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Maximising the use of the outdoor environment: Aughton Early Years Centre

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Brief description

Children in the Early Years Foundation Stage benefit from spending a lot of time learning through playing outside, whatever the weather. This makes a significant contribution to the excellent progress they make, particularly in their personal, social, emotional and physical development as well as their communication skills.

Overview – the centre’s message

‘Outdoor play adds another dimension to children’s learning. It is not what you have got outside but how you maximise its use that makes a difference.’

Julie Turner, Head of Centre



Head and Deputy Head

The good practice in detail

Eight or nine years ago, outside the (then) nursery school was a very steep grass slope with a tarmac area at the side. The tarmac area disappeared when the building was extended to

accommodate the integrated services for children and families, and the time was right to review the outdoor provision. Since then, the garden has evolved (and indeed continues to do so!). Subsequent [inspection](#) by Ofsted has recognised that all children have access to exceptional outdoor provision at Aughton.

While senior leaders readily acknowledge that they are fortunate to have a large outdoor area to use for outdoor play, equally they are adamant that it is possible to recreate much of what they do on a smaller scale. They are keen to point out that the quality of their outdoor provision is not dependent on huge amounts of money or expensive resources.

So what is it about?



The garden

1. Making the most of the natural environment

From the outset, senior leaders were determined that the garden should be developed as 'a park not a playground'; an area of natural greens and browns where children were free to develop their own play, not something designed around brightly coloured fixed play equipment. Julie talks of 'going back to what we remember as a child', having fun outside and being safe to explore, and the importance of children being aware of the natural environment, the seasons and life

cycles in a meaningful way. The area has been developed as a series of smaller gardens within the whole. In the wooded area, children can hide and climb trees; in the kitchen garden they grow vegetables and make compost; they can also observe birds in the nesting boxes and look for bugs under the rocks. On a sunny day, they learn the importance of shade and the need for a hat; autumn may find them playing in the leaves or on a frosty morning looking at the patterns of spiders' webs; while when the snow comes the slope provides wonderful opportunities for sledging!



Climbing trees in the wooded area

2. Inexpensive resources



Making music

The outdoor resources are by no means all brand new or even necessarily purchased. There are bikes and scooters but it is not unusual to have one, or indeed several consecutive non-bike days! The guiding principle is that resources should be flexible and allow children the freedom to develop their own imaginative play. As Julie says, 'You only need a box and a torch and you're in a cave'. So some old plastic chairs become the seats on a train; kitchen pots and pans are used to make music; and a branch that had to be chopped off one of the trees laid on the ground is used for practising balancing skills. Other adults make an important contribution. Parents and carers give up their time to come and dig the vegetable beds; the housekeeper gets involved in cooking the vegetables that the children grow and

dries the washing outside – both important contributions to learning in these days of ready meals and tumble driers!

3. Skilled staff

At the heart of the high quality of the outdoor provision, is the understanding of all staff that when children are outside they are learning and that as adults their role is not merely one of supervision. Activities are planned on a daily basis, taking account of children's interests and inputs, and in response to what happened the day before. All staff, from those working with babies to those in Foundation Stage 1, contribute to planning, ensuring that they coordinate with each other and with activities indoors. The starting point is that activities are planned across all six areas of learning and that there are intended learning outcomes. However, ongoing training and the mentoring of new staff ensure that they are skilled at planning open-ended activities and responding to how children engage; that they gauge when it is best to step back from a child-initiated activity or intervene; and that through their talk with children they develop their learning and their language for thinking. They make the most of opportunities to observe and assess children's learning in a different environment.

‘You only need a box and a torch and you're in a cave.’

4. Opportunities for all children

Children from babies to four-year-olds access the outdoor area. Sometimes, activities are specifically planned for a certain age group. More often than not, it is about staff knowing



how to adapt activities according to the children who want to join in, something which is helped by the tradition that over time staff will move between the rooms in the centre to gain experience of working with children at different stages of development. Senior leaders are keen to emphasise the benefits of children of different ages learning together. Siblings may feel reassured by seeing a brother or sister; younger children may be challenged by interaction with older ones, who in turn learn to care for others. Equally important is accessibility for children with additional needs. The

pathways have been developed to ensure that even though the garden is on a slope, a less mobile child or a wheelchair user can access all areas. Staff firmly believe that being able to play and learn outside particularly benefits those who may feel restricted by being in a classroom, as evidenced by the fact that they have no real behaviour issues.

5. Well-informed parents

As Julie and her deputy Andrea Reed say, it is important to make sure from the very beginning that parents and carers appreciate how much time their child will be spending in the garden and why. Whether it is specific meetings or discussions before children start, workshops with an outdoor 'thread' or sharing children's learning stories staff ensure that parents and carers are clear about the learning that takes place outside and generally accept the state their children may come home in as a result!

The Centre's background

[Aughton Early Years Centre](#) serves an area of mixed housing and families from a wide range of social and economic backgrounds, providing early education and childcare for children from birth to four years old.

Are you thinking of putting these ideas into practice; or already doing something similar that could help other providers; or just interested? We'd welcome your views and ideas. Get in touch [here](#).

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