

# Out to Play

## SECTION 12: CARING FOR OUR OUTDOOR SPACES

 TheScottishGovernment

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# Executive Summary



This guidance is part of the *Out to Play* series that aims to support Early Learning and Childcare (ELC) practitioners to provide great outdoor play experiences for our children. *Caring for Our Outdoor Spaces* is about making the most of the outdoor spaces your ELC settings use and caring for the environment through embedding Learning for Sustainability (Lfs). It has been developed to complement the original **Out to Play** guidance.

Relationships are key to the effectiveness of caring for any outdoor space. We know that relationships matter between children and adults and that these relationships need to be nurturing, caring and empowering. We also know that when outdoor play is happening successfully, children and staff have develop a strong relationship with the places where they play. They have an emotional and spiritual attachment to the land and a sense of belonging to, and being part of, nature which motivates them to care for their environment.

# Executive Summary

## Why we need this guidance

It's a really exciting time for ELC and outdoor learning in Scotland. Outdoor play and learning is already an integral, everyday part of ELC. More and more settings are now fully outdoors or expanding their outdoor facilities and experiences to increase children's opportunities for quality outdoor play and learning.

As outlined in '**Best Start**', the Childcare Strategic Plan, it is our vision that children in ELC will spend as much time outdoors as they do indoors, and that time outdoors will happen every day, in every setting. We also set out our commitment to work with our partners to build on the range of outdoor learning support for providers that we put in place during the pandemic.<sup>1</sup>

There is clear research, evidence and recognition about the benefits of outdoor play, especially in natural spaces. This includes physical, social, emotional, cognitive and spiritual benefits, as exemplified in the Inspiring Scotland (2018) **Scotland's National Outdoor Play and Learning Position Statement**.

How we manage and care for our outdoor spaces reflects our values and understanding of a pedagogy<sup>2</sup> that embeds LfS. With increasing use, our outdoor spaces are at risk of detrimental wear and tear. This can reduce the play and learning possibilities for our children and impacts on the biodiversity of the space – that is the range of wildlife, including plant life, that inhabit these spaces, even in urban areas.

In addition, the environmental and climate challenges that we currently face – now and in the foreseeable future – are significant and serious. We are having to learn creative approaches requiring new ways of thinking and acting, using LfS as the context. It is important that professionals working with children have the capability to do this very well so that we and our children feel empowered to shape our future.

## Who is this guidance for?

This guidance is written primarily for all professionals working with children in ELC and at early level in schools. This includes ELC practitioners, childminders, teachers working at Early Level, playworkers and practitioners who work in Out of School Care (OOSC) for young children. Throughout the guidance, the term 'practitioner' is used to collectively represent the workforce.

While the guide is primarily aimed at ELC settings and early primary, much of it is relevant for others providing play experiences in an outdoor environment. It will also be of interest to decision makers with responsibilities for developing outdoor play and learning and/or sustainable cultures and approaches.

## How to use this guidance?

This new chapter of *Out to Play* guidance has been published online in order to uphold our commitment to environmental sustainability. Practitioners will be able to download relevant sections of the guidance and to access links to helpful resources.

<sup>1</sup> **Best Start: Strategic early learning and school age childcare plan for Scotland 2022-26** ([www.gov.scot](http://www.gov.scot))

<sup>2</sup> Education Scotland (2020) **Realising the Ambition: Being Me** has helpful explanations of the term 'pedagogy'.

# Section 1

## Why care for our outdoor places

### 1.1 Outdoor spaces and outdoor play

This guidance is part of the *Out to Play* series that aims to support practitioners to provide great outdoor play experiences for our children. *Caring for Our Outdoor Spaces* is about making the most of the outdoor spaces your group uses and caring for the environment through embedding Learning for Sustainability (LfS). It has been developed to complement the original **Out to Play** guidance.

Relationships are key to the effectiveness of caring for any outdoor space. We know that relationships matter between children and adults and that these relationships need to be nurturing, caring, and empowering. We also know that when outdoor play is happening successfully, children and staff have developed a strong relationship with the places where they play. They have an emotional and spiritual attachment to the land and a sense of belonging to, and being part of, nature which motivates them to care for their environment.

### 1.2 Why we need this guidance

Scottish Government have committed through the national outcomes to focus on creating a more successful country with opportunities for all of Scotland to flourish through increased wellbeing and sustainable and inclusive economic growth. In recent years we have seen significant changes within Scotland's Early Learning and Childcare (ELC) sector to support this purpose, which set the context for this guidance.

'**Best Start**' - our strategic plan for early learning and school age childcare 2022-26, contains a clear commitment to our vision that children in ELC will spend as much time outdoors as they do indoors, and that time outdoors will happen every day, in every setting. In the plan, we set out our commitment to work with our partners to build on the range of outdoor learning support for providers that we put in place during the pandemic.<sup>3</sup>

The Plan also describes our vision and strategic priorities for early learning and school age childcare over the rest of this Parliament and articulates the three outcomes we expect all of our policies to deliver:

- Children's development improves and the poverty related outcomes gap narrows
- Family wellbeing improves
- Parents' and carers' opportunities to take up or sustain work, training, and study increase

There is also a greater emphasis on quality outdoor provision supported by guidance such as: **Space to Grow**, Care Inspectorate (2017); **Realising the Ambition: Being Me**, Education Scotland (2020); and **Out to Play: Practical guidance for creating outdoor play experiences in early learning and childcare**. It's a really exciting time for ELC and outdoor learning in Scotland. More and more settings are now fully outdoors or expanding their outdoor facilities and experiences to increase children's opportunities for quality outdoor play and learning.

<sup>3</sup> **Best Start: Strategic early learning and school age childcare plan for Scotland 2022-26** ([www.gov.scot](http://www.gov.scot))

# Section 1

## Why care for our outdoor places

There is clear research evidence and recognition about the benefits of outdoor play, especially in natural spaces. This includes physical, social, emotional, cognitive and spiritual benefits, as exemplified in the Inspiring Scotland (2018) **Scotland's National Outdoor Play and Learning Position Statement**. Nationally we have a strong commitment to ensuring all our children have daily opportunities to play outside as a fundamental part of growing up in Scotland. The emergence of Covid-19 has further emphasised that being outside can be safer and can be a pragmatic measure that reduces the transmission of contagious diseases and promotes good health and wellbeing in our children.

How we manage and care for our outdoor spaces reflects our values and understanding of a pedagogy<sup>4</sup> that embeds LfS. With increasing use, our outdoor spaces are at risk of detrimental wear and tear. This can reduce the play and learning possibilities for our children and impacts on the biodiversity of the space – that is the range of wildlife, including plant life, that inhabit these spaces, even in urban areas.

In addition, the environmental and climate challenges that we currently face – now and in the foreseeable future – are significant and serious. We are having to learn creative approaches requiring new ways of thinking and acting, using LfS as the context. The ELC profession and teachers working with children at Early Level, have the capability to do this very well so that we and our children feel empowered to shape our future.

“The space is an aquarium that mirrors the ideas, values, attitudes and cultures of the people who live within it.”

(Loris Malaguzzi, 1984)

<sup>4</sup> Education Scotland (2020) **Realising the Ambition: Being Me** has helpful explanations of the term 'pedagogy'.

# Section 2

## About this guide

### 2.1 Who is this guidance for?

This guidance is written primarily for all professionals working with children in ELC or at early level in schools. This includes ELC practitioners, childminders, teachers working at Early Level, playworkers and practitioners who work in school aged childcare (SACC) for young children. Throughout the guidance, the term ‘practitioner’ is used to collectively represent the workforce.

While the guide is primarily aimed at early primary and ELC settings, much of it is relevant for others providing play experiences in an outdoor environment. It will also be of interest to decision makers with responsibilities for developing outdoor play and learning and/or sustainable cultures and approaches.

### 2.2 Aims of this guidance

- To support practitioners to critically reflect upon their own understanding, perceptions and values about outdoor and indoor places. In doing so we may need to reframe and rethink our everyday practice, relationships and interactions.
- To use inclusive and sustainable approaches that value children and our own need to feel a sense of attachment and belonging to our communities, which includes the natural world.
- To ensure the rights of a child are a core part of our sustainable approach. This includes observing how they play in a space, listening to and then acting upon their suggestions, followed by critical reflection – a ‘child-led’ approach.
- To provide practical advice about caring for our outdoor spaces. It is about the “what” of maintaining a site and also the “how” this happens.

Every child has a right to play outside and belong to their local places and community. Additional Support for Learning and the importance of equality and diversity are considered throughout the text and are integral to how children are perceived, involved and empowered in their outdoor spaces. **Out to Play Section 11: Practitioners Supporting Children with Additional Support Needs** provides useful practical advice for practitioners.

“It is essential that we regularly evaluate how children are using the spaces within the environment and make changes and additions when required. Children should be involved in developing and caring for their environment. By involving children fully in planning their learning they will begin to understand the importance of caring for their environment and resources.”

([Realising the Ambition](#), 2020, p54)

“Where we spend our time has an important effect on our lives and our wellbeing. Improving the quality of places and the opportunities we have access to can help to tackle inequalities.”

(The [Place Standard tool](#))

## Section 2

### About this guide

#### 2.3 Using this guidance

The guidance has been designed to be dipped into rather than read from cover to cover. It takes time to develop an ethic of care and understanding of places, so practitioners are encouraged to use this guidance to take small steps, and gradually build their experience and understanding. Practitioners do not need to be experts in the outdoors to care for our places and practitioners of all levels can be part of developing a pedagogy of sustainability. Throughout Scotland there are local authority early years teams, outdoor education professionals and a range of partner organisations who can provide a variety of support and advice to practitioners about playing and learning outside.

Of course the range of ELC provision throughout Scotland varies hugely and reflects the diversity of place and its landscape, location and cultures. Therefore, not every aspect of this guidance will be relevant for every childcare setting. For example, the sections on beaches, sand dunes and rockpools will primarily be used by those based within easy reach of a seashore.

#### 2.4 Terms used in this guidance

We use the following terms throughout this guidance.

- **'Outdoor space'** encompasses all the outdoor environments which children access. This varies enormously and includes everything from a domestic back garden, the outdoor space of a setting (asphalt or naturalised), a school playground, a park, a beach, allotment, field, patch of scrub, reclaimed land, botanical garden, special areas like a nature reserve or national park or other urban or rural greenspace in various states of use and care. All settings will have access to outdoor space and use for this guidance.
- **'Landowner'** encompasses the organisation or individual that owns the outdoor space. Often the landowner, such as a local authority, estate or private organisation will have a representative that we liaise with who has management responsibilities for the site. For example, this could be a countryside ranger team. In school-based ELC settings, the outdoor space is normally managed on a day-to-day basis by the head teacher and/or the janitor. Some aspects of maintenance are devolved to the setting, other elements are the responsibility of the local authority. As practitioners we need to understand our specific processes and know who we can turn to for advice and permissions about our outdoor spaces.
- **'Sustainable'** to describe our practice which purposefully creates and cares for the spaces that we play for the benefit of all species that live there or visit at the present and in the future.



# Section 2

## About this guide

### 2.5 Considering risk

Throughout the guidance there are examples of practice that contain elements of risk and a sensible and proportionate approach to risk is needed when applying the guidance.

As practitioners:

- We have an ongoing and developing awareness of our own competences and confidence to manage these identified risks and ensure the routines, resources and environment are as safe as necessary.
- We work with each other, the wider community and our children to ensure everyone takes personal responsibility, communicates effectively and looks out for each other when concerns emerge.
- We know our children, their developmental ages and needs and take this into account.
- We are also able to undertake risk-benefit assessments for any situation we feel demands this. The Scottish Government (2018) **Out to Play** has a suggested list along with links, guidance and advice about health and safety which applies when Caring for our Outdoor Places too.
- Watch these short **videos** for more on dynamic **risk-benefit assessments** in practice.
- The Care Inspectorate have a set of helpful practice notes around keeping children safe – these can be accessed here: **practice-notes**.
- This includes information on the Care Inspectorate's **SIMOA** campaign keep children safe by raising awareness of how, and why, they could leave a childcare setting without a responsible adult.

## Section 3

### The importance of values and sustainable outdoor practice

#### 3.1 Valuing the outdoors

##### Scotland's national outcomes

"We grow up loved, safe and respected so that we realise our full potential"

"We value, enjoy, protect and enhance our environment"

"We are healthy and active"

##### Why do values matter?

"As practitioners, we need to value the essential and special nature of outdoors. Outdoor provision needs equal status, equal time and equal thinking to indoor provision."

(White & Edwards, 2018)

Our personal values, beliefs and motivations underpin our professional approach - that is what we do and why we do it. Every one of us plays our part in making our outdoor provision the best it can be and protecting it for our children and their future.

Our values support and guide us and underpin our practice. They need to be relevant to our provision and the community it serves and enable LfS to flow through our ethos. We help parents to understand why the outdoors and sustainability are so important to us. [Section 3.2](#) is all about LfS, what it is and why it matters.

"Values change as we are influenced by other people, experiences and environments. What children encounter in their early years will shape the framework of their values for life."

(Davy, 2019)

##### Values that support caring for our spaces

We cannot separate children from their environment so caring for children effectively requires caring for the spaces in which they play. This means adopting a range of inclusive approaches in sensitive ways which don't inhibit children's free play and builds upon their interests and curiosities.

Many laws that are in place to look after our land are based upon the values of respect and responsibility. Guidance is available to help us, such as the [Scottish Outdoor Access Code](#). With ensuring children's right to play outside comes the responsibility of looking after these places as an everyday part of what we do outdoors. This needs to be embedded into the routines, experiences and interactions with our children.

Reciprocal relationships are vital for our well-being. These involve mutual give and take and may require effort on our part to establish and maintain. Have a look at [Section 4.2 Developing reciprocity](#) to see why this matters when embedding values that support sustainability into our practice.

##### A pedagogy for sustainability

LfS needs to underpin our values and practice. This will differ for every provider as it is unique to our outdoor spaces and community. Enabling all children to have the time and space outside to respond to what matters personally to them is fundamental to their making sense of sustainability. Through doing this, new ways of thinking, imagining and creating possibilities also emerge.

## Section 3

### The importance of values and sustainable outdoor practice

#### 3.2 Learning for sustainability (LfS)

##### What is LfS?

“The term “Learning for Sustainability”, coined in Scotland, is now gaining traction in other countries as a cross curricular approach which enables learners, educators, learning settings and their wider community to build a socially-just, sustainable and equitable society; and as an effective whole-setting approach which weaves together global citizenship, sustainable development and outdoor learning to create coherent, rewarding and transformative learning experiences.”

**(“Target 2030” A movement for people, planet and prosperity: Learning for Sustainability Action Plan 2023 – 2030)**

LfS weaves together three key themes; global citizenship, sustainable development education and outdoor learning, to create coherent, rewarding and transformative learning experiences. Particularly in the Early Years, outdoor learning is the gateway to understanding and appreciating each theme of LfS, which continues to be developed throughout the rest of a child’s years in education.

Being outside and being actively involved in creating and caring for our outdoor spaces, we can help our children make sense of the complex world in which we live through embracing all that LfS entails.

##### The United Nations Sustainable Development Goals (UNSDG)

“These 17 interconnected goals are the blueprint to achieve a better and more sustainable future for all. They address the global challenges we face, including those related to poverty, inequality, climate change, environmental degradation, peace and justice. *The scale of the undertaking, to address the SDGs and particularly to ‘learn our way’ towards a sustainable future, is considerable and requires long-term, sustained commitment*”

(Vision 2030+, 2016)



##### Find out more

- Inspiring Scotland have outdoor play **videos** which include examples from Out of School Care Clubs and outdoor nurseries
- Holmes, T. et al (2011) **The Common Cause Handbook**, Public Interest Research Centre. Free to download
- For more information on outdoor learning in the context of LfS visit **Education Scotland’s National Improvement Hub**

## Section 3

### The importance of values and sustainable outdoor practice



- For examples of how settings consider the **sustainable management** of spaces that are regularly used for learning and play there are two **videos** from Learning through Landscapes and Outdoor Woodland Learning

#### Why does LfS matter?

In 2020, the Scottish Government commissioned, **The Educational Outcomes of Learning for Sustainability: A Brief Literature Review**. The following highlights from this report are particularly relevant to caring for outdoor places:

Outdoor learning and time spent outdoors are fundamental to embedding LfS.

Pro-environmental attitudes and behaviours are developed by effective LfS deliver.

LfS supports the development of critical thinking skills. It can help children to uncover and unpick complex interdisciplinary issues. It can also support creativity, allowing learners to imagine solutions to existing and emerging issues. This is an opportunity to develop and practice skills necessary to thrive in an increasingly fast-paced, uncertain world.

Fostering an emotional connection to nature through time spent outdoors is particularly important.

LfS can help children to explore, experience and come to know themselves, their connection to the world around them and the contributions they can make to society now and for the future.

LfS is an excellent context through which all aspects of Realising the Ambition and Curriculum for Excellence can flourish, especially the 'four capacities', that is: confident individuals, successful learners, responsible citizens and effective contributors.

The importance of appropriate real-world and outdoor learning environments.

That to make sense of the complexity of the world, we need to look at issues holistically and in terms of relationships.

LfS is more than an environmental agenda. It is also about social justice, children's rights and offers a range of ways to engage, challenge and progress issues of inequity, disadvantage, justice and community cohesion.

## Section 3

### The importance of values and sustainable outdoor practice

In June 2023 the Scottish Government launched a refreshed **Learning for Sustainability Action Plan** which focuses on a bold new “Target 2030” Vision for every learning setting in Scotland (school and early learning setting) to be a Sustainable Learning Setting by 2030.

In order to ensure that children’s views were reflected in this Action Plan, the Children’s Parliament were commissioned to engage with children across Scotland on why Learning for Sustainability is important to them and what they would like to see improved or changed about the current offer.

The **calls to action** from the Children’s Parliament investigation are:

1. All children should have the chance to learn outdoors throughout the school year
2. Outdoor learning should be part of every school subject
3. Adults in school and adults who decide what we learn, need to learn about the climate emergency too
4. Children are passionate about climate change; their views, ideas and opinions should be included in how and what they learn about this subject
5. Scottish Government should take urgent action to protect and respect trees and the natural environment
6. Children and adults should have opportunities to work together on children’s rights, climate change and sustainability
7. Scottish schools should have links to other schools around the world.

## Section 4

### Supporting practitioners to care for our outdoor spaces

As practitioners, we need to consider our knowledge, skills, experience and motivations around caring for outdoor spaces. We are the key to facilitating the input needed.

This section contains the theory and practical ideas to help us create an ethos of sustainable change, including:

**4.1 Being an adult who cares.** This makes a difference to a child, their perceptions and values about the places they live and play.

**4.2 Developing reciprocity.** We can enable our children to develop relationships with the places where they play.

**4.3 Changing our perceptions of nature.** This sub-section will explore how our beliefs, assumptions and language affect actions and values that are truly inclusive of all people and places. Re-framing our perceptions can help – practice may be needed to do this.

**4.4 Understanding the importance of biodiversity.** This sub-section will explore what biodiversity is and why it matters.

**4.5 Learning about life on Earth.** Everything is interconnected. This sub-section provides a framework to help you and your children understand the main elements and entities involved so that we can feed into our everyday experiences outside.

