

Outdoors with your child

Ideas for teachers to share with parents

Do you remember playing outdoors when you were a child? Did you spend long days in the garden or out exploring, climbing, discovering, roaming, relaxing and getting dirty? Being outside was probably an important part of your childhood experience, and spending time outdoors is still important for children.

Children are naturally drawn to the outdoor environment and given the chance will often prefer to be out than in. Being outdoors stimulates their imagination and satisfies their curiosity. They like the multi-sensory experiences the outside offers: the smell of flowers or damp grass, the touch of pebbles, mud, leaves; the sound of the wind blowing through the trees or a stream trickling over rocks. Even in busy cities, children will find the outdoors fascinating and will want to explore.

Spending time outdoors, in your (or a friend or family's) garden, the park, at the beach, in a nearby woodland or fields with your child will add to their experience of the special nature of the outdoors. It can also be fun for you, taking you back to your own childhood. You can share some of your childhood games or take your child to some of your favourite places. Outdoors, you will find yourself free of indoor distractions, like the television or computer games, and have the opportunity to talk or sit quietly and relax.

Outdoors children don't need expensive or special resources. Often they will use their imagination, finding sticks, stones and leaves to create the props they need for their play. At the same time the freedom and space the outdoors provides naturally encourages physical play, and helps support a healthy lifestyle. It also offers a huge range of opportunities for children to learn about the world around them, helping provide them with fun and interesting experiences that will build a love of learning.

Don't be put off by the weather – instead use it to your advantage (splash in puddles, make water channels with leaves etc). And enjoy the fact that outdoors there is little or no packing up to do, and that mess can easily be cleared up or swept away!



Activity – Ice eggs

Use frozen water to create ice eggs!

What you need

- Funnel
- Balloons
- Food colouring
- Tiny toy or object of your choice

What to do

- 1 Without telling your child, use the funnel to partly fill a few balloons with water. Add two or three teaspoons of food colouring. Pull the neck of the balloons wide enough to drop in a small toy or object.
- 2 Shake the balloons slightly if you want a solid colour when frozen. If you want a slightly marbled effect try not to shake too much.
- 3 Tie the top of the balloon and put in your freezer. It normally takes around two days for the 'eggs' to completely freeze.
- 4 When they are frozen take them out and cut away the balloon. Place the 'eggs' somewhere in your garden or any outdoor area.
- 5 Explain to your child that you are going on the hunt for ice eggs – then take them outdoors and search for the eggs.
- 6 When your child finds the eggs ask them to describe what they see, feel and think about the eggs. They should be able to see that there is something frozen in the ice. Ask questions about what might come out of an ice egg. Could they draw what they think might appear?
- 7 Suggest they should create a small nest-like area to place the egg to make sure whatever is in the egg doesn't get lost
- 8 Check back regularly to see the object 'hatch' as the ice melts!

Your role

- This activity relies on a sense of adventure and wonder at the unknown. Being excited about the discovery yourself will stimulate your child's excitement, firstly about the egg itself but also about what might be inside it.
- Make sure you ask lots of questions about the egg to make use of their growing vocabulary. Questions like 'what does it feel like?' or 'does it look like anything else you've seen?' will bring this kind of language out.
- To avoid disappointment, you might want to guide your child's expectations over the type of object frozen inside the egg.

Activity – Den building

Build a shelter to survive on a desert island

What you need

- Bamboo canes
- Sheets of material or tarpaulin
- Pegs
- String
- Boxes

What to do

- 1 In your garden, local park or woodland, identify an area that would be suitable for children to use as a small den. The area should be relatively small and have shrubs or small trees that you can tie, peg or drape material on.
- 2 Set the scene by asking your child to imagine their boat ran adrift and landed on a deserted island. All they have managed to salvage are the things you have given them.
- 3 Talk about what they need to do to make sure they will survive until a rescue boat comes. Lead the conversation around to shelter and get them to think about how they might put the shelter together. Other things to consider are water, food, games to play so they don't get bored etc.
- 4 Get them to identify the space they want to use and let them reason why it is the best place.
- 5 Help them to secure the material and create the space.
- 6 Once the shelter is built you can start to explore other needs such as food, water and entertainment. Can they devise their own games to play? Where might they find food (apples on trees, berries in hedgerows etc)? How could they collect water from the rain?

Your role

- Make sure the area you have chosen is safe and appropriate for children to use. Woodlands are always great places to build dens but check the floor for dog mess, glass etc before you start. A garden is always a great and safe place to make dens.
- Children have fantastic imaginations so try to remain excited and be in their creative world with them for a while.
- Try not to guide how the shelter will be constructed but ask your child questions that will get them thinking about various problems and solutions. What does it need to do? How will it shelter them from the rain? Even better, how could it collect rain? How might it be attached and not blow away in the wind? How will you stop small animals coming in and stealing food?
- Make sure that when you have finished all items are tidied away, particularly if you are in a public area.

Activity – Ephemeral art

Use natural materials to recreate the world of a favourite story

What you need

- A large piece of string
- Your child's favourite story book

What to do

- 1 In your garden, local park or woodland, identify an area about 1m square and mark it out with a piece of string.
- 2 Explain to your child that they are going to be recreating a scene from their favourite story – this would be a good time to revisit the story together and their favourite sections.
- 3 Spend time thinking about what they want to create and the objects they could use to do it.
- 4 Ask your child to collect natural items such as bark pieces, leaves, grasses, sticks, stones, shells etc along with other man-made items they need to recreate their world.
- 5 Sort the items out into categories suggested by your child (colour, type etc).
- 6 Watch and support them as they put all of the pieces together to bring the world to life.
- 7 If you have more than one child, get them to recreate different parts of the story. When finished take a picture of the scene.

Your role

- Keep referring back to the parts of the story your child loves and suggest items they might want to use, but as much as possible give them the freedom to make choices.
- Encourage your child to use lots of adjectives (describing words) to explain how they will use each item – for example 'I want to use these stones as the river because they are shiny like water'.
- You may need to give guidance about what they are allowed to collect. For example, if you are in a public garden, it may not be appropriate to pick flowers. Explain that flowers have to stay for others to enjoy.
- Allow your child plenty of time. Children are fascinated by nature and will enjoy discovering as much as they do collecting.

This resource has been produced by Learning through Landscapes, the national charity dedicated to helping early years settings and schools create stimulating, challenging and fun outdoor learning and play experiences for your child. To find out more about what we do visit our website www.ltl.org.uk and sign up for our free newsletter, or visit our facebook page.

