

Get out there !

There is a special quality to being outdoors: experiencing the changes in natural light, feeling wind, rain, snow and sleet, or getting warm in the sun. So whilst we offer a broad and balanced curriculum outdoors, covering all six areas of learning, that does not mean that all indoor experiences are available outdoors (or vice versa).

Being outdoors has a special importance to children growing up in a busy, noisy, crowded environment. The garden has been carefully planned to give children a sense of tranquillity and an enjoyment of natural textures and colours in a densely built and large-scale environment.

There is small and large scale climbing equipment which is safe for all children to use independently: children are never lifted onto equipment. Children have opportunities for large-scale building in the garden with the hollow blocks. A range of balls and bats is available, in different sizes and with different levels of hardness/softness. Emergent writing is supported with clipboards, and with paintbrushes and pots of water to “paint” the back walls, fences and floors. Imaginative play is particularly supported by many of the design features of the garden (for example, trees to hide behind, hills and hidden corners, to encourage imaginative play and hide-and-seek.

The all-weather clothing (for children and staff) enables the garden to be used in any weather and for children to have the experience of standing in the rain, splashing in puddles, being out in the snow, making snowballs and snow-structures. In the early stages the younger children enjoy digging and turning the soil, finding the creatures and minibeasts that live in it. They can explore how wet and dry soil feels, and look for stones. With the help of an adult, they can pick a range of vegetables and fruits.

They learn about the changing seasons in the garden, how weather affects plant growth, the need for sun, light and water, and the life cycles of butterflies.

Gardening and outdoor play as a context for development and learning in the EYFS

Gardening and outdoor play helps children's personal, social and emotional development by providing opportunities for exploring the environment with interest, finding and enjoying new features, developing skills, confidence and autonomy, and sometimes involvement for long periods of time with or without adult support. The garden provides physical challenges which children will enjoy at first with support, and then independently, managing a small number of rules and boundaries, gaining confidence in their own abilities and recognising risks and dangers. The garden provides large-scale experiences which encourage children to link up with others and work collaboratively, and in using bikes and other individual equipment children learn about how to share resources and also to be appropriately assertive.

Gardening and outdoor play also supports children's developing communication, language and literacy as they talk about what they are doing and collaborate with others. Children will often have to follow instructions from adults, and when they work and play collaboratively they need to listen carefully to each other, respond to each other's ideas and negotiate. Gardening particularly provides a context for learning new vocabulary, and supports mark-making (putting in labels) and early reading. Children can also enjoy making marks in the sand, and developing large and fine motor skills which will support their emergent writing.

Children develop their problem-solving, reasoning and numeracy by exploring capacity (sand and water), length (e.g. observing the growth of a plant) and counting and sharing out items (e.g. when planting seeds or seedlings). Children also have opportunities to sort when they select a particular seedling or bulb to plant. The environment is rich in different shapes and textures to observe, enjoy and identify. There are many different materials to enjoy putting in and tipping out of containers.

Whilst climbing, running and crawling, children experience being in, out, under and over, and can develop their understanding and use of positional language.

The outdoor area is also a good context for children to expand their knowledge and understanding of the world, exploring the greater space and number of materials, sometimes focussing on specific features or processes and observing actions and their effects. Outdoors, children can find out and talk about the features of different living things, notice and talk about patterns and become aware of change (both immediate, e.g. what happens when you add water to soil, and also over time, e.g. noticing the leaves drop in autumn, the growth and harvesting of vegetables year-round). The outdoors also provides a space for large-scale construction, making dens, and also using pulleys and the water pump to explore forces and structures.

Outdoors, children can use tools for a purpose, supporting their physical development, and learn about keeping safe whilst experiencing risks. They can make large-scale movements and enjoy their increasing mobility, delighting in changes of perspective as they walk and climb. Children experience negotiating the space, making, developing and sequencing movements, and using a range of ways to move around like slithering, shuffling, rolling, crawling, walking, running, jumping, skipping, sliding and hopping. They can change speed and direction, go backwards and forwards, negotiate equipment, climb up and also crawl into structures, and balance. Children can move to express their feelings and ideas, and to represent ideas (e.g. being a superhero, running and dancing in response to seeing a butterfly). They can gain skills in using bats, rackets and balls. When they put on and take off all-weather clothes and boots, they are developing their small-motor skills and their autonomy in managing clothing. Children can use gardening tools outside, at first with very close supervision and then increasingly manage their own safety and be able to put away and take out tools safely and correctly.

Children's creative development is supported as children respond in different ways to the rich textures, sounds, smells and things to see outside in different ways. They may explore and represent what they see, think and feel through drawing, painting, making music and dance. Outdoors, children can develop movement and dance on a large scale, and can also take part in ring-games. Outdoor role play can develop stories across large areas and at different levels, involving large numbers of children.