

Outdoor learning and play

“The United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child (UNCRC) is the global “gold standard” for children’s rights and sets out the fundamental rights of all children. The UNCRC is the most widely ratified human rights treaty in the world and sets out the specific rights that all children have to help fulfil their potential, including rights relating to health and education, leisure and play, fair and equal treatment, protection from exploitation and the right to be heard.”

Scottish Government

This EASEYS for ASN is about best practice in inclusive approaches for outdoor learning. It’s impossible to include everything, however, this document contains a range of ideas and suggestions to consider when planning for and with the children in your setting. What you choose to include will depend on the range of needs of the children you work with. This is not an exhaustive list but hopefully will stimulate a discussion within your setting, with parents and the community around the **spaces**, **experiences** and **interactions** being created.

Spaces

“For each child, think about accessibility, their stage of development and physical ability. For example, this could mean thinking about creating safe spaces for babies to crawl, explore and develop their senses. If any child has mobility or sight impairment, sensory considerations are crucial. You should plan thoughtfully so that everyone is included, rather than taking separate measures to meet the needs of an excluded group. You should consider accessible pathways and manageable gradients for your service’s grounds. However, your areas need not be sterile – think about adding interest and sensory experience, with varying materials, for example.”

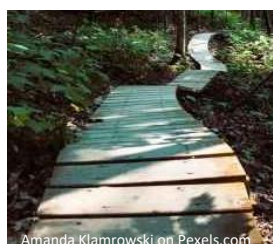
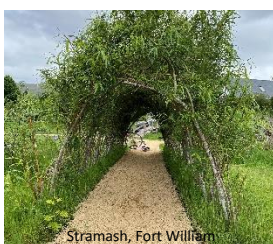
My World Outdoors

Best practice, when planning your outdoor space would be to think of the needs of all your learners. If you have children with Additional Support Needs (ASN) within your setting, ensure that you cater for their needs at the planning stage so that it reduces the need to ‘add on’ adaptations or find ways to make access easier. Nothing is perfect and things may need to be tweaked over time, but consideration of ASN at this stage ensures a more inclusive approach.

Considerations around accessibility:

- It is important to have some areas of flat ground for children who are not so steady on their feet, have physical difficulties or use mobility aids.
- Manageable gradients to offer some challenge and provide opportunities for children to risk asses for themselves.
- Portable pathways facilitate movement over tricky ground in between spaces, making them more accessible for buggies, wheelchairs, walking frames, etc. Try lengths of old carpet, mats or if you need something more durable there are options for temporary portable pathways.
- Hi-visibility, non-slip paint or edge markers between thresholds, steps or slopes.
- Does the space between activities provide access for wheelchair/walking frame users?
- For ground-based activities, can everyone get on the ground or is there a way the activity can be brought to those that can’t.

Here are some examples of accessible pathways and high visibility edge markers used where there is a depth difference. Edge markers may also be needed where there is a change in ground surfaces e.g. grass to tarmac.



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Adaptations within spaces

There are many examples of how outdoor spaces could be made more accessible by including adapted resources and furniture e.g. wheelchair friendly picnic tables, troughs or mud kitchen. Can all the children, including wheelchair or buggy users, get close enough to reach the activities? Here are some examples of adapted outdoor furniture/equipment to illustrate a range of possibilities. Could you adapt what you already have?



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- A height adjustable table could be used for table-top activities outdoors e.g. mud kitchen, sand tray, loose parts, small world toys, etc.
- Outdoor features like wheelchair/buggy accessible willow tunnel or tunnels/safe areas to lie or crawl could provide other interesting spaces for exploration.
- If you are including swings, consider how accessible they are for all the children or could there be alternative ways to provide experiences of speed and motion e.g. swinging on a blanket or in a hammock. Whatever adaptation you choose to provide should be safe and tailored to meet a child's individual needs.



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Challenge should be offered at all stages of a child's development and this is no different for children with ASN. Providing safe, risk-taking opportunities should be part of active play for all children including those with sensory and mobility difficulties. Always when considering adaptation and accessibility consult with specialist support services such as [Highland Education Vision Support Service](#), [Occupational Therapist](#), [Physiotherapist](#), [Deaf Education Service](#).

Special places

Building on [Sobel's Design Principle](#), [creating special places](#), consider the needs of individual children who may become overwhelmed by sensory experiences outside e.g. too much wind, sun or rain or having to wear an all in one suit. Just having to put on/off a suit or wellies can be a challenge for some. However, the cause could be a carryover from the impact of an earlier hidden stimulus, and this may also be seen when returning to an indoor environment. Providing access to a quiet space would give time to have a break from social interactions, to just observe others in play, and allow them to participate in their own time. The difference about these spaces is not that they are necessarily special but managed differently to meet individual needs.

Maps and Paths

Some children, such as those with a visual impairment or neurodevelopmental difference, may struggle to know where they are and what happens in different spaces around the outdoor area. Consider using colour, texture or pieces of equipment as visual markers or edge boundaries to cue them in; "I know when I get to 'this' I know where I am and what happens here."

- Different surfaces; bark, stone chips, textured mats, non-slip paint markers
- Objects of reference e.g. a small pan hanging at the entrance to the mud kitchen.
- The symbols on wood cookies from a visual timetable could be matched to the same symbols on a signpost or visual marker.



