

Playful Neighbourhoods

Introduction



Playful Neighbourhoods encourages nursery practitioners to look beyond the nursery gate and recognise local greenspaces as valuable extensions of the learning environment.



Beyond the Setting

Parks, fields, woodlands and community green areas offer rich, real-life experiences that cannot be fully replicated within the nursery setting.

By regularly accessing local greenspaces, children are given opportunities to explore, move freely, take appropriate risks and engage with the natural world in meaningful ways.

These experiences support children's physical development, emotional wellbeing and communication skills. In the next chapter, we will explore the practical 'how' of Playful Neighbourhoods in more detail, including managing risk, reviewing policies, considering ratios, and developing confident, consistent practice beyond the nursery gate

Benefits of Visiting Local Greenspaces

- Supports children's physical health and wellbeing
- Encourages confidence, independence, and resilience
- Provides rich opportunities for language development
- Supports social skills and cooperation
- Builds a sense of belonging within the local community
- Enhances children's understanding of the natural world

Understanding of the World

Regular visits to local greenspaces strengthen children's sense of connection to their community and environment. Shared outdoor experiences encourage meaningful conversations, storytelling and collaborative play, supporting speech and language development across all age groups. Observing seasonal changes, wildlife, and weather also deepens children's understanding of the world, fostering curiosity, respect for nature, and a growing sense of responsibility for the places they use and enjoy.

Confidence, Independence and Risk Awareness

Exploring neighbourhood greenspaces allows children to experience manageable risk in a real-world context. Navigating paths, stepping over roots, or climbing small hills helps children develop confidence in their own abilities and begin to assess risk for themselves. These experiences support resilience, problem-solving, and decision-making skills, encouraging children to trust their bodies and judgement while being supported by attentive, responsive adults.



Physical Development and Wellbeing

Local greenspaces naturally encourage children to move their bodies in varied and challenging ways. Uneven ground, slopes, trees, and open spaces provide opportunities for running, climbing, balancing, and jumping, supporting both gross and fine motor development. Being physically active outdoors also supports children's overall health and stamina, while exposure to fresh air and open space can help reduce stress, support regulation, and improve concentration back in the nursery environment.

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Setting the Foundations



Taking children beyond the nursery gate can feel daunting at first, but with clear systems, shared understanding, and thoughtful planning, it becomes a natural and valuable part of everyday provision



Prepare, Prepare, Prepare

Careful preparation helps ensure visits to a local green space are calm, purposeful, and enriching rather than rushed or stressful. This includes clear procedures for counting children during transitions before leaving the setting, on arrival at the local green space and again when leaving as well as establishing consistent routines and boundaries once the group arrives, so children understand where they can explore and how to move safely. When these foundations are in place, visits to the local green space

become embedded within practice rather than reliant on individual confidence or enthusiasm. Planning outings as a regular part of the week also reduces pressure; if a session is rained off, it is not a disappointment or a missed opportunity, as children will return the following week. This consistency supports staff, children and families alike, creating a shared understanding of how local green space visits are managed and why they are an essential, reliable part of everyday learning.

Essential items to take with you

- First aid kit
- Mobile phone
- Emergency contact details
- Tissues and wipes
- Spare clothes
- Water and snacks if needed
- Sun cream
- Risk-benefit assessment and register
- A simple go-bag kept ready for regular outings
- Risk-benefit assessment and register
- Bin bag

Risk-Benefit Assessment

Risk-benefit assessments support practitioners to balance safety with opportunity rather than removing challenge altogether. Instead of focusing solely on what could go wrong, these assessments consider what children gain from visiting a local green space, such as confidence, physical development and independence. Assessments should be reviewed regularly and adapted as children and staff become more familiar with routes, spaces, routines, and expectations.

Going Regularly, Not as a One-Off

Visits to a local green space are most effective when they happen regularly, rather than as occasional, special trips. Visiting the same local green space weekly or frequently helps children become familiar with routines, boundaries and expectations, reducing anxiety and increasing confidence. Over time, this consistency ensures visits to a local green space are a meaningful and valued part of everyday practice, not a one-off experience.



Ratios

Working within ratios is one of the most common concerns when planning visits to a local green space, but it does not need to be a barrier. Careful planning of routes, destinations and group size allows outings to remain manageable and safe. Some settings choose to take smaller groups on a rota, while others involve additional staff such as managers or room leaders, with parent volunteers supporting where appropriate safeguarding is in place.

