

BRIEFING PAPER

Looked After Children and the Natural Environment

The Fostering Outside Play Project





Aims and audience

This briefing paper outlines why it is important for looked after children to access outdoor play in nature. It discusses the benefits and rights of children to play, offering ideas on types of outdoor play in nature. It promotes a risk–benefit approach to care, as opposed to a risk-averse approach.

The briefing paper is aimed at foster carers and social care professionals working with looked after children. It has been developed as part of the Fostering Outside Play Project, which aims to improve the physical and mental health outcomes for looked after children through supporting foster carers and social care professionals to provide high-quality, frequent and regular activities and play outside and in the natural environment. The project is managed by Learning Through Landscapes (LTL), with funding provided by the Welsh Government and The Waterloo Foundation (TWF). Play Wales and BAAF Cymru (British Association for Adoption and Fostering) are partners in the project.

Introduction

Many looked after children are affected by trauma, caused by their experiences of abuse and neglect. This may also be combined with an increased occurrence of loss and change in the life cycle, which can be in relation to the separation of sibling groups or placement disruptions. Whilst there is an enormous focus on the vulnerabilities of looked after children, it is, however, important to recognise that all individuals are both vulnerable and resilient at the same time (Cairns and Stanway, 2013, p 55). It is essential that the systems which underpin the provision for looked after children do not erode their right to explore and learn through play, including outdoor play in nature. Children’s rights to play have been enshrined by the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child (UNCRC) and the Welsh Government’s Seven Core Aims (Welsh Government, 2004).

Children have the right to relax and play, and to join in a wide range of cultural, artistic and other recreational activities.

(UNCRC, 1989, Article 31: Leisure, play and culture)

On 1 February 2013, the UN Committee on the Rights of the Child adopted a General Comment that clarifies for governments worldwide the meaning and importance of Article 31. The General Comment provides guidance to the governments of the 192 countries that are

signatories, on the provisions of the Convention in relation to play and recreation, rest and leisure, cultural life and the arts. It raises awareness of the importance of these in the everyday lives of children worldwide.

The General Comment defines play:

Children's play is any behaviour, activity or process initiated, controlled and structured by children themselves; it takes place whenever and wherever opportunities arise. Caregivers may contribute to the creation of environments in which play takes place, but play itself is non-compulsory, driven by intrinsic motivation and undertaken for its own sake, rather than as a means to an end. Play involves the exercise of autonomy, physical, mental or emotional activity, and has the potential to take infinite forms, either in groups or alone. These forms will change and be adapted throughout the course of childhood. The key characteristics of play are fun, uncertainty, challenge, flexibility and non-productivity. Together, these factors contribute to the enjoyment it produces and the consequent incentive to continue to play. While play is often considered non-essential, the Committee reaffirms that it is a fundamental and vital dimension of the pleasure of childhood, as well as an essential component of physical, social, cognitive, emotional and spiritual development.

(UN Committee on the Rights of the Child, 2013, pp 5–6)

The General Comment also identifies the lack of access to nature as one of the challenges to be addressed in the realisation of Article 31. It notes that:

Children come to understand, appreciate and care for the natural world through exposure, self-directed play and exploration with adults who communicate its wonder and significance. Memories of childhood play and leisure in nature strengthen resources with which to cope with stress, inspire a sense of spiritual wonder and encourage stewardship for the earth. Play in natural settings also contributes towards agility, balance, creativity, social co-operation and concentration. Connection to nature through gardening, harvesting, ceremonies and peaceful contemplation is an important dimension of the arts and heritage of many cultures. In an increasingly urbanised and privatised world, children's access to parks, gardens, forests, beaches and other natural areas is being eroded, and children in low-income urban areas are most likely to lack adequate access to green spaces.

(UN Committee on the Rights of the Child, 2013, p 12)

The Welsh Government's Seven Core Aims, based on the UNCRC, state that all children and young people, including looked after children, should:

- 1. have a flying start in life and the best possible basis for their future growth and development;**
- 2. have access to a comprehensive range of education, training and learning opportunities, including acquisition of essential personal and social skills;**
- 3. enjoy the best possible physical and mental, social and emotional health, including freedom from abuse, victimisation and exploitation;**
- 4. have access to play, leisure, sporting and cultural activities;**
- 5. be listened to, treated with respect, and have their race and cultural identity recognised;**
- 6. have a safe home and a community which supports physical and emotional well-being;**
- 7. not be disadvantaged by child poverty.**

(Welsh Government, 2004)

Outside play and contact with nature – why is it important?

