Embedding LOtC into the EYFS curriculum

The new EYFS framework published in March is due to come into force in September 2012. The EYFS “promotes teaching and learning to ensure children’s ‘school readiness’, and gives children the broad range of knowledge and skills that provide the right foundation for good future progress through school and life.” LOtC directly supports this statement and is undeniably central to the EYFS by providing children with opportunities to touch, see, hear and explore the world around them and develop their motor skills, self-awareness, positive relationships and social interactions.

The EYFS framework makes a number of improvements:

- Reducing bureaucracy for professionals, simplifying the statutory assessment of children’s development at age five.
- Simplifying the learning and development requirements by reducing the number of early learning goals from 69 to 17.
- Stronger emphasis on the three prime areas which are most essential for children’s healthy development. These three areas are: communication and language; physical; and personal, social and emotional development.
- For parents, a new progress check at age two, on their child’s development.
- Strengthening partnerships between professionals and parents, ensuring that the new framework uses clear language.

This article highlights the changes to the framework which are of relevance to learning outside the classroom and investigates how making the most of the opportunities for learning outside the classroom can ensure children achieve their early learning goals around the seven areas of learning and development set out in the framework.

Using learning outside the classroom to improve teaching and learning

The new Early Years Foundation Stage framework states:

Practitioners must consider the individual needs, interests, and stage of development of each child in their care, and must use this information to plan a challenging and enjoyable experience for each child in all of the areas of learning and development.

Learning outside the classroom, whether undertaken in the setting’s own grounds, local community or further afield, supports learning and development for all young people. Evidence demonstrates that when children experience the world beyond the classroom walls they:

- attain higher levels of knowledge and skills;
- improve their physical health and increase their motor skills;
• socialise and interact in new and different ways with their peers and adults;
• show improved attention, enhanced self-concept, self-esteem and mental health;
• change their environmental behaviours and their values and attitudes.

Every Experience Matters, Professor Karen Malone (Faculty of Education, University of Wollongong, Sydney, Australia). 2008.

The new Early Years Foundation Stage framework states that:

In planning and guiding children’s activities, practitioners must reflect on the different ways that children learn and reflect these in their practice. Three characteristics of effective teaching and learning are:

• **playing and exploring** - children investigate and experience things, and ‘have a go’;
• **active learning** - children concentrate and keep on trying if they encounter difficulties, and enjoy achievements; and
• **creating and thinking critically** - children have and develop their own ideas, make links between ideas, and develop strategies for doing things.

One of the main benefits of learning outside the classroom is that it has benefits for children of all ages and abilities and engages different learning styles, particularly children who learn through doing (kinaesthetic learners.) Learning outside the classroom helps teachers and others respond to the different learning styles of young people and to provide compelling curriculum experiences. In this way, including more opportunities for learning and development outside the classroom in your curriculum can significantly improve the quality of teaching at your setting.

**Making the most of outdoor play opportunities**

The new EYFS framework continues to advocate the value of outdoor play as a daily part of the children’s learning experience.

**Providers must provide access to an outdoor play area or, if that is not possible, ensure that outdoor activities are planned and taken on a daily basis (unless circumstances make this inappropriate, for example unsafe weather conditions).**


Many settings utilise the outdoor space to help the children be active and develop motor skills such as coordination, balance and spatial awareness. Clearly, enabling children to have frequent access to outdoor space has immense value in encouraging physical development, as well as giving active children the opportunity to let off steam. However, the setting’s outdoor area can add value across all 7 areas of learning and development including literacy, mathematics, understanding the world and personal, social and emotional development.

A Department for Education report “Children’s experiences of the Early Years Foundation Stage”, 2010, reported that not all settings are making the most of their outdoor space in supporting learning and development, concluding that:
Although a high proportion of children enjoyed active outdoor play, some settings appeared to offer a relatively narrow diet of physical activities outdoors, with children’s talk dominated by reference to play on wheeled toys or competitive ball games. Children’s accounts raise questions about some favourite activities as potentially repetitive and perhaps unchallenging. This is likely to be an issue where choices are limited. In some settings, children’s views suggest that rules and fixed routines may further limit opportunities for physically active play outdoors.

This report identified a number of factors which are known to limit the effective use of the outdoor space in Early Years settings. These include:

- Lack of challenge and variety in outdoor activities
- Limited access to outdoor space with limits on the times of the day or number of children able to access the space. “Children described feeling unhappy about waiting for particular times of day for outdoor activity.”
- Access to outdoor space being denied due to rain or cold weather. “We aren’t going out today because it’s raining... it’s too wet.” Sophie (3 years 10 months)

Outdoor play supports children’s problem-solving skills and nurtures their creativity, as well as providing rich opportunities for their developing imagination, inventiveness and resourcefulness. With a bit of planning and imagination all settings can improve their outdoor provision and organise learning outside the classroom with the minimum of fuss.

