

Early movers

Helping under-5s live active & healthy lives



4 Getting the best from your environment



BHF National Centre
physical activity+health

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Creating environments for physically active play



Encourage children to play more actively

Your environment is vital in helping young children learn. So, you need to ensure that your indoor and outdoor spaces are attractive, challenging, safe and secure places where children can learn, feel confident and develop well.

There are several important factors that encourage children to play more actively.

Promotion and attitude

Providing opportunities for physically active play is vital. But how you promote its importance, both by creating the best environment and by emphasising a positive attitude to the children and their parents and carers, is crucial too.

Training


Everyone at your setting needs to feel they have the skills, understanding and confidence to provide physically active play opportunities for achievable, fun challenges to the children in their care. Training which covers ways to incorporate more physically active play into the curriculum can substantially increase physical activity. For training opportunities, see Section 3, page 12.

Support and encouragement

This is especially important for children who are shy, avoid group play, and may need individual support. Interacting directly with children can help to increase the variety and intensity of physically active play they engage in, especially for younger children.

Physical layout of the setting

How your outdoor and indoor space is laid out can have a really positive impact on how active children are.

 For information on outdoor design, see resources in Section 1, page 18.

Outdoor play

Children are usually more active when they're outside compared to indoors, as:

- they're able to take part in more vigorous physical activities, eg, cycling, climbing and running
- they have more room to be active, noisy and messy, and the freedom to explore and develop their physical boundaries.

Natural spaces can stimulate more active play. For example, Moore and Wong² observed children balancing, chasing, climbing, crawling, dodging, hanging, hopping, jumping, leaping, rocking, rolling, running, sliding, spinning, squirming, swinging, tumbling, and twisting, in a natural playground.

Forest Schools

The idea of Forest Schools is a philosophy which encourages and inspires children through positive outdoor experiences. It's being adopted more widely by early years settings and schools to improve outdoor learning experiences and to help children enjoy the benefits of a more natural environment.

'The outdoors offers space to be physically active and to learn about the world, to be challenged by changing seasons, and by the variety of stimuli to be explored and discovered in both the natural and built environment.'

Physical and movement development, maintaining health through regular exercise and building a lifelong commitment to an active lifestyle can all be enhanced through active outdoor play.'

Patricia Maude (2009)¹

Case study

Hampden Way Nursery School

Hampden Way Nursery School in London, places the highest value on the outdoors for children's all round development. It caters for 50 children aged three and four and provides the curriculum over three rooms, one of which is the outdoor environment. They believe the outdoors is where children will do most of their learning.

The curriculum is child-led and planning is based on children's interests. They've invested financially in allowing two members of staff to become Forest School leaders, which the Headteacher says has enhanced their practice and is now fully embedded in their provision.

They have a large outdoor area where planning for the six areas of learning is as detailed as for the indoor area. The garden is on a slope with tarmac areas, grassy areas, large dens, a large sandpit, dig pits and structures, and all the available space is used.



'When children spend time in the great outdoors, getting muddy, getting wet, getting stung by nettles, they learn important lessons – what hurts, what is slippery, what you can trip over or fall from.'

Peter Cornall (2007)²

Making the most of your outdoor play space



Good outdoor provision for physically active play doesn't depend on expensive equipment. It's more important to make the most of your space and resources, and to be positive and enthusiastic about your outdoor environment.

Organise your outdoor learning environment with the same attention to detail as your indoor environment. Think of your outdoor environment as a number of areas for learning, not just one open space.

Areas which encourage a variety of physical activities can incorporate learning across all curriculum areas, and support the 'thematic' approach to planning adopted by many settings.

If possible, adopt more natural resources in your outdoor play spaces, eg, varying terrains (sand, shingle, bark chippings, soil, grass, stepping stones), using natural materials (branches from tree/hedge cuttings, pine cones, hay/straw, soil, rocks, water, plants in containers, logs). If you only have limited space, visit local parks, woodlands and natural areas, and nearby open spaces, once you've made a risk assessment.



For more information, see resources in Section 1, page 18.



Organisation of the outside space

Positive features

Organise your space to make the best use of its positive features, such as:

- shade – important for activities during hot weather
- natural mounds – for running around on
- tarmac areas – for wheeled vehicles, markings for games
- sandy areas – for digging, setting up tunnels/crawling activities.

Rotate activities so that all the children can have different experiences and challenges in different seasons.

Shelter and shade

If possible, have a covered outdoor area so that children can be active in all weather conditions. If this isn't possible, consider how best you can use:

- natural features, eg, trees, hedging, willow structures
- structures, eg, gazebos, tents (flaps open)
- canvas sun shades, tunnels, parachutes.



Equipment

Young children need sufficient equipment (adapted where necessary), to encourage their maximum participation. They shouldn't have to stand around waiting to 'have their turn'.