There is evidence to show that children's relationship with nature is an essential part of development which supports them in reaching their full potential. There are many reasons why children are now experiencing less time in nature, for example, parental fears of traffic or of "stranger danger", and a loss of green spaces for public access (Bird, 2007, p 46). There are concerns that children and young people are spending significant periods of time engaging with media technologies. Many people have observed that this is diminishing the time spent on outdoor play in nature, which in turn is reducing imaginative play and social interactions. A study by the University of Cambridge (2002, cited in Bird, 2007, p 47) demonstrated that children were more able to identify Pokémon characters than British wildlife species (78 per cent compared with 53 per cent respectively). Whilst it is acknowledged that technology brings many benefits to children and young people, there is a need for balance and for carers to create other opportunities for learning and play.

Every carer and professional supporting looked after children has a responsibility to promote their health and emotional wellbeing (Looked After Children Health Exchange, 2012, p 25). Whilst more research into the benefits of accessing nature is needed, the findings so far support what many people feel, that being in

I thought I knew a lot about outdoor play but this course has helped me see outside the box.

Foster carer, Fostering Outside Play course

nature is good for us! The findings so far suggest that contact with nature can be an effective component in:

- *the treatment of children with poor self-discipline;*
- *hyperactivity and Attention Deficit Hyperactivity Disorder;*
- *coping with anxiety and stress;*
- *strategies to reduce crime and aggression;*
- *concentration levels in children;*
- *reducing stress;*
- *healthy cognitive development of children;*
- *strengthened communities;*
- *increased sense of wellbeing and mental health.*

(Bird, 2007, p 6)

These findings are important, as a 2004 examination of national statistics for looked after children aged between 5–17 years found that 49 per cent have been assessed as having a mental health disorder (Looked After Children Health Exchange, 2012, p 9). Whilst it is important for children to access specialist services to address their needs, a holistic perspective is required. The role of the foster carer is critical in promoting exercise, a healthy diet and opportunities for outdoor play. This includes spending time in nature.

How can we promote this?

There are some essential components which need to be in place to promote looked after children's access to nature and outdoor play. These are: permission, time, space and materials.

Permission

When we reminisce about our childhoods, many of us will recall happy times spent outdoors in nature. Children need permission from carers to play outdoors. The looked after child's specific circumstances need to be considered in relation to safety and risk. However, this should not result in a child not being allowed access to outdoor play in a natural setting. Agencies should support foster carers in this endeavour by recognising the value that outdoor play brings to the looked after child's life experience.

To demonstrate a supportive attitude towards outdoor play in nature, we should ensure that we do not:

- dismiss it as frivolous and a waste of time;
- unnecessarily restrict it through fear;
- over-regulate and over-organise it;
- subvert it for other (adult) purposes.

(Play Wales, 2013b, p 2)

Time

For many reasons, children's time for outdoor play has decreased significantly in recent years. By making time for children's outdoor play in nature, we promote and value children's freedom, independence and choice, and these characteristics perform a crucial role in children's resilience, ability to deal with stress and anxiety, and general wellbeing. While commercial spaces or products may offer new opportunities, they do so at the cost of the loss of control children have over their own play. This is a significant loss as the central point about play is the control it offers to children. It is a process of trial and error where children can experiment, try things out and repeat and refine behaviour. Central to this behaviour is that children can choose how and why they play. The level of control children have over their own play is part of what makes it play, along with its characteristics of flexibility, unpredictability, spontaneity and imagination (Play Wales, 2013a, p 3).

