



Early Childhood
Outdoors

Forest Kindergarten: Local Nature Play Guiding Principles for Trainers

VISION:

All children in early years settings becoming connected to the natural world through playing in natural settings in their locality, throughout the year as a normal part of their early years provision.

PURPOSE (of the LNP training/qualification):

- To enable practitioners in early years settings to see the possibilities and harness the learning and health opportunities of local natural settings.
- To enable practitioners in early years settings to feel and be safe, competent, and confident in taking young children off site to local natural settings on a regular and frequent basis.

What is Forest Kindergarten: Local Nature Play?

- It is an experiential programme facilitated for children by **early years professionals as part of regular provision for learning in the early years.**
- Empowering practitioners to **access local nature for young children to play in** – off site and regular/frequent, all year round.
- Building **relationships and connection** and **working with** (not using) the local natural area (ultimately having a lasting impact on caring for our world).
- Enables practitioners to reap the **benefits for young children** of playing and learning outdoors from, in and with nature, focused on supporting lifelong wellbeing and learning.
- **Part of a continuum of practice-based learning** in the outdoors from first steps to full immersion.
- It is a Level 3 **qualification?**

Principles (aspirations) for Forest Kindergarten: Local Nature Play Level 3 qualification

The rationale for each principle gives more detail and includes wider relevant concerns.

PEOPLE

1. ***Local Nature Play is relevant and responsive to all communities, focusing on their specific contexts and circumstances.***

We want this training to reach as many people and communities as possible, and to be accessible, inclusive, and socially relevant so that everyone is able to participate fully. Following a rights-based approach, each course will be flexible so as to understand specific circumstances, respect diverse and individual cultures, and accommodate local

requirements for participation. For example, focusing on access to local green spaces means that people are not excluded due to a necessity for transport.

- **Access, inclusion, diversity and respect.** Get to as many people as possible. Accessible to diverse groups and relevant to all; respectful to all cultures (socially and culturally relevant).
- **Accessible for all, inclusive, flexible, and respectful**
Inclusive, Participation, UNCRC, rights based.
No transport – access to local spaces – no one excluded.

2. Local Nature Play is centrally about empowering early years practitioners, enabling them to extend their daily practice.

Raising confidence in feeling safe, comfortable, and competent in regularly taking their young children out of the nursery into suitable local settings is a core purpose of the course, with the aim that this becomes a normal and sustainable element of the outdoor experiences they provide. We want practitioners to become enabled to feel at ease, capable in keeping children safe and supported in these environments, and able to fully capture the great potential that these places offer.

- **Empowering and enabling practitioners** as part of their regular and ongoing practice – **extends daily practice to make best use** of local natural settings.
- **Safety and welfare are fundamental** – practitioners feeling capable and confident in keeping children safe.
- **Feeling safe** and comfortable in the outdoors/natural settings. Feeling safe outside – confidence and assurance.

PLACE

3. Local Nature Play emphasises relationships with locality and community in building the foundations of belonging to society.

Relationships sit at the heart of the purpose of Local Nature Play. Young children need lots of experiences that work to grow a sense of belonging to the place where they live and nurture the sense of being part of their local community that underpins ‘cultural identity’. Building positive relationships works in both directions, so the neighbourhood also needs to get to know, welcome and interact with the children.

Being outdoors regularly and frequently is in itself important for young children, meeting life and everyday nature on their doorstep. Emphasising locality and community (rather than going further afield), a continuum of suitable spaces exists that are sufficiently contained to enable children to freely engage, explore and play, and sufficiently malleable for children to be able to act upon them.

- Being **outdoors in itself** is important – everyday nature, nature on your doorstep (towns