

A spot of weather

Pull on a mac, put up your broolly and sound the foghorn as **Wendy Bowkett** carries out an early years exploration of the elements...

We'd decided months before it actually happened to try a theme based around the weather. We had planned activities throughout the early years curriculum to give children opportunities to 'see and do' weather indoors as well as outside. However, other things got in the way, and it wasn't until one really foggy morning when a few of the children, who came to nursery by car, started to tell tales of their journeys, that we finally got started.

Once the tales were in full flow, children who had walked to nursery or arrived in buggies, etc. began to tell their stories. They couldn't see the lollipop lady until they were almost at the crossing; their plastic pushchair covering was dripping wet and all steamed up; mums had had to go really slowly on the path through the park because they couldn't see the edges and it was really bumpy on the grass. One little boy told us how his dad had got into trouble with his mum because he'd used a word he shouldn't when the fog lights on his car weren't working properly. Our weather theme was under way...

Feeling foggy

As thick fog occurred so rarely in our town, we wanted as many children as possible to experience how it changes our perceptions of space. We put on coats, gloves, hats and scarves and walked around our familiar garden space. What a strange feeling to not see things we knew were there – the picnic bench, flower beds or even the playhouse – and then suddenly come across them, even though we knew they were there all the time! Some of the children found the experience quite disconcerting. This added to our conversations on returning indoors, especially how weather can affect our bodies, feelings and emotions.

One of the first activities indoors, suggested

by a colleague, was to make some cardboard cut-outs of the front of a car with headlights and an open windscreen. Each outline had handles at both sides of the car for children to hold. The cars were big enough for a child to 'sit' behind and look through the windscreen. All the cars were painted and numbered and onto the windscreens were placed different 'windows' – one each of Perspex, tracing paper, tissue paper and greaseproof paper. All had varying degrees of visibility when looked through. The idea was for children to experience how what we see affects our behaviour. 'Driving' across a cleared space in a room looking through a Perspex windscreen is very different to looking through greaseproof paper. Place a chair in the pathway and manoeuvring becomes much more difficult!

When the fog had cleared, these cars were in continual use in the garden too. The children loved the idea of being in the driving seat and steering their way around. We drew roadways on the tarmac, made traffic lights with the inners from carpet rolls, a zebra crossing with Belisha beacons (orange balloons on top of tubes) and soon the children were devising obstacle courses and using 'foggy' goggles (made like colour lenses glasses but with different papers similar to the car windscreens) to move around the course. Children who often rushed around the playground actually found fun in taking their time completing the course without knocking anything over or bumping into obstacles in their path.



Thunderstorms can be an ideal opportunity for practising counting skills by measuring the time between the flash of light and the clap of thunder



We talked about the dangers and hazards of being at sea as well as land, the use of foghorns and listened to music with ear muffs on to try to emulate the muffled sounds in fog. Using icing sugar or white paint sprinkled or splattered onto vehicle templates on black paper also made an unusual foggy day picture display.

Cats and dogs

The lifting of the fog when it came certainly didn't mean the end of exploration of the elements. The conservatory area at our nursery was very popular on rainy days. Listening to the sound of rain on the glass roof always inspired us to sing *It's raining, it's pouring* and *Doctor Foster* among others. *Incy Wincy Spider* and related activities could be an article in itself, but singing *Pitter Patter Raindrops* while dropping water from a pipette onto paper or Perspex adds another dimension to circle time. Why not try it with paint onto paper for a different painted effect? (Ensure there is plenty of protective covering underneath the paper, pre-schoolers are not renowned for their aim!)

Rainy activities

- We loved 'making' rain (especially rain sticks from decorated tubes with rice, spaghetti, small gravel or beads inside), spotting the differences in the sounds they make and finding two rain sticks that sound the same – do they have the same contents?
- Drip water into a water tray or a variety of dishes. Are the sounds different if there is



water already in the containers?