Space

Characteristics of quality children's spaces include opportunities for wonder, excitement and the unexpected, but most of all opportunities that are not overly ordered and controlled by adults. These spaces are crucial to children's own culture and for their sense of place and belonging. Children's spaces are preferably outdoor spaces. Given the choice, children still prefer to play outdoors and value the independence and opportunities for discovery that it offers. The Welsh Government has also recognised the importance of outdoor spaces and suggests that they are inseparable from the Foundation Phase (the statutory curriculum for all three- to seven-year-old children in Wales) (Play Wales, 2013a, p 4).

Materials

While children can and will play anywhere and with almost anything, there are resources we can provide that can facilitate and encourage play. Such materials can be cheap and accessible – simply leave a pile of them for children to explore and you will be amazed at the motivation and intensity of children's play. Children who play outdoors with others do not need many toys. By providing perhaps just a few well-chosen toys but numerous "loose parts", we can enrich the play space and facilitate play. Loose parts (Nicholson, 1971) refers to anything that can be moved around, carried, rolled, lifted, piled one on top of the other or combined to create interesting and novel structures and experiences (Play Wales, 2013b, p 4).



Loose parts can be natural or synthetic and include:

- | | |
|------------|---------------------|
| Wood | Fabric |
| Containers | Twigs |
| Shapes | Logs |
| Toys | Stones |
| Stones | Flowers |
| Stumps | Rope |
| Sand | Balls |
| Gravel | Shells and seedpods |

Play in a natural setting can include:

- Watching birds, insects or animals
- Building dens
- Playing with sand and water
- Foraging and exploring forests
- Digging
- Climbing trees
- Collecting and categorising

Having loose parts available allows children to use the materials as they choose. Providing these supports children to play in many different ways and on many different levels. Environments that include loose parts tend to be more stimulating and engaging than static ones. Loose parts promote and support imaginative play as they allow children to develop their own ideas and explore their world.

Playing in a space rich with the aforementioned materials supports a wide range of development, including flexibility, creativity, imagination, resourcefulness, problem-solving, self-esteem and spatial awareness (Play Wales, 2013a, p 5).

When 14-year-old Jessie came to me for her first respite visit, I just couldn't get her to talk. In the end, I persuaded her to go down to the beach with me for a walk. We didn't need eye contact and could chat side by side as we walked and collected materials for her to do a collage.

Denise, support foster carer

Research and theory

As general interest in the natural environment grows, so does the body of research and theories which support the notion that being outside in nature has many benefits. Whilst the focus of this paper is on the benefits for looked after children, it is also suggested that outdoor play in a natural setting has benefits for the whole foster family, including foster carers.

There is a growing body of literature which considers the role of green spaces in relation to emotional recovery from stress. Aspinall *et al*'s study (2013) considered 12 participants recruited from Edinburgh University (eight men and four women) as they explored three types of urban spaces in Edinburgh:

- Zone 1: an urban shopping street (many people, buildings and traffic lights).
- Zone 2: a green space (path through a green space with lawns, trees and playing fields).
- Zone 3: a busy commercial area (heavy traffic with high noise levels/heavily populated).

