

**The Global Pandemic:
An opportunity to re-focus on
outdoor environments for the benefit of
social interactions development.**

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This article aims to present a re-focus for practitioners on outdoor play experiences intrinsically linked to social interaction development for early childhood and early years educators.

It is well documented that access to the outdoors yields physical, cognitive, social, and emotional wellbeing (White, 2014, Bilton, 2010, Garrick, 2009, Tovey 2007). However, there has been a recent decline in the amount of time children spend on free play outdoors (Mullen, 2019, Bento and Dias, 2017) coupled with the closure of many outdoor play spaces in the UK due to lack of local authority funding (API, n.d.). Moreover, during the last year a substantially reduced right to outdoor environments has become part of life whilst the world takes on the global pandemic (Covid-19). This global phenomenon has impacted every country within the world; however, the scale of its impact will be variable according to the reaction of governments, local authorities, and society itself (Froebel Trust 2021).

In a world where playgrounds temporarily closed, and society has been ordered to 'stay at home' children's opportunities to connect with the outside world have been further diminished. Furthermore, and in response to the pandemic, UK Government issued a temporary disapplication of obligations within the current statutory framework (DfE, June 2021).

The social interactions contributing to children's holistic development remain influenced through a myriad of sub-themes throughout a child's early life. Starting from those first interactions between a caregiver and their new-born child, additional family members and the wider community as a baby grows and develops (Bronfenbrenner, 1979). Whilst early social learning theories are central to the overall progress of children, changes across community, cultures and society bring to the forefront changes within the nature of learning.

As a child begins to interact within the wider environment, dynamic interrelations between personal and environmental factors emerge to form part of a child's socio-ecological framework (Bronfenbrenner, 1979). Historically Vygotsky's theory of imaginative play and social levels created a 'medium of language' and 'internalised thought' (Vygotsky 1987 cited in Gray and MacBlain, 2015). Vygotsky's assertion was that children's play began with social interactions with adults.

A recent study conducted by the Department of Education (DfE, 2018) suggests high quality early years provision plays a part in developing pro-social behaviour. Furthermore an increase in substantially positive outcomes for disadvantaged families has been found through the provision of such high quality care (Sammons et al., 2002, 2003a, 2003b; Sylva et al., 2004). Part of this high-quality provision includes access to outdoor play spaces, suggested by Bilton (2010) as being an important part of learning and development, alongside a unified vision of clear beliefs and values (White, 2011). However, research shows some conflict between practitioner values when supporting children within natural environments (Maynard, 2007, Bilton, 2010, Rose, 2014, Hunter, 2019). Maynard (2007) highlights the teacher-child power struggles particularly when working in natural settings. Later works of Bilton (2010) confers adults as primarily facilitators during a child's learning process, conducted through direct and considered interactions. Indeed, works of Rose (2014) sought to demonstrate the key debates in early years provision between the 'role of an adult in adult-led and child-initiated activities' (Rose, 2014, p.4) indicating a myriad of opinion.

Research conducted by Leggett and Newman (2017) in Australia drew upon research to explore educator beliefs of their roles as 'intentional teacher' (Newman, 2017, p.24) during indoor and outdoor activity. They identified a frequent occurrence of practitioners taking a 'stand back' approach', prioritising 'supervision' over time spent on meaningful interactions (ibid., p24). Whilst two much earlier studies have highlighted practitioners' understanding of a scaffolding approach to enable children to engage in higher, more intricate activity (Vygotsky, 1978 in Bodrova and Leong 2006, cited in Tsai, 2015), Leggett and Newman (2017) perhaps indicate the rather sporadic nature to which such intentional teaching within outdoor environments is subjectively driven.

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Hunter et al (2019) conducted qualitative analysis of an early childhood centre, following its transition from traditional playground to a nature-based outdoor classroom. Hunter et al (2019) found a consistent theme from teachers seeing children as 'leading the way' (Hunter et al, 2019, p.34) and practitioner's primary purpose as facilitators of safety. Hunter's contemporary research appears to strengthen earlier conclusions of Rose (2014) and Leggett and Newman (2017) indicating outdoor learning may be limited in value due to the lack of 'specific goals' (Hunter et al, 2019, p.45).