**4.6 Getting to know plants, animals and fungi that live in our outdoor spaces.** This sub-section provides some advice from practitioners and outdoor enthusiasts about developing our own knowledge and understanding of other species in our outdoor spaces. This will help us better care for them.

**4.7 Supporting our children to develop a sense of place.** This sub-section considers how to develop a sense of place by involving families, developing communities and recognising the social element of caring for outdoor spaces. This leads to deeper ties and moving towards any space becoming “our green place”.

# Section 4

## Supporting practitioners to care for our outdoor spaces

### 4.1 Being an adult who cares

#### Why this matters?

Chawla (2006) highlights the importance of a child spending time outside with a significant adult who is able to model practice and demonstrate:

- Care for the land as a limited resource essential for family identity and well-being
- A disapproval of destructive practices
- Simple pleasure at being out in nature
- A fascination with the details of other living things and the elements of the earth and sky

Also, the quality of the relationship mattered. It was *“not only care for the natural world, but equally, care for the child.”*

This relationship with a significant adult has been shown to have a positive lifelong impact including a willingness to take pro-environmental action.

This research demonstrates that being an outdoor expert is not necessary. A practitioner who is reflective will have a desire to keep learning, an ability to interact sensitively, will be flexible and responsive to the children in their care and will have an understanding of how children learn and develop.

### Nurturing wellbeing in an outdoor Community of Practice

“Acknowledging the challenges faced by practitioners in maintaining their enthusiasm for outdoor ELC, I created a Community of Practice named WIGLS, Working in Green Local Spaces, to nurture professional friendships, identity and connectedness which support wellbeing, while simultaneously deepening practitioners’ knowledge and skills through training, building confidence.

Hospitality visits, sharing peer-to-peer experiences in developing an outdoor context and further in-person and on-line training helped guide practitioners through the year. We explored the gifts of nature in Natural Treasures sessions, and the value of the outdoor context through Nurture Outdoors training. During the pandemic, training continued and included reflective practices to support practitioner self-care.”

(Dr Elizabeth Henderson, retired Education Support Officer, Aberdeen City)

## Section 4

### Supporting practitioners to care for our outdoor spaces

#### Tuning into the world around us

Being present in the world is a form of mindfulness. It can help us relax, slow down and pay attention to what is happening. This state of being is very helpful when working outside with children and tuning into their needs too. There are many approaches for acclimatising to being in natural spaces.

For example, when you are outside, ideally in a natural spot, take a moment to reflect on how you are interacting with the world around you. Focus on:

- Breathing air, in and out of your lungs
- The feeling of the weather on your face
- The connection of your feet to the ground (even stronger if this is barefoot)
- The warmth of our bodies inside our jackets

Other similar ways of “standing still” and developing a wider awareness include:

- Finding a leaf, stone or other natural item. Spend a moment feeling its texture, shape, size, noticing its colours and patterns and smelling its scent.
- The noticing of what is happening around you: birds singing, clouds moving, traffic humming.
- Gazing into the distance and focusing on something moving. This could be leaves waving on a tree, a car moving along a road, a bird flying overhead or exploring the shape of a blue patch of sky.

#### Health and Social Care Standard 4.25:

I am confident that people are encouraged to be innovative in the way they support and care for me.

“I would urge practitioners to encourage children to look up. I found that was often missed. Take time to encourage them to look up at the sky, tree tops, clouds birds. Lie down and watch the clouds move.”

(Marian Cairns, Retired Forest Kindergarten Development Officer, Scottish Forestry)



## Section 4

### Supporting practitioners to care for our outdoor spaces

#### Understanding and embedding the Rights of a Child

“...in terms of the provision of play opportunities and environments, in general we might expect ‘high quality opportunities’ to happen when: the principles of the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child are put into practice, the environment provides stimulus for play to flourish and if adults are involved, they work to established ethical and professional standards.”

(**Play Strategy for Scotland: Our Action Plan**, 2013)

#### The United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child (1989)

Article 29 states “*The development of respect for the natural environment.*” At times it may seem to be a balancing act between this and ensuring the right of a child to play outside (Article 31). Sometimes, children perceive their environment differently to adults. Patience and tuning in to children is required rather than assumptions being made about their behaviours. For example, many children like to strip bark from trees, which is damaging to any living tree and the organisms living under the bark. Yet it is a satisfying undertaking for children. When asked about this, children’s responses typically include:

- I wanted to see what it looked like on the inside
- We like to take things to pieces
- The outdoors is full of stuff you can use and take to pieces, why not bark as well?

One solution is to acknowledge this need and find a suitable fallen down tree that has bark which can be stripped off, whilst remaining mindful that deadwood provides a habitat for other living things.

There is a lot to learn about being in and thinking with nature. We’re all on an evolving journey. Being outside is a way to learn more about the children with whom we work. Some useful things to remember include:

- Being able to identify and talk about the skills and attributes children are developing through creating and caring for their outdoor spaces, not just what your children are doing.
- Avoid using language framed around the need to save the planet or of climate and ecological disaster when having important discussions. It can cause anxiety and stress so requires an approach informed by the children’s levels of maturity and their overall responsibility for the situation.
- When an environmental issue arises that children notice, rather than rushing into advocating solutions, take time to listen to children’s ideas and thoughts and together act upon these (Article 12). This is about empowering our children make positive changes, even if this involves trial and error.
- Showing a genuine interest in what children are doing outside, letting them lead on where to explore, what to learn about and how to engage with the outdoor space.

## Section 4

### Supporting practitioners to care for our outdoor spaces

- Slowing down and making the most of spontaneous moments.
- Giving children the chance to respond to the spaces they are in and all the elements and entities that exist. This is particularly important for babies and children who may not be able to talk confidently so that we learn more about what they need to thrive outdoors.
- Consider the different needs of children and how you may need to adapt your approach to make sure they can fully access outdoor spaces.

The Care Inspectorate (2022) **Quality Framework for Daycare of Children, Childminding and School Aged Childcare** describes the importance of children having an active role in influencing the design of the setting and in shaping their experiences and activities throughout the day, whether delivered indoors, outdoors or a blend of both. Quality Indicator 2.1 'The Quality of the Setting for Care, Play and Learning' encourages settings and staff to:

- Understand the importance of outdoor play for health and wellbeing, promoting sustainability and caring for the environment
- Recognise the right of all children to enjoy outdoor play
- Understand the positive impact rich multi-sensory outdoor play and learning has on children's resilience
- Promote opportunities for children to learn about sustainability and caring for their environment



#### Find out more

- **The ELC National Induction Resource** helps us plan and review what new staff need to develop their outdoor practice.
- **Outdoor and Woodland Learning Scotland (OWLS)** have local groups which provide support and training. The OWLS website has many resources.
- **Realising the Ambition: Being Me** applies equally to indoor and outdoor learning environments.
- Play Scotland (2017) **Play Types Toolkit** has information about the importance of observation and giving space and time for play experiences and interactions with nature.
- South Lanarkshire Council has developed a helpful GIRFEC in the Outdoors **poster** that links improving wellbeing with the opportunities and experiences children can have outdoors.

## Section 4

### Supporting practitioners to care for our outdoor spaces



#### 4.2 Developing reciprocity

##### Why does reciprocity matter?

Reciprocity is the practice of exchanging things with others for mutual benefit. Many cultures around the world have embedded this concept for generations, particularly indigenous groups.

All life is interdependent and depends on reciprocal acts. For example, when we breathe out, we create carbon dioxide. Green plants need this, along with sunlight and water to make nutrients and oxygen. We need the oxygen to breathe and that has been made by the green plants. Thus, we are

responsible *to* (rather than *for*) all things around us not out of superiority to them, but because we are part of them, and cannot be safely disconnected from nature.

Our practice can embrace the concept of reciprocity by ensuring that whenever we use, take or receive something, we give back. What have our outdoor spaces gifted to us? It could be a sense of peace, room to run, plants to forage or use in our play. Likewise, how do we return these gifts and give thanks for them? This is the beginnings of expressing gratitude and developing a collaborative life with everything around us. It is also at the heart of genuine care.

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### Supporting practitioners to care for our outdoor spaces

#### Building upon prior learning

We can show children that they are already demonstrating an awareness of the foundations of reciprocity by:

- Using our outdoor spaces on a daily basis and being actively involved in caring for these spaces through our ethos and routines.
- Supporting our children to notice cause and effect in the world around us.
- Identifying reciprocity in positive ways, for example through observing our children's acts of kindness and responding to these.
- Continuing to develop joyful reciprocal relationships with our children. For example, we notice: *'the many ways children express themselves, recognizing that intentional, open listening is the basis of a reciprocal relationship.'* (Rinaldi, 2001)

#### Supporting personal development

Reciprocity acknowledges we have spiritual, cognitive, emotional and physical connections with everything around us. When fostered, it deepens our relationship with our place and can lead to a sense of unity. It involves:

- Engaging in the world around us in ways that regenerates balance in our environment.
- Being aware of and understanding that we are completely dependent on everything in nature. Thus we have to cooperate with everything else as a way of life.
- Children and practitioners being active, yet equal participants within our world – be this natural or artificial – in loving and respectful ways.

#### Moving beyond environmental stewardship

At a community level, the concept of reciprocity extends to all species and entities in order to be healthy and balanced. Our use of different outdoor spaces is special and part of this includes giving back to the space in different ways. For example:

- We can be proactive in communication with our landowners. Do they feel valued? How reassured do we make them feel about use of the outdoor space? How do we make them feel a sense of belonging to our community?
- How do we acknowledge and celebrate the gifts of nature? Do we support our children to learn the ecological connections and the significance of various life forms throughout the seasons and all around us? Do we talk about how these relate to the past and future as well as other parts of our lives?
- When we harvest food from our garden or forage are we undertaking this in sustainable ways to support more life and improve the land? How do we share what we have harvested and who and what needs acknowledgement?

## Section 4

### Supporting practitioners to care for our outdoor spaces

#### Reflective thoughts

“What would be different if we lived with a strong sense that water, land, all of the world around us, are relatives? What if we love the world around us deeply, as our family? Our actions would then begin to reflect reciprocity in how we live and move in any direction, including seven generations into the future... we would ensure balance in all our interactions with the world around us, through space and time.”

(Anderson et al, 2017)



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### Supporting practitioners to care for our outdoor spaces

#### 4.3 Changing our perceptions of nature

Our beliefs, assumptions, and language affect actions and values that are truly inclusive of all people and places. Re-framing our perceptions can help – practice may be needed to do this.

These statements are summarised from a range of published research. In particular, the work of Ruck & Mannion (2021), Nelson et al (2018), Wilson (2019) and the [Common Worlds Research Collective](#).

##### From:

Referring to nature in terms of how it benefits humans or as a resource, object or utility.



##### To:

That we have **reciprocal relationships** with all existing entities at any given moment in time, including plants, animals, water, soil, landforms, etc. We treat them as part of our extended family or network of friends.

Assuming that nature and/or species are passive and need saved, protected or helped.



Nature is constantly active, changing and evolving with or without our care. But our **responsible** actions make a positive difference.

Using language that separates humans from nature and implies dominance.



Humans are a part of nature, no more or less important than any other species with whom we share a common world. Nature **includes** and looks after us too.

Speaking on behalf of other species, to ensure we do not reinforce human privilege.



Developing our capacity to acknowledge and **respect** the differences between and within other species.

Focusing on human interactions outside.



Realising that at any given moment we are interacting with everything in our environment: the ground we move on, the air we breathe, the stick we hold and so on. As a result, it is complex, messy and “entangled” but this more **relevant** to how children become immersed in their play.

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### Supporting practitioners to care for our outdoor spaces

#### 4.4 Understanding the importance of biodiversity

##### What is biodiversity?

Biodiversity means “diversity of life” and is essential for our planet’s health. Humans and all other species rely on lots of other species for their existence. There is biodiversity:

- *Within species:* For example, we are all human but we are all unique beings. We have diversity thanks to our genes.
- *Across species:* This is the numbers, type and range of animals, plants and fungi within any given space.
- *Across climate and/or geology zones:* For example, in Scotland, different species will be found in coastal areas compared to in old native woodlands or on the top of a mountain. Also, what appear to be similar environments can be very different – using a global example, the Amazon equatorial rainforest in South America has very different flora (plants) and fauna (animals) compared with the Congo rainforest in Africa.

We now recognise that plants, fungi, animals and microorganisms have a right to exist and flourish and this right includes our children and ourselves.

Humans, along with all other living things and entities such as water, soil, rocks and landforms are all interconnected and dependent on one another reciprocally. Terms such as “more-than-human” are being increasingly used to avoid singling out humans as different, special or better. It also helps focus attention on the relationships between entities. (See Ruck & Mannion, 2021)

#### Importance of biodiversity to our environment

**Scotland’s Biodiversity Strategy** is overseen by NatureScot. Every local authority has a Local Biodiversity Action Plan.

#### Children need biodiverse play spaces

A range of habitats with lots of plants, fungi and animals has greater and more diverse play possibilities including:

- Shelter
- Places to play
- Food to forage through the actions of pollinating insects
- Encounters with animals
- More variety and quantity of plant materials such as fruits, flowers and sticks

See **6.8 Gathering and using natural materials** and **6.10 Animal allies**.

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### Supporting practitioners to care for our outdoor spaces

#### Some useful terms to know

**A species** is a specific type of plant, animal or other life-form (organism). A native species is one that has existed in Scotland since the last Ice Age or longer.

**A habitat** is the natural home of a plant, animal or other species, such as wetlands, moorlands, parks, meadows, rock-pools.

**An ecosystem** is a biological community of interacting organisms and their physical environment. Every woodland, aquatic or other ecosystem is unique.

**Natural heritage** is a term that includes plants, animals and geological features as well as natural beauty and amenity. Scotland's biodiversity is a key part of its natural heritage.

**Biodiversity loss** is a key impact of human action. We can make a difference through developing an awareness of its importance and taking positive action to maintain or improve biodiversity in all outdoor spaces we use.



#### Find out more

- [NatureScot](#)
- The Wildlife Trust. Check out [the Wildlife Watch](#) section
- [Royal Society for the Protection of Birds](#)
- [Eco Schools Scotland](#)
- [Scotland's Outdoor Learning Directory](#)
- [Local authority biodiversity groups are listed here](#)
- Learning through Landscapes, Scottish Forestry and the Outdoor Learning Network have a series of helpful videos around [sustainable management](#) of sites for outdoor play and learning. Here are two that focus on conservation and nature play



# Section 4

## Supporting practitioners to care for our outdoor spaces

### 4.5 Learning about life on Earth

Everything is fundamentally connected. A healthy planet depends upon the complex relationships between the sun, water, air, land and living things (producers, consumers and decomposers).

Each child has their own intuitive way of growing into their relationship with the world and in doing so, developing their sense of being part of and belonging to nature.



#### Sun

The source of energy that green plants capture. The Earth's tilting towards and away from the sun impacts on our weather and seasons.



#### Air

The gases that we breathe and can feel on our bodies when the wind blows.



#### Producers

Producers are mainly green plants such as trees, flowers, grasses, ferns and moss. They use sunlight to make food.



#### Consumers

Consumers are mainly animals. Herbivores are animals that eat plants. Omnivores eat plants and animals. Carnivores (predators) eat other animals (known as prey).



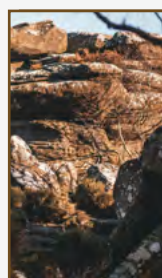
#### Decomposers

These are tiny animals, fungi and bacteria which break down dead organisms in many different ways. The decomposition process produces nutrients that plants can then absorb through their roots.



#### Water

On land, plants and animals need water to stay alive. Seas, rivers, ponds and other natural water sources are also habitats.



#### Land

The underlying rock affects our soil and the shape of landforms. Many organisms live on rocks and in soils. Most plants need soil to grow.



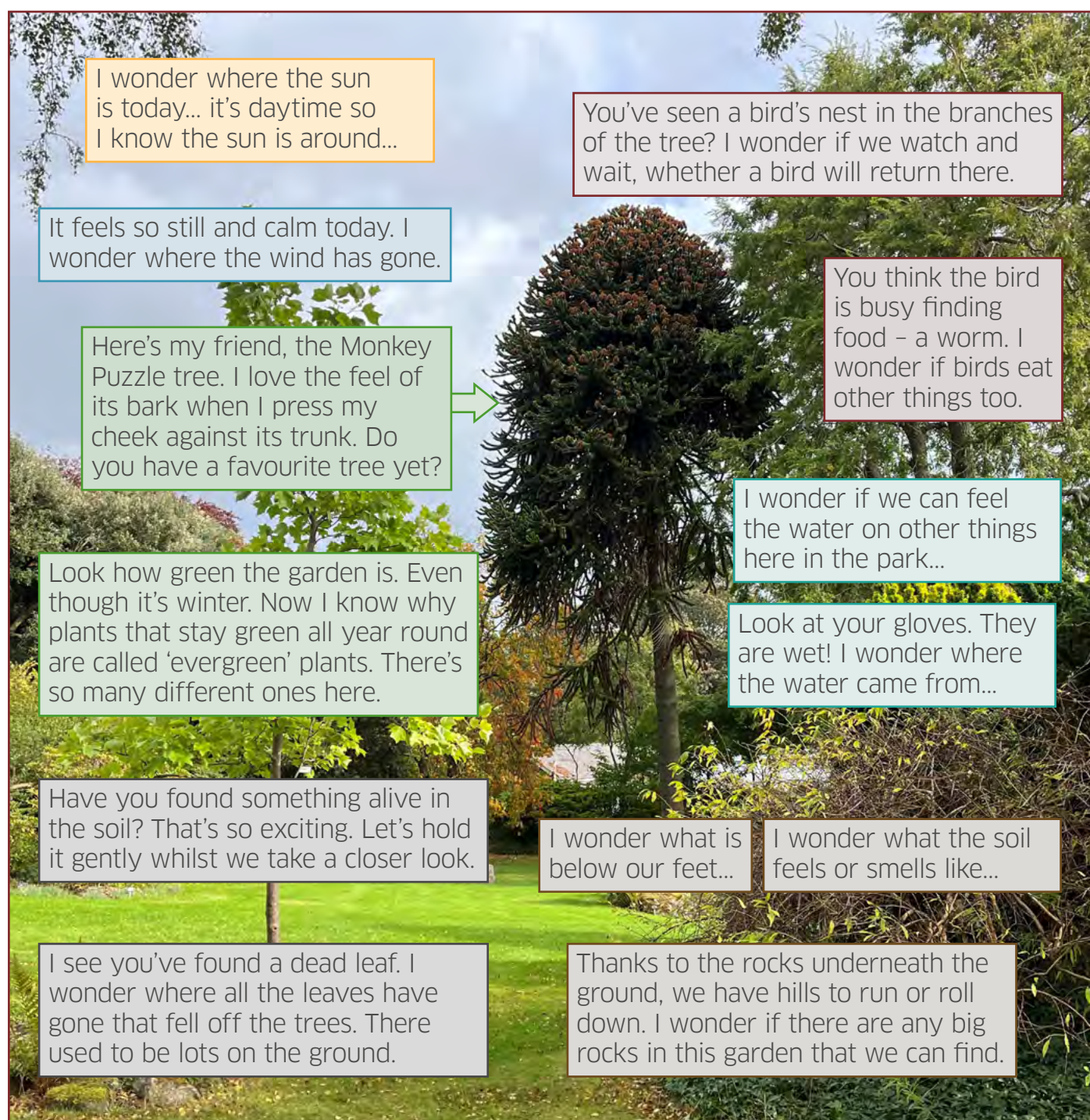
## Section 4

### Supporting practitioners to care for our outdoor spaces

#### Discovering life: nurturing awareness

Through our explorations with children, as we play together, we can introduce basic ecological ideas.

