Exploring the real world: Learning outside at the Early Years Foundation Stage

Anyone who takes children outside regularly sees the enjoyment and sense of wonder and excitement that is generated when children actively engage with their environment. Opportunities for active learning help children to enjoy learning through play and exploration. Some of the key benefits of learning outside the classroom in the early years include:

- Supporting the development of healthy and active lifestyles and promoting a sense of well-being.
- Giving children contact with the natural world and experiences that are unique to the outdoors, such as direct contact with the weather and the seasons.
- Improving self-esteem, self-confidence and behaviour in children who may find settings indoors noisy or intimidating.
- Supporting children’s problem-solving skills and nurturing creativity, as well as providing rich opportunities for developing imagination, inventiveness and resourcefulness.
- Providing children with space, both upwards and outwards, and places to explore, experiment, discover and develop their physical capabilities and motor skills.
- It is more accessible 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.
- It gives opportunities to teach children personal safety skills and get them involved in early risk management, e.g. road safety; stranger danger; water safety; what it is safe to touch and what to avoid.
- Children experience considerable enjoyment and an undoubted sense of wonder and excitement when they actively engage with the outdoor environment.
- Helping children to make sense of the world around them, and giving real life context to support learning through play.

A consideration of the Statutory Framework for the Early Years Foundation Stage reveals that learning outside the classroom (LOtC) activities should be at the heart of early years education. There are clear links between the overarching principles of the framework, and the benefits of LOtC. In addition, LOtC offers many of the activities and experiences outlined in the framework:

- **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.

  Learning outside the classroom can give access to a range of situations to help children to develop their language skills, give them new experiences to inspire their speaking, and expand their vocabulary by taking them into new situations.

- **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.

LOtC gives children a broader range of opportunity for physical activity, whether that is taking them on a walk through woodland or on other unpaved surfaces to support the development of balance and coordination, or exploring the school grounds in different ways. Through LOtC activities, children can also learn about where their food comes from, and think about healthy eating.

- **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.

LOtC is proven to develop young people’s independence and self-confidence. The opportunity to leave the setting and explore the local community also helps them to learn about appropriate behaviour in different situations.

- **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.

Visits to external sites can give access to different kinds of reading materials, such as road signs, or museum labels. The setting’s outdoor space can also be used for physical literacy activities, such as phonics races, to engage those children who struggle with sedentary learning.

- **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.

LOtC can give context to maths, for example using real objects such as leaves for counting activities, or identifying different shapes in the buildings around them.

- **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.

Outside the classroom, children can explore weather, the seasons, and many other simple scientific principles. They need to be given access to the physical world in order to be able to make sense of it.

- **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.

The outside environment can provide inspiration and even resources for role play and art activities, as well as experience of music and theatre through visits to external providers.
These are just a few of the ways in which LOtC can support the outcomes of the Statutory Framework for the Early Years Foundation Stage. Some areas of the framework cannot be fully taught inside the classroom. Children need to be given real world experiences to build their creativity, understanding of the world, and resilience, so that they have the skills needed to engage with their later education, and can develop into fully-rounded adults.

In order to support and encourage LOtC for EYFS children, the Council for Learning Outside the Classroom has developed a set of resource packs with activity ideas for each of the four principle areas of the framework. Most of the activities can be undertaken in the school or setting grounds and local community, to make them as cost-effective and easy to manage as possible.

Examples of activity ideas include phonics hopscotch, making natural dyes and finding numbers in nature. All lesson plans have detailed methodology, and include ideas for extension to suit different children’s needs, as well as links with other areas of the framework. To find out more, visit www.lotc.org.uk/eyfs-resource-packs.