Continuous Provision - Outside

What is Continuous Provision?

Continuous provision refers to the areas, resources and equipment that are consistently available for children to access and explore independently. In an outdoor environment, this might include areas for sand, water or mud play, construction, climbing and physical development.

Each area should offer a core selection of resources that children can choose from, encouraging child-initiated play.

Enhanced provision builds upon this by introducing additional resources, materials or experiences with a specific learning intention in mind. These enhancements may respond to children's interests, emerging needs or current learning opportunities, helping to extend and deepen their play.

This document provides practical suggestions for creating and developing outdoor areas, alongside examples of resources and equipment that can form part of continuous provision. These ideas are intended to support the development of a stimulating, accessible and flexible outdoor environment, providing a foundation that can be further enriched through enhanced provision.

The provocations throughout Nature Talks offer further ideas for creating invitations to play and explore. These may involve introducing additional resources, materials or experiences alongside existing continuous provision, serving as enhanced provision where they reflect children's interests, build upon their play or provide meaningful opportunities to support their learning and development.



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What is the purpose?

The purpose of continuous provision is to provide the resources and opportunities for play, rather than determine what that play should look like. Spaces should remain flexible, allowing children to follow their interests, develop their own ideas and use materials in imaginative and unexpected ways. For example, wooden crates might become part of a construction, seating for a performance or a vehicle in an imaginative adventure. By offering versatile resources without prescribing how they must be used, practitioners can create environments where children take the lead, make choices and develop their play over time.
The following areas offer practical ideas for creating outdoor spaces using accessible, authentic and open-ended materials.

When developing these areas, remember that continuous provision should offer consistency without becoming restrictive. Children may choose to transport resources between areas, combine materials in unexpected ways or use a space for a purpose different from the one originally intended. For example, a metal bowl from the nature kitchen might become an instrument, a container for collecting natural objects or part of an imaginative construction.
Where safe and practical, enabling this flexibility supports children's play.



Choosing Resources

When developing outdoor continuous provision, offer authentic, open-ended and natural materials wherever possible, rather than relying predominantly on manufactured toys or resources with a fixed purpose. Real objects can offer valuable sensory experiences that support children's curiosity and exploration. For example, a stainless-steel jug has a different weight, texture, sound and feel from a lightweight plastic alternative, providing opportunities for children to explore the properties and functions of everyday objects.

Natural, reclaimed and repurposed materials can also provide a cost-effective and sustainable way to develop outdoor provision. Resources should be carefully selected to ensure they are safe, accessible and appropriate for children's ages and developmental needs.

That being said, this doesn't mean plastic resources need to be removed altogether. Plastic still has a valuable place in outdoor provision where it serves a clear purpose. For example, small-world figures, vehicles and certain construction resources can offer meaningful opportunities for imaginative play and exploration. The aim is not to eliminate plastic, but to be intentional about the resources offered, prioritising authentic, natural and open-ended materials where possible, while recognising the value of other resources in supporting children's play, interests and development.



When developing continuous provision, remember that less can often be more. Rather than filling spaces with large quantities of resources, offer a smaller, carefully selected range of high-quality, open-ended materials. E.g rather than providing 10–15 identical jugs in a water play area, offer two or three jugs of different sizes, shapes and materials. This provides opportunities for children to compare, investigate and experiment, while encouraging them to share resources and negotiate.

Organising and labelling

Consider how resources are stored and presented so that children can independently find, access, use and return materials. Clear, consistent organisation helps children develop confidence, independence and a sense of responsibility for their environment.

Use low, accessible shelving, baskets, crates or containers to keep resources visible and within children's reach. Where appropriate, label using photographs, pictures and written words to help children recognise where resources belong, supporting early literacy and encouraging independent tidying. Labels could also indicate the quantity of each resource (where appropriate), for example, '4 spades', helping children recognise how many items should be available and where they should be returned. This will be less useful when you are offering a basket of smaller, loose-part or natural items e.g. shells or sticks.