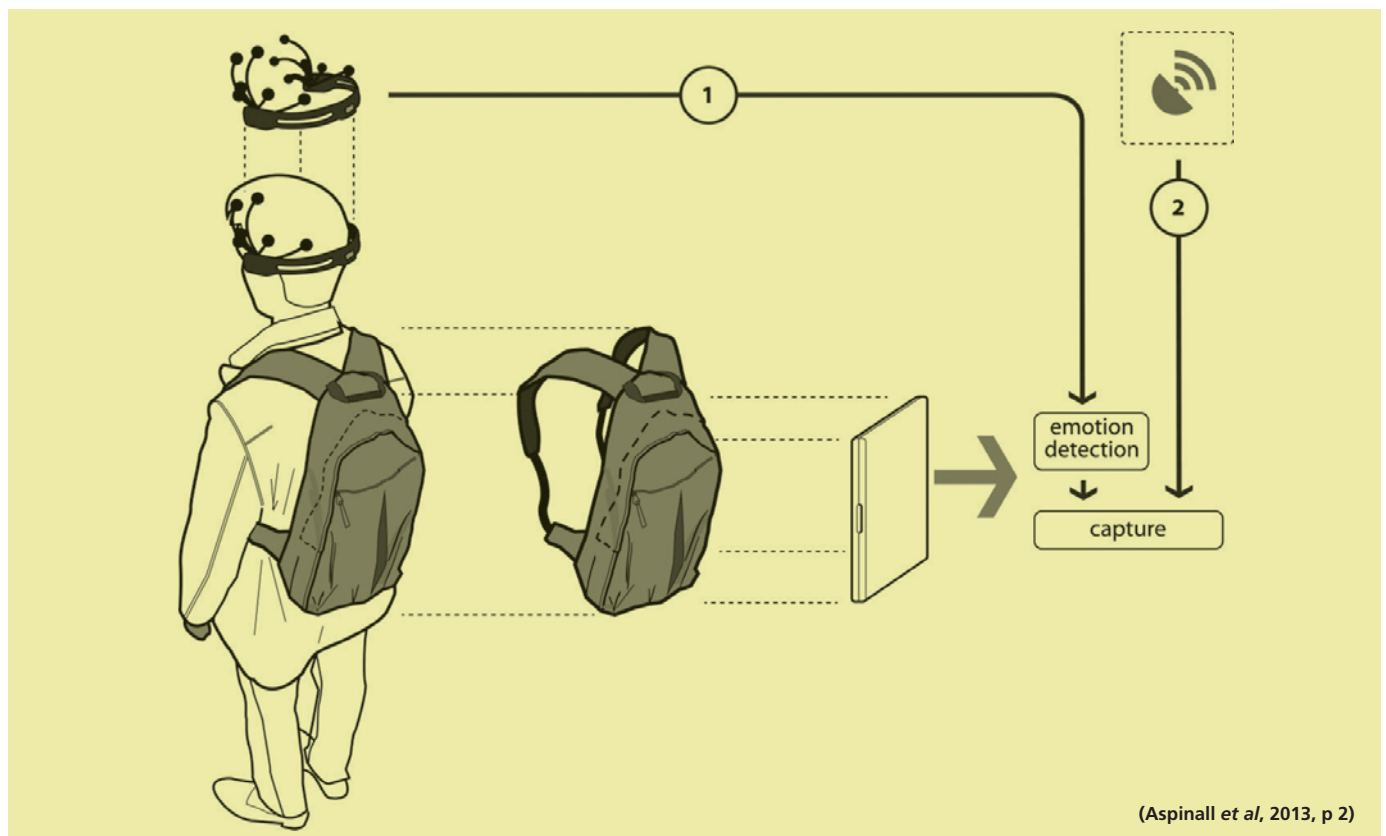
The study used mobile electroencephalography (EEG), in the form of EEG wireless headsets worn by the walkers (see diagram below), to collect data as the group undertook a 25 minute walk in each different location, with each participant walking the same route independently.

The study found evidence of a lower frustration rate and a higher meditative rate when the walkers were in the green space setting. The study provides evidence that accessing green spaces helps enhance our mood.

Other research has focused specifically on children, and some on children with specific needs. Research in Sweden by Grahn *et al* (1977) looked at children attending nursery and found that those who were able to play in a natural setting had increased physical ability and were prone to fewer illnesses, as opposed to those who accessed a normal playground-type setting. In relation to larger sample sizes, a nationwide survey of almost 50,000 children found that whilst 31 per cent would like to cycle to school, a mere three per cent were able to do so (Worpole, 2003).

Many children with ADHD have difficulties with their attention span and overactive and impulsive behaviour. Since 1995, there has been a steady increase in the use of medication such as Ritalin for children with ADHD (Bird, 2007, p 73). Children's concentration levels and self-discipline are viewed by some studies as being connected to access to the natural environment (Bird, 2007, p 57). The few studies which have considered this area provide evidence that the natural environment is likely to help children with ADHD. For instance, Taylor *et al* (2001) asked parents of children with ADHD to rate the children's symptoms after different activities. When green outdoor activities were undertaken, 85 per cent had better scores (15 per cent had worse scores).

Attention Restoration Theory was developed in the 1980s by Kaplan and Kaplan (1989; Kaplan, 1995). Kaplan and Kaplan's theory posits that by being exposed to nature, concentration can improve and mental fatigue can be reduced. Attention fatigue happens when our brains have been overloaded because of a need to focus on certain tasks or stimuli. This theory suggests that being in a natural setting allows us time to recover from overstimulation.



