



# The Outdoor Classroom

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Almost 100 years ago Margaret Macmillan wrote in *The Nursery School*, “The best kept classroom and the richest cupboard are roofed only by the sky”. Today, with the increasing use of technology, the reduction in play spaces, particularly in our cities, and with children starting school earlier, her words are possibly more significant than ever.

At St George's we believe that children should be outdoors as much as indoors, and that a well-designed, well-organised, integrated indoor/outdoor environment is crucial in child development. It should be, in Margaret Macmillan's words, “unique in its opportunities, in its variety and interest”.

What is it that makes outdoor play so different from indoors? Of course, we could take out cars, dolls or bricks and replicate indoor play outside, but by its very nature, outdoor play is different. It is about taking risks, experimenting, discovering, making up games, noisy role play, and singing and laughing without the limits set by being indoors. A young child's need for involvement as well as their wellbeing, alongside their urge to explore and make sense of the world, can be satisfied through high quality play in an outdoor environment.

“There is a garden in every childhood, an enchanted place where colors are brighter, the air softer and the morning more fragrant” *Elizabeth Lawrence*

So what areas of development does outdoor play enhance? It not only offers the more obvious physical benefits in terms of an increase in a child's physical development, capability and activity, but it sets up patterns for a healthy and active lifestyle.



Freedom of movement encouraged in outdoor spaces also promotes a sense of well-being, and for many children playing outdoors in their early years setting may be the only opportunity they have to play safely and freely whilst they learn to negotiate and assess risk, and develop the skills to manage new situations. Children become familiar with nature, the weather and the change of seasons.

Research has shown that a child's language, communication and problem solving skills can also benefit in the outdoors environment. Quieter children learn to speak more, and their more active peers become calmer and more focused. Friendships are established and communication skills grow through cooperative play. The outside helps a child to self-regulate, resulting in fewer behavioural problems, and giving children more physical space and more opportunity to be active may reduce possible conflict. It is well documented that there is a strong connection between movement and well-being and movement and cognition. The outdoors allows children to move more freely within their environment, and this is particularly important to those children who learn best through active movement. It helps them to practise and master skills, and promotes positive attitudes towards the world through exploration and interaction. The outside classroom also stimulates a child's senses, increasing their awareness of others as well as giving a strong sense of self. Mastery of all these skills in early childhood is fundamental in the development of an enquiring mind and later learning.

Whilst a well-planned outside classroom gives children a more relaxing space to learn and initiate their own activities, the support of well-informed, enthusiastic and engaging teachers is key. The high levels of interest and involvement that can be seen when children are engaged in learning outside allow teachers and classroom assistants plenty of time for long interactions and in-depth observations. Just as the outdoor environment encourages the early years child to become familiar with nature, weather and the changing seasons, it gives teachers and assistants further opportunity to observe and nurture the rapid changes in each child. ■

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