Playful Staff
Introduction

Nature play pedagogy is about connecting everyday playful outdoor practice to established educational theory. It is a way of integrating children's play experiences with nature.



A focus on Nature Play

The adult as a co-explorer not an instructor. Playful staff see the possibilities in nature. It's not about avoiding nature but engaging with it.

Gentle risk-taking, supporting climbing, supervising safe tool use, encouraging problem solving in real situations, and helping children regulate their emotions through natural sensory experiences. Playful staff are the children's co-explorers not instructors.

Nature Pedagogy is about presence, nature, and play.

" Presence represents a mindfulness of staff…a care giver who is wholly there in body and mind, actively holding the space, being respectful of the children, aware and ready to respond if required "
Sue Palmer – Play is the Way.

Playful staff:

- Actively and genuinely enjoy being with the children in nature.
- Are responsive to the child's ideas and needs rather than directing them.
- Ensure that children feel safe, secure, valued, and excited to explore.

Friedrich Froebel

Froebel believed that play is the highest expression of learning and that meaningful development happens when children are free to explore, create, and discover through play. He saw nature as a vital environment for children's growth; offering rich, sensory experiences and opportunities for curiosity and imagination. In this approach, adults act as gentle guides rather than directors, supporting child-led exploration rather than controlling it. Using natural materials such as sticks, stones, leaves, and water reflects Froebel's philosophy that children learn best through hands on engagement with real objects in the natural world.

Rudolf Steiner

Steiner emphasised the importance of seasonal awareness, natural rhythms and the use of simple, open-ended materials drawn from the natural world. He believed that young children thrive in environments that feel calm, predictable and closely connected to nature. A key element of Steiner's approach is the presence of a calm, centred adult who models care, creativity and respect for the environment. Within this supportive atmosphere, children's imaginative play flourishes, helping them build a deep, lasting connection with the natural world.

Leo Vygotsky

Vygotsky highlighted the importance of adults and children as co-constructors of learning, where knowledge develops through interaction, shared exploration, and meaningful conversation. He emphasised that adults should support and extend children's thinking without taking control of their play or ideas. Through sensitive guidance, questioning, and playful dialogue, adults help children move beyond what they can do alone. This collaborative approach supports the development of language, problem solving, and higher order thinking skills within playful learning environments.

Playful Staff Developing
Playful Behaviour

Supporting and developing playful behaviour with staff in nature is about helping adults to feel confident, present, and responsive, by participating in children's curiosity.



Language and Style

Risky play can trigger adult anxiety, as the perceived risks often feel greater than the real risks involved. In outdoor play, adults may overestimate hazards, even though these experiences are essential for children's confidence, competence, and safe risk-taking.

Reflecting together on actual and perceived risks, and on how risky play is encouraged and managed, is essential for developing confident, playful staff interactions.

Reframe Language:

Swap

"Be careful!"

for

"Do you see that branch?, Notice how slippery that is?"

or

"What's your plan?"

Focus on Benefits: Shift from preventing accidents to managing risks and reaping developmental rewards.

Model Risk: Adults taking their own small risks in front of children can build trust.

"The More Risks you allow children to take, the better they learn to take care of themselves."

Roald Dahl

The Benefits

Supporting staff to develop playful dialogue outdoors begins with giving them opportunities to slow down, notice the environment, and reconnect with their own sense of curiosity. When adults feel grounded and open, their interactions with children become richer, more responsive, and more imaginative.
Playful dialogue should be open-ended, curious, and rooted in shared exploration. Language swap exercises help staff become more aware of the words they use outdoors and explore alternative phrases that better support curiosity, playfulness, and child-led exploration. These exercises encourage staff to shift from instructional language to open, invitational, and exploratory language, the kind that nurtures children's thinking and imagination:

Swap directive phrases for playful invitations
Swap closed questions for open, curious ones
Swap adult-led instructions for child-led prompts.

By using open, curious language.
"I wonder where this path leads?"or "I wonder how many sticks we'd need to build this?" It helps staff practise dialogue that invites children into thinking rather than directing them.





