

Outdoor Learning Guide

First steps for early educators

family.



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Why do outdoor learning?

If you're reading this, you're at least curious about outdoor learning – and that's a great first step.

We couldn't make a guide long enough to fully dig into every good reason for doing outdoor learning. But in a sentence, outdoor learning helps make children healthier, happier, and more closely connected with this planet of ours.

Outdoor learning and children's health

It's no secret that being outside is good for your health. But what does that mean, in the day-to-day benefits for children?

Of course, there's the clear benefit of being able to run, climb, and roll about as much as you want. But beyond just physical activity, outdoor learning is great for children's health in two key ways:

- **Outdoor play boosts children's immune systems.** In a 2021 study from the University of Helsinki, researchers found that regular exposure to dirt from the forest floor (and the bacteria within it) helps strengthen children's own immune responses, a benefit which can follow them for years. You can read my whole [write-up of that study right here.](#)
- **Children move more when they're outside.** When you're learning in the great outdoors, you'll find many more opportunities to run, climb, crawl and explore during your lessons. This freedom of movement builds physical activity into every part of your day, rather than having your exercise isolated in a designated physical activity time.

Anne Therkselsen, an early educator based in Denmark, explains that for her, outdoor learning helps give children a real-life investment in nature, as they learn to exist within and alongside it:

"We teach the children to take care of nature as part of their education. We're just borrowing this space, so we need to act as guests. When we learn to respect and understand nature, we learn to respect and understand each other, too."

- Anne Therkselsen (Børnehuset Evigglad, Denmark)



Does growing a carrot make you more likely to eat it?

One of the more common ways to get started with outdoor learning is by keeping a vegetable garden. It's simple to set up, doesn't cost a lot, and offers lots of different opportunities for play and learning for little green thumbs.

And interestingly enough, a bit of gardening can reshape children's relationship to the leafy greens on their dinner plate. When you've played in the dirt where a carrot comes from, it no longer seems so scary to the picky palate.

To learn more and discover more benefits of gardening, you can [keep reading here](#).



Some things are best learned outside

Outdoor learning isn't just good for your physical health. It also changes the way children learn, and gives them unique lessons with a big impact on their relationship to nature.

Here are three big educational boosts children get from being outside:

1. Outdoor play helps make learning more engaging for children.

"Real-world stuff, objects that are concrete and solid, are more engaging for children than images of things," says Dr. David Sobel, Professor Emeritus at Antioch University. "When you're learning concepts outside, in relation to real objects, it's much more compelling than learning those ideas in relation to something more abstract, like pictures in a book."

2. Getting outside makes children more resilient.

In a [2021 study comparing outdoor preschools with conventional preschools](#), Dr.

Sobel and his research team found that spending more time outdoors helps children become more confident, better at taking initiative, more focused during lessons, and better able to form relationships with other children as well as adults.

3. Outdoor learning connects children to their community.

Young children are often shuttled from place to place, and can miss the opportunity to explore on their own. Outdoor learning allows children to explore the landscapes, communities, nature, and local history that defines the places we live. In that sense, it can give children a greater sense of connection to, and responsibility for, the community and nature around them.

How to get started

Getting into outdoor learning might seem intimidating, especially if you don't feel like you live near any ideal outdoor spaces. But as you explore more, you'll see that anyone (yes, including you) can find small ways to introduce outdoor learning in any context.

Plus, outdoor learning is bigger than ever. The more you look, the more resources you'll find to give you inspiration and support along the way.

Top tips for getting started with outdoor learning

Jo Skone has been practicing outdoor learning for over a decade, at Randolph Beresford Early Years Centre in London. Because she's right in the middle of an urban housing estate, she's had to be creative with finding the right space for outdoor learning.

