



Rostrum

## The importance of outdoor play for young children's healthy development

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### ABSTRACT

Changes in current societies are affecting childhood experiences. Time for outdoor play is diminishing, contributing to more sedentary lifestyles, disconnected from the natural world. Recognizing the importance of outdoor play for young children's healthy growth, a project focused on the exploration of the outdoor environment was developed with a group of young children in an early childhood education setting in Portugal. The project aimed to transform educational practices, moving from frequent indoor activities to a regular use of the outdoor environment. In this paper, we present the main dimensions related to outdoor play that emerged during the project (contact with natural elements, importance of risk, socialization opportunities) and highlight the role of professionals and families in creating quality outdoor play opportunities.

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### Introduction

The importance of play for children's healthy development is grounded in a strong body of research.<sup>1-3</sup> As a natural and compelling activity, play promotes cognitive, physical, social, and emotional well-being, offering the necessary conditions for children to thrive and learn. Through play, the child can experiment, solve problems, think creatively, cooperate with others, etc., gaining a deeper knowledge about his/herself and the world. From an early age, the possibility to experience several opportunities for unstructured play, in which the child can decide what to do, with whom and how, promotes positive self-esteem, autonomy, and confidence.

Acknowledging the influence of time and space in play experiences, in this article we address the special contribution of the outdoor environment to fulfil children's needs for free play, reporting into an outdoor educational project developed with a group of 14 children, between 15 and 36 months old, in a Portuguese early childhood setting. The work presented aims to identify important dimensions of outdoor play that contribute to effective learning and healthy development, and highlight the role of professionals

and families in the provision of such experiences in early childhood education settings.

### Outdoor play in current society and education settings

The specific features and stimulus of the outdoor environment provide for different play opportunities that can hardly be replicated inside.<sup>4</sup> The outdoors can be described as an open and constantly changing environment, where it is possible to experience freedom, gross and boisterous movements, and contact with natural elements.<sup>5</sup> While playing outside, children benefit from being exposed to sunlight, natural elements, and open air, which contributes to bones development, stronger immune system and physical activity.<sup>6,7</sup> The need to be physically active from an early age is particularly relevant if we consider the concerning growth of children's obesity and overweight. According to the World Health Organization,<sup>8,9</sup> Portugal is the second European country with the highest values of overweight among children with 11 years old (32%), being preceded by Greece (33%) and proceeded by Ireland (30%). Also, play in green outdoor environments promotes higher levels of attention and well-being.<sup>10-12</sup>

However, the growing evidences about the importance of outdoor play does not seem to have an impact in the type of experiences that children have access to. Contrary to what would be expected, opportunities for outdoor play are diminishing, in consequence of globalization, technology expansion and urban growth.<sup>13</sup>

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A growing culture of fear about the possible accidents that might happen affect parent's and professionals attitude towards outdoor play, so children tend to be kept inside, occupied with structured activities, and controlled by adults.<sup>3,14,15</sup> Possible hazards, interactions with strangers and car traffic are the most frequent factors mentioned by parents for not letting their children play outside, even though they acknowledge the importance of such experiences.<sup>13,16</sup> According to Gill,<sup>14</sup> these fears are often brought by misinterpretations of reality, without having a real expression in society. For example, the fear about child's abduction is not linked to an increase in these type of crimes, although a greater emphasis is given to these situations by social media.

Adding to this, there is a concern to occupy children during the day, considering that most parents work long hours and want to guarantee the best opportunities for children to acquire different skills and knowledge. Academic activities and sports often occupy children's time to play freely. Going from one activity to another, children tend to be transported by car, without experiencing the outdoor environment through the interaction with the community.<sup>17,18</sup>

In this scenario, there is a need to raise general awareness regarding children's right to play outdoors, as well as its potential in supporting children's well-being, learning and development. Acknowledging the time children spend in educational settings, concerns about the time and space to play outside should be integrated in education planning and intervention, starting in day-care and kindergarten. In Portugal, research shows that early childhood education is too centred in what happens inside the activity room, wrongly considering that the outdoor environment serves merely as recess time, during which children can stretch their legs and expend their energy.<sup>19-23</sup> A recent study focused on the use of outdoor spaces in four Portuguese kindergartens showed that the number of times children go outside is very reduced, especially in the winter months. Children tend to spend long periods in closed environments, more exposed to disease contamination and saturated air.<sup>24</sup> Also, the time spent outside was often insufficient, varying between 16 and 30 min. This is a very short period for children to take advantage of the benefits related to outdoor play, being recommended a minimum of 40 min, per day.<sup>7</sup>

