Why Nature Play?
Introduction

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 then tire of.





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 physi-cal benefits of nature play?

Why Nature Play?
Setting the Foundations

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.'

Childhood and Nature: Design Principles for Educators. David Sobel 2008

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 in autumn.

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.

Why Nature Play?
Refecting on Experiences

Once the staff and children have enjoyed the example outdoor activities, use your experiences to reflect on the outcome in terms of success and areas for development.



Activities

Making use of natural materials for small world play. Making the most of the puddle that stays after the rain has stopped.
Engaging the senses and exploring the outdoor area through a nature-based scavenger hunt.
Linking play to the seasons by using leaves or creating nests.
The example activities provide an opportunity for staff and children to enjoy nature-based play in any space, as well as providing opportunities to build on children's enquiries and interests.

Research highlights a difference between nature contact and nature connection, with the latter being more of a holistic experience based on regular and sustained access that leads to a more personal relationship with nature.
Playing with nature in the early years helps build the foundation towards nature connection.
Reflect on how children responded to the activities and how staff can ensure regular, meaningful nature-based experiences.

"Experiment with little ideas and help them grow. Keep on dreaming and asking, "What if...?" or "How about...?" It makes for a much more interesting life and keeps your outdoor work creative."

Juliet Robertson – Education Consultant and Outdoor Play Specialist.

Reflections on Outdoor Space and Practice

Do children have access to natural loose materials, including smaller items like sticks, pinecones and leaves? If not, how can these be sourced? For example, through a local nature walk, donated items from home gardens or a local tree surgeon. If adding trees to the space, consider species that offer year-round interest and are a source of natural items like seed pods. Plants like Lavender offer sensory stimulation and are valuable for pollinating insects. Let the grass grow long. A range of other loose materials are also needed for activities like bridge building, nest building and puddle clearance.

Review your current provision in terms of the variety available and how children currently access it. Do you have child-friendly storage and can the children self-select the items they want? Review the wider space for nature play opportunities. If the space is small, make use of the vertical surface for planting and include features with more than one use (for example Willow planting encourages biodiversity, supports small world play, creates screening, reduces wind blow and can be used for arts and craft activities).





Facilitate a whole staff conversation about supporting nature-based play to ensure a consistent experience for all children. Focus on the difference between interaction and interference and allow time for children to enjoy and engage in focused nature play, or just simply to sit under a tree and observe, versus organisation, routine and adult-led activities.

Why Nature Play?
Further Thinking & Reading

Engagement with research, pedagogical practice and relevant organisations will support practitioners who wish to further develop their understanding.



Further Exploration

There are a variety of opportunities for staff who wish to expand their knowledge base and associated pedagogical practice, including access to research papers and professional organisations and networks across the UK.

Well informed, knowledgeable staff who share their passion with children are also better equipped to foster understanding and interest amongst parents and families. By helping children develop strong, healthy connection with nature, we empower them to become environmental advocates in the future.

"If a child is to keep alive his inborn sense of wonder he needs the companionship of at least one adult who can share it, rediscovering with him the joy, excitement and mystery of the world we live in."

Carson, R. (1998) The Sense of Wonder. New York: HarperCollins.

Example Support

- David Sobel Play Principles www.davidsobelauthor.com
- Early Years Alliance (England) www.eyalliance.org.uk
- Learning through Landscapes www.ltl.org.uk
- The Froebel Trust www.Froebel.org.uk 'Children and Nature'.
- British Assoc. for Early Childhood Education www.early-education.org.uk
- Creative Star Learning www.creativestarlearning.co.uk

Futher Reading

A life "in and with nature?" Developing nature engaging and nature enhancing pedagogies for babies and toddlers.

This peer-reviewed research paper focuses on babies and toddlers and the recognition that whilst being outdoors and in nature has a positive impact, concerns over health and safety and an emphasis on physical activity can mean that natural elements may be discouraged in favour of manufactured alternatives. Through Froebelian philosophy the paper focuses on the limitations of such practice and the need to develop nature-engaging and nature-enhancing pedagogies from birth.

Search 'Global Education Review', and then the names of the two authors Joanne Josephidou and Nicola Kemp. Published 2022

There is a section entitled '**Nature Connection'** in the free Outdoor Hub section of the Muddy Faces website, comprising a wide range of articles, publications, research, useful websites, and short videos. www.muddyfaces.co.uk (click 'Outdoor Hub' then 'Nature Connection').





Promoting a healthy gut biome in children – the role of nature play.

1). Optimising Early Childhood Educational Settings for Health Using Nature-Based Solutions: The Microbiome Aspect www.mdpi.com Type the title of the paper into the search bar to access.
2). Search for 'The Benefits of Learning to Love Mud' by Allesia Franco and David Robson 2022 www.bbc.co.uk/future/family-tree

Why Nature Play?
Moving Forward: Next Steps

It is important to regularly review year-round, outdoor nature play opportunities. Involve staff, children, parents, and caregivers with developing and implementing ideas.



Positive Promotion

Review how the benefits of nature play and its links to child development are promoted by nursery to support understanding amongst parents. Develop an outdoor policy that helps disseminate the message and include lots of outdoor play photos in communications. If nature is limited in your space encourage donations of natural resources from parents, collect items when out and about, use containers for planting and encouraging minibeasts and include different materials such as sand, water, and mud. If there is green space avoid mowing and trimming and encourage access.

Again, positive messaging is important here, communicating the value of wild spaces to parents and visitors (highlighting the associated play value of an unmaintained space).

Communication between staff too, for example allowing children to hide and what to do if a thistle or nettle is found.

Summary

- Audit your outdoor space for nature play opportunities and identify gaps.
- Review existing loose materials provision and include more natural items.
- Incorporate planting for play, for example screening, den building, shade, atmosphere, small world. Make use of vertical surfaces to save floor space.
- Include different textures and surfaces – soil/mud, water, sand, pebbles.
- Allow green areas to grow wild and embrace the opportunities this offers.

Growing Food

Growing food supports children's understanding of where food comes from, encourages healthy eating habits and the process requires patience and routine. Digging for play is a popular, open-ended, sensory-rich experience with no set outcome that strengthens motor skills, supports scientific thinking and provides calming regulation. Encouraging both outdoors can be tricky if you want to avoid everything being dug up! Consider location, visual cues, screening, use of raised planters for food growing and digging in the grass, use of vertical surface and resources like hanging baskets.

A Sense of Place

Going beyond your boundary and making use of local, walk-to green spaces is another way of supporting nature play. Repeated visits to the same place throughout the year allows children to experience nature through seasonal change and helps develop a sense of place through a connection with their local environment, experiencing awe and wonder through observation and enquiry with practitioners following their lead.





Climate Change

Help children begin to understand the importance of climate change through nature play, highlighting that they can make a positive contribution through practical change. Experiencing the natural world in the early years has the power to shape deep and long-lasting connections to nature.