Include natural elements, as they encourage more physical activity. For example, use wood stumps or logs, construct mounds for children to run up and down, allow rougher areas to grow up.

If your setting has limited space, avoid large, bulky equipment and concentrate on providing small equipment, which can be used imaginatively. Small equipment has been found to encourage children to be even more physically active.



Some examples of portable equipment for the outdoors (taken from Norfolk County Council's Early Years Outdoor Learning toolkit) www.norfolk.gov.uk/outdoorlearning are:

- different sized and shaped logs, poles, sticks, wood shapes
- blocks, crates, tyres
- natural items – sand, water, leaves, stones, bark chip, earth, mud, clay, rock, shells, seeds
- ropes and string of different sizes and lengths
- mallets, pegs, clothes pegs
- pulleys
- baskets, bags, buckets, watering cans, containers
- pipes of different shapes and lengths
- chinks, charcoal, crayons, pens, pencils, brushes with water, paints
- large paper or fabric, rollers
- tools for digging, planting and caring for plants
- tools and benches for woodwork and making things
- nets, bug pots and brushes, magnifiers, binoculars, trays, tanks.

Specific environments

Creating specific environments can encourage certain types of physical activity, eg, for more energetic play, set up some chasing games or continuous-type activities using wheeled toys or obstacle courses.

Zoning

You can provide a wide variety of activities throughout the week if you zone your space. It also helps to ensure that certain activities don't dominate the available space. How you zone your outdoor areas will depend on your space and equipment.

Use of zoning can help to ensure:

- all children access a broad and balanced variety of activities
- more boisterous activities are kept to a designated area, so less confident children can still take part in some form of activity without feeling intimidated.



Ideas for physical activity zones

Gardening zone

- digging and playing with mud
- looking for creepy crawlies
- planting
- watering
- gardening books
- composting.

Adult-facilitated games

- With small equipment, eg:
- balls (various sizes and textures)
 - bats
 - hoops
 - skittles
 - skipping ropes
 - stilts
 - parachute
 - chasing games
 - cooperative games.

Imaginative role play zone

- dressing up box and props (including magic wands)
- mark making materials
- pop-up tents/tunnels/dens
- till and money
- books
- walkie-talkies
- small world play
- clipboards and pens.

Wheeled toys zone

- With ride-ons, trikes, bikes, scooters, prams and buggies:
- introduce road signs, speed cameras. Children have to stop, start, change direction
 - children chalk their own routes
 - role play – driving to the supermarket, going on holiday, emergency service rescues, postman, farmer, delivery person.

Large movement zone

- **Running activities** – in and out of cones, through pathways drawn with chalk or ropes on floor, enjoying open space, natural areas.
- **Jumping and hopping activities** – stepping stones using carpet squares, jumping lines. Rhymes to encourage jumping ‘One Little Speckled Frog’.
- **Large equipment** – logs, ‘A’ frame, tyres, slide, rope ladders, planks, crates, tunnels, barrels, obstacle courses, dens, large fixed equipment.

Playground marked zone

- moving through marked lanes
 - counting
 - hopscotch
 - train track
 - letters
 - shapes and colours.
- NB. You may need to suggest ideas for what to do.

Small equipment zone

- variety of balls
- bats
- ribbons, streamers, wands, plastic bags on string etc. (good on windy days)
- skipping ropes (requires close supervision)
- hoops
- quoits
- skittles
- pegs and washing line
- bean bags
- suspended hoops
- old cameras and mobile phones.

Topic box zone

- props and equipment linked to current theme or events, eg, dinosaurs, transport, seasons
- windy/rainy, snowy, hot weather boxes
- natural objects
- shapes/colours/numbers
- key words on laminated cards (with image).

Rhyme and rhythm zone

- streamers and ribbons
- action songs
- structured movement patterns
- music to dance to (children’s choice)
- CD player
- baskets of instruments
- home made instruments
- sound makers – wooden/metal plastic.



For more information, see resources in Section 1, page 18.

These zones can be rotated on a weekly basis and introduced alongside other zones, which you’ll need to meet the requirements in other curriculum areas of learning and development.



Outside space for babies (non-walkers)

It's important that even the youngest children have regular opportunities to be outdoors, so they can experience all the benefits of being outside in the fresh air too. If babies are sharing outside time with children of various ages, make sure that they have their own zone or area, where they can feel safe and secure. It's also important that other children understand that they mustn't run around in this zone.

An outside environment for babies (non-walkers) can:

- be made soft by placing mats, blankets or cushions on the grassy area
- be visually stimulating, eg, plants, flowers, trees, bird feeders to encourage birds to visit, shiny mobiles, balloons, wind chimes, ribbons or streamers
- provide objects of different colours, textures and sounds to grasp at
- provide objects at different levels, eg, on the floor, eye level and hanging from above
- be varied – change mobiles or displays often, and frequently change the position of the baby area if possible.



