

Provision for learning outdoors for under fives: State of the nation survey ^[1]

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Executive summary

In July 2015 the national charity Learning through Landscapes (LTL) working with the national Early Childhood Forum (ECF) and other partners, initiated a survey to 'check in' with the state of outdoor play in early years in the UK.

The survey had nearly 400 respondents from the sector, and found continued strong support for outdoor play and learning that promotes healthy child development in the early years. Encouragingly, many respondents also reported that they have made improvements in their outdoor provision over recent years. However, the survey also found a wide variation in what children are offered in terms of their statutory entitlement to daily outdoor experiences as part of their core early education provision. Many providers are unsure of what is required, are struggling with inadequate space or in some cases have no outside space at all. The survey responses also identified the need for additional staff training as well as more detailed information for parents, planners and childcare commissioners.

Government funded early years education and childcare is offered through a range of schools and settings, voluntary groups and private provision. Unlike the schools sector however, there is little guidance and no statutory requirement for the minimum outdoor space per child. This survey shows that the importance of outdoor space as a key learning and development resource (not simply recreation) is not fully understood by some planners and developers of childcare businesses. This is of particular concern as the Government rolls out its plans for the expansion of free childcare for working parents from 15 to 30 hours per week with the potential for growth in the market and expansion of places as a result.

The statutory Early Years Foundation Stage (EYFS) still requires that "Providers must provide access to an outdoor play area or, if that is not possible, ensure that outdoor activities are planned and taken on a daily basis" (EYFS 2014 para 3.58). The survey found a wide variation in what is offered to young children in terms of the entitlement to daily outdoor experience under the EYFS, with many settings struggling with inadequate or insufficient space to provide high quality outdoor learning, and that there may also be a small minority of children who are not getting this entitlement at all.

Ofsted is the regulating body for the EYFS, and whilst there are good case studies on their website (the latest we could find was dated 2012), the survey results suggest that many providers are unsure about what is required, or find it difficult to do so well. There was a particularly strong call from providers for more staff training in this area and also for help with engaging with parents about the importance of outdoor play for young children's development in all weather!

Summary of recommendations

1. ECF and LTL should lobby the government to develop statutory guidance and standards for the provision of publicly funded Early Years and Childcare provision.

There should be support for schools, nurseries and pre-schools that do not meet the standard to create a plan to achieve these standards within a given timescale.

2. ECF and LTL should share the findings of this survey with Ofsted and explore what further research would be helpful in relation to regulation of this area of work.
3. ECF and LTL should work with Ofsted to encourage inspectors to consistently ask about and assess teaching and learning outdoors and the entitlement to daily outdoor experiences for children in the EYFS.
4. ECF and LTL should work with Ofsted to create an up to date report on their findings on the quality of provision for Early Years learning outdoors and to develop and publish more guidance for providers.
5. ECF should share the findings of this survey with membership organisations in the sector and ask for feedback and collaboration for further research and in developing responses to the findings.
6. ECF and LTL should work with partners (eg Health) to commission more research on factors which impact on young children's experiences of outdoor play and learning and its correlation with health and educational outcomes.
7. ECF and LTL should work with training providers to commission a more in-depth study about the quantity and quality of training provided by local authorities and in each local authority area.
8. ECF and LTL should consider working with partners and training providers to develop a menu of locally available and quality assured training courses to meet continuing professional development needs at all levels.
9. LTL and ECF should work with partners to develop information for parents and staff working in early years about the importance of daily outdoor play and learning for young children's healthy development.
10. ECF and LTL should work with SENSE (reference their inquiry launched in September 2015) and other relevant organisations to consider more specifically the needs of disabled children and their access to outdoor experiences within the EYFS.

Related link: [New report calls for action on EYFS children's entitlement to outdoor play](#) [2]

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Source URL (modified on 27 Jan 2022): <https://childcarecanada.org/documents/research-policy-practice/16/03/provision-learning-outdoors-under-fives-state-nation-survey>

Links

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