

# PLAYING INTO PRIMARY

Outdoor play provides a valuable learning experience throughout KS1 and KS2 and offers opportunities for careful assessment of children's learning, says the Institute of Education's Dr Sue Rogers...

**M**uch is written about the benefits of play in the early years, but less is known about how it benefits primary school pupils. Even so, observation suggests the play of children aged 6–13 shares many characteristics with that of younger children. For example, it is experimental, exploratory, spontaneous, includes self-imposed goals (rather than external goals), active engagement (cognitive and/or physical) and is highly social. For all children, linking learning in the indoor and outdoor classroom will also break down traditional subject boundaries and help them to make important connections between formal and informal 'real world' concepts. This has implications for how we interact with, plan and assess children's learning in outdoor play. However, for many adults, children's play is chaotic, unpredictable, noisy and messy. It is difficult to control and difficult to assess.

## Beyond risk assessment

Much has been written about assessing levels of risk associated with outdoor play and learning, and about the fear that adults may experience when supervising children in this environment. Of course, it is important to ensure children's safety in the outdoors. Key questions include:

- **Have you checked the number of children?**
- **Do you have adequate adult support?**

- **Are the children wearing suitable footwear and clothes?**
- **Is the equipment safe and age appropriate?**
- **Is the outdoor environment inclusive?**

But we need also to move beyond risk assessment to assessing the benefits of outdoor play and learning for children's education and overall development. Not just because it will help us to know our children better and plan accordingly, but because it will also enable us to justify why we offer such experiences to children in curriculum time.

## Planning for possibilities

Part of your assessment practice is concerned with gathering evidence. Assessment of outdoor play activities can be achieved through careful observation, giving feedback, consulting and listening to children and active participation. Observations, photos and children's ideas can be documented in outdoor learning portfolios. Children's reflections and 'soundscapes' can be recorded to encourage recall and to share achievements with parents.





Sometimes adults can lead the play, inject new ideas and make suggestions. However, it is important to observe carefully and listen to what children say before intervening, asking "What is going on here?". One teacher told me that she found it hard "not to jump in with my size tens", especially if children were squabbling over resources or seemed to have reached a lull in the play. Adults often report that their interventions stop the play and this is certainly true in some cases. But children also enjoy the involvement of adults and will invite you to join – although this will be as play partner rather than an adult authority. Knowing your outdoor space and its potential is important. However, too much planning and direction on the part of adults may actually limit the possibilities for learning. One of the ways we can think about planning and assessing outdoor play is to plan for possibilities. Keeping an open mind and trusting the children might also enable you to see different aspects of children's abilities, as in the case of Kieran.

## We know that children of all ages enjoy this kind of play and that it can help to build relationships, confidence and imagination – all essential skills in accessing the more formal curriculum and life-long learning

### Kieran and the pirate ship

Kieran is aged six and in a reception and Y1 mixed class. He is a large boy who finds it difficult to sit still on the carpet or to move about the classroom space without bumping into the furniture. Other children in the class call him 'clumsy' and the teacher describes him as disruptive and boisterous. Observing Kieran outdoors, however, shows quite a different side. The class project is Pirates. Kieran seems really interested in this and in one outdoor session he starts to build a pirate ship out of large wooden blocks. Quickly he is surrounded by other children who want to join in with the story. Kieran takes the lead as 'director', showing other children where to place the blocks and assigning roles. Soon the ship is complete and the play begins. What follows is 25 minutes of a pirate ship adventure. Of course, it involves goodies and baddies, mock fights and walking the plank. The story includes references to Peter Pan, Pirates of the Caribbean and children's shared understanding of what pirates are. At this point we have the opportunity to ask some key questions:

- What kinds of learning are taking place in this episode?
- How could you justify this kind of play in the curriculum?
- What role does the outdoors play in supporting this activity?
- What is the role of the teacher?

Children in this scenario not only behave as pirates, but the temporary suspension of reality – the pretence – allows them to experience what it might be like to be a pirate. For Kieran this is a positive experience where he becomes the master player, taking the lead, communicating his ideas effectively to other children, building relationships and staying focused for a sustained period; all things he found difficult to achieve in the indoor classroom. The storytelling is rich and complex. The outdoors enables large scale, noisy and physical play that few classrooms can accommodate. The wind and the sun give the activity an authenticity and atmosphere that enhances the experience. The teacher acts as an observer, documenting children's interests, actions and ideas. Later she revisits this activity with children in circle time, encouraging Kieran to take the lead. Observing and documenting this activity supports later activities in writing and reading.

This kind of role-play is rarely seen as children progress from the FS to KS1 and is almost lost altogether as children move to KS2. And yet, we know that children of all ages enjoy this kind of play and that it can help to build relationships, confidence and imagination – all essential skills in accessing the more formal curriculum and life-long learning.

Dr Sue Rogers is a senior lecturer and head of department of learning, curriculum and communication at the Institute of Education. She is co-investigator with Sue Waite, University of Plymouth and Dr Julie Evans, University College Plymouth St Mark and St John, on a research project funded by the Economic and Social Research Council (ESRC) 'Opportunities afforded by the outdoors for alternative pedagogies as children move from Foundation Stage to Year 1'

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