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# Young Children's Outdoor Play-Based Learning

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## Introduction

In this chapter, we consider current thinking about young children's learning when they engage in outdoor play. The role of the teacher, parent and/or caregiver (hereafter 'adult') and the importance of cultural context in relation to the learning that takes place outside is explored. Recent research, noting the reduced opportunities for unsupervised outdoor play, centres upon:

- The child's developmental outcomes, e.g., physical, socio-emotional, cognitive, creativity and imagination;
- Children's connections with the non-human natural world.
- The adult's role in children's play, learning, access to and engagement with the outdoors.
- The setting, i.e., urban spaces, natural/non-built spaces, pedagogical spaces.

## Subject

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Young children’s learning is the focus of attention globally and is seen as the route by which countries can invest in their futures1 as part of Sustainable Development Goals.[2] Within this global conversation, the position of play in young children’s learning, the forms of play that support learning and ‘effective’ provision for young children’s playful activity as a part of their care/education experiences are debated and contested.[3-7] Discussions about the place of the outdoors as a site for young children’s play and learning are now commonplace in international literature.[8-13]

The content of research and literature relating to children’s learning outside is wide ranging, and includes, for example:

- the impact of outdoor play provision on children’s motor skills development, health and fitness;[14]
- risk negotiation skills;[15,16,17]
- early scientific enquiry through hands-on engagement with the natural world;[18]
- participation and sense of self through playful experiences in the outdoors;[19]
- the attunement of young children with the physical world around them in order that they are ‘at home in the world’ and may develop an ecologically sustainable outlook;[20,21]
- post-humanist and post-colonialist ‘common world’ understandings which take account of children's relations with all living and non-living others in their worlds.[22]

**Problems**

An essential feature in the field of outdoor play provision is the orientation of the adult, since this will shape the learning experiences of the child. Key issues are:

- Adult understandings of and orientations toward play, children’s competencies and the outdoor space;
- Tensions between ‘free play’ and play as a directed learning activity, between structured curriculum goals and play-based approaches;
- Availability and quality of outdoor play spaces;
- Decreased opportunities for outdoor play, the causes of which are socially, culturally and historically situated.

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## Research

The issues above are addressed across a range of research paradigms, often through small scale qualitative studies and, increasingly, through interdisciplinary research which can be influenced by turns in philosophical thinking. This includes, for example, children's geographies;[23,24] early childhood education considering children's inter-/intra-activity with materials;[25,26] ecological and environmental psychology;[27] and socio-cultural perspectives within the field of education.[28]

## Key Research Questions

Research questions in the area of outdoor play and learning are similarly wide-ranging. Some key questions include:

1. How does outdoor learning take place? What is the role of the adult and peers?
2. How do we understand children's engagement with their surroundings, adopting a 'common worlds' approach?[29]
3. What is the contribution of outdoor play to children's holistic development, including their relationship with the outdoor environment?[62]
4. How do children participate in different spaces? How is their participation related to the adult conceptualizations and intended purposes of the space?[30,31]

## Recent Research Results

Global environmental concerns continue to urge us to incorporate environmental education and outdoor play opportunities within early childhood provision. Research demonstrates how this benefits children holistically.[62] Results of small-scale qualitative studies typically are localized to specific contexts. The evidence base includes studies, relating to social and emotional development, physical health and activity, and cognitive benefit indicators.[32-35]

However, children's experiences in the outdoors are shaped by their specific social-cultural context, the perceptions and attitudes of adults towards their competencies, and the specific affordances of the outdoor space.[36] Therefore, the existing evidence base can provide some relatable insights for planning for children's outdoor play-based learning.

The orientation of adults who provide access to, and shape interaction with, the outdoor space is emphasized throughout the literature. If adults are risk averse, or underestimate children's

competencies, children can be deterred from overcoming fear of new challenges;[37] conversely, adults can support children's engagement in risk-taking to gain mastery over challenges and adjust understandings of their own competencies.[38-40]

Children's access to outdoor spaces may be increasingly limited as a result of risk aversion, the perception that children lack competency to engage with the world alone, and are in danger when outside.[13,24,41-43] The corollary to such cultural understandings is that those providing care and education for young children may be risk averse and fear litigation.[44] Similarly, those designing play equipment for young children can create unappetizing play spaces lacking challenge.[45] Such adult orientation can mean that children's play, if understood as being freely chosen, personally directed and intrinsically motivated,[46,47] may be severely curtailed, especially outdoors.[48] Cultural aversions to inclement weather can also limit children's access to outdoor play,[49] rather than expecting children to experience weather conditions as part of their development as capable, ecological citizens.[50]

The conflict between child-directed activity and adult-driven agendas and interpretations are evident.[31,46,51] Children's playful activity may contrast with adults' expectations as children interact[25] with the socio-material environment. Importantly, playful activity does not necessarily only happen within the allotted time,[52] or within the allocated spaces.[53]

Adults adopting a 'playful pedagogy approach'[54-56] in which interactions are directed responsively toward the interests and activity of the child appears to enhance opportunities for learning,[3,57-59] including environmental engagement62 and increased responsive communication between adults and children.[36,59]

**Research Gaps**

Further empirical work would benefit our understanding of the impact of professional learning, and differing employment routes into the early years education-care sector, on the provision for, and outcomes of, children's playful engagement in the outdoors.

While the value of large-scale quantitative studies in the area of early childhood is contested;[60] there is a gap in the empirical evidence base which lacks systematic large-scale studies comparing children's learning for those engaging in regular outdoor play compared to no such engagement.

There are also research gaps pertaining to the impact of, and mechanisms by which, children with diverse needs engage and learn through play in the outdoors.

**Conclusions**

The literature related to children's outdoor play and learning increasingly demonstrates that children benefit from opportunities to regularly engage in playful activity in a variety of outdoor spaces. It also demonstrates the relationships between adults' attitudes and actions and the learning outcomes of children that result from playful engagement in the outdoors. Children's learning outside is supported by adults who are responsive to the child's interests and can support the development of them, without taking control of the activity.

This evidence base is not conclusive; however, play in varied outdoor spaces that is exploratory, includes opportunities to be social, and is supported by responsive adults appears to support children's enquiry skills, sense of self-efficacy, well-being, connections in the world, and their all-round physical competency. These benefits seem to be enhanced when adults are oriented towards and responsive to children's enquiries and interests, supportive of children's managed risk-taking and mastery of physical challenges, and feel confident enough to not restrict children's activity unless their safety is genuinely threatened.

**Implications for Parents, Services and Policy**

The implications of the above are wide ranging. Adults may want to consider providing experiences outdoors in which children can explore the world around them, challenge themselves, create their own challenges and play with others, without overt and limiting surveillance that restricts opportunities to successfully negotiate risk and gain, cognitive, social-emotional and physical competence. Adults may wish to consider children's opportunities for playful engagement in varied natural and built outdoor spaces balancing concerns about risk with opportunities for learning and exploring.  Policy providers should consider whether regulatory requirements or guidelines for early years' service providers should include an explicit expectation for children's outdoor play. Those who regulate, inspect or assess such provision should be mindful of what appears to benefit children when they engage in outdoor play and learning, as set out above, supported by adults attuned to, and responsive to, children's interests.  Additionally, those providing professional learning for the education-care workforce should consider their provision in the light of the above.[61]

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