

# Early Years Outdoors

## Whatever the weather



The British weather is an endless source of debate: we love to discuss it, we try to predict it, we are always being surprised by it, but how many of us embrace the many variations of our changeable climate as a valuable resource in our working lives with young children? This *Groundnotes* aims to explore how changes in the weather and seasonal conditions can be used to support children's learning. It looks at resources, ideas and adult roles, but most importantly it encourages and supports you to make outdoor play available to your children everyday, whatever the weather.

### Why go out whatever the weather?

Children need to be outdoors and, as highlighted in your *Early Years Outdoors* welcome pack, the Foundation Stage curriculum guidance (pages 14-15) states that practitioners should:

**"The weather – well this is one of our most valuable resources. Sun, rain, snow, mist, wind...all provide experiences which can increase children's knowledge and understanding of the world in which they live"<sup>1</sup>**

- Provide well-planned play both indoors and outdoors
- Use outdoors as a learning environment
- Use this space well and capitalise on what it offers that inside cannot.

If we restrict children's access to outdoors to the few days that we consider are not 'too cold', or 'too hot', or 'too wet', or 'too

windy', we limit their opportunities to benefit from a fully combined indoor-outdoor learning environment throughout the year. We also deprive them of the unique opportunities for learning that the weather provides. If we think back to our own childhood, many of us remember splashing through puddles, scuffling through autumn leaves, the wonder of a snowflake, the excitement of the wind, the muffling blankets of early morning mist. As well as providing valuable starting points for scientific discoveries, these seasonal events continue to offer children unique sensory experiences and will arouse their sense of fascination and wonder at the natural world.

Children are active learners and they learn best through real and meaningful experiences. A snowy photograph is a very poor substitute for actually being out in the snow. A picture of a snow-covered garden is only meaningful if children have a real experience to relate it to. A thunderstorm featured on a television programme will not convey to children the speed and brilliance of the flashes of lightning, or the magnitude of a roll of thunder.



(1) *The early years – a curriculum for young children: outdoor play.* M Lazenby (1990)



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How can we expect children to be extra vigilant when walking in fog if they have no understanding of the difference it makes to vision? How can they learn to dress appropriately for cold conditions if they are never taken out on a crisp, frosty morning?



## Reviewing and developing children's year round access to outdoors

As with any other planned change to your policy or practice it is important to begin with a review of your current provision. Refer to *Auditing your Outdoor Provision* in your *Early Years Outdoors* welcome pack and consider the following questions:

- How much time do children spend outdoors at different times of the year? Are there times when they do not get to go out much?
- How easy is it for children to move between indoors and outdoors at different times of year?
- What are the issues for you (such as the time it takes to get coats on, or problems with mud brought indoors)?
- How much shade does the outdoor space have?
- Is there any shelter to protect children from extreme conditions (wind as well as rain)?
- Does the space include natural features, such as grassed areas, plants and trees?
- Are there readily available resources for supporting learning in different weather conditions?

- Is there an accessible supply of suitable clothing to protect children against extreme weather conditions?

Discuss each of the above points with colleagues and think about:

- What happens now?
- How well it is working?
- What are the factors that limit further development?
- What improvements could be made to enrich and extend the existing provision?



Record the outcomes of your discussions and use this as a basis for future development. Remember, the solutions to your problems will not always be expensive. Happy Faces Pre-school in Kent struggled to provide children with sufficient shade on hot days. The issue was resolved through the creative use of lengths of cotton sheeting dyed in rainbow colours and fixed between the fence and the building. The effect was dramatic and very appealing to adults and children – a billowing rainbow 'tent' of shade under which everyone felt cool and comfortable, as well as protected from the sun. Also in Kent, at a setting where some staff were reluctant to go outside, discussion on the issue revealed that it was their own lack of suitable clothing that was exacerbating the problem. The provision of fleecy waterproofs for staff to wear outside has resolved the problem and now they are as keen to get outdoors as the children.

It will be important to bring your parents with you as you develop the use of the outdoors throughout the year in all weathers. *Curriculum Support: Engaging your parents in your outdoor provision* offers many useful ideas for you to consider.

