

**A Practitioner's Guide  
to  
OUTDOOR PLAY BASED LEARNING  
EXPERIENCES  
Guest Blogger: Natalie White**

**Oh no! How do I squeeze this in?**

**When I was asked to write about 'experiences' I have to be honest – I worried! How would I be able to squeeze the value and importance of *experiences* into a short blog? They are after all, the very basis of what makes us, who we are, and we know that *'the learning experiences provided in the earliest months and years in the child's life are so critical for their future success in life.'*<sup>1</sup>**

So, I've picked a just a few key 'offers', experiences that I think can make a big impact on the development of our future generation.



**What do you do when a child ties themselves up in a skipping rope?**

**Offer experiences in alternative social and cultural contexts**

Long ago, when I picked my youngest son up from pre-school I was greeted with a smile and a question, 'Is your husband a climber?' Slightly surprised I responded that he was. The children had been playing with skipping ropes and Callum had immediately picked one up and tied it around his waist. He'd apparently been quite 'annoyed' when he had been told not to do that as it was dangerous, he might hurt his stomach. His protests, 'but that's what Daddy does' had led to raised eyebrows and some questioning!

<sup>1</sup> Education Scotland (2020), Realising the Ambition: Being me. [P9]

*'We need to be aware that each child's development is influenced by their direct and indirect experiences of particular social and cultural contexts. In other words, **where they live and who they interact with** as they grow and develop contribute to shaping who they are as individuals.'*<sup>2</sup>

The following day, Callum and his dad, took in the climbing ropes, harnesses and some pictures. This experience created quite a 'buzz' for both staff and children, hearing about climbers, seeing pictures of mountains, trying on harnesses and helmets - widening horizons, creating new possibilities, making memories.

How can we take simple and sometimes mundane objects like a rope, and use them as a vehicle or stimulus for adventure, curiosity, and wonder? What other objects and artefacts do you have in your setting or local greenspaces that may be something different when viewed in an alternative social or cultural context? What parental experiences could be shared in your setting that could create awareness of other ways of life?

## How do we capture 'that moment' that leads to awe and exploration?

### Offer experiences that encourage curiosity

'Oh, be careful - I think that's a Red Admiral' she exclaimed, 'It's wings are really delicate'. I had been reading a story, children all hunched down on the little log seats in their wildlife garden, when the beautiful butterfly had gently landed on the bush next to me. The children were captivated, I stopped the story and **Lucy shared more details she'd learned from her grandpa**. In that moment, the butterfly became far more important than the story, a portal had opened in each of their little minds, they were curious, they wanted to learn more, understand more, engage more, the experience had motivated them intrinsically.

*'The choice of experiences on offer should reflect an environment of open-ended possibilities in which children can feel intrinsically motivated to explore and investigate.'*<sup>3</sup>

This is the beauty of the outdoor environment, its constant changes, the multi-sensory experience, the authenticity and the awe and wonder that can appear spontaneously! Seizing the opportunity to allow the children to lead the learning, following their train of thought and creating the support structure around them is easier in the outdoors, the



<sup>2</sup> Education Scotland (2020), Realising the Ambition: Being me. [P91]

<sup>3</sup> Education Scotland (2020), Realising the Ambition: Being me. [P47]

constant changes present endless possibilities and opportunities. What experiences can you offer which allows nature to permeate the learning space? Where can you go that looks, smells, and feels different? Can you encourage the children to ask 'Why?' More?

## How do children learn how not to get squashed?

### Offer experiences that are in the real world



I was at a pedestrian crossing a few weeks ago and heard a little boy say 'This is the way we go when we go to the woods at nursery Mummy, we have to stop here and look left and right because we don't want to be squashed!'. I smiled, quietly congratulating the nursery staff who were clearly delivering regular outdoor experiences beyond the establishment, where the children were engaging in the real world, learning life skills which would stand them in good stead for the future.

*Creating 'experiences to help them develop their skills, knowledge and understanding of the world around them'<sup>4</sup>, is so valuable.*

Learning how to behave, engage, respond to the world helps to build positive relationships with our communities.

Ensuring these experiences are regular and frequent deepens their learning and understanding. The opportunities available 'getting' to the space are endless, so often we plan for the activity at the site but how often do you plan learning along the way? I often ask why children don't know what a cylinder is... we have lampposts on every street!

What learning could take place on your way to a site, are the children actively engaging in road safety as an integral part of your off-site visits? Do you stop and look at the environmental signage, look for letters on the street names, numbers on the doors? Have you explored the areas around the establishment?

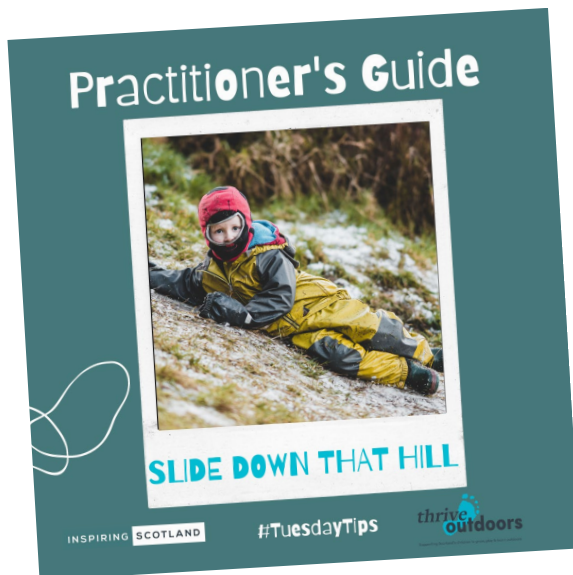
With a fresh pair of eyes, look at the immediate environment the children live in - what learning or play opportunities are there?