Celebrate Playful Thinking

Acknowledge and celebrate moments where staff took risks, followed curiosity or engaged in imaginative dialogue. This builds a culture where playfulness is valued, not seen as frivolous. Use photos, feedback from children, and staff training displays as a way of embedding good practice across the setting.

Playful Staff
Provocations

Playful staff provocations support rich nature-based play. While play remains child led thoughtful adult interactions can spark curiosity, extend thinking and invite children to explore materials, ideas and possibilities more deeply.



A provocation is an invitation to think, explore and discover.
In early childhood practice the term describes an intentional setup, question or addition to the environment that encourages children to engage more deeply with their play.

In a nature play context, provocations often use natural loose parts such as sticks, stones, leaves, water, sand or mud.

These materials are open ended and adaptable, meaning children can use them in many different ways.
Unlike fixed toys with a clear purpose, natural materials allow children to invent, build, combine, transform and imagine freely.

The intention is not to guide children towards one correct outcome. Instead, provocations invite children to interpret materials in their own way, creating space for creativity, problem solving and collaboration.

Provocations might include

- A collection of different sized sticks placed beside a shallow stream.
- Pinecones and leaves arranged in a spiral pattern on the ground.
- A magnifying glass placed near tree bark or insects.
- Hollow logs or crates positioned to create a balance challenge.
- Buckets and containers near a puddle after rain.

The Role of the Adult

In nature play environments adults act as observers, facilitators and co-explorers. This approach reflects research highlighting that learning is often strongest when adults extend children's thinking without taking control of their play. Staff can support playful provocations by taking time to watch how children are using the environment and materials. Observation helps adults understand children's interests, motivations and current learning.

Instead of directing children, adults can use curious language such as: "I wonder what might happen if…?" "What do you notice about these stones?" "or "How could we make this stronger?" Because natural environments constantly change, provocations can evolve throughout the year. Autumn leaves may inspire pattern making, winter frost may encourage investigation of ice and spring growth may spark interest in insects,lowers and new life. Encourage staff to:

wonder out loud,
use descriptive language,
introduce rich vocabulary and higher order thinking and questions.





Adding Simple Invitations

Small changes to the environment can spark new ideas. Adding a basket of shells near water, or placing stones beside a mud kitchen can encourage children to combine materials in new ways.

Playful Staff
Environments

Co-designing playful spaces means inviting children's ideas, behaviours, and interests to shape the environment with the support of an adult.



Language and Style

Observing children's natural behaviours and listening to their ideas will reveal to staff what they need and want to do in their outdoor space.

Floorbooks allow staff to consult deeply with children during the planning and documentation process.

Mindstretcher's Claire Warden describes the floorbook approach as "...a child-led, inquiry-based method of documentation and planning that invites children to shape their own learning journey."
Playful staff can shape the environment to support these impulses safely and creatively.

Playful staff should use children's interests as design drivers:

- dragging sticks - they may want building materials
- climbing - they may need height, challenge, or vantage points
- collecting - they may need baskets, shelves, or treasure spaces
- digging - they may need earth, tools, and open ground.

Reflections

Children naturally seek out perspectives and experiences that intrigue and inspire them. This curiosity can sometimes lead to behaviours adults find challenging. Instead of viewing these moments as problems, it's important to recognise them as signs of investigation and exploration. By using these behaviours as insight, we can design playful spaces that respond to children's interests and support their natural drive to discover.

Playful staff need to take time to reflect with children on what works.

Ask children:

What do you like about this space?
What would you change?
What else could we add?





.

Playful staff shall celebrate the space as a shared creation.

Display photos, drawings or stories showing how the outdoor space has evolved. This builds ownership and pride for both staff and children.

Playful Staff
The Weather

Experiencing the weather is a uniquely powerful aspect of outdoor play, the weather can often be viewed as a problem or hazard, leading adults to avoid them rather than explore them, yet these weather-driven moments offer rich opportunities for curiosity, discovery, and playful learning.



Whatever the Weather

Natural elements – the wind, rain, sun, and weather conditions – should be seen as an opportunity, providing stimuli and creating playful spaces in early years settings.

Collecting raindrops, cloud watching, and listening to the howling wind all offer rich provocations for playful staff in their outdoor settings, no matter the size or type of space.

