareness of place and one’s existence in the world!

These themes do not act in isolation. Sometimes children can be playing a game or doing something that covers a multitude of themes. However, when working with children of all ages, it can be useful to consider these themes to provide appealing child-centred experiences in during class time as well as breaks and lunchtimes.

By using these nature play themes, a bottom up approach that builds upon children’s interests happens. For example, think about what children do with and in trees: climb them, build houses in them, read in them, hug, them, make nests with their leaves, ride on their branches, play with dolls in their shade, gaze at the sky through the leaves, smell them, become friends with them.

Nature play is more about the relationships that can be cultivated between children and trees in their own backyards as a precursor to saving the rainforest as they get older, when they can actually do something about it. Talking to trees and hiding in trees precedes saving trees.

This approach is more effective than an adult imposed top-down mind set, e.g. rainforests are disappearing, so let’s teach children about the rainforests so they will save them.

THE THEORY OF LOOSE PARTS
written by Jennifer Kable and adapted by Juliet Robertson

The theory of “loose parts” was first proposed by architect Simon Nicholson in 1971. Over the years, it has begun to influence child-play experts and the people who design play spaces for children in a big way. Nicholson believed that it is the ‘loose parts’ in our environment that will empower our creativity.

Loose parts are materials that can be moved, carried, combined, redesigned, lined up, and taken apart and put back together in multiple ways. They are materials with no specific set of directions that can be used alone or combined with other materials.

Loose parts can be natural or synthetic. In an outdoor environment we can provide an array of loose parts for use in play such as stones, stumps, sand, gravel, fabric, twigs, wood, pallets, balls, buckets, baskets, crates, boxes, logs, stones, flowers, rope, tyres, balls, shells and seedpods.

Having "loose parts" available in a play space allows children to use these materials as they choose. Once children awaken to the potential of loose parts you will find that children will play with these materials that they can use and adapt as they please at least as much or if not more than expensive pieces of play equipment.

Encouraging children to use resources as they choose can provide a wider range of opportunities than one that is purely adult led. Children playing with loose parts are using more creativity and imagination and developing more skill and competence than they would playing with most fixed toys.

For example, consider a child who collects a pile of conkers and begins to play. The conkers can become anything the child wants them to be. Maybe they will be used with the cooking props in the sandpit as ingredients, or with the trucks as a load of bricks. By contrast, a toy car is a “fixed” toy in that it will almost always be used simply as a car.

Being able to cart materials from one area to another allows kids to make connections and use their imaginations. Whilst careful zoning helps, the ability to transfer materials between play zones makes a difference.

As play providers, we need to ask:
• Can the materials or environment we offer be used in many ways?
• Can it be used in combination with other materials to support imagination and develop creativity?
• Are the materials freely accessible?
• Am I allowing children to make connections in the play environment?

When children play in a space or with an object they experience it in a unique way. They view it in terms of its ‘affordances’, rather than its common use. The ‘affordances’ of an object or space are all the things it has the potential to do or be. A table offers the child a jumping deck, if turned upside down a boat, and if on its side a protective wall that becomes part of a fort. These, and all the other ‘affordances’ of the world adults take for granted, are discovered and elaborated upon through play.

It may take a very open mind on our part (there is often a lot of cleaning up involved as materials end up in places you would never expect them to be) but when children cross play materials and areas in creative ways, it is our responsibility to support and encourage their work and ideas.

Jennifer Kable is a pre-school teacher in an Australian progressive school. Her blog, “Let the Children Play” http://progressiveearlychildhoodeducation.blogspot.com/ is a great source of play ideas for children of all ages.

Useful Tips for Working With Children Outdoors:
Possible Ways Forward

This section has been taken from The Centre for Confidence and Wellbeing website

Plan activities and lessons that appeal to the naturalist intelligence within your children, e.g.

- Multi-sensory activities
- Categorising, classifying and sorting natural materials, plants and animals
- Gardening and caring for plants
- Nature walks
- Field trips
- Examining patterns in the local environment such as similarities, differences, anomalies, repetitions
- Looking after animals: minibeasts, hamsters, hens, etc.
- Developing scrapbooks, logbooks, journals about natural objects and nature
- Have field guides, fiction and non-fiction books about nature and the natural world
- Environmental and nature based projects

Get to know the local neighbourhood around your school. Find out where the nearest greenspace is. If necessary ask your nearest ranger service, greenspace officer or other environmental organisation for advice. The majority of Scottish schools are within 1km of woodland.

