

Outdoor Health and Safety

Health, Safety and Managing Risk

To ensure children (and adults) have **successful and positive experiences outdoors**, it's important to take time to reflect on all aspects of health and safety in the outdoor environment. Practitioners need to be given **time** and **training** to ensure that they are fully equipped and aware of how to **keep themselves** and **children safe** when outdoors, managing and **reducing any risks effectively**.

When considering your outdoor environment, it is worth considering how **best to organise the space** according to the **needs of the children** as well as ensuring that your outdoor space is **age appropriate, suitable and fit for purpose**.

Finding systems and processes that are suitable for your setting are vital to keep everyone **safe** and **ready to play, explore and learn in nature**. It is the intention of this resource to support you with considering many of the aspects that should be considered.

If you are looking for support and inspiration for the outdoors, explore this [Outdoor PowerPoint Pack](#).



Managing Risks

It is vital that **children are kept safe at all times**. Settings must thoroughly consider how they will keep children safe while they access the outdoors, including the mud kitchen, gardening and wild areas. As well as **identifying hazards, potential risks** and considering what **control measures** could be introduced to ensure children are kept safe while they explore and play, it is useful to identify the benefits of an activity.

A **risk-benefit assessment** provides a **balanced approach** to assessing risks by **considering the benefits of the activity** as well as **weighing up any risks** involved. Much of the information that will be included in a risk-benefit assessment will be the same as that on a risk assessment. The main difference between the two is that, in a risk-benefit assessment, **benefits will be highlighted** to enable adults to view risky play activities in a more positive light.

Risk-benefit assessments are **extremely useful** in the context of **outdoor learning and risky play**. Considering the benefits as well as the risks can enable an exciting and adventurous activity to take place rather than preventing it.

You may find this [Risk-Benefit Assessment](#) guidance and form useful.



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Children's Safety Outdoors

There are lots of things to consider when children are playing outdoors in order to support children's safety and wellbeing. Clothing, handwashing and the importance of risky play are explored further below.

Clothing

Children love to explore the outdoors but it can often involve mud, mess and water! Depending on the season and weather, **keep children warm and dry** by following the advice on this [Dressing for the Outdoors Handout](#). All-in-one waterproof outfits, dungarees and wellies are the perfect clothing choices!



In addition to considering how clothing will keep children warm and dry, you may wish to consider **brightly-coloured outdoor outfits** and **reflective strips** so that children can be **seen easily** - this is particularly useful when **taking children off-site**.

Lastly, always be aware of **toggles, straps and hoods** as these can become **caught** on play equipment and branches.

Handwashing

This is an **essential** part of the process when playing and exploring outside. Make sure you **establish routines for handwashing** when using your outdoor continuous provision, **providing handwashing facilities that are nearby and easily accessible**.



Risky Play

Risky play often happens in the outdoor environment and gives children the opportunity to **challenge themselves**. It is important to help children to **push their boundaries, judge a situation** and **consider their actions**, helping them to **navigate risk and keep themselves safe**.

Risky play is seen to be an **exciting activity** that **involves a physical risk** and provides an opportunity to **test limits**.

Refer to this [Risky Play Handout](#) for further information regarding the benefits of risky play and children's involvement of managing their own risks.



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Being Safe with Messy Materials

The outdoor environment offers children the opportunity to explore all weathers and seasonal delights, as well as the chance to interact with messy materials. Children can benefit greatly from interacting with a range of different materials as long as attention has been given to potential hazards and control measures. Let's explore the use of soil, mud, sand and water in further detail.

Soil

There is much research to say that 'mud' is safe to use and that having contact with soil is beneficial in helping to develop **healthy immune systems**. However, soil can contain harmful bacteria, especially when contaminated with animal faeces. Therefore, it is advisable to purchase **topsoil** to set up gardening and mud kitchen areas rather than using soil from gardens. Using bought topsoil will not only **eliminate the risk of animal faeces**, but it should also be **free of small stones** that can present as a choking hazard with young children.



