

Introduction to nature and play

**Happy
By Nature**

A daily dose of nature for every child



**Learning
through
Landscapes**

What do we mean by nature-based play?

While all play has benefits to children, play in a natural setting offers particular benefits. Outdoors alongside nature, away from an adult's gaze, there is a strong sense of freedom that encourages a more imaginative, creative and unique style of play. The numerous and ever-changing natural resources, like sticks, sand and pebbles, and geographical features like trees and hills, are non-prescriptive. Their uses are only limited by a child's imagination.

This toolkit explores how nature-based play can enhance creativity, imagination, knowledge and skills whilst also improving physical and emotional health.

Nature-based play can...



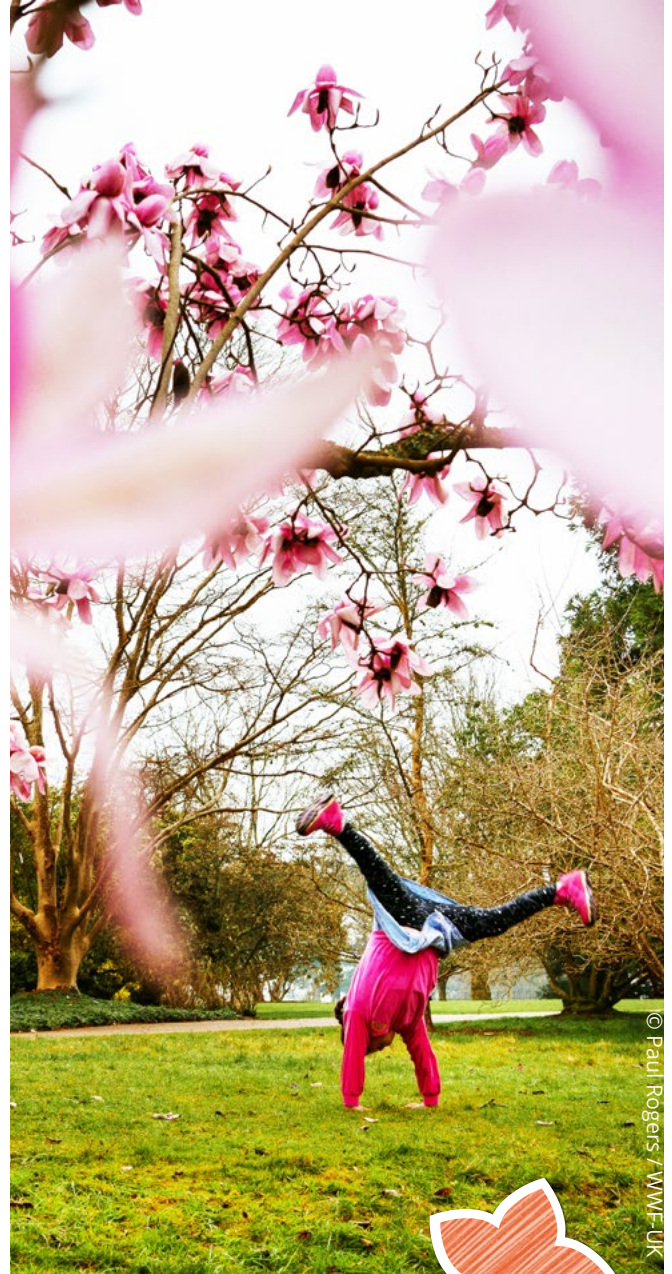
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Why do children need nature?

We are starting to understand more clearly just how significant regular access to nature is for children's health and wellbeing. There's now a wealth of research highlighting that outdoor learning in a school environment can improve children's health and happiness and lower stress for children and teachers. It's also good for educational outcomes: Greener school grounds have been linked to better learning processes, concentration and motor skills.

Nature also needs children. Young people's shrinking experiences of nature is leading to a decreased awareness of the natural world. Most children can recognise big brand logos far more readily than the leaves of the UK's main tree species. It's not just knowledge about nature that suffers from a lack of first-hand experience; if children don't have these experiences, they will grow up without any real sense of emotional connection with nature. What children don't experience, they can't connect with and won't value.



Why does play matter?

Play is how we learn without being taught – a more intuitive type of learning than a more formal environment might offer. Play is essential to healthy human development. Many things that are learnt through play cannot be learned any other way.

Play fulfils a variety of different developmental needs, supporting a holistic approach to children's learning:

Physical Development



The desire to run, jump, crawl, climb, balance and swing is natural and if the opportunity is there, these activities will form part of their play. Research shows that physical activities and movement can improve coordination, increase bone density and muscle growth, and develop strength, agility and endurance. All of these things are essential for the child's development, but also for their physical health in adulthood.

Social Development



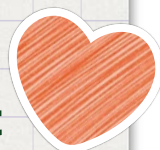
Children need to play with others to understand tolerance, sharing, respect and empathy. Co-operation in play is key in helping humans form connections with each other. Play encourages trust and vulnerability.

Cognitive Development



Through play, children discover, explore and understand the world they live in. They will begin to understand the relationship between cause and effect and how their own behaviour impacts their environment. Play increases resilience by supporting us to memorise new skills, increase our attention span and solve problems – even as adults!

Emotional Development



Play reduces stress and helps regulate strong emotions. It brings joy, providing a safe space for children to role play and, in turn, experience a range of different feelings. Play can trigger the release of natural, 'feel-good' hormones such as dopamine, oxytocin and endorphins.

