

Young children have an innate urge to learn about the world around them, and the outdoors offers a never-ending range of exciting opportunities. They can satisfy their love of movement when outside, improving muscle strength, lung capacity and bone density along the way, as well as developing important physical skills such as coordination. A rich outdoor environment offers the chance to explore and investigate, and also encourages language and communication skills.

From the minute you open the doors, or start the ritual of finding the correct clothing and footwear, babies and toddlers sense that change – and the potential for adventure – is in the air, so make the most of their enthusiasm by developing your outside space...



findoutmore

Learning through Landscapes offers a range of services to support outdoor learning and play in the early years. Its membership resources and publications provide a regular supply of fresh activity ideas, and it offers on-site support through advisory visits and half-day, full-day or twilight training sessions for nurseries. Visit ltl.org.uk

Natural appeal

Stimulate your babies and toddlers with these outdoor ideas from Learning through Landscapes...

Stimulating senses

Babies are highly responsive to outdoor stimuli. Sound moves in a different way outside – changing naturally with the wind or variations in air pressure. Until they're about six months old, babies can differentiate sounds much more effectively than adults; they're much more receptive to bird sounds, for instance, and as a result they'll love being outdoors. Light also behaves differently. It's changed by the weather, filtered by trees and alters throughout the day. Visit spaces near trees or create a place where voile or chiffon can hang – this will filter the sun

and move with touch or the wind.

Smell and taste can also be stimulated outdoors. Babies on the move make the most of any opportunity to pull themselves up to standing. An effective way to encourage this behaviour while offering exciting sensory experiences is to install low-level, sturdy planters filled with strongly-scented herbs such as lavender or rosemary, colourful summer plants, or edibles like strawberries or redcurrants.

And don't forget touch – another key sense for helping babies to learn about the world. Outdoors, they can lie on the grass and feel it tickling their skin, or experience the textural differences between hard and soft surfaces.

the texture. Children can extend their play to a digging area filled with soil. Here they can pretend to plant and dig up vegetables (try providing onions or potatoes for this activity).

Water is fascinating for young children due to sounds that can be created with it, and because it causes reflection. It also presents an opportunity for them to explore the qualities of the above materials, by mixing – and getting grubby! Also think about resources that support exploration of the weather, such as streamers, windsocks, umbrellas and wind chimes.



Tailored for toddlers

Once babies are toddling, they'll benefit from varied landscapes. Small hillocks, tunnels, and trails encourage activities such as crawling, rolling, stretching and running. Tyres, ladders and planks provide opportunities for climbing, and low walls and rails at various heights allow babies to pull themselves up to standing. Textured pathways (bark, wood chip, gravel, pebbles) not only add visual interest, but also sharpen the mobility skills required for managing uneven ground.

Natural materials such as sand and soil provide fantastic opportunities for exploration, investigation and manipulation. Smaller sandpits offer great opportunities for digging, while larger areas of sand allow toddlers to use their entire bodies to feel

TIP Nooks and crannies will entice crawling and toddling youngsters, so try creating natural dens under low-hanging branches.

Alternatively, supply large cardboard boxes or lengths of fabric attached to fences. Cushions and blankets help create cosy nooks for snuggling into with adults and other children for stories, songs and games. Adding interesting items such as mirrors, fir cones, sponges, large buttons, toy animals, etc. will stimulate exploration and conversation.