Whether you're in the countryside or the concrete jungle, here are Jo's top tips for bringing your learning outdoors:

- **It's getting outside that counts – not where you do it.** A national forest might be picturesque, but your local park is just as full of new challenges, discoveries and lessons for children.
- **Remember that for children, any space feels three times bigger.** This might help you find new spaces to explore with your children.
- **Trust children to lead their learning.** Give children room to follow their curiosity and impulses out in nature, and be willing to adapt your learning plans to suit their interests.
- **Help parents understand all the benefits.** Sharing resources on the developmental benefits of outdoor learning can help defuse any concerns you might get from children's parents.
- **Let parents see all the fun.** Sending pictures of a gleaming child climbing a tree is another powerful way to get your whole community's support behind outdoor learning.

"Twenty years ago, we were pioneers, and it was difficult to get going with outdoor learning. Now there is a movement, there is knowledge, and great examples to draw from."

- Nilda Cosco, Co-Founder,
Natural Learning Initiative



→ If you'd like to see our full interview with Jo Skone, where she shares her best advice for getting started with outdoor learning, you'll find that [right here](#).



If you're just starting out with outdoor learning, it might be hard to imagine how it'd work with the outdoor space you've got in your own child care center. But don't worry: you don't need a forest in your back yard to get into outdoor learning.

UK-based educator Sue Cowley's no stranger to finding space for outdoor learning, even in the littlest nooks and crannies. Here are her top tips to keep in mind:

- **There's no corner too small.** Even if your backyard is half the size of a mattress, it could still become a mini sandbox, vegetable garden or muddy play area. [Even the littlest outdoor play zone](#) can give big benefits to children.
- **Bring in some small-scale nature.** You might build a ['bug hotel'](#) to collect and examine local insects, or a [homemade bird feeder](#) to say hello to our feathery friends. These little projects are easy to put together, and can start to open you up to other larger opportunities within outdoor learning.
- **Find new uses for old space.** Maybe you can't tear up your sidewalk, or your concrete driveway — but you can get chalk to use these surfaces as artistic canvasses, or use old cardboard boxes to build outdoor obstacle courses.

What spaces can you use for outdoor learning?

To give you an idea of all the different shapes and forms that outdoor learning can be, let's take a quick look at some spaces you could use:

- Your backyard
- Your nearest local park
- Your front sidewalk
- A local university's sports fields, used during off-hours
- A field trip to the arboretum
- A grassy boulevard on a quiet street
- Your neighbor's vegetable garden (with their permission)
- The grassy lawn of a retirement home (also with their permission)



How to coordinate with parents

If you're setting up outdoor learning at your child care setting, there's one key factor you can't overlook: parents.

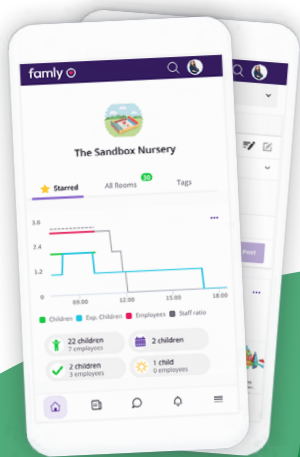
If parents aren't familiar with outdoor learning, they might be a little resistant to the idea. The good news is, it's easy to get everybody on board – it's just a question of good communication.

Here are two tips to help that happen:

- Connect with parents ahead of time for an information session. Talk about why you're doing outdoor learning, and what you'll do to keep children comfortable and safe while you're outside.
- Show parents that children are comfortable and happy. If you're using child care management software, you've got a terrific tool to share text and photo updates of your outdoor adventures with the parents at home.

"The Famly platform is great for sending updates, because it's so fast. I just spend 30 minutes at the end of the day firing off photographs of children dressed warmly, sitting round a fire and having hot cocoa. That does a lot to make parents comfortable with the whole thing."

- Jo Skone, Randolph Beresford Early Years Centre



Interested in seeing how **Famly** can help make outdoor learning an easy part of your everyday practice?

Sign up for a **demo today** at <https://www.famly.co/demo> and we'll walk you through it.

Outdoor learning, rain or shine

A big part of outdoor learning is being able to adapt, plan and thrive, even in inclement weather.

Now, this doesn't mean you need to force your toddlers to recreate the Shackleton expedition. Some days, the little ones might not be feeling it. But as you'll find out, much of young children's attitude toward outdoor learning is going to come from your own.

