

Why Nature Play?

Supporting child development

MY
NATURE
PLAY

Opportunities to scaffold and enable nature play are many and varied no matter the size, shape or set up of your outdoor area.

A focus on Nature Play

The well known author and environmental educator, David Sobel, states that there are seven play themes (or principles) common to all children from any background or culture. These are adventure, fantasy and imagination, animal allies, maps and paths, special places, small worlds and hunting and gathering. Does your outdoor space enable these seven play themes and how can natural spaces and / or natural materials support all the children to engage in these



rich learning experiences? For example, bushes to hide and play in will help support fantasy, imagination and adventure. With regards to small worlds, Sobel states 'children love to create miniature worlds. Through creating miniature representations of ecosystems, or neighbourhoods, we help children conceptually grasp the big picture. The creation of small worlds provides a concrete vehicle for understanding abstract ideas.'

Concerns about safety, and a need to ensure energy release through physical play, may mean more of a focus on fixed play equipment rather than natural resources that don't last as long. The ability for children to adapt and modify their outdoor environment when they choose to, combined with planting (in the ground or in containers) supports the creation of their own special places to spend time in, either alone or with friends. Natural materials to support den building is another example, which also incorporates physical play.

Supporting nature play

In addition to the many benefits, building confidence through managing risk and developing a lifelong connection with the natural world, nature play is also inexpensive! Areas of unmown grass, creating hidey holes in bushes, willow planting in containers, including natural materials as part of the small world offer and sourcing branches and sticks to add to the den building kit....the list is endless! Make use of the changing seasons for inspiration too, capitalising on different weather conditions and incorporating seasonal materials, e.g. seeds, bulbs, leaves in spring and autumn, conkers and ice.

Risk management and maintenance

Nature play supports risk management, from learning to balance on a wet log to being able to identify certain plants like nettles that are valuable for wildlife, but should be avoided by people. Long grass, plants, mud, sand, water, weeds – nature is messy, but with this brings a wealth of exploration and discovery opportunities. When a wooden log rots, it becomes difficult to climb on, but the decay process supports a wealth of learning and interest.

The role of the adult

You don't need to be an environmentalist to support nature play, you don't even need to like minibeasts! Through creating open ended outdoor opportunities, children can explore, discover and create without adult intervention, and your observations help scaffold their interests over time.

