

Whatever the weather



Melanie Pilcher, quality and standards manager at the Alliance, shares ideas for getting outdoors and being active with children at your provision, whatever the weather throws at you...

With so few hours of daylight and many days of rain, ice and wind, the temptation to stay indoors all winter and wait for spring to arrive is quite compelling. But there is a very strong argument for getting children outside and active in the winter months.

Little bodies and minds need fresh air and exercise whatever the season. Too much time spent on the sofa, looking at screens and eating snacks mean that many children will not meet the NHS' recommended three hours of daily exercise and could exceed the WHO's recommended limit of one hour of sedentary screen time each day.

Even in the gloomy days of winter, getting outside and exposed to sunlight helps our bodies to make vitamin D, which keeps bones, teeth and muscles healthy.

While the restrictions of 2020 and 2021 may feel like a distant memory, the impact of the pandemic on children's health and development is still with us. As such, it's still worth reflecting

on the benefits of being outdoors for children's mental health and wellbeing and how spending time connecting with nature in a natural environment can help to redress that balance.

Outdoor spaces can offer everything that children really need for their physical and mental wellbeing. Even better, we know that being outdoors as much as possible is still the recommended option for everyone at this time.

Get mindful

What better way to start the day than with some outdoor mindfulness? Mornings can be stressful times in a busy family with siblings going off to school and parents prepping for work. By the time children arrive at a setting, their stress levels may already be high. Slow things down and get outside as soon as you can to try these mindful exercises:

- Walk slowly and carefully, listening to the scrunch of leaves on the ground or the soft squelch of mud. Encourage the children to listen to the sounds that their feet make on the grass, earth or pavement.

- Stand still and close your eyes, tune in to the sounds of traffic, the whistle of the wind or the patter of raindrops. Are there any birds singing?
- If it is cold, breathe in through your nose and out through your mouth. What can the children see? Focus on deep breathing for a minute or two and watch the vapour clouds that are formed as children exhale.
- Focus on a particular tree, shrub, leaf or maybe a dew-encrusted cobweb. Look carefully, noting every detail.

Get moving

Some children will have travelled to your setting by car, public transport or buggy – they could have been sitting for 30/40 minutes before being dropped off. First thing at the start of your session is a good time to gather the children together so that your first activity of the day is morning exercise while they are still in their outdoor attire.

Obviously, you need to risk assess the condition of your outdoor surfaces. Slippery pavements would be chaotic if you wanted to skip and run, but even icy puddles require balance and coordination as children use their gross motor skills to stay upright.

Don't forget to join in and lead by example. One of the main reasons why practitioners are often reluctant to go outside at this time of year is that standing and doing nothing leads to boredom and potential hypothermia! If you are active and motivated, the children will be too.

Get muddy

Mud is great at any time of the year. Studies have shown that muddy play supports children's healthy immune systems and is a mindful activity, as the focus is on the properties of the mud.

Observe the mud carefully and focus on what it consists of. Children may be able to spot sand, small stones, fine roots or leaf mulch. Encourage older children to look for signs of life as even in the winter some plants will be emerging.



Get meteorological

Our ever-changing weather is one of the reasons why it is always a favourite topic of conversation amongst adults. "Will it rain later? Has there been a frost? Is there snow forecast?" These are all phrases that children will hear. A study of the sky each day offers so many opportunities for learning.

Look at the shape, colour and movement of the clouds and discuss what they signify. Discover the direction of the wind by making your own windsock or look for signs that the weather is changing. For example, the way that cows or sheep are said to lie down before it rains or some plants will close their leaves on a cold day.

Being curious about the weather helps children to connect to the natural world which, in turn, stimulates an awareness of their environment and their place in it.