

5 ways to...

mark-make outside

How to combine mark-making activity with the outdoors environment. By **Julie Mountain**

Use your outdoor spaces to develop a love of mark-making, encouraging children to scavenge for markers and use every kind of surface as a canvas.

EVERY SURFACE

As children develop their co-ordination, they need lots of space for mark-making. Use every surface outdoors to encourage them to create – pebbles on grass, sticks in the sandpit, chalk on the Tarmac, water on the walls, string through the fences, paint on rolls of wallpaper, bark chips in the Mud Lab.

Creating large-scale, semi-permanent marks like this can be collaborative (unlike a sheet of A4) and involves the big muscle groups, building children's command of their bodies and creating huge artworks into the bargain.

2 UNUSUAL MARK-MAKERS

Emergent mark-makers are not ready for the physically stressful pencil grip demanded by a standard pen or pencil, and with an abundance of alternatives outdoors, they don't need to. Stock your mark-making trolley or 'corner' with paintbrushes of all sizes and buckets for collecting water or mud; big chunks of natural chalk; home-made charcoal lumps; sticks of various widths and lengths; ribbons, string and wool; different types of squirter (for example, squeeze bottles and trigger-activated bottles); feathers, leaves, bamboo and bunches of long grass.

You could even provide a brightly coloured silky ribbon or scarf on a long stick for 'mark-making' in the air – and in the winter you could provide neon glowsticks to use in the dark.



3 BE INSPIRED

Children do love to use a clipboard – but try to vary the types.

Transparent boards can be drawn on with dry-wipe markers – great for depicting 'the view from here', and A5 and A3 boards support contemplation of scale and size. Try asking children to draw something huge (for example, a tree) on an A5 sheet, and then on an A3 one.

The colour and type of paper on offer influences children's choice of mark-makers and colours, so offer everything from tracing paper, cling film (stretch it over a frame) and aluminium foil to chunky cardboard and fabric offcuts. Also offer lots of familiar books outdoors and encourage children to represent the story in different ways.

4 VIGOROUS ACTIVITY

The ability to write relies on strong finger, wrist, forearm, shoulder and back muscles, so encouraging as much

vigorous physical activity as possible is an excellent way to build the co-ordination children need to be able to master the tripod grip.

Resilient and flexible upper-body muscle groups are crucial, and activities to develop this include swinging from and spinning around horizontal poles, using a punch-bag, handstands and cartwheels, throwing and catching balls of differing sizes and weights, and den-building. Such movements also stimulate neurological connections, so starting the day with physically active outdoor play is a great way to prepare children for focusing on mark-making.

5 REAL PURPOSE

Offering purposeful opportunities for mark-making will help children understand the importance of learning to write and why we write.

When I work with children to redevelop their outdoor spaces, we mark-make all over the features, furniture and vegetation, allowing children to express their preferences without needing to have the vocabulary of design. We use Post-it notes, labels, stickers and coloured ribbons.

Mark-making should be a pleasure in itself; there is a joy in creation so purposeful writing for children might just be about them expressing themselves in the moment – for example, taking rubbings of tree bark, pressing their hand into frost to leave a print or laying a trail by dripping mud across the garden.

And another thing...

Use mark-making to develop children's vocabulary about writing and movement, giving them language to describe the parts of their body that move during mark-making, their muscles and the concepts they are illustrating with their mark-making. ■

