Creating unique outdoor spaces

Creating spaces and finding solutions



Sometimes, practitioners might find it helps to step outside and look in at their practice from a solutions-focused perspective to determine what is working and what is not – and to know what to do about that. What is needed to improve how children use and enjoy the space? Have children been consulted about their preferences, or has their play been purposefully observed? Are their interests built upon in line with what they say and do? If solutions are needed to perceived barriers, think creatively about how to solve them or ask for help from like-minded professionals. For example, if your setting has limited access to handwashing, consider creating a 'spa tap' to save water use and wash hands where no running water is available (Inspiring Scotland, 2022).



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For settings with limited natural resources, practitioners can consider sourcing materials like log stumps and sticks from nearby spaces, and taking simple measures to attract wildlife. If there is space and opportunity, it may be possible to plant small trees, shrubs and flowers, and create bug hotels and a butterfly-friendly garden with wildflowers and other insect-attracting flora.

Outdoor environments offer wonderful opportunities for children to communicate in their own ways. The aim is not to fill every corner with equipment, but to create spaces where children feel comfortable and curious.





Start with the child's perspective

Before buying or building anything, spend time noticing how children already use your outdoor area.




Which spaces do they seek out?
Where do conversations happen naturally?
Where do children retreat when the environment feels busy?

·Get down to children's eye level. Notice what they can see, hear and reach.

- Observe the flow of movement, noise and activity at different times of day.
- Talk with children and families about places they enjoy and what helps them feel comfortable.

Remember: A communication-friendly space is not necessarily a quiet space. Children need a choice of lively, collaborative places and calmer, more intimate spaces.

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Create a den

Dens can provide cosy, enclosed spaces where children feel comfortable, encouraging conversation, imaginative play and opportunities to connect with others. They can be temporary, flexible or permanent, depending on the space and materials available.

Ideas for creating an outdoor den:

- Fabric dens: Drape sheets, blankets or lightweight fabrics over frames, branches or washing lines to create temporary hideaways.
- Tarpaulin shelters: Use waterproof tarpaulins to create all-weather dens, secured safely between suitable supports.
- Willow structures: Plant living willow to create natural tunnels, domes or cosy enclosed spaces that grow and change with the seasons.
- Natural planting: Use tall grasses, shrubs or climbing plants to create sheltered, secluded spaces.
- Wooden structures: Repurpose wooden pallets (once made safe), timber frames or existing play structures to create more permanent dens.
- Bamboo or stick dens: Arrange long branches or bamboo poles into a teepee-style structure, with fabric or natural materials for additional shelter.
- Existing features: Make use of spaces beneath trees, alongside fences or in quiet corners, adding cushions, logs or other comfortable seating.



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Flexible seating areas

Flexible seating can help transform outdoor spaces into inviting places for children to gather, talk, collaborate or spend time quietly. Seating doesn't need to be expensive or permanent. Using natural, recycled or movable materials allows children to adapt spaces to suit their play.

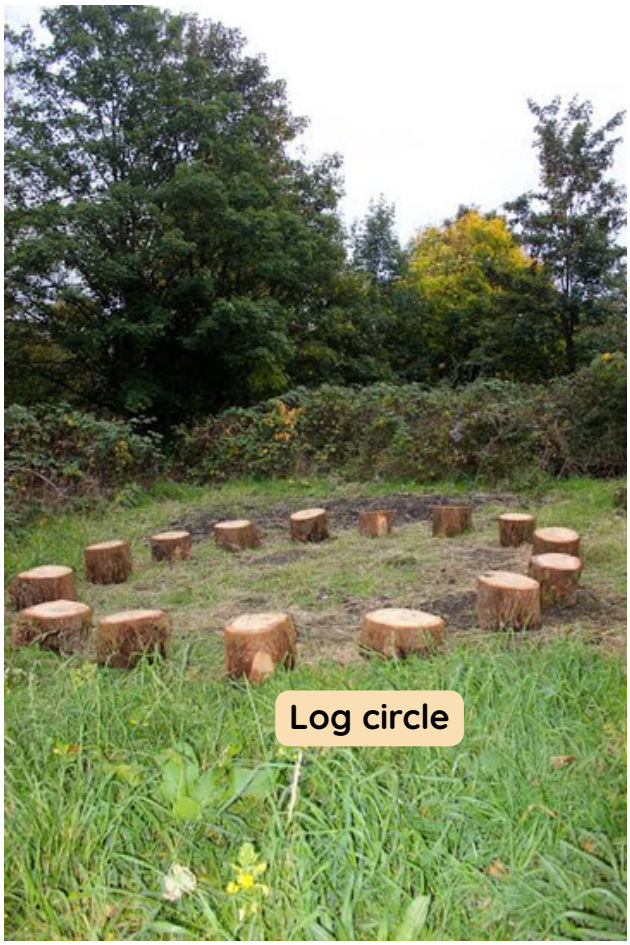
Ideas for creating flexible seating:

- Logs and tree stumps: Use as individual seats or arrange in circles for small-group conversations.
- Recycled tyres: Place flat on the ground or partially sink into the earth to create informal seating areas.
- Cable reels: Repurpose wooden cable reels as low tables, paired with logs or stools - you could even upcycle them and paint them!
- Wooden crates: Use sturdy, appropriately reinforced crates as movable seating or low tables.
- Outdoor cushions and mats: Provide comfortable, portable seating for cosy corners, dens or storytelling spaces.
- Hay or straw bales: Create temporary seating for group gatherings, storytelling or seasonal activities.
- Low benches: Position benches beneath trees, alongside planting or in quieter areas to encourage conversation.
- Decking or raised platforms: Create informal gathering spaces where children can sit together, play or relax.

Think about communication: Consider offering a mixture of seating arrangements, including face-to-face spaces for conversation, side-by-side seating for shared play and quieter spots for children who prefer less social interaction.

Check that reused materials are clean, stable, free from sharp edges and  suitable for children's use. Avoid treated or splintering timber and ensure seating is accessible to children with different physical needs.

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Log circle


Arrange two or three logs


Use tyres


Use pillows, cushions and mats


Upcycle cable reels




Involve the children - create the spaces with them

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Places to explore the senses

Creating a multi-sensory outdoor environment offers children opportunities to explore, discover and connect with the natural world. Different colours, textures, scents and sounds can spark curiosity, encourage exploration and provide shared experiences that naturally invite communication. Even small additions, such as planting a lavender bush, can attract bees and butterflies, giving children something fascinating to observe, notice and talk about together.

Ideas for creating sensory-rich spaces:

- Scented planting: Grow lavender, rosemary, mint or other fragrant herbs in accessible pots or planters for children to smell and explore.
- Different textures: Introduce a variety of natural surfaces and materials, such as grass, bark, sand, smooth pebbles, moss, leaves and timber.
- Colourful planting: Grow flowers, shrubs and wildflowers that change with the seasons and attract pollinators.
- Natural sounds: Plant ornamental grasses that rustle in the wind, or introduce simple wind chimes made from natural or recycled materials.
- Attract wildlife: Add bird feeders, bird baths, insect hotels or pollinator-friendly plants to encourage wildlife into your space.
- Growing spaces: Provide opportunities for children to plant, care for and harvest herbs, fruits and vegetables, exploring their colours, textures, smells and tastes.
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Think about communication: Think about communication: Sensory experiences create natural opportunities for children to notice, describe, compare, ask questions, gesture and share discoveries. Follow children's interests and observations, allowing conversations to develop naturally rather than directing every interaction.

Safety consideration: Choose child-safe, non-toxic plants and materials, and consider allergies, sensory sensitivities and accessibility when planning your space.

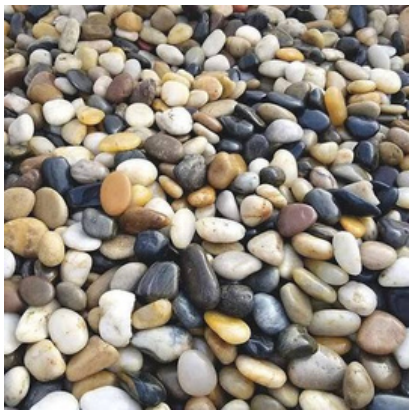


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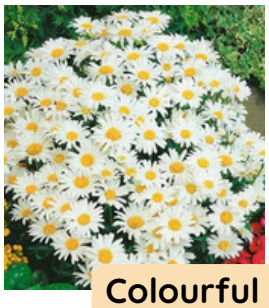


Scents - Lavender, rosemary, mint

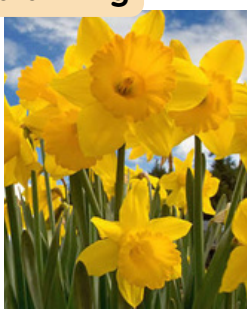




Consider different textures






Colourful planting





Attract wildlife