

All the world's

a stage...

Role-play isn't just for one corner of the room – take it outside and give your children the space to really express themselves, says Kirstine Beeley...



As Margaret McMillan said way back in 1925, “The best kept classroom and the richest cupboard are roofed only by the sky”. As the winter frosts crunch beneath our feet, what better time to reflect upon the uniqueness of the outdoor learning environment? As part of our now established child-led, child-centred approach to delivering the EYFS, we should all be brimming with enthusiasm at the prospect of embracing all that the outdoors has to offer. Yet there is much to consider if we are to offer high-quality learning opportunities for our children.

Outdoor learning is not just another area to be considered alongside the likes of block play, messy play and creative play; it is an approach in its own right and should be given equal footing to indoor play, viewed as yet another complementary arena in which all of our learning provision can be offered.

This does not, however, mean simply

taking what we already do indoors and plonking it unceremoniously outdoors, and hoping that will suffice. Planning for outdoor provision and, in the context of this article, more specifically outdoor role-play, takes careful consideration and an understanding of the differences and unique learning opportunities which can only be accessed outdoors. Outdoors offers new experiences, amazing spaces and ever-changing interactions with the natural world and the elements – all of which need to be considered when planning for your role-play provision.

Outdoor play

The outdoor learning environment offers children increased space to make bigger, more energetic gestures and to develop larger scale play scenarios than is possible inside.

The physical lack of walls has an impact on the sound levels in particular: not only does sound dissipate more easily but children are also more likely to make more noise. Indeed, studies have shown that children are likely to talk more outdoors than indoors, and when you consider the levels of background noise inside you can understand why: they are less likely to be competing to be heard or even just to be able to hear themselves think! With this in mind, we should be encouraging more raucous play outdoors and acknowledging that in today's society it may be the only opportunity some children will have to roar as loudly as a dragon or scream like a princess being whisked away by a troll!

A supporting role

So, what can be done to ensure that role-play provision outside is both unique and exciting? Here are a few ideas to get you re-evaluating your current practice.

Open-ended opportunities

With restrictions on storage often an issue and many settings unable to leave equipment out overnight, opportunities for open-ended play represent the perfect solution. Indoors, practitioners and children alike will toil for hours developing the latest space landscape, forest or supermarket; only rarely do I witness deconstructed play opportunities (I wish it were more). Yet outdoors, you can offer large tubs of boxes, cardboard tubes, bean poles, pegs, blankets and paper – all easy to put away and store – which the children will readily begin to explore and develop as part of open-ended outdoor play. A toilet roll becomes a telescope, a box becomes a dragon's cave or a TARDIS, and a sheet draped over a picnic table becomes a princess's castle. Remember, a plastic boat can only ever really be a boat, so why not offer some of the cheapest, most readily available resources to your children daily and see who is the first to climb a mountain, discover a new planet or don a cape and save the world!

Working with nature

Within our outdoor settings we should always be looking to enhance what nature provides



find out more

Kirstine Beeley is an independent trainer and consultant, with experience of teaching in early years, primary and SEN settings. Visit playingtolearn.co.uk



Perfect props



Costume change

"When I grow up I want to be an astronaut!" How many times have you heard your children say something similar? Playing 'dress-up' instantly transports children into a role – real or fantastical – so make sure you have a wide range of costumes available. Visit pretendtopee.co.uk

Resources for role play

If you're looking for resources to equip your role-play corner, look no further than Eduzone, which offers a host of products designed to stimulate imaginative play and support social development. To browse through everything that's available, call 08456 445 556 or visit eduzone.co.uk and request a catalogue.