(Aspinall *et al*, 2013, p 2)



I have thoroughly enjoyed these training sessions. I love the outdoors and felt that I didn't really need any training in this area, but I was so wrong! It has helped me go back to my childhood and remember how important play outdoors was for me as I grew up. We all felt a bit silly at times but the way in which everything was done was wonderful, we did stuff together, joined in as much as we felt comfortable with, and shared stories, which was great fun.

Foster carer, Fostering Outside Play course

Some studies have explored this; Hartig *et al* (1991, cited by Bird, 2007, p 36) considered three groups of young adults: one group went on a wilderness holiday, one an urban holiday and the other group did not go on holiday. Afterwards, each of the groups undertook a proofreading test which was deemed to be demanding of direct attention. The group which had gone on the wilderness holiday showed 'significant improvement in scores' compared with the other two groups.

For these restorative effects to occur, four properties need to be present (Kaplan, 1995, p 174):

- extent (the sense or perception of being immersed in nature);
- being away (accessing natural settings as an opportunity to remove yourself from habitual activities);
- soft fascination (natural settings can capture our attention without great effort, e.g. clouds and sunsets);
- compatibility (people must want to be exposed to a natural setting).

The theory of Attention Restoration Theory has been widely considered, but more research may be needed to

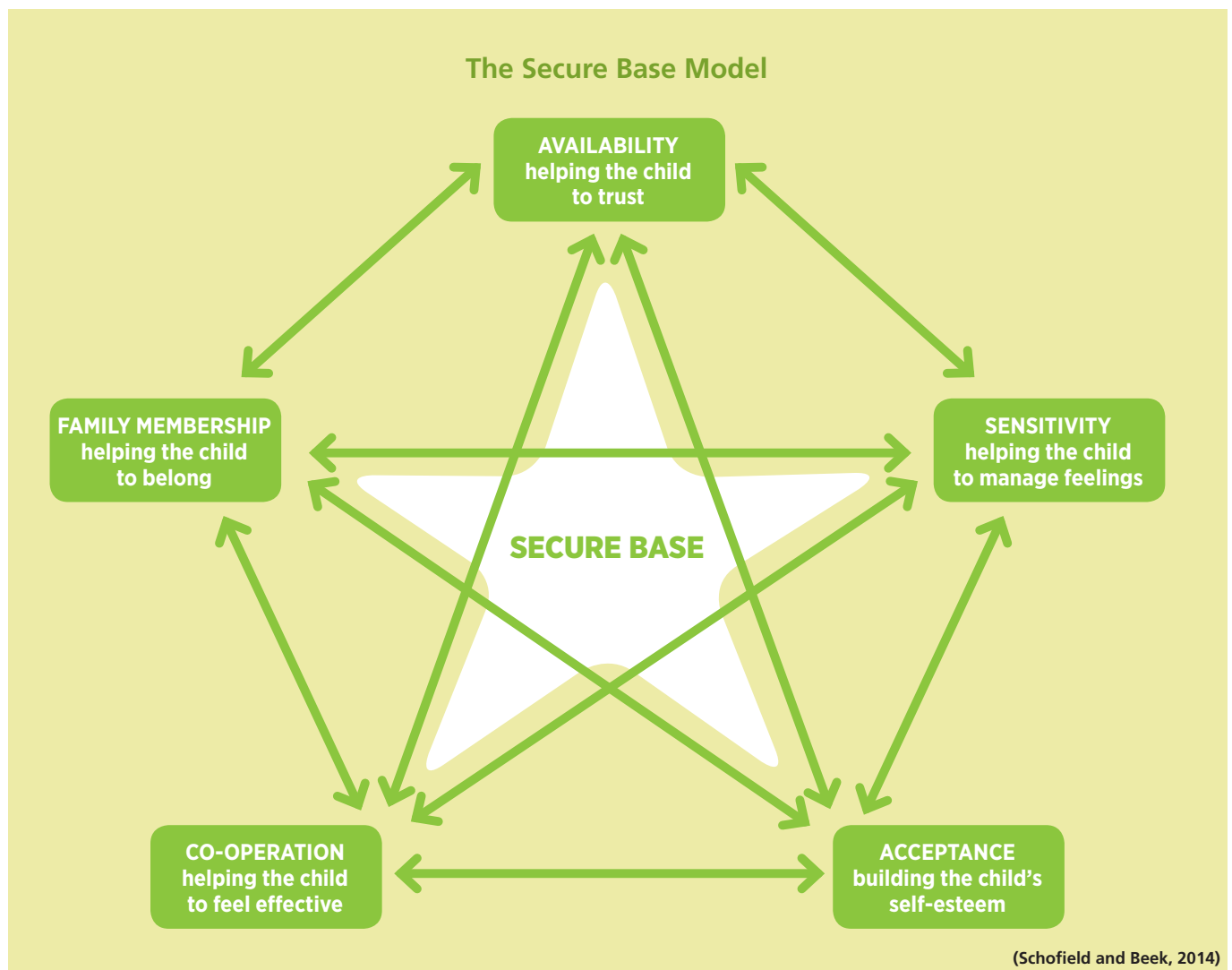
test it fully, especially as new techniques in neuro-imaging are now available which can help explore these ideas.