Visual timetable: Stramash, Fort William

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Experiences: intentional and responsive

“It is important too that children with additional support needs also have the chance to experience challenging play – and that quality play opportunities are offered to all children, according to their needs and preferences.”

Aileen Campbell, Minister for Children and Young People 21st January 2016
My World Outdoors

There is a balance to be achieved between providing experiences similar to those on offer to all children, but which are also accessible for those with an ASN. Differentiating experiences can provide more inclusive opportunities, the chance to observe friends in play and build on more meaningful experiences of social play. It gives all children the chance to view each other as play partners – playing with the same toys but perhaps with adaptations.

Differentiation and adaptations

When observing children, you may notice that sometimes there are barriers to them being fully included in an experience or activity. Think about the type of support they may need to enable their participation. Here are three stages of support, with some examples.

Remember, when planning play experiences which may require differentiation or adaptation, first follow the guidance from parents/carers and professionals involved around specific individual needs.

Consider the task:

- Is the task motivating?
- Does it help to model the task?
- Can you break an activity into smaller steps?
- Can the child do all the steps or just some?
- Which steps might need to be supported?
- Do they need more time to practice?
- Would prompts help?

Consider the role of the adult:

Know when to step in and when to step back. The gradual removal of support and prompts provides challenge, helps to develop skills and leads to increasing independence. For more detail on this topic see the [EASEYS for ASN Support Strategies Toolbox](#)

Using the same thing but differently:

Sometimes you may need to bring an activity to a child or adapt a game for it to be accessible to them.

- Take your ball/car run off the wall so that wheelchair users can access the tubes/drainpipes. Could they catch a ball/car on their lap as part of peer play?
- Reducing the number of cards in a matching game so a child is not visually overwhelmed
- Taking a game into a distraction-free or low arousal space
- Putting activities on high contrast background for a child with visual impairment

Using something different:

A child may sometimes benefit from having a toy adapted to suit their individual needs. This could include:

- Tools with adapted handles for gardening, painting, cutting e.g. right-angled handles
- Light-weight tools, foam handles for easier grip or long handles to allow reach from a wheelchair;
- Velcro-inset mitts for holding onto tools, toys, etc. or to support catching;
- Magnifiers with larger handles or neck straps;
- Slow-Mo balls with ribbons/bells, etc. making them more visible and easier to catch; and
- Using Velcro straps to maintain grasp e.g. to support parachute or stretchy fabric games.



Sensory considerations

All children need and may seek sensory play, but some children may be developmentally at the stage of sensory motor play for longer or may need support to access this type of play. For a range of differentiated ideas for outdoor experiences please see the supporting document: [Play Ideas: Outdoor learning](#)

Outdoor learning and play

Interactions: sensitive

“We need to be confident we are providing the kind of rich culture, including high quality experiences and sensitive interactions in a variety of outdoor and indoor spaces, which will develop in ... young children, the emotional resilience they need to form a secure wellbeing base.”

Realising the ambition: Being Me 2020

It is important to remember that whichever total communication support is being used inside your setting for individual children, needs to be transferrable to support meaningful interactions outdoors. You may need to think creatively to implement these as conditions will be different e.g. wood cookies for a visual timetable, portable First/Then, Now/Next board, BIGmack switch in a waterproof bag, etc.

Much of what we do to support interactions with children indoors would be the same outdoors. We would still be sensitive in our approach to support:

- know when to step in and step back;
- recognise the importance of modelling and scaffolding;
- engage in interactions which are developmentally appropriate; and
- support social and imaginative play opportunities.

Safety

“I need spaces that:

- encourage a sense of safety and security, yet enabling appropriate risky play, which enables me to be playful in my learning”

Realising the ambition: Being Me 2020

An important part of child development is learning to manage risk, and this is no different for children with ASN. For this to be done safely, successfully and with growing independence in mind, careful planning needs to take place. Ideally this should involve consultation with parents/carers and other professionals involved with supporting the child.

When completing risk assessments for outdoor learning there may be extra elements you need to consider in relation to additional support needs:

- Visibility – can your staff see what’s happening in all spaces?
- Are staff aware of children who may not have an awareness of personal safety and may put themselves at risk?
- Do staff have access to individual children’s current safety/medical protocols?
- Is emergency medication close to hand and stored appropriately?
- Have risks been minimised by carrying out an environmental survey for potential hazards?

Additional considerations

When taking non-mobile children outdoors, there may be some extra considerations to ensure that their postural management plan is followed. Which pieces of equipment can be taken outdoors? Which experiences can be provided in a different way? How might you provide opportunities for a child to see and experience things from different viewpoints. Do you need different moving and handling plans to reflect the outdoor spaces?

Non-mobile children and children with medical conditions may be unable to maintain their core body temperature. Some children with neurodevelopmental differences may not recognise or be able to communicate when they are cold. Within your planning and checks ensure that you have the equipment/resources necessary to keep them warm.



Useful Link

[Messy and Muddy A guide to outdoor play for children with a visual impairment](#): A guide to outdoor play for children with vision impairment from the RNIB