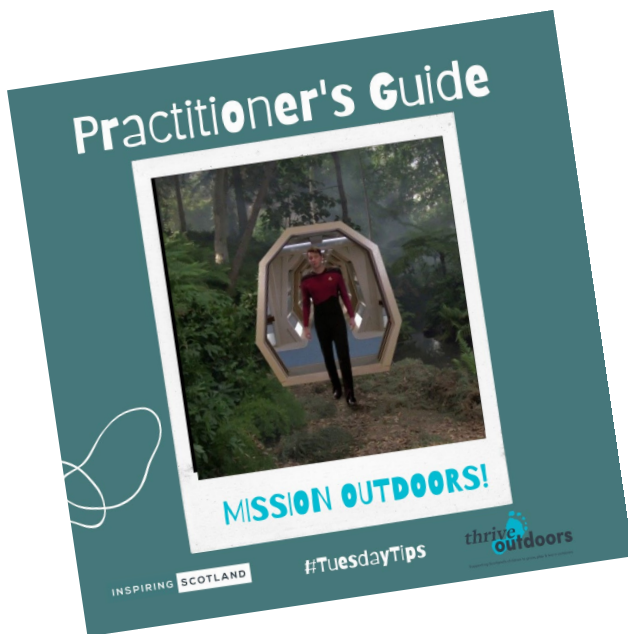


Alastair Davidson A Practitioner's Guide to OUTDOOR PLAY BASED LEARNING SPACES

Is going outdoors like stepping into the unknown?

Outdoor space, the final frontier... It can sometimes feel that way.

For some people, going outside can feel equivalent to the exploration of another galaxy. Strange and unpredictable things happen, and people in shiny and brightly coloured clothing seem to inhabit these places. The looks I used to get from other staff members, you would think I was taking them on a 5-year mission (apologies if you didn't ever watch Star Trek – know your audience, Alastair)



The odd thing about outdoor spaces is that you are not boldly going where no man or woman has gone before, we are all simply following in the footsteps of the generations before us. It's only in recent history that we started over protecting ourselves from the elements – moving from one box (room) to another (car), arranging our time outside meticulously with organised activities and supervised play dates. Perhaps, it's a bit like what life would be like on a spaceship. Let's go on a tethered spacewalk kids... have you seen a walkodile?

“But it's so difficult to go out”

The good news is that **it's not that difficult to get back out there** as we once did. Astronauts train for years underwater, and in free-falling planes to

prepare for space. You don't need to do that. Really you don't. Going outdoors is part of your make up; like learning to walk and talk. The children you work with know exactly what to do. You know how to meet their needs indoors and, honestly, it's not all that different outdoors. We can all unlock the inner outdoorsperson, and along with interactions and experiences, space is the key.

Venturing outdoors – the 'how'

I'm going to use this blog to let you know **how** I approach/establish an outdoor space for use in the early years. There is no one size fits all answer though. The outdoor space that you use is as unique as the children you work with and the teams that you belong to.

Talking about space I feel a bit like an estate agent. We talk of space having potential and something that needs to be filled with stuff. In fact, the dictionary defines space as “*a continuous area or expanse which is free, available, or unoccupied.*” Oh,

the idea of glorious uninterrupted space. I find this interesting, and I've always thought **about place as opposed to space** in the outdoors. Maybe there's not much difference, but I feel that when it comes to terminology, this is important to me. I'm not sure I've ever heard a child talk about space like this for example; “Oh, Angus, this play space is just delightful, so airy, so much potential”.

Unlocking the 'space' to 'place' potential

In short, a space has potential to become a place under certain conditions. Let's think about unlocking that potential and the unique role that the people



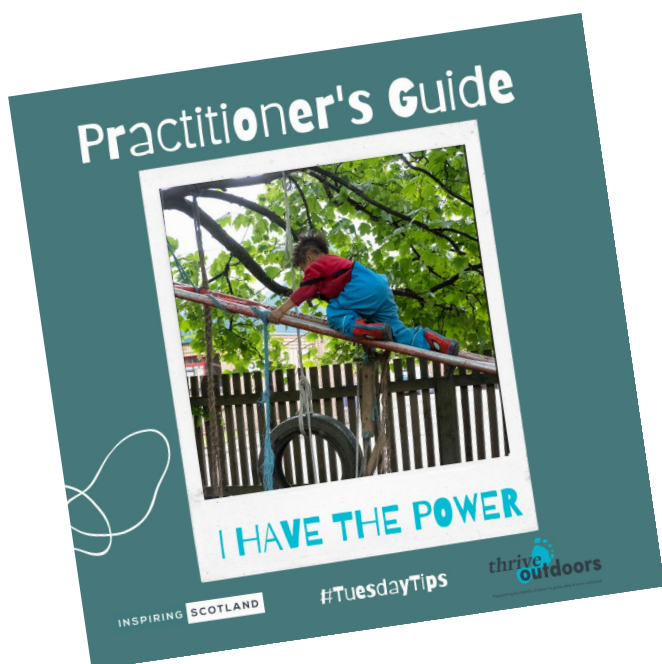
that inhabit the place have. First, I'm talking about me... for erm, context obviously. Maybe you'll see how I came to view space as I do.

