



Nottingham Trent
University



Reimagining Outdoor Learning

A practice-led approach to agency and environment

Written by Rebekah Gear



Acknowledgments

This toolkit is the result of close-to-practice research carried out with children and practitioners in an English EYFS setting.

I am grateful to the children who shared their voices, preferences, and honest reflections about their outdoor experiences. Their insights shaped this research and every page of this resource.

And finally, with sincere thanks to Roanne Torr and Dr Aaron Bradbury, whose research, guidance, and sector leadership meaningfully shaped my thinking and development of this toolkit.

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Introduction

Foreword

Early childhood education is built on a profound belief that children are capable, curious, and active participants in their own learning. Nowhere is this more visible than outdoors, where children move freely, test ideas, take risks, and express themselves with a confidence that often exceeds what we see indoors.

This toolkit emerges from a close-to-practice research project that questioned how to develop children's agency within the outdoors environment. The research placed children's voices at the centre, and through photographs, conversations, and observations, children showed what matters to them outdoors, what excites them, what worries them, and what helps them feel confident to explore. Their insights provided an opportunity to challenge current practice and revisit the environment and reframe both adult language and assumptions around risk and independence.

The Outdoor Agency Toolkit I have designed aims to support practitioners in creating outdoor spaces where children's choices are honoured, their ideas shape provision, and their agency is not only recognised but actively nurtured. It offers practical tools, reflective prompts, and research-informed guidance that can be adapted to any early childhood setting.

Most importantly, this toolkit is an invitation:

to listen more closely,
to step back more often,
and to trust more deeply in children's capabilities.

I hope it supports you in creating outdoor environments where every child feels empowered to explore, experiment, and take ownership of their learning.

Rebekah

Children are active agents in their own development

Birth to 5 Matters, 2021

Purpose of this Toolkit

The approach

Outdoor environments offer children unique opportunities to express agency: to choose, to act, to take risks, and to shape their own learning. This toolkit supports early childhood practitioners to create outdoor spaces where children's voices are heard, their choices valued, and their independence is nurtured.

What's included

The toolkit provides:

- Practical tools for gathering child voice
- Strategies for supporting positive risk-taking
- Guidance on the adult role outdoors
- Templates for reflective practice
- Approaches for strengthening home–school alignment

Who is the toolkit for?

This toolkit is designed for all practitioners working within early childhood, who want to create outdoor environments where children's agency, independence, and confidence can flourish. It supports teachers, early years educators, support staff and leaders to translate research-informed principles into everyday practice, offering practical tools that bridge theory and action.

It is also relevant for anyone involved in shaping children's outdoor experiences, including families, by providing shared language, reflective prompts, and strategies that help children thrive as capable, confident agents in outdoor spaces.



How to use this toolkit

This toolkit is a practical guide to strengthening children's agency outdoors. Use it to spark ideas, reflect on practice, and make small, meaningful changes that enrich children's experiences through the following:

- Inspire practice: Dip into the tools, prompts, and examples to shape daily interactions and support child-led exploration.
- Develop outdoor spaces: Use the frameworks to review your environment, identify gaps, and plan improvements that increase choice, challenge, and independence.
- Build home–school relationships: Share the parent-facing materials to explain your approach and create a shared understanding of outdoor learning
- Support staff CPD: Use the discussion prompts, scenarios, and Action Research Cycle in team meetings or training to develop confident, reflective practitioners.

This toolkit is designed to grow with your setting and support ongoing reflection, collaboration, and research-informed change. It is designed to be flexible, adaptable, and rooted in real practice and both the voices and experiences of children.

Why this Matters: Policy, Practice and the Place of Agency

High-quality outdoor provision is a statutory expectation in the EYFS, yet current policy offers little guidance on what meaningful outdoor learning should look like or how children actually experience it.

Crucially, key documents such as the EYFS Framework (DfE, 2024) and Development Matters (DfE, 2023) make no reference to children's agency, despite its centrality to autonomy, inclusion, and child-led learning.

This absence is reflected in practice: early findings from this research project demonstrated that children often avoid challenge, mess, and risk, echoing adult messages they have internalised. In contrast, Birth to 5 Matters (Early Education, 2021) positions agency as fundamental, emphasising children's right to choose, influence, and act within their environment.

This toolkit responds to these policy gaps by offering a research-informed model for creating outdoor environments where children can develop confidence, independence, and a strong sense of their own agency.

Children have real understanding only of that which they invent themselves.

Jean Piaget

Defining Agency

Agency refers to a child's capacity to act independently, make choices, and influence their environment.

Outdoors, agency is visible in small but significant moments: choosing a route up the climbing frame, deciding how to use a loose part, or returning repeatedly to a space that feels meaningful to them.

Children demonstrate agency when they:

- Initiate their own play
- Make decisions about materials
- Take manageable risks
- Express preferences and dislikes
- Influence the direction of learning

Agency grows when adults trust children, step back at the right moments, and create conditions that invite exploration.