**Framework for improving the value of your outdoor space**

1. **Consider the variety and challenge offered by your outdoor equipment and activities.**

   Think about:
   
   - Using your outdoor space to add value to learning and development across all 7 areas of learning and development.
   - Providing a breadth of opportunities to climb, explore, experiment, discover and be creative outside the classroom.
   - Making use of opportunities to count, explore shape, patterns or other mathematical features.
   - Ensuring the outdoor space has opportunities for role play including dens or materials that children can adapt according to their interests and imaginations.
   - Ensuring the outdoor space includes some natural elements where children can learn about plants, animals and the environment.

2. **Where possible, remove the limitations on access to outdoor space.**

   Think about:
   
   - Is it possible to introduce a free flow system where children can choose between indoor and outdoor play, at least for part of the day? Learning that flows seamlessly between indoors
and outdoors makes the most efficient use of resources and builds on interests and
enthusiasms.

- Can you spend a greater percentage of your time outside, setting up activities such as
  painting, role play storytime in the outdoor space instead of inside?

- A bit of rain or cold weather need not prevent you from taking children outside. Usually the
  weather is more of a barrier to adults than children who will find splashing in puddles and
  playing in the rain an exciting activity. For this reason, the new safe guarding and welfare
  requirements in the EYFS framework state that children should have everyday opportunities
  for outdoor play unless circumstances make this inappropriate, for example in ‘unsafe’
  weather conditions. Subject to safety, bad weather is no reason to prevent children from
  going outside. Remember: “There is no such thing as bad weather - only bad clothing”.

- If space is limited, is there a nearby outdoor space outside your grounds you could use for
  outdoor play on a daily basis? A local park or natural area, or the grounds of a local primary
  school could all be incorporated into a regular part of your routine.

3. Involve children in the design and development of the outdoor space.

- Children are the experts in how they like to play so ask them what they would like to do
  outside or how they would like the outdoor environment to be improved. “Children enjoyed
  planning their activities, but often they were not as involved in the planning process as they
  could have been.” Department for Education “Children’s experiences of the Early Years
  Foundation Stage”, 2010.

- What do your children like or dislike about going outside and how can you use this
  information?

- Build the children’s sense of pride and ownership in their outdoor space by letting them
  paint walls, tiles or plant pots.

- Get the children involved in planting a garden, planters, hanging baskets, etc., or building
  their own den for the outdoor space.

- Involve the children in assessing risk - talk to them about what the hazards are and
  appropriate behaviour to minimise risk. A simple way to involve children in a risk assessment
  is to draw a picture of the area and discuss where the risks are. For many children, playing
  outdoors at their early years setting may be the only opportunity they have to play safely
  and freely while they learn to assess risk and develop the skills to manage new situations.

Although many of the findings reported here are consistent with themes, commitments and
guidance in the EYFS, it was also clear that there are omissions in the EYFS, in part due to the
emphasis on children as receivers of a curriculum generated by adults. The theme of children
taking responsibility is one such omission which we have pointed to as evident in children’s
 clear desire to engage with the world around them, to demonstrate their knowledge of the
world around them and to maintain a range of types of relationships.
Department for Education “Children’s experiences of the Early Years Foundation Stage”,
2010.
4. **Audit the possibilities and identify short, medium and long term actions for development.**

Think about:

- How can the outdoor space be used across all 7 areas of learning and development? Think about communication and language, mathematics, understanding the world, expressive arts and design and literacy - not just physical development.
- How is the outdoor space being used effectively and what are the areas for development?
- In evaluating the impact of your outdoor space, don’t forget to ask the children for their views.
- What can you do easily and quickly to make the space more effective?
- What is a medium term goal for your setting?
- What would be a good long term goal?

Where children had free access to varied and flexible resources and a relatively large open area, they identified a wider range of play interests and more complex play.  
Department for Education “Children’s experiences of the Early Years Foundation Stage”, 2010.

**One small step outside the gates - one giant leap for learning!**

Learning outside the classroom engages and motivates learners through curiosity, fun and novelty, as well as a sense of making learning real and relevant.

However, in most Early Years settings there is still a reticence in making the most of the opportunities that lie beyond the gates as a regular part of the learning experience.

Some children also talked about **visits beyond the setting**, which were more occasional experiences, for example visiting places of interest or going to a show. Tizard and Hughes (2002, p.xv) identify the "richness, depth and variety" of young children’s conversations during daily domestic activities as compared to much talk during play in nurseries. Their finding was mirrored in this research, reflecting children’s engagement in real world experiences.  
Department for Education “Children’s experiences of the Early Years Foundation Stage”, 2010.