When I was a child, I lived next to some woods and all the local kids, a mix of ages, would run about, climb and swing from trees, build dens, play war and hide and seek. I have very little memory of being watched by a supervising adult or the use of any 'resources' other than what we could find around us. I know what you are thinking... Check out 'Mr. Fancy Pants Woodland Experience'. I know not everyone is lucky enough to have that experience. I see part of my role is to bring some aspects of that experience to the people I work with.



The more you do, the less you see

My background is Outdoor Education, having made initial explorations, I then studied a Postgraduate Diploma in Outdoor Education at Edinburgh University. There are many things which have stuck with me from that time and influenced



my thinking throughout my career. One of my lecturers once talked about how **the more technical the outdoor activity the less the participant could engage with the natural environment** around them. Take mountain biking for example, which I love by the way. The more you have to concentrate on the trail, the less you notice about the place around you. It's perhaps a bit like wearing blinkers. I've seen this kind of thing repeated several times over, but replace mountain biking with activities, learning intentions, outcomes or power and control.

But something wasn't right...

Moving into the outdoor sector after university I felt that the emphasis was all a bit skewed. As the instructor, I seemed to be the focus, the provider of fun, the entertainer, the dude. Maybe I'm just not a natural showman, but I had a feeling that the **place should provide the inspiration, not me**. As educators, I think we suffer a bit from our egos, (says the guy using a large portion of blog post to talk about himself). It seems we can be caught in a trap of thinking we need to be 'teaching' or doing something inspirational like planning a kick ass lesson that kids will remember for life or 'making a difference'. **Or do we?**

Something's still wasn't right ...

(see last week's tips for 'fish face' info <https://www.inspiringscotland.org.uk/wp-content/uploads/2020/10/Practitioner-Tips-Interactions.pdf>)



The truth is, I believe that the children that we work with don't really need us to give that amount of direction. They need us to be supportive, to listen and guide; ultimately be nice people. There seemed to be a lack of knowledge or recognition to children leading the learning. For example, any attempt to follow children's interest as they explored an outdoor space (30 acres of woodland!) was met with those comments, you know the ones that make your heart

sink, like "that's not outdoor learning, that's just a walk." I was also seen as the person who would just take the kids "guddling about in the woods". There wasn't much value attached to the approach, apart from what was viewed as

‘good behaviour,’ this was put down to children getting to “do what they wanted”. I mean, how dare we let children do what they want, right?

Why was it STILL not right?

My first Outdoor Early Years' experience took place in a Site of Special Scientific Interest (SSSI) woodland, which was unbelievably special. However, the children had very little connection to it because their day was filled with adult led activity and resources brought into the woodland. Now, I'm not saying that these places had it wrong or didn't have the best intentions. The children were generally happy as were the various governing bodies. Again, this just didn't feel right to me. The point is, the space won't really matter if these things aren't addressed first.

It became ALL RIGHT when we stop planning and leading and start following

So, we stopped the planning and leading and started following the children. EUREKA! That's when the spaces I worked in **came to life**. With the child at the centre we began to closely reflect on the experiences that the space was providing, **our interactions** and adapting the day to suit the children and the place, not the adult. It was a bit like removing the blinkers. The **spaces became places**. So, how do you make a space into a place? Here's what to look for and what to think about.

Choosing a Space

At Inverness College, where I currently lecture, all our HNC Childcare Practice students complete the Forest Kindergarten award. One of the first practical things they do is a 'Site Appraisal'. This is to see how suitable an outdoor space will be for running forest kindergarten session. It's a useful place to start by looking at Access, Terrain and Potential Hazards.

Basically,

- ✓ can we get to this space?
- ✓ Is it safe enough?
- ✓ What is in it?

It could be you find a natural space with a variety of terrain, flora and fauna or an empty field. Either is fine, and sometimes working with what you have got is okay, in fact it's preferable – let the children respond to the space before you get it ready for them or start introducing things you think they need. I find it helpful to think back to the places I played as a youngster – how did I feel in each of these places? What did I do?



At first glance an empty field, yet full of potential viewed from the child's perspective.

