

Early Years Outdoors

January 2005

Creative Play for 3 to 5 year olds



Creativity is one of the most important curriculum areas for young children and underpins all other areas of learning. It covers a wide range of opportunities and can be part of most experiences, such as music, dance, performance, all sorts of mark-making, art, den-building, construction, problem-solving and design, imaginative/pretend/role and small-world play. It supports the development of learning dispositions and life skills such as resourcefulness, symbolic thinking, planning, problem-solving, persistence, trial and error and seeing new ways of doing things. One of the most useful abilities to have in the modern world is to be creative and to take pleasure in being so.

Why take creative play outdoors?

All types of creative experience can be very effectively offered in the outdoor environment to extend and enhance what children do indoors. The special nature of the outdoor environment enables children to engage with creative play opportunities in a way not possible, or rarely possible, indoors.

Outdoors offers children:

- Space to move and to be active, and opportunities to work on a large or grand scale;
- Freedom to be more exploratory and inventive in the way they do things (involving mess, movement and noise);
- A huge range of interesting and exciting stimuli from the natural world, the local community and real experiences;

- Opportunities for collaboration with a range of group sizes and over time.

Some children find the outdoors a place where they more easily engage in creative activity, especially those who need the freedom and space to move or who need the right kind of stimulus to get involved. Experiences in this area of learning outdoors will inevitably feed in to ideas and activity indoors: the best learning takes place when the two halves of the learning environment join up.



Remember how important it is to provide activities generated by the children's own interests and ideas and in the area of creative play, this is especially important!

'Practitioners should give particular attention to: a stimulating environment in which creativity, originality and expressiveness are valued; a wide range of activities that children can respond to by using many senses; sufficient time for children to explore, develop ideas and finish working at their ideas...'



[Curriculum Guidance for the Foundation Stage p116]



SureStart



CREATIVE PLAY

LEARNING THROUGH LANDSCAPES – 01962 845811

- Collect a range of ropes and string of different thicknesses, lengths and colours; make sure to have at least one very long one (DIY stores, boat suppliers and educational suppliers are good sources).
- Twigs, leaves and other natural materials can be incorporated with satisfying effect. Beads and other shiny items will give a great deal of pleasure too.



- Providing a stage has been found by many settings to really encourage performance. This can be an area marked out by chalk; a slope or raised area of ground to provide an amphitheatre effect; a platform made with a wooden pallet; a place framed by bushes or old curtains. Audience seating can be provided using up-turned buckets or crates.
- Painting on a wall with poster paint will prompt theatre with shadows, puppets or small-world people.



Using natural and recycled materials

- Collect a variety of things to hang on branches or place over the end of twigs on trees and bushes.
- Use petals, leaves, pebbles, rocks, shells, sticks, bamboo lengths and so on for artwork, pattern making and as props in play. Feathers, dried materials and glass beads used in flower arranging also make good resources for creative play.



Drama and performance

- Collect together role play clothes (open-ended items such as hats, bags and jewellery) and lots of fabric of all shapes and sizes to dress up in and use as props – these will stimulate and support endless story creation.
- Provide a range of instruments as suggested above for music and dance and include a Karaoke machine or microphone to simulate modern singers.



- Embroidery frames in a range of sizes provide a circular stimulus in pattern-making (available from haberdashery suppliers). PE hoops and rubber quoits are also appropriate.
- Sand trays made from builder's cement-mixing trays or grow-bag trays, with fine sand of sufficient depth to stand small items in, make wonderful landscapes for patternmaking and small-world play.

Using cameras to support creative play

Photography is an art form in its own right that young children find interesting and are surprisingly competent at. Single-use cameras are robust and practical for children to use themselves. If you develop this idea you are likely to find that a digital camera is well worthwhile, and children will be fascinated to see their photographs straight away and to witness the processing of them on a computer.

Use photographs to record children's outdoor creations, which because of their scale and nature usually cannot be kept or sent home. Photographs are also an effective way of recording the process of children's engagement to share with parents; stimulating ideas in others or follow-on by the child; and looking at children's interests so can they can be further supported or extended.

Useful resources

Springy's Playbag from NES Arnold (Findel Education), developed by Learning through Landscapes.

A starter kit of some of the best small resources for movement and physical play for children aged 3-5 yrs in an easy to store and use kit bag, with curriculum guidance by LTL. It includes several resources to support creative play through movement, such as scarves, ribbons, balloons, ropes and a music CD. Very good value for money and a contribution goes to LTL for every bag sold. Telephone: 01530 418229.

Movement and Dance in Early Childhood (previously *Helping Children to Learn Through a Movement Perspective*), Mollie Davies (2003), Paul Chapman Publishing, ISBN 0761940545.

Supporting Creativity and Imagination in the Early Years, Bernadette Duffy (1998), McGraw-Hill ISBN 0335198716.

Creative ideas

There are so many possibilities for creative play outdoors that it is best to offer a variety of experiences over time (especially if your outdoor space is small). Offer one or two of the following at any one time, for as long as the interest remains.

Develop their use through child observations and team reflections as to how to either support and extend or to introduce new ideas and skills. Working from children's ideas and interests usually leads to much better involvement and learning.