Here's how you can make outdoor learning work, no matter the weather.

How do children handle cold-weather outdoor learning?

Put simply, children follow your example. You've got to be prepared for the cold yourself, and model what it looks like to be resilient and enthusiastic outdoors. Jo Skone said it best in an interview with me:

"If you stand around saying, 'oh, it's cold, and I'm uncomfortable,' the children will pick up on that," she says. "Instead, you should be modeling enthusiasm for being outdoors. You have to be comfortable and confident, because you can't give what you haven't got."

Granted, being able to handle chilly weather doesn't always come naturally. But as Jo explains, building up that skill is in itself a valuable lesson for young children.

"You can give children responsibility by asking, 'We're all a bit chilly now, what can we do?' And they'll come up with ideas, like let's run around and play chase, let's get a hat, let's have a bonfire," she says. "Of course, you show you care that they keep warm and comfortable, but this is a way to nudge them toward learning to recognize and solve their own problems."



Scandinavia's secrets to outdoor learning in any weather

If we're looking for global examples of outdoor learning with children, Scandinavia's a perfect place to start. There's a saying in Denmark: "There's no such thing as bad weather, just bad clothing."

Sourced from several interviews with Scandinavian early educators, here are three tips we can borrow from our northerly neighbors:

- **Rethink what needs to happen indoors.** Does lunch, naptime or your math lesson really need to be inside? How might you adapt those to work outdoors? Odds are, the children will have an easier time adjusting than you.
- **Make proper preparations.** Good outdoor learning needs a bit of planning, like making sure you've all got the right clothes, and plenty of things to do. We'll have more on this just down below.
- **Keep your plans flexible.** You can never fully account for the weather, or for what children are feeling on a particular day. It's good to be able to adapt your lesson plans and activities for what your children, and the skies, will accommodate.



→ Want to learn more?

For more on how outdoor learning works in Scandinavia, you can read our coverage on that – both for [summer time](#), as well as the [cold winter months](#).

Checklist: What do you need for outdoor learning in early education?

It doesn't take much to get outside. But to really get the most out of outdoor learning, it helps to come with a plan in place. Here's what you might want to prepare ahead of time, if you're incorporating outdoor learning into your everyday practice.

General

No matter where you are, having these items in your outdoor learning toolkit will help make things run smoothly and safely.

- ❑ A set of walkie-talkies for staff
- ❑ High-visibility safety vests for children
- ❑ Toilet hygiene / diaper change kit
- ❑ First aid kit
- ❑ List of parents' contact information
- ❑ Cell phone with good coverage



For cold and rainy weather

Part of outdoor learning is being able to thrive and explore in inclement weather. To make that experience comfortable for everyone, here's what you should bring along.

- ❑ Proper warm clothes and rain gear for every staff member
- ❑ Spare winter jackets, rain coats and gloves in children's sizes
- ❑ A dry change of clothes for each child
- ❑ Physically active outdoor games, to help everyone keep warm
- ❑ A pack of hand warmers
- ❑ Several hot water bottles
- ❑ Warm treats to share, like a Thermos of hot cocoa

Keep in mind that you can get plenty of extra gear at your local thrift store or charity shop. Check during the warmer months to find even

Creating your own outdoor learning space

If you'd like to do more outdoor learning on your own property, these ideas can help you get that started.

- ❑ Sidewalk chalk, for outdoor art lessons
- ❑ Milk crates and spare planks, to create an obstacle course
- ❑ Scrap wood, to mark off a new muddy play corner
- ❑ Stepping stones or old logs, for building a simple backyard wandering path
- ❑ Soil and a plastic container, to create a simple outdoor planter box
- ❑ Plants ideal for [growing with children](#), like tomatoes or sunflowers

"When it's done well, outdoor learning looks unplanned. But great learning happens when someone plans it, prepares it, and can be adaptable and flexible with the children."