Keep labelling purposeful and avoid overcrowding the environment with unnecessary signs and displays. Outdoor spaces should retain their natural character, allowing children to notice and engage with the world around them rather than being surrounded by visual clutter. Consider whether a label or sign serves a clear purpose, supports children's independence or adds value to their learning.

Not every area needs a fixed name or designated purpose. For example, a space used for role play does not necessarily need a sign identifying it as a 'Role Play Area'. Children might choose to use the same space for construction, storytelling, den building or other imaginative experiences. Avoiding overly prescriptive labels helps maintain flexibility and allows children to determine how spaces are used.



The aim is to create an inviting, calm and flexible environment where resources are easy to find and return, without unnecessary visual distractions or restrictions on how children choose to play.

Creating Areas

The following suggestions offer practical ways to create and develop outdoor areas that support children's play, exploration and learning. Each area includes an explanation of the opportunities it provides, ideas for setting up the space and examples of core resources that could be consistently available as part of continuous provision.

Where possible, the suggestions prioritise authentic, natural, reclaimed and open-ended materials, making use of existing spaces and resources rather than relying on expensive, purpose-built equipment.

These areas do not need to be separate, permanent or fixed in their purpose. Children should be encouraged to access resources independently, move materials between spaces and determine how they use the environment. The suggested resources are examples rather than exhaustive lists. Their availability and quantities should reflect the number of children, their developmental needs and interests, and the space available.



Mud Kitchens

Mud Kitchen (or nature kitchen!)
A mud kitchen or nature kitchen can be a simple, flexible space where children combine, mix, transport and experiment with natural materials through imaginative and exploratory play. It doesn't need to resemble a traditional kitchen; an accessible surface and a selection of open-ended materials can provide opportunities for play.

- Use an existing structure – position an outdoor table, bench or low shelving unit in a suitable space e.g. a fence or wall to create a basic kitchen space.
- Make your own – use safely secured, smooth wooden pallets, crates, cable reels or sturdy timber to create work surfaces and storage.
- Use natural features – position stable logs or tree stumps at different heights to create preparation surfaces, seating or places for arranging materials.
- Create a nature kitchen – offer natural ingredients such as leaves, petals, herbs, sticks, mud and water for mixing, arranging and experimenting. This can work particularly well where space for a traditional mud kitchen is limited.
- Provide accessible storage – use baskets, shelves, hooks or containers to keep resources organised and encourage children to select and return equipment independently.
- Make use of the surroundings – locate the kitchen near soil, planting areas or water access where practical, allowing children to collect and transport materials as part of their play.



Core resources

Pots, pans, bowls, bottles/cups, spoons, ladles, jugs, sieves, funnels, trays, buckets, containers, scoops and accessible natural loose parts.

Where appropriate, provide water and a source of soil or mud.





Sand Play

Sand play offers opportunities for sensory exploration, experimentation and imaginative play. Children can investigate the properties of dry and wet sand, exploring how it can be poured, transported, shaped and combined with other materials. These experiences naturally encourage curiosity, problem-solving and collaboration.

- Use an existing area – create a sandpit using a suitable section of the outdoor environment, with timber edging to define the space.
- Repurpose containers – use a large, sturdy wooden or metal trough, raised container or suitable low-level tray where space is limited.
- Introduce different levels – provide stable wooden surfaces, tree stumps or low benches nearby for filling, pouring and experimenting.
- Make use of natural materials – offer stones, shells, sticks and other suitable natural loose parts for arranging, burying and creating.
- Encourage larger-scale play – where space allows, provide an area where children can dig, build, transport and create on a bigger scale.
- Provide accessible storage – use baskets, crates or low shelving to keep equipment organised and encourage independent access.
- Offer water to experiment with how sand consistency changes when water is added

Core resources

Metal buckets, wooden scoops, stainless-steel sieves, funnels, spades (different sizes and shape), measuring containers, wooden bowls, Natural resources e.g. smooth stones/pebbles, shells, sticks





Water Play

Water play provides opportunities for children to explore movement, flow, capacity and cause and effect through hands-on investigation. Pouring, transporting, transferring and experimenting with water encourages children to test ideas, make discoveries and develop an understanding of how materials behave.