Stay & play

Kids Music Company's award-winning Stay and Play resource is packed with songs that will immerse children in an exciting imaginary world, and encourage creativity, visualisation and laterality. Topics include 'my body', 'home', 'games', 'instruments' and more. To order, visit kimblefun.com or call 01283 219330.



specific role-play scenario outdoors. If you do choose it's important to look at role-play opportunities that truly embrace the outdoors, whether because they directly reflect situations which take place outside or because they offer opportunities which would not be possible indoors. If you are going to have some kind of shop then make it a shop that embraces the outside, like a pizza delivery outlet with bikes and trikes as delivery vehicles, or a builder's yard complete with sloppy sand cement for building and mixing, a car garage with tyres, jacks and tools, or the three pigs' houses built of twigs, bricks and straw (well twigs, straw and cardboard boxes, at least!). Oh, and when was the last time you saw a garden centre that only kept its plants and flowers inside? If space is limited, a picnic basket with blanket and food, or a treasure chest with treasure and maps, will help stimulate and excite.

Den-making

No article on outdoor role-play would be complete without mentioning the art of den-making. Its merits in developing confidence, speaking and listening skills, as well as imaginative storytelling and play opportunities, are well-documented – some Scandinavian countries even pay to encourage den-making in open public spaces to develop these skills. Visit any well-managed Woodland Trust site and you will witness the excitement of children building stick dens and shelters. This excitement can and should be encouraged daily in your outdoor environment. It costs little if anything to resource and the benefits to play are instant. So, gather a selection of sheets, curtains and pegs together with string, bean poles and masking tape, and let the children have a go at building their own magical spaces where imaginations can run wild and anything can happen.

play ideas, and utilise nature's props as an integral part of the children's play. After all, how many things can you think of that a stick could become?

Enhance their play

When observing children's play, the astute practitioner should be looking for opportunities to enhance the situation and help them to take their learning forward. This does not mean that you have to go charging into the dragon's cave or impose yourself on the fairies' tea party (although I have seen some practitioners doing an amazing flying dragon impression!). There will be times when just recognising an opportune moment to add carefully thought-out props to an ongoing role-play situation will allow children the chance to take their play even further. If your open-ended resources offer no solution then you may like to look at developing some enhancement boxes or baskets with items that will stimulate and excite outdoors. Why not have a pirate box, complete with maps, binoculars, treasure (cheap necklaces and bracelets are great), scarves for use as bandanas and eye patches for full effect? Or a fairy box with miniature items (doll's house accessories from hobby shops are amazing), tiny pieces of paper and envelopes for letter writing, and the all-important fairy dust (glitter to us oldies!).

Other enhancements can include a bird/animal watching explorer set with magnifiers, binoculars, spotter books and camouflage nets, or a basket of shiny, reflective and coloured fabrics for use as capes, shawls and headdresses (add a silver foil emergency blanket and the possibilities are endless!).

Embrace the outdoors!

Occasionally you may decide, guided by the children's interests, of course, to develop a

daily as a stimulus, and this is particularly true when it comes to role-play. If Mother Nature has seen fit to provide you with muddy puddles and a waterlogged digging area then instead of avoiding it, enhance it! Add oversized wooden spoons (you can get them up to one-metre long!), cauldrons, pots, pans and camping equipment, and watch as the potion-making and baking parties begin. If snow besets you, why not try taking some ice cream containers, filling them to make your own snow bricks, and building an igloo or a polar bear's house? Or follow the footprints in the snow to see what you find... A monster, a bear, or even the gruffalo's child?

In autumn, a pile of leaves becomes a hedgehog's hiding place, and twigs and branches can (with supervision) become a great camp or cubby hole. On those rare sunny days, your sand area should be resonating with the sounds of the seaside, with buckets, spades, deck chairs and ice cream cones aplenty. Use our ever-changing weather to spark storytelling and imaginative

Points to remember

KEEP THE FOLLOWING IN MIND WHEN PLANNING OUTDOOR ROLE-PLAY IN YOUR SETTING...

- Make it open-ended – provide open-ended resources.
- Make it relevant – make outdoor role-play scenarios which are about being outdoors.
- Plan to offer role-play on extremes of scale – from extra large to extra small (both will spark imaginations).
- Utilise what nature provides.
- Acknowledge and embrace the uniqueness of role-play outdoors – don't just bring the indoors out.