

Mastering ICT

Used properly, technology can introduce added dimensions to children's outdoor play – so let's not get it wrong, says **Juno Hollyhock...**

I went to the National Gallery recently and was amazed to see how many people were taking photographs of the paintings, something that I thought was not allowed. Indeed, many were taking 'selfies' standing in front of such works as Van Gogh's *Sunflowers*, thereby obscuring most of the actual painting, much to the annoyance of people like me trying to have a proper look. It was not only frustrating, it also seemed pointless. If you want a digital picture of a work of art you can find it easily enough on the Internet. Focusing solely on taking the photograph must have detracted from the potential of the experience. Many did not take the time to stand and observe but just moved on to the next painting. The only consolation is the high number of these selfies that now have an image of my husband in photo-bombing mode as he sought to manage his frustration in a more creative way...

This is a lesson for when we think about using ICT in the outdoors for children's learning and play. If we focus on the use of the device and not how it might enhance and enrich the out-of-doors experience then we are missing the point. We do not want our children to experience nature and the environment through a lens, however good that lens might be.

Being outside can add new dimensions and offer a richness of landscape and inspiration. More room to play and move about, less restriction on noise, more scope for self-directed play are all great reasons to be outside. Using ICT creatively outdoors can open up the opportunity for a wealth of new activities.

Personal, social and emotional development (PSED) in the Early Years Foundation Stage is particularly supported by the use of ICT outside. Through creative learning and play supported by ICT, children can develop a range of key skills, from problem solving, team working and taking responsibility, to watching, listening, choosing and reflecting.

Children can also be more deeply involved in assessing what they have learned, and how, by using ICT to play back their experiences through sound, film or still images.

So what sort of technology can we take outside?

On a dry day, pretty much anything that you can use inside can go outside, as long as there is some kind of power source – battery-powered devices are the most



flexible and have less health and safety hazards, such as trailing cables, associated with them. PAT testing applies to anything that has to be plugged in – so if your device is rechargeable then the re-charging unit would need to be PAT tested.

In wet weather, devices will need to be protected in some way, and it is not appropriate to use mains-powered devices unless they are specifically set up for this purpose.

A pragmatic approach suggests that things are more likely to be damaged when being used outside, so making use of older/more dated equipment is a good way to recycle effectively and also not incur huge costs for replacements should little Marcus decide to see if the camera can fly like a birdie... Do, of course, check that any recycled devices are safe to use.

Remember, it's not just about cameras – there's so much more that can be used effectively in the outdoors. To give you a snapshot, consider the following:

- Microscopes
- Music mats
- Microphones
- Tablets
- Tape recorders
- Video recorders
- Mobile phones
- Webcams
- Walkie-talkies
- Metal detectors
- Mechanical toys (drills, etc.)
- Lights
- Overhead projectors
- Bee Bot scanners and robots
- Temperature/humidity sensors
- Timed irrigation systems

There are multitudes of ways in which these devices can be used to enhance learning and play. They can help children to develop enhanced senses of place and time as they record the change in the seasons, film the stages in plants' growth or watch and record birds coming to and from a feeding station.

They can feed the need for exploration and discovery, as children find metal objects using their detectors, working as a team using walkie talkies in a hide-and-seek game, or giving an outside broadcast from a secret den.

They can provide a source of creative design – leaves placed on an overhead projector in a dark corner, coloured lights providing a display in the late afternoons in the winter months, photographs providing materials for collages.

ICT is our tool and not our master. Used effectively, it can enhance and deepen and add richness to experiences. Used badly, it will place a barrier between the child and the outdoors, the equivalent of them pressing their noses up against glass.



about the author

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Through Landscapes, a UK charity dedicated to enhancing outdoor learning and play for children. For more information on a range of services and resources for early years settings, visit ltdl.org.uk