Every child must be free to express their thoughts and opinions and to access all kinds of information, as long as it is within the law.

UN Rights of the Child Article 13
(Freedom of Expression)



Graphic title here

Stories from the Study

A Research Review

1. Adult language about risk matters

Children's confidence increased when adults used supportive, risk-positive language. When adults framed challenge as something manageable rather than dangerous, children were more willing to explore and persist.

2. Home experiences shape confidence

Children's choices outdoors were strongly influenced by expectations at home. Many avoided activities they believed adults at home would disapprove of, showing how family attitudes directly affect children's willingness to take risks.

3. Choice increases engagement

When children could choose materials and spaces freely, their play became more sustained, creative, and purposeful. Open-ended choice supported deeper engagement than adult-directed areas.

4. Observation matters

Practitioners noticed richer expressions of agency when they stepped back and observed before intervening. Reduced adult direction allowed children to initiate, problem-solve, and take ownership of their play.



The Outdoor Agency Model

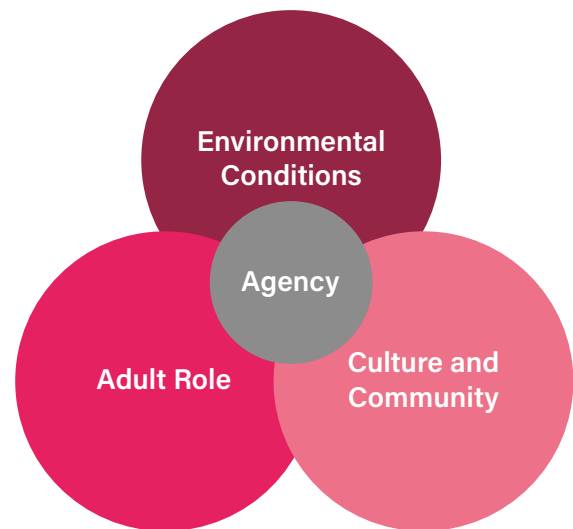
How environments, adults, and culture work together to shape children's agency outdoors

Children's agency does not emerge by chance. It is shaped through a dynamic interplay between the environment, the adults within it, and the wider culture of the setting.

Findings from the research highlighted that children's experiences outdoors were deeply influenced by the choices available to them, the language adults used around risk, and the expectations they carried from home. These insights align with wider early childhood theory, which positions agency as relational, co-constructed, and embedded within social, cultural, and physical contexts.

The Outdoor Agency Model brings these elements together into a clear, practical framework. It recognises that the outdoor environment is not a passive backdrop but an active pedagogical space, one that can either enable or inhibit children's autonomy. It also acknowledges the crucial role of adults as facilitators, co-learners, and risk supporters, and the importance of a shared culture that values children's voices, preferences, and evolving capabilities

The model is organised into three interconnected components:



- 1. Environmental Conditions:** The physical environment shapes what children feel able to do. When spaces are choice-rich, open-ended, risk-enabled, flexible, and designed for independence, children are more likely to explore, take initiative, and express agency. These conditions reflect the research finding that children's engagement deepened when they could choose materials, move freely, and test themselves physically and emotionally.
- 2. The Adult Role:** Adults influence children's agency through their presence, language, and decisions. The research showed that children were more confident when adults framed risk positively and stepped back to observe before intervening. The model identifies six key roles for adults: facilitator, co-learner, observer, risk supporter, responsive planner, and nature guide. These roles enable practitioners to adopt a stance that empowers rather than directs.
- 3. Culture and Community:** Agency is strengthened when the wider culture of the setting supports it. This includes shared language about risk, alignment between home and school expectations, and a commitment to respecting children's preferences. The research revealed that children often avoided activities they believed adults at home would disapprove of, highlighting the need for consistent, collaborative messages around independence and outdoor play.

Together, these components form a practical, research-informed model that helps practitioners design outdoor environments where children's agency can flourish. The following pages explore each element in more detail.

Environmental Conditions

Children's agency is shaped powerfully by the environments they inhabit. Outdoor spaces that are thoughtfully designed and intentionally structured can either open up possibilities for autonomy or quietly restrict them.

The research showed that when children had genuine opportunities to choose, adapt, and influence their surroundings, their confidence, independence, and engagement increased significantly. The following five conditions describe the environmental features that most strongly support agency outdoors.

1. Choice rich

Environments that offer meaningful choice allow children to select materials, spaces, and challenges that align with their interests and motivations. When children can decide where to go and what to use, their play becomes more purposeful and self-directed. This reflects the study's finding that children engaged more deeply when they were free to follow their own ideas rather than adult-defined pathways.

2. Open ended

Open-ended resources, such as loose parts, natural materials, and flexible equipment, invite multiple possibilities rather than single, predetermined outcomes. These materials encourage experimentation, creativity, and problem-solving, enabling children to shape their play in ways that reflect their thinking. Open-endedness supports agency by removing the 'right way' to play and replacing it with endless potential.