## The outdoor education project

With the desire of offering a different educational response to young children and acknowledging the importance of the outdoors for learning and development, a Portuguese early childhood a Portuguese early childhood centre took the initiative of implementing an innovative outdoor education project, going against the tendency of keeping children inside. During a period of three years, the setting located in a rural area in the centre of Portugal, catering for children from 4 months to 10 years of age (from 6 to 10 years old children attend an after school service), introduced gradual changes in pedagogical practices, in order to create quality outdoor play opportunities for children.

Despite having a large and well equipped outdoor area, with natural elements and different type of structures to promote play, in the beginning of the project the children did not used the outdoors regularly. The professionals perceived the indoor environment has being more secure and comfortable, so they avoided going outside for long periods. They were also afraid about possible accidents or diseases that might affected children, fearing for negative reactions from the families.

To overcome these obstacles, a methodology close to action-research was adopted to facilitate practices' transformation, which included teachers' training in outdoor play, regular team meetings and observations of children's play. In this way, problems that

emerged were interpreted as mile stones in the process of improving educational practice and specific strategies were experimented to achieve a solution.

This outdoor project directly involved all the early childhood teachers of the institution (5 women) and, indirectly, the board of the setting, other professionals, families, community members and, of course, the children. In this paper, the experience of one of the groups, with 14 children between 15 and 36 months old will be shared.

Through qualitative data collection techniques, such as observations, written records, videos and photographs focused on children's outdoor play, three dimensions were identified as key to promote learning and development: contact with natural elements; importance of risk; socialization opportunities. The analysis of each dimension will take in consideration current international literature. Also, these three components of outdoor play can only be fully developed if children are accompanied by attentive and responsive adults, concerned with their needs and interests.<sup>25,26</sup> The role of professionals and families in this project is also presented, considering that cooperation between adults is an important aspect for the success of outdoor play experiences.

## Promoting learning and development outside

### Contact with natural elements

The outdoor environment offers unique stimulus that capture children's attention and interest. Sticks, rocks, flowers, soil, water, etc., are explored with curiosity and drive to learn, as they offer countless possibilities for play. As White<sup>27</sup> states, natural elements are open-ended materials, that can respond to children's imagination and needs. In this process of reinvention and assigning new meaning to objects (e.g. a stick can be a gun, a boat or a pen), it is possible to mobilize skills related to divergent thinking, creativity, problem solving, among others. The use of natural elements in children's play also creates a more sustainable strategy in what concerns resources provision. Natural elements are easy to find, cheap and they do not offer the limited options that commercial toys do.<sup>28</sup>

The exploration of natural elements is also important to capture children's attention to the richness and diversity of Nature. The sense of discovery and fascination influences meaningful learning and allows for the development of an emotional connection towards the environment. If we assume that attitudes of respect and care are more likely to emerge regarding something that is dear to us, than it is crucial to promote a sense of belonging and familiarity towards Nature from an early age to facilitate ecological and sustainable behaviours along life.

Through outdoor play and the exploration of natural elements, it is possible to promote education in its broadest sense. Activities related to playing with soil and water can serve as examples of learning opportunities in which concepts related to mathematics, science or language were promoted in an integrated way. As children filled and emptied containers, several times, they could explore notions related to weight, volume and time, and as they talked about what they were experiencing, new vocabulary was being acquired. Similar findings were found in other researches, showing, for example, children's ability to learn and employ mathematical products and procedures during outdoor play, using their body as a learning tool.<sup>29,30</sup>

It what concerns health, the interaction with natural elements such as the soil helps build immunity. Growing research has been showing the importance of experiences that promote the contact with "harmless microbes", that provide protection against diseases.<sup>31</sup> Among the group we worked with, some children had respiratory and skin problems (e.g. asthma and eczemas), and going

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