

# The power of *outdoor play*

by Anne Statham





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*the power of outdoor play,*  
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# introduction

Close your eyes and think of your own childhood play...

**Where were you?**

**What made this place special?**

**What sort of games did you play?**

Chances are that you remember playing outside in gardens, streets, fields, footpaths, parks, streams, woods and even on waste ground, in those secret spaces in between other spaces, with your friends and out of sight of adults. You probably got a bit dirty, or even wet, from first-hand experience with nature, whether it was climbing trees, building a den in the bushes, or paddling in the river.

Outdoors can be a source of surprise, curiosity and adventure for young children, and the enduring nature of these long-lasting memories, right into adulthood, is a testament to the powerful impact of experiences of playing and learning outdoors.

Research tends to agree that freedom to play outdoors is declining rapidly for many children living in both urban and rural areas. Research on children's independent mobility (the area around the home to which children can roam) suggests that it has shrunk to a ninth of what it was in the 1970s. In a short space of time, favourite places for play such as streets, fences, footpaths, open spaces and waste ground have disappeared or are now out of bounds for children.[1]

At My First Five Years, we argue that there is no substitute for the holistic learning and well-being opportunities offered to babies and young children by giving them the time and space to connect with nature as they are internally wired to do.



## a 'dose of nature'

It's important to clarify what we mean by 'outdoors', as we know families have a range of different habitats!

Outdoors is anything outside your front door, this can be the street, your garden, a balcony, patches of grass or trees alongside a playground, local wild space, or even overgrown footpaths. These are just as important as more remote, wilder areas like moors, beaches or picturesque, 'pretty' places.

A helpful way to think about it is to find a space or place where you and your child can feel the elements, find living things, see the sky and feel the earth. These are in fact the sorts of spaces many of us sought out to help our sense of well-being during the recent pandemic.



## the benefits of outdoor play

At My First Five Years, we identify six streams of child development within our app. Learning through outdoor play makes a ripple through all these streams.

### Sensory development

Outdoors is a dynamic environment, it is always changing. This engages the senses, as children receive all kinds of stimulation that is different and more varied than the more static indoors.

Changes in the weather offer sensations such as differing and moving qualities of light, dappled shade and shadows, the air might be warm or cold, you might feel a breeze or a strong wind, and there might be drizzle on your arms and face.

As the seasons change, there is so much to be curious about. Why do the leaves flutter down? How do puddles appear and disappear? Why does everything look different on a misty day?

We know that these rich, sensory, first-hand experiences are essential for babies' and young children's growing brains. The new sights, sounds, smells and textures associated with being outside spark curiosity and exploration.

For tips on creating the next generation of adventurers, check out our blog - [How to foster a love of the outdoors in your child's first year.](#)



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The natural outdoor soundscape is so varied, you can stop and listen to birdsong, hear the rustle of branches, the sound of water flowing or even the noises of animals. Children can also explore making more noise themselves, such as shouting loudly, whooping and singing, which is perhaps more likely to be discouraged indoors.

There are different perspectives to explore visually and the opportunity to look closely at details or to spot far away things. Going up to the top of a hill gives a different view of the world, your child can see things from a different perspective and look at things that are distant. Hanging upside down from the branch of a tree certainly puts a different slant on things!

### Read more about it on our blog!



There are endless different new textures and surfaces to explore. The granular feel of sand or the cold, sticky feel of mud on the toes can offer children a burst of stimulation.



Helen Tovey, Principal Lecturer in Early Childhood Studies at Froebel College, London, sums it up beautifully in her book *Playing Outdoors*.

**“We can learn about a place by touching, feeling, seeing, smelling, hearing it and responding emotionally. The connection between our senses and emotions can remain powerfully evocative throughout our lives.”**

### Cognitive development

Cognitive development is all about how our brains build, develop and process ideas and information. It helps us to develop skills such as thinking, memory, processing and understanding.

Even very young babies are motivated to respond to the range of stimuli outside. They will find lots of new things to look at when lying in the pram, being carried, or lying on their back outside. They can track clouds moving across the sky, branches dangling or moving in the breeze or leaves fluttering down.

Being outdoors offers children greater space and freedom to try things out, explore, experiment and investigate how the world works. Some things are unpredictable which gives a sense of excitement and thrill or may result in a problem needing to be solved, like how to cross a muddy puddle without getting stuck!

Outdoors offers an abundance of natural 'props' for play, like stones, rocks, branches, sticks, mud, water and leaves, along with a diversity of spaces such as slopes, caves, rivers, moorland, woodland and undergrowth. Children have freedom to investigate, change and transform these open-ended natural materials and spaces to represent their ideas, feelings and experiences.