With practice this will soon become part of your everyday conversations with children outside.



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### Supporting practitioners to care for our outdoor spaces

#### 4.6 Getting to know plants, animals and fungi that live in your outdoor spaces

Deepening the relationships we have with the range of species that share our outdoor spaces is a never-ending journey of discovery. It can feel daunting not being able to recognise or know much about the wildlife that exists. This advice from practitioners may help.

**Get excited about it – awe and wonder, curiosity and questions!**

“Find a bug, bird, plant or fungi that you like and explore it. Share your new knowledge. I was very cautious about beetles because of their creepy, wriggly wee legs. Now I have a real respect and admiration for these guys. I get so excited if I find a new kind or see a different larvae. I even bought myself a beetle T-shirt.”

(Suzanne Robinson)

#### Share and learn together

“At my old outdoor centre, we decided on a tree, a bird, a mammal and a bug each month. We spent four weeks pointing out these species to whoever was passing. In a year the whole team felt more confident and we continued with more plants and birds, the year after.”

(Matt Robinson)

#### Capture creatively what you notice

“I enjoyed creating a nature journal as I liked drawing and collecting bits. My brother-in-law gave me a basic microscope and I loved it. For the beginner, what motivates you? Is it colour, pattern, beauty or the weird and macabre? If you are out often enough, patterns begin to reveal themselves.”

(Penny Martin)

#### Make it relatable

Here are some examples:

- Be excited about what your children find and learn more with them. Build up your knowledge through their interests.
- Imagine the species is a new family member. What would you need or want to know about this species? How would you treat this species? What would you do to make the species feel welcome and valued?
- Find out, read and tell stories that help you remember a species.
- Assign words to a song call or other sounds they make, e.g. Chaffinches calling “Pink. Pink.”
- Use what you find. By making a link with a purpose, such as eating, drawing or crafting, it can be easier to remember the plant.

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### Supporting practitioners to care for our outdoor spaces

#### Start with what's around you every day

When you see things every day it's easier to remember them.

“Get to know one or two plants at a time. Sit with them, research them, draw them.”

(Mell Harrison)

“I first took photos and identified the birds that came into my garden from a book. The same ones came regularly which helped me remember them. I then took part in the Big Garden Birdwatch and started to identify less common ones I saw on walks.”

(Natalie Campbell)

Ideas to increase awareness and developing a sense of space include: carrying out an audit or keeping a list of trees, plants, mammals and insects; participate on citizen science surveys; guided walks, including focussing on a particular sense e.g. smell, touch; creating maps; worm survey.

#### Learn from more knowledgeable people, including:

- A child with a passion, a parent, an outdoor professional or volunteer.
- Joining a countryside ranger or similar professional; for a guided walk or course. Absorb the enthusiasm of others attending too.
- Remember it's more than identifying species, it's about observing their lifestyles and habits.
- Using reputable apps and websites.

#### Look, talk and write

“Look at the key features as you see them. Talk about them. Give the plant a name which describes it. Only then look at the correct name. Write both names together as well as a note about where you found it and what you were doing. Many of our wildflowers have common names that describe how they look, where they were found or how they were used.”

(Marian Cairns)



#### Find out more

- Learning through Landscapes and Scottish Forestry have two [videos](#) on [practitioner knowledge and understanding](#)

#### 4.7 Supporting our children to develop a sense of place

##### What is a sense of place?

The concept of 'place' describes the feelings and perceptions we develop about a space as we visit it repeatedly based upon our experiences and aspirations. Our ties to any place are strengthened by processing and absorbing information through our bodies and emotions as well as our minds.

“Our research showed that 'place-responsiveness' is cultivated by repeat visits, noticing how places change, and noticing what the children are attending to, such as frogspawn or sponginess of moss.”

(Mannion et al (2012).)

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### Supporting practitioners to care for our outdoor spaces

Children and adults have a very different relationship to place. Engaging with children at their level and ensuring their voices are heard needs to be supported and valued by adults.

Every place has a history and meaning and continues to be shaped by our interactions. The landscape tells a story of the place: from the rock type which indicates how it has moved around the planet, to the history of how the place came to be as it looks today. Our use, including how we live and work in the place, as well as the presence of other species, are part of this bigger story.

The interactions with local community and involvement of families to come and play and learn alongside their child enriches and deepens children's sense of themselves being part of a community. Intergenerational learning is reciprocal and a core part of building a strong community.

#### Why a sense of place matters

- It is a lifelong process of developing deeper and more engaging relationships: with humans and other species and forms.
- It can help us feel safer and give us stability – a sense of being and belonging to our communities (including being part of nature).
- Responding to the environmental and climate crises is vital. Collectively, we are responsible for this and also vulnerable to its effect. Developing a sense of place can help build individual and community resilience and enable us to respond through positive actions within our locality.

#### Making links in children's lives

Being outside is naturally interdisciplinary. Our practice needs to ensure our children make connections in their play: between their lives at home, our ELC setting, and our community by:

- Noticing and learning when a child comes alive, what matters to them and what makes them laugh and connect with other children and adults outside.
- Acknowledging and addressing practical, cultural, mindset and other challenges. Ensuring all children and their families feel a sense of belonging and identity through our outdoor experiences.
- Exploring our outdoor spaces in all seasons, weathers and even at night in ways that foster community, for example through: shared oral stories about the stars, moon and constellations; eating food; star gazing; and after dark explorations.
- Equipping children with the skills and confidence to continue playing outside in their own time with their family, away from the ELC settings.
- Discovering the plants and animals that live in our place. Can any of them be eaten or used in some way? Are any not okay to use and why?

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### Supporting practitioners to care for our outdoor spaces

“Most children want to be able to play outside in their local neighbourhood. They enjoy spaces that offer them the opportunity to experiment, to challenge themselves physically, to feel free and to interact with others. The changing nature of the outdoors makes it a more interesting, stimulating place to play, and allows children the sense of fun and freedom they crave whilst at the same time promoting their physical, emotional and psychological health.”

(Play Scotland’s **‘People, Places and Play’**)

#### Building upon prior learning, for example, by considering:

- Engaging all of their senses: touch, taste, smell, sight, sound, vestibular and proprioception<sup>5</sup>. Demonstrating how we are providing this for our children when playing outside daily in nature.
- Extending the involvement of children’s families in our time outside, especially in local greenspace.

“**You’re joining a community not a nursery.**’ This is our mantra at Stramash Fort William. Our 2021 Care Inspection report strongly reflects this ethos with many parental comments demonstrating the strong place-based culture. Our community days enable families to stay connected, even after their children have left.”

(Cameron Sprague, Team Leader)

#### Capturing children’s voices and experiences of their places

How children experience place and how they indicate this to the adults matters. Children tell us about their connections to place through their body language and that needs to be observed.

*Listen* to your group of children talk about their special places.

- How do they react?
- What expressions and body language can you see?
- How do they describe their place?
- What is their relationship with the place?
- How can we deepen and enrich this?
- How do children play in different spaces and why might this be? Why is the space special or unique for the children?

Encouraging children to *express* their sense of place in creative ways could happen through drawings, craft, sculpture, song, digital media, journaling and helicopter stories (see ‘Find out more’ on the following pages).

The documentation of children’s perceptions and understandings can be illuminating and helps children feel that adults are taking their feelings and thoughts seriously.

<sup>5</sup> Proprioception is how your body knows which position it is in and how it is moving. You can find more information about this at: [Proprioception | Glasgow Science Centre](#)

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### Supporting practitioners to care for our outdoor spaces

“We cannot really approach the truth about our world without feeling how our identities are intimately woven into place, without truly being our place, in every way. And when we do feel this way, the patterns of waves or the appearances of certain birds at certain times assume profound meaning, inspiring an expansive love for where we live.”

(Anderson et al, 2017)

#### Sharing stories of land and people

“Stories and knowledge of our place ultimately live in people not books. If we are severed from such stories we are severed from place.”

(Anderson et al, 2017)

- What are the stories and history – both natural and cultural of this place? For example, what is the significance of the standing stones, or the ‘granny’ Scot’s Pine? What was happening in the Jurassic era on this land? We may not know, but through time, our children may create their own stories about how the land came to be.
- Whose stories have maybe been forgotten or untold here? For example, there may be a Gypsy/Traveller connection or memories from other minority communities which include some of our children and their families?
- Do we know about our families connections to local places? Parents and grandparents have their own narrative, such as the origins of local place names that will never appear on a maps or photos of them playing outdoors in the past, both locally and from other places and countries. What stories, myths or legends have been passed through generations?
- Over time, our children will also begin to name features and markers in imaginative ways which indicates that they are “place making” in the places they walk, visit and play. For example, an electricity substation passed on the way to a park may be where the children believe a monster lives. Roads become rivers, and pavement features become crocodiles.
- What about local dialects and how they link to the land? Is our landscape mapped by Gaelic, Nordic or other ancient names and how can we learn more about these based upon our children’s interests?

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### Supporting practitioners to care for our outdoor spaces

“We’ve been nurturing a partnership with Early Years settings in Accra, Ghana. Our children have been prompted to explore the identity of their own communities and their place within that identity, in line with our Frobelian principles. Their love for and ownership of their coastal environment has been particularly striking. This common feature of life in Edinburgh and Ghana allows children and adults to contemplate how connected their communities really are. Our children’s interest in their natural environment has been a wonderful catalyst for shared experiences and developing relationships.”

(Jayne Weaver, Early Years Practitioner, Cowgate Under 5’s Centre)

- When do we feel a shared sense of belonging? Does every child and their families in our ELC community feel this or are we unintentionally marginalising some groups? How can we support families from all cultures, countries, races and religions through our outdoor practice? Through the co-creation of new traditions and legacies, we can help create places that are truly inclusive.
- For some children and adults, connections with place may be severed. Starting from where they are at in gentle and respectful ways, can begin the process of healing and strengthening ties. Take the time to learn about approaches to connecting with places from across the globe and incorporate learning about these with children. Emphasise, accept, celebrate and include individual cultures and approaches as this can create a shared appreciation of our special places.

#### Reflective thoughts on equalities and inclusion

- Research (CPRE, 2021) has highlighted differences in engagement with nature, dependent on people’s backgrounds and identities. Inequalities in access to the countryside are connected to income, age and disability but are particularly severe when it comes to race. Our approach in the early years can reinforce or challenge these inequalities.

“Partnership working is a key theme of working and extends beyond the family to local services within the community. It is crucial to understand the local context that the family and your setting is in.”

(Realising the Ambition, 2020)



## Section 4

### Supporting practitioners to care for our outdoor spaces



#### Find out more

- **Breaking the Mould** – is a programme that has been designed to support learners, educators and leaders understand what an anti-racist curriculum can mean in practice
- Davy, A. (2019) *A Sense of Place: Mindful Practice Outdoors* is an early years book full of suggestions and support
- Mannion & Adey (2011) have thought provoking questions and discussions relevant to all ages about intergenerational learning and responsiveness to place



- **NatureScot have bilingual resources** in Gaelic for Outdoor Learning
- The **Sheiling Project**
- **The Place Standard** is aimed at decision-makers
- **Play Scotland have Place Standard Tools** for Children and Young People that are child-friendly and The **Play Well Outdoors Pack includes a mapping** activity
- Information on establishing **PEEP sessions** outside, e.g. in a nearby park or open community space
- **The Helicopter Approach of Storytelling and Story Acting** is based on the work of Vivian Gussin Paley who has been pioneering this work in the UK since its conception in 2002
- **A research overview: Access to nature in the English countryside**, CPRE, 2021



- Robert McFarlane's book **Lost Words**, described as '*the bearer of a powerful message about the need to close the gap between childhood and the natural world*'
- The writers Robin Wall Kimmerer, Suzanne Simpard and Peter Wohlleben extensively explore reciprocity, including the **Wood Wide Web**

## Section 5

### Embedding caring for our outdoor spaces into our planning



In this section there are suggestions for things you can consider when embedding an ethos of care into your practice. Scottish Government (2019) **Out to Play** guidance also has lots of practical advice which can ensure your time outside is enriching and rewarding for all involved. Browning, Marion and Gregoire (2013) and Browning (2012) observed that long-term success in sustainable management of children's play spaces is based upon extensive planning.

Most preventive actions we take can be integrated into our intentional planning of learning experiences and, by responding to our children's interests, needs and perceptions. When undertaken sensitively, we can help deepen the relationship our children need with other species and the place itself.

## Section 5

### Embedding caring for our outdoor spaces into our planning

#### What this section covers

This list summarises the guidance, provided in various forms, on the following pages.

#### 5.1 Children and practitioners caring for outdoor spaces together

This [flowchart](#) is to enable you to respond to issues that arise promptly. It is a reminder of the process of addressing matters that arise and could be useful for reflection and self-evaluation. For example, supporting a child who is enthusiastically picking lots of wildflowers for the love and joy of it, or, managing the development of a large, deep puddle that has created a health and safety concern. It is aimed at what practitioners can do and rather than addressing concerns that require landowners to act.

#### 5.2 Sustainable planning

This [handy planning checklist](#) is adapted from [Appendix 2: Out to Play, Discussions with Landowner](#). You will need to amend this for your site, climate and group. When thinking about any children who have specific support needs you can involve the child, their families and other professionals in ensuring their needs are addressed. Ensure you know and understand who is responsible for what with regards to your outdoor spaces and avoid assumptions. Remember to follow local and national guidance when using off-site spaces. For practitioners working with primary-aged groups, the Nature Scot guidance, [Beyond Your Boundary](#) is a useful resource.

#### 5.3 Our off-site places: planning and reflection

Children and staff need time to learn the routines and expectations of being off-site. This [sheet](#) may be useful to support intentional planning of these repeated visits. This originated from the Wee Green Spaces project in Aberdeen City.

#### 5.4 Our outdoor spaces calendar

There are many different ways of annual planning for the maintenance and care of an outdoor space. This outdoor calendar is for illustrative purposes and is inspired by Stramash Outdoor Nursery's calendar.

#### 5.5 Daily things we do to care for our outdoor space

This sheet provides pointers for daily care activities. Many children enjoy working alongside an adult when invited and supported to do so. Don't expect every child to want to participate. You may need to find ways to make some tasks relevant and appealing for children.

#### 5.6 How well are we caring for our outdoor spaces?

This subsection will help you assess the impact of the ethic of care for outdoor spaces and to reflect on 'How well are we doing and how do we know?'

# Section 5

## Embedding caring for our outdoor spaces into our planning

### 5.1 Children and practitioners caring for outdoor spaces together

<b>Prevent</b>	Being aware: noticing and responding to changes	Learning how to “be” outside: values, experience, knowledge, skills, modelling, language	Caring tasks embedded in routines: daily, weekly, annually	Pro-active communication with landowner and others	
<b>Assessing What’s Happened</b>	Recognising the change and acting	Knowing or finding out WHAT action is needed and WHY	Knowing or finding out WHEN action needs to happen: NOW, SOON or LATER and BY WHOM		
<b>Communicating with</b>	An individual: grown up or child	Group	Landowner	Others, e.g. family, outdoor professional, police	
<b>Changing and Repairing</b>	Learning or remembering how to “be” outside	Changing routines or establishing new ones	Changing spaces	Temporary fix	Longer lasting fix
<b>Restoring</b>	Helping others to learn or remember how to “be” outside	Time for site to recover	Monitoring changes	Making adjustments - fine tuning	
<b>Resulting in</b>	Reduced re-occurrence of the adversity	Improving or maintaining biodiversity: A better place to “be” for all species	Site becoming more impact-resistant to use by our group	Improved resilience to climate and environmental changes	

# Section 5

## Embedding caring for our outdoor spaces into our planning

### 5.2 Sustainable planning checklist

Remember to involve your children in the decision-making around these matters and landowners too.

#### Group impact

- Size of group (children and adults)
- Ages and maturity of group (first timers, additional support needs, new staff)
- Frequency of visits
- Day/time each week
- Suitability of group for the greenspace and intended area of play, e.g. noise levels
- Presence of other user groups: liaisons and shared expectations

#### Can-go areas: we have agreed...

- Main play space
- Alternative play spaces to enable rotation and/or to support children to choose where to play
- Access routes in and out of the site, including emergency procedures
- Use of existing pathways through the site

#### Site use

- Designated impact-resistant spaces for toileting, hand hygiene, snack, gathering
- Specific tree(s) for tree climbing, swings, rope structures, etc.
- Tree protection if using ropes
- Suitability of shelter for terrain and space
- Any structures to be created: seating, dens
- Seasonal impacts and jobs, e.g. light pollution after dark

#### No-go areas (add to site map and calendar)

- Safety
- Natural or heritage protection: protected species, nesting, animal homes
- Private property
- Environmental impact, e.g. trampling, native bulbs
- Site work (e.g. timber operations, estate work, excavations)
- Biosecurity (invasive species)

#### Routines that care for the land

- Infection control: toileting, hand hygiene, snack
- Tree climbing check
- Foraging approach
- What we can use in our play
- Fire: permission to have, designated space, leave no trace system, off-site
- Playing near water margins

#### Community building: when and what

- Litter picking (each time we visit)?
- Planting trees, bulbs, other?
- Minor maintenance, e.g., pruning at child level, weeding around newly planted trees, etc.
- Habitat improvements - what, where, when?
- Family celebrations or special events
- Reporting concerns

# Section 5

## Embedding caring for our outdoor spaces into our planning

### 5.3 Our off-site places: planning and reflection tool

This can be adapted for your spaces, children and pedagogy, then linked to your curriculum.

#### Site check (prior to use)

- Windspeed
- Weather
- Ground conditions
- Canopy concerns
- Other changes
- Phone
- Wifi
- Dog mess check
- Litter pick
- Group photo
- Other concern, notes, actions

<p><b>Needs</b> of the group (social, physical, intellectual, emotional, spiritual)</p>	<p><b>Interests</b> of the group</p>	<p><b>Focus routines</b> (caring for people and place)</p>	<p><b>Nature, seasons and community events</b></p>
<p><b>Support strategies</b> (game, story, song or poem, challenge, hook, adult modelling)</p>	<p><b>Review</b> (think <b>SHANARRI</b>) <b>What worked well...</b></p>	<p><b>Even better if...</b> (sign &amp; date when achieved)</p>	

#### Have we...

- Reviewed the session with the group and included needs of the place and other species
- Connected to ongoing curriculum (not SACC)
- Adding observations for focus to the children's records
- Updated our risk benefit assessments
- Contacted landowner regarding any site concerns
- Dried and sorted out equipment and organised resources for next session
- Thanked volunteers, listened to their reflections
- Arranged volunteers for next session

## Section 5

### Embedding caring for our outdoor spaces into our planning

#### 5.4 Our outdoor calendar

This can be adapted for your spaces, children and pedagogy, then linked to your curriculum.