Educational visits can range from trips to the local park, forest school area, local primary school, shop, place of worship or library in walking distance of the setting to visits involving use of public transport or a coach to a theatre, farm, zoo or nature centre.

All of these experiences can enthuse learners with new experiences and adventure and increase the child’s understanding of the world around them.

Learning in context and through direct experience is essential for all young people. For example, there is an immense value in imaginative play around real world experiences such as post offices or markets - but how can children be expected to imagine these scenarios if they have never been to a post office or market? So often, children from disadvantaged areas or with special educational needs
lack experiences of the wider world, so the early years settings have a vital role to play in providing these experiences to enable children to thrive in formal education and in later life.

Most meaningful learning occurs through acquiring knowledge and skills through real-life, practical or hands-on activities. The Department for Education report “Children’s experiences of the Early Years Foundation Stage”, 2010, stated that:

Engagement in real world activities seemed important to children in terms of supporting a sense of competence. Some children were keen to take on what might be commonly seen as adult roles, for example preparing food. Real world activities also provided opportunities for sustained interaction with adults, as when Carly (4y 6m) arranged flowers with her childminder. In addition, they provided opportunities for children to demonstrate knowledge and understanding, linked to their interests, as when Angie (3y 5m) and Holly (3y 11m) practiced reading house numbers on the way to school.

The report noted that childminders tended to provide more of these opportunities than other Early Years provision and recommended that real world experiences be considered alongside play as being important in delivering the areas of learning and development.

**A framework for getting children out and about as a regular part of learning and development**

1. **Audit the opportunities just beyond your gates.**

Think about:

- What opportunities for learning outside the classroom lie in walking distance of your setting?
- Talk to your staff and parents if you don’t live locally - they might have some interesting ideas.
- Build the confidence of your staff (and parents!) by starting with small steps before venturing further afield.

2. **Consider the opportunities further afield.**

Think about:

- What you would like to achieve and how learning outside the classroom visits might help you to achieve your aims.
- Think about what you would like to do in an ideal world, setting barriers aside.
- Look for venues that hold the LOtC Quality Badge to provide you with assurance about the safety and educational quality of the provision. Visit www.lotcqualitybadge.org.uk to identify LOtC Quality Badge holders in your area.
3. **Get a handle on paperwork.**

- Reduce paperwork by obtaining parental permission for LOtC off site when children enrol at the setting, rather than every time you want to take children out and about.
- Think about the best way to evidence learning when out and about - for example a Dictaphone might be more practical than using pens and paper.
- Understand your health and safety responsibilities. The requirements for educational visits set out in the new EYFS framework are as follows:

  *Children must be kept safe while on outings, and providers must obtain written parental permission for children to take part in outings. Providers must assess the risks or hazards which may arise for the children, and must identify the steps to be taken to remove, minimise and manage those risks and hazards. The assessment must include consideration of adult to child ratios. The risk assessment does not necessarily need to be in writing; this is for providers to judge.*

- Risk assessments need not be an onerous job. The time taken to plan an activity should be proportionate to the duration of the activity. Discuss the potential risks with an experienced colleague and take sensible steps to minimise the risks.

**Embedding LOtC across the 7 areas of learning and development**

**Communication and language** development involves giving children opportunities to experience a rich language environment; to develop their confidence and skills in expressing themselves; and to speak and listen in a range of situations. (EYFS Framework 2012)

LOtC provides experiences that encourage children to actively listen and respond to events, to thoroughly understand situations and inspire responses in the form of questions, comments and actions.

There are many examples of children who hardly say a word within their setting who suddenly ‘come alive’ when taken on an outing outside the setting, chatting animatedly with the staff. Often this will represent a breakthrough, with the child continuing to be more communicative when they return to the setting environment.

**Physical development** involves providing opportunities for young children to be active and interactive; and to develop their co-ordination, control, and movement. Children must also be helped to understand the importance of physical activity, and to make healthy choices in relation to food. (EYFS Framework 2012)

Learning outside the classroom supports the development of healthy and active lifestyles by offering children opportunities for physical activity, freedom and movement, and promoting a sense of well-being.
Children need an outdoor environment that can provide them with space, both upwards and outwards, and places to explore, experiment, discover, be active and healthy, and to develop their physical capabilities.

LOTc is also particularly important to those children who learn best through active movement. Very young children learn predominately through their sensory and physical experiences – which supports brain development and the creation of neural networks.

Regular LOTc ensures that children are active, developing their motor skills and co-ordination as they try to solve simple problems or explore new concepts. For example, Forest School activities provide excellent opportunities for physical development and learning through play.