- Container (for water) – provide a sturdy water trough, large metal basin or suitable low-level container that children can access independently.
- Create a simple water station – position containers on stable wooden benches, low tables or securely positioned platforms.
- Introduce guttering and channels – securely attach reclaimed guttering, pipes or bamboo channels to fences or sturdy frames, allowing children to investigate how water travels.
- Offer different heights and levels – arrange suitable containers at varying heights to encourage pouring, transferring and exploring water flow.
- Make use of natural materials – introduce smooth stones, leaves, pieces of wood and other suitable natural objects for investigating floating, sinking and movement.
- Consider water access and drainage – position the area where water can be safely accessed, transported and emptied, with appropriate drainage.

Core resources

Use stainless-steel where possible (rather than plastic) - jugs, metal bowls, funnels, ladles, measuring containers (all of different sizes), watering cans, buckets, reclaimed guttering, sponges, bamboo channels, suitable tubing, smooth stones and natural floating materials.





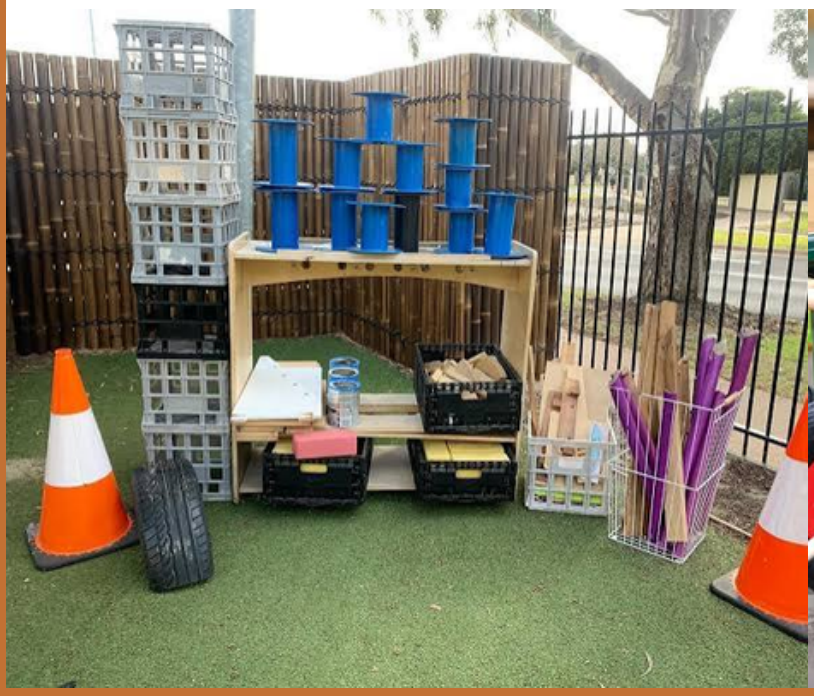
Construction and Loose Parts

Construction and loose parts play encourages children to experiment, create, problem-solve and develop their own ideas. Open-ended materials can be moved, combined, balanced and transformed in different ways, allowing children to explore possibilities, collaborate and adapt their creations over time.

- Identify an open area – provide enough room for children to build, transport and rearrange materials.
- Use natural materials – introduce size appropriate logs, branches, wooden blocks, pebbles, sticks
- Repurpose everyday materials – offer wooden crates, cable reels, sturdy boxes and cardboard tubes
- Provide different scales – include larger materials for collaborative construction alongside smaller pieces for more detailed building.
- Allow creations to remain – where possible, provide space for children to return to and extend their constructions
- Make resources accessible – organise materials using low racks, crates or designated storage areas.

Core resources

Wooden blocks of different sizes, wooden crates, suitable timber planks and offcuts, logs, tree slices, sturdy cardboard tubes, suitable cable reels, bamboo poles, fabric and age-appropriate joining materials.





Digging Pit

A digging pit provides opportunities for children to explore a material such as soil or pebbles, investigate beneath the surface and experiment with moving and transforming natural materials. Digging encourages curiosity, physical development, problem-solving and imaginative play, while allowing children to notice changes in texture, moisture and the natural environment.

