Playful Spaces
Introduction

With thoughtful design by practitioners, even small changes can transform opportunities in the outdoor area, as children play in and learn about the natural world.



Any Size, Any Shape, Any Budget

Nature-play can be provided in every type of environment, no matter the size or shape of your outdoor space. Opportunities to play with nature can be woven into every play zone and can be as simple as adding herb planters in the mud kitchen, wood cookies for building and creating or conkers splashing in water play. Weaving nature-play throughout different play zones helps children to understand that they are part of nature, and allows them to care for the wonderful world around them. Studies show that children need to be surrounded by nature in order to truly learn about it (Tuuling,et al., 2019).

Nature provides durable and varied, budget-friendly play materials which can be added to all areas and keep children engaged all year; whether they are sweeping autumn leaves, decorating mud-pies with blossom or crafting art from stones, leaves and sticks.

Independence and Creativity

Studies have consistently shown that nature-play gives children a developmental boost unlocking creativity and igniting imagination. These skills help children understand their feelings, connect with others, and make sense of their world. (Dankiw et al., 2020). Outdoor zones should weave in nature-play, giving children the freedom to explore, experiment and choose how to use materials.

Small and Mighty

Smaller spaces can still offer high-quality play opportunities with plenty of nature play. Implementing open-ended zones keeps play flexible. For example, sand areas can shift from digging to small-world scenes or construction areas. Cosy corners can become inviting spots; like a mini mud kitchen, while walls and fences can be utilized. A simple upright pallet attached to a fence can become a sensory garden or a storage spot for natural loose parts. Moveable natural items, like log stumps, add even more flexibility to areas, such as log rounds for seats or to climb on.

Unique Experiences

The outdoor space is a learning world of its own – not just an add-on to the classroom. It gives children room to roam, create, and explore with all their senses in exciting and meaningful ways. Natural materials invite children to explore and experiment as they use them in their play. Both large and small resources, from larger planks to small stones, can be used in creative, ever-changing ways that are different to those experienced indoors.





Building Resilience

Nature play gives children space to explore, rehearse, succeed and sometimes stumble; all aspects of an enabling environment (Birth to Five Matters, 2026). These experiences help to build resilience, allowing children to confidently try new ideas and bounce back when things don't go to plan.

Playful Spaces
Setting the Foundations

Although it may feel like a big undertaking, adding nature-play to your space often begins with the smallest steps. Simple changes can quickly make a big difference.



Let Their Play Lead the Way

Observe the children to understand how they currently play with nature in your outdoor space. Their play will guide your next steps. As you observe, consider:

- Are they engaging with nature?
- How are they using natural materials?
- What resources are already available?

Once you have observed the children, start by adding simple resources to enrich the spaces.

Some ideas are:

- Leaves and seeds: for mud pies, sweeping, as a mark-making resource for creating nature pictures.
- Tree stumps: as seats, balance obstacles, clay-face canvases or as building blocks.
- Hardy plants: for finding minibeasts or as small-world landscapes.

Alternatively, you could focus on adding nature to one zone at a time.

Climate Resilience

In our ever-changing climate, it is important to think ahead and prepare your outdoor space. Audit your area from a climate perspective. Does it offer shade in hot weather and shelter from rain or wind? How diverse is the plant life? Natural features, like trees for shade or hedges for wind protection, can make a big difference. These additions may take time to establish, but thoughtful planning now will benefit children and staff in the future.

Whatever the Weather

The outdoor area should be accessible every day, whatever the weather brings. Playing in all kinds of weather builds children's resilience, develops their vocabulary, and helps them make sense of the world around them. To make the most of all-weather play, children need access to suitable clothing. Consider how to provide this – through a clothing library kept in your setting, or by asking parents to provide them– and decide where and how it will be stored. A transition space, indoors or under an outdoor canopy, helps children get ready for their outdoor adventures.

Organisation and Storage

One of the great advantages of natural materials is that they tend to be hardy, all-weather resources such as stones or logs which can happily live outdoors in all weathers. Storage tubs, such as flexi-tubs, can be used to store large loose parts outside and smaller loose parts can be kept in pots attached to a pallet or fence. To stop rainwater collecting you could even use plant pots for your smaller natural treasures.