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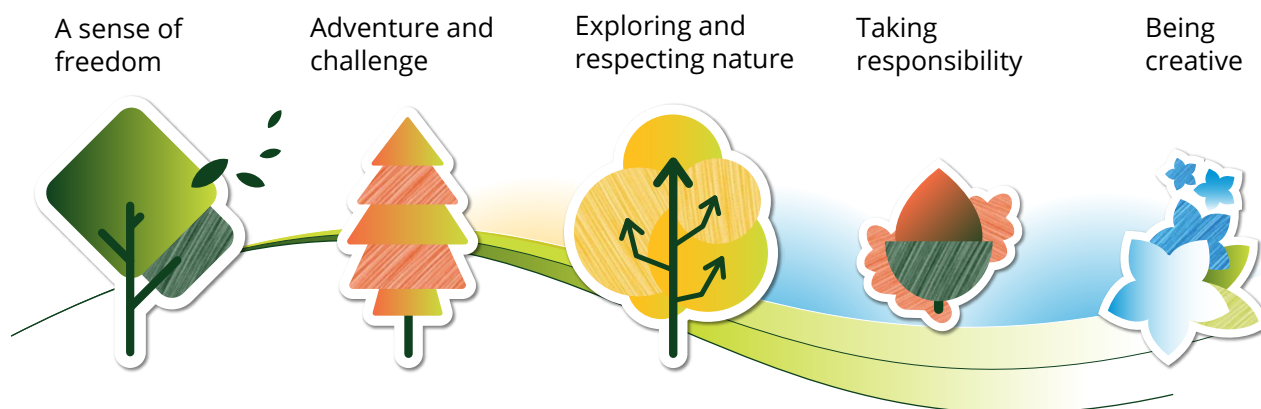
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Nature-based play spaces mean the child is empowered to take control of their own choices. Children can run, jump, swing, hide, climb, take risks, get wet, explore, build dens, get dirty, dig, invent games, pretend, talk, sit or relax.

Bringing nature into your school grounds – and encouraging children to engage with it – will offer incredible play value, educational opportunities and fun!

Large or small, natural play spaces always offer a range of resources that can support children's creativity such as sticks, leaves, pebbles, mud, seed pods and puddles. A bit of imagination can extend these play opportunities even further with minimal investment from adults. Think about encouraging scavenger hunts, simple mud kitchens or den building. Visit our Happy By Nature digital hub for many more ideas for nature-based play and learning outdoors (www.wwf.org.uk/get-involved/schools/happy-by-nature).

Nature-based play is all about...



Taking the chance to play in nature will develop a multitude of life skills within pupils, such as being able to assess risks for themselves. They can think critically about how to dress appropriately and manage different terrains in wet and dry weather. They will also practise vital soft skills: teamwork, co-operation, problem solving, empathy and looking after each other.



Playtime supervision

The kind of play environment described here is different to the current norm in many schools and calls for a different approach to playground supervision.

Children can play without needing to be organised by adults, but children need adults to provide good-quality play opportunities. There is a need for access to these high-quality environments. Children need time to be given to play and peers to play with. It is therefore important that the adults involved understand the value and purpose of nature-based play and how to provide it. Only then will we ensure the maximum benefits are provided to the children.

Instead of policing play, the role of the adult changes to a facilitator who:

- provides an environment that has lots of play possibility
- selects what materials/spaces will be available for a particular play session
- creates an environment where children feel empowered to take control and direct play
- involves children in the development of a minimum set of basic rules of conduct, especially relating to safety and mutual respect
- stands back, allowing children to lead their play
- resists the temptation to suggest activities or mediate in disputes
- observes closely, gaining an understanding of what is happening – not just what children are physically doing but what is going on in their minds and relationships as they do it – and what the impact of this is on children
- understands what is happening, informing future decisions about resources, materials and boundaries etc.
- encourages children to take responsibility for managing materials – including tidying up and storage
- intervenes – but only when absolutely necessary for children's welfare.

Although playground supervisors often express understandable concerns at the start of this process, with appropriate management support and time to plan properly, most develop their own common-sense approaches to managing this kind of play. Crucially, most breaktime supervisors quickly appreciate the benefits to children when

they see them playing in these ways. Most even report that there are less incidents of poor behaviour and play times become calmer. A breaktime should be an enjoyable and valuable experience for both the children and adults – this can be achieved with a greater understanding of the purpose of play.

Naturally inclusive

The quality of natural school grounds can either support children with additional needs or make life more difficult for them. Well-designed school grounds can enrich the school experience for many pupils with additional support needs. For example, children with sensory impairments experience more sensory stimulation outdoors than indoors, while children with behavioural issues often respond well to opportunities to be more physically active and adventurous.



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Nature-based play can...



Children who find it difficult to interact socially tend to mix more readily when there is a wider range of play opportunities on offer, while children who struggle with classroom learning often do well in more practical outdoor situations.

Designing inclusive grounds isn't about ensuring that every feature is accessible to every child all of the time, but that most experiences are accessible to most children most of the time. For example, how can children with additional needs have access to adventure, calm, play, nature and gardening? How can this be done in a way that encourages children with different abilities to enjoy the outdoors together?

Your nature-based play journey – top tips

When you are ready to increase the nature-based play in your school grounds use these top tips to help you on your journey:



Every school site can provide opportunities for children to play in nature



Engage your pupils to find out what they will enjoy – they will always have the best ideas!



Introducing a few natural resources, such as logs and sticks, pebbles and water, is a great way to start



Provide support for whoever supervises the play so that they can ensure playtime is the best it can be



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