- Create a simple boundary – use securely positioned timber, logs or suitable edging to define the space and choose your material e.g. soil, gravel, pebbles
- Provide space for transporting – allow enough room for children to use buckets and small wheelbarrows.
- Keep equipment nearby – provide accessible storage for digging tools.
- Ensure it is covered to present animals soiling in the area!
- Conduct a risk-assessment and consider your class/cohort and age-appropriateness if deciding to use gravel/stones for choking hazards.



Core resources

Child-sized metal spades, trowels, metal buckets, small wheelbarrows, sieves, watering cans, wooden bowls and suitable containers (or small-world transport vehicles) for collecting and transporting gravel/soil.

You could also offer materials for dressing up e.g. hard hats, high-vis jackets and/or fabrics for children to 'step into role'





Small World Play

Small-world play provides opportunities for children to recreate familiar experiences, explore relationships, develop stories and use their imagination. Offering a selection of open-ended materials alongside small-world figures allows children to create their own environments and scenarios, rather than following a predetermined theme or activity. Children might use dinosaurs, insects, animals or people figures alongside natural materials, fabric and other loose parts to develop their own ideas, supporting creativity, storytelling and collaborative play.

- Use existing surfaces – a low table, wooden platform, tree stump or sheltered corner can provide a starting point for small-world play.
- Keep the space open-ended – rather than creating a fixed dinosaur world, farm or woodland scene, offer resources that children can use to create their own environments and stories.
- Provide a variety of figures – include dinosaurs, insects, animals, people and vehicles that children can combine in different ways according to their interests.
- Offer natural loose parts – provide stones, sticks, bark, logs and other natural materials that children can use to create landscapes, habitats, homes or imaginative settings.
- Include flexible materials – offer fabric, wooden blocks, baskets, crates and boxes that children can transform into different features within their play.
- Encourage resources to move – allow children to transport and combine materials from other areas, recognising that their play may extend beyond the original small-world space.
- Keep resources accessible – organise materials in baskets, trays or low shelving so children can independently select and return what they need.





Core resources

Small-world figures such as dinosaurs, insects, animals and people, realistic miniature vehicles, wooden blocks, small logs, tree slices, smooth stones, bark, sticks, fabric, scarves, wicker baskets, wooden trays, crates and other suitable natural loose parts.



Gross Motor Play

Outdoor physical play offers opportunities for children to develop strength, balance, coordination and confidence through movement. Natural features, permanent structures and movable resources allow children to explore different ways of moving, challenge themselves and develop increasing control over their bodies.

- Use natural features – make use of suitable grassy areas, slopes, logs and changes in ground level.
- Create a balance trail – provide stable logs, stepping stones or securely fixed timber beams.
- Retain open space – allow room for running, jumping, dancing, throwing and exploring larger movements.
- Offer movable resources – provide equipment children can rearrange to create their own physical challenges.
- Provide climbing opportunities – use suitable permanent or movable climbing structures.
- Consider wheeled play – where space permits, provide safe pathways for trikes, scooters and balance bikes.

Core resources

Permanent structures: stable logs, securely positioned timber balance beams, stepping stones, low platforms, suitable climbing equipment

Hoops, balls of different sizes, bean-bags, cones, age-appropriate ramps, planks, trikes, scooters and/or balance bikes, tyres, crates, beams, coloured spots (for jumping on), sensory stones







Exploring, Investigate and Tinker...

An exploration and investigation area encourages children to be curious, experiment, problem-solve and discover how things work. By offering a range of interesting objects, tools and materials, children can investigate different properties, textures, sounds and movements through hands-on exploration. Opportunities for tinkering, making and experimenting allow children to follow their own questions, test ideas and make discoveries, supporting creativity, critical thinking and communication.