These moments of deep engagement with the natural environment reveal what captures children's curiosity and can guide the creation of playful, responsive spaces and play opportunities.

In the Rain: use rain as a sensory experience – feeling, listening, watching.

In the Wind: chase leaves, ribbons, or natural materials carried by the breeze.

In the Cold: make patterns in frost or explore frozen puddles.

In the Sunshine: explore shadows and create sun prints.

Head, Heart, Hands Approach – Climate Action

Playful staff can make climate awareness feel hopeful, hands-on and rooted in everyday experiences outdoors through an emotional connection to nature. When staff feel playful, confident, and connected to nature they naturally model the attitudes and behaviours that support a sustainable future. Climate change becomes less about fear and more about care, curiosity, and shared responsibility.

Embrace it all

Playful staff need to embrace messy play as a natural part of outdoor learning in all weathers. When adults feel confident exploring mud, rain, wind, and shifting textures alongside children they model curiosity, joy, and a spirit of adventure. Messy play becomes a shared experience that strengthens relationships and deepens children's connection to the natural world.





When staff embrace messy play in all weathers, they show children that the outdoors is a place of possibility. They help children build resilience, sensory awareness, creativity, and a deep connection to nature. Playful adults create playful environments, and weather becomes a partner in learning, not a barrier.

Playful Staff
Further Thinking & Reading

Developing confidence in nature play is an ongoing journey. Exploring research, books and new ideas helps practitioners deepen understanding, strengthen practice and continue nurturing curiosity, creativity and connection with the natural world.



High Quality

High quality nature play practice grows through reflection, shared learning, and engagement with research. By exploring different perspectives on play, outdoor learning, and child development, practitioners can strengthen their understanding of why nature-based experiences are so powerful for young children.

A wide range of researchers, educators and organisations have contributed to our understanding of play in nature.

Their work highlights the importance of child-led exploration, access to natural materials and the role of adults in supporting curiosity. Wherever possible allow staff to share ideas, reflect on experiences, and discover new approaches that support playful learning outdoors.

Developing knowledge over time helps settings build confident teams who value curiosity, creativity, and exploration as central elements of early years practice.

Important study themes include:

- play as the foundation of early learning,
- nature as a rich environment for exploration and discovery,
- children learning through hands on experiences with natural materials,
- The role of adults as guides and co-explorers and the importance of risk, challenge and resilience in play.
- These ideas underpin many outdoor learning approaches used in early years settings today.

The Benefits

A number of educational thinkers have influenced nature play practice. Friedrich Froebel highlighted the importance of play, creativity and direct experiences with nature. The Reggio Emilia approach emphasises the environment as a powerful teacher, encouraging curiosity and exploration through rich learning spaces. Forest School practice, which originated in Scandinavia, focuses on regular outdoor learning in natural environments and supports children to build confidence, independence and resilience. Together these approaches emphasise the value of child led exploration and the influential role that natural environments can play in early childhood development.

Books, Podcasts and Other Resources

Practitioners interested in developing their knowledge further may find inspiration through books, podcasts and professional learning networks.
Authors such as;

Richard Louv
Juliet Robertson
Angela Hanscom

explore the importance of outdoor play and children's connection with nature. Podcasts focused on early childhood education and outdoor learning also provide opportunities to hear ideas from researchers and practitioners.

The benefits A Culture of Ongoing Curiosity

Professional learning in nature play is most powerful when it becomes part of a setting's culture. When teams share ideas, discuss research and reflect on outdoor experiences together they build confidence and curiosity. This shared learning helps settings cre-ate environments where both adults and children continue exploring, questioning, and discovering.

Playful Staff
Reflecting on Experiences

Staff need opportunities that centre on being in nature, reflecting on experiences and celebrating playful minds, in order to reconnect them with curiosity and the sense of awe and wonder that drives high quality early years practice.