- Watch the ripples as rain falls into puddles. Make circular patterns with string or paint on paper.
- Observe and draw open and closed umbrellas, designing patterns to paint onto umbrellas or Wellington boots – it's all very fashionable!
- Play corners can be set up with only 'wet' weather clothes and associated items with a few additions. Find the odd ones out!
- How many coats are needed for two people? How many Wellies? Understanding the permanence of two and as a pair can be effectively introduced by counting boots for outside puddle jumping!
- All living things need water (rain). Experiment with dyed water – put a stick of celery into a container with the water and use a ruler or other measure to see how much liquid it drinks every few hours or each day.

Blow, wind, blow

Windy days seem to bring out the boisterousness in me. I'm full of energy, hopping about, ready to get started – and it's usually the same with the children too! To get started, talk about running in the wind, which parts of you get cold, how you can stay warm, is it best when the wind is behind or against you, can you lean against the wind without falling over?

To go with their excess energy, children

seem noisier on windier days too, and often need to shout in the wind to make themselves heard. Chat with them about why this might be. It is, however, also an ideal opportunity to spend some time sitting quietly in your outdoor space listening to the sounds the wind or breeze makes.

Windy activities

- Make kites. They're simple and fun. Getting them to fly is often more difficult...
- Make patterns and pictures with different-shaped triangles. Introduce the idea of symmetry and tessellation.
- Blowy days always remind me of *Mrs Mopple's Washing Line* by Anita Hewitt, a favourite story whether or not it's windy outside. Enact the story with a group, it can be hilarious!
- Combine a water play activity with soapy water and a wash day. Hang out washing on a windy day. Compare drying times on a dry calm day, a very hot sunny day or even a cloudy, showery day.
- Experiment making wind chimes with different materials, e.g. metal spoons, lollipop sticks and dowelling, to hang outside in the breeze.
- Use coloured, shiny paper streamers to swirl and shimmer in the wind or hold them up in the air to twizzle around when running about.

Going down a storm...

Many children fear thunderstorms and, although they have happened rarely when I've been at work in a pre-school setting, it can be

very demanding on staff comforting frightened children. Thunder and lightning are difficult concepts for under-fives to grasp. However, thunderstorms can be an ideal opportunity for practising counting skills by measuring the time between the flash of light and the clap of thunder – and playing related games can help detract from the real thing, especially if they're played regularly as part of ordinary activities.

Stormy activities

- Use a flashlight and a drum to simulate the storm. Flash the light, start counting to five and then bang the drum loudly. Increase the number you count with the children each time to suggest the thunderstorm is passing over.
- Play a variation of 'Simon Says' we call 'Bang – Snap'. Give quick, short, sharp instructions with either 'bang' or 'snap' at the end. If you say 'bang' everyone jumps in the air and claps their hands. If you say 'snap' everyone carries out the instruction and then sits down.
- Play 'Just like lightning' outdoors for fun. One child has a torch, two others have tambourines or drums. Once the torch has flashed, everyone runs around like lightning, dashing here and there with short, sharp movements. Then, when the tambourine is shaken or the drum is struck, everyone runs to a safe place (wherever is chosen at the beginning)!



Whatever the weather

When we first chatted about our weather, the children mentioned rain and sun, while parents mentioned cloudy days, hail and frosts as well. There are so many facets to our weather that a pre-school setting is unlikely to cover all of them in one theme – and in a short article like this, it's even more difficult.

Snow and frost are obvious choices, especially at Christmas time and at the beginning of a new year (when we haven't had any snow, we have resorted to using polystyrene chips in a play corner to enhance weather, climate or holiday topics). Sunny days are introduced to under-fives usually preceding summer holidays, although with many of our under-fives jetting off to warmer climes throughout the year, this can be a continuous theme, so I hesitate to add ideas here to these huge, potentially 'done-to-death', themes!

Suit you!

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Any way the wind blows...

This Cockerel Weather Vane from Reflections on Learning (£24.99) would make a fantastic addition to any early years setting. Designed to represent the traditional weather vane, with distinct cardinal points, the colourful spinner will identify the direction of the wind. For more information, visit reflectionslearning.co.uk or call 01732 225850.

