



Section 6

Embedding care for our outdoor spaces into our experiences



This section is about specific impacts that can arise from a range of outdoor environments and how to mitigate these through working with children in participatory ways. The impact is influenced by several factors including:

- The amount of play, type, timing and location of that play by each child and the group as a whole
- The group size, age, abilities, needs and the levels of experience and knowledge about being in any given outdoor space
- The confidence and motivation of the practitioners to ensure timely preventative and proactive measures are taken
- The interplay of the group with the weather, seasons, other species and with the unique features of the landscape such as the geology, soil type and the gradient and aspects of any slopes


The examples used in this section are not exhaustive. Practitioners may be interested in exploring the further information signposted in the 'find out more' boxes and references across the guidance, and seek expert help where they need it.



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Each example contains a variety of information and most include:

- **Why this matters:** Background information about our rights and responsibilities or what needs to be considered.
- **Building on prior learning:** We need to follow children's interests and experiences. For example, a child who is struggling to move through a mud patch could be an opportunity to bring this to the groups attention and seek their thoughts about what to do.
- **Reflective thoughts:** To help us think about the wider context.
- **Reflective prompts:** These are identified by the  icon to help prompt reflective conversations with children.
- **Making a positive difference:** These are actions we can take with our group of children which will empower us all to make changes for the better.
- **Find out more:** A good place to start to find lots of further information and support.

“What approaches do we have to ensure children access and effectively use, develop and care for their natural environment?”

(Care Inspectorate, 2021)

What this section covers

6.1 Managing our impact proactively

6.2 Why soil matters

6.3 Mud

6.4 Digging

6.5 Footfall and trampling

6.6 Trees and shrubs

6.7 Willow structures

6.8 Gathering and using natural materials

6.9 Dead wood spotting

6.10 Animal allies

6.11 Food and composting

6.12 Compost cycle

6.13 Water in our outdoor space

6.14 Inland water margins

6.15 Exploring aquatic pond and stream life

6.16 Beach visits

6.17 Sand dunes

6.18 Rockpools

6.19 Fire experiences

6.20 Creating and constructing

6.21 Antisocial behaviours, including vandalism

6.22 Worn-out spaces

6.23 Sharing spaces



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6.1 Managing our impact proactively

Why this matters

Most of the time our children will be playing in outdoor spaces that will be subjected to high levels of use. Anticipating and therefore managing our impact proactively makes a positive difference:

- Children tend to feel safer and more comfortable in places that feel informal but cared for. A degraded, worn-out site often looks unhappy and has less play value. Its accessibility can be impaired.
- Almost all off-site greenspace is public space and our local communities will benefit from our positive actions.
- We need to maintain or improve the biodiversity of the space and protect its soils. The more native plants, animals and fungi, the healthier the place becomes and the greater the play possibilities that exist.
- Invasive species take over habitats and stop such a biodiverse mix. Some plant and animal diseases can be inadvertently spread by humans for example, by children transporting treasures to other sites. We need to be aware of any that exist on our site and know what to do.
- We need to ensure our local places are resilient and able to adapt to climate and environmental change.

If a setting or childminder adopts sustainable nomadic practices where children are moving from space to space during the day, then the site damage is unlikely to be significant, especially if the group numbers are low, the site is a well-used area by the local community and well-maintained.

“...children read not only the physical landscape but from traditions, practices and the attitudes of those around them. In other words, how the grounds are managed and maintained, the way things are ‘done’ or ‘not done’, was also seen to have considerable influence on children’s attitude and behaviour.”

(Titman, 1994)

See [NatureScot](#) for further information about invasive non-native species.

Neither pristine nor perfect

A site showing wear and tear is often much-loved by children. Do not assume that every mud patch or area of trampled ground is a bad thing. Sites are in a constant state of flux: puddles will come and go, grass will get worn in winter and so on. Focus on addressing issues that impact adversely on children’s play, on access, health and safety and, if off-site, that are covered by our rights and responsibilities under the Scottish Outdoor Access Code.

Be vigilant

As soon as adverse changes begin to happen, deal with them promptly. See the flowchart at [5.1 Children and practitioners caring for outdoor spaces together](#).

If necessary, stop using part of a space until it regenerates or can be used differently. Cordon off areas and rotate use if you have a space big enough. Having at least two spaces to play and making good use of local off-site places can help lessen impact. Children will then have a better idea of their impact as they compare each site.



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The greatest learning and understanding happens experientially

This means that we learn by doing which includes making mistakes, experimenting and, in the process, developing our knowledge and skills. There is no formula for getting things right as each outdoor space is unique as are the group of children who play there.



The importance of routines

Routines help young children feel secure as they come to know what is happening and what will happen next. We also have to be aware that children learn routines gradually and at their own pace. We have a role in showing children what to do, supporting and promoting choice and in explaining what is happening. Some children may not have enough receptive language to cope with this, especially when under stress, so visual and sound prompts can be helpful. **Realising the Ambition**, p33.

When introducing an ethos of care, it is often the little things that rub off on children over time and make a difference:

- Checking in on children to ensure they are feeling okay and are comfortable
- Greeting the tree, gently shaking a branch and asking permission to hang up the bags at the gathering space
- Looking to see if the new flowers that popped up are still present
- Talking aloud about what action we are taking and why, for example,
 - ☞ “Oh we must remember to leave lots of blackberries for our friendly birds and anyone else who may want some”
- Asking older children to check in on some of the younger children or those new to the group

“HSCS 1.10 I am supported to participate fully as a citizen in my local community in the way that I want.”

Adopting low impact approaches

These approaches can be adopted sensitively and sensibly so that they do not overly constrain children’s play. As much as possible, the emphasis will be on leaving any outdoor space as you found it or in a better state.

When damage occurs, prompt mitigating action is taken. This will require the group to adapt informally to the changing conditions on a daily and seasonal basis and to develop an awareness of their impact.



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There needs to be clear and simple expectations about using any given outdoor space: some of these expectations will come from the landowner but others will be developed as part of your ongoing discussions with children.

Selecting impact-resistant sites

This means avoiding environmentally sensitive areas and having a space with vegetation and soils that can withstand children and adults learning how to “be” outside. This includes learning experientially and from inadvertent mistakes. It is likely that a place will recover of its own accord given time and if left alone.

Often, what can be considered “waste” ground or marginal sites in urban areas have good potential for being used by children.

Remember to consider the human basics such as a gathering space, **toileting, hand washing** and shelter. Have a look at the main **Out to Play** guidance for more information and these **videos** for practical examples of how settings have managed toileting and handwashing outdoors.

Involving children in participatory and practical approaches to caring for the site

Maintaining or improving site biodiversity requires shared, sustained consideration and it forms a core part of the experience of outdoors for ELC. This is based upon our children’s understanding and experience of playing in these sites and a growing awareness of themselves as part of the space alongside other species. In addition, we need to develop meaningful processes that match our children’s interests, needs and maturity.

The importance of storying cannot be overstated. This includes stories about caring for birds, animals, insects, trees so children can engage inwardly and with their imagination. Useful further reading on this matter is Bruce, T., McNair, L., Whinnett, J. (2020). *Putting Storytelling at the Heart of Early Childhood Practice* Abingdon: Routledge.