Get children outside during class time all year round. Outdoor learning is truly inclusive. All subjects, all ages and stages can be taught outdoors, at least some of the time. It does take a couple of months for teachers and pupils to acclimatise to learning outdoors, but the effort reaps rewards. Use local greenspace as well as the school grounds.

Ensure children have outdoor clothing. This may involve fundraising, if parents are unable to supply. Remember that teachers need to be suitably dressed too!

In consultation with staff, pupils and community begin to green up your school grounds. Seek advice from the Scottish school grounds charity, Grounds for Learning. Possibilities include:

- Planting native Scottish plants in tubs and planters
- Creating a garden or raised beds and plant food which can be used for cooking and eating
- Start a tree nursery and liaise with a local outdoor professional about planting the trees within and beyond the school grounds
- Grow plants from seeds
- Create wildlife corridors, enabling animals to safely use the grounds as a safe passage
- Cover walls with climbing plants such as hops and jasmine.
- Consider natural surfacing such as sand, grass and bark rather than “wetpour” safety surfacing and asphalt surfaces.
- Seek advice from the Forestry Commission about natural play features such as logs and stones rather than expensive play equipment

Undertake the outdoor literacy audit and implement some of the ideas.
Find out about forest school activities. The Forest Education Initiative can provide resources and training www.foresteducation.org/

Bring the forest to the school! If you have little suitable greenspace within walking distance, then start collections of natural materials for use in your school grounds. For example, collect dead leaves, cones, sticks, stones, shells, feathers, etc.

Develop a bank of resources for outdoor activities. Include:
- Lots of laminated pictures of animals and plants which live in your local area or Scotland
- Field guides and books about nature
- Magnifying glasses, bug boxes, plastic mirrors and little boxes
- Mats for sitting on outside. The cheapest solution is the foil insulation rolls from DIY shops which are used to insert between radiators and walls. They can be cut up to a suitable size
- Quick activities which can be done as a brain break after some hard indoor work!

Give children outdoor playtimes as much as possible. If your grounds are limited in size, consider staggered break and lunch times. Risk assess your break times to take account of being outdoors in all weathers and remember to consider the health and cognitive benefits of children having outdoor breaks.

Consider time in nature as part of a programme of support for individual children who additional support needs. The well-being of children and young people is at the heart of the Getting it right for every child approach. Frequent, regular access to greenspace may be effective in terms of meeting some children’s needs.

Check the views from classroom windows. If children cannot see trees and plants from where they sit, another alternative is to have posters of natural places on classroom walls.

Get your children involved in an outdoor award project. The John Muir Award combines environmental action with time in greenspace and can be undertaken by a class or even an individual or group of children.

Take your class on trips to natural sites and visit a wide variety of different habitats. Go the seashore, moorland, a farm, a loch. If your school has no funds for trips, make this a focus of an enterprise project. Enjoy adventure activities and remember horse riding, dolphin watching and similar experiences can be new and different for many children.

Work with parents and carers and make time to explain why you are taking the class outside more often. Invite parents to join you and be an extra pair of hands.
Suggestions for adults, parents, carers, teachers and anyone who spends time with children to provide additional support through outdoor activities

This section has been taken from The Centre for Confidence and Wellbeing website

• **Be curious.** Start spending time in natural settings with your children. This can include woodland, leafy urban parks, moorland, beaches. Get to know the greenspaces in your local area

• **Get dirty.** Gardening and nature activities are hands-on. Soil, water and plants invariably end up on hands, clothing and shoes. Wear comfortable clothes that are up to the task and don’t be afraid to get dirty

• **Take time.** Spend as much or as little time on an activity as needed. You can always return to the task another day.

• **Use all your senses.** Let children experience the natural world with all their senses and explain when it’s okay to touch or taste and when to check with an adult

• **Handle with care.** Many nature and gardening activities involve touching plants and interacting with living creatures. Model how to handle living things with care and respect

• **Be still.** Observing nature may require sitting quietly for a while. This does not come easily to every child. Start with a very short time period, such as one minute. Give the children some ideas, e.g. to see if they can see any insects in the grass, or watch the clouds passing by.

• **Garden anytime, anywhere.** If you do not have a garden, start with window boxes and bring nature indoors

• **Encourage unstructured, spontaneous play.** Games are great, but time just for your child to “be” in nature on his or her own terms is also important

• **Let your child play with natural materials as much as possible.** When playing outside, encourage your child to use the materials around them, such as sticks, stones, dead leaves and shells

• **Go camping in wilder parts of the country.** Always follow the Scottish Outdoor Access Code advice.

• **Be a positive role model.** Demonstrate through your words and actions that you care about nature and your local environment