Autumn	Winter	Spring	Summer
<p><b>September</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Greenspace visit with small group of children to help plan and advise on what others need to know and preparations needed (children, parents, staff)</li> <li>• Harvest celebrations and explorations</li> </ul> <hr/> <p><b>October</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Getting to know local site</li> <li>• Learning about how to be out and about</li> <li>• Cutting wildflower meadow</li> <li>• Leaf piles and leaf mould</li> </ul> <hr/> <p><b>November</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Tree planting</li> <li>• Feeding the birds: where and how</li> <li>• Geese migrations</li> <li>• Prepare for snow play and winter weather</li> </ul>	<p><b>December</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Play on the darkest day: winter solstice celebrations</li> <li>• Winter festivals linked to our families: outside and nature-based</li> </ul> <hr/> <p><b>January</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Staying warm and safe</li> <li>• New year – wishes for our special places and people</li> <li>• RSPB Big Birdwatch</li> <li>• Clear pond of excess plant material</li> <li>• Annual external tree check and installed playground equipment check</li> </ul> <hr/> <p><b>February</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• New life – rotate or move play space if needed</li> <li>• Check or make and put up bird boxes</li> <li>• Prune trees, shrubs and willow structures</li> <li>• Plan seed sowing</li> <li>• Harvest compost bin</li> </ul>	<p><b>March</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Check local ponds for frog, toad and newt spawn</li> <li>• Start seed sowing, including re-grassing cordoned-off areas if needed</li> <li>• Chit potatoes</li> <li>• Community clean-up of greenspace</li> </ul> <hr/> <p><b>April</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Spring celebrations:</li> <li>• Watch out for ground nesting birds</li> <li>• Nettle season – good soup!</li> <li>• Wild garlic – great pesto!</li> </ul> <hr/> <p><b>May</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Keep gardening</li> <li>• Plant out seedlings</li> <li>• Sorrel season – good soup!</li> <li>• Enjoy playing with common wildflowers</li> </ul>	<p><b>June</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Play on the longest day: summer solstice celebrations</li> <li>• International mud day</li> <li>• Keep gardening</li> <li>• Care for saplings</li> </ul> <hr/> <p><b>July</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Harvest summer fruits such as strawberries</li> <li>• Stick to paths rather than trample through vegetation</li> <li>• Shallow pond and stream dipping</li> <li>• Pond check</li> </ul> <hr/> <p><b>August</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Landowner discussions</li> <li>• Update permissions from: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>◦ Parent/carer</li> <li>◦ Management/organisation</li> <li>◦ Local authority educational visits procedures</li> <li>◦ Landowner</li> </ul> </li> <li>• Review risk benefit assessments</li> </ul>

## Section 5

### Embedding caring for our outdoor spaces into our planning

#### 5.5 Daily things we do together to care for our immediate outdoor space

Adapt for seasons, climate, landscape and features of your space as well as age and maturity of your group. Determine which actions need taken prior to children's arrival.

Anything else? Add your own and children's ideas.

##### Caring for our creatures

- Ensure there is water and food available for birds
- Clean out bird feeders and the ground below prior to refilling, once empty
- Add spare wood and found sticks/stones to habitat piles
- Ensure our pets or domestic animals are cared for in line with animal welfare guidelines

##### Caring for our plants

- When available, add the following to the compost bin:
  - fruit and vegetable peelings
  - clippings and other appropriate plant material from gardening, snipped up small
  - shreds of used paper and cardboard
- Weed, water, prune and dead-head annual flowers as needed.
- Check seasonal jobs to do.

##### Caring about access within our space

- Ensure pathways are free from obstructions
- Check emergency access routes are free from obstructions
- Grit any key paths that are slippery
- Check ground surfaces – cordon off any patches that need recovery time
- Check boundaries are intact where they exist.
- Handwashing and toileting facilities available and accessible where needed

##### Maintenance matters

- Repair or remove any broken items
- Ensure tools are clean, dry and put away safely
- Keep storage areas accessible and tidy
- Check installed play equipment and self-built play structures to ensure safe as necessary

##### Caring for our sandpit

- Remove breathable sand pit cover
- Remove debris and any hazards
- Play in sand – it adds air, keeps it fresh
- At the end of the day, rake sand. Cover if required

##### Local and national guidance followed, where it exists

- Local guidance on security checks, fire prevention, loose parts, etc. in place
- Latest infection control guidelines for cleaning schedules
- Empty stagnant water, e.g. from tyres and other holders

“Saying thank you, together, at the end of the day to the birds, plants, animals, trees, clouds, rain, wind, sunshine and earth for letting us share their space, builds humility and connectedness to nature for children. This can be done using a simple song or rhyme. The children can add anything specific to each day, such as seeing our first snowdrop, or catching our first falling autumn leaf.”  
(Dr Elizabeth Henderson)



## Section 5

### Embedding caring for our outdoor spaces into our planning

#### 5.6 How well are we caring for our outdoor spaces?

How well are we doing and how do we know?

#### Why does reflecting upon and evaluating our spaces matter?

- Our spaces have to be flexible and responsive to the needs of our children. This will change throughout their time with us.
- Our spaces also change through time. The weather, seasons, the movement of other animals, the growth of plants and so on, all have an impact.
- This is about caring for children as well as the spaces in which they play.
- There are two main strands to consider:
  - How well the site is bearing up to use by our group?
  - What is the ethic of care being expressed and demonstrated by children, staff and wider community, including janitors and parents?

“We should consider how this process could be recorded or documented so that we can talk about and evidence the children’s development journey.”

([Realising the Ambition](#), p85)

#### Monitoring biodiversity in our space

- Build a collection of the wildlife observed in your outdoor space. Celebrate what a child has found with a photo and a date.
- A **bioblitz** is an informal time-based search for plants, animals and fungi. It’s also fun as a family session with young children as then shared learning can happen.
- If you use local woodland, older children may be interested in a **biodiversity survey**. Remember to compare results year-on-year and take steps to actively improve biodiversity.
- **Make Space for Nature** has examples of seasonal actions.

#### Listen to your children

Children are learning all the time. Ask them for their advice and act upon it, e.g.:

- 🗣️ How can we stop a mud patch from growing?
- 🗣️ What do we need to remember when climbing a tree?
- 🗣️ How do we care for a slater we have found?

## Section 5

### Embedding caring for our outdoor spaces into our planning

“Even very young children develop an awareness of their world. For example, an 18-month-old toddler on a walk found a leaf to hold. The child said “jaggy” and pointed to the brambles and nettles each time the group walked past them”

(Juliet Robertson, education consultant)

Look at the **SHANARRI** wellbeing indicators. These are useful to review what learning has happened. Often, values such as “included”, “nurtured” and “respected” come to light through these conversations and are about children relating to the more-than-human world.

#### How well are we caring for our outdoor spaces?

How well are we doing and how do we know?

#### Every photo tells a story

Children and staff can take photos of an outdoor space over time. It works best if taken from the same place. Use the photos to:

- Reflect upon what is happening in this space?
- What are children doing?
- What are staff doing?
- What is not happening?
- What was happening before the photo was taken and afterwards?

Use photos to document “before” and “after” situations. For example, what a willow den looked like before being pruned, photos of the children being involved, their thoughts and what the willow den looked like afterwards. What did your children learn from being involved?

To compare you can take pictures across each season and year-on-year. This could be helpful as staff and children change which means that routine site monitoring can still continue and the visible impacts recorded and discussed.

Document the story. For example, if a child is struggling in a mud patch and decides that a ladder is needed to cross the mud, then take photos and note down what is happening and what the children think they have learned - skills and knowledge about how to manage the mud. The **“Learning Story”** approach to documenting children’s experiences developed by Lee & Carr (2016) has many helpful examples.

## Section 6

### Embedding care for our outdoor spaces into our experiences



This section is about specific impacts that can arise from a range of outdoor environments and how to mitigate these through working with children in participatory ways. The impact is influenced by several factors including:

- The amount of play, type, timing and location of that play by each child and the group as a whole
- The group size, age, abilities, needs and the levels of experience and knowledge about being in any given outdoor space


- The confidence and motivation of the practitioners to ensure timely preventative and proactive measures are taken
- The interplay of the group with the weather, seasons, other species and with the unique features of the landscape such as the geology, soil type and the gradient and aspects of any slopes

The examples used in this section are not exhaustive. Practitioners may be interested in exploring the further information signposted in the 'find out more' boxes and references across the guidance, and seek expert help where they need it.

## Section 6

### Embedding care for our outdoor spaces into our experiences

Each example contains a variety of information and most include:

- **Why this matters:** Background information about our rights and responsibilities or what needs to be considered.
- **Building on prior learning:** We need to follow children's interests and experiences. For example, a child who is struggling to move through a mud patch could be an opportunity to bring this to the groups attention and seek their thoughts about what to do.
- **Reflective thoughts:** To help us think about the wider context.
- **Reflective prompts:** These are identified by the  icon to help prompt reflective conversations with children.
- **Making a positive difference:** These are actions we can take with our group of children which will empower us all to make changes for the better.
- **Find out more:** A good place to start to find lots of further information and support.

“What approaches do we have to ensure children access and effectively use, develop and care for their natural environment?”

(Care Inspectorate, 2021)

#### What this section covers

- 6.1 Managing our impact proactively
- 6.2 Why soil matters
- 6.3 Mud
- 6.4 Digging
- 6.5 Footfall and trampling
- 6.6 Trees and shrubs
- 6.7 Willow structures
- 6.8 Gathering and using natural materials
- 6.9 Dead wood spotting
- 6.10 Animal allies
- 6.11 Food and composting
- 6.12 Compost cycle
- 6.13 Water in our outdoor space
- 6.14 Inland water margins
- 6.15 Exploring aquatic pond and stream life
- 6.16 Beach visits
- 6.17 Sand dunes
- 6.18 Rockpools
- 6.19 Fire experiences
- 6.20 Creating and constructing
- 6.21 Antisocial behaviours, including vandalism
- 6.22 Worn-out spaces
- 6.23 Sharing spaces

## Section 6

### Embedding care for our outdoor spaces into our experiences

#### 6.1 Managing our impact proactively

##### Why this matters

Most of the time our children will be playing in outdoor spaces that will be subjected to high levels of use. Anticipating and therefore managing our impact proactively makes a positive difference:

- Children tend to feel safer and more comfortable in places that feel informal but cared for. A degraded, worn-out site often looks unhappy and has less play value. Its accessibility can be impaired.
- Almost all off-site greenspace is public space and our local communities will benefit from our positive actions.
- We need to maintain or improve the biodiversity of the space and protect its soils. The more native plants, animals and fungi, the healthier the place becomes and the greater the play possibilities that exist.
- Invasive species take over habitats and stop such a biodiverse mix. Some plant and animal diseases can be inadvertently spread by humans for example, by children transporting treasures to other sites. We need to be aware of any that exist on our site and know what to do.
- We need to ensure our local places are resilient and able to adapt to climate and environmental change.

If a setting or childminder adopts sustainable nomadic practices where children are moving from space to space during the day, then the site damage is unlikely to be significant, especially if the group numbers are low, the site is a well-used area by the local community and well-maintained.

“...children read not only the physical landscape but from traditions, practices and the attitudes of those around them. In other words, how the grounds are managed and maintained, the way things are ‘done’ or ‘not done’, was also seen to have considerable influence on children’s attitude and behaviour.”

(Titman, 1994)

See [NatureScot](#) for further information about invasive non-native species.

##### Neither pristine nor perfect

A site showing wear and tear is often much-loved by children. Do not assume that every mud patch or area of trampled ground is a bad thing. Sites are in a constant state of flux: puddles will come and go, grass will get worn in winter and so on. Focus on addressing issues that impact adversely on children’s play, on access, health and safety and, if off-site, that are covered by our rights and responsibilities under the Scottish Outdoor Access Code.

##### Be vigilant

As soon as adverse changes begin to happen, deal with them promptly. See the flowchart at [5.1 Children and practitioners caring for outdoor spaces together](#).

If necessary, stop using part of a space until it regenerates or can be used differently. Cordon off areas and rotate use if you have a space big enough. Having at least two spaces to play and making good use of local off-site places can help lessen impact. Children will then have a better idea of their impact as they compare each site.

## Section 6

### Embedding care for our outdoor spaces into our experiences

#### The greatest learning and understanding happens experientially

This means that we learn by doing which includes making mistakes, experimenting and, in the process, developing our knowledge and skills. There is no formula for getting things right as each outdoor space is unique as are the group of children who play there.



#### The importance of routines

Routines help young children feel secure as they come to know what is happening and what will happen next. We also have to be aware that children learn routines gradually and at their own pace. We have a role in showing children what to do, supporting and promoting choice and in explaining what is happening. Some children may not have enough receptive language to cope with this, especially when under stress, so visual and sound prompts can be helpful. **Realising the Ambition**, p33.

When introducing an ethos of care, it is often the little things that rub off on children over time and make a difference:

- Checking in on children to ensure they are feeling okay and are comfortable
- Greeting the tree, gently shaking a branch and asking permission to hang up the bags at the gathering space
- Looking to see if the new flowers that popped up are still present
- Talking aloud about what action we are taking and why, for example,
  - “Oh we must remember to leave lots of blackberries for our friendly birds and anyone else who may want some”
- Asking older children to check in on some of the younger children or those new to the group

**“HSCS 1.10 I am supported to participate fully as a citizen in my local community in the way that I want.”**

#### Adopting low impact approaches

These approaches can be adopted sensitively and sensibly so that they do not overly constrain children’s play. As much as possible, the emphasis will be on leaving any outdoor space as you found it or in a better state.

When damage occurs, prompt mitigating action is taken. This will require the group to adapt informally to the changing conditions on a daily and seasonal basis and to develop an awareness of their impact.

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### Embedding care for our outdoor spaces into our experiences

There needs to be clear and simple expectations about using any given outdoor space: some of these expectations will come from the landowner but others will be developed as part of your ongoing discussions with children.

#### Selecting impact-resistant sites

This means avoiding environmentally sensitive areas and having a space with vegetation and soils that can withstand children and adults learning how to “be” outside. This includes learning experientially and from inadvertent mistakes. It is likely that a place will recover of its own accord given time and if left alone.

Often, what can be considered “waste” ground or marginal sites in urban areas have good potential for being used by children.

Remember to consider the human basics such as a gathering space, **toileting, hand washing** and shelter. Have a look at the main **Out to Play** guidance for more information and these **videos** for practical examples of how settings have managed toileting and handwashing outdoors.

#### Involving children in participatory and practical approaches to caring for the site

Maintaining or improving site biodiversity requires shared, sustained consideration and it forms a core part of the experience of outdoors for ELC. This is based upon our children’s understanding and experience of playing in these sites and a growing awareness of themselves as part of the space alongside other species. In addition, we need to develop meaningful processes that match our children’s interests, needs and maturity.

The importance of storying cannot be overstated. This includes stories about caring for birds, animals, insects, trees so children can engage inwardly and with their imagination. Useful further reading on this matter is Bruce, T., McNair, L., Whinnett, J. (2020). *Putting Storytelling at the Heart of Early Childhood Practice* Abingdon: Routledge.



# Section 6

## Embedding care for our outdoor spaces into our experiences

### 6.2 Why soil matters

Adapted from Scottish Forestry (2016) *The World Beneath Our Feet* [curriculum resource](#) available on the Outdoor and Woodland Learning Scotland website.

#### What is soil?

In general, soil is:

- Made up of 45% minerals from underlying rocks: 25% water, 25% air and 5% organic matter
- Formed over time – and this can be up to 1000 years
- Made through the activity of living things such as worms, fungi and microbes that live in the soil
- Kept healthy by animals which burrow or dig, such as worms, moles and foxes
- Reliant on specific climatic conditions, which is why soil varies so much from place to place



#### Super soils

Did you know that:

- One quarter of the world's biodiversity is found in soil. This supports most of the food webs on our planet.
- Soils filter our water and purify our air.
- Healthy soils store more carbon than all the forests in the world, helping us combat climate change. **Peatlands** in particular, hold most of Scotland's carbon store. This rare habitat needs special care.
- 95% of all our food relies on healthy soils.
- Soils are an important part of every ecosystem. Some soils are more susceptible to trampling and compaction than others.
- If your children dig carefully into undisturbed soil, then it is possible they will be able to see the different layers of soil underneath the ground. Eventually they will meet bedrock, before New Zealand.

#### Soil can be harmed by:

- **Erosion** is what happens when the soil is lost. This happens through tree loss, drainage and intensive farming. It is made worse by the effects of wind, drought and water.
- **Loss of organic matter** by erosion, compaction and sealing. Soil organisms starve and the loss of biodiversity impacts on the ability of the soil to combat 'pests'.
- **Sealing** is what happens when water is prevented from going into the soil but just runs over the surface.
- **Compaction can be** caused by trampling. It destroys the structure of soil and its biodiversity.



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### Embedding care for our outdoor spaces into our experiences

#### The difference between soil and compost

- **Homemade or garden compost** is produced when you compost fruit and vegetable waste on-site. You add it around the base of plants or mixed into the soil and it acts as a conditioner, improving the soil structure, water retention and providing nutrients. It does not contain fertiliser. See Section **6.11 Food and composting**
- **Commercial potting compost** is more like a soil than a compost. It's specific to growing plants and not for playing with. It will contain fertiliser. Only use peat free compost.
- **Topsoil** can be used in the digging or mud area. Be aware that no topsoil, even sterilised topsoil is guaranteed free of glass - it very occasionally gets through the sieving process so be aware of this potential hazard.

#### Invasive Species Alert!

New Zealand flatworms are easily transferred with the movement of soil. To find out more and to identify them,

[AboutFlatWorms](#)



#### 6.3 Mud

“There is little more important in our physical world than earth and water and they are truly intriguing things, especially when they interact.”

(White & Edwards, 2018)

#### Why mud matters

Mud is a mix of soil and water. Patches of mud can quickly appear and grow. In the right place, these offer deep, sensory play and can connect children to the land in ways that cannot always be verbalised. Experiencing mud is an essential part of childhood.

#### Building upon prior learning

Observe and involve interested children in looking at the following:

- What mud exists and where in your outdoor space?
- Which muddy places are children drawn to and which are left alone?
- Which provide seasonal interest?
- How do our children experience mud?

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### Embedding care for our outdoor spaces into our experiences

Map your mud patches and take photos. This helps with observing if and how they change over time. This could involve conversations that include wondering about:

- Q What is mud and how is it formed?
- Q Whether mud changes with our use or through the weathers and seasons?
- Q Is today a good day for mud play?
- Q Does the mud need a rest from us?
- Q Who or what also enjoys playing with mud?
- Q What was the land like before the mud appeared? How do we know?
- Q Is this mud patch in a sensible place?
- Q Do we need to rethink where mud play happens in our outdoor space?

#### Reflective thoughts

- Do our children have open-ended opportunities to explore mud, on and off-site?
- In what ways do we support children to broaden their experiences. For example, are children able to explore with their feet, to sit in mud, to wallow or to slide if they want to?
- What strategies do we have to help children self-regulate their mud play?
- What assumptions are we making about mud play, based on our own experiences, culture, upbringing and beliefs about childhood?