Consider other outdoors issues

Access to equipment

Make sure the children know where the equipment is kept. Having easy access to it will help their free choice and independence. Also, show them how it needs to be put away. Clearly label boxes with pictures of what's inside each one, so that children can be encouraged to keep them organised.

Outside play times

If you're not providing free-flow, it may help to modify outside play times. More frequent, shorter break times, are more effective in increasing children's physical activity levels than fewer, longer play times. For example, it may be more beneficial to have 4 x 15 minute breaks rather than 2 x 30 minute breaks.

Interaction with the children

Encourage staff to interact with the children. Adult interaction with young children has been shown to facilitate more physically active play.

Inclusion

Make sure every child has access to the opportunities available. You might have to timetable some equipment such as trikes, bikes or climbing frame, and rotate groups regularly to ensure everyone gets a turn.

Put children into smaller groups and give them sole access to equipment for short periods. This can encourage less confident children to try it out without feeling intimidated by more confident children who usually dominate popular items.

Recognise that children's differing needs may require specialist or adapted activities to enable them to participate fully.

Outdoor play boxes and bags

Introduce outdoor play boxes and bags. These can support a theme, topic or story. The children can use them on their own or combined with existing equipment.

Windy day box

- ribbons
- streamers
- kites
- windmills
- yachts on water
- wind chimes
- plastic bags on sticks (needs close supervision)
- empty box.

Small equipment box

- variety of small balls
- beanbags
- bats
- skittles
- buckets
- skipping ropes
- targets
- frisbees.

Little Red Riding Hood story box

- wolf mask
- red cape
- map of woods
- picnic basket/bag
- flowers
- nightwear
- cushions (bed) and blanket
- story book.



For more examples, see 'Learning outdoors in the early years' in Section 1, page 18.



Recycled materials and equipment

Recycled materials and equipment can stimulate children's imagination far more than specially designed play equipment and lead to many more possibilities for play opportunities.

- They can include anything from plastic tubing and tyres, to fabric, netting, tubs and cardboard tubes.
- Encourage parents to donate old toys, and other items from home rather than throwing them away.
- Local businesses often donate safe waste to their local scrap stores. For more information visit www.scrapstoresuk.org
- It's important that all children can access equipment easily and safely.
- Girls and boys should be given equal access to all types of play equipment, eg, bikes and trikes, dolls, balls etc, as sometimes certain equipment can be dominated by one gender. Some children may need to be encouraged to access certain types of equipment.

Clothing

To ensure all children can (and want to be) outdoors, they need the right clothing for all weathers, eg, waterproofs and wellies for wet weather, warm layers, hats, gloves and scarves for cold weather and long-sleeved cotton tops, hats and sun cream for sunny weather.

Ask parents to make sure their children are dressed to suit the weather. You could mention this in your physical activity policy and make it part of your 'uniform' requirements. Or, you could provide some second-hand clothing for children to borrow.

It's also important that staff have appropriate clothing too.

Audit and policy

For an example of how to carry out an audit of the outdoor area, ideas for designing outdoor play spaces and how to develop an outdoor play policy, see outdoor play resources in Section 1, page 18.



Making the most of your indoor play space



Create movement opportunities

Your indoor environment is like a second home to some children, a place to play, rest, eat and sleep. Meeting all these needs can be challenging, but if you plan carefully, it's possible to organise space and timetable regular opportunities for physical activities in most indoor environments.

Although children have less freedom to run around indoors, there's still a lot you can do to make sure they have an indoor area that lets them:

- play with small equipment
- move to music
- participate in action rhymes
- roll around.

And with careful organisation, you might be able to bring some of the outdoor resources inside to increase active play, eg, ball pool, zoned areas for ride-ons, using small equipment, eg, soft balls, beanbags, hoops.

You could use your carpeted area for these activities, or move all table-top activities to the sides of the room or to one particular area, freeing up 'movement' space in the rest of the room.

'In any environment both the degree of inventiveness and creativity, and the possibility of discovery, are directly proportional to the number and kind of variables in it.'

Simon Nicolson (1971)³

Rotating activities


Encourage children to move around and try the different activities on offer, especially if they've been involved in a sitting activity for some time. This ensures that those who want to try a particular activity get an equal chance to do so and avoids the more confident children dominating more popular toys and activities.

Timetabling

Plan physical activities to ensure that they're repeatedly offered to children several times a week. Ensure that all children, regardless of how many hours of day care they attend, have the opportunity to try out all the activities.

Schedule regular opportunities for physical activity in your timetable. For example, this could be:

- 10 minutes of group action rhymes at the start of the day and just before lunch
- five minutes of dancing to music
- an action story where the children participate
- a circle-type activity or active game with simple equipment.