-Jo Skone, Randolph Beresford Early Years Centre



Featured interview: Nilda Cosco, Natural Learning Initiative

We called up Nilda Cosco, co-founder of the Natural Learning Initiative (NLI), to talk about what makes an excellent outdoor learning space – and how anybody can get involved.

The **NLI** is a unit within North Carolina State University's College of Design, which studies how we can design healthier, more enriching outdoor learning spaces for children. Their goal is to help educators understand how (and why) to design good outdoor learning spaces, and to conduct and promote research that gives us a sharper picture of why outdoor learning is so critical for children.

We've got some highlights from our conversation down below. Of course, if you'd like to [watch the full 45-minute interview](#), you can head over to the Family Early Years Blog.

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Family: In your experience, what are the biggest barriers preventing early educators from doing more outdoor learning?



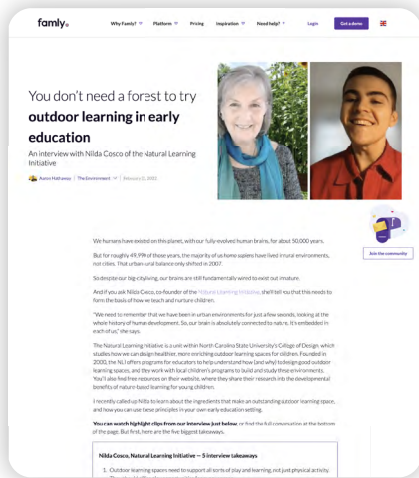
Nilda: There are both real and perceived barriers. In the case of many teachers, I think it's a problem of awareness and education, of just learning more about why outdoor learning is so valuable, and how little it takes to get started. Another main barrier is people saying they don't have the money. But that's very easy to counteract, as these environments are not as costly as you'd think. You can create a good outdoor learning space for less than it costs for a conventional playground of the same size.



Family: When you're planning an outdoor learning space, what do you think are the most important elements to consider?



Nilda: The first thing is diversity. Your environment has to change and reflect the seasons, because if it's static, it can lose attraction for children. So planting flowers, fruits and vegetables is a great way to get that, but you also need to adjust your perspective as an educator with the seasons. Whether you're covered in snow or piles of dry leaves, you should look at your learning space and ask children, what's interesting about this? What can we do here, in exploring new forms of play?



Want to hear more of Nilda's ideas on why you should dive into outdoor learning, and how you can do it? You can find our entire interview online at the [Family Early Years Blog](#).



Family: Can you give me some examples of small steps educators could take, in terms of modifying their backyard or garden space for more outdoor learning?



Nilda: There's almost always a corner where you could set up a simple planting box, where you can plant edible or seasonal plants, and use that to garden and play with children. If you've got a fence, you could hang old pots and pans from that and let children use those for musical play – though you might want to space that away from your classroom. Or, you could use flagstones or old logs to create a balancing obstacle course for children.



Family: I noticed you're careful to say 'outdoor learning space,' rather than 'playground.' Do you feel there's a meaningful difference between the terms?



Nilda: When we think of playgrounds, we often think of spaces focused on encouraging physical activity, like climbing and running. But not every child is going to be attracted to vigorous activity – many prefer pulling twigs, collecting rocks, or talking to each other, or pretend cooking. Playgrounds don't often accommodate these valuable forms of play as well, but you can design those easily into outdoor learning spaces. So, it's about acknowledging that outdoor learning is holistic, and must account for more forms of play and learning.



Family: What would you say to someone who's just getting started with outdoor learning?



