



## Early Years Settings' Grounds

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Most early years settings will have access to outdoor space, however small or uninspiring, within their grounds. Whatever issues with your outdoor space, outdoor provision is an essential part of the Early Years Foundation Stage. It is essential to view the outdoor and indoor areas as complementary and combined learning environments holding equal status within a child's early years experience.

Outdoor play should be available to young children everyday throughout the year. Ideally they should be able to move freely between the indoor and outdoor environments. Free flow access may not be easy to provide in many early years settings, and this along with other issues such as lack of green space or space in general, storage issues, vandalism, and the weather can all be seen as barriers to provision outdoors. However, rather than using challenges such as these as barriers to provision we should be looking at ways to overcome them.

Outdoor spaces for very young children should be developed in ways that support and facilitate active learning. The use, design and landscaping of outdoor learning areas will be influenced by the space available, and you may need to be extremely creative with the resources you have. There are however a number of features that are crucial to providing a flexible, dynamic and stimulating outdoor environment.

**A transition zone** having a low level coat rack and Wellington boot storage near to the door to the outdoor space can make such a difference to supporting 'free flow' movement between the indoor and outdoor environments, as well as supporting children's independence.

**All weather clothing** being prepared to go outdoors, whatever the weather, is a must. It may be that you ask for donations or fundraise so that you can ensure all children have the right clothing. As well as raincoats/all in ones and wellies, sunhats, umbrellas, scarves and gloves will all help to provide access to the outdoors no matter what the British weather dictates.

**Well planned space** – thinking about what experiences you want the children to have and what you want them to be able to do in your outdoor space is one of the keys to effective practice and provision. You need to give as much thought to your outdoor provision as you inside. A well planned and resourced environment can support child-led activity; try to offer a mix of first hand experiences (such as growing) and plenty of play opportunities (such as creating a building site). Outdoor learning and play is a lot more than 'letting off steam' and physical activity, although this area of development is important.

**Physical health** Outdoor provision is vital for ensuring all young children experience the pleasure and benefits of active play and learning. It offers many opportunities for physical, movement based play, both child-led and adult-led. This can be due to the amount of space and freedom the outdoors affords.

Physical activity is vitally important to very young children for many reasons. As well as supporting the development of motor skills, physical activities afford children the opportunity to let off steam and release energy. Recent studies and research have highlighted the lack of physical activity in children's lives.

Society's shift in attitude to the way that freedom and playing outdoors is perceived can be said to have a direct impact on children's physical health. Fears of obesity, development of type 2 diabetes, cancer and heart disease in children all help to support the argument that young children need opportunities to be active. Given this shift in thinking it is therefore important that opportunities to access the outdoor environment are offered to children when in an educational setting.



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Outdoor play can offer children the opportunities to test themselves and learn about risk and challenge. Exposure to acceptable levels of risk in the security of an early years setting will help avoid them seeking the thrill of risk elsewhere in unsupervised situations.

Settings' grounds can be developed in order to support physical health. Creating an area outdoors and choosing resources that support physical activity will give young children the opportunity to develop their skills in coordination, control, manipulation and movement.

Creating a space where plants, fruits and vegetables are grown will help to teach children about aspects of healthy eating and sustainability. Opportunities to develop sensory awareness and skills are in abundance outdoors. Natural resources will provide a stimulating and tactile environment that supports children's natural urge to explore.

### **Social development and emotional well-being**

Young children often choose to be outdoors. It can be a place they feel connected to and they enjoy the sense of freedom being outside often affords them. The environment in which children and adults play and work affects emotions, behaviour, personality and the ability to learn. Young children love to move, explore and be active, all of which can be supported in the outdoors. The amount space outdoors, both around and above them, can help children to be more co-operative, tolerant and confident.

As well as spaces to be boisterous, noisy and active it is also important that we provide space outdoors for children to find quiet and to reflect, and also have the opportunities to develop friendships.

Natural elements, nooks and crannies can offer special places for children. They give children a place to be with friends, or a quiet place to be alone. It gives them a place to be away from direct contact with adults and so have a sense of independence. When you look back at your own childhood were you constantly supervised whilst you played, or were you allowed the freedom to discover for yourself? Children should be able to create their own nooks and crannies through den-building activities if natural spaces do not lend themselves to it.

Giving children the opportunity to develop independence is an important part of learning in their early years. The Early Years Foundation Stage requires that we help children to 'know themselves and what they can do'. Outdoors can offer children a perceived sense of freedom from adult direction, which in turn will help them to develop skills that will support a 'can do' attitude. Important dispositions for learning can be developed outdoors that children will take with them throughout their academic life.

When young children have opportunities to engage closely with their physical environment, and to turn spaces into places which have meaning to them, they gain a sense of belonging. This in turn, contributes to children's well-being and to their developing sense of self, an important part of the EYFS. Children should be allowed resources to add to their play (and of course be shown how to put it back). This will help them to develop their play, and if it is something they have ownership of they are more likely to repeat it and therefore consolidate their learning.

Children will naturally become more engaged and involved in activities that they have choice over, and that they have opportunity to lead on. Observation and guidance by the practitioner outdoors will help to facilitate good quality learning experiences that are attractive and engaging to young children.



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### **Community engagement**

The grounds of your early years setting will be shared with your local community- at least visually. They may be the first impression that visitors to the setting and passers-by gain, and can shape local attitudes about the setting.

Outdoor spaces can offer a route for the community to engage with the setting. In whatever way you want to make more use of your grounds there may be someone in the community who is willing and able to help. This may be a workforce gathered together to help clear an overgrown area or by donating plants, seeds and cuttings for a new garden. Working together in this way can improve community cohesion by providing a common vision and developing positive relationships between people from different backgrounds.

By inviting parents and community members in to improve your settings grounds can help to build a workforce that can be asked to help with the sustainability and management of the site. Children will also learn important first lessons in citizenship.

Attractive grounds at your setting can or may be shared with other community groups. This in itself may be a positive aspect as community projects can often be key to accessing further funding to improve your grounds.

### **Nature and sustainability**

Early years settings' grounds have so much to contribute to the natural environment. Outdoor spaces can easily be developed to provide a haven for wildlife and plants. Even spaces with only concrete or tarmac play space can be added to with large planters, barrel ponds, bird feeders, nesting boxes and habitats for mini-beasts to create natural habitats.

Your setting's grounds provide an important opportunity for young children to experience nature first hand in all its seasons- essential to their connection and understanding of the world around them. Observing plants and creatures will help develop their innate sense of awe and wonder at the world around them.

This sense of wonder for the natural world can be the starting point for inspiring action to protect and conserve the natural environment, initiating behaviours and attitudes that young children will carry with them for life. Children will learn about conservation, food sources, and life cycles from activities that involve gardening and growing things.

Introducing children to the concepts of composting and collecting water will form a good basis for environmental understanding.