Consider how to keep your soil (and sand) safe and uncontaminated in between sessions. You may decide to **cover the area** to prevent animal visitors. Ensure you have completed **daily checks of soil and sand areas** for animal faeces before children explore. The key here is to ensure that the area is always **carefully managed and maintained**.

Sand

Sand areas are a brilliant resource in the outdoors and can be accessed all year round. Before you embark on creating a wonderful sand area, please consider the following:

- ▶ **Does your sandpit drain properly?** If this is not the case, sandpits can become saturated with water which then stagnates and becomes harmful.



- ▶ **How will you provide shade over the sandpit in summer?** Children tend to play in sand areas for prolonged periods of time. Will your sand area be placed under cover, near trees or will you provide shade from temporary covers to protect children from direct sunlight?

- ▶ **How will you clean up sand spillage?** Maybe consider ways to introduce children's awareness of their responsibility in keeping each other safe. Provide child-sized brooms and dustpan/brushes nearby and children will enjoy the responsibility of helping to clean up.

- ▶ **How will you prevent sand contamination, considering the weather elements as well as leaves, dirt and bark?**

- ▶ If you are planning on covering your sandpit, **how will you allow for natural aeration?**

- ▶ **What cleaning/disinfection procedures will you have in place?** If your sand is used frequently, you will need to consider a clear schedule of how to aerate, disinfect, top up and replace the sand. If you disinfect the sand, then you will need to keep children away from the sand for a day or so.

- ▶ Ideally, handwashing facilities are best placed near to your sandpit. Will this be possible? If not, **how will you ensure that children and adults wash their hands before/after sand play?**

Water

Children love water play in all weathers and what better way to explore water than in the outdoors!

There are many things to take into account when setting up a safe water area, such as the age of children, the physical space and routines.

When preparing for water play, keep in mind the following:

- ▶ Where water collects in the outdoor area to prevent children from accessing **stagnant water**.



- ▶ **Water temperature** - Monitor the water temperature to avoid water that is too hot or too cold. A good idea is to have a thermometer available to use.
- ▶ **Spillages** which might cause slips or trips.
- ▶ **Safety rules** to use with children in the water area and consistent use with all practitioners.
- ▶ Ensure **babies are fully supervised**. Adapt the water play by providing shallow bowls of water rather than a whole water tray.
- ▶ If adding **messy materials to water**, such as colouring and bubble mixture, **ensure they are non-toxic** and safe for children to use. Remember young children's skin is much more sensitive.
- ▶ **Check water areas and equipment** used in the water area on a daily basis, to ensure it is safe and that nothing is damaged or broken.
- ▶ Have **procedures in place to prevent children from playing in wet clothing**. You may consider waterproof weather outfits, aprons, rolling up sleeves or waterproof gloves for sensitive skin. Practitioners need to be vigilant ensuring that they help children who become wet and cold to change and dry themselves to prevent sore skin.
- ▶ **Direct sunlight** - Be aware of how long the area will be in direct sunlight as children can play happily in water for hours. Consider how to shade the area on sunny days.
- ▶ If using **taps, hoses or sprinklers on hot days**, ensure they are **run thoroughly before children have access**. This will run through any stagnant water in the system. In addition, pack away hoses and do not leave in direct sunlight. Hose water has been known to be scalding if left holding any residue water in direct sun.



Herbs, Plants and Digging

Have a **designated patch** where children can **dig, pick herbs, flowers or leaves**. Make sure all staff are **aware of what plants you have in your patch**. **Plant identification** is very important to ensure they are all safe to be touched. For example, some plants are skin irritants so make sure you have researched this in advance! A useful idea is to **provide** adults with **photographs of seasonal plants** to be aware of growing in your patch and place them outside for everyone to become aware of. For any plants that are **not to be picked or touched** by adults and children, **place flags, cones or 'do not touch' signs next to them**.



In addition, it is important when accessing natural resources to talk to children about their **responsibility and role in protecting and conserving the natural environment**. Encourage children to **leave areas as they found them** and in **digging and picking areas** support children to **become mindful of how much they are taking**.

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Outdoor Equipment Safety

In the outdoor environment, children will have access to a range of tools, equipment and play structures. Regular checks, inspections and maintenance as well as considering safe storage is essential.