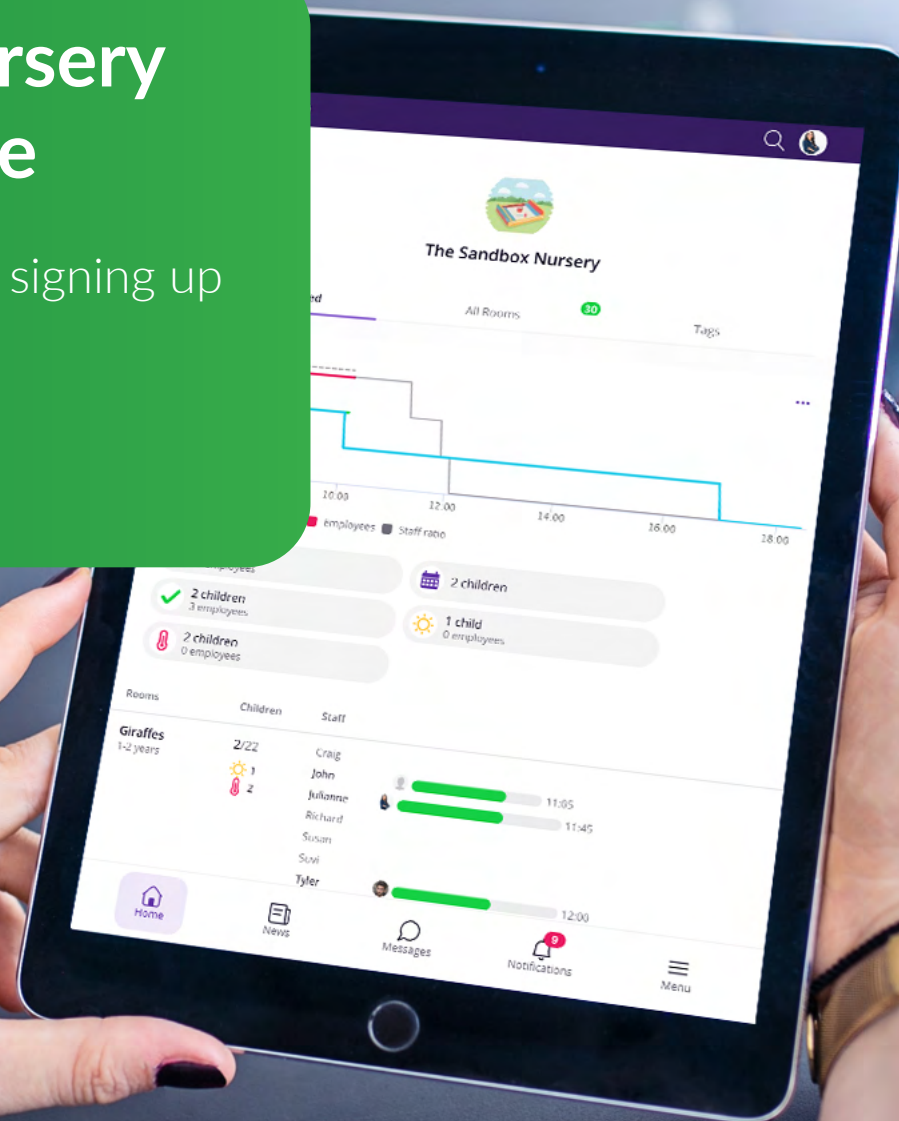
Nilda: First, this is possible, second, you are not alone. There are many people doing outdoor learning, and if you need help, [the NLI] has a lot of resources and materials on our website to help convince parents, policymakers and other colleagues that this is important. We see this like dropping a rock in the water, to start a ripple effect. Every little step you take in outdoor learning, no matter how small, is enough to make that ripple go further.



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How does outdoor learning work in the city?

If you live in a big city or the suburbs you might feel like all this is out of reach for you. But fear not! You don't need a lush leafy forest to give children a rich experience with outdoor learning.

Let's look at what you can do to get outside, no matter where you're at.

Why place-based learning might be your perfect starting point

Especially if you're in a big city, you might start getting outside more by following the pedagogy of place-based learning. Put simply, it's a form of outdoor learning that's got more focus on built-up urban environments.

