

Toddlers Outdoors

Play, learning and development

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Introduction

“The child is wonderfully prepared for active learning from birth. Children approach the world with all senses open, all motors running – the world is an invitation to experience. Their job is to develop and test all their equipment, make sense of the confusing world of people and things and unseen mysterious forces and relationships, like gravity, number and love. Neither infants not preschoolers, toddlers are furiously becoming: increasingly mobile, autonomous, social, thoughtful creatures with language and insatiable urges to test and experiment. These restless, mobile characters have a drive to take apart the existing order and rearrange it, by force if necessary, to suit their own whimsically logical view of the universe.”

[Jim Greenman 1988]

Daily opportunity to spend time in rich outdoor environments is of crucial importance for all children, and this is especially true for children in their second year. The development of walking enables the child to explore under his or her own steam, and to have their hands available whilst doing so, opening up a vast range of possibilities. This child is intensely driven to explore and is hugely disadvantaged if this is restricted to a range of indoor environments, however varied. As adults entrusted with the care of very young children, we are duty-bound to provide the best possible circumstances for their well-being and healthy development. Playing outdoors has a huge range of benefits.

“Very young children have a very special way of relating to the outdoor world. It is of enormous interest to them – the easiest way to support an unsettled baby or toddler indoors is to take them to a window to look outside. They have an inborn affinity, curiosity and fascination with the natural world: sky, wind, rain and shadows; plants, trees and leaves; sticks, pebbles and rocks; water, puddles and mud; dogs, birds and beetles and people. Children use their whole body and whole self to engage with, explore, dismantle and think about the world – and this is very apparent when young children are in the real, outdoor world.”

[Jan White 2009]

The outdoors is a very special place for one year olds. As you watch this film, here are some of the things you might identify that the outdoors offers toddlers:

- freedom for movement, action and working out what bodies can do;
- natural light, sunshine and fresh air, providing oxygen-rich air and helping the body to operate and grow optimally;
- visual and physical space, with the full range of close-up to views of the distance, and upwards as well as side-ways. Movement in this space enables development of all the complexities of visual perception;
- a richly varying, highly sensorial environment where touch, smell, sound, taste, sight, movement and body-awareness sensory systems can develop and integrate together;
- a phenomenal range of interesting stimuli, the surprise of spontaneous events, and daily variations in the quality of the air, temperature and light as weather and seasons change;

- physical and emotional contact with the natural world: both the living world of plants, mini-beasts and other animals, and physical world of water, earth and stone;
- a myriad of different spaces (with different microclimates, sensations and viewpoints) and hundreds of things from the miniscule to the mighty to poke at and ponder;
- a place to watch people of different sizes and behaviours, to interact, to build relationships and learn about being human.

[Jan White 2009]

This film has been made to support parents and providers in early years settings to develop their understanding of, and commitment to, the role of the outdoors for children from 12 to 24 months. Watching the sequences repeatedly will enable adults to tune more deeply into just what it is that toddlers want to do and know about when they are outdoors. It will also give a great deal of food for thought and discussion towards the development of appropriate provision and practice that is fulfilling for children and adults alike.

We hope the film will:

- show how much toddlers get from being outside and why it is so important for them;
- make the special nature of being outside apparent and clear, so as to build the rationale for outdoor provision in all early years settings;
- show what the outdoors offers toddlers, how it meets their interests and supports well-being and development;
- help adults tune in and see more of what is really happening in toddlers' exploration;
- emphasise movement and exploration for this age group, showing how experience develops both brain and body;
- indicate what environments are appropriate by illustrating what toddlers are interested in and what they want to do;
- expand adults' thinking about what is appropriate provision - and that this is so much more than tarmac and toys;
- make adults WANT to take toddlers outside and be with them, to share in their pleasure, delight and discovery;
- show that toddlers must have outdoor experiences every day (several times in day) and all through the year;
- make parents expect and demand outdoor opportunities every day for their child.

The notes have been written primarily to help viewers to observe more closely some of the significant things that are taking place for the child in the sequence. The section entitled 'things to notice and understand' aims to focus attention on issues that are important to know about. The sequences show a great deal about child development in general, and can be used very



effectively in this way. The focus of the notes, however, is to bring attention to those elements that are particularly relevant to being outdoors. Understanding more about these issues will support practitioners to develop both provision and their practice outdoors. There are common themes across the six children, such as 'the role of movement', because these themes are of great importance during this year. Within these themes, development can be seen as we move from Liam at 13 months, to Daisy at 22 months.

The notes for each child also have a section called 'prompts for developing practice'. The aim here is to identify what makes outdoor provision effective and satisfying for both child and adult, and to give prompts for closer observation of the film sequences followed by focused discussion. Improvements in provision and practice are more likely when understanding of these issues is developed and positive thinking about barriers, objections and stumbling blocks is carried out.

