

## How to help children learn

- **Try to see things from their point of view.** Understanding how children see the world will help you to help them as they learn.
- **Let children be children.** A skilled five year old grows from a busy four year old, a curious three year old, a cuddled two year old, an adventurous one year old and a communicative baby.
- **Be a playful companion.** You can enjoy childhood with the children as well.
- **Feelings matter** – both the children's emotions and your own are part of any situation with young children. It is very helpful to be aware of your own moods as well as the children's when enjoying yourself with them and during difficult moments.
- **Don't expect to be perfect.** Everyone does something they don't mean sometimes. Children can be forgiving as long as we are thoughtful most of the time and are ready to say sorry when we should.



# Going out to play and learn

Marjorie Ouvry

## Why go outside?

### Big movers

Have you ever been in an open space with young children? The first thing they want to do is to break away from your hand and run! They are born with the desire to move, and open space is exciting.

Learning to move is not just about making muscles strong, it is also vital for children's growth and development. It helps them learn about the world and their place in it. So movement is important and it requires lots of room. The space outdoors, in gardens, woodlands and parks, provides children with so much of what they need to stimulate their minds and bodies.

### Risk and challenge

Young children need to learn how to use their bodies. They need to find out how strong they are, how fast they can run, how loud they can shout and how high they feel safe to climb. They test themselves as part of growing up and become good at working out what their body can and can't do.

This involves a degree of risk – for them and for us. It sometimes means that we have to be brave about letting children try out their growing strength. We have to learn which of our fears about safety are important and which we can let the children work out for themselves.

So while you might insist that children hold your hand and walk steadily near roads, you may let them run faster than usual down a hill in the park. Falling down is part of growing up. When children are able to try out new things with their body, they develop the confidence to use it well and to believe in their own decisions.

## Pretending

One of the joys of a good outdoor area where children can play is that nature provides the toys. A leaf becomes a plate and twigs are used as knives and forks.

When children pretend in this way something amazing is happening in their minds. They are thinking in symbols – making one thing 'become' another.

Thinking in symbols like this is very important in helping children to become good readers, writers, counters and problem-solvers. This is because writing and numbers are also symbols. They stand for the words that we speak and the amounts that we count. They are not the real things. Children are sometimes hurried through their early learning and are made to sit down with paper and pencil tasks. But they need to learn their 'pretend' skills first.

## Children need to be outside

Children learn best by being very active physically. This is especially true of boys, who can sometimes find it almost painful to sit down for a long time – they need to move. Young children who are like this will always feel the need to move about if expected to sit still for too long. These children often find themselves in trouble because they can't keep quiet. This can have a terrible effect on their self-respect and their confidence as learners, which can continue into school. Going outdoors solves the problem for children who need to move as it gives them plenty of opportunities to learn while their bodies are active and busy. And if they have been able to move a lot as young children, they are more likely to be ready for sitting when they get to school.

## Things to do in the garden

If you have a garden, it's a good idea to have things for children to do there and special places set aside for them.

- Create a place where children can just dig in the earth with proper trowels and hand forks. Don't bother with plastic ones as they bend in the soil and children can't do anything real with them – though do show children how to dig soil with these tools so that they can use them safely. Make sure everyone understands they are not to be used in any other way.
- Together with the children, make a lawn mower out of cardboard boxes and tubes.
- If you have a mature tree, hang a rope swing from it and, depending on the shape of the tree, the children's confidence and their physical skill, encourage them to climb the tree.
- Install a sandpit. Sandpits are great learning places for young children. As well as having fun with sandcastles, children love to play pretend with sand, perhaps by counting ladlefuls of it into old pans and talking about the delicious soup they've made.
- If you have a garden tap or water barrel, allow the children to fill buckets and use brushes to 'paint' using just water, or to water the plants and make mud pies. (If you don't have a tap or a barrel, find a large old container which can be filled with water and used outside whenever the children want it.)

Mud is also lovely stuff for painting with – either on to paper or, if you can bear it, on to outside walls. It washes off beautifully.

- Encourage the children to help you with the gardening. Enjoy with them the thrill (or horror) at finding snails, slugs and worms, and talk about how some creatures help the garden grow and how others don't.

- Set up tents and dens in the garden. They can set off all sorts of pretend play and don't need to be bought; a sheet draped over a few chairs will work just as well – if not better.
- Go outside with babies. They can sleep and play there, and share books with you about the birds you see.
- Children love to be out in different kinds of weather. Windy days make them excited, so fix a plastic shopping bag on to a stick so that children can feel the strength of the wind. And, of course, shovelling snow into buckets with spades will hold their interest for a long time. If you don't have a garden at home (and even if you do), access to a garden is something you can look for when choosing a childminder, nursery or school for your child. Share the ideas here with a childminder so that the children can enjoy them during their time away from home. Good nurseries with outdoor spaces allow children to choose whether they want to be in or out throughout the session, because they know that children need to be able to learn outside as well as in. Some reception classes in schools are also able to offer this.