#### Too much mud: possible solutions

Mud can be seasonal which means that different action is required at different times of the year. Check with your landowner about a suitable course of action. The time taken for the ground to recover can be substantial. The mud needs prompt attention if:

- It is in a place that could cause disruption or hazard to other users and children, such as at site entrances and on or around pathways and access routes.
- The size or number of mud patches start growing and affecting the range of play opportunities or the feel of a site in a detrimental way.

**Mud slides** are great fun and physically challenging for many children. Yet the erosion to a slope or even flat ground can be significant, with lots of recovery time needed, even after one session. Check with the landowner first. If children want a sliding experience, encourage them to consider alternatives such as putting a pegged tarp under a water or mud slide.

#### Temporary solutions to consider

- The use of materials as stepping stones through the mud. Wet wood is slippery so this needs to be taken into account if wooden planks, disks or pallets are used.
- The use of conifer brushings or woodchip. Avoid imported materials to maintain biosecurity in environmentally sensitive sites. If no underlay is used, then regular topping up will be needed.
- The use of temporary, portable pathways that are laid over the ground to enable access by children in wheelchairs or who are less mobile.

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### Embedding care for our outdoor spaces into our experiences

#### Define the mud patch to avoid expansion

- Use logs, raised beds, biodegradable tape or other boundary markers. Ask your children for advice about where these should go and involve them in creating the visual markers.

#### Long-term solutions

- Creating alternative habitats: a pond or wetland area in places that are permanently wide, wet and muddy.
- Re-seeding with the correct species mix of grass in the spring or summer months and avoiding using the area until the grass has grown. Where needed, use artificial matting to protect grass.
- Replacing with an alternative surface can enable greater use especially at pressure points such as entrances to sites or shelter or if you have children who are less mobile or rely on aids to move. Have a look at [6.5 Footfall and trampling](#).

#### Leaving mud behind

- Clean any mud and leaves off footwear to avoid spreading pests and disease before leaving a site.
  - Where's the best place to do this?
  - How much time do we need to give ourselves?
- Develop enjoyable mud removal routines from clothing and footwear, e.g., use of hoses and brushes. Use the grey water created for watering plants as part of the process.
  - What songs do your children like to sing as part of this process?
  - What advice can they give each other about mud removal from their clothes and boots?

What's the minimum amount of water we can use?

Why do we use only a little water?

- Don't use mud from your local greenspace site to replenish mud supplies in your outdoor space. Buy topsoil from a local firm instead.

Does all mud look and feel the same?

Why do we need to leave mud where it is?

- Mud clods (dubs) that find their way into drains and streams can have adverse effects on aquatic life and water quality. See [6.14 Inland water margins](#)

#### Watch wet grass or soft ground

If footprints appear, discuss the impact with your group. You may need to stop using until no trace can be seen which may take days, weeks or months.

How will we remember which areas need a rest from us?



#### Find out more

- Making a Mud Kitchen free booklet: [English version | Mud Kitchen book | Muddy Faces](#)
- International Mud Day is 29th June. Why not invite families to join your group for a shared session? [International Mud Day | Mud | Muddy Faces](#)

## Section 6

### Embedding care for our outdoor spaces into our experiences

#### 6.4 Digging

##### Why digging matters

Children benefit from the opportunity to dig in soil. It is a place of imagination, physical labour and treasure to be found. It is also a time to wonder about things which cannot easily be seen such as what is beneath our feet in the spaces that we play.

##### Building upon prior learning

When children show an interest in digging you can take the opportunity to decide together on a suitable spot. This is a sensible precaution to prevent lots of holes being dug all over your site and creating trip hazards.

Let's see if we can find a place to dig that...

- Q Is far enough away from trees, as digging can damage their roots.
- Q Is large enough for a group to safely dig together.
- Q We can dig! The ground isn't too hard.
- Q Has space around the patch that enables us to enter and leave without causing the surrounding ground to suffer. Do we need to put down matting to prevent wear and tear? Who can best advise us?
- Q Works well with other nearby areas such as gardening where the tools can be shared.
- Q Is there anywhere we need to avoid digging?

##### Reflective thoughts

- Is digging an only physical act or is it a context for other types of play? How can we facilitate this?
- Do staff and children understand where is okay to dig and why?
- How do we enable and broaden connections to be made between children's digging play and other aspects of our nursery and community lives? For example, linking to gardening, farming, building and excavations and animal life?

##### Creating a digging space

- There are underground pipes, cables and drainage in some outdoor spaces which must not be disturbed. Know what's under the ground and where. Check the utility map of the outdoor space and consult your landowner, if necessary.
- Sometimes the earth is too compacted and will need breaking up in advance. It may be possible to add sandy loam soil to the loose soil to make digging easier, if the soil is clay-rich.
- If digging down isn't possible, because of asphalt or the ground is too hard, then a large raised bed can enable digging to happen - big enough for a group of children to physically get into and dig. Go for a depth of at least 500mm for a satisfying digging experience.
- Having a source of water nearby can add to the discovery and experimentation as well as meeting children's desires to transport and mix materials.

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- In public spaces, refill child-made holes before leaving the site and replace the turf or ground cover to ensure the place is left as you found it. Fill in holes made at beaches too.

#### Following children's curiosities

This could involve conversations with children that include wondering about:

- 🗨 Have you noticed any changes in the soil as you dig down?
- 🗨 What treasures can be found in our soil? Who has lived here before us and what secrets does the earth hold about the past?
- 🗨 How can we care for the worms and other creatures that we find in our digging area?
- 🗨 What other creatures dig holes and why? Does a mole have a different way of digging to that of a badger?
- 🗨 What does our soil feel and smell like? It should have a fresh "earthy" smell. Does it need a rest from being dug and trodden upon?
- 🗨 Can we help keep our soil healthy by giving it what it needs?

#### Caring for your digging tools

- Using real tools for digging is more satisfying and it's possible to buy high quality small tools for this purpose and for gardening.
- We need to look after our spades, forks and other digging tools. They need to be wiped down after use and stored in a dry place. It's not safe to leave them lying around.
- Have storage nearby and help your children learn to return them immediately after using.

#### We care for soil by

- Gardening organically. This means without using artificial fertilisers and pesticides. This is safer and healthier for children as well as soil biodiversity.
- Composting (natural organic matter) and adding this to our gardening areas.
- Planting trees and shrubs to reduce erosion.
- Knowing that in parks and botanic gardens we do not go on the brown soil beds as plants are growing there.
- Being aware of the value of peat.

## Section 6

### Embedding care for our outdoor spaces into our experiences

#### 6.5 Footfall and trampling

##### Why this matters

Footfall is the amount of people walking, running and exploring within an area. A space has to cope with children moving around as they play. The wear and tear includes:

- Trampling – the flattening and eventual loss of vegetation
- The creation of informal paths and trails
- The expansion of mud patches where access is needed
- Soil exposure, loss, compaction and erosion

##### Building upon prior learning

- Observe how your children move through their outdoor space. Be attentive to what they are doing with their feet. Note which pathways and features seem to attract their attention.
- Draw children's attention to any noticeable impact made by their activity, e.g., the leaving of footprints in fresh mud or sand, or their imprints on soft grass. Ask them about what happened here. Together, start noticing how we are leaving traces of our play.
- Link this to evidence that other species are also leaving traces of their existence too. For example, there may be bird droppings near bird feeders or lots of grain on the ground below them. There may be pawprints found on a soft surface.

- Talk about what is the same and different between our impact and other species. Try and frame this positively. Discuss why we may see more traces from humans, e.g., we're bigger, there's more of us in the space for a longer time.
- Whether our own and other species impact is okay and whether there's anything we need to do to lessen this impact. What traces are good to see? What traces are telling us that the ground isn't coping with how we are playing. Decide together what can be done to care for this – have a look at the suggestions over leaf.

##### Reflective thoughts

- Think about the site from a child's perspective. Take time to observe what they need from the time in this space.
- Think about the suitability of surfaces on which children play in your outdoor space. How robust are they, especially in places that have high footfall such as entrances and exits?
- In conjunction with your landowner, ensure you have a shared understanding of both the needs of your children and the need to ensure the site can adequately cope with your group's presence.

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#### Following children's curiosities

- Noticing the impact of other animals as well as ourselves can lead to a genuine interest in tracking. A local naturalist or countryside ranger could visit and help your group see clues to what's been happening in our space.
- Look at how the traces of ourselves and other animals change through time. For example, if you are at a beach, the movement of the water removes traces and shifts sand and pebbles. At other times, the presence may be long lasting, such as deer rubbings on trees.
- Footfall and trampling is cause and effect. Simple experiments such as pushing a small stone into different surfaces, can help children witness this as well as be the start of pattern work.

#### Making a positive difference

- With landowner permission, create paths and trails that match children's patterns of play where needed. Alternatively create paths that guide children's movement through the space, such as: Strim or mow paths through meadows, long grass and where lots of "inhibitor" plants such as brambles and nettles exist. This can be done in late spring or early summer.
- Make the path boundaries clear through the use of branches, brushings or logs as informal path sides. The branches rot down and add to the biodiversity. Think about what other path sides and entrances increase the affordance of the space – for other creatures as well as ourselves.
- Worn patches can be restored. For example, rubber tiles that are laid over the

prepared ground, with grass seed sown through the gaps.

- Consider the surfaces immediately around a shelter, shed or storage that is being created or put into an outdoor area so that these are robust and accessible. Budget for this.
- Think about any children with mobility issues or visual impairments. How will they move through your outdoor spaces in ways which foster independence?

#### Think about

- Rotating between several sites to enable each one to recover.
- Using a designated gathering place within a site if one exists, where the ground is compacted within a defined area. This could prevent areas with a wilder feel from being overused. It allows other species to get on with their lives at key times that matter.
- Encouraging wise use of natural materials: see **6.8: Gathering and using natural materials**
- Landowners sometimes receive grants for specific land management practices so check with them about "can-go" areas.

Be aware of how the weather and seasons can impact. Certain areas may be "no go":

- In late winter and spring to allow new herbaceous growth, including bulbs
- During specific weather conditions, e.g. avoiding damp areas if there's been a lot of rain
- If there are rare or sensitive plant species which could be at risk such as native bluebells
- Sticking to paths where your landowner requests that you do so

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#### When walking off-site, follow the Scottish Outdoor Access Code advice

This includes getting to and from your local greenspace:

“Access rights apply off-path, but when you are close to houses or in fields of crops or in places where the environment is particularly vulnerable to damage, it may be sensible to follow paths and tracks where they exist. This can help to facilitate access and help safeguard the interests of land managers and the environment.”



#### Find out more

- **Paths for All** – Information and advice on everything to do with paths
- **The Conservation Volunteers** – practical advice on site management
- The Scottish **Outdoor Access Code** (SOAC)



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#### 6.6 Trees and shrubs

##### Why trees and woodlands matter

- Woodlands provide space away from the stresses and strains of life where children and educators can relax, be more physically active and feel calmer
- Trees provide abundant sticks and other free, biodegradable learning resources
- Trees are fun, good companions and when sufficiently mature, a place to climb, hide, swing and hang out
- Repeated experiences of playing in a known woodland helps develop an emotional connection which is often rekindled when children reach adulthood and actively choose to visit woodlands

##### Building upon prior learning

Playing in woodlands and around trees is the “how” children learn to value trees. From the outset, support children to play with care for the trees in mind. This relies on modelling, conversations with, and support from, adults.

##### Reflective thoughts

- How do we model and interact with trees and shrubs to ensure an ethic of respect, care and reciprocity?
- What do our children think and feel about trees? How do we know this and what do we do with this knowledge?
- What have the trees witnessed on the land? What stories could they tell us? What are we learning from the trees and shrubs?

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“The group understand that we would never simply cut a tree down to make a den. They recognise that we look for a tree that was at the end of its life, or that was not growing as it should. We only use natural wastage – our ‘gifts’ from the woodlands.”

(My World Outdoors, 2016)

#### Trees and shrubs: useful information

##### The green leaves are alive and...

- Catching raindrops, slowing down the speed they reach the ground
- Reducing wind speed and providing shelter not just in the trees but in the space downwind
- Absorbing carbon dioxide from the air;
- Releasing water back into the air along with oxygen
- Transforming energy from the sun into chemical energy for food webs
- Providing food and shelter for lots of animals: mammals, birds and insects

#### The roots...

- Help reduce soil erosion and aerate the soil
- Obtain water from the soil
- Bacteria that live on some roots convert nitrogen in the air into a form that the plant can use
- Provide strength and stability to the tree

#### Food and reproduction...

- Trees produce flowers, sometimes called blossom on fruit trees
- Flowers are a source of nectar and pollen for bees, wasps and other pollinators - some can be eaten by people!
- The pollinated flowers grow into fruit: nuts, seeds and berries which grow back into trees and shrubs
- Nuts, seeds and berries are a source of food for many species including humans

#### Dead leaves, twigs and branches...

- Rot down and provide nutrients that are held in the soil to be re-used by the trees and other plants
- Are used by fungi, microbes and lichen as food and a place to live
- Are fun to use when we play
- Leaves can be used to make leaf mould that is good for growing seeds
- Piles of leaves provide shelter for animals like hedgehogs - check before you dive in!



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#### Trees and shrubs: practical actions

Looking after the trees in the spaces where we play can make a big difference to their health.

Ensure regular health checks are undertaken of trees in high use areas especially in your designated outdoor space, at least on an annual basis. Tree maintenance needs to be a priority here. Seek professional advice from a tree surgeon or arboriculturist.

**The weather and seasons:** strong winds, periods of drought, prolonged heavy rain, snow and ice may all add stress to a tree.

- Let's check our trees are okay when we arrive on site and we'll report any we are worried about.

**Land operations:** Always stay away from any site where timber operations or tree work is happening. When trees are felled from a site others can be left more vulnerable.

- Let's check which areas are still okay to use after. We also need to remember to never climb stacked wood as it's dangerous.

**Bark damage:** This can happen by stripping of bark, cutting into it or rubbing.

- How can we care for the bark of living trees? It's their protective coat and if it gets damaged it may become sick and the tree could even die.

When choosing trees for climbing or for putting up tree swings, hammocks, ropes and slacklines, we need to pick species which can withstand the stress. See guidance on [play structures in woodland settings](#).

Rope swings and structures need to be attached and used with care. Check with the landowner whether they need to be removed at the end of a session or can be left out. Always ensure these have risk-benefit assessments in place.

We can support children to climb trees with care. This [tree climbing guidance](#) can help.

- Let's add scarves or soft tubing to protect the tree trunk and branches.
- Do we know which trees can tolerate tree climbing and the addition of rope structures?

See this [video](#) capturing how Earthtime, Duffus approaches sustainable climbing at their setting.

**Soil compaction around tree base:** This is when the tiny holes in the soil that hold water and air are squashed out. This can prevent roots growing and reduce the oxygen levels in the soil. This makes the soil unhealthy and unhappy. It can also lead to increases in flooding as water can't soak in so easily and more water flows over the surface.

- How can we protect the bases of the trees where we play especially in high use areas?

**Foliage stripping:** The removal of living leaves and breaking branches that are still growing on trees.

- We need to use fallen leaves, sticks and branches when we play, rather than remove from living trees and shrubs.
- Which ones can we find to play with?

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**Root exposure:** When roots are exposed above the soil, they're easily damaged; they can be worn and torn by foot traffic. Damaged roots can't do their job of collecting water and nutrients to support the tree.

🗨️ I wonder how long the roots are and if we can follow them out from the tree?

**Insects and diseases:** that burrow, eat or destroy different parts of the plant.

🗨️ In late spring or early summer, let's check if our trees are healthy and let our landowner know. See [Forestry Scotland's guidance](#) on tree diseases.



#### 6.7 Willow structures

##### Why willow matters

- It provides shade and shelter. It can be a special place where children can play and feel they have a sense of privacy.
- It improves the biodiversity of our outdoor space. There are a range of willow species native to Scotland. Osier willow ([Salix viminalis](#)) is commonly used to create structures. It is one of the first trees to flower in the spring, providing an early source of food for many pollinators.
- It creates interesting play structures and features. Living willow can be bent to make a range of play structures including screens, hedges, dens, tunnels and other play structures.
- Willows provide a fast growing and renewable supply of art and building material. The rods (withies) can be used to create sculptures, artwork, baskets.
- It can help with managing our climate. Willow likes damp places and holds a lot of water. It can help play a part in storm water management and contribute to capturing carbon.

##### Building upon prior learning

- Children have experience of playing with a willow structure and are interested in the pruning work needed to keep it healthy.
- Children find and play with willow sticks and/or willow baskets and other willow resources.
- Children use charcoal in their drawings and may be interested in finding out how it was made.

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#### Reflective thoughts

- What size are our willow structures? Do we have a variety, some at a small height for babies and toddlers? Do we have ones that are accessible by children who have a physical disability or wheelchair bound?
- In what ways do we use willow rods creatively?
- What traditions, festivals and celebrations involve willow that would be relevant to our children?
- What examples of willow products do we have in our setting and in children's homes?

#### Before you begin

- Landowner permission is needed to plant willow directly into the ground. Alternatively, willow can grow in deep raised beds and containers on hard surfaces.
- With your children, think about the intended purpose, type of structure, its location, height and how it links to other play features in your space.
- Avoid planting over underground utilities. Willow prefers damp rather than dry ground.
- Consider the surfacing around the structure and its accessibility particularly for the children with mobility needs. Create a path or base first before planting willow and extend this beyond the entrances to avoid the growth of mud patches.
- Weed matting around the base can help the structure grow.

- Professional willow workers can install a structure. Ensure they show several staff how to care for and maintain it.
- A cost-effective approach is to fund a couple of staff to attend a willow structures course and use rods donated from other willow structures locally. They can then maintain the willow structure with children year on year.

#### Maintenance

- Maintaining any willow structure is an essential job. Once established, it can grow very quickly and requires year-on-year care.
- If a willow structure becomes unsafe because it has not been adequately maintained, you must ensure it is repaired or removed.
- The annual main pruning and weaving happens in winter and children enjoy getting involved. You need to ensure their input is given proper consideration as it involves the use of tools. A risk-benefit assessment will help here.
- You can plant and create further structures from one original source. It is an economical approach to adding height, greenery and interesting spaces into your outdoor area.
- The spare willow rods created through the annual pruning can be used by children for further planting, sculpting and other creative features.
- The annual maintenance and ongoing care are opportunities for all staff to learn what is involved. This can ensure continuity of care as experienced staff can support but if they move on, then others have the required competency.

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#### Caring for our willow structures

Willow structures can be inadvertently damaged through play activities. Involving children in the planting and aftercare of willow structures is a way into talking about impacts and to gain their thoughts about how to minimise potential damage. This includes:

- Foliage stripping:
  - 🗨️ I wonder if there are other leaves lying around we can use.
- Branch breaking:
  - 🗨️ We can prune the willow branches which is better for the tree. Let's put a note in the calendar to do this over winter.
- Soil compaction around the base:
  - 🗨️ I wonder if we need visual matting and how wide should this be?
- Development of mud through and around the structure.
  - 🗨️ This structure needs a rest from us playing here until we fix the ground and sort out the mud.
- Willow structures can also suffer stress from becoming top heavy if they are not pruned and cared for. Likewise, they may need watering in prolonged periods of dry weather.