Designing Safe, Playful Spaces

Safe outdoor play begins with thoughtful design, rather than strict limitations. Choosing natural enhancements carefully will help create spaces where children can explore confidently and creatively. Make sure every resource is checked and well-suited for the way it will be used.

Playful Spaces
Refelcting on Experiences

Outdoor spaces are always evolving, so it is important to pause to reflect on your successes and where you can grow. Now that you have introduced nature play what naturally comes next?



Digging into Play

Pause to reflect on the nature play that is now happening in the space.
Have the natural enhancements improved the quality of play? Consider whether the children:

- can play in their own way.
- can make a range of choices.
- have many possibilities to create and develop their own play.

(Play Wales, 2025)
Regularly reflecting on your children's play helps to shape and sustain a high-quality space.

Branching Out

Carrying out a more in-depth provision audit for your outdoor area will support your practice and help you decide your next steps.

Your starting point will allow you to decide where to go; whether it is to add more zones of play to your area or if you want to explore a particular project, such as adding different natural surfaces to your space or planting trees.

Climate Resilience

Playing in nature has huge benefits for all children and it is especially powerful for children with additional needs or disabilities (Sensory Trust, 2020). Reflect on the opportunities your space provides.

- Is it accessible throughout the year?
- Are there different types of nature-play experiences available?
- Does it engage the senses?

Grow Your Own: Staff Reflection

Reflect on how your practice has grown, both as a team and as individuals. Just like the children, we all develop at our own pace. If some staff are still less confident providing natural play in your space pair them with a more confident member of staff when outside.

It can be tempting to only focus on what we need to do next, but it is important to reflect on your successes. A little one may have stopped to smell the herbs in your planter or you may have had a group delight in catching autumn leaves. These tiny triumphs should give you a big boost!

Making It Manageable

It is important to remember that nature-play should be on offer all year round. Think about how you can keep this going, whilst making it manageable for staff. Decide on how you will plan for your enhancements and activities – will you allocate one person to be responsible for gathering and checking one outdoor zone, with everyone offering ideas? Will there be a specific team who will check all resources and gather materials?





Playful Communities

When looking for further resources for your spaces and nature-play activities, consider asking for resources from your families or local community businesses. You may have a parent who is a tree-surgeon or a family member who has an allotment who can provide the materials you need.

Playful Spaces
Further Thinking & Reading

There are lots of ways to continue learning about space with nature-play in mind. Here are a few ideas to take your own understanding of the power of nature-play spaces further.



Sharing Good Practice

One of the most powerful tools for further development is to visit other settings to gather and share new ideas. There is always something new to learn and a great way is to learn is to see it in practice.
Contact your Early Years team for your local authority to find out about other settings to visit, as they will have an overview of the practice in your area.
Be a magpie and steal new ideas for your setting and share your own with others.

Special Days

There are lots of outdoor celebration days to explore throughout the year, from World Wildlife Day in March to Den Day in June.

Check out the Muddy Faces list of special events days. As you explore these days with the children, you'll naturally grow your own nature-play knowledge too.
www.muddyfaces.co.uk/events/annual-special-days-weeks-months

Publications and Guidance for EYFS Spaces: ltl.org.uk/publications:

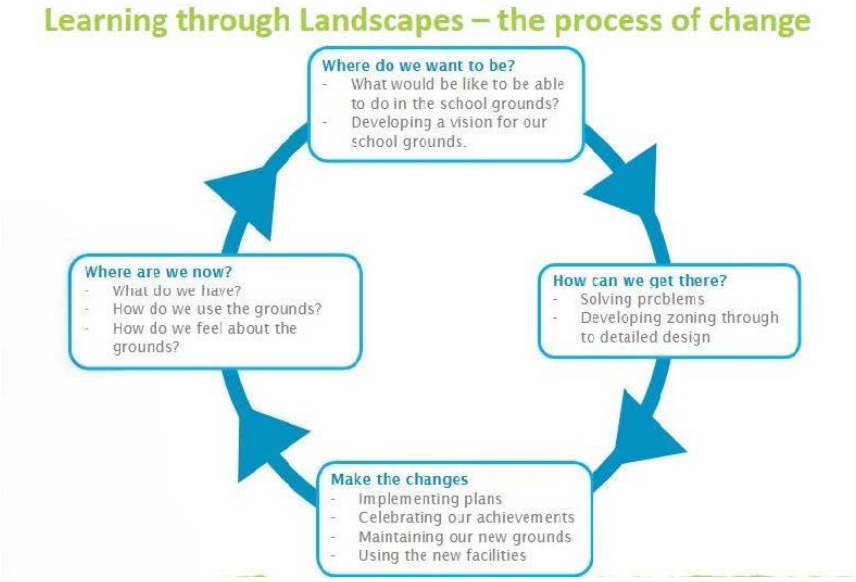
- A Vision and Values for Early Years Outdoors
- Early Years Outdoor Practice Audit
- Learn and Play Out
- Loose Parts Play Toolkit
- Looked After Children and the Natural Environment
- Nature Play: Maintenance Guide