Social skills and emotional development can be fostered through a child's sense of wonder, questioning and excitement and a teacher's response can provide for rich, meaningful interactions (Waters and Maynard, 2010). It is important to provide careful planning of quality interactions to establish high quality play, however it is clear from research that practitioners and teachers remain caught between the political frameworks of academic outcomes over pedagogies of practice (Alexander, 2010). Furthermore, practitioner approaches to outdoor play tends to lean towards a 'stand back' approach (Leggett and Newman, 2017, p24) alluding to a more supervisory role when partaking in outdoor activity. Whilst research concluded by Singer (2014) highlights the correlation between adult proximity and stronger impact on play engagement, Devi, Fleer and Li (2018) found teachers frequently place themselves outside of children's play and do not engage as play partners. This would suggest a gap in theoretical knowledge of practitioners and warrants further investigation within early years practice.

Whilst some research has highlighted views of some practitioners in gaining 'freedom outside the classroom' (Waite and Davis, 2007), later works of Waite (2008) appear to highlight the 'acute awareness of external requirements' (Waite, 2008, p65).

Despite the above concerns, research indicates practitioner understanding of the 'reciprocal nature of adult-child interactions' may aide the uncertainties surrounding intervention from adults (Rose, 2014 p.4).

Earlier works of MacNaughton and Williams (2004) sought to highlight the many interactions early years practitioners can have with children during an average day. Several studies have sought to understand, through qualitative analysis, the attitudes of practitioners during outdoor play activity (Maynard, 2007, Bilton, 2010, Leggett and Newman, 2017, Hunter, 2019). Maynard (2007) highlights the teacher-child power struggles particularly when working in natural settings. Later works of Bilton (2010) confers adults as primarily facilitators during a child's learning process, conducted through direct and considered interactions. However, later study (Rose, 2014) shows evidence of conflict arising between practitioners viewing the outdoors as a supervisory space rather than a place for intense adult-child interaction. Indeed, works of Rose (2014) sought to demonstrate the key debates in early years provision between the 'role of an adult in adult-led and child-initiated activities' (Rose, 2014, p.4) indicating a myriad of opinion.

A mixed methods research project conducted in the Netherlands (Singer et al 2014) highlighted the strong association of positive play engagements where there was continuous proximity of a teacher and child. Moreover, Singer asserts a clear connection between the length of time there is close 'physical proximity of the teacher' and its influence on 'play engagement' (ibid., p.1233). This study correlates with much earlier works of Howes and Smith (1995) and more recently, Laevers (2005) indicating play engagements are 'closely related to the' child's 'emotional security' within 'the' practitioner- 'child relationship' (Laevers, 2005, p.207).

Whilst Singer (2014) found a correlation between practitioner presence and positive play engagement Singer points towards the potential for additional research. This includes an analysis of the impact varying time periods practitioners spend in the presence of children; alongside analysis of specific practitioner interactions to theorise the concept of meaningful interaction (Leggett and Newman, 2017).

Further contemporary research conducted by Devi, Fleer and Li (2018) has reaffirmed teachers frequently positioning outside of children's play. Whilst the adults within the study identified their

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important 'contribution to children's imaginative play' (Fleer, 2015, p.309), they had not identified the importance of being a 'play partner' inside of children's play (ibid., p.309). Yet Wilson (2018) highlights the philosophical approaches to western discourses of human-nature as 'children, especially young children take their cues from adults and the social environment as to how to view the rest of the natural world and their relationship with it' (Wilson, 2018, p.31).

Perhaps Bilton's (2014) earlier works provide some weight in suggesting a need for explicit aims of the outdoor provision and a valuable focus on oral language to promote effective communication skills. Indeed, more recent research, following the global pandemic conducted by O'Keefe and McNally (2021) suggests that whilst teachers understand the importance of focus on children's social and emotional wellbeing following aftermath of the crisis, recognition of play as a valuable driver in promoting effective communication may be key. Such focus may also indicate a superseded approach towards children's learning with a more focused role of play for social and emotional wellbeing.

Findings from O'Keefe and McNally (2021) conversely highlight the contemporaneous issues of play pedagogy alongside restrictions brought about by Covid-19. This poses further questions surrounding current social distancing measures, limited access to play materials, and lack of clarity or policy.