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Reflecting on Experiences



Spending regular time in local green spaces often brings noticeable changes that staff quickly begin to talk about. Practitioners commonly observe children becoming calmer, more focused, and more engaged when learning outdoors



Social interactions often strengthen, with children supporting one another, solving problems together, and showing increased confidence and independence.

These everyday observations help staff recognise the value of off-site learning and build motivation to return to local green spaces as a meaningful part of nursery practice.

Effect on Staff

- Being outdoors can reduce stress and support emotional regulation for adults as well as children
- Shared positive experiences outside the nursery grounds improve team relationships on site
- Outdoor visits often feel calmer and less pressured than indoor routines
- Staff gain confidence through practical experience, not just paperwork
- Seeing children thrive outdoors increases job satisfaction and motivation
- Informal reflection outdoors (e.g. staff meetings with hot drinks) supports open, honest conversations

Growing Staff Buy-In Through Experiences

Once staff begin to see the benefits of off-site play, children's engagement, calmness, confidence, and curiosity, motivation naturally increases. One powerful way to build enthusiasm is to hold a staff meeting in the green space itself, sharing a hot cup of chocolate and biscuits while reflecting together outdoors. Experiencing the space as learners and colleagues helps staff connect with the vision, making it far more likely they will want to return with children again and again.

Learning Through the Seasons

Regular visits to the same local green space allow children to notice how the world changes over time, from weather and light to plant growth and wildlife. Taking time to notice these changes together supports shared conversations, curiosity, and deeper understanding, helping children build a meaningful connection to place and the natural environment.



Working in Partnership with Parents

Clear communication and shared planning help parents feel confident about visits to local green spaces. Parents can also be invited to support visits as volunteers, helping settings meet ratios while strengthening relationships. Using social media and children's learning journeys to share experiences, photos, and reflections helps educate families about the benefits of woodland and outdoor learning, encouraging understanding, trust, and ongoing support.



Across the literature, time spent in natural environments and local green spaces is consistently linked to positive outcomes for children who experience neurodivergence, trauma or disrupted attachments.



Supporting Neurodiversity

Research exploring ADHD highlights how nature supports attention, emotional regulation and behaviour, while studies focusing on looked-after children emphasise the relational benefits of shared outdoor experiences. Together, these findings suggest that green spaces offer something unique: environments that are calming, flexible and relational, where children can feel less pressured, more regulated, and more connected to trusted adults.

Rather than nature being a single intervention, the research points to regular, familiar experiences in green spaces as particularly powerful. When children return to the same outdoor places with consistent adults, green spaces become settings for relationship-building, emotional safety and self-regulation, supporting children whose needs may not always be met in busy, indoor, or highly structured environments.

Key Findings: Why Green Spaces Matter

- Time in green spaces supports attention, calm and self-regulation.
- Nature can reduce ADHD-related behaviours and sensory overload.
- Outdoor spaces are often easier for neurodivergent children to engage in
- Shared outdoor experiences strengthen relationships with trusted adults.
- Familiar green spaces build routine, safety and belonging.
- Nature supports recovery for children who have experienced trauma.
- Regular outdoor experiences promote confidence and inclusion.

Sense of Belonging for Looked After Children

Studies exploring outdoor and nature-based experiences for looked-after children highlight the role of shared outdoor activities in strengthening relationships with trusted adults. Walking, exploring, or playing together in a local green space can reduce the intensity of direct eye contact and formal interaction, making it easier for children to communicate and connect. Regular visits to the same green spaces also help children develop familiarity and a sense of ownership, supporting feelings of stability and belonging that are especially important for children who may experience frequent change in other areas of their lives. Gill, T. (2014).

The benefits of children's engagement with nature: A systematic literature review. *Children, Youth and Environments*, 24(2), 10-34.

The Effect of Green Spaces on Children with ADHD

This review brings together research looking at how time spent in natural environments affects children with ADHD. Across the studies, children who regularly spent time in green spaces showed improvements in attention, behaviour, and self-regulation, particularly after outdoor play in more natural settings. The findings suggest that being outside in nature can help children feel calmer and more focused, making it a valuable support alongside everyday strategies used in early years settings.

For practitioners, this reinforces the idea that regular visits to a local green space can be especially beneficial for children who struggle with attention, impulse control, or emotional regulation.

.Tillmann, S., Tobin, D., Avison, W., & Gilliland, J. (2024). Could nature contribute to the management of ADHD in children? A systematic review. *International Journal of Environmental Research and Public Health*, 21(2), 173. Available via ResearchGate:

https://www.researchgate.net/publication/381188587_Could_Nature_Contribute_to_the_Management_of_ADHD_in_Children_A_Systematic_Review