Useful Websites for Developing Spaces Information and Re-

- Children and Nature Network: www.childrenandnature.org
- Frobel Trust: www.frobel.org.uk
- Early Excellence: www.earlyexcellence.com
- Creative Star Learning: www.creativestarlearning.co.uk
- EEF: www.educationendowmentfoundation.org.uk
- Muddy Faces: www.muddyfaces.co.uk
- Thrive Outdoors: www.thriveoutdoors.org.uk
- Montessori Play Theory: www.montessorifortoday.com

Process of Change

Remember that outdoor spaces are always evolving. The best way to keep our outdoor spaces fresh and exciting for children is to follow the process of change, shown below. Following the cycle will help you to keep your outdoor space responsive and provide an environment full of possibilities.



Useful Websites for Developing Outdoor Spaces:

The Primary Science Teaching Trust: www.pstt.org.uk/resources/play-observe-ask
National Education Nature Park: www.educationnaturepark.org.uk/resource/eyfs-nature-park-guide
Teach Early Years: www.teachearlyyears.com/learning-and-development

Playful Spaces
Next Steps

Once you see the spark of joy in the children as they play with nature, you will be inspired to keep your momentum going. Every little addition is a stepping-stone to the next big idea!



Zoning Out

Zoning your outdoor space is a great way to provide children with well-rounded learning opportunities while making it easier to spot new ways to enhance your environment.
Developing these zones with thoughtful planning will automatically develop communication skills and gross & fine motor skills, as well as early maths and literacy skills, all whilst the children are having fun playing and learning about their world!

Zone Suggestions

- Space to be active – running, jumping, climbing, moving freely
- Mud Play area
- Loose Parts area – including large and small loose materials
- Water Play area
- Gardening area – space to plant and explore minibeasts
- Digging area – something different to your mud play area, e.g. sand
- Quiet area – reading, down time
- Role Play area.

Tips to Keep It Going

- Keep your resources as open-ended as possible. This will support children's imagination and creativity, as well as having the advantage of allowing you to swap resources between areas without having to buy something new each time.
- Review play zones regularly to make sure that they are offering the play-types that your children need and tweak as required.
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Enchanting Enhancements

Use the seasons to easily and economically add wonder to your areas.

- Autumn: catch autumn leaves and sycamore seeds, peg the leaves onto a washing line, make a conker rolling station, twirl like seeds as they fall.
- Winter: make marks in ice, wonder at a frosty spiderweb, use sticks to build a home for hibernating animals, create active games to keep warm.
- Spring: add blossom to water or make potions, search for minibeasts and make habitats, use herbs in mud pies, add daisies to clay play.
- Summer: explore shadows outside, go on a rainbow flower hunt.

Mischief with Meaning

Remember that children will be children and some little explorers may dig too enthusiastically near plants, or post sticks into an unreachable place. Don't get disheartened! This can be a teachable moment for the children. Take a moment to review – how can you teach the children to have fun while taking care not to cause damage? Do some resources need to be moved elsewhere? Does a new activity need to be introduced, e.g. a posting activity?





Wonderful Weather

Different weathers offer different learning experiences for the children. Once you have all donned suitable clothing, the rest is up to you! Modelling using the weather for play, helping the children to immerse themselves, learning and having fun, will in turn help to create all-weather learners and all-weather staff!