“It's a place for our imaginations to grow. We have an established willow dome in our outdoor area which the children love. They use it in all sorts of ways, such as rolling small cable reels into it to make a house, café and even an ice-cream stand on warmer days. We put den building material near it which they use to make it darker inside. It's sometimes a quiet story space and we have windchimes hanging inside and old CDs which reflect the sunlight beautifully. It has to be cut back in winter before it starts to bud as it grows so fast. It's also easier to weave in the new shoots as they appear.”

Lisa Alexander, Westfield Nursery, West Lothian”



#### Find out more

- **Out to Learn Willow** has advice about maintaining willow structures including pruning, watering and looking after the surfaces around your structure
- There are lots of online video clips about planting and maintaining willow
- For information visit the **Willow Scotland** website

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#### 6.8 Gathering and using natural materials

##### Why this matters

Children love to play with natural materials such as sticks, stones, cones and shells. Foraging for food plants can make our snacks relevant to our children. By positively managing how these are gathered and used, we are:

- Enabling children to make and shape their environment. By moving and manipulating natural materials in many ways, children acclimatise to being in the space and develop a relationship with it.
- Helping our children learn the ecology of the places where they play – learning to identify different objects and recognising their play and wildlife value.
- Cultural links can be made by tapping into traditional games used with different materials, such as conkers. There are also stories, songs, recipes and activities associated with natural objects and plants – search online.
- Sharing with families and inviting them to tell of their experiences can also support learning about other traditions from other countries and parts of Scotland. For example, a *blaeberry* in Scotland is commonly known as a *bilberry* in England. Its Gaelic name is *braoileag ghorm* and its botanical name is *Vaccinium myrtillus*. Our culture is steeped in our natural heritage.

##### Seasonal play

The weather and seasons enable children to play with a range of loose parts at different times of the year. For example, apples and

brambles are harvested in Autumn, catkins and blossom appear in the Spring. Adapt [5.4 Our outdoor calendar](#) to ensure you plan for the natural events happening in your locality and the gifts they bring for your children. These can also link to other cultures such as blossom festivals in Japan.

Our imaginations are particularly important when supporting children outside. Simple provocations can create a world of possibilities as children explore. Imagine:

- A seed is asleep through the winter.
  - 🗨️ What could it be dreaming about?
- They have jackets and little houses to keep them safe.
  - 🗨️ What could be hidden inside?

Using the senses, art, colour and music in combination with natural materials and telling little impromptu stories stimulates the mind, body and heart.

**“Materials live in the world in multiple ways. They can evoke memories, narrate stories, invite actions, and communicate meanings. Materials and objects create meeting places. In early childhood education we gather around things to investigate, negotiate, converse and share. Materials... beckon and draw us in. Materials are not immutable, passive, or lifeless until the moment we do something to them; they participate in our early childhood projects. They live, speak, gesture and call to us.”**

(Kind, S., 2014)

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#### Building upon prior learning

- Ensuring children have plenty of time for free play with natural materials, in local greenspace as well as on-site
- Sharing ideas and discoveries about the materials we find: the joy of a leaf being dropped, etc
- Encouraging our children to notice the uniqueness of each object and its qualities. This precedes being able to identify and name them
- Listening to your children's stories of playing with natural materials and documenting this in creative ways
- Encouraging children to repurpose the natural materials, helping them understand how this is sustainable



The interplay between children and the loose parts, landscape, elements and seasons creates an ever-changing, growing, evolving play space, especially in natural environments that are loved and cared for. Furthermore, children experience a sense of freedom, space and autonomy that connects them to the land in an intimate way.

**(Loose Parts Play: A Toolkit, 2019)**

#### Reflective thoughts

- In what ways can we support our children to play freely whilst developing an awareness and care for the land?
- With our youngest children and those with different levels of maturity, what additional support may be needed?
- What plants and fungi do we need to recognise and why? Do we know the invasive species on our sites? Can we recognise potentially harmful plants and are we able to assess the level of risk they pose?
- It can be repurposed for loose play and construction activities. The children had fun using loose parts and various tools. They made ramps and learned new tool skills.
- See **4.6 Getting to know plants, animals and fungi that live in your outdoor spaces** for ideas to improve your wildlife knowledge. It's empowering to recognise different species and know about their history and value.



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#### Following children's curiosities

- Where possible, use natural materials *in situ* for playing with.
- If a child wants to keep a stick or other object, suggest they find a special space to keep it safe and to look for it the next time they come. If something has to be removed to comfort a child, then bring it back next time.
- Role model returning natural loose parts to where you found them. Can you remember?
- Moss and lichen can be fascinating for children – model how to gently stroke these species and talk about how they need to stay where they are growing. Have a look at [6.9 Dead wood spotting](#) for ideas and information.



#### Being aware

- Natural spaces such as woodlands, moorlands, inland water, the sea, wetlands are habitats for many different species. By removing natural materials and over-picking plants there are less food sources and homes for other species. For example, some species of crab live inside empty shells.
- Some species are invasive and non-native and takeover habitats. We need to know and recognise these and ensure our group does not spread these to other places.
- Some landowners have created gathering spaces in woods and other greenspaces where children can play more freely. Use these if they exist, even if there are less or different sorts of materials available.
- Some loose materials such as deadwood have particularly high biodiversity value. Parts of your site that have lots of deadwood may need to be left alone. Some, like lichen, are slow growing and best left undisturbed. Mirrors and magnifiers in a range of strengths can help children look closely and enjoy the beauty and wonder of these species.



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#### Making a positive difference

- Grow lots of plants in your outdoor space so you have plenty of loose natural materials and reduce the need to bring any in from elsewhere. This mitigates inadvertently transferring invasive non-native species, diseases and pests.
- Only pick common plants, berries, seeds, and fungi. Help your children to learn to gather only a little even if there is a lot around.
- Ideally, collect and use objects that have fallen to the ground rather than those still living and growing.
- Create habitat piles, especially deadwood piles in your immediate outdoor space. Seek advice from local outdoor professionals about the best place to put them.
- Create a group agreement about what is and is not okay to collect. Have a look at the Leave Less Trace Nature Play Principles in Out to Play, Appendix 3.
- Build a “virtual” collection – encourage your children to take photos of objects and of each other interacting with the materials.

#### Remember

- Select impact-resistant sites with a good level of biodiversity to begin with.
- Be patient especially with younger children or those with additional support needs as they learn what is okay to pick and what isn't and in what quantities. This skill and knowledge is only acquired through experience, role modelling and conversations with adults.
- Follow the [Scottish Outdoor Access Code](#) and national collection codes where they exist.
- Check with the landowner about what is okay to collect and the best places to play.
- If you purchase any loose natural materials for your outdoor setting, check that they have been sustainably sourced and harvested, ideally locally.

“Plants not only modify the climatic conditions and provide light shade, but the flowers, seeds and leaves produced by this living material can provide open-ended play props for children. Play spaces that incorporate vigorous low growing maintenance plants created sensory-rich play spaces.”

(Herrington and Lesmeister, 2006)

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#### Collecting codes

Be aware of guidance about sensible gathering practices and ensure you are not gathering any protected species:

- [Scottish Wild Mushroom Code](#)
- [Fungi Code of Conduct](#)
- [Wildflower Society Code of Conduct](#)
- [Scottish Fossil Code](#)

There are other codes too - have a look at the [Scottish Outdoor Access Code](#) website for more information.

“To avoid cross contamination and keep things simple, we have the rule ‘if you make it at Our Wee Garden then it stays at Our Wee Garden’ and you can choose where it goes. Also, if you find a leaf or twig outside of the Royal Botanic Garden Edinburgh you cannot bring it in to avoid cross contamination of plant biomatter. This rule is also an important learning experience for the children as they learn about how to take care of the plants in the National Collection.”

(Walsh, 2021)

“**HSCS 1.31** As a child, my social and physical skills, confidence, self-esteem and creativity are developed through a balance of organised and freely chosen extended play, including using open ended and natural materials.”



#### Find out more

- [Out to Play](#) has lots of advice about invasive species.
- [The Scottish Outdoor Access](#)
- [NatureScot](#) have lots of foraging advice. Download their [Foraging for Wild Plants](#) and [Food from Nature Learning Pack](#) which includes a foraging calendar.
- [Muddy Faces](#) have lots of ideas for foraging in their outdoor hub.
- The Conservation Volunteers have a [Dead Good Deadwood Survey](#) with free identification guides.
- Invasive non-native species. [NatureScot](#) has further info.
- Play Scotland (2020) [Playful Schools: Toolkit for Delivering Loose Parts Play in Covid-19](#) has risk benefit assessments and advice.

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#### 6.9 Dead wood spotting

Deadwood is a whole tree or part of a tree that has died and is beginning to rot.

**A “snag” is a standing dead tree.** They are used by lots of birds – woodpeckers make holes in them... can you find out why?

As the inside of a tree breaks down, it can become very crumbly and powdery.

See if you can find any wee beasties helping the process.

**Deadwood stores carbon**, helps prevent soil erosion and 40% of woodland wildlife species are dependent on deadwood. It also supplies nitrogen, an important nutrient, releasing it into the soil.

As branches used to edge paths decompose, they become homes for many tiny creatures and fungi. The children must know this is inedible.

**Stumps** come in all shapes and sizes. Some have points, others have holes. Flat ones have usually been cut down.

Can you see any faces in your stumps?

Have you a grumpy stump?

A **stumpery** is a garden full of stumps! They became fashionable in the Victorian era. Why not turn a stump into a mini garden in your outdoor space?

**Fallen deadwood** can be dead good for playing too:

I wonder what's underneath a tree... Stable fallen trees are good for exploring roots. Get the magnifiers ready!

Some lichens love deadwood. How many different sorts can you find on just one stump or stick of dead wood?

A bed of moss is growing on top. I wonder who would like to sleep here?

#### 6.10 Animal allies

##### Dead, dying or injured animals

If you are worried about an animal, phone the **SSPCA** immediately: 03000 999 999. Use **what3words** app on a mobile phone to give the location of the animal. Let your landowner know if a large mammal has died of natural causes.

Any large dead bird with no obvious injuries may have died of Avian flu and should not be handled but reported in line with **guidance**.

When dead or dying wild animals are encountered, respond in ways that are sensitive and allow for spiritual conversations as well as the practicalities. Be attentive to the needs of any child who may be grieving the loss of a loved person or pet.

Be prepared for a range of discussions: about life and death; the linking to deaths of a pet or known person; what happens with dead bodies; how things rot and decay; how this creates food for decomposers; how some creatures die while others will be born and grow.

##### Being aware: Protected species and wildlife crime

Wildlife crime describes the illegal theft or harming of animals, plants and habitats, either in rural or urban areas.

Ask your landowner if there are any wildlife sensitivities on your site. You could seek advice from a local countryside or wildlife ranger too.

When you find animal homes such as nests, holes or dens make sure you stay away from them.

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Avoid choosing or using sensitive areas where your group may inadvertently cause damage to a protected species.

Linking to the UN Sustainable Development **Goal 15 Life on Land** Lerstrup et al (2018) suggests that embodied experiences of a variety of animals in a green setting creates a foundation for young children to later understand ideas about biodiversity and ecological processes. This knowledge, connectedness and care they feel for individual animals at an early age may later be extended to whole species and ecosystems leading to a life-long affection and willingness to care for, protect, and restore the varied ecosystems and their diversity of life.

“If children grow up not knowing about nature and appreciating it, they will not understand it, and if they don’t understand it, they won’t protect it, and if they don’t protect it, who will?”

(‘**Conserving Wonder**’,  
Sir David Attenborough)

#### Exploring

Let’s go on an expedition! I wonder what we could discover:

- Animal tracks, traces and signs that they have been here: eggs shells, chewed cones or leaves, feathers, bones, owl pellets, animal poo, traces of fur, hair or fluff, the presence of a nest, rubbings or other marks on trees, paw prints and many other things!
- We may see or hear them from afar, if we move quietly or stay very still. Can we show each other how to do this?
- Where’s a good place to find animals? Under logs and stones, in grass, in dead wood, the soil?
- What’s a good way to find an animal? What will we need to look at them more closely? Who or what can help us work out what we have found?

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#### Discovering

Let's share and learn from each other and the animals we discover:

- How to find, catch and handle small creatures safely: caring for the creature and ourselves. This could include: placing them down, counting them, watching, then letting them go, holding the animals firmly but gently, passing animals from hand to hand without damaging them, putting them in observation jars, feeding them.

🗨 Which animals should always be left alone and why?

- Where they live, how they reproduce, take care of their offspring, what they eat and what eats them, where they sleep, how and where they survived winter, how they died, what they may be thinking, and so on.

- Wanting to care for them:

🗨 Is it better to leave them where we found them?

🗨 What can we do, make or give to the animal to ensure they are okay?

- Use other people as well as texts such as ID charts, digital apps and books for information and experiences.

#### Creating

Discovering an animal often leads to reflections, questions, conversations and creations. These can spark interest within children.

🗨 What was the “find of the day” and why was this so special?

- Support children to draw, take photos or use their imaginations to capture the moment such as making nests, small world play using feathers, fluff and other animal residues.
- Imagining and talking about being animals, acting out animal roles, dramatizing life cycles.

Through short, wee stories develop your children's understanding of the interdependence of species, e.g., the bird drops a seed. The seed grows into a plant that provides food for the bird and other animals. It also provides nesting material that helps the bird.

#### Reflective thoughts

- Imagine if all animals, other species and entities such as stones, were part of our families: siblings, cousins. How would this affect our perceptions of “other-than-human” species? Reframing how we think about and relate to animals can help improve our understanding of equity and sustainable practice
- Considering how we talk about animals; Avoid using ‘he’ for any animal or bird we spot. Can we tell if it's a ‘he’ or ‘she’? How can we tell? If we can't, maybe ‘it’ is better?
- What values and rights could children learn through their animal encounters? By extending the concept of values and rights to other species, we can better understand why these matter. For example, when we talk about equity, do we consider other species as equal to humans?

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“Small creatures were valued because they provided direct experiences of animal life cycles and were a means of learning about ecosystems and natural phenomena like the weather, seasons, life and death.”

(Lerstrup et al. (2021, p67))



### Find out more

- Care Inspectorate (2018) **Animal Magic**
- **Out to Play** Section 6.4
- **NatureScot** - resources suitable for early years and advice on wildlife crime and protected species
- **Outdoor and Woodland Learning Scotland** website has lots of relevant resources
- **Silverhaar** has wee songs and stories about animals
- **Scottish Society for the Prevention of Cruelty to Animals**
- **Police Scotland Wildlife Crime**

### 6.11 Food and composting

#### Why this matters

Composting enables children to see how decomposers such as worms, slugs, other invertebrates, fungi and microbes play a part in breaking fruit, vegetables and other items into organic matter. Compost conditions the soil providing nutrients for plants. The compost bin becomes a home for many decomposers. This helps improve the biodiversity in our outdoor space. It saves money and energy too. Have a look at **6.2**

#### Why soil matters

#### Building on prior learning

- Finding a worm outside and wondering where a good place would be to put it.
- Start small – make compost in a bottle or in a bag!
- Creating sequencing books using photos of your children doing each stage of the composting cycle makes it personal and relevant to the children involved.
- Many tiny creatures live in a compost bin. During the warmer months, put a bit of the compost under a powerful magnifier or microscope to see what is happening at a micro level.

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#### Reflective thoughts

- Are we aware of our families' perspectives on food and can we ensure our practice is sensitive to their needs? For example, in some cultures, food play is not acceptable.
- In what ways could you ensure your food provision is litter-free to avoid packaging ending up in landfill?
- The process of composting ensures that food is never wasted. What isn't suitable for us to eat can be recycled. How does thinking about food like this impact upon the conversations you have with a child about trying different foods?

#### Embed composting into your snack and meal routines

- ☞ Which parts of the vegetable are we going to eat and which parts will the compost creatures like?
- ☞ Aha! I see there's some food left for the worms and slugs to eat.
- ☞ We've had our snack, now the compost creatures need theirs - who would like to feed them today?
- ☞ Remember to wash food caddies after emptying.

Grow and harvest fruit and vegetables with children so they witness the cycle of decomposition and plant growth. Here is a video to explain how [Earthtime Elgin](#) have approached growing their own food.

#### Wormeries work well

"There's a mix between children who get REALLY engaged and want to be involved in feeding the worms every week and others who are not interested. Even these children usually show an interest when it's time to get the compost out and use it in the garden. They like the way it's turned from food we don't want into something useful. The wormery pretty much looks after itself. A couple of times a year, I rearrange the levels and take out the compost to make space for more food scraps. Once a year we collect the 'worm pee' from the base of the wormery which can be used as a natural fertiliser once diluted. We sell it to parents at sports day. Some families put in an order every year so it works! Don't worry if you are squeamish, you don't actually see the worms that much and they don't smell any more than any other enclosed compost bin."

(Nyssa Pinkerton, Blackhall Nursery, Edinburgh.)

#### Remember

- The practicalities of a compost bin: ease of access, size, height and location: sited on soil and in the shade. Source free ones or at a discount price from local authorities. Simple designs can be built from wooden planks or pallets. Front-opening compost bins show the layers of transformation taking place.



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- There's different approaches to composting, which could engage children. Examples include food waste digesters, green cones, a wormery and making leaf mould.
- Put compost bins beside minibeast homes so the creatures can migrate between them.
- Most compost bins need emptying and the organic matter added to your garden on an annual basis.
- If your compost bin is very smelly then something is wrong. Seek advice.
- Some staff and child may find the concept of composting off-putting. What support do they need to acclimatise?

#### Being aware

- Avoid food play outside, e.g., the use of rice, pasta, lentils. It can attract scavenging animals to the site or increase numbers of certain species, potentially leading to adverse changes in biodiversity and the spreading of diseases. Use mud or nylon-free clay as alternatives to playdough.
- Take all litter, including any spare food back to your base. Recycle the packaging and compost the leftover food. For an example of how this works in a setting, here is a [video](#) from Earthtime Elgin.
- After Halloween, compost your pumpkin. Don't leave outside for wildlife. It's particularly bad for hedgehogs.

**“HSCS 1.38** If appropriate, I can choose to make my own meals, snacks and drinks, with support if I need it, and can choose to grow, cook and eat my own food where possible.”