- Create a simple investigation station – use a low wooden table, bench, stable tree stump or cable reel as a surface for examining objects, experimenting and tinkering.
- Offer interesting objects and materials – provide natural collections such as pinecones, shells, stones, bark, feathers and leaves, alongside suitable everyday objects with different properties.
- Encourage tinkering and experimenting – offer simple objects that children can connect, arrange, balance, move or explore to discover how they work.
- Explore sound and movement – provide metal bowls, wooden beaters, bamboo, chimes and other objects that children can tap, shake, roll or move to investigate the sounds they produce.
- Make use of the wider environment – encourage children to explore trees, plants, insects, weather and natural sounds, recognising that investigations do not need to remain within a designated space.
- Keep resources accessible and flexible – use baskets, trays or a nearby storage area so children can independently select and transport tools and materials to wherever their investigations take them.





Core resources

Magnifying glasses, binoculars, mirrors, wooden trays, wicker baskets, observation containers, bug viewers, simple pulleys, suitable cogs and wheels, tubes, funnels, wooden blocks, natural objects such as stones, shells, bark, leaves and pinecones, and nature identification cards.

Mark-Making

Outdoor mark making offers opportunities for children to express ideas, represent experiences and communicate through different materials and movements. Larger surfaces and varied textures encourage children to experiment with marks on different scales, supporting creativity, coordination and early writing development.

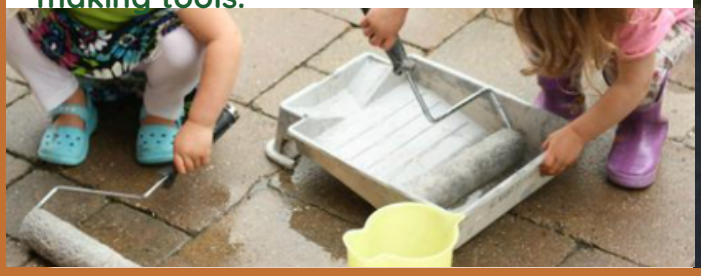
- Use vertical surfaces – attach suitable chalkboards or mark-making panels to fences or walls.
- Create a simple easel – securely attach paper to a wooden board, fence or freestanding frame.
- Make use of the ground – provide opportunities for chalk drawing and water painting on suitable paving.
- Introduce natural tools – offer sticks, leaves and other safe natural materials for creating marks and patterns.
- Offer different scales – provide large surfaces for sweeping movements alongside smaller spaces for more detailed marks.
- Make materials accessible – organise resources in baskets, containers or low shelving.

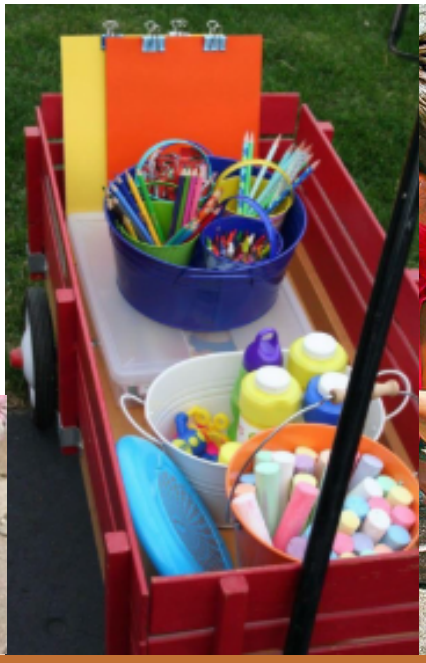
Don't forget, Mark making (like all areas) does not need to be restricted to a designated area. It is good for children to select and use resources for all areas and use them in others. Consider making resources accessible and moveable, perhaps being based in a cart or moveable trolley and throughout the outdoor environment so children can use them purposefully within their play. The aim is for mark making to arise naturally from children's interests and experiences.