## The key role of outdoor clothing and its organisation

As highlighted in *Groundnotes: First Steps*, it is essential to provide a well organised 'transition zone' between indoors and outdoors to allow children a place to contemplate, review and make choices about the outdoor activities. In settings where children have all-year-round



access the transition zone has another important function, as the place where children and adults can prepare for being outdoors. These preparation routines will vary according to the time of year. In the morning on sunny days at Bridgwater Early Years Excellence Centre, an adult stationed in a shaded spot just outside ensures that each child has sun protection applied the first time they choose to go out. This routine is repeated after lunch to ensure that children remain protected all day. Similarly, the provision of welly storage in a covered transition area enables children to change their footwear on wet or muddy days.



An excellent resource for all weather activities is a camera for children to record their experiences and discoveries.

## Resources to inspire or extend children's exploration of wind and air

- Warm clothing on cold days (especially for ears)
- Feathers of different sizes and colours
- Lengths of floaty materials or scarves
- Larger pieces of fabric for capes
- A selection of balloons of different shapes and sizes
- Bubble blowing kits
- Metre lengths of 5cm wide ribbons or streamers
- Soft children's hair-bands to attach items to children's wrists (especially those which might blow away!)
- Handheld windmills
- Paper bags, bin-liners (opened out) and string for kites
- Card and garden sticks for flags
- Biodegradable confetti or scraps of rice paper
- Sycamore seeds
- Big pieces of stiff card for trying to run with
- Windbreaks for sheltering behind
- A parachute
- Kites
- Collection of materials for making wind chimes
- Old umbrellas which will turn inside out (as in the story *The Wind Blew*)
- Unbreakable mirrors to look at reflections or hair blowing
- A tape recorder to record the sound of the wind
- Card 'viewer' (frame about 6"X4") to focus on clouds and birds in the sky etc

## Resources to inspire or extend children's exploration of sunny weather and being hot

- Extra drinks, sun-block and sunhats!
- Sunglasses and cellophane for looking at the world in different shades and colours
- Plant spray bottles – for cooling off and watching evaporation
- Light reflective objects – CD's, foil trays, prisms
- Materials for creating shade
- Ice for melting experiments
- Chalk for evaporation and shadow experiments
- Parasols and sun umbrellas
- Old glasses frames and coloured cellophane for making sunglasses
- Decorator's brushes, rollers and buckets for painting and evaporating
- Role play around summer themes

As with other aspects of outdoor provision, good organisation will ensure that the equipment to support children's exploration of the weather is accessible when it is needed. Boxes labelled with words and pictures will ensure that both adults and children can easily locate and return resources.

Some settings support students and less experienced staff by providing laminated cards in equipment boxes with suggested ideas and vocabulary relevant to each type of weather. Laminated photographs from previous experiences can remind those children who took part and suggest new ideas to others. Having a selection of stories that have a weather theme provides another way of reinforcing children's experiences. It is also useful to compile lists of relevant nursery rhymes, songs and poems for each weather type (such as *Incy Wincy Spider* for rain) as prompts and keep these in the relevant resource box.

## Resources to inspire or extend children's exploration of rain

- Waterproof clothing and wellies!
- Umbrellas (umbrella play is great fun in itself)
- Foil – wrap it over umbrellas and listen to the sound
- Chalk for drawing round puddles
- Collections of absorbent and non absorbent materials
- Collections of materials that float or sink
- Child-sized brooms for sweeping puddles
- Guttering for collecting and channelling rain
- Pop up tents
- Different shaped containers for collecting and measuring rainfall
- Builder's tray for creating puddles
- Plastic sheeting of tarpaulin for creating waterproof shelters or painting in the rain (so that the colours run and mix)
- Sponges, decorator's brushes and rollers
- Unbreakable mirror – watch the raindrops land on it
- Washing up liquid and food colouring for colourful 'bubble puddles'

