Playful Families
Introduction

The adults in a child's life will often be the gatekeepers who decide when and how a child will interact with nature. How can we encourage greater engagement and what might we need to consider?



What do we mean by nature?

The term 'nature' is perceived very differently by people depending on their own experiences and interactions with it. Some people imagine wilderness, risk and adventure, others think about more domestic childhood experiences of muddy puddles and collecting tadpoles. Studies (Groves & McNeish, 2008) show that this translates for some parents into anxiety over the "dirt" and the "danger" of outdoor play.

We need to be prepared to tackle misconceptions about weather, risk, and what is developmentally appropriate for children if we are to convince families that time spent in natural environments will benefit both them and their children, cementing bonds, (Torkos, 2025) and providing sensory opportunities in real-world contexts. Nature can be a powerful antidote to life's stress and accessing it through play alongside parents and carers can be a great way to promote this.

Secure Attachment Outdoors

Outdoor activities often foster closer parent-child bonds, as families share challenges and successes in a natural context (Beames et al., 2012). Families can struggle to carve out quality time together in busy lives. By creating drop-in sessions or planned events we can support families to make time for play in nature and demonstrate the benefits to both them and their children.

Positive Parenting

Positive parenting, characterised by supportive, nurturing, and responsive interactions is also reinforced through outdoor education. Outdoor experiences encourage family bonding and joint problem-solving, which strengthens the parent–child relationship (Smith & Barker, 2019). Studies have shown that parents who actively participate in outdoor activities with their children report higher levels of satisfaction and a stronger emotional connection (Wilson & Garland, 2018). There is a perceived freedom in an outdoor, natural, and less formal environment which enhances relationships.

Potential Pitfalls

Despite these proven benefits, the practical implementation of outdoor education can be inconsistent (Waite, 2017). One reason for this gap, as identified by Gill (2014), is the perceived lack of structured outcomes or academic achievements, making it less appealing to educational policymakers. Families may believe the role of nursery is to formally 'teach' their child without fully understanding what is developmentally appropriate.





Social Factors

Socioeconomic factors can limit access to outdoor programs, particularly in urban areas (Evans et al., 2019) where families may have limited access to natural spaces. This again, makes it all the more important for nursery settings to support families to access outdoor opportunities.

Playful Families
Setting the Foundations

Parents and carers are the key influencers in a child's early life. The nursery setting can support and empower them to access the benefits of nature play with simple and consistent interventions.



What might we see?

It is important to set out your culture around outdoor play and learning from your earliest interactions with families. When they come for an initial visit or have settling in times, make sure that children are able to access outdoors and that families understand that being outside in nature is a normal and incredibly beneficial part of the nursery experience. Be prepared to answer questions about weather, clothing, and the kinds of opportunities children will have in your outdoor spaces. If you have a parents' information letter or introductory session, be sure to include information about your outdoor areas so that you set clear expectations from the beginning about how and when children will access the outdoors and the reasons why nature play is such a valuable part of your curriculum. These simple actions will begin to shift the culture in your setting.

Hidden Messaging

- Consider your online presence. Does your website and social media promote a positive culture around outdoor nature play through the photos and stories you share?
- Is the outdoor area always closed at pick up and drop off times? Some settings have developed systems where children can be dropped off in the outdoor areas so that families can witness the play in these spaces.

Weather

Many families worry about the weather and how their child will cope with certain conditions. Children are very resilient and will often be quite content in a variety of weathers, but we can alleviate parental fears by making sure we communicate clearly on our policies. It can be helpful to have a presumption that children will be able to access outdoors regularly and instead ask when do we NOT go outdoors? This will help staff, children and families understand the 'why' of dynamic risk assessment and decision-making. For example, 'We can go outside UNLESS there are very high winds.'

Clothing

Many nurseries ask families to provide waterproofs or wellies for going outdoors. This can create its own challenges as the quality and availability can vary. Sometimes a child will forget their outdoor gear. In other instances, outdoor clothing is not provided, through forgetfulness, lack of money to buy this type of clothing or in some cases, deliberately, to try and control whether the child goes outdoors or not. This needs careful navigation.





Consider whether you can create a borrow box with a variety of sizes and styles so that the right clothing is available when needed. This increases equity and allows the nursery greater control over the quality of items and the dignity of children. A borrow box of adult clothing and footwear also removes a barrier to staff and visiting adults accessing nature play.

Playful Families
Reflecting on Experiences

A lovely way to help families better understand the value of nature play is to invite them to join a session in the nursery. This allows them to see the benefits to their child in context and in real time.



Nature Stay and Play

Having a 'stay and play' session in your nursery garden or local greenspace lets families see first-hand how their child is responding to and learning from nature. You may want to target your invitations to particular groups or stages at first, so that staff are not overwhelmed or under pressure if lots of people sign up. Having a brief, nature-based activity to engage with can help families feel comfortable.

Any activities should encourage interaction between children, their family member, the natural world and natural materials. Staff can be on hand to support and guide, but the focus should be on time spent together as a family group.

Avoid any lengthy written descriptions which may disrupt the experience for family members with lower literacy levels or those who speak English as an additional language. Activities should provoke a response and encourage play.

Top Tips

- **Be flexible**: working patterns for parents and carers will vary so offer a variety of drop-in sessions, monthly or quarterly to suit their needs.
- **Be aware of attachment:** when a child's favourite adult stays to play in nursery you will often find the child becomes 'clingy' or unsettled. This is a completely normal response, and you should allow time and space for them to adjust without rushing into any activities or experiences.