### Things to do in the park

- When young children get to the grassy freedom of a park they often want to just run, so take equipment like balls, skipping ropes and streamers with you that will give some purpose to their running.
- Use the park facilities. On the swings, climbing frames, slides and roundabouts, use words like 'up' and 'down', 'around', 'on top of', 'behind', 'back' and 'forwards' as children move about. Words like these only make sense if children actually feel them with their bodies.
- Show how much you enjoy the outdoors, perhaps by lying under the huge trees together, watching the sky through the leaves and talking about what you see and feel.
- Have a picnic. Children will often try new food when they eat in the open air, partly because the fresh air and exercise makes them more hungry.

- Listen to all the sounds in the park and make your own – a stick dragged along the railings can accompany your songs.
- Find out the names of the plants, trees and birds – either from books or by asking other people.
- Count squirrels and collect leaves, conkers or stones to sort and make into patterns and pictures. Take collecting jars and bags with you.
- Take a camera along and let children take some pictures of what they see, then make a simple book about your visit when you get home

Things to do when you're out and about  
There is so much to talk about when catching the bus with children, going to the shops and local market or even posting a letter. You can talk about which bus to catch, how to get there, what to buy and how much it will cost. Because children learn quickly when information is full of meaning for them, it's good to just talk about what you are doing as these everyday events are packed with good memories and knowledge.

A regular visit to the library offers the perfect chance to build an enjoyment of books and reading while also having some time outdoors. And if there is a free, local museum, it is good to pop in with young children just to see one exhibit rather than trail around the whole place.

### When to go out?

Young children need to be outside in the middle of winter just as much as they do in the summer. To make this possible, you need the right clothing – for yourself as well as the children.

Make sure you have wellies and umbrellas for wet weather, warm clothes for cold, windy days and long-sleeved lightweight tee shirts and caps for strong sunshine. The children's enthusiasm at being outside will soon help you enjoy being out in the rain.

When children need to get out and your nerves are frayed, being in a big outdoor space will make life better for both you and the children. Their time outdoors doing interesting things will

help them to digest their food and have a good sleep from being physically tired. It will make them healthier, fitter and stronger.

### Going out to play and learn

#### Useful publications and resources

Ros Bayley & Lynn Broadbent (2001)

**50 Exciting things to do outside**, Walsall: Lawrence Educational Publications

Margaret Edgington (2002) **The great outdoors: developing children's learning through outdoor experiences**, London: Early Education.

Sally Featherstone (2001) **The little book of outdoor play**, London: A&C Black

Marjorie Ouvry (2003) **Exercising muscles and minds**, London: National Children's Bureau

Helen Bilton (2004) **Playing outside** London: David Fulton

Elizabeth Matterson (1991) **This Little Puffin Puffin Toddlers outdoors & Two year olds outdoors** Siren Films Ltd: info@sirenfilm.co.uk

#### Useful contacts

Your **local garden centre** may run a gardening club. It can provide valuable help about what to plant and when.

**Mindstretchers** for wet weather clothing and interesting outdoor ideas

**National Playing Fields Association:** www.npfa.co.uk

**Wildlife Trusts:** www.wildlifetrusts.org.

Marjorie Ouvry is an independent early childhood education consultant and author, with over 30 years' experience as a teacher, Ofsted inspector, school governor and head teacher of two large nursery schools. Her book *Exercising muscles and minds* is regarded by early years professionals as essential reading on outdoor play.

## Early Education

The British Association for Early Childhood Education

### Early Education

136 Cavell Street, London E1 2JA

tel 020 7539 5400

www.early-education.org.uk

British Association for Early Childhood Education (Early Education)

### Learning together series

The Learning together series of leaflets aims to help parents and other caring adults understand children's development, play an active part in their learning and enjoy the children they spend time with. The leaflets cover a wide range of topics, including life with babies and toddlers, children's behaviour, being outdoors, drawing and writing, reading, maths, ICT and equality – and more. The leaflets can be downloaded from the Early Education website [www.early-education.org.uk](http://www.early-education.org.uk)

Early Education promotes the right of all children to education of the highest quality. It provides support, advice and information on best practice for everyone concerned with the education and care of young children from birth to eight.