## Resources to inspire or extend children's exploration of snow

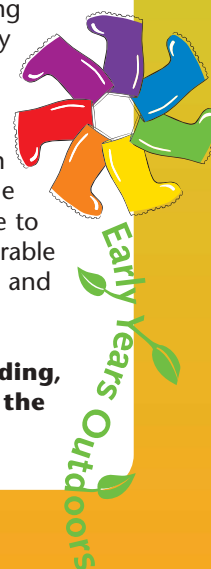
- Warm hats, scarves, gloves and extra socks (feet get cold quickly in wellies)
- Scoops and shovels
- Buckets and containers
- Builder's tray
- Corks, sticks, twigs, bottle tops for decorating snowman
- Rakes and sticks for pattern-making
- Sheets for making 'igloos' and snow shelters
- Bottles, food colouring (or watery paint) for colouring the snow
- Brushes and paint for snow paintings
- Black paper and magnifiers for catching and examining snowflakes

## Resources to inspire or extend children's exploration of fog

- Torches and bicycle lights
- Bike hooters for fog horns
- Cones and tubes for making own fog horns
- Gauze or fine net to recreate a foggy experience
- Magnifiers to look at droplets on leaves etc.
- Home-made telephones for communicating across a foggy space

Given the opportunity, children will often build on their outdoor experiences when they return inside. For example, an unexpected chance to go out in the snow had a very positive impact on one child's learning in a Reception class in Mongeham Primary School in Kent. Staff were aware of his reluctance to participate in mark-making activities inside and decided to provide him with a stick for tracing patterns in the snow. Having been fascinated by the marks his stick made in the snow on the playground, he then went inside to the mark-making area and spent a considerable amount of time experimenting with crayons and making marks on paper.

**For details of suppliers and further reading, contact the Early Years Advice Line for the information sheet: *Whatever the weather.***



Don't forget to provide a bench for children to sit on whilst they swap shoes for boots. A non-slip mat to reduce mud and grass brought indoors can be very helpful too. By



is no such thing as bad weather, only bad clothing". Part of your commitment to providing outdoor

learning is to ensure that all children can be kept comfortable and able to go out in all conditions. Because children often come to nursery by car, there will always be occasions when they arrive without the right clothing for the weather that day. One solution is to ask parents to leave a raincoat and wellies permanently at the setting (and in summer to provide a sunhat that their child likes to wear); another is to have a supply of spares ready, either collected through donations or

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One of the keys to success is preparation. As Marjorie Ouvry explains:

"At some point there will definitely be a windy (or rainy or frosty or even snowy) day when the children are at the setting. But if you are to go with the flow of children's enthusiasm, it is too late to start planning on the morning of the day".<sup>2</sup>

The identification and collection of resources to support children's exploration of different weather conditions will pay dividends when that windy, snowy or rainy day arrives. The weather is notoriously unpredictable but we can turn that to our advantage by using a sudden downpour as an exciting opportunity to build a shelter, stand under umbrellas, stamp

Although changing clothes can be time-consuming, this is an important opportunity for children to learn how to be independent and to make



choices. Encourage independence by organising the area well and teaching children how to put on coats and wellies, and how to keep them organised on pegs and in baskets. A photographic display in this area, at child height, can prompt children to consider what extra clothes they need today. Sequenced photos can support them to master the technique for putting on their coat, and so on. If children leave their outdoor clothing in a different place on arrival (where the parents drop them off may not be the same door you use for access to outdoor play), you may find relocation to this transition area very helpful.

You may have heard of the Scandinavian comment "There



purchased by the nursery as part of the continuous provision. These resources are equal in importance to other resources and budget should be allocated to ensuring enough are always available. Good outdoor clothing gives children the freedom to make the most of what the outdoors offers. Even when it is not raining or cold, cagoules, dungarees and wellies can allow children to engage in messy or wet activities – just as aprons do indoors for the 'messy area'. When exploring water and the natural world, it is usually children's legs and feet that need protection.

**Developing resources to support learning – whatever the weather!**



in puddles, or collect rainwater for a measuring activity. Adults can ensure that the right equipment is available outdoors by using their knowledge of children's existing achievements, and observing children's current interests.

A particularly useful source of resources and ideas is *The Little Book of Outside in All Weathers* published by Featherstone Education (see the book list in your *Early Years Outdoors* welcome pack). The lists that follow are not exhaustive but may provide a basis for discussion with staff and act as inspiration for further ideas.

<sup>2</sup> *Exercising Muscles and Minds*, M Ouvry National Children's Bureau (2000)