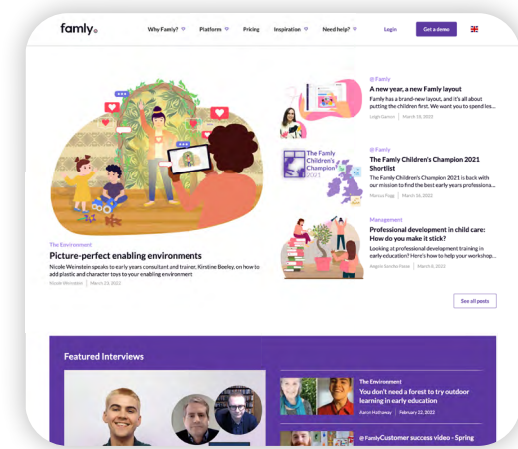
Dr. David Sobel of Antioch University, who helped come up with the term in the 1990s, tells me:

"We developed the term to be more widely inclusive. It's not just about learning in nature, but also about exploring the built environment, local culture, the arts, and history."

Sure, the woods can be a great place to play and learn. But so can your neighborhood vegetable patch, the local park, or a grassy boulevard on a quiet street.

Place-based learning taps into children's inherent fascination with nature, and makes it accessible no matter where you are. Splashing in puddles, picking dandelions, and climbing trees aren't things we teach to children — it just springs from their natural curiosity.

Place-based learning frames your activities in this curious, active context, and helps keep nature close at hand.



If you'd like to learn more about how you can get involved, you can visit the [Family Early Years Blog](#), or find more resources via Antioch University's [Inside-Outside Network](#).

How you can help connect children with their community

Young children are often shuttled from place to place — from home, to child care, to the grocery store, and back. When we do that, children can miss the opportunity to explore on their own, and get to know the in-between spaces that shape our cities and communities.

Getting outside in the city allows children to explore the landscapes, communities, nature, and local history that defines the places we live. In that sense, it can give children a greater sense of connection to, and responsibility for, the communities around them. Plus, it's great for learning routes, wayfinding, and positional and directional language.



Bringing “just go outside!” from idea to reality

It might sound overly simple, but getting started with place-based learning just comes down to moving things outside. You don't need a master plan in place — just challenge yourself to get outside, in whatever capacity you can, for a chunk of each day, or perhaps one day a week. Of course, if you're headed somewhere completely new, it's good to scout things out and do a risk assessment first.

Think about everything you do indoors — does all of it have to be indoors? Could you do story time outside, or move your messy play out into a park or a garden?

Here are some small, easy examples of what those outside moves might look like:

- You and your children could collect twigs in your local park, and use them to spell out the letters of the alphabet, or everybody's names.
- You could make music using sticks and a chain-link fence, as you take a walk to learn about the history behind your nearby park. What was there before they built the park?
- You could invite a trusted neighbor or community member to help start a garden with your children, and tend it throughout the season.

Staying safe with outdoor learning

While it doesn't take much to just get outside, you'll need to do a bit of planning to make sure everybody stays safe and comfortable during outdoor learning.

Outdoor learning requires a strong knowledge of your children, yourself, and your physical surroundings. You may need certain qualifications or permission slips, depending on your licensing agency or education authority.

To keep everyone safe, ask yourself the following questions:

- Where might the children escape from the outdoor space? How can you ensure this doesn't happen?
- How will you ensure that your team can have sight of all of the space at all times?
- How will staff working outdoors make contact with those inside, if something goes wrong?
- What are your procedures for making sure all children are accounted for at all times?
- How will staff know where to be located in outdoor/indoor spaces at different times of the day?
- Are there any considerations about the public accessing the space?
- How will you find the extra time needed for staff to plan for/ set out resources in the space?
- What additional staff training/equipment might you need to support best practice?



If you're doing outdoor learning in a local park or garden, follow these two safety practices:

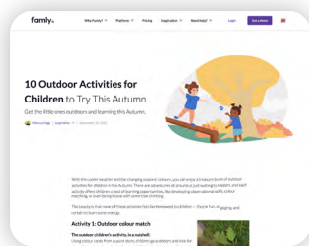
- **Establish a meeting area.** Just like where you'd do during circle time, having an outdoor meeting spot is a must for trips to parks, gardens or nature reserves. It gives you a place to gather, and gives children a place to come back to.
- **Mark some boundaries for where children can roam.** Educator Hannah Lindner-Finlay, published Dr. David Sobel's *The Sky Above and the Mud Below*, recommends marking off "stop spots" for your first few visits to a new area, to help children adjust their expectations toward where they can move.