3. Flexible

Flexible environments can be rearranged, adapted, and shaped by children. Movable resources, reconfigurable spaces, and opportunities to construct or transform areas give children a sense of ownership. Flexibility signals that the environment is responsive to children's ideas, not fixed around adult priorities. This adaptability mirrors the iterative, child-led nature of the research cycles themselves.

4. Risk-enabled

Risk-enabled environments allow children to test themselves physically and emotionally within safe, supported boundaries. The research highlighted that children were more confident when adults framed risk positively, helping them assess challenge rather than avoid it. Risk-enabled spaces communicate trust: they tell children that their bodies, decisions, and judgements are valued.

5. Designed for independence

Independence flourishes when children can access materials without adult mediation. Self-serve resources, reachable storage, and clear pathways empower children to initiate play, return to ideas, and manage their own learning. The study showed that when children did not need to seek permission or assistance to access materials, their agency became more visible and sustained.



When outdoor spaces embody these five conditions, they become co-constructors of children's experiences, shaping how children move, choose, explore, and express themselves. In this way, the environment actively participates in the development of agency, rather than simply hosting it.

The environment is not a backdrop; it is an active partner in learning.

Adult Role

Adults play a pivotal role in shaping how children experience agency outdoors. The research showed that children's confidence, willingness to take risks, and depth of engagement were all influenced by the stance adults adopted.

When adults stepped back, observed, and used positive, enabling language, children demonstrated greater autonomy. However, when adults controlled the space, directed play, or emphasised risk avoidance, children's choices narrowed. The adult role, therefore, is not simply supervisory; it is pedagogical, relational, and deeply influential.

1. Facilitating Learning

Facilitators create conditions where children's ideas can unfold. Rather than directing play, they offer prompts, resources, or language that extend thinking without taking ownership away from the child. Facilitation supports agency by keeping the child's agenda at the centre.

2. Co-learners alongside children

Co-learning positions adults as partners in inquiry rather than instructors. This stance communicates respect for children's ideas and acknowledges their expertise in their own play. Co-learning strengthens relationships and models curiosity, collaboration, and shared problem-solving.

3. Observing and documenting

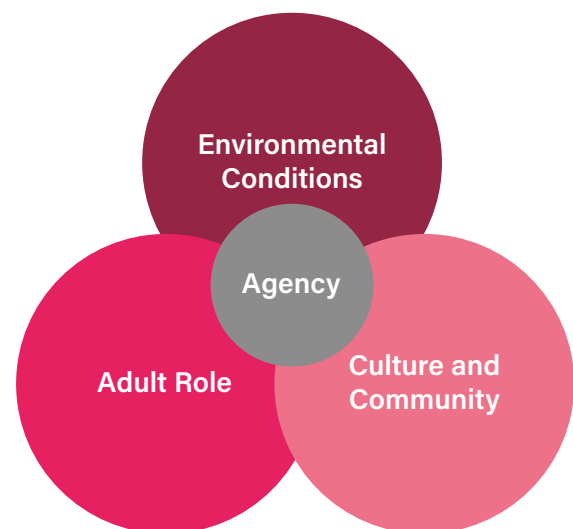
Observation is a powerful tool for understanding children's preferences, motivations, and emerging capabilities. The research highlighted that when adults paused to watch before intervening, they noticed more authentic expressions of agency. Documentation, through notes, photos, or reflection, helps practitioners plan responsively and honour children's voices.

4. Supporting safe risk-taking

Adults act as risk supporters, helping children assess challenge rather than avoid it. This includes using positive, enabling language, such as "How could you do this safely?", and trusting children's judgement. When adults frame risk as something to be managed rather than feared, children develop confidence, resilience, and self-awareness.

5. Planning responsively

Responsive planning involves adapting the environment based on what children show us they need. This might mean adding new materials, rearranging spaces, or removing barriers that limit independence. Responsive planning mirrors the iterative nature of the research cycles adopted within this study, which include: observe → adjust → observe again.



6. Guiding children's connection with nature

Adults help children develop a relationship with the natural world by drawing attention to seasonal changes, natural materials, and ecological processes. This guidance is gentle and invitational, supporting children to explore, care for, and feel connected to their outdoor environment.



Adults should stand back enough for children to take responsibility for their own learning.

Tina Bruce (2011)



Culture and Community

Agency is not only shaped by the environment and adult interactions; it is also influenced by the wider culture of the setting.

The research revealed that children often carried expectations from home into their outdoor play, avoiding activities they believed adults would disapprove of. A strong, consistent culture helps children feel safe to explore, take risks, and express preferences.

1. Independence is celebrated

When independence is recognised and valued, children feel empowered to take initiative. Celebrating independence reinforces the message that children are capable, trusted, and competent.

