

OUTDOOR LEARNING PROJECT
GUIDANCE FOR SCHOOLS
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Section 1

Background and Rationale

1. A key aim of the Pre-School curriculum and Foundation Stage of the Northern Ireland (NI) Curriculum is that children learn through well planned, challenging play that develops their interests, curiosity and creativity according to their individual age and stage of development.
2. The key principle underpinning the Foundation Stage Curriculum is that young children learn best when learning is interactive, practical and enjoyable. At this age, children must be given opportunities to be actively involved in practical, challenging play-based learning in a stimulating environment. There is an emphasis on balancing whole class, group and individual activities, to engage children in effective learning.
3. During the current Covid-19 pandemic, there has on the return to school been an increased focus on outdoor learning across schools and pre-schools. Providing increased opportunities for outdoor learning is a key approach for pre-schools and schools in response to guidance from the Public Health Authority and the Department of Education around maximising the use of outdoor space to promote learning, health and well-being during the COVID-19 pandemic.
4. For the vast majority of children, the opportunity to play outside when not in school is in decline. Parents are increasingly reluctant to let children play outside unsupervised. A number of studies have further shown that school closures and closed community and grassroots sports facilities during the two periods of lockdown had a major impact on mental and physical health, with many children having reduced level of physical activity. Even when there is an opportunity for outdoor play, many children increasingly shun this in favour of more sedentary pastimes, particularly spending time on phones, tablets, computers and games consoles. The decline in outdoor play outside school is well researched and documented across a significant number of studies.
5. The lack of opportunity and inclination to undertake physical activity outside has been shown by numerous studies to have a negative impact on both the health and development of children. These studies do show, however, that children who do participate in outdoor play benefit in many ways and these can have both long term and short term benefits for the child.

Benefits of Outdoor Play

6. At pre-school and primary school, the outdoor area provides young children with one of the best possible environments in which to learn. All the areas of learning across the curriculum can be achieved outside while the children's long-term social, emotional and mental health are being enhanced.
7. The main benefits of outdoor play and learning are detailed below.
 - One of the biggest benefits of outdoor play is that it can make children physically healthier. Playing outside, where there is more space, enables them to be more active. Outdoor play also supports the development of gross motor skills including walking, jumping, kicking, throwing and lifting. Gross motor skill development is crucial because it forms the basis for fine motor skill development.
 - There are also well documented mental health benefits from outdoor play. One of the main recommendations for people with depression and anxiety is to take part in physical activity as it increases endorphins and reduces stress. Getting children to do physical activity can be a way to keep children mentally healthy so that these problems do not arise in the first place.
 - Outdoor play also has a significant impact on learning. Many of the key learning skills set out in the NI Curriculum are developed and honed through playing outside. These include collaboration, resilience, concentration and focus.
 - One of the most important things about outdoor play is that it is generally unstructured and this is ideal for letting children use their imaginations and develop their creativity. This is especially important for younger children who benefit enormously from taking part in roleplay to learn about the world in which they live.
 - Outdoor play provides the opportunity for assessed risky freedom, where children can play and socialise freely and use their own imagination and initiative.

Principles of Outdoor Play

8. A number of key principles underpin the delivery of high quality outdoor play in the Early Years:

- Indoors and outdoors need to be viewed as one combined and integrated environment.
- Indoors and outdoors need to be available to the children simultaneously.
- Outdoors is an equal player to indoors and should receive planning, management, evaluation, resourcing, staffing and adult interaction on a par with indoors.
- Outdoors is both a teaching and learning environment.
- Outdoor design and layout needs careful consideration.
- The outdoor classroom offers children the opportunity to utilise effective modes of learning – play, movement and sensory experience.
- Children need versatile equipment and environments.
- Children need to be able to control, change and modify their environment.
- Staff have to be supportive toward outdoor play

Section 2

Outline of Outdoor Learning Project

What is the Outdoor Learning Project?

9. In order to further promote the delivery of the curriculum outdoors, the Department is providing additional funding to pre-schools, nursery schools and primary schools to purchase outdoor play equipment to enhance curriculum delivery outdoors.

10. The Outdoor Learning Project will support the delivery of high quality creative and innovative outdoor play and learning experiences for all children. It should be particularly noted that for high quality outdoor play to be fully implemented children need versatile equipment and environments.

11. The type of equipment purchased could include:
 - horticulture equipment including gardening tools and resources, mini greenhouses, composters and bug hotels,
 - games equipment such as ball towers, cones, balls, parachutes, skills equipment; bikes, scooters
 - creative and musical equipment such as outdoor whiteboards and chalkboards and musical equipment including chimes, triangles and drums;
 - seating such as play tables, benches and chairs including nature inspired outdoor seating;
 - large movement/trim trail equipment such as rope walks, suspension bridges, balance benches, small slides and climbing frames;
 - role play equipment such mud kitchens or role play shops;
 - water and sand trays.

Project Aim

To limit any long-term adverse impact of the COVID-19 lockdowns through enhancing outdoor spaces and providing outdoor play equipment that will support the delivery of high quality creative and innovative outdoor play and learning experiences for all children in pre-school, nursery and primary school.