Care and the benefits of Base Camp

If a space seems to be safe following a site appraisal, I like to tackle this one first as you might not realise the full play potential until children are in the space. If they are going to spend time in an outdoor space then you need to provide some basics for care – rest, shelter, gathering place, warmth and somewhere to go to the toilet. So, start with those features and observe how the children respond to the other things that they see. During my time as an outdoor nursery manager I have, with my teams, had to identify several new spaces to play and I always found it most useful to imagine visiting the place for a session first. Where is the best place for a tarp or shelter? Is there an area that is sheltered enough to put temporary changing and toilet facilities? Where is the best place to gather and have a fire? It's having a little secure base camp that the children can return to from their explorations.



The addition of areas to rest, gather and go to the toilet allow play to flourish. (Stramash Outdoor Nursery Elgin)

Play

What might a child or group of children do in this space? A good idea is to view your site through some differing perspectives, the child's is a good place to start. A particularly good perspective to look at next is through David Sobel's **Nature design principles**. Basically, Sobel has researched children's

play and found that no matter where and what the background children tend to play in the same themes. Identifying those themes (or reproducing them) in your space is a great idea. If you can identify the opportunity for a few of these 7 play motifs you are onto a winner: **Adventure, Special Places, Fantasy and Imagination, Animal Allies, Miniature Worlds, Hunting and Gathering, Maps and Paths.**

Themes could be obvious in your space, or you may have to introduce something to allow them to flourish. Bird Feeders for Animal Allies, for example. Occasionally I might introduce something to get them going – a slack line or a few fairy doors, for example.

<https://creativestarlearning.co.uk/interesting-issues-hot-topics/sobels-nature-design-principles-in-action/> (I like this post as it's about a natural environment, also see <https://stramash.org.uk/2019/11/04/guest-post-cameron-sprague/> for a nursery context.



Children creating a place with loose parts, addition of nature, and more.

Belonging ~ a home from home

Get to know your space intimately. There are great learning opportunities to be had here, not only for the children but for you as well. Find out what is around you, what the space is like at different times of day and in different weather. Try and identify the flora and fauna that you see, if any. This can happen alongside the children; the hope should be that they feel a **connection to the place** and see it as part of their world. Let the children name the space and the things that live in it, don't rush to impart your newfound knowledge upon the children, let them name and identify things through their own perspectives. This is how stories, songs and legends are born. We have a great history of this connection with nature in Scotland through the Gaelic language.

In exploring nature and belonging with children we may well see that history come to life again. **People who feel a part of the natural environment rather than apart from it are more likely to care for it,** <https://www.theshielingproject.org/> live and breathe this philosophy.

Participation

Will children have an opportunity to transform or contribute to this space in their own way? By starting with the basics – shelter etc. - you should be able to observe play and respond. If it feels like there is something that needs added to the space the children are your best resource. I've seen many a water wall and music area lie dormant because it looked good as a Pinterest panel, but the children didn't really need it or have a say in its introduction or construction. Participation can also be in reference to the things that the space **needs** in terms of care. Growing plants and trees, chopping wood, repairing paths and filling bird feeders for example.

What about Loose Parts?

So, you have identified that your space has little going for it. This is where introducing loose parts could be helpful, the more natural the better in my opinion but I'm not opposed to a good tyre. Look back at how you can realise the sites play potential. Inspiring Scotland have a great Loose Parts Toolkit, packed with ideas from how to get started, how to store and how to use! Check out the link in the box at the end.



Sustainability

Think about the underlying messages that you might be sending through how you treat your place, the products you use and the things that you do. I recently attended a permaculture with children course and their 3 principles of **Earth Care, People Care and Fair Share** would make a good foundation for your approach to this. Sustainability can also be about your impact on the outdoor space and how you manage that, you may need more than one space. I can remember feeling extremely proud the day that one of my teams gave up the glitter addiction. <https://www.permaculture.org.uk/children/about>



Experience tells me that while space is important, children will, on the whole, fill it with their curiosity and interest. It is the values, beliefs and pedagogical approach of the adults involved that is vital and should be explored before you boldly go...

- Will you create the space alongside the children?
- Will you promote self-directed risky play?
- Will planning be responsive, based around the children and the place they inhabit?

If the answer is yes, then you can watch your space transform into a place to play and grow.



Enjoyed this blog? Share your discussions, pictures, and progress with us on social media – details below

If you have top tips ideas you would love us to cover or share, please contact us on: Facebook @ThriveOutdoorsScot, Twitter @Thrive_Outdoors or by email Jo@inspiringscotland.org.uk

Useful Links

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

UHI Forest Kindergarten CPD Award
<https://www.inverness.uhi.ac.uk/courses/cpd-award-forest-kindergarten/>

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 <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/>