Your Practice

For playful practice to thrive it must be supported by the culture of the whole setting. When leadership teams prioritise curiosity, reflection and shared learning staff feel more confident to engage playfully with children outdoors.
Creating this culture begins by recognising that adults need time and space to reconnect with their own sense of curiosity and wonder. Opportunities for staff to pause, observe and reflect on what they notice outdoors helps build confidence in using nature as a co-teacher. Team discussions, shared reflections, and collaborative planning all support staff to exchange ideas and celebrate playful approaches.
Settings can also encourage playful practice by valuing experimentation rather than perfection. When staff feel supported to try new ideas, explore the outdoor environment and follow children's interests, playful interactions become a natural part of everyday practice.
A strong culture of playful staff ultimately supports richer learning environments where exploration, imagination and discovery are valued by both adults and children.

There are three teachers of children, adults, other children and their physical environment. The environment is the third teacher."

Sue Palmer, Play is the Way

Model Playful Adult Behaviour

Many adults feel they need to teach rather than play but encouraging staff to get down on the ground, experience staff play sessions (adults only!) show curiosity, join in with play, and follow children's ideas helps shift this mindset. When adults participate alongside children, they demonstrate that exploration, wonder, and shared discovery are at the heart of outdoor learning.
Creating a playful staff culture means recognising the role of the environment in shaping learning.

Building Confidence in Playful Practice

Settings can help shift this mindset by supporting staff to experience play themselves. Adult-only play sessions, shared outdoor exploration, and reflective team activities allow staff to reconnect with curiosity and creativity. These
experiences help adults rediscover the joy of playful exploration, while developing confidence in using natural materials and outdoor environments as learning opportunities. When staff experience the benefits of play themselves they are more likely to embrace playful approaches with children.

Reconnecting with the 'Why'

Creating a playful culture also involves revisiting why outdoor play matters. When staff understand how nature-based play supports wellbeing, physical development, language growth, and emotional regulation playful interactions feel purposeful rather than optional. Connecting everyday outdoor experiences with child development helps staff recognise the powerful learning taking place through exploration. This shared understanding builds confidence across the team and encourages adults to value moments of curiosity, experimentation, and discovery as meaningful learning opportunities.

Playful Staff
Next Steps

Playful staff interactions are central to meaningful nature play experiences. When adults observe, respond, and engage with curiosity, they support children to explore ideas and build confidence and deepen their learning outdoors.



Interactions and Intentions

In nature play environments, staff play an important role in creating a supportive atmosphere where curiosity, exploration and imagination can flourish. Rather than directing children's activities adults observe carefully and respond thoughtfully to the interests emerging within children's play.

Playful interactions might involve joining a game briefly, asking an open question, introducing a new material or simply sharing a moment of wonder. These small actions can extend children's thinking while still allowing them to remain in control of their play. Nature-rich environments naturally invite exploration. Puddles, sticks, stones, leaves, and mud all offer opportunities for children to test ideas, solve problems, and collaborate with others.

When adults remain playful and curious themselves they model a positive attitude towards discovery and learning. Through valuing children's ideas and supporting experimentation, staff help create environments where children feel confident to take risks, try new things and develop resilience through their play.

"Children learn as they play. Most importantly, in play children learn how to learn."

Fred Donaldson, Play Researcher.

Staff can support this by noticing children's interests before intervening, offering simple materials that invite curiosity, asking open ended questions rather than giving instructions, and allowing time for children to explore ideas fully.

Observing Before Acting

Observation is one of the most powerful tools adults can use in nature play environments. By watching closely staff can identify children's interests, questions and developing skills. This helps adults decide when to step in and when to allow play to unfold naturally. When adults respond to children's ideas rather than imposing their own plans, learning becomes more meaningful and engaging.

Modelling Curiosity

Adults strengthen the natural curiosity of children by modelling their own sense of wonder. When staff notice the patterns on a leaf, listen to the sound of the wind in the trees or question why a puddle has frozen overnight, they show children that exploration and discovery are valued. This shared curiosity encourages children to ask questions, test ideas and observe closely. These experiences help children develop a deeper understanding of nature and their place within it.





A Lasting Connection

Through playful interactions with supportive adults children build positive memories of time spent outdoors. These early experiences help nurture confidence, creativity and a sense of belonging in the natural world. When children feel connected to nature through play they are more likely to care for and value it as they grow.