

GO their own WAY



NDNA's **Stella Ziolkowski**, offers advice on incorporating free-flow



outdoor play into your setting...

Q I want to introduce more free-flow outdoor play opportunities in my setting – what are the benefits to children?

A Daily outdoor play is an important part of children's learning and is required by the EYFS. It offers many new learning experiences, and boosts mental and physical wellbeing and confidence. Free-flow play adds further benefits, giving children more space and freedom to explore the world around them, letting them make decisions and assess risks while reducing the feeling of being rushed from one activity to the other. Children all have different learning styles and needs; some prefer to play and learn outside, and should be offered this opportunity wherever possible. Some may not have outdoor space at home, in which case it's even more important.

Q What safety measures do I need in place?

A Free-flow play should be managed by staff to ensure learning opportunities are planned and the safety of children, including staff-to-child ratios, is fully considered. It's essential that all risks are assessed outdoors, just as you would do with inside areas, and this will help free-flow play to work more smoothly. Including children in identifying risks and planning to overcome them will give them the skills to begin to manage their own safety.

Q How do I deal with unpredictable weather?

A All types of weather can present challenges, so pre-planning is key. In preparation for sunny days, it's essential to have parents' written permission to apply sun cream to children – be sure to ask about any allergies children might have to particular brands. Your sun care policy is important as it will ensure staff and parents understand your approach, and help you to meet regulatory requirements.

Try to teach children the importance of sun care, too, so they can take some responsibility for keeping safe outdoors – for example, helping them to understand the need to put on their hat and sun cream and to drink lots of water.

Changeable weather such as rain or snow provides its own challenges, but it's still

important to allow children to venture out, as long as they and staff are suitably dressed and it's safe (in the new EYFS framework, the caveat in the initial draft of not requiring children to play outdoors in 'poor weather conditions' has been removed). Free-flow play in cold or wet weather is an ideal opportunity to teach children to put on their coats, shoes or waterproof clothing, helping to develop their fine motor skills. It's a good idea to create an outdoor clothing box and to ask parents to donate old Wellington boots, coats, hats, scarves, gloves and umbrellas to be kept at nursery. Purchasing waterproofs, particularly overtrousers for staff and children, can be a great investment as it will allow further experimental outdoor play. Remember, playing in rain, snow, wind and sun all provide invaluable opportunities for learning that cannot be found elsewhere.

find out more

NDNA is the national charity and membership association for children's nurseries across the UK. Sample sun care and outdoor play policies are available free to NDNA members. Go to www.ndna.org.uk/policies and log in to access this and other free template policies and procedures.

Q How do I manage ratios with free-flow play?

A How ratios are managed depends on the layout of your building; e.g., if the nursery is on one level with outdoor space at the back, it may be easier to manage than if the outdoor space is downstairs, or not directly joined to the room. Usually, settings will decide on a system such as one staff member stationed outside and one inside with other 'floaters' who will follow the children, to enable them to have freedom whilst staying safe. In the winter months, you may need to think about how to keep staff stationed outside warm, and how duties will be rotated so that all staff are comfortable. If you have limited access to the outdoor area, consider different methods for allowing children the opportunity to choose if they want to play outside, e.g. using a badge system to alert staff that they would like to head outdoors.