Checklist: Key safety items for outdoor learning

- A set of walkie-talkies for staff
- High-visibility safety vests for children
- Toilet hygiene / diaper change kit
- First aid kit
- Hand sanitizer
- Children's necessary medications
- An Epi-pen, in case of severe allergies
- Plenty of sunscreen and water, for warm weather
- Plenty of warm clothes and dry spares, for cold weather
- List of parents' contact information
- Cell phone with good coverage



Activities for every season: Fall



Looking for more autumnal activities? You might like our article, [10 Outdoor Activities for Children to Try This Autumn](#).

Science and observation: The rotting pumpkin experiment

You can easily boost children's observation skills with this rotting pumpkin experiment — it's both icky and interesting. Plus, it's a great use for your leftover squash, especially after Halloween.

Ideal for ages:

4 - 7 years

What you'll need:

- A pumpkin (any type of pumpkin will work)
- An area where you can leave the pumpkin without it becoming lunch for some wildlife
- A diary or notebook to record your observations

How to do it:

Place a cut pumpkin outside, in a place where you can easily see it or walk to it. Then, each day, go check it out with your children to watch the way it decays. Explain scientific words like hypothesis, data, and observation and teach the children how to use these terms correctly.

Record the children's observations of the slow decay of your pumpkin. You might want to read to them what they observed the day before, and ask them if they see anything different. You could also record their observations and play that back to them each day before they look for any changes. The idea is to guess what you think will happen and watch to see if that actually is what happens — it's a big part of our observation skills.

Activities for every season: Winter

Make frozen overnight art

Here's some winter art that's eco-friendly. Plus, this activity can start a wonderful conversation with children about how we can find water as a liquid, a solid (ice) and gas (steam and vapour) in our world.

Ideal for ages:

3 and up

What you'll need:

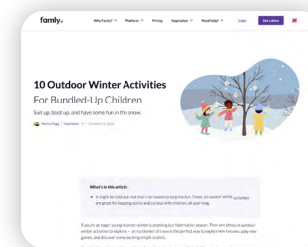
- Shaped containers for freezing water
- Natural elements (twigs, leaves, berries, pine cones)
- Water
- Something to hang your ornaments, like twine, yarn or ribbon
- Freezer space or freezing temperatures

How to do it:

Make sure your container will fit into your freezer – it doesn't have to be large. Whether you collect them outside or have them on hand, start by placing your natural elements in the freezing container. You can arrange them to form a pattern or a scene if you want to make it more decorative.

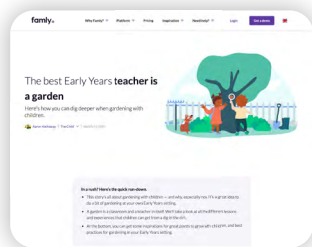
Then, add a few centimetres of water to submerged your treasures. Place both ends of your twine, yard or ribbon at least three centimeters into the water, allowing the loop to stick out. Now, pop your container into the freezer.

Once the ice is fully set, remove it from the container – you'll have a glittering, icy prism full of natural treasures, perfect for outdoor decorating. Use the loop to hang your ice art in a tree or outside a window.



We've got activities to last you through the winter. Check our full article, ['10 Outdoor Winter Activities for Bundled-up Children.'](#)

Activities for every season: Spring



Want to give your green thumbs a go? We've got a garden of inspiration blooming on our blog. [Click right here to dig into gardening with children!](#)

Decorate your own planting pots

Decorating a plant pot personalizes the experience of growing a pot plant, and makes each seedling more individual. It's amazing to see how unique each pot comes out, despite giving a class of children the same instructions. Let their creativity run wild!