The outdoors offers rich opportunities for imaginative and creative play. Children are often inspired to formulate and enact their own stories, incorporating found items and places within the play to represent their ideas. Children can transform a hidden space underneath a bush into a house, using leaves as plates and stones for food. This open-ended creative play involves children in symbolic thinking, which is when they use one object to stand for another.

Playful representation may include exploring aspects of the child's own day-to-day life or developing knowledge of scientific or mathematical concepts, or aspects such as pattern, shape, or symmetry.

Children are experts at finding spaces to hide, make dens and create their own secret worlds. When playing outside, you might notice the more primitive and mythological characters emerging in children's play, like wizards, dragons, trolls, and pixies.

Friedrich Froebel, a pioneering 19th century educator, argued that all children need a space they can make their own small world or 'kingdom', and that this is best chosen and created by themselves. [2]

For some great ideas of ways to support your child's cognitive development outdoors, [check out the blog on our website.](#)

## Gross and fine motor development

Outdoor spaces offer plenty of opportunity to practise motor skills for all ages. Young babies can develop their core strength and balance to sit unsupported, with the benefit of a soft grassy surface to land on if they topple over.

Older babies who are practising pulling themselves up to standing or cruising can find support and challenge, for example, holding onto a slightly wobbly tree branch or using a low wall to support themselves. The outdoors offers the additional challenge of navigating uneven or sloping surfaces. Children can test their physical skills through climbing and balancing in all sorts of ways.

Opportunities for developing fine motor skills are also abundant. Babies and young children can support their hand-eye coordination by having opportunities to reach for moving things like insects flying by, or for the long grass that tickles their legs. You can encourage children to pick up and grasp natural objects such as thin flower stems and grasses, small sticks and branches, and find smaller, heavy objects such as pebbles and rocks.



Older children often are inspired to run, jump, spin and roll in wider open spaces. A grassy field or slope offers rich opportunities for chasing each other, changing direction and developing an understanding of balance, speed and coordination.

Hills provide a perfect place to test stamina and develop balance and posture. As long as you find a hill that is not too steep, and that has a safe place to stop at the bottom, your child can practise rolling down the hill. Rolling stimulates your child's vestibular system, which helps them to maintain and control their balance and posture.

For more information about developing gross motor skills outside, check out the blog on our website –

**[Freedom, movement and space – gross motor development in a field.](#)**

## Language development

The dynamic and changing nature of the outdoors provides new opportunities for language development.

There is plenty to capture even the youngest baby's attention and this stimulation often encourages them to vocalise. Babies and young children can also enjoy

quiet and stillness and contrast this by tuning into the environmental sounds all around.

Talking about real things that interest your child in the moment when they can see, feel and hear them is a brilliant way to help them build their vocabulary. Being outside can often help remove distractions so gives your child time with you, and time to chat as you comment together on the things that you notice with them.

There's plenty of opportunity to expand vocabulary and identify the insects, plants, trees, flowers and birds that they might spot. You could find a book about birds to look up the names of the birds that you see.

Books can be enjoyed simply anywhere and there is something rather magical about taking a favourite book outside and settling down to enjoy reading in the forest, by the stream or in the local park.

**To find out more about books which are great to enjoy outdoors, check out our blog!**



**10 books that  
can be enjoyed  
outdoors**



Spending quiet time away from other distractions is a great way to bond, as you explore together all the new experiences around. By spending time outside you can pass on and foster a respect and love for nature. When we feel connected ourselves, we are unconsciously modelling this for our children. Over time, children can learn that nature can support their well-being and improve the quality of their lives and understand the importance of nurturing and protecting it.

## Social and emotional

Outdoors offers a unique environment, which is different to indoors. It provides the space and freedom to try things out and to explore and experiment, often without the constraints of indoor spaces. Indoors often feels like a space where adults are in control, but outdoors is more the child's space. This freedom from limitations often inspires children to view the potential to make the space their own, follow their own agenda and have a go at things without worrying about what might happen.

Because of its fluid nature, the outdoor space lends itself to being changed and transformed by children, giving them a sense of control and agency which is often missing in other parts of life.

The outdoors is great for discovering secret places, such as comfortable grassy seats, hollows in the sand or hills, and dens in the undergrowth that make cosy spaces where children can be still, dream, watch others or hang out with friends. This uninterrupted time which allows for reflection can be helpful for working through stress or simply being quiet and feeling safe.

## References

- [1] Tovey, H. (2007) *Playing Outdoors, Spaces and Places, Risk and Challenge*. Open University Press, Berkshire.
- [2] Tovey, H. *Outdoor play and exploration*. Froebel Trust, London. Accessed: <https://www.froebel.org.uk/uploads/documents/FT-Outdoor-Play-Pamphlet.pdf>





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