#### Find out more

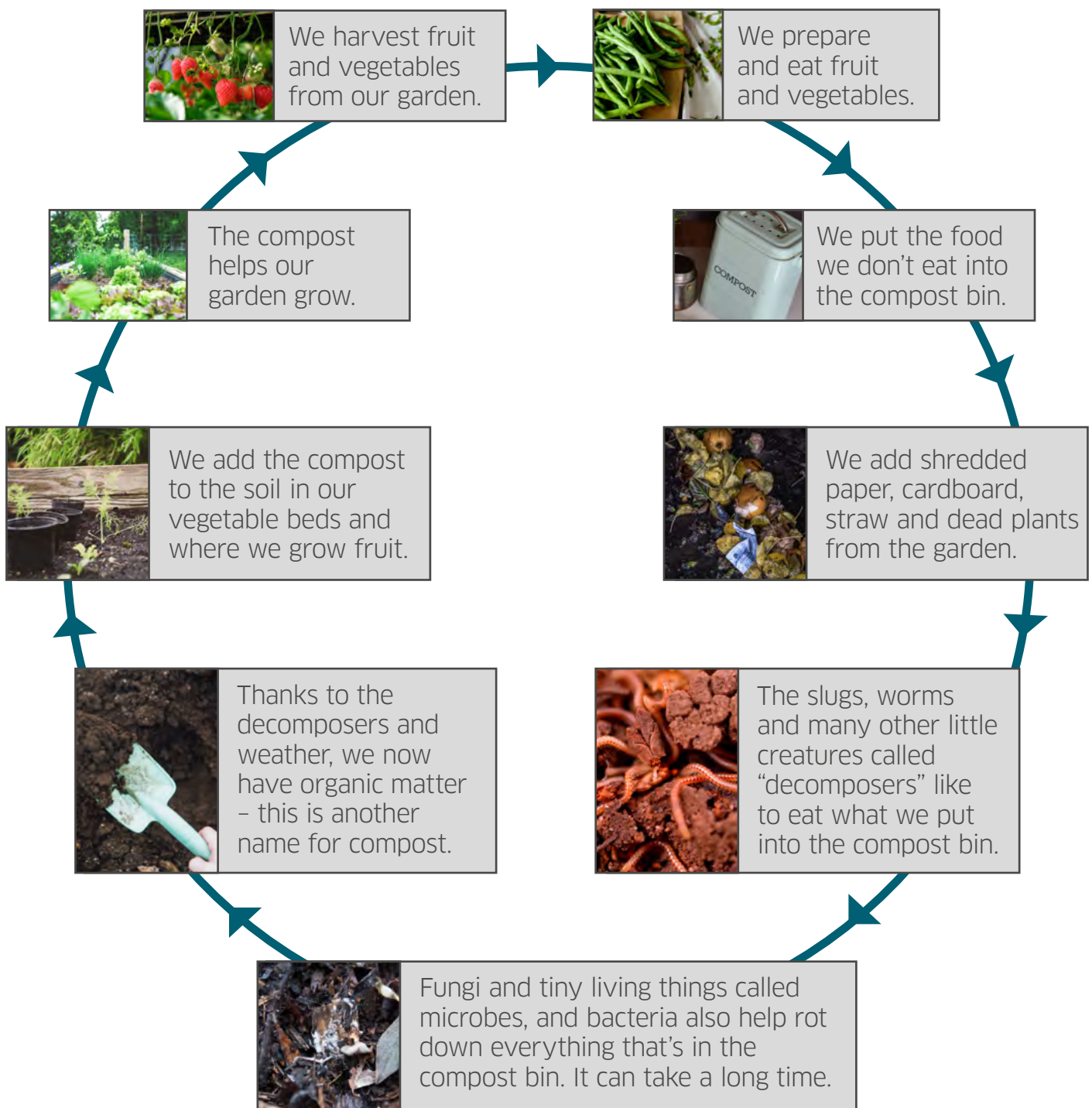
For practical ideas, advice and material that can be safely composted

- The Little Rotters [Composting Handbook](#)
- [The Recycled Devon School](#)
- Section 6.12 Compost cycle on the next page
- Care Inspectorate (2018) [Food Matters guidance](#) for best practice around food
- The Royal Highland Education Trust has developed an online [learning resource](#) exploring food and sustainability which aims to engage learners in real world issues through providing information and activities.

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## Embedding care for our outdoor spaces into our experiences

### 6.12 Compost Cycle



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#### 6.13 Water in our outdoor space

##### Why this matters

- Water is precious. To make it safe to drink and use, it has been processed. Before it returns to a river or other water source, it is processed again, to remove effluent.
- Using lots of water puts pressure on our watershed and the habitats upstream from where we live, affecting wildlife and farming.
- By increasing the amount of rainfall our site can hold through planting and using water storage features we lessen the impact of high rainfall and reduce flash flooding. The flow of storm water can be part of a rainy play experience.
- When using paint, detergents and bubble liquid, ensure these are biodegradable and non-toxic.

##### Building upon prior learning

A group of children are often found where water exists! Observe their interactions with water, the environment and each other. It's the starting point for sustainable thinking and acting.

Children often assume there is unlimited amounts of water, and so awareness-raising is needed. With interested children, consider:

- 🗣️ What water can be found and where in our outdoor space?
- 🗣️ What sort of water features are children drawn to? Which are left alone, unnoticed or ignored?
- 🗣️ Who or what else needs water in our outdoor space?
- 🗣️ How do other species use water?
- 🗣️ Do we have any creatures that are living in water, e.g. in a pond?

- 🗣️ Where does water go?
- 🗣️ On a rainy day, what happens to water landing in our outdoor space?
- 🗣️ Do we have features or places where water is soaked up by plants or trees?

Use the above to document children's understanding and interest. They can be involved in taking photos, creating drawings and thinking about their own need for water as well as other species.

##### Reflective thoughts

- What's the range of water experiences all our children access? Is this sufficient to develop their conceptual understanding of water as an element and as ecosystems such as ponds, streams and the sea that need cared for?
- What messages are we giving about water and its value? Is this a human-orientated message or more universal to include all species?
- Do our children have opportunities to broaden their experiences such as paddling, canoeing, learning to swim and to learn how to be in and around water? How can these be offered safely and in line with local and national guidance? Get further advice from your local authority outdoor education team.

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#### Using less water

I wonder how we can use less water.  
Could we:

- Q Carry and transport water without spilling any. What advice can we give each other?
- Q Learn how to turn a tap on and off.
- Q Monitor our usage outside? For example, by using canisters of water.
- Q Use the leftover water in our trays and containers for watering plants.
- Q Have collection tubs at the foot of water walls to re-use the water.
- Q Collect rainwater in a water butt. Ensure the lid is secure and can't be accessed by a child. Position and secure it safely. Empty and clean if the water becomes stagnant.
- Q Attach rain chains to guttering to collect rainwater. Search online for creative examples.
- Q Ensure our drains, pipes and guttering on our buildings are kept free from debris.
- Q Small scale solar fountains re-use water and fascinate many children.

#### Storm water management

During and after heavy rain or snowmelt, surface water increases. Outdoor spaces that absorb runoff help reduce flash flooding. There are small-scale ways of holding and using rainwater and purifying the runoff such as:

- Rain gardens - dips containing bog plants or ones that can tolerate damp conditions. They collect and filter runoff, absorbing up to 30% more than a lawn. Use native plants and pollinators as a wildlife habitat.
- A **living roof** grown on the top of sheds or shelters.
- Living walls cover a wall with growing plants. Pockets of soil or plant pots are used all the way up.
- Planting trees, ground cover vegetation and vertical planting on fences and walls.
- Removing the asphalt and replacing with more absorbent surfaces. Only do this with landowner permission.

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#### Water for wildlife

Wildlife needs natural sources of water (not from a tap). We can offer:

- Flat, shallow dishes for bird baths – empty and clean regularly.
- Small ponds and wetland areas. These can be in raised beds on asphalt. Adding stick and pond plants enable wildlife to climb in and out of the pond.



#### Find out more

- **Out to Play** Section 6.4.7
- SEPA – **Scottish Environmental Protection Agency** is a useful starting point for a range of activities about looking after water supplies
- Bird baths and water butts – check out the **RSPB website**
- Establishing wetlands - **Gardener's World** and the **Royal Horticultural Society** have a step-by-step guides
- **Plantlife**
- **Eco Schools Scotland**
- **International School Grounds Alliance** have water conservation and quality explorations for all ages
- **World Water Day** is 22 March, every year

#### 6.14 Inland water margins

See also the **6.16 Beach visits**

#### Why this matters

Ponds, streams, rivers and lochs are part of our natural heritage. Think of the hours of fun to be had playing beside a burn: damming its flow, skimming stones and messing about.

There are invasive aquatic plants and animals that spread easily. If you enter water or go pond or stream dipping then do the following:

- **Check** your equipment and clothing after leaving the water for mud, aquatic animals or plant material. Remove anything you find and leave it at the site.
- **Clean** everything thoroughly as soon as you can, paying attention to nets, boots, and areas that are damp and hard to access. Use hot water if possible.
- **Dry** everything thoroughly before using elsewhere. Some invasive plants and animals can survive for two weeks in damp conditions.
- **Check-Clean-Dry: Stop the Spread.**

#### Building on prior learning

- Find out who knows about and has experience of playing in or near water locally.
- Children may also have relatives who fish, undertake water sports, go wild swimming or who spend family time together near a lake, stream or beach.

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#### Looking after ourselves

Your local authority will have guidelines which must be adhered to around groups using beaches and inland water sources. These are based on national guidance such as **Going Out There** and **Group Safety at Water Margins**. All ELC providers must ensure their group uses these water spaces in a safe manner and that the risks and benefits are assessed. The Royal Society for the Prevention of Accident (RoSPA) also has useful guidance on **water and leisure safety**.

#### Reflective thoughts

- What fears or fascinations do we have, as staff when supporting children to play in or near slow moving, shallow natural water sources?
- What preparations, routines and practices do we need to support children's freedom to play beside and in water especially those with limited understanding or maturity?

#### We have agreed with the landowner/ manager:

- Which water source is suitable for exploring so there's no inadvertent conflict with other user groups.
- Access points where children can get in and out unaided without causing significant erosion to the banks or sides.
- Clear boundaries so that our play minimises impact on the aquatic and nearby wildlife.
- Months and seasons when it's okay to explore. This is because some aquatic wildlife disappear into the mud or ground at certain times of the year and sometimes the banks and entry points may be too muddy or icy.
- Infection control practices and toileting that don't impact on water quality and wildlife. Washing hands is good practice after playing in and with natural water.
- Leaving the area as we found it. For example, we'll dismantle any dams we have made before we leave. (Leave beaver dams in place, though)!

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#### 6.15 Exploring aquatic pond and stream life

##### Building on prior learning

A child notices a movement or finds a frog when playing outside near damp or wet ground. They may have seen or heard about tadpoles.

##### Amphibians (frogs, toads and newts)

- In the spring, avoid water activity in the vicinity of ponds whilst the spawn is laid and tadpoles are growing.
- If the spawn has been laid in a place which is in danger of drying out, contact the SSPCA ([Scottish Society for the Prevention of Cruelty to Animals](#)) for advice and to arrange for it to be moved.
- Visit week on week rather than taking spawn back to your immediate outdoor space. Encourage children to watch the tadpoles – what are they doing? Where are they going? How can we capture the changes we observe?
- Amphibians have highly porous skins which can easily be damaged through handling, so try to avoid this.

##### Pond and stream dipping

There are outdoor professionals, e.g. countryside rangers, who can provide support and advice about these activities.

- Most aquatic creatures are active in the warmer months of the year from late May through to early September.

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- Ensure only the minimum amount of pond and stream life are disturbed.
- Use a cylinder with a see-through bottom to view the animals without having to remove them. Learn [how to easily make an underwater viewer](#).
- Have insulating mats to lie on close to the water's edge. This is useful for children with limited physical mobility and to create a calm observation space, where the edge of water is more visible.
- Use hands to gently move rocks on the bottom of a stream or pond and avoid kicking.



#### Having a closer look

- Partially fill a shallow white tray with water from the pond or stream.
- Carefully transfer animals from net to tray by lowering a soft net into water and turning inside out. One netful should be sufficient.
- Keep the tray away from the water's edge and out of direct sunlight.
- Return the creatures back to their home as soon as possible after studying.
- Create your own mini pond in your immediate outdoor space – good for wildlife and to see lots of pond life.



#### Find out more

- RSPCA [Fieldwork guidance](#)
- [Amphibian and Reptile Conservation Trust](#)
- [Froglife](#)
- [Scottish Invasive Species Initiative](#) has river and other outdoor resources
- [Buglife](#)



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#### 6.16 Beach visits

See also [6.14 Inland water margins](#), for links and safety guidance and [6.17 Sand dunes](#) and [6.18 Rock pools](#).

#### Being beach aware

Every beach is different: we need to know the subtleties of the tides, flow of water and how this can impact on the play experiences in different weathers and at different times of the year. Local authorities usually know who is responsible for different beaches and coastline. Remember to read and adhere to advice on signs.

Occasionally strange items turn up on beaches. If this happens, keep your distance, cordon off the area and treat as an emergency incident. Contact the Coastguard (Tel: 999) **immediately** and tell them about the object: size, shape, colour, markings, features (fins, horns, wires, pins), visibility (in sand or washed up), and any leaks or smells.

**Check the tides** every time before you visit to ensure you have space to play safely on the beach

#### Caring for beach and marine life

- The [Scottish Outdoor Access Code](#) applies to beaches and has specific commentary.
- During bird nesting season (April to July) follow the requests on any notices.
- Keep your distance from seals, allowing them to rest at any time of year.

- Regular 2-minute litter pick keeps the beach cleaner. Children soon learn how to litter pick safely, knowing what is okay to touch and what an adult needs to take care of.
- Keep an eye out for injured wildlife especially after storms and contact [SSPCA Animal Helpline](#) to report any concerns **03000 999 999**

“We love beach visits! We use sticks as markers to show the children how far they can go along the beach. We discuss this together so the children feel part of the decision making. The litter pick part is vital. Always bring a bag for the rubbish you find.”

(Tracey Malcolmson, Cunningsburgh Early Years, Shetland)

#### Reflective thoughts

The world relies on reciprocal relationships. For example, find a smooth pebble on your beach. Imagine how long it took for the water and pebbles playing together to make this happen. That’s a lot of play over a long time!

What other examples of reciprocity can you find in your outdoor spaces?

How can you describe this in ways that your children understand?

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#### Find out more

- Out to Play [Section 6.4.7](#)
- **Group Safety at Water Margins guidance: Group Safety at Water Margins (rospa.com)**
- **Going Out There:** Scottish Framework for Safe Practice in Off-site Visits
- **Coastguard safety campaign**
- **Royal Life Saving Society UK:** enjoying water safely
- **Royal National Lifeboat Institution**
- **Royal Society for the Prevention of Accidents**
- **Surfers Against Sewage** website
- **Scotland's Year of Coastal Waters 2020-21** has lots of ideas
- **World Ocean Day** is 8 June each year with lots of resources on the website and annual programmes for the day



#### 6.17 Sand dunes

**How strong are our legs?** If children are not used to walking on sand, take this into account when visiting as little distances can seem much further. If we have a child with mobility issues, is it possible to hire an adapted beach buggy?

**What do our children think about sand dunes?** Does it remind them of other places... being in the desert or on the moon?

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#### What do our children want to do?

Depending on the wind direction, dunes can be ideal for a snack in a sheltered spot or lying on our backs and listening to the sand and grass moving and watching the world go by.

The **strandline** is the high tide or water mark. It's often a line of seaweed or debris that has been washed ashore.

**Sand dunes are biodiversity hotspots!** They are constantly changing as they are moved by tides and wind. When marram grass grows, their roots bind to the sand grains and stabilise the dune. In time, flowering plants and small shrubs become established and eventually coastal heathland is formed where flowers, moths, butterflies and many rare insects can be seen.

#### Invasive species alert

If sea buckthorn (**Hippophae rhamnoides**) or pirri-pirri burr (**Acaena novae-zelandiae**) are growing in the dunes you visit, be extra careful to check your clothing and footwear at the end of your visit in case you have picked up any berries or burrs. Bin what you find.

#### Stay away from sensitive areas.

Follow the advice of signs – conservation work may be happening, e.g. marram grass planting.

Some of Scotland's rare birds nest in dunes between April and September especially along the edges of dunes near the strandline. Leave them in peace.

Always stick to footpaths or boardwalks where they exist – this minimises the erosion of sand and plants caused by our presence.

Dune sliding is so tempting but sliding down loose sand, on the seaward side of high dunes is damaging the biodiversity which has taken many decades to build up.



#### Find out more

**NatureScot Sand dunes** have lots of information about the importance of sand dunes. 71 per cent of UK's sand dunes are found in Scotland

**Dynamic Dunescapes** is a sand dune restoration project. It has a lot of suggestions for things to do, education links and family activities

#### 6.18 Rockpools

**Rockpools rely on the tides** to be replenished. Check the tides before you go to ensure there are rockpools and to avoid being caught by an incoming tide.

**A small gym or yoga mat** can be laid out near a rockpool to provide an insulating surface for any child who needs this for warmth, stability and to lie on.

**Go easy** – rocks can be slippery. Keep an eye out for hidden hazards too, such as broken glass.

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#### Knowing what you're seeing

What names would you give the wildlife you see? Look at its shape, colour, texture, movement and location to help you choose.

The RSPB have a [Rockpool ID](#) chart.

The Marine Conservation Society have helpful information too [Seashore Safari](#).

**Remember to replace rocks** as you found them if looking underneath to see what is there.

**Checkout the seaweed.** Use free floating seaweed if you want to play with it. Don't tear off any attached to rocks. Remember where you found it and put it back there when you've finished.

“Our children are used to climbing rocks in different types of weather, with supervision, but the children do learn to risk assess for themselves. I'd wait till the nicer weather if verging out for the first time. We have had fantastic times with amazing finds: starfish, crabs and not a tuff tray in sight! We've enjoyed this whether bare foot or waders and wellies.”

(Gillian McKeown, Childminder, Fife)

**The water is clear** in most rockpools so you can see lots of things just by looking in! It's like peeking through the window of someone's house. What can you see?

**Rockpool creatures** like to be left alone to get on with their lives. Using a net to catch something may harm them if they get stuck in the holes of the net.

**Use a cylinder or pond viewer** with a see-through bottom so that you can view the animals in their natural habitat without having to remove them. Why not make your own? [How to make an underwater viewer](#)

**Be light on your feet!** We are giants compared to rock life! As you move over rocks, take care not to crush or damage some of the more delicate creatures.

**Life on earth - and in water.** Use the framework in [4.5 Learning about life on Earth](#) to help you make connections between all the elements and wildlife.



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#### 6.19 Fire experiences

##### Why this matters

For thousands of years, humans have used fire within their lives for warmth, light, cooking, protection and as a focal point for social gatherings. These are important, nourishing activities. Simultaneously, we need to be mindful of the impact on wildlife and habitats as well as the air pollution caused by particulates and the release of carbon dioxide back into the atmosphere.

##### Building upon prior learning

Ensure you offer a range of fire experiences that start with children's interests and curiosities about fire.

- Find out how your children's families experience fire. Then you can ensure you take account of any sensitivities around fire and who has competence and experience of fire. This also includes staff.
- Consider how your planned fire explorations connect to wider society and culture; including empowering children and their families to know what to do should a fire start in their homes.

##### Before you begin

Thorough preparation is essential. The Outdoor and Woodland Learning Scotland **Fire Guidance** is a useful reference.

- Let your local fire service know when and where you're having a fire. You may have neighbours who need to know. Have a system for putting out the fire.
- Ensure you are competent to lead this activity and have undertaken a risk benefit assessment.
- Follow Scottish Outdoor Access Code (**SOAC**) guidance.