Ideal for ages:

3 and up

What you'll need:

- Terracotta or plastic pots
- A selection of recycled containers such as metal cans or buckets if you wish to use them
- PVA glue, paint, old gardening magazines, twine, paintbrushes or marker pens
- If using mosaics - pebbles or tiles and adhesive

How to do it:

Familiarise yourself with the plant pot you're using for this. Terracotta is absorbent, making it suitable for decorating using marker pens or paint. Plastic pots are difficult to draw on, so you might want to use glue to apply decorative items like buttons, sequins, beads, and pictures instead. Place the decorations in containers on the tables where the children will be working and allow them to choose how they wish to decorate their pots, demonstrating how to use the glue safely. You can also seal the children's decorations by applying a coat of PVA paint when you're done.

Activities for every season: Summer

Go on a listening walk

Take your children on a walk around your neighborhood on the hunt for all sorts of ambient sounds. Make sure to bring your listening ears!

Ideal for ages:

3 and up

What you'll need:

- A suitable walk for your children (e.g. to a local park)
- Adults to chaperone
- High-visibility vests for your children
- Recording device
- Notebook
- Pen

How to do it:

Take the children on a walk in your local area, and explain that during your walk you are going to listen out for sounds and collect them. You could either make a note of the sounds you hear, or take a recording with your phone. Encourage the children to listen carefully and pick up on background sounds, too. Talk about the sounds you hear – which of them are from nature and which are man-made? This is a useful activity for developing phonological awareness.

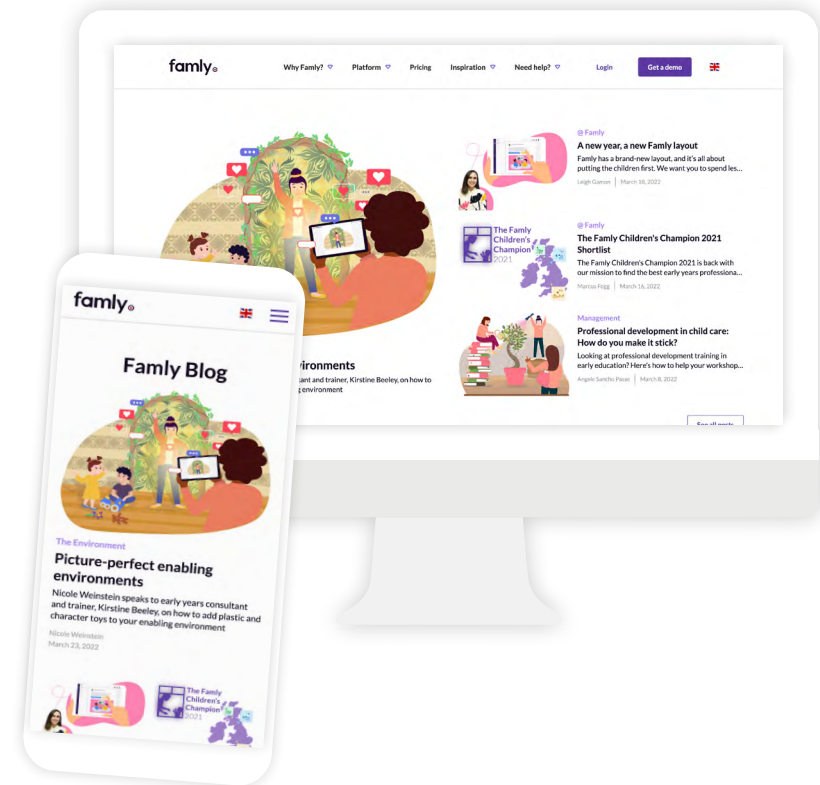


Make play while the sun shines! More sunny summertime outdoor activities are [just a click away](#) - come check it out.

There's more than the great outdoors

If you liked this guide, you should check out the Family Early Years Blog. There, you'll find hundreds more stories about early education and how children grow up. We're here to make resources for little ones, and the grown-ups who care for them.

We can also send the best stories straight to your inbox. To join thousands of other educators and parents on our newsletter, just scan the QR code below, or [click right here](#).



Family can give you more time to get outside. Let us take care of the paperwork, so you can focus on the children.

Head to family.co/demo, and we'd love to show you how a little bit of software makes your day a lot easier.