2. Children's preferences are respected

Respecting children's likes, dislikes, and choices communicates that their perspectives matter. This respect strengthens their sense of identity and belonging.

3. Adults share a consistent language about risk

When all adults use similar language and expectations, children receive clear, coherent messages about what is safe, possible, and encouraged. Consistency reduces mixed signals and builds confidence.

4. Home and school values align

Children thrive when families and practitioners share an understanding of the importance of outdoor play, independence, and risk-taking. Alignment helps children feel secure in their choices and reduces the tension between home-based restrictions and school-based opportunities.



Understanding Agency Outdoors

Why the outdoors matters

The outdoors offers possibilities that indoor environments simply cannot replicate. It is a space where children encounter freedom, uncertainty, and challenge in ways that reveal their capabilities and strengthen their sense of agency. The research showed that children often behaved differently outdoors: they took on new roles, attempted greater risks, and demonstrated independence that was less visible inside. These moments were not accidental but were enabled by the qualities of the outdoor environment.

Space for movement and challenge

Outdoors, children have room to run, climb, balance, build, and test their physical limits. This physical freedom supports agency by allowing children to choose the level of challenge they feel ready for. The research showed that when adults framed risk positively, children were more confident to explore these challenges, revealing resilience and competence that might remain hidden indoors.

Sensory rich experiences

Wind, rain, mud, textures, sounds, and changing light create a sensory landscape that continually invites curiosity. These sensory experiences support children to make decisions based on what they feel, see, and hear, strengthening their ability to assess risk, adapt, and problem-solve. The natural variability of the outdoors encourages children to respond in the moment, deepening their engagement.

Opportunities for independence

Outdoor spaces naturally lend themselves to independence. Children can move freely between areas, access materials, and initiate play without waiting for adult permission. In the study, children showed greater ownership of their actions outdoors, especially when environments were designed for independence and adults stepped back to observe before intervening.

Natural unpredictability

Weather, seasons, and the changing environment introduce uncertainty that cannot be manufactured indoors. This unpredictability supports agency by offering children real decisions to make, including: where to play, how to adapt, what to use, and how to respond to changing conditions. It also encourages resilience and flexible thinking, qualities that emerged strongly in the children's feedback during the research cycles.

A context where children can lead

Outdoors, children often take on leadership roles, negotiate with peers, and shape the direction of their play. The research highlighted that children's preferences became more visible outside, and their choices were more confidently expressed. When adults listened and responded to these choices, children's agency became more pronounced and sustained.

Outdoors, children often take on roles, risks, and responsibilities that reveal their capabilities.



The Role of Risk

Risk is a natural and necessary part of childhood. When children encounter challenge, uncertainty, and physical or emotional stretch, they learn about themselves and the world in ways that cannot be replicated through adult-controlled experiences.

The research showed that children were more confident outdoors when adults framed risk positively and supported them to think through their decisions, rather than stepping in to prevent challenge.

Here are some of the things children learn from taking risks:

Judging challenge

Children learn to assess what feels safe, possible, or too difficult. This builds decision-making skills and supports their developing sense of capability.

Understanding their bodies

Climbing, balancing, running, lifting, and navigating uneven ground help children learn how their bodies move, how strong they are, and how to adjust to stay safe.

Building resilience

Risk involves uncertainty. When children try, adapt, and try again, they develop persistence and emotional resilience.

Developing confidence

Successfully managing risk strengthens children's belief in themselves. Each challenge met becomes evidence of their competence.

Trusting themselves

Risk supports children to listen to their instincts, trust their judgement, and make choices based on what they feel ready for. This is a core component of agency.



The more risks you allow your children to make, the better they learn to look after themselves.

Roald Dahl



How Adults Support Safe, Meaningful Risk Taking

Adults play a crucial role in shaping how children experience risk.

The research showed that children were more willing to explore when adults used risk-positive language, such as:

"How could you do this safely?"

"What do you think your body can manage?"

"Show me how you're thinking about doing this."

This approach positions adults as risk supporters, not risk controllers.

Adults enable meaningful risk by:

- Observing before intervening
- Offering language that helps children think through decisions
- Trusting children's capabilities
- Modelling calm, confident responses
- Ensuring the environment offers a manageable, developmentally appropriate challenge

When adults frame risk as something to be explored rather than avoided, children feel empowered to test themselves, make decisions, and grow.



Risk is not the opposite of safety; it is part of learning.

Outdoors, children often take on roles, risks, and responsibilities that reveal their capabilities. When adults support this with trust, positive language, and thoughtful observation, risk becomes a powerful catalyst for agency.

Home - School Influences

Children do not arrive in the outdoor environment as blank slates. Their confidence, preferences, and willingness to take risks are shaped long before they step into a setting.

The research revealed that children often carried expectations from home into their outdoor play, expectations that influenced what they felt able, allowed, or confident enough to do.

