

Round & Round the garden

Summer is on the way, so why not use the warmer weather to introduce exciting child-friendly displays to your outdoor area? **Kirstine Beeley** offers some inspiration...

I think you would struggle in early years nowadays to find people who don't naturally embrace the positive impact of the outdoor learning environment (at least I would hope you would!). After all, where else can you witness magical mud pie potions being created, alongside a gigantic modern masterpiece in full flow; or superheroes battling to save the planet next to an intricate search for fairies, frogs and other things beginning with the letter 'f'? The

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EYFS framework both acknowledges the "uniqueness" of outdoor play and asks that it be given "equal value to indoor play". In doing so, much of what we as practitioners observe outdoors is by its very nature fantastically imaginative and uniquely creative.

In our enthusiastic efforts to provide rich and engaging learning opportunities in our outdoor areas I am concerned that we are missing out on an amazing opportunity to both boost self-esteem and to enhance our learning provision through the creative use of display. In my two previous articles I have highlighted the need for display to both engage children as well as celebrate their achievements and develop their learning. I see no reason why these principles cannot be applied to the wide and varied learning which we witness on a daily basis in our outdoor learning provision.



Presenting the process

I have witnessed many amazing outdoor learning moments in my time working in the early years. I have seen amazing creations which would not have been possible indoors, perhaps due to the materials involved or the sheer scale of a creation or project. I have experienced the calmness that can descend outside when all of the children are thoroughly engrossed in their individual learning activities, and I have nearly lost toes as those enjoying bikes and trikes whiz past on a mission to break their own world land speed record! Yet only on rare occasions do I see any evidence of 'learning gone by' actually outdoors where the learning took place. Very occasionally there might be a display board in a corridor with a few photos of some outdoor play that took place weeks before, but often there is nothing.

In the early years we embrace the fact that what is important in children's learning is often just as much about the processes which take place as any particular end product that might result from them. I know many wonderful practitioners who work tirelessly to display pictures of indoor learning, often with captions or speech bubbles to record that 'eureka' moment as it had happened; so why do we not try and extend this approach into our outdoor environments? Would a child digging in or around a garden planting area not enjoy seeing pictures of themselves and their friends taking part in their last horticultural venture? Would pictures of children playing with mud pies and water channels not inspire continued exploration and investigation?

I acknowledge that, as with the rest of the outdoor learning provision, outdoor display is unique and carries its own set of issues, but with a little bit of creativity and a whole heap of imagination you can display outdoors just as effectively as indoors.

Picture perfect

It is easy to print photographs of learning processes observed outdoors, and by laminating the pictures (double laminating can work wonders against our amazing British weather system) you can then look for ways to display which enhance the environment and utilise the provision you already have. Why not fasten some of the pictures to a playhouse or shed wall (if staples don't work then Velcro is great and allows you the opportunity to change the photos on a regular basis)? Don't forget to include laminated annotations of the children's comments as well.

If you don't have any flat surfaces to attach photos to then you could try hanging photos using natural rope and pegs or ready-made hanging frames like those from Ikea pictured here.



1

2. A place to display

Previously I have made much fuss of developing areas where children's creations can be displayed and celebrated, and where children can be involved in labelling and annotation. This principle applies equally to outdoors. Why not create a display space using 'outdoor materials' – for example, some weathered planks and large logs or bricks to create outdoor shelving specifically for displaying creations. Add a large varnished log slice or different height wooden blocks and you will have the perfect platform for a proud child to display their work for all to see.

2



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KIRSTINE BEELEY

In the frame

Two dimensional creations such as paintings, drawing and writing can also, with a little bit of imagination and some basic DIY skills, be really effectively displayed outdoors. Garden trellis can be adapted by stapling on clear zip wallets to allow children's work to be displayed safe away from the elements and in such a way that they can be changed regularly. Smaller pockets can be attached at low level to show children's collections and 'finds' (again with annotated comments included).

Alternatively, the pictured framework made from garden bamboo canes tied together to create a frame can display laminated work really effectively, providing room for both artwork and photographs.

3



Making space

Where space is an issue then look to your existing environment for inspiration for display and maybe use a tree to hang creations or log slices as paint canvasses? Or, if you are feeling really adventurous, why not work with the children to create a large scale installation like the one created by children at Dereham Children's Centre in partnership with local artist Jessica Perry (see jessicaperry.co.uk/photo_7167341.html).



Back to nature

I have written much about using display as an interactive tool to engage children in learning, and as a useful means to stimulate excitement and exploration. How great would it be to see 'outdoor investigation stations' where an array of weird and wonderful objects are available for children to explore and investigate? Why does the 'nature table' have to be inside? Surely it suits being in its 'natural' environment? Or what about a natural Gruffalo display complete with nuts, log pile house and Gruffalo stories stones? (See abcdoes.typepad.com for further Gruffalo inspiration.)

Don't get me wrong – having worked in many settings across the UK, I am a realist when it comes to both the UK weather and what you can leave outdoors permanently at the mercy of local vandals and the elements alike; however, I do hope that there is something here that will whet the creative appetites of the practitioners of most settings and which will in some way help to make outdoor display an integral part of our ongoing provision, a celebration of our children's learning and creativity and a valued ongoing learning tool. As with all best practice, it would be great to see it finally become common practice!

Take it outside

Five things to keep in mind when you're developing your outdoor display...

- Utilise the environment you have – make the most of trees, fences and sheds to display
- Create display areas using natural materials to enhance the outdoor environment
- Display the processes of learning outdoors as well as the final products
- Look out for innovative weather-resistant display ideas whilst you're out shopping – some of the best solutions can be found in home and office shops.
- Adapt interactive displays for use outdoors if the subject matter lends itself to being outdoors

TIP: Make sure you have pens and paper available outside so children can annotate their own work. I have found that laminated, folded, blank cards are great for outdoor labelling as large wipe-clean markers can be used when needed.

find out more

Kirstine Beeley is an independent trainer and consultant, with experience of teaching in early years, primary and SEN settings, who focuses on helping early years professionals in creating exciting learning environments. Visit playingtolearn.co.uk