 For lots of practical ideas, which can be easily timetabled into your day, see Section 5.

Commercial programmes

Some settings like to buy in to commercial programmes which offer DVDs and music CDs promoting use of routines to engage children in structured physical activities.

Many of these are available on the internet, but it may be best to find out how useful they are by talking to other local settings or your local education authority beforehand.

Create different environments

Baby rooms

For babies to feel safe and secure, their environment needs to be safe and clean. You can encourage babies to move by providing:

- space for babies to move around and explore
- space for adults to spin, tip, rock and sway with babies
- soft cushions to crawl over and lie on, pop up tunnels to crawl through
- comfortable mats to lie on
- plenty of stimuli, eg, objects, toys and people with varied sounds, colours and texture
- staff close by to interact with and encourage movement (this is essential)
- music and sounds (with some words to encourage language)
- different types of lighting
- sturdy structures to pull up on
- treasure baskets to stimulate curiosity and exploration.

Toddler and pre-school rooms

Tables can be one of the biggest barriers to children's movement in an indoor space. They can dominate a room and have a substantial impact on both the type of play and how active the children are. Create space by:

- setting up tables so they're confined to one area of the room or around the walls. This will allow space in the centre for more activities that encourage movement
- encouraging activities where children can play underneath the tables, eg, making dens, crawling through tunnels.





Link your indoor and outdoor areas

Free-flow

Ideally, children should have opportunities for free-flow and be able to move easily around activities inside and from indoor to outdoor areas. If they have to disturb, or walk through, one indoor activity to get to another, children may be put off having a go.

If your indoor and outdoor areas aren't attached, plan to ensure all children have regular opportunities to be taken outside to play. And:

- set up activities that link the indoors with the outdoors to encourage movement between the two, eg, hospital – beds and first aid area inside and ambulances outside, shops – inside and outside
- follow the children's lead by responding to their requests to extend their play, eg, more beds in the hospital
- extend children's imagination and curiosity by adding something new or unusual to the play.

Transition areas

Having a transition area or sheltered space leading to the outdoor area can encourage children to play outside more often.

It's important that you organise the children sufficiently to play outside by prompting them to put their coats on etc. if necessary. If there are lots of them, they may need to go out in phased groups, otherwise movement can be chaotic and put some children off outside activities.



Sitting less, moving more



Reduce sedentary behaviour and increase physical activity

Sedentary behaviour is any activity that uses very little energy (usually while we're sitting or lying down).

Despite the common perception that sitting still for extended periods does no harm, there is evidence that this can be harmful as it can contribute to overweight and obesity as well as lower cognitive development.

Children who spend long periods of time sitting still during allocated play times are also missing out on opportunities to develop both physically and socially.

Babies can be sedentary too. Before they can walk, babies need plenty of time to practise movements such as reaching for and grasping objects, kicking and touching. As babies start to crawl and eventually walk, they continue to need plenty of time and space to move freely and practise new movements.

The UK early years physical activity guidelines⁴ recommends: All under fives should minimise the amount of time spent being sedentary (being restrained or sitting) for extended periods (except time spent sleeping).



For more information on why reducing sedentary behaviour is so important, see Section 2, pages 20–21.

Limit sedentary activities

Limit these activities



Replace with these activities



As well as planning for and encouraging physical activity during the time children are awake, limiting long periods of time where children are sedentary is also an important part of promoting a healthy lifestyle in early childhood.

Limit these activities



Replace with these activities



Tips to sit less and move more

Young children are naturally curious and eager to explore, so you need to provide active play opportunities as often as possible. You could:

- limit watching TV to 20 minute maximum slots or special occasions
- offer free-flow (moving freely between activities both inside and outside), to gently encourage children who regularly choose table-top activities to get involved with more physically active alternatives
- encourage children to move on to try another activity if they've been doing a sedentary activity for some time
- schedule regular short bouts of physical activity, eg, dancing to music, action rhymes or stories, waving streamers/ribbons/scarves, and encourage everyone to participate
- join in. Young children who have adults to play with are more likely to be active
- reduce time children spend in walking aides or baby chairs or bouncers – these limit free movement
- interact with children regularly, especially babies, as this encourages movement. Facilitate, support and prompt to encourage further exploration and learning when necessary
- support and encourage shy children who avoid groups to join in play situations, especially when playing outside and opportunities exist for them to be more active
- encourage children to help with all aspects of tidying up and preparing for future activities inside and out – including packing up toys, sorting objects, preparing for meal times and clearing away afterwards
- work with families to make them aware of the importance of reducing sedentary time, and give them some tips on how this can be achieved.



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British Heart Foundation
Greater London House
180 Hampstead Road
London NW1 7AW
T 020 7554 0000
F 020 7554 0100