

A Practitioner's Guide to OUTDOOR PLAY BASED LEARNING EXPERIENCES

Guest Blogger: Emma Smith

Childminding – the good, the bad, the crazy

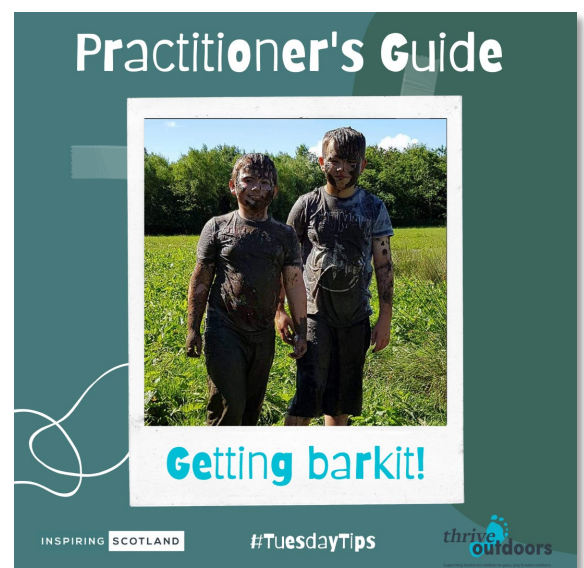


So, Emma, did you always like getting barkit?

Yes, and it's become a family thing! My love of outdoors and the freedom it gives began as a wee girl, running wild and free with friends at every available opportunity. Also, my grandparents encouraged this love further with their huge garden, vegetable beds and their constant teaching whenever we were out together.

Even as a young adult, I appreciated the feeling of calm I experienced whenever I was outside, so I was determined to pass this on, when my husband and I had our first son 19 years ago. He was always out and about, always *barkit* (encrusted with dirt!), always with pockets full of treasure and endless questions. They call this curiosity approach now I think.

Well, he's taken this genuine love and he's turning it into a reality studying Animal Conservation Biology at Napier University!



How do you make a career out of encrusted mud?

When our second son arrived 14 years ago, we carried on embracing every opportunity to be outside, having fun and adventures as a family. Then, I made a career change.

We were lucky to have had a hugely positive experience with our eldest son's childminder and she was one of the inspirations behind my choice to change careers. So, 13 years ago, I became a registered childminder, and it is, without doubt, the best thing ever. The learning, the fun, the adventures, the love, the laughter, the disasters, the fails; every second, every experience has been worth it, and I wouldn't change it for the world.

You can even get outdoors with a mix of age groups

One thing I have been sure about is ensuring that my 'mindees', also known as 'my crazies!', have as many opportunities to play outside, to be outside, to learn outside as possible. I strive to make this a big part of my service. Regardless of their ages, stages or abilities, children have the right to experience and learn from all the benefits that being outside brings.



Over my minding years, whether I have two babies or six 'schoolies', or somewhere in between, I can see the happiness children get from simply being outside. It doesn't have to be complicated, it can be playing in the garden, it can be a muddy dub (muddy puddle or pool), a patch of grass, a forest, a beach, a hill, an urban walk, the list of explorative places for children is endless.

Don't be put off if you live in a concrete jungle, there are still adventures to be had with your children. Don't worry about what others do or think - embrace your inner craziness and let yourself be led by your children.

There are so many places available nowadays to get ideas and resources for outside play, so why not have a look and adapt them to fit. And again, let the children lead.

But how do you carry all the stuff?

Being prepared is good. I like to be prepared and organised, but over the years I've managed to pare down the bulk of what I cart about with me when we head off for an explore.

For most of our adventures I have a simple rucksack containing:

- ✓ a wee first aid kit
- ✓ nappies if necessary

- ✓ wipes
- ✓ tissues
- ✓ and some poo bags
- ✓ along with water
- ✓ sometimes even sun cream!

Other than that, everything else is pretty much left in the house or the car. No need to be hauling half a ton of stuff when we'll be back for it eventually - even dry clothes!

What if you don't have outdoor gear?

I completely understand that sometimes parents don't necessarily understand the extent of our outdoor adventures and may not have the children kitted out in a way I feel is appropriate.

I also understand that not all parents are in a position to provide a level of appropriate clothing that may only be worn at their childminders, so along the way I collect wellies, hats, gloves and waterproof breeks (Lidl's ones are incredible).

These can be donated, or from a charity shop, and it ensures I can dress the children in a way that I see as appropriate for whatever shenanigans we're getting up to that day. I do often wonder about waders, as it doesn't seem to matter how long their wellies are, we inevitably end up past our welly tops.

Aren't you always rushing when you go outdoors?

The single most important thing to have on your side is time. Allow time to slow everything down, let the children explore and discover. Watch them and give them pointers only if they seek help or if they are struggling and you think they need it.

Simple games like "I-Spy" can be done with colours for preschool children and really encourage the children to open their eyes and see what's all around them. One of the best games we keep in our rucksack, is a card game called "Can You Find It" – we have spent endless hours with this wee packet!

If you don't have a lot of time, keep it local, keep it easy – go and find three different leaves, touch three different trees, sit and look at the sky. It doesn't have to cost a penny; the children will benefit so much just from the fresh air and from being with someone who isn't trying to hurry them up.

To be fair, we've had plenty of days when I've had to become some sergeant major and have them marching along because we've lost hours of a day climbing trees, rolling down hills, playing pooh sticks. I've lost count how many times I've had to text my families to say we'll be a bit late home!



How do you keep it achievable for non-outdoorsy folk?

Be realistic about your own abilities and your children's abilities too. There is no point dragging six children to the top of Ben A'an if you're not confident in all your abilities, but when you know you can do it, go for it. Doing exactly this was one of the highlights of my childminding career to date, even if it did come with a million questions about why I was the colour of a tomato!

Do push yourself to do a bit more though. Be brave, trust in yourself, and don't let yourself become complacent. Sometimes the days you feel least like heading out become the most special.

Failing to plan is preparing to fail!

Plan to plan in the moment is my advice! I often have a master plan; this could be a printed-out scavenger hunt for every animal, season, tree, or possible intention. Nine times out of ten, we either don't do it, or we start then get entirely waylaid by a stone, a hill, a leaf, or a puddle. Yet planning often comes into its own if the weather isn't the best. It's easier to encourage the children (and yourself) to wander further if there is a reason or a goal.



What about the risks?

Well, what about the benefits of risk?

There's a huge amount of research out there nowadays explaining risk versus benefits. Yes, children fall, tumble, crash and collide when they're outside. But remember that they do this inside as well, with their parents, their grandparents, at nursery and at school, so don't be too afraid when it happens with you.

Children have a way of testing their own limits, of pushing themselves, of understanding their bodies and their capabilities. Every bump and bruise are surely worth it when they proudly announce, "I DID IT!"

But I'm worried about failing...

For every success story, I have ten tales of failure. They're as much a part of my learning journey as the great stories.

The wellies we've lost in streams; our attempt at making dandelion syrup that turned into dandelion tar and ruined my favourite pot; the elderflower cordial that smelled identical to cat pee because we picked it at the wrong time of the day; our inability to grow fresh basil because we LOVE snails.

By far the most epic failure was the time we were collecting pinecones in our pockets, until I realised one of my 'mindees' was actually collecting dog poo!

Embrace the fails, and hopefully, you'll be as lucky as I am with completely understanding parents who tolerate their crazy childminder's 'Emma-isms!'

And remember, the failures make you stronger, braver, and more confident.

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Email: Jo@inspiringscotland.org.uk



Useful Links

Inspiring Scotland's Loose Parts Toolkit

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/>