Some children came into the setting with strong physical confidence, familiarity with outdoor equipment, and encouragement to explore. Others had been taught, implicitly or explicitly, to avoid risk, mess, or physical challenge. These home-based messages shaped their choices outdoors and influenced how they engaged with the environment.

What our children told us

Children's comments offered clear insight into the home influences shaping their behaviour outdoors. Some children had absorbed messages that climbing or physical challenge were unsafe, limiting their willingness to explore. Others lacked familiarity with certain equipment, reducing their confidence and readiness to try.

Many had internalised adult attitudes toward mess, which restricted their sensory engagement and comfort outdoors. Together, these statements highlight how children's outdoor choices are deeply connected to the values, routines, and expectations they experience beyond the setting.

"My mum won't let me play on the gymnastics because I banged my nose"

"I don't like getting wet and dirty clothes"

"I don't like getting my shoes sandy"

"I don't like the swings because I am not allowed to have them in my house"

Why this matters for presence

Understanding home-school influences helps practitioners:

1. Scaffold confidence: Children who have been encouraged to avoid risk may need gentle, consistent support to build trust in their own abilities.
2. Respect starting points: A child's hesitation is not a lack of capability; it is often a reflection of the messages they have received.
3. Bridge home and school values: Open communication with families can help align expectations and build shared understanding about the importance of outdoor play, independence, and manageable risk.
4. Plan responsively: Knowing a child's background helps practitioners design experiences that build confidence gradually and celebrate small steps toward independence.

Children's outdoor agency is strengthened when practitioners understand the stories they bring with them.

By recognising the influence of home experiences, practitioners can respond with empathy, intentionality, and support, helping every child develop confidence, independence, and a positive relationship with the outdoors.

Practitioner Tools

Photo-Voice Tool

Photo-Voice is a powerful method for accessing children's authentic perspectives on the outdoor environment. By giving children a camera and inviting them to capture what they like, dislike, or want to change, practitioners shift control into children's hands. This approach aligns with the project's commitment to child voice and agency, allowing children to document their experiences in ways that feel natural, meaningful, and self-directed.

Using Photo-Voice helps practitioners see the environment through children's eyes. It reveals the spaces they gravitate towards, the areas they avoid, and the subtle barriers that may not be visible through adult observation alone. These insights can directly inform planning, risk assessment, and environmental adjustments.

Why Photo-Voice matters

- Gives children control: Children choose what to photograph, placing them in the role of decision-maker.
- Reveals authentic preferences: Images show what children truly value, not what adults assume they value.
- Highlights barriers to agency: Avoided spaces, disliked materials, or areas associated with fear or discomfort become visible.
- Supports planning: Practitioners can use the images to adapt provision, respond to concerns, and enhance independence.

Photo-Voice prompts

Use simple, open invitations that encourage children to lead:

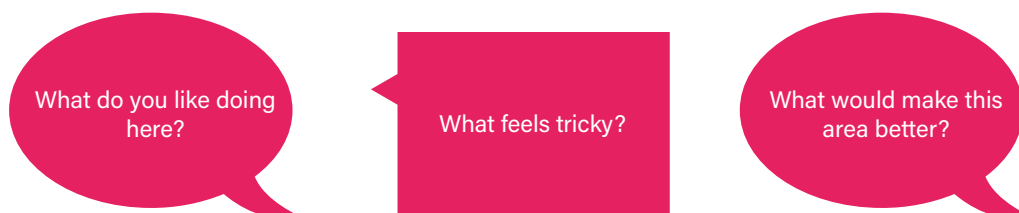


These prompts help children express their agency while giving practitioners rich, actionable insights.

Conversation stems

Open, non-leading questions help practitioners understand children's thinking, motivations, and emotional responses to different outdoor spaces. These conversations deepen the insights gained from Photo-Voice and ensure that children's voices guide decision-making.

Use open, non-leading questions such as:



These stems encourage children to articulate their preferences, concerns, and ideas without being steered toward adult assumptions.

Practitioner Tools continued

Emotion/Agency Mapping

Emotion and agency mapping is a visual tool that helps children communicate how they feel in different parts of the outdoor environment.

Using icons, stickers, or simple drawings, children place markers on a map to show:

- **Confident spaces:** where they feel capable, safe, and independent
- **Unsure spaces:** where they feel hesitant or need support
- **Desired challenges:** areas where they want to try more, climb higher, or explore further

This method makes children's emotional landscape visible and supports practitioners to plan responsively. It can inform risk assessments, highlight areas needing environmental adjustments, and reveal opportunities to strengthen independence.

Why Emotion/Agency Mapping Matters

- Helps children express feelings that may be hard to verbalise
- Makes patterns of confidence and avoidance visible
- Supports targeted planning and risk-positive practice Encourages children to reflect on their own agency



Adult Role Cards

Why the Adult Role matters

Adults shape children's experiences outdoors through their language, presence, and decisions. These role cards support reflective, intentional practice.