Project Objectives

12. The objectives of the project are to:

- Increase the use of creative outdoor spaces for play and learning opportunities for all children.
- Increase children's physical; mental health and wellbeing and social interaction, through high quality outdoor play and learning.
- Support pupils to increase their motivation, engagement, resilience, self-esteem and confidence, through better engagement in play.
- Support and enhance pupils' development including personal capabilities and managing risks in safe outdoor spaces.
- Build capacity within the educational workforce to make better use of the space available for creative and innovative opportunities for outdoor play and learning.

Section 3

Eligibility and Financial Arrangements

Which schools can access the project?

13. All pre-schools, nursery schools and primary schools in Northern Ireland will be provided with varying levels of funding to provide additional outdoor play equipment. Funding will range from a minimum of £1,000 for pre-schools, nursery and primary schools with less than 100 pupils to £2,500 for those with more than 600 pupils. The allocation of funding is based on the size of each primary school (based on 2020/21 enrolments including nursery units) as detailed below. A spreadsheet detailing all allocations has been provided.

Primary Schools Pupil Enrolment	Amount per school £
0-100	1,000
101-300	1,500
301-600	2,000
600+	2,500
Pre-school / Nursery School	1,000

Section 4 - Monitoring, Reporting and Evaluation

What are the targets for the Outdoor Learning Project and how will it be evaluated?

14. There are no specific targets for the project in terms of system wide outcomes.
Rather the focus of the project is to help limit any long-term adverse impact of the COVID-19 lockdown through the development and enhancement of existing outdoor spaces that will support the delivery of high quality creative and innovative play and learning experiences for all children in pre-schools and primary schools.
15. It will be for settings to identify their own intended outcomes and associated success criteria and to monitor and evaluate the impact of the project using internal assessment systems, including the use of teacher recording and observation to monitor use of the new equipment.
16. Fundamentally, it is for settings to decide how to best utilise project funding within the aims and objectives of the project in order to maximise positive outcomes for their pupils. There is no prescriptive or suggested ideal model for what the project delivery should look like or specific parameters for settings to follow, such as an exclusive focus on particular groups of pupils, year groups, or particular Areas of Learning.
17. Settings are encouraged to explore creative and innovative approaches to outdoor learning, in deciding how to utilise the funding to address pupil needs. Settings know their pupils best and have autonomy and flexibility to use their professional judgement to decide upon relevant priorities and which pupils and year groups will be the focus of the project. This will be based on each setting's unique circumstances and assessment of particular needs.
18. Whilst it is anticipated that the project may reveal improvements in such things as building pupil confidence, increasing levels of motivation and engagement, enhancing pupil attitudes to learning, encouraging school creativity and innovation as well as assessing individual pupil progress in learning, this will be determined at setting level.
19. Settings will be required to complete a short Project Outline Plan which captures of key information in respect of the project, particularly the resources that the funding will purchase, how the resources are being used and the intended increase in the quality and/or quantity of outdoor play as a result. Schools will subsequently be

required carry out an evaluation of impact at the end of the 2021/22 academic year. The Department will also commission ETI to provide a short evaluation of impact in a sample of settings.

Section 5 – Useful Resources

A range of resources are available to assist settings implement outdoor learning and play. Links to these are listed below.

Staff from the Department Sponsor Team are also available to assist with questions in relation to the project. School Improvement Team can be contacted via email at: DEsit@education-ni.gov.uk

Resources

- **CCEA – Learning Outdoors in the Early Years** <https://ccea.org.uk/downloads/docs/cceaasset/Curriculum/Learning%20Outdoors%20in%20the%20Early%20Years.pdf>

- **Eco-Schools NI**

<https://eco-schoolsni.org/eco-schoolsni/documents/007123.pdf>

- **Learning through Landscapes (LtL)**

LtL are a leading UK-based charity dedicated to enhancing outdoor learning and play for children

<https://www.ltl.org.uk/free-resources/>

- **The Muddy Puddle Teacher- Outdoor Continuous Provision Training** <https://themuddypuddleteacher.co.uk/>

- **Northern Ireland Forest School**

Association <https://www.communityni.org/organisation/northern-ireland-forest-schoolassociation>

- **Outdoor Classroom Day**

Outdoor Classroom Day is a global movement to inspire and celebrate outdoor play and learning, at home and at school.

<https://outdoorclassroomday.org.uk/resources/lesson-ideas/>

- **School Outdoor Learning**

<https://schooloutdoorlearning.com/curriculum-linked-resources/>

- **Teach Outdoors- online training**

<https://www.teachoutdoors.co.uk/>

- **The Conservation Volunteers**

<https://www.tcv.org.uk/northernireland/>

- **The Early Years Training Hub- Developing High Quality Outdoor Play Provision** <https://www.theearlyyearstraininghub.co.uk/>

- **The Education People- Strategic Improvement Visit- Outdoor Provision** <https://www.theeducationpeople.org/>

- **The Great Outdoors- Developing Children's Learning through Outdoor Provision** <https://www.early-education.org.uk/great-outdoors>

- **The Outdoor Teacher- Training Resources**

<https://www.theoutdoorteacher.com/courses>

- **TT Education** - The School Improvement Company- Creative Outdoor Learning through Outdoor Learning- live stream or recorded training

<https://www.tteducation.co.uk/cpd-courses-inset/other-curriculum/creativeoutdoor-learning/>