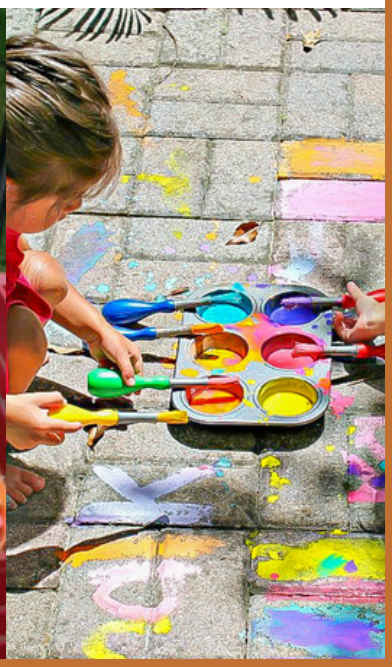
Core resources



Chunky chalk, pencils, crayons, charcoal, paper in different sizes, clipboards, paintbrushes (in different sizes), rollers, wooden easels, water containers, natural clay, sticks, leaves and suitable natural mark-making tools.







Reading

An outdoor reading and storytelling space offers opportunities for children to explore books, share stories and enjoy conversations in a calm, inviting environment. It supports listening, attention, vocabulary and narrative development, while providing opportunities for independent book exploration and meaningful interactions.

Books are an important part of continuous provision and can be placed in **all areas,** see the following page for more ideas!

- Choose a quieter location – use a sheltered corner, space beneath a suitable tree or area alongside a fence.
- Provide comfortable seating – offer wooden benches, stable logs, mats or outdoor cushions.
- Create a sense of enclosure – introduce a canopy, suitable fabric or natural screening.
- Make books accessible – store books in a weather-protected basket, box or outdoor storage unit (ideally, bring books back inside at the end of the day)
- Offer storytelling props – provide puppets, wooden figures and natural objects for inventing and retelling stories.
- Keep the space flexible – allow children to use it for independent reading, shared stories or quiet conversation.



Core resources

A varied selection of fiction and non-fiction books (these can be changed - the 'continuous' aspect is that books are continually offered.

Outdoor cushions, blankets, woven mats, puppets, wooden figures, story stones, natural storytelling props and suitable fabrics.









Books... in ALL areas

Books are an important part of continuous provision. While a designated reading area provides a calm, inviting space for children to independently explore books, share stories and enjoy reading with others, books should also be available throughout the outdoor environment to support children's interests, play and investigations.

Consider placing a carefully selected range of fiction and non-fiction books in different areas. For example, books about oceans and marine life might be available near water play, while books exploring different types of homes and buildings could inspire ideas in the construction area. Gardening books, wildlife identification guides and stories about the natural world can also encourage children to look more closely, ask questions and make connections with their own experiences.

Keep books accessible and relevant - this is how your continuous provision is maintained, whilst reviewing and rotating them in response to children's interests and emerging play.

Rememebr, the aim is not to direct children's activities through books, but to offer opportunities for children to independently explore information, develop vocabulary, make discoveries and draw inspiration for their own ideas.

Consider how books are presented and made accessible. Remember, less is often more. Rather than providing large piles of books, offer a small, carefully selected range displayed in inviting and accessible ways. For example, books could be placed in small wicker baskets, displayed on low shelves, positioned on tree stumps or hung securely from low branches using suitable holders. Think creatively about how books can become a natural part of the outdoor environment, without creating unnecessary clutter.



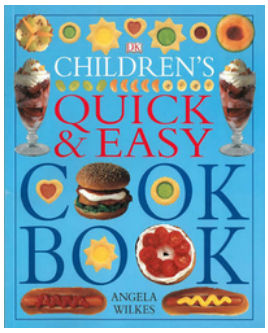




Book suggestions...

This selection of fiction and non-fiction books provides examples of how books can be incorporated across different areas of outdoor continuous provision. Books should be reviewed and changed to reflect children's interests, emerging play and developmental needs. The aim is to provide a varied and engaging selection that encourages curiosity, inspires ideas and supports children's exploration and learning.