Each card includes:

- What the role looks like
- What it sounds like
- What it is not
- A reflective question

Co-learner

Looks like:

- Joining play without leading
- Modelling curiosity

Sounds like:

- "I wonder what would happen if..."

Not:

- Asking test-like questions

Reflect:

- How am I showing children their ideas matter?

Observer & Documenter

Looks like:

- Watching before acting
- Capturing choices and interests

Sounds like:

- "I noticed you kept returning to this..."

Not:

- Interrupting play to ask questions

Reflect:

- What is the child telling me through their actions?

Facilitator of Learning

Looks like:

- Open-ended materials
- Invitations to explore
- Time and space for deep engagement

Sounds like:

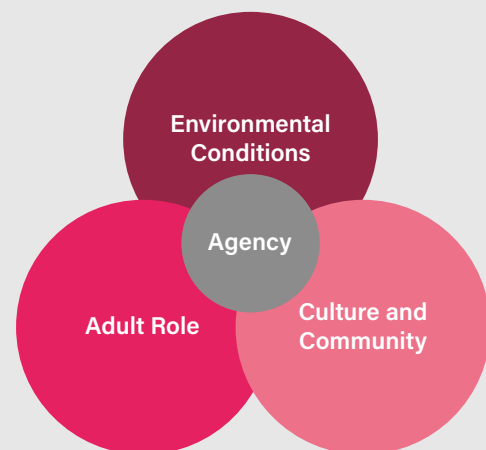
- "What are you thinking of trying next?"

Not:

- Directing children toward a specific outcome

Reflect:

- Whose agenda is driving this moment?



Adult Role Cards continued

Risk Supporter

Looks like:

- Positive risk language
- Helping children judge challenge

Sounds like:

- "Let's think about how you can do this safely..."

Not:

- "Be careful!"

Reflect:

- Am I enabling or inhibiting agency?

Responsive Planner

Looks like:

- Planning from children's interests
- Adjusting provision

Sounds like:

- "You've been really interested in climbing..."

Not:

- Over-structuring the outdoor space

Reflect:

- How is my planning amplifying choice?

Nature Guide

Looks like:

- Encouraging curiosity
- Using nature as a co-teacher

Sounds like:

- "What do you notice?"

Not:

- Avoiding mess, mud, or weather

Reflect:

- How am I helping children connect with nature?



Risk Positive Practice Pack

Risk - Benefit Assessment Template

Risk positive practice recognises that challenge, uncertainty, and physical stretch are essential to children's learning.

A Risk-Benefit Assessment helps practitioners move beyond a prevent and prohibit mindset and instead consider how risk can be safely supported, thoughtfully scaffolded, and meaningfully experienced.

The suggested template encourages practitioners to weigh the development value of an activity alongside the potential hazards, ensuring that decisions are balanced, intentional, and rooted in children's agency.

Use this template to support safe, positive risk-taking:

Activity/Area:	Identify the space or experience being assessed (e.g climbing frame, mud kitchen, loose parts construction)
Benefits:	Consider the developmental, physical, emotional, and social gains. This might include confidence, resilience, coordination, problem-solving, or independence.
Possible Risks:	Note the genuine hazards without exaggeration. Focus on what could happen, not what is unlikely or based on adult anxiety.
How children can manage risk:	Identify the strategies children can use independently, such as: balancing, testing surfaces, negotiating with peers, using their bodies carefully, or making decisions about readiness.
How adults will support:	Describe the adult stance, such as: observing first, offering language to help children think, modelling calm responses, or adjusting the environment without removing challenge.

This approach values risk as a learning opportunity and positions children as capable risk-managers, not passive recipients of adult protection.

Risk Positive Practice Pack continued

Language Guide

The language adults use around risk has a profound impact on children's confidence.

Words can either empower children to assess challenge for themselves or shut down exploration before it begins. Risk positive language communicates trust, supports decision-making, and helps children tune into their own bodies and instincts

Empowering language:

These phrases encourage children to think, assess, and act with agency:

"What feels safe for you?"

"How could you try this safely?"

"I can see you're thinking carefully"

"Show me how you're planning to do that"

"What do you need to feel ready?"

Limiting language:

These phrases can unintentionally undermine confidence or signal that challenge is unsafe:

"Be careful"

"Don't do that"

"That's too dangerous"

"You are going to fall"

"Stop! You can't do that"

Why language matters

Language shapes how children interpret risk, how they view their own capabilities, and whether they feel trusted. Empowering language supports children to:

- assess challenge independently
- build resilience and confidence
- develop self-awareness
- take ownership of their decisions

Risk positive language is not about encouraging unsafe behaviour; it is about helping children learn how to manage risk thoughtfully and confidently.

Environmental Enhancers

Outdoor environments do not need a full redesign or lots of money spent to become more agency-rich.

Small, intentional adjustments can transform how children move, choose, and take ownership of their play. These quick wins listed here can help practitioners create spaces that invite independence, encourage challenge, and open up possibilities for child-led exploration.

