



Access to Nature Project

The Access to Nature Project was led jointly by the Froebel Trust and Early Education between October 2021 and January 2022.

Executive Summary, March 2022

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Introduction

The purpose of the Access to Nature project was to explore a series of data across real-life early years environments to help to explain the complexities of children's outdoor experiences from birth; in other words, their access to nature. The impact of Covid on young families' engagement with the outdoor environment was a core line of enquiry.

Summary of the Literature Base

Research Questions

Four research questions framed the data collection for this small-scale mixed methods study:

1. How should access to nature be defined?
2. Is young families' access to nature similar for all?
3. Is young families' access to nature being enabled both at home and in the early years setting?
4. Has Covid had an impact on children and their engagement with the outdoor environment?

Attempts were made to reach as representative a cross-section of the population as possible in terms of location, to include both densely populated city areas to rural settings. Data was collected in settings from across the north-east of England, London, and the south-east of England. Parent and early years educator questionnaires focused on access to nature, aiming to gather views from as large a population of parents and practitioners as possible, and were followed up by focused group activities and pupil voice tasks. Focus groups collated data on approaches to taking children into nature, including the impact of Covid-19.

Key Findings

- 1. Access to nature was clearly defined according to the individual perceptions of each of the three stakeholder groups involved in the project; the participant children, the parents, and the early years educators. Definitions of access to nature shaped adult responses as to what were perceived as outdoor experiences available to young families.**

The children's perceptions of access to nature centred on play resources available to them both at home and in their early years setting. Being outdoors was always about being active, and engaging in activities to support the development of both fine and gross motor skills. It also included a social aspect, or companionship, particularly playing with siblings in the back garden at home. Key adults in the children's lives,

including parents and grandparents, had an impact on the types of experiences children were exposed to outdoors.

The definition of access to nature across adult participants differed between the parents and early years educators. Parents talked about gardens and being outdoors with their children in a range of spaces and places. Whilst one set of responses amongst the early years educators centred on a clear definition of the term 'access to nature' as being outside and exploring the environment, the term was typically described in the context of what the setting could offer the children in their care in relation to in situ outdoor experiences. All the early years settings interviewed described their outdoor area as a space where learning opportunities were naturally embedded as part of the early years curriculum and effective early years practice.

2. Access to nature was not similar for all young families.

A link between young families' access to nature and location (living in the countryside or town) was evident. Additional limitations are covered in Key Finding 4.

3. Young families' access to nature was, where possible, being enabled both at home and in the early years setting. This included during the lockdown periods of the pandemic.

Access to nature was seen as important across both home and setting contexts, for example adults noticing a clear link between children's improved well-being because of going outside. For both parents and early years educators, enabling access to nature was important, however there were some differences in perspective. Those early years educators of city-based children clearly felt that part of their role was to fill a perceived gap in the children's outdoor experience, especially those children who lived in flats. Both parents and early years educators across all contexts described benefits to being outdoors. For parents of children with special educational needs, additional concerns were expressed to do with avoiding stigma when outdoors with their children which meant they went outside on a less regular basis. In addition, this group of children could not always access the outdoors independently.

4. Barriers to access to nature emerged for both parents and early years educators.

Early years educators discussed barriers to going outside in the setting, including children who preferred to stay inside; not having the appropriate clothing, for example, or their perception of the outdoors. Practitioners mentioned changing patterns of behaviour amongst parents, such as driving the short distance to school which negated the need for a coat. Barriers to nature included the type of home lived in, for example a flat or a house; the quality of the outdoor environment that was available; having the means to get to outdoor spaces, including transport and cost; the weather; and for early years educators, the intrinsic needs of specific groups of children such as EAL learners, and those with special needs. Limitations of statutory curricula beyond the Early Years

Foundation Stage were also perceived as a barrier by those teaching in a special needs primary school.

5. Differing opinions across the adult data sets emerged in relation to the impact of Covid-19.

Some families felt that Covid-19 had not made any difference to outdoor access, whilst others felt strongly that it had. Interestingly, the majority of parents described taking new, more creative approaches to being outdoors because of lockdown restrictions. In contrast, early years educators tended to be more cautious; they focused more on the consequences for those children who had not been exposed to the outdoor environment during lockdown and the need to compensate for this. There were also some concerns about children having missed social contact with peers, which is of note as Key Finding 1 reveals that there was a clear social aspect to being outdoors for the participant children themselves.

6. Two effective pedagogical strategies used across settings to support children's and family engagement with outdoor spaces emerged; the importance of being a role model, and signposting in various ways to help parents gain ease of access to outdoor places and spaces.

These strategies are of importance when considering the development of effective outdoor practice in the early years and in expediting effective communication with parents to encourage similar experiences at home; in other words, enabling access to nature. Working with parents as children's first educators is a core tenet of the Early Years Foundation Stage (DfE, 2021). A separate leaflet details the implications of this finding for early years settings.

Summary

The findings support evidence that has begun to emerge from the existing literature base, particularly pandemic-related, that there are patterns to children's outdoor experiences, and that children are engaging, and indeed, need to engage, with outdoor environments as a natural part of growing up, from birth onwards. The Access to Nature Project provides evidence to show that facilitating such [outdoor] engagement, both in and beyond children's early years setting experiences, should form the basis for future important enquiry in this area.