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<sup>4</sup> Education Scotland (2020), Realising the Ambition: Being me. [P63]

## Is it possible to deliver experiences that are beyond our current comfort zone or fitness level?

**Yes, it is! Offer experiences that encourage physical activity**



Last year, I was working with a group of early years practitioners in a local park. I gave them a rope and asked them to come up with an activity that they would be able to do with pre-5's. I was delighted by their ingenuity: rope swings, blind trails, swamp games and knot tying activities, so many different possibilities.

The part that stood out for me though, was the realisation that I could no longer climb a rope! The muscles required in my arms just no longer existed! A bitter pill to swallow. The experience made me reflect on the more sedentary lifestyle I was living. The requirement for me to climb ropes and use

those muscles no longer existed, what other movements had I stopped doing? Which other muscles weren't being used?

It had been interesting observing the adults, the less active ones suggesting activities that required less movement. More adventurous staff pushing the parameters. Recognising that our 'comfort zone' may be more cautious or sedentary doesn't need to affect the experiences on offer to the children. **'Outdoor environments can offer different surfaces, different levels, lots of natural features to explore, trees to climb, and bushes and shrubs to hide and build dens in.'**<sup>5</sup> *'Outdoor play in different environments encourages me to move my body in different ways.'*<sup>6</sup>

It's vital that we help children to foster healthy mindsets and habits around physical activity, that will set them up to be healthy, active adults. Do you stop them climbing the trees? Are they accessing areas to encourage running? Can you locate slopes to climb and roll down? The world has changed, who knows what it will look like in a year, never mind 15 years!

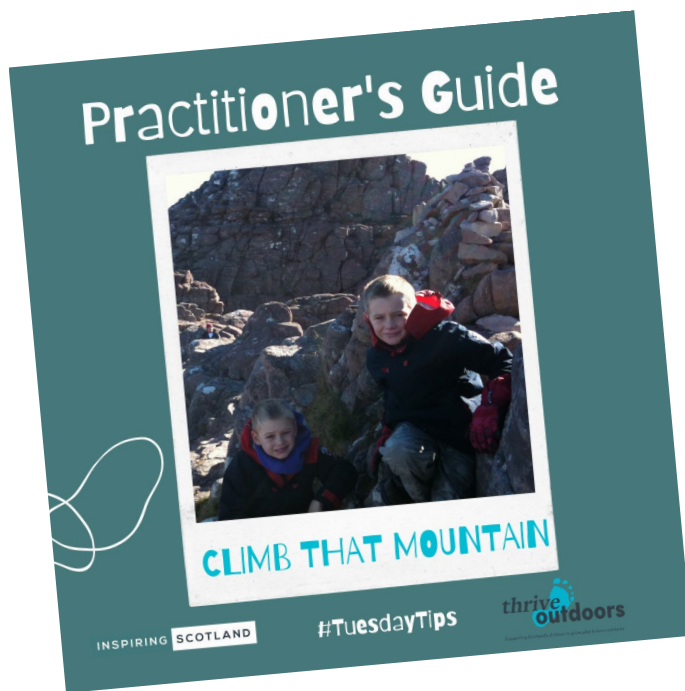
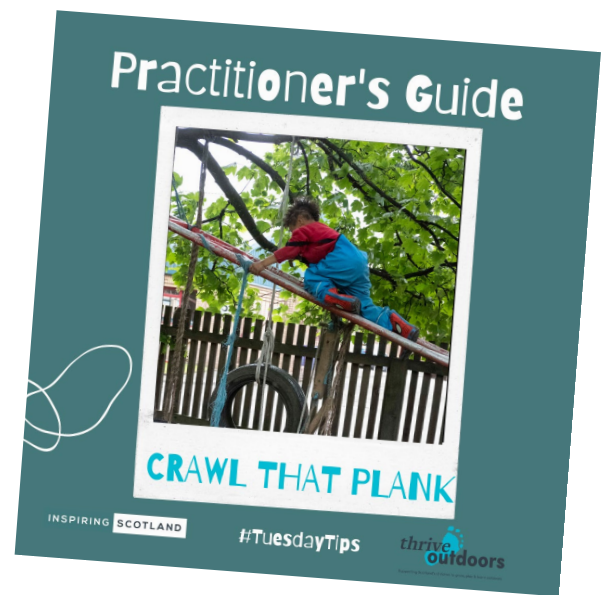
<sup>5</sup> Education Scotland (2020), Realising the Ambition: Being me. [P56]

<sup>6</sup> Education Scotland (2020), Realising the Ambition: Being me. [P28]



One thing is certain though, now more than ever,

*'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, ...[that can build] the emotional resilience they need to form a secure wellbeing base.'*<sup>7</sup>



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*'You are sum total of everything you've ever seen, heard, eaten, smelled, been told, forgot - it's all there. Everything influences each of us, and because of that I try to make sure that my experiences are positive.'*  
*Maya Angelou.*

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<sup>7</sup> Education Scotland (2020), Realising the Ambition: Being me. [P15]

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### Useful Links

**Inspiring Scotland's Loose Parts Toolkit** <https://www.inspiringscotland.org.uk/wp-content/uploads/2019/07/Loose-Parts-Play-Toolkit-2019-web.pdf>

**Realising the Ambition: Being Me** <https://education.gov.scot/improvement/learning-resources/realising-the-ambition/>

**Education Scotland Early Level Play Pedagogy Toolkit**

<https://education.gov.scot/improvement/learning-resources/early-level-play-pedagogy-toolkit/>