- Bring supplies of tinder, kindling and dry firewood onto the site if there is a scarcity of suitable wood which can be gathered.
- Avoid the use of deadwood which is a vital part of a healthy woodland habitat.
- Avoid the use of living wood: this means deliberately stripping trees of branches that are still growing.
- Learning through Landscapes and Outdoor and Woodland Learning have two short videos to share how **different settings** approach planning safe **fire experiences**.

##### Reflective thoughts

- Who wants to light a fire? Is this an adult-led desire or based upon genuine interest from our children?
- Do we have a clear rationale for fire play and other experiences that is based on the maturity of our children and their ability to make sense of what is happening?
- What are our children learning from how we facilitate fire experiences? What words are staff using? Are these controlling and prohibiting or enabling language during the conversations that happen?
- In what ways can older children be involved in the teaching of younger children about fire?
- In what ways are we changing our practice as our own and our children's competencies grow?

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#### The Scottish Outdoor Access Code (SOAC) states:

- Wherever possible, use a stove rather than light an open fire.
- If you do wish to light an open fire, keep it small, under control and supervised – fires that get out of control can cause major damage, for which you might be liable.
- Never light an open fire during prolonged dry periods or in areas such as forests, woods, farmland, or on peaty ground or near to buildings or in cultural heritage sites where damage can be easily caused.
- Heed all advice at times of high risk.
- Remove all traces of an open fire before you leave.
- Seeking landowner permission, ensuring you follow local guidance and by-laws where they exist is a must, on or off-site.

#### The Scottish Outdoor Access Code (SOAC)

##### Why not:

- Save making hot drinks over the fire as part of a special experience? You can bring warm drinks in flasks as part of your routine on a colder day.
- Use designated fire pits or barbecue sites where they exist. You may also wish to create one, where it's appropriate to do so.
- Seek out stoves that burn the minimum amount of fuel.
- Consider alternative explorations of fire as part of your overall approach, for example, cooking over a tealight.

- Find campfire recipes and snacks which are litter-free from start to finish – often they are likely to be more healthy options.
- Discover how fire was traditionally used in the past or within the range of cultures that exist in your group. Are there legends and folklore that can be shared?

“We only use dry seasoned wood supplied by a friendly tree surgeon for our fire. He also keeps us stocked with a pile of wood chip so that we can resurface our footpaths when they get too worn and to protect the ground a bit better.”

(Zoe Sills, Earthtime Forest School Nurseries)

#### Making a positive difference

Pick your site carefully to minimise impact, for example:

- No nearby animal dens, e.g., badger set, rabbit burrows. Fire can be frightening for other species too.
- No overhanging branches – a high tree or no tree canopy.
- Consider ground conditions: no exposed roots, enough space to move around the fire area and avoid peaty soil.
- Remove nearby dead wood, ground debris, leaves and flammable litter from the campfire area prior to lighting a fire.
- Use a fire bowl or other safe method of raising the fire above ground.
- Keep the fire away from other ongoing play activities. Use of temporary boundary markers if needed.

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- Ensure the area is sufficiently sheltered.
- Remove all ash, charcoal and burned wood from the site.
- Replace turf and ground cover as you found it.

### Note

In some ELC settings, a fire pit may be a permanent much-loved feature and a constant visible presence that adds much learning and play value. It is the practice and ethos that matters.

“Many children aged 3-6 years old are developmentally ready and are fascinated by fire so we need to interact and extend their understanding appropriately. We would start with candles set in a tray of water, to understand the basics whilst interacting with a staff member. Then they could move on to using the fire bowl with small groups outside in the garden. This would start with teaching about materials, building the fire, fire safety and then the experience. This might include cooking small foil wrapped new potatoes or toast. Once it was linked to stories about the Great Fire of London. On another occasion it was linked to poetry and music about fire for a different creative approach. Finally linking to the celebration of various festivals which celebrate light in the late autumn months the whole setting could share in Diwali, Hanukkah and Guy Fawkes in a safe but engaging fashion.”

(Solly, 2019)

## Embedding care for our outdoor spaces into our experiences



### Find out more

- [Scottish Outdoor Access Code](#)
- [Out to Play, Section 6.4.6](#)
- Connecting nature with children – [fire building](#)
- [OWL Scotland Fire guidance](#)
- [Forest School Association – woodsmoke inhalation](#)

### 6.20 Creating and constructing

#### Why it matters

On and off-site, children and practitioners enjoy creating temporary structures. These could be:

- Small world fantasy or imaginative play
- Den building
- Biodiversity features such as bird boxes, meadows and log piles
- A building project for a group that involves tool work or erecting rope structures and swings. See [Section 6.6 Trees and shrubs](#)

Such activities may require consideration of wildlife and the environment. Little changes to practice can make a difference to the ecological impact.

Creating and constructing may need a risk benefit assessment and dynamic risk assessment throughout the creative process. There can be hidden hazards which we can mitigate, such as fall heights, sufficient working space, the correct use of knots, structural stability and so on. Refer to the links in “Find out more” for advice.

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This section does not include installations or items fixed in place with concrete and other more permanent approaches. Those structures would require landowner discussions and permission.

#### Building upon prior learning

Observing children find material – be this natural or man-made – in their environment and using it in their play is the starting point. Children like to shape and manipulate their environment. In doing so, a space takes on personal meaning and fosters attachments between a child and the place.

It may take several sessions, but it is worth observing what is being created, by whom and where:

- Where are children finding the materials for building?
- What is the impact of our building work on the surrounding area?
- Do our structures create conflict? For example, are there rules which hurt our feelings and if so, in what ways?
- Is the building work happening in places which disrupt other's use of the space, including the needs of wildlife?
- How do we enjoy playing with or using what we create?
- What other animals are also building and creating structures? Can you find nests, holes or other evidence of their activity?

If children are building special places such as dens, be courteous and check the rules of use. For example, no adults may be allowed inside.

#### Reflective thoughts

- What access do our children have to a broad range of constructing and creating opportunities, such as rope structures, tool use and woodworking?
- How do we look after the places where building structures happens? Do we replenish natural materials used and give spaces time to recover, where needed?
- How much time do children have to experiment, build structures and to play in them – what needs are being met when this happens?
- In what ways do we view what is happening from a child's perspective?

**“HSCS 2.27** As a child, I can direct my own play and activities in the way that I choose, and freely access a wide range of experiences and resources suitable for my age and stage, which stimulate my natural curiosity, learning and creativity.”

“The interplay between children and the loose parts, landscape, elements and seasons creates an ever-changing, growing, evolving play space, especially in natural environments that are loved and cared for. Furthermore, children experience a sense of freedom, space and autonomy that connects them to the land in an intimate way.”

(Casey & Robertson, 2019, p7)



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#### Should it stay or should it go?

- In some spaces, it's okay to leave creations in place from day to day. In others, you may have to dismantle these and return the area to its original state.
- This management of the space, the nature of the structures created and how other visitors perceive and are able to access the constructions will impact on your decisions. Common sense and consulting your landowner is essential.
  - 🗨️ How can we remember what our site looks like when we arrived?
  - 🗨️ What do we need to do to ensure it looks the same before we leave?
  - 🗨️ I wonder what the plants and animals who live here would find most helpful?
- If your children are proud of their creations, support them to photograph, draw or capture their constructions so that the next time they visit, it is possible for them to recreate what they have made.
- Why not photograph your work and we can add this to your journal with advice about how you created it?

#### Stay local

In your immediate outdoor space, you may need collections of materials to support children to construct and create. Often arboriculturists, tree surgeons and local authority tree services have spare branches, wooden disks or other natural wood items that you can have for free or a small charge. Whilst these will need replenished from time to time, it keeps the acquisition of materials local reducing transport and environmental costs of buying from afar. Do any of our parents, families or friends have materials we could use for constructing? How could we find out?

#### Help your group work out how and where is okay to create and construct:

- Some ground is too fragile and could be damaged by the increased trampling and footfall; other surfaces can cope better. See Section **6.5 Footfall and trampling**.
- Blocking paths and access routes may not be okay:
  - 🗨️ I'm worried about using this area to build a rope bridge. It's crossing a path that other people will need to use. Let's find a better place to do this.

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- Thinking about how items are attached or held in place. For example, avoid damaging tree bark by rubbing rope or nailing items to it. Children are often unaware of the importance of bark to a living tree.
- The visibility of structures needs consideration particularly for young children, those with mobility needs or sensory impairments. For example, using high visibility guy ropes can reduce trip hazards.
- Being aware of how natural loose parts are being used in greenspace sites as part of the building and creative processes. Refer to **Section 6.8 Gathering and using natural materials**:

🗨️ I wonder how this tree feels about its growing branches being cut off its trunk?

🗨️ Is there something else we can use instead?

**“Safety should always be a consideration when you’re building, but don’t lose sight of progression and the adventure in what you are doing.”**

(Cameron Sprague, Stramash Fort William Outdoor Nursery)



#### Find out more

- See the section on tool use and creating semi-permanent play structures in Casey, T. and Robertson, J. (2019) **Loose Parts Play: A Toolkit. Loose Parts Play Toolkit 2019 edition - Inspiring Scotland**
- Muddy Faces have a useful downloads about den building **den building - Activities Category**
- **Play Wales**: information and advice
- **Play Scotland**

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#### 6.21 Antisocial behaviours, including vandalism

##### Why this matters

Anti-social behaviour covers a range of activities that cause annoyance to, and disapproval from, others. A common example is using our immediate outdoor places for socialising out of hours. Whilst this may be a good use of available space, it may not be left as found. Not all 'anti-social behaviour' is intentional or malicious.

Vandalism is the deliberate destruction of, or damage to, public or private property. It's costly, unsightly and frustrating to have to deal with.

There are many reasons why vandalism or antisocial behaviour happens. Working out the source can be helpful to reduce the occurrence. Ongoing fly tipping is very different to a few cans being left in a gathering space.

Some behaviours may appear "bad" but may indicate a developmental need which can be addressed. For example, accessing roofs could indicate a desire climbing or seeking of heights, good views, a sense of space and adventure. Developing community partnerships beyond your setting can enable creative approaches to mitigating issues.

There is evidence that ELC groups *reduce antisocial behaviour by adding value to this place within the wider community* especially when they show care for their site. (Martin, 2021)

#### Building upon prior learning

Children may witness vandalism or the after-effects of anti-social behaviour in the places where they play.

- Children notice changes that have happened in their space or when out and about in their community. Make it part of your routines to tune in, e.g.,
  - 🗨 What's changed since the last time we visited?
  - 🗨 What do you notice?
- This can also help you see the space from their perspective.
- The above gives rise to comments and questions from children. Take your time to genuinely listen and help the group make sense of the situation, on their terms and in their way according to their levels of maturity and understanding. Deciding what needs to be done and doing this is also empowering. Use the flowchart in [Section 5.1 Children and practitioners caring for outdoor spaces together](#) as a guide.

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#### Reflective thoughts

- How do adults respond to antisocial behaviour and vandalism? Staff often do not live in the area they work. The children usually do.
- Some places are traditionally used by members of their family or their community who also see it as 'theirs'. Engaging with them alongside community police, rangers may help change behaviours.
- What feelings do we display to our children and what impact do these have?
- Do our own values and behaviours match? For example, if we allow a space to feel uncared for or unloved, does it matter if others show similar behaviours, albeit in a different form?

#### Group safety and antisocial behaviour

- Be alert to and aware of other users of the space. Never approach a person whose behaviour is causing a concern unless you are sure it is safe to do so – and do this with another adult.
- Be prepared to leave a site earlier than planned – have a safe space written into your emergency procedures or return to your setting and/or move your group inside if it is safer to do so.
- If your group witnesses any crimes, then these must be reported. If in doubt, consult your local community policy officer. See [Section 6.10 Animal allies](#), for reporting wildlife crimes.

- Work through any incidents that have happened that matter to a child or group and also their families.
- Learn from the experience, make changes and keep those who need to be informed updated.

#### Making a positive difference

A little forethought can help mitigate unwanted antisocial impacts:

- Creating DIY features that cost little or nothing and that can be secured out-of-hours. They can be more easily fixed if damaged.
- If children want to, create signs that remind visitors what to do.
- Avoid putting features or items in places that facilitate access, e.g., over a fence, onto a roof, etc.
- Being aware of, and following, any local guidance to minimise wilful fire-raising and arson prevention.
- Storing loose parts in safe places and/or having robust storage facilities.
- Involving older children in relevant ways to work with younger children on site improvements. This could include secondary-school age children too.
- Sharing and celebrating your outdoor place with your parents and community. Make the place a valued community asset. For example, arrange or join in community clean ups in the space or have a day where volunteers come to help garden.

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#### Remember

- Keep a record of incidents: dates, times, nature of the damage, etc. Take photos and note factual details.
- Log the incident with the police, but do not expect a follow-up visit when you do this. Look for patterns in your incidents as this can provide insights too.
- If you have a lot of antisocial behaviours or vandalism, evidenced from your record keeping, seek the advice of a local Crime Prevention Officer. They may offer practical suggestions around signage, lighting and so on. Implement their advice.
- Develop positive relationships with neighbours whose property overlooks your outdoor space.
- Be an extra pair of eyes and ears for your landowner. Report any damage promptly so that it can be managed.
- Let your landowner know immediately if your group causes inadvertent damage to your place.
- Clearing and fixing the damage promptly is important in terms of a “we care” message and to address any health and safety issues. Don’t leave a place looking unhappy.

#### Cultural heritages sites

Historical and archaeological sites and features may not be obvious, particularly to children when playing near or visiting. These sites can be of great value, so it is important to look after them. The **Scottish Outdoor Access Code** (SOAC) states:

Follow any agreed guidance aimed at preventing damage to a site.

Leave the site as you find it by:

- Not moving, disturbing, damaging or defacing any stones, walls, structures or other features
- Not digging or otherwise disturbing the ground surface
- Not taking anything away including loose stones and objects
- Not lighting fires, camping or using metal detectors there
- Not interfering with or entering any archaeological excavations



#### Find out more

- **“I don’t let vandalism get me down”. (251) Westpark Outdoor Space**

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#### 6.22 Worn-out spaces

##### Why fixing a worn-out space matters

A much-loved outdoor space has value to children. This can be increased and broadened to make it better for all species, making it a healthier and safer place for all who have a right to be there.

Consider if you are truly meeting the range of needs of the children.

- Is there sufficient breadth and depth of outdoor experiences which are different and complementary to inside, making the most of the weather, seasons and natural features?
- Go through the GIRFEC wellbeing indicators and reflect on how these are being met outside. Broaden this to consider if the wellbeing needs of all species are being met.

Remember that 'untidy' in nature is different from 'un-cared for' in this context. Straggly grass, large bushes and neglected corners can support more biodiversity than a 'too-tidy' site.

If there are hazards that present a health and safety risk, then you must act immediately to reduce or manage the risk.

“Don't wait till all the site is looking worn. Identify overuse and deal with it quickly. Do not be afraid to stop using part of a space until it regenerates or can be used differently. Cordon off areas and rotate use if you have space big enough. Explore protective surfaces (bark, matting etc).

It is worth identifying two sites so that the impact on each is less. You can gain permission for both, use one for occasional visits and the other for frequent use then then alternate them over time. Children will then have a better idea of their impact as they compare each site.”

(Anonymous ELC practitioner)

“**HSCS 5.22** I experience an environment that is well looked after with clean, tidy and well-maintained premises, furnishings and equipment.”

#### Outdoor spaces can recover

A bare patch of ground can be restored. Whilst there may be some quick fixes, sometimes the restoration can take several months or longer. With your group, consider:

- Rethinking the design of a space. Are all the play areas situated in the best place?
- Any basic adaptations that need integrated into your outdoor space to make it more accessible, inclusive and welcoming. Think about the needs of your children, especially those with physical mobility or sensory impairments and seek advice from specialists where necessary.

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- Finding sustainable solutions that require less ongoing work for staff. For example, putting in place paths and surfaces that need only little or no gritting in frosty weather. Look at using local contractors and repurposed materials.
- Developing and integrating maintenance checks and work into your ongoing routines and intentional planning processes. See [Section 5 for practical illustrations](#).

#### Building upon prior learning

- Does your outdoor space match the values of your setting? This is a useful check.
- If describing your outdoor space, what 3 words would you use? Ask your children, parents and other visitors too. Use this as a quick baseline assessment and to help agree what changes are required. Repeat the 3 words exercise to test the impact once changes have been made.
- With your children, take photos of your outdoor space, for before and after comparisons. Taking photos from each corner is particularly useful for this.



#### Find out more

- [Stramash Puddle Patter video](#): Caring for our Field of Dreams
- Highland Council Psychological Service Outdoor Learning and Play section has [resources](#) to support inclusion outside
- [Learning through Landscapes Scotland](#) provide training and facilitators who can support grassroots restoration work. They can also signpost to local professionals and organisations

#### 6.23 Sharing spaces

The use of your outdoor places may impact neighbouring land or houses and you may need the goodwill of neighbours to make sessions run smoothly. There is also specific guidance in the [Scottish Outdoor Access Code](#) about groups using the outdoors and enabling others to get on with their lives.

Putting time and effort in to develop good relationships can have benefits:

- Neighbours often notice out-of-hours events and visitors which can deter antisocial activity.
- Knowing locals may help in the event of an emergency.
- Your group may benefit from meeting and learning from local people.
- Learning through Landscapes and NatureScot have produced this helpful [video](#) on Site Selection and discussions with landowners.

Keep your neighbours on side by:

- Finding effective ways of sharing what your group are doing and seeking feedback and input in advance. This could be through email, social media or QR codes for example.
- Inviting neighbours to special events or celebrations as appropriate.
- Ensuring gates, roads and access routes to neighbouring land or housing are kept clear. Let parents know this too.
- Ensuring your gathering space is sufficiently far away from neighbouring property where possible.

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#### What's happening over the fence

Activities undertaken on neighbouring land can impact on where and how you play. Be aware of:

- Timber operations and tree maintenance or felling work, especially movement of vehicles.
- Spraying of crops as the wind can carry the chemicals or slurry into areas used by the group.
- Movement of livestock that impacts on the group's normal access.
- Hunting, shooting or similar estate work.
- Work or situations where a water supply used by the children for play becomes contaminated.
- Construction work.

#### The other groups using our greenspace do not look after it

- Have a conversation with the landowner. Find out if there are shared expectations about how the space is used.
- Get in touch with the other groups. The staff may be less experienced or not aware of the expectations of using the greenspace: support rather than challenge.
- Have shared meet ups from time to time. As well as good for professional learning, you could undertake shared tasks together such as litter picking, bulb or tree planting.
- Here are two videos to give ideas for **engaging** with your **community** connections.

#### The general public

Most people are very accepting of day care groups getting out and about, but be prepared for the unexpected such as:

- Having a range and choice of play spaces in any given outdoor place
- Ensuring your activity does not prevent members of the public using paths and public facilities such as toilets
- Following the **Scottish Outdoor Access Code** at all times
- Checking with your landowner/manager in advance about leaving play traces, such as chalk marks, and whether child-created structures and ephemeral artwork can remain

#### Reflective thoughts

- Are the actions and behaviour of our group causing distress to another user or group?
- Do we need to move our gathering place? Is there an alternative site?
- Do we need to engage in activities that develop the trust, build relationships and ensure positive communications with others?
- Are there traditions, beliefs and cultures within our community that we are unaware of around the use of this space?



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