Whilst the outdoors provides open space, it also encourages 'fluidity' through its 'weakly defined and moveable boundaries, characterised by social mixing' (Sibley, 1995, cited in Lester, 2008, p.55). Whilst Bilton (2010) highlights the possibility of outdoor environments being viewed more as a learning environment rather than a teaching environment, further clarity is provided in terms of how staff should approach outdoor activity. Bilton (2010) suggests this should be approached with the same professionalism to that within indoor activity. Therefore, whilst outdoor play may be primarily child-led, facilitation within such play situations can help to scaffold children's higher order thinking skills (Vygotsky, 1981).

Research has highlighted the views of some practitioners in children gaining 'freedom and fun' within outdoor environments (Waite, 2011, p.65). However, according to Waite (2008) appears 'framed by an acute awareness of external requirements' (Waite, 2008, p65).

Despite the above concerns, research indicates practitioner understanding of the 'reciprocal nature of adult-child interactions' may aide the uncertainties surrounding intervention from adults (Rose, 2014 p.4).

Children's play and play spaces influence children's ability to grow and thrive physically, cognitively, socially, and emotionally and it has long since been recognised the holistic benefits access to the outdoors brings. Children's rights are fundamentally upheld through statute (UNCRC, Article 31) requiring children to be exposed to a play-based approach to learning, however the existence of quality outdoor experience remains contested.

Outdoor play has been at the heart of early years policy provision and continued to form a focus for many contemporary scholars (Tovey, 2007, Maynard and Waters, 2010, Bilton, 2010, 2012). The global pandemic has offered fresh challenges toward children's access to the outdoors despite fundamental children's rights (UNCRC, 1989, Article 31). Conversely, early years practice offers a unique opportunity in delivering quality outdoor activity, with particular focus on natural play spaces to encourage: a greater sense of positive feelings towards one another (Bixler, Floyd and Hammitt, 2002); encourage longer periods of complex play (Kuh, Ponte, & Chau, 2013; Morrissey, Scott, & Rahimi, 2017; Nedovic & Morrissey, 2013) and; buffer psychological stresses in the promotion of wellbeing (Wells and Evans, 2003, cited in Oberbilig, 2014). That said, Bilton (2014) suggests the outdoors is not to be more superior to that of indoor environments and whilst Gray (2011) asserts the natural environment provides a 'richer place' for social interactions (p.11), Hestenes and Carroll (2000) suggest children with socio-emotional difficulties may experience difficulties engaging in social play bringing further questions around the role of practitioners in guiding and scaffolding social interaction play activity (Vygotsky, 1978).

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How a practitioner or teacher interacts can impact the resulting experience and outcomes for children. Whilst the early years sectors place strong emphasis on child-led, self-initiated play (EYFS guiding principles) it can also pose valuable learning opportunities for a child. Social skills and emotional development can be fostered through a child's sense of wonder, questioning and excitement and a teacher's response can provide for rich, meaningful interactions (Waters and Maynard, 2010). It is important to provide careful planning of quality interactions to establish high quality play, however it is clear from research that practitioners and teachers remain caught between the political frameworks of academic outcomes over pedagogies of practice (Alexander, 2010). Furthermore, practitioner approaches to outdoor play tends to lean towards a 'stand back' approach (Leggett and Newman, 2017, p24) alluding to a more supervisory role when partaking in outdoor activity. Whilst research concluded by Singer (2014) highlights the correlation between adult proximity and stronger impact on play engagement, Devi, Fleer and Li (2018) found teachers frequently place themselves outside of children's play and do not engage as play partners. This would suggest a gap in theoretical knowledge of practitioners and warrants further investigation within early years practice. Furthermore, adult/child ratios may have some bearing on the quality of interactions between adults and children. In practical terms, the EYFS statutory requirements on adult to child ratios (EYFS 2021) will have some bearing on outcomes and is perhaps something that warrants further research.

Whilst this paper has addressed outdoor play from a social and emotional standpoint, it appears inconclusive from existing literature whether the outdoor environment is a pre-requisite to social interaction development or the features within it. It cannot be argued that access to the outdoors yields overall holistic development however the extent to which the outdoors develops social skills remains difficult to conclude. Gray (2011) confers natural environments as substantial places for social interactions, however socio-emotional difficulties may hinder children's progress. Practitioners may form a crucial role in guiding and scaffolding social interaction, particularly those with language or communication difficulties (Hestenes and Carroll 2000).

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