

Your 2-minute guide to... *Year-round outdoor play*



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Whatever the season, playing outdoors benefits young children's development.

In a world where most of us (including children) spend a lot of time in cars or looking at screens, it's not surprising that so many of us aren't used to being outdoors in all weathers. However, the health benefits of being outdoors are well-evidenced.

Whether exercising, reading, or enjoying nature, it's known to be good for us to be out in the open air. It is important, then, that we encourage young children to appreciate the outdoors.

This is all very well on dry and warm days, but what about all those other days? The weather isn't always inviting.

There is no such thing as bad weather, only bad clothing.

Though we may think this Scandinavian proverb isn't entirely accurate (a gale *is* bad weather), there is something to it. Wearing suitable clothes is key to enjoying the outdoors and staying well. Preparing for this is essential if children, parents, and staff are going to be up for all-weather outdoor activities.

Lots of children will come to nursery in coats, but they aren't necessarily warm coats. Similarly, in the summer they may wear strappy dresses, vests etc, which don't give them protection from the sun. Settings need to have additional clothes and work closely with parents to ensure the children are dressed for the weather.

As well as wearing suitable clothes, children need to engage in weather-appropriate activities. Standing at a water tray for a long period is not suitable in cold weather: young children don't always realise how cold they are getting. Similarly, racing around in hot weather isn't a good idea – children can get overheated and dehydrated.

Being Outdoors

There is a difference between spending time outdoors and outdoor play.

Spending time outdoors simply means taking time to be outside, regardless of the activity. It might be having tables and chairs outside for the children to paint and write, sitting on the grass and sharing a story or having lunch. Any of these can be done indoors.

Outdoor play focuses much more on physical and nature-based activities. These are activities that children engage in *because* they are outside. These might be running games, riding bikes, climbing, nature walks and forest school.

Both ways of being outdoors have benefits.

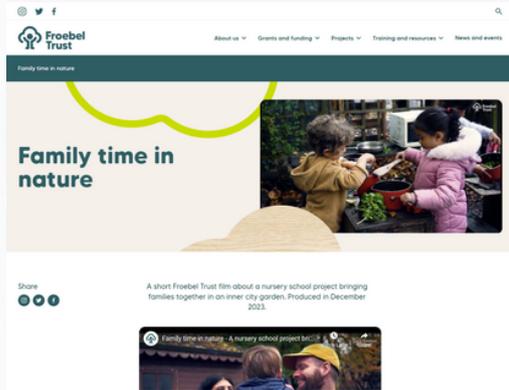
Wellbeing Benefits

Advantages of being outdoors include:

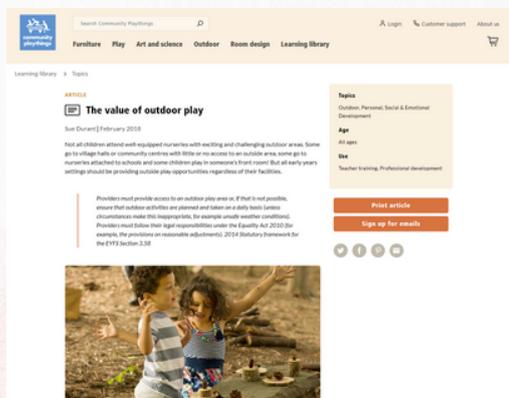
- Physical health: children can run, jump, skip, climb, play ball games, and ride a bike. All of these are good for their growth and physical development. It helps their cardiovascular health, strength, coordination, fundamental motor skills and bone density.
 - Mental health: being in nature and open air can reduce anxiety, stress, and depression. It provides a calming, soothing environment that impacts on the child's emotional state.
 - Social skills: outdoor play affords interactions with other children. This helps develop teamwork and cooperation, as well as communication and language skills. It can provide opportunities for making friends and building relationships.
 - Cognitive development: exploring the many delights of the outdoor play requires cognitive skills. For instance, finding a way to climb a tree encourages problem-solving, critical thinking and imaginative play.
 - Vitamin D: exposure to the sunlight helps us to produce this vitamin. It helps us to absorb calcium and phosphorous, which maintain strong bones and teeth. It also promotes a healthy immune function.
 - Connection with nature: spending time outdoors fosters a connection with the natural world. Exploring plants and wildlife can provoke new curiosities and interests, as well as having a calming effect. Being aware of sounds, scents, and textures also develops sensory awareness. A connection with the natural world also bodes well for developing environmental awareness.
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Inspiring information:

Kay Rowe Nursery School in Newham (2023): [The outdoor project](#)



Community Playthings: [The value of outdoor play by Sue Durant \(2018\)](#).



[Playing and Learning Outdoors by Jan White \(3rd Edn 2019\)](#)