Engaging with Families

Make use of your current communication channels, online journals and conversations at drop off and pick up times. Simple technologies such as QR codes are helpful as they can be placed on noticeboards or sent out in emails and allow the families to respond to your questions in their own time. A personal, verbal invitation can be very powerful; especially for those families who may feel more nervous about coming along. Some families will have negative memories of education environments. Inviting them into an outdoor space often results in greater engagement as this space has different rules.

Sharing Attention

Some parents and carers will experience anxiety about being observed in the nursery environment; others may be overcompensating and start to take over. Reassurance and redirection are key here. Focus your attention on the child and model playful interactions to set the tone for the way they should also behave. Limit the length of 'stay and play' sessions so that people don't feel pressured to stay for too long, but are also clear when it's time to leave.





It Takes a Village

Parents and carers who are working often feel guilty about missing out on these types of sessions during the nursery day. It can be good to facilitate other family members attending to give more flexibility. Make sure any additional people are approved according to your safeguarding procedures.

Playful Families
Further Thinking & Reading

Involving parents, carers, and the wider family in your nature play can build confidence in and support for this type of play pedagogy in your setting and community.



Finding Local Greenspaces

If your space is more limited in terms of nature play opportunities, you may want to explore getting off-site with your children into your local community. There are many ways to do this, but simple walks with families can be a great way to get the correct ratios and allow you to access spaces which have richer experiences to offer. You don't need a wilderness on your doorstep to provide excellent opportunities for young children to explore.

You may have a local park with slightly wilder edges or trees, a network of paths through a wood or a beach. Any natural space which is within walking distance of your setting will offer many benefits to learning and play. Regular visits will unlock learning about seasonal change. You will need to check your safeguarding policies for guidance on who can work with your children and any regular volunteers may need to be registered with national schemes such as DBS or PVG.

Things to consider when heading off-site

- Get landowner permission for regular visits and update your policies.
- Complete a site appraisal and risk-benefit assessment before visiting.
- Pack a bag with essentials - remember a mobile phone and any medication.
- Consider shelter, handwashing, toileting and snacks.
- Engage with parents, staff and children to manage expectations.
- Dynamically risk assess on the day and during the session.

National Play Opportunities

Outdoor Classroom Day

Outdoor Classroom Day is celebrated in May and October. It is a global movement celebrating outdoor learning and play, and brings together over 13 million children in over 170 countries.

Den Day

A Den Day is a great way to get creative and spend time with family & friends. Den building, especially outdoors, supports the development of several key skills as well as being a great family and community activity.

National Play Day

National Play Day, also known as 'Playday' is an annual event held on the first Wednesday in August to celebrate the value of play for children of all ages. It emphasises the role of play in fostering creativity, imagination, social skills, and physical development. Play is recognised as essential for children's overall wellbeing helping them explore their environment, develop problem-solving skills, and build relationships with peers.





Family Bags

Putting together a simple bag of resources to support nature play outdoors can make experiencing nature easier for families. Add a tarp to sit on, a nature-based book, some binoculars for bird watching and a bug pot for exploring minibeasts. Let families borrow it to extend their nature play.

Playful Families
Next Steps

The nursery community is always evolving with staff changeovers, new children settling in and well-known children and families moving onto the next stage.



Building an Outdoor Culture

Building support from families for nature play is crucial for its ongoing success in your setting. Parents and carers who understand nature play and how it meets their children's needs will become champions of it; fighting for it beyond the nursery and embedding it into their own lifestyles.
When staff or families who have championed nature play move on, it can sometimes impact the culture in the nursery. One way to counter this is to think in terms of legacy.

Would this continue if you were to move on? What systems could be put in place to allow family nature play experiences to continue in the longer term?

How could we train staff so that everyone feels a level of comfort in facilitating this important type of family session? Embedding outdoor nature play as part of your setting's policies, welcome pack, and online presence will ensure the message continues and is passed on to new people.

Siblings

A common barrier to families attending drop in sessions is having to look after younger siblings. Think about whether you can invite younger siblings to attend with their parent or carer. This can be an important step in transition between home and nursery, building familiarity for the future, and it also allows families to attend who might otherwise be unable. Remember to adjust your invitation numbers if everyone is bringing a younger child.

Interactions in Nature

Nature Play with families, unlike child-led free play, is more about the opportunity to interact and relate to one another. This has far-reaching consequences for speech and language and attachment. It also has benefits for the mental and physical health and wellbeing of both the adult and the child. Many parents and carers report enjoying a freedom and joy in playing in nature with their child, and how setting aside time for this reminds them of the hope and delights of parenting, rather than day to day tasks and drudgery often portrayed in the media.

Regularity is Key

A one-off trip to a natural environment, such as he local park, is a wonderful memory to make with families, and the benefits will be far more evident and start to compound if you access these types of activity regularly. Aim to arrange a regular outdoor 'stay and play' or visits to a local greenspace. You may start with something each term, but once a month would be even better. A theme or series will encourage more sign-ups.





Low Cost & Effective

Families often struggle to find opportunities for their children that don't cost money to do. Communicating the benefits of nature play to them and giving them confidence to try with their children opens up lots of free or cheap days out and simple ways to support play and learning.