Quick wins!

Add loose parts

Loose parts such as crates, planks, tyres, and natural materials give children the freedom to build, transport, combine, and invent. They support creativity, problem-solving, and self-directed challenge.

Create flexible zones

Instead of fixed, adult-defined areas, use movable resources to create spaces that can shift with children's ideas. Flexibility signals that the environment is responsive to children, not the other way around.

Offer self-serve resources

Place materials at child height and make them easy to access. When children can choose what they need without adult mediation, independence and agency flourish.

Provide climbing and balancing opportunities

Simple additions, such as logs, low platforms, slopes, stepping stones, offer a manageable challenge. These features help children test their bodies, build confidence, and practise risk assessment.

Introduce deconstructed role play

Rather than themed, fixed role-play areas, offer open-ended props that children can transform, such as fabric, crates, boxes, steering wheels and baskets. Open-ended props encourage imagination and allow children to lead the narrative.



Open-ended Materials

Open-ended materials are the backbone of an agency-rich outdoor environment. They invite multiple possibilities, support collaboration, and allow children to shape the space according to their ideas.

Examples include:

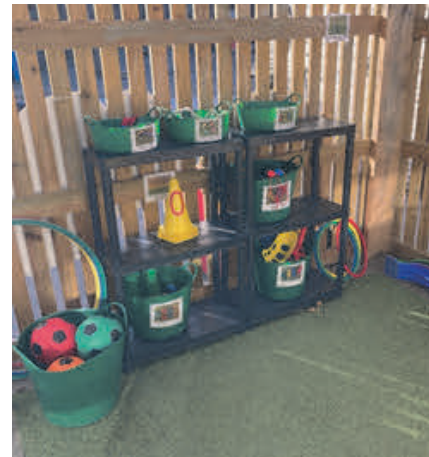
Crates for building, transporting, climbing, or creating boundaries

Planks for bridges, ramps, balancing, or construction

Ropes for tying, dragging, den building, or obstacle courses

Fabric for shelters, costumes, dens, or imaginative play

Natural materials such as sticks, stones, leaves, pine cones, mud, or water



Materials such as these encourage children to experiment, negotiate, and take ownership of their play and are all key components of outdoor agency.

Developing Home-School Alignment

Children's outdoor experiences are shaped by the messages, routines, and expectations they encounter at home.

Bronfenbrenner's ecological systems theory reminds us that children develop within interconnected environments, with the home and the early childhood setting forming two of the most influential. The relationship between these environments, or the mesosystem, play a crucial role in shaping children's confidence, independence, and willingness to explore.

Understanding Outdoor Agency through Bronfenbrenner's Ecological Lens

The child at the centre

Children bring their own experiences, preferences, worries, and capabilities into the outdoor environment. Their agency grows when the systems around them work in harmony.

MICROSYSTEMS

Home

Family routines
Attitudes toward risk, mess, and challenge
Opportunities for outdoor play
Messages children internalise ("Don't get dirty", "Be careful", "You might fall")

Early childhood setting

Environment design
Adult language and expectations
Opportunities for independence
Risk-positive or risk-averse practice

These two microsystems directly shape how children feel and act outdoors.

MESOSYSTEM

Where home and school meet

This is the space where alignment matters most. The research showed that children's outdoor choices were strongly influenced by home messages. When home and school share understanding, language, and expectations, children experience:

- Greater confidence
- More consistent messages
- Increased willingness to explore
- Stronger sense of agency

EXOSYSTEM

Local Community & Wider Influences
Access to parks and green spaces
Community attitudes toward outdoor play
Local opportunities for physical challenge

These shape what children are familiar with before they arrive in the setting.

MACROSYSTEM

Policy, Culture & Societal Values
EYFS Framework (DfE 2024)
Development Matters (DfE 2023)
Birth to 5 Matters (2021)
Cultural attitudes toward risk, safety, and independence

Developing Home-School Alignment

The Home-School Alignment Toolkit strengthens this mesosystem by supporting communication, shared values, and collaborative decision-making.

In support of this, it is recommended that you develop the following resources:

Parent leaflets

These two themes can support clear, positive communication with families:

1. Why Risk Matters

Explains the developmental value of manageable risk and how it supports confidence, resilience, and decision-making.

2. Supporting Agency Outdoors

Introduces the idea of children as capable decision-makers and offers simple ways families can nurture independence and choice at home.

These resources help align expectations across home and school, reinforcing consistent messages for children.

They should be supplemented with information about your outdoor setting and information about how you support risk-taking and risk management.

Home questionnaire

Using a questionnaire can be a powerful tool to help practitioners understand the outdoor experiences children bring from home, ensuring provision is responsive and grounded in children's lived realities.

Questions explore:

- What does your child enjoy outdoors at home?
- What risks do they take?
- What worries you?
- What would you like to know more about?

