

Why Nature Play?

Introduction

MY
NATURE
PLAY

It is well documented that play is a key foundation of child development. Nature play combines the benefits of play and the benefits of connecting with nature together.



A focus on Nature Play

Nature based play is defined as “a form of play that takes place in a natural environment and/or involves interaction with natural elements and features (e.g., water, streams, mud, rocks, hills, forests, and natural loose parts, such as sticks, pinecones, leaves and grass.” (Outdoor Play – Glossary of Terms. Outdoor Play Canada 2022)

Combining opportunities for both physical play and more focused, sedentary activities, nature play can

be achieved in different settings in different ways and does not require access to large areas of green space. A broad range of outdoor play opportunities is key. Access to nature and natural materials add an additional dimension to play that supports different children’s needs, a recognition of seasonal change and an opportunity for children to foster a sense of connection with the natural environment that will stay with them as they grow.

‘If we want children to flourish, to become truly empowered, then let us allow them to love the earth before we ask them to save it. Perhaps this is what Thoreau had in mind when he said, “the more slowly trees grow at first, the sounder they are at the core”, and I think the same is true of human beings.’

David Sobel - Environmental Educator and Academic.

The benefits

National guidance and research highlight that access to natural spaces and natural loose parts offers a wide variety of benefits to children of all ages. Health and wellbeing benefits include emotional regulation and the calming effect of nature, as well as boosting the immune system. Apart from breathing fresh air and experiencing different temperatures, a growing body of research has highlighted that access to nature supports a more resilient and healthy gut biome in children, reducing the likelihood of infection and allergies.

As well as building resilience internally, nature play also supports confidence and a 'can do' attitude. Overcoming challenges, for example learning to balance on a log, checking the depth of the puddle to avoid water in your wellies and learning to associate the best clothing for the weather are all problem solving opportunities. Natural environments, and the affordance of natural materials, offer endless exploration and discovery opportunities compared to more prescriptive resources that children master and tire of.



Access

Access to nature and natural spaces is not equal for all children, further emphasising the need for the shared outdoor space to offer these experiences year round. How can your setting support children to access the social, cognitive, emotional, language and physical benefits of nature play?