Play Value

When considering what play equipment, tools and materials you have available in your outdoor play spaces, it is worth keeping in mind



their '**play value**'. Focusing on play value ensures you are **keeping in mind the quality and variety of experiences** by offering **open-ended, challenging and exciting opportunities** for children. To achieve optimum play value, **safety has to be considered**.

Tools and Equipment

Outdoor areas, such as the mud kitchen and gardening areas, tend to include a variety of **tools and items that can potentially be harmful**. The best guidance is to **involve the children** when introducing new resources, **modelling how to use them safely** and effectively. In addition, it is important that children learn how to **store them safely** to reduce any injuries, such as trips and falls.

Tools and equipment (including pots, pans and utensils in the mud kitchen area) need to be **checked regularly** to ensure they are **fit for purpose** as well as being **washed and dried thoroughly**. To avoid them rusting, it is advisable to store them in open wire racks or **hang them on hooks** so that they can **drain and prevent water stagnating**. Another tip is to wipe around the metal surfaces with a little cooking oil. This will prevent mould from building up and avoid rusting.

Second-Hand Equipment

Health and safety is very important to bear in mind when sourcing and using second-hand resources to ensure they are **properly cleaned and sanitised** before use. Check that all resources are **intact** and that there are **no sharp or broken elements** that could catch or cause injuries.



Structures and Play Areas

Settings have a **responsibility to regularly check children's play areas** as well as tools, resources and equipment to ensure they are safe and fit for purpose. You must always consider these in your risk assessments or risk-benefit assessments, regularly checking and inspecting for **faults, dangers and breakages**. If any equipment becomes unsafe or unsuitable, you will need to remove or prevent children from using them to ensure any risks are removed or minimised.

Settings will have a **designated person in charge of health and safety**. However, it is **everyone's responsibility** to ensure that areas are safe for children to access. **Establish daily routines to check play areas** and consider any environmental/seasonal changes. For example, assess whether the play structures are safe for children to access on damp, wet or icy days.



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Off-Site Outdoor Safety

Taking children off-site to explore their local area, community and green spaces is a wonderful way to encourage **children's interactions, widen their experiences** and ultimately **establish a relationship and sense of responsibility to care for the world around them**. Whether you are taking a walk to the park, shops, playground or visiting a local woodland or beach, safety is paramount to ensure these experiences are positive.

When taking children off-site, the key is to plan thoroughly. You might want to do the following:

- ▶ Check that you are **allowed to access the land** that you are visiting. If you are regularly visiting a site, **seek permission** for use as well as ensuring you have the correct **public liability and insurances** in place.
- ▶ Ensure you have considered **ratios**. It is advisable to find extra adults to help with off-site visits.
- ▶ You must have staff with the correct **first-aider qualifications**.
- ▶ Complete a **risk-benefit assessment or risk assessment** and ensure everyone is aware of all the different hazards and control measures that are set in place.
- ▶ Ensure you have an **emergency plan** and **evacuation procedure** as well as a **lost child procedure** in place. All practitioners should be aware of these plans and be fully briefed in their role and responsibilities in an emergency situation.
- ▶ **Prepare children** (and their families) thoroughly before heading away from the setting. For young children, investing time in preparing them

means they will feel confident, comfortable and reassured therefore able to enjoy the experience. Prepare children by checking they will have suitable clothing, make them aware of the space they are travelling to, explore boundaries and learn how to gather and come together quickly.

- ▶ **Walk the route** to the off-site space you are visiting to establish the hazards and the safest places to travel with young children. Ensure you are aware of **road safety** and the **Green Cross Code**.
- ▶ Complete a [Daily Outdoor Site Risk Check](#) once you have reached your destination.
- ▶ Leaders need to **consider, prepare and pack suitable equipment and resources** for an off-site visit. You may wish to refer to the 'general equipment resources' list in this [Outdoor Resources](#) [handout](#).
- ▶ It is important to have thought about **procedures, facilities and equipment that may be needed for toileting** when taking children off-site.



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