Being risk competent, not risk-averse

A review of children's play in nature asserted that outdoor activities stimulate creativity, provide opportunities to learn about risk-taking and promote well-being (Bird, 2007, p 60). A child who is resilient can respond and adjust more effectively to difficult circumstances involving risk. They are more able than less resilient children to overcome adversity. Foster carers and social care professionals are well placed to support children and young people in developing resilience across a variety of domains such as education, social competence and interests. A secure base will allow looked after children to explore the world whilst feeling safe (Schofield and Beek, 2014).

By using the Secure Base Model (as shown in the diagram below), we can ask what looked after children need from foster carers and social care professionals across each domain.

It could be argued that by its very nature, being responsible for someone else's child, e.g. a looked after child, brings with it additional duties for the foster carer,





in terms of responsibility to the birth family and the need to be fully accountable to the local authority and fostering service for the care provided to the child. Therefore, when thinking about improving children's access to outdoor play, it is important to consider foster care in detail. It has been argued that all children and young people are losing opportunities for outdoor play in nature, based on risk-averse notions. A study by Worpole (2003) which entailed interviews with 500 children from the general population, found that:

- 45 per cent were not permitted to play with water;
- 36 per cent were unable to climb trees;
- 27 per cent were not permitted to play on climbing equipment;
- 23 per cent were not permitted to ride bikes/play on skateboards.

(Worpole, 2003, cited in Bird, 2007, p 65)

In addition to this, the media has been recognised as creating a negative image of outdoor spaces which can deter children and young people from seeking experiences in nature.

You see all these things on the news like people getting buried out in the woods and stuff, and that's quite scary.

(Ruth, aged 17, quoted in Bird, 2007, p 53)

Giving children managed opportunities to take risks is a way of compensating them for this loss of wider freedom. There is growing debate about the value of allowing children to deal with risks, and about the dangers of overprotection. However, this should not lead us to think that we do not have a role to play as foster carers and social care professionals. The Welsh Government's *Play Policy Implementation Plan* (2006) makes it clear that this needs 'a balanced judgement of risk' (Play Wales, 2013a, p 3). Within play environments, it is important to allow for some degree of risk, for instance, in allowing a child to climb trees or sit around a campfire. However, it is important to consider the background of the child or young person involved, as there should be prior thought about how a looked after child may perceive the outdoors, for example, a child who has experienced neglect and abuse may have been sent outside as a punishment and so may associate the outdoors with fear and uncertainty.

Very enjoyable experience that I will remember for a long time and intend to share with others, especially the children I care for.