Above all, every adult living with and supporting toddlers wants to give them certain messages, and hope that they will come to believe these things about themselves. Close examination and consideration of the film and accompanying notes should support adults to use the huge potential of the outdoors to make young children feel that:

- they are good to be with – it's great to be doing things together outdoors;
- they can feel good in their body – responding to children's drives for doing, moving and using their whole body, and helping them to take pleasure in how that makes them feel;
- they are capable and competent – offering the right level of intellectual, emotional and physical provocation and challenge, and using experiences to help children gradually learn how to look after themselves and others;
- they are trusted and responsible – setting things up so that children can play independently and support each other, and providing plenty of first-hand experiences and meaningful real tasks;
- they are curious and adventurous – offering an environment full of irresistible paces, materials and experiences;
- they are creative and inventive – having an open, flexible approach that encourages young children's great imaginations and values the unexpected.

[Jan White 2010a]

This quotation, written in 1956, seems as relevant now as it was then:

"If a child is to keep alive his inborn sense of wonder... he needs the companionship of at least one adult who can share it, rediscovering with him the joy, excitement and mystery of the world we live in."

[Rachel Carson 1998]

We hope that being able to closely observe and come to understand these six deeply curious and enthusiastic one year olds will help you to tune into their real natures and passions; and that you will want to share in their pleasure, delight and discovery, every single day, throughout the year.



Liam

13 months

Things to notice and understand

The role of movement

“Young children take in information about the external world by physically and bodily - interacting with it, and build understandings by moving thought it and manipulating it. They think by moving and express their thoughts through movement. They gain an understanding of their bodies, themselves and how their body relates to the world by experiencing the sense of movement.”

[Jan White, 2008]

Movement is the child's first 'language' and it remains their dominant sense throughout childhood. For adults, the movement information coming into our brain from our body and the external world is so deeply embedded that we are, for most of the time, completely unaware of it. This means that we can deal with life without having to take up thinking space for controlling our body and functioning well in space and gravity. When we watch toddlers, especially when they have the space, freedom and stimulus, we can look deeply into the fundamental role movement takes in their lives, and in their exploring, examining, thinking and development. It really is the most important thing for toddlers to be doing and it's what they want to do, all the time. Alarming though, opportunity for movement is increasingly being reduced in the lives of many very young children, as they are strapped into car seats, buggies and other restraints, offered TV and DVDs and have limited space to move energetically. Lack of movement makes a child lack-lustre and sleepy or frustrated and depressed, and it severely and deeply prevents healthy development.

Watching Liam at work in the familiar space of his garden, with the nearby emotional base of an attentive and important person who he knows is taking care of his safety, we can see much about how he uses his whole body and movement to find out about his world, see how things work in this world, and feel how he relates to it. He is also getting a great deal of work done on developing his balance, loco-motor skills, coordination, strength and control. And in doing this he is also developing an awareness of his own body and a sense of himself in space; gaining pleasure and mental stimulation from movement; feeling good in his body and building a sense of being 'me'. Use of the body develops the brain in many other ways, and research shows that perceptive and cognitive growth is highly dependent on use of the body and movement in space [Hannaford 1995]. For young children movement is thinking, and they do not think well without action and movement. All the children in this film show us aspects of the vital role that movement has for toddlers and that it is a very important part of life throughout this year.

Liam knows what this space offers him for using his body, and each day he can revisit and repeat these experiences. Through this daily access his abilities develop a little every day, so that he can use the same interesting and opportunity-filled environment slightly differently each time – and keep referring to his safe base both to check that he will be safe and to share his delight in what he can do.

Sensory development

“Armed with his senses Liam uses his movements and actions to explore the world.”

As well as feeling the world through movement, toddlers actively use all their other senses to stimulate the development of nerve connections in their very rapidly developing brain: research has shown how much a richly sensory environment impacts on the complexity of the brain in mammals. The outdoors is intensely multi-sensory, meeting these needs very well in a multitude of ways, and we can see Liam seeking out sensory information and stimulation all the time. As well as touch, sound, vision, taste and hearing, the human body has sensory systems to detect and analyse the body's position in gravity and acceleration, enabling us to have balance and coordination (the vestibular sense – or equilibrioception) and internal body awareness (the kinesthetic sense – or proprioception) (see the notes for Abolfazal). Toddlers are very actively working to develop all of these, wiring up the brain through experience so that it can both detect, and interpret what it has detected. These senses also need to wire up to each other to become smoothly integrated (sensory integration), so that the body can work in the highly effective way it is capable of [Stock Kranowitz 2005]. The integration of vision with movement, for instance, allows us to understand what is going on when we move through space – and it can only become wired up through moving through space while receiving complex visual signals at the same time. (Vision also needs movement to develop fully: we can see this taking place when Yasmine is moving around her group of animals to view them from different perspectives). Having well-developed and well-integrated sensory systems is incredibly important to life functioning and learning, so it's not surprising that toddlers are so driven to do this work on their bodies! It is our task to ensure that they are doing this (and we can't do it for them) – so we need to find a good balance between meeting these developmental imperatives and our tolerance for bumps and bruises.

The special nature of the outdoors

“The outdoors has a special way of supporting young children's well-being and supplies both the medium and the means for responding to their deep drives for exploration and their quest to make sense of their world for themselves. Outside, children can learn in the ways that suit them best, actively handling, moving and doing, using their whole bodies and all their senses, and with direct experience of real things that matter to them – the real world of adults and older children.”