This information supports planning, strengthens relationships with families, and helps practitioners scaffold confidence and independence outdoors.



Using Action Research Cycles to Support Implementation

Applying the theory to your practice

High-quality outdoor provision does not emerge from a single change — it grows through ongoing enquiry.

The research underpinning this toolkit showed that children's agency is shaped by subtle interactions between environment, adult language, home influences, and daily routines. To embed these insights meaningfully, practitioners need a structured way to test ideas, observe impact, and refine practice.

The Action Research Cycle offers a practical way for practitioners to implement the approaches advocated in this toolkit. Rather than adopting ideas at the surface level, the cycle encourages practitioners to trial changes, observe their impact, and refine practice based on what children show and say.

The research demonstrated that strengthening outdoor agency requires ongoing enquiry; a process of noticing how children respond to adjustments, listening to their perspectives, and making intentional shifts that build confidence and independence. By engaging with this cycle, practitioners become critical implementers of the toolkit: testing strategies, interpreting evidence from their own setting, and embedding changes in ways that are meaningful, sustainable, and responsive to children's lived experiences.



Applying the Theory to the Practice

Practitioner Action Research Cycle

Observe → Listen → Adjust → Offer Choice → Reflect

This cycle supports responsive, child-led practice and ensures that changes are grounded in evidence, not assumption.

Observe	Listen	Adjust	Offer Choice	Reflect
Notice how children use the environment, where they hesitate, and where they show confidence.	Gather children's voices through conversation, Photo-Voice, or mapping tools.	Make small, intentional changes to the environment, resources, or adult stance.	Create opportunities for children to act with independence and agency.	Consider what changed, what improved, and what still needs attention.

Practitioner Action Research Cycle

Use this template to document each cycle of practitioner enquiry. It will help capture the reasoning behind decisions and build a record of how practice evolves over time.

Focus:

What aspect of outdoor agency are we exploring?

What we changed:

The adjustment made to the environment, language, or routines.

What we noticed:

Observations of children's behaviour, confidence, and engagement.

Children's voices:

Comments, photos, or mapping insights that reveal children's perspectives.

Next steps:

What we will refine, extend, or explore next.

This structure ensures that practice is continually informed by real evidence from children.

Final Reflections

Outdoor environments are living, evolving spaces, shaped not only by weather and seasons, but by the children who inhabit them.

As practitioners, our role is not to control these spaces, but to curate them with intention, curiosity, and respect for children's autonomy. The work of nurturing agency is ongoing. It requires us to observe with fresh eyes, to question our assumptions, and to remain open to the unexpected. It asks us to balance safety with challenge, structure with freedom, and guidance with trust. Most of all, it invites us to see children as capable decision-makers whose voices deserve to shape their environment.

As you use this toolkit, I encourage you to return to the children's words and actions. Notice where they hesitate, where they flourish, and where they take ownership. Let their perspectives guide your planning, your language, and your design of the outdoor space.

Agency is not a destination; it is, and should be, a daily experience of our children and young people.

It is nurtured within moments of choice, in opportunities for risk, and in relationships built on trust.



Further Reading

Policy and Guidance

- Department for Education (DfE) (2023) Development matters. London: Department for Education. Available at: <https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/development-matters--2> (Accessed: 11 February 2026).
- Department for Education (DfE) (2024) Statutory framework for the early years foundation stage. London: Department for Education. Available at: <https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/early-years-foundation-stage-framework--2> (Accessed: 11 February 2026).
- Early Education (2021) Birth to 5 matters: Non-statutory guidance for the Early Years Foundation Stage. London: Early Education.
- British Educational Research Association (BERA) (2018) BERA statement on close-to-practice research. London: British Educational Research Association. Available at: <https://www.bera.ac.uk/publication/berastatement-on-close-to-practice-research> (Accessed: 11 February 2026).

Theoretical Foundations

- Bradbury, A. and Swales, R. (2022) Early childhood theories today. London: SAGE.
- Bronfenbrenner, U. (1979) The ecology of human development: Experiments by nature and design. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press.

Research on Agency, Play and Outdoor Learning

- Baker, S. and Le Courtois, S. (2022) 'Agency, children's voice and adults' responsibility', *Education 3–13*, 50(4), pp. 435–438. doi: 10.1080/03004279.2022.2052234.
- Sandseter, E.B.H. (2010) 'Scaryfunny: A qualitative study of risky play among preschool children', *Child Care in Practice*, 16(2), pp. 237–248.
- Waller, T., Årlemalm-Hagsér, E. and Sandseter, E.B.H. (eds.) (2017) *The SAGE handbook of outdoor play and learning*. London: SAGE.

Recommended Practitioner Texts

- Bilton, H. (2010) *Outdoor learning in the early years: Management and innovation*. 3rd edn. London: Routledge.
- Knight, S. (2013) *Risk and adventure in early years outdoor play: Helping children learn through challenging experiences*. London: SAGE.





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