

With purpose

What does effective planning look like for the outdoors? **Professor Jan White** explains the benefits of well-prepared outside provision and gives examples of best practice

What does effective planning look like for the outdoors?

How planning contributes to providing rich and motivational experiences outdoors is the ninth Key to unlocking the full potential of the outdoors as a wonderful place for wellbeing and learning in the early years.

KEY 9: PLANNING FOR THE OUTDOORS

Planning:

- draws from long-term aims
- makes best use of the outdoors
- is responsive to observation of individuals
- complements and enhances indoor experiences and interests
- means staff are clear about purposes and intentions, as well as their role.

WHY IS THIS ISSUE KEY TO UNLOCKING THE OUTDOORS?

Being outdoors is different from being inside – so planning for the outdoors requires just as much attention as for indoor learning. Effective planning translates the enormous potential held in the rich outdoor environment into distinctive and valuable experiences for children. It also plays a key role in helping us as adults to support them in doing so.

Outdoors often offers children what the indoors cannot: different things that invite curiosity, action, interaction and play; different ways of feeling, being and behaving; and different ways of experiencing and learning.

At the heart of planning for outdoors is a focus on harnessing this difference towards your overall, long-term aims for your children's learning and development, such as encouraging curiosity and communication, so that it can



contrast with or extend what the children are able to do, be like and experience indoors. Finding a ladybird-eating blackfly on the beans you have been growing is likely to inspire both fascination and great desire to share with others. When this possibility has been considered in advance, adults can be ready to build upon this motivation in ways well suited to the children involved and which make good use of the space, freedom and feelings of being outside (for example, by becoming a winged ladybird flying from place to place).

In planning possibilities for developmental experiences outdoors, the content of learning will be at the front of our minds: the stimulating materials, events, opportunities and discoveries that provide young children with what they want to learn about and make their own sense of. But it is also important that careful consideration is given to the process of learning; that is, the ways

A motivational mathematical experience outdoors

young children will need to engage with the planned opportunities (such as by using their whole body, watching and imitating others or being able to repeat experiences many times over).

Above all, since the outdoors brings children into such motivating contact with both the real physical world and the real world of humans – the very things they are innately fascinated by and deeply curious about – planning must focus upon enabling experiences that are relevant, authentic and meaningful to each of them as individuals. The child's purpose is paramount, rather than any external 'curriculum' demands.

Professor Jan White is author of several books on outdoor provision and practice and co-director of the specialist training company Outdoors Thinking

WHAT DO WE NEED TO BE WORKING UPON IN PRACTICE?

The menu outside changes with the weather and seasons and through the children's own actions. As well as anticipating predictable interests in the world outdoors, planning has to be flexible and

ready to harness what comes up each day: the most useful preparations help both to enable this readiness and involve children in ongoing decision-making. The best response to a rainy day, for example, is a joint agreement to explore water in its 'natural habitat' by mobilising water-play resources to playfully interact with this water falling from the sky and making everything wet.

Effective planning emphasises continuous provision and empowering children through self-selection of interaction and resources. Planning will always be responsive to careful observation, built from extensive knowledge of individuals or groups and understanding of their current interests, and will aim for deep involvement in a range of play types. It also includes discussing what you intend to do with specific provision, such as using guttering on a rainy day, so that practitioners can think about useful language they could introduce in a meaningful context and consider what the most useful role for them to take in supporting and furthering children's engagement might be. For example, an adult as excited as the children by heavy rain running along a downpipe might find the opportunity for using thrilling words such as 'spurting', 'gushing', 'deluge' and 'torrent'.

Finally, routines should not disrupt the possibility of extended periods outdoors. Indeed, routines such as story and snack time can very effectively take place outdoors, where they can both fit into the flow of children's play and harness the conditions and atmosphere of the outdoors.

HOW TO MAKE A START AT DEVELOPING PROVISION AND PRACTICE

Things to consider, discuss and evaluate

- Does your planning for offering experiences outside make really good use of the outdoors each (and every) day?
- Are you planning in the best ways to maximise the value of the outdoors for the children you currently have?
- Is every member of the team clear about the purposes and intentions of provision made outside, and their own role in supporting children's use of it?

Things to explore and read

- *Child Led Play* by Jan White, <https://muddyfaces.co.uk/outdoor-hub/outdoor-play/child-led-play>
- 'Following Children's Interests: child led experiences that are meaningful and worthwhile' by Liz Magraw in *Outdoor Provision in the Early Years*, edited by Jan White (Sage, 2011).
- 'Offering Rich Experiences: contexts for play, exploration and

How clearly are planning decisions based on long-term aims?

talk' by Clare Warden in *Outdoor Provision in the Early Years*.

- *Child-Initiated Play and Learning: Planning for possibilities in the early years*, edited by Annie Woods (2nd edn. Routledge, 2017).

Things to do

- Review what the drivers are for the planning you do for children's experiences in the outdoors. How clearly are planning decisions based on long-term aims, developing positive dispositions, the characteristics of effective learning and building skills for life?
- Select one area of continuous provision outdoors and observe play there for some time and over several days. Evaluate how motivated and involved children are in it, how holistic the play is and how much it draws on the special and different nature of the outdoors. Is it really earning its keep in your outdoor space? What could you do to enable longer, deeper play or bring in further possibilities for how it can be used?
- Consider how well the indoors and outdoors are working to complement and contrast with each other, making the most of what each does well while providing linked experiences across the two environments. Do outdoor opportunities connect with and extend what children can do indoors, providing something more and in a different way? Do experiences inside follow up and build upon what children do or discover outside? ■

The best learning comes from children's own fascinations



how we plan for outdoor play at Quackers, by Menna Godfrey

I used to tell visitors to my setting that we don't do any planning. I'd explain that we follow and support the children's play agendas. However, when I reflected on what we do, as the adults in the setting, I realised that we do a great deal of planning to allow us to support the children to follow their interests. Most of our planning takes place as we design the environment and add or remove resources in response to our observations of the children, weather, available seasonal resources, etc.

Our mud kitchen is one of the places

where the children love to play, transforming materials as they mix sand and water and transforming the space as they reorganise it for their needs. As the adults, we constantly reflect on the way that the space is being used and consider how we can make it more effective as a support for learning and development. We noticed children were spending a lot of time pouring into the narrow-necked plastic bottles we had provided, often spilling a lot of liquid. We decided to add a range of funnels to the resources in the kitchen, as we

recognised the possibilities that these would afford for play and learning. On another occasion we provided planks of wood and milk crates as an invitation for children to build close to the mud kitchen; they built a new work surface.

Our planning is informed by careful observation of the children, knowledge of their interests and an intimate knowledge of the garden. We plan what we offer, not how we expect children to use the offer.

Menna Godfrey is owner and pedagogical lead.