[Jan White 2009]

Rather than attempting to 'take the indoors out', it is absolutely vital that outdoor experiences for young children capture the special nature of the outdoors. The outdoors is different to the indoors and this is why it matters for children [White 2010b]. If we don't harness this potential to offer children what the indoors cannot, we are missing the point – and missing the huge capacity of the outdoors to help

young children thrive and grow. Watching the incredibly rich experiences Liam has with his Mum in the garden, the park and the small lane behind their house, it is clear that the outdoors offers many things that add greatly to what the indoors can offer – it is a very different place for children to be in. It's a very worthwhile exercise to analyse the special nature of the outdoors. It is complex and multi-layered and it takes time to fully appreciate; but young children are very tuned into these differences. Several viewings of Liam and plenty of discussion will be necessary to fully appreciate everything he, and the other children in the film, are able to get from these environments. Paying close attention to the differences and complementary experiences available – what makes the outdoors special – will help teams to reach a shared understanding and belief in the importance of the outdoor half of the setting's environment. And these are the things that we should be seeking to provide through outdoor experiences for all children.

Liam's Mum has experienced the value of taking him outside every single day as part of their routine – he thrives on these experiences and his well-being is served also by his certainty that he will be able to go outside whatever the weather or time of year. She also gains by having time with Liam where he is fully engaged, enlivened and responsive to her, which is fulfilling for both of them and helping to deepen the relationship they have with each other. Every day is different and new, and all weather is good for toddler exploration, discovery, experience and development. During this year, children are developing at such a rapid rate that they cannot wait through the winter for 'good weather' – they need the richness of this environment every day of their lives.

Toddlers are driven with a strong biological need to find out about and make sense of the real physical world and the real world of humans; and the outdoors in all its richness and complexity has a huge role in this. Short walks into the locality and community, with very small groups of children, is so valuable that practitioners must work out how to tap this potential.

Although practitioners and parents have a very realistic and understandable concern about germs and hygiene when young children are exploring the outdoor world, this needs to be balanced with the value of exposure to the normal bacteria that live in every part of our environment. Medical opinion seems to be growing in support of the 'hygiene hypothesis', first proposed in the 1980's, which suggests that early childhood exposure to bacteria in the environment 'prime' the immune system to prevent allergies [Davies 2009]. The young child may need such exposure in order for their developing immune system to learn how to protect the body without over-reacting: some germs do appear to be good for us. Since humans evolved in the outdoor environment, it is likely that our bodies learned to live with many of the germs that co-exist with us, and that toddler exploration assists in building a well-functioning immune system. Along with many other health benefits, play outdoors may help to protect against allergies and other immune deficiencies [see also Engle 2005].



What matters to toddlers: schemas

Young children have some very important questions that they constantly seek to explore, and like the scientists that they so clearly are, they ask their questions at every possible opportunity, construct 'theories' based on the evidence they have gathered, and seek to test these theories many times and in lots of ways. Through this process, they are constantly constructing their abilities to perceive and their abilities to think, as well as their ideas and theories about how things are in the world. Toddlers, and Liam is a very good example, seem to be driven by such big questions as 'what is in the world?', 'how does it work?', 'what does it do to me?' and 'how do I fit in?', and they do this through a great deal of 'object play' and embodied exploration. Later in the film we can see slightly older children working on 'what can I do with these things?' (Yasmine) and 'what can they become?' (Jaleel). It is very important that adults supporting toddlers are tuned into the questions they need to explore. Not only does this help cognitive development in the best way; it also strongly supports their emotional well-being and reduces frustration and conflict.

A fascination with holes and gaps is very common in 1 year-olds, and they are intensely aware of miniscule things. This is a particularly enjoyable aspect of sharing explorations with children of this age: they notice things adults have long forgotten and ceased to look at. We must find the time to allow ourselves to be drawn in, to share in the detail and wonder of the tiny side of the world.

Liam's interest in holes may also be connected to his on-going passion for exploring the idea of 'in and out'. In and out is a pervasive element of the physical world and provides a foundation for mathematical and scientific ideas – as well as having relevance to the social and emotional world of human relationships. Watch the film with others to notice all the ways he finds to deepen his understanding of this concept, and how he gains embodied feelings for what it really means. (The notes for Abolfazal, Michael and Yasmine say more about schemas. Also see Arnold 2010).

The right stuff

The outdoor environments that Liam has daily access to contain just the right materials to best support his thinking and development. They are part of the real world, so they are of great interest to him. They are highly sensory, providing stimulation for several senses at once. They are open-ended, non-prescribed and abundant, so he can do what he wants with them. We provide materials like these indoors, such as sand and water, as they are very effective as learning tools, but toddlers are then severely constrained in the ways they can use them. In the outdoors they can be accessed in much richer ways: they can be picked, gathered, collected and piled up; they can be moved around from one place to another; they can be dipped and dropped, rolled and dumped; they can be mixed and stirred; they can be sat in and stood on; they can be felt and experienced with the whole body; they change with the weather and the season; they can be present in great quantities; and they are