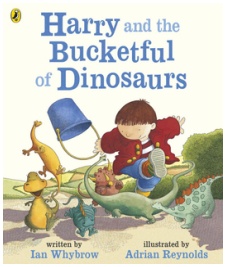
Mud kitchen





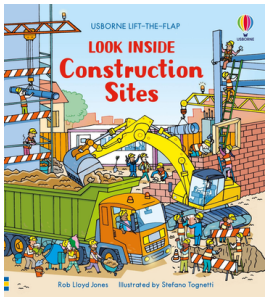
Small World



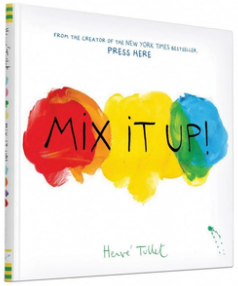


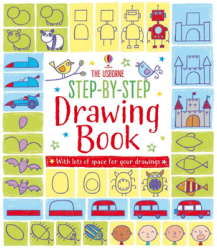
Construction





Mark-Making



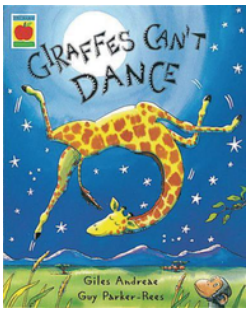


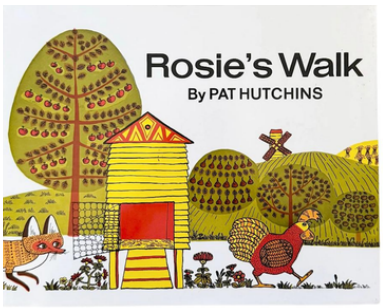
Sand Play





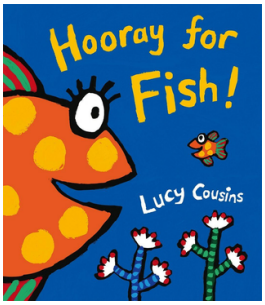
Gross Motor



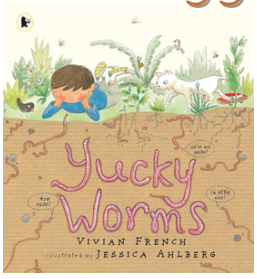


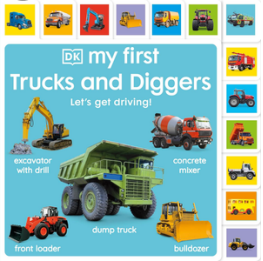
Water Play



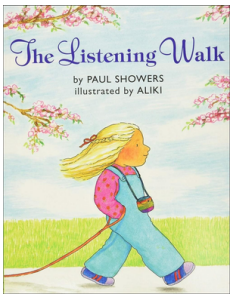


Digging Pit





Investigate and Explore





Maths and Literacy... is everywhere!

There is no need to create separate, designated areas for mathematics, literacy or other areas of learning outdoors. These opportunities naturally arise throughout continuous provision, as children explore, investigate, communicate and follow their interests.

For example, children might explore capacity and measurement in the water area, compare quantities and sizes during construction, recognise numbers through imaginative play or develop early writing skills through mark making.

Communication and language are woven throughout every area, as children negotiate, describe, question, explain and share their ideas.

Consider how mathematical and literacy resources can be meaningfully integrated into areas where they naturally support children's play, rather than introducing them simply to demonstrate a particular area of learning.

For example, measuring jugs in a mud kitchen, tape measures in construction or clipboards in a gardening area can encourage children to explore mathematical and literacy concepts for a real purpose.

It can also be useful to have a small collection of 'to hand' resources, stored in an accessible outdoor shed, trolley or cupboard. These can be introduced when relevant to children's play, interests or emerging learning, without needing to remain permanently available in every area.

The aim is not to turn every play experience into an adult-directed learning activity, but to ensure that resources are readily available when they can enhance children's existing play, extend their thinking or support their own investigations. Practitioners can observe children's interests and introduce resources sensitively, while allowing children to remain in control of their play.





Suggested 'to hand' resources:
Number cards, numeral stones, measuring tapes, rulers, metre sticks, weighing scales, balance scales, timers, number lines, large dice, clipboards, paper, pencils, chalk, notebooks, phonics mats/word mats, picture books, non-fiction books, letter formation mats, letter tiles, labels and suitable writing materials.