Foster carer, Fostering Outside Play course

Conclusion

The Welsh Government defines a rich play environment as one which is flexible, adaptable, varied and interesting (2012). It should maximise the potential for socialising, creativity, resourcefulness, challenge and choice. It is a trusted space where children feel free to play in their own way, on their own terms. *Play, Naturally*, a review of natural play commissioned by the Children's Play Council (Lester and Maudsley, 2007), offers an excellent review of the benefits to children of playing in nature, concluding that there is substantial evidence that such play has numerous benefits. It stresses the opportunities which can be provided in control and mastery, constructing special places and risk taking, promoting creativity and imaginative play. Children are able to develop their sense of self in such settings, recognising both their own independence and their connectedness with the life around them. Furthermore, there are direct benefits for children in relation to physical and emotional wellbeing when carers combine a diversity of play experiences with a natural setting (Lester and Maudsley, 2007, p xiv).

Quality play provision offers all children the opportunity to freely interact with or experience the following:

- Other children – of different ages and abilities, with a choice to play alone or with others, to negotiate, co-operate, fall out, and resolve conflict.
- The natural world – weather, trees, plants, insects, animals, mud.
- Loose parts – natural and man-made materials that can be manipulated, moved and adapted, built and demolished.
- The four elements – earth, air, fire and water.
- Challenge and uncertainty – opportunities for risk taking, both on a physical and emotional level.
- Changing identity – role play and dressing up.
- Movement – running, jumping, climbing, balancing, rolling, swinging, sliding and spinning.
- Rough and tumble – play-fighting.
- The senses – sounds, tastes, textures, smells and sights.

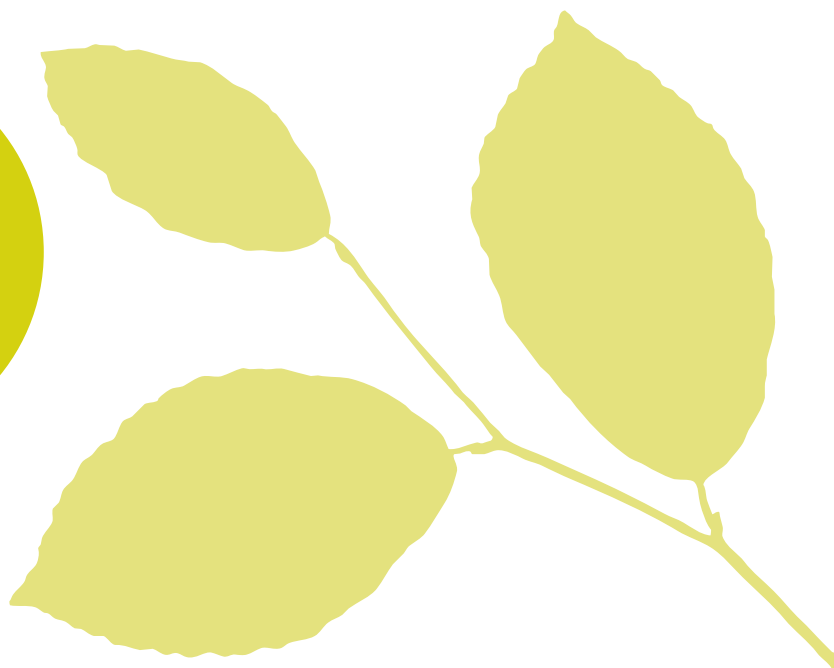
(Play Wales, 2014)



This briefing paper has considered the importance of promoting outdoor play in nature for looked after children. Several studies have shown children's preference for natural or wild spaces for play opportunities (Bird, 2007, p 81), and there is no evidence to suggest that looked after children would feel any different. It could also be suggested that looked after children have more to gain than their peers in relation to the stress of experiencing abuse, removal from parents and subsequent placement moves whilst in care. In today's world of technological advancements, rapid communication and diminishing play settings, it is important that we provide children with opportunities for outside play in nature. The Fostering Outside Play project works with foster carers and social care professionals in Wales to promote such opportunities for looked after children.

***A really good day
that everyone enjoyed.
A day with a difference
that was positive,
practical and uplifting.***

Foster carer, Fostering
Outside Play course



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Published by BAAF (www.baaf.org.uk)
on behalf of Learning through Landscapes
The Studio, c/o The Castle
Castle Hill, Winchester
Hampshire SO23 8UL

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Registered office: The Studio, Castle Hill, Winchester, Hampshire SO23 8UL