Creativity with water, paint and chalk

Experiment with different surfaces and materials:

- Drape big plastic sheets over a fence (for painting on one side) or a climbing frame (so that both sides are available).
- Use paint in various consistencies for further exploration, such as using runny paint; using thick paint and then spraying with water to make the paint run; paint in the rain.
- Paint a big plastic sheet on the ground with ready-mix paint bottles and large brushes. Double the plastic over and enjoy squishing the paint around between the layers, then unfold it to observe the patterns the paint makes upon opening.
- Wallpaper can be pegged to fences for a mural or on the ground for foot printing, bike wheel painting or 'art attacking' with ready mix paint from a washing-up liquid bottle.
- Cotton sheets can be hung on fences and painted with paint in spray bottles, or squirted with dilute paint from old shampoo bottles. Felt pen markings can be sprayed with water to observe the effect.
- Chalk is a wonderful material and can be explored on all surfaces dry or wet – supply lots of it so that you do not worry about it being used up.
- Decorator's brushes of all shapes and sizes will be useful for water painting on every surface; a sturdy stepladder will enhance the experiences.
- Thick paint (add some washing-up liquid so that it washes off more easily) can be hand-printed onto surfaces around the play area.
- Squirt paint into water running down a slope, or into puddles for bike and wellie play.
- Large boards, made from marine plywood, painted with emulsion or blackboard paint and sealed with varnish, can be attached to fences and walls for large scale paint and chalk work. Make them removable if vandalism is a problem. Offering just 2 or 3 colours to work with can be a powerful experience on this scale; the size of the boards allows work with both hands at once and encourages collaborative work too.



are best) hung on hooks or from a line, will initiate much exploration of sound making using spoons as strikers.

- Obtain large metal and plastic bins to use as big drums, with sticks and brushes to strike them. Children will love the energy involved in playing them.
- Collect nursery rhymes for marching (The Grand Old Duke of York) and dancing (In and Out the Dusty Bluebells). Keep a laminated prompt sheet with your outdoor resources, so that a wide variety are introduced and regularly used.
- A maypole made from a long broom handle embedded in cement in a plastic bin, with long ribbons in rainbow colours, will be much loved.

Weaving and using string and rope

- Collect tapes, string, wool, ribbons, coloured plastic and any other weaveable materials; use your local Scrapstore or ask for donations from parents.
- Use your fences for large scale work with lengths of all sorts of materials. Supplement this with lengths of plastic and metal mesh from garden centres or building suppliers for a variety of shapes and sizes of grid.
- A roll of 1m width green garden mesh can create a den which can be decorated by several children weaving together from both inside and outside.
- Bamboo canes pushed into grass when soft will supply a frame for in-and-out work with string, cable and ropes. If set far enough apart, children will have the stronger experience of going in and out themselves as they weave.

Creative music and dance

- Collect a variety of music for children to respond to, from jigs and Samba to classical and pop. Provide mood music for imaginative play such as to create a jungle context.
- Balloons, ribbons, scarves and larger pieces of light, floaty fabric are wonderful for stimulating children to dance; when tied to soft ponytail hair-bands which can be worn on the wrists, children do not have to worry about them floating off.
- Instruments such as wrist or ankle and hand bells, castanets, maracas and hand drums encourage a range of movement exploration.
- Kitchen implements such as saucepans, jugs, and pan lids (the bigger ones from school kitchens



Creativity needs time!

The importance of sufficient time for children to explore, engage with and get deeply involved in creative activity cannot be over-emphasised. Children need to know that they will have long enough for the creative process, and then to play with their creations, in order for high quality involvement to emerge. They need long and uninterrupted periods of time everyday. They need to be able to return to a project over time and they need to be able to return to an experience at a later date. Children with enough time to really develop their ideas will be found to have strong interests in embellishing and decorating something they have made, such as a den, having played in or with it for a while.



Children need time, space and opportunities to:

- explore materials, getting to know them and what they are like (what is this; what does it do?);
- find out what they can do with the materials, and use them to do something new (how can I use it?);
- use their environment and the materials available to process and express their thoughts, feelings and ideas.

This impression – expression cycle is an important part of learning. It is possible to plan specific opportunities for expression, but spontaneous expression should also be made possible through being flexible in how you plan time, providing continuous access to resources and space, and ensuring children know they have permission from adults.



What do we need to think about regarding organisation and planning?

Be prepared to tidy up!

Creative play creates mess and disorder, and this messiness is vital to allow children the freedom to explore and be inventive in their use of materials. Staff need to be committed to the amount of tidying up a truly creative outdoor session can generate. Children can help and at this age are usually more than willing to try. Capitalise upon this to develop the expectation that children are involved in the clean-up. Once established, older children will train the younger ones into the correct routines. You may also need to think about providing old clothes or overalls (as you would use aprons inside): wet weather gear works well for wet messy play. Be prepared to change clothes and to wash children. It is important that parents understand how their child is benefiting so that they are supportive in this! Hand washing is a good routine for children to get into and can be organised easily with warm water and soap in a large bowl outside. Big towels will help when children have got particularly messy.

Creativity needs to be planned for as part of your continuous provision outdoors, just as you would indoors. If the basic materials are available all the time and children know where they are, they will gradually develop their exploration and use of them, using them in innovative and unexpected ways (this is real creativity). Specific resources can then be provided in addition, responding to current interests or shorter term planning.

Think about how to keep resources well organised (see *Groundnotes: Storage and organisation of resources*), for example using well-stocked paper trays on wheels, baskets and labelled crates. Paper trays can have basic resources such as equipment for joining things, mark-making equipment and other small, often-needed resources. Baskets can hold fabric, weaving materials, shells, stones and other natural resources.

Colour photographs of items on crates will help children to keep the resources organised. You could organise a shed (or at least a section of a shed) so that children can access resources as their need arises, as you might do for the creative workshop area indoors.