**Personal, social and emotional development** involves helping children to develop a positive sense of themselves, and others; to form positive relationships and develop respect for others; to develop social skills and learn how to manage their feelings; to understand appropriate behaviour in groups; and to have confidence in their own abilities. (EYFS Framework 2012)

LOTc encourages children to try new things and be confident in their approach. Visits to museums, city farms or even a walk in the local community can promote co-operation, help children to develop relationships with adults and other children, and learn what acceptable behaviour is.

LOTc also has an important role to play in teaching children to manage risk in controlled situations, giving them skills they can draw upon to keep them safe in later life.

There is a significant element of incidental learning in many learning outside the classroom experiences, building self-confidence and self-awareness as well as collaborative and communication skills.

**Literacy development** involves encouraging children to link sounds and letters and to begin to read and write. Children must be given access to a wide range of reading materials (books, poems, and other written materials) to ignite their interest. (EYFS Framework 2012)

The Department for Education report “Children’s experiences of the Early Years Foundation Stage”, 2010, reported that:

> Children in most settings told us that they liked to look at books alone or with friends, but fewer children talked about opportunities to retell stories or write in playful ways. In a small number of settings the comments of some children suggest that they experience some literacy and/or numeracy activities as ‘work’, which they sometimes view as less enjoyable than other activities.

LOTc can make these activities more novel and enjoyable, appealing to more active learners.

For example, a Gruffalo Hunt, Bear Hunt or storytelling in a local park or on a city farm can bring a story alive, drawing children’s attention and encouraging new vocabulary in the form of questions and discussion.

Regarding writing, an activity such as writing a list of the bugs found during a bug hunt can make a writing task more enjoyable for kinaesthetic learners. Another example is Martenscroft Nursery and Sure Start Centre in Manchester providing children with ‘writing to go’ rucksacks full of mark making materials to develop writing and drawing skills when out and about.
Mathematics involves providing children with opportunities to develop and improve their skills in counting, understanding and using numbers, calculating simple addition and subtraction problems; and to describe shapes, spaces, and measures. (EYFS Framework 2012)

The EYFS includes a focus on mathematical language, for example language of shape, size, measurement and position, and a focus on pattern. There are many opportunities to explore these mathematical principles outside the classroom, as they occur in nature or in the built environment. Outdoor play also supports children’s problem-solving skills, providing rich opportunities for developing imagination, inventiveness and resourcefulness. Counting exercises work well in the school grounds – a simple activity such as collecting 5 leaves or 10 twigs can be used to develop numeracy skills.

Understanding the world involves guiding children to make sense of their physical world and their community through opportunities to explore, observe and find out about people, places, technology and the environment. (EYFS Framework 2012)

Real world experiences of visiting the shops, the post office or the library can bring learning to life and can be extended back at the setting, making role play much more meaningful.

Learning outside the classroom also gives children contact with the natural world and offers them experiences that are unique to outdoors, such as direct contact with the weather and the seasons. Playing and learning outside helps children to understand and respect nature, the environment and the interdependence of humans, animals, plants and lifecycles.

Children demonstrated strong interests in animals in many settings, with several children talking about experiences of small animals in the natural world during outdoor play. For some children, an interest in looking closely and talking about the features of animals linked to more imaginative and playful understandings of the world. Children at a childminding setting talked excitedly about two ladybirds found in the garden. Maisie (2y 11m) explained: ‘And another ladybird in a tyre... He sleeps cos he’s a bit tired.’ However, many settings provided no or limited opportunities for children to play in natural environments where living things might be found.

Department for Education “Children’s experiences of the Early Years Foundation Stage”, 2010.

Expressive arts and design involves enabling children to explore and play with a wide range of media and materials, as well as providing opportunities and encouragement for sharing their thoughts, ideas and feelings through a variety of activities in art, music, movement, dance, role-play, and design and technology. (EYFS Framework 2012)

LOtC offers inspiration and space for children to take part in countless creative activities. It can be messy, liberating and gives children the room to be noisy, active and work on a large scale, e.g.
building dens from natural materials at a local nature reserve or creating a large mosaic on an appropriate wall in the setting’s grounds.

**Resources:**
For LOfC lesson ideas which can be used to teach the above learning goals, consider using our LOfC resource packs for Early Years.

CLotC members can view the CPD module “Early Years: Planning for Learning Outside the Classroom” at [www.lotc.org.uk/plan-deliver-lofc/cpd-modules](http://www.lotc.org.uk/plan-deliver-lofc/cpd-modules)

For more information and advice on making better use of your grounds visit the Learning through Landscapes website [http://www.ltl.org.uk/](http://www.ltl.org.uk/)