

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;
- make parents expect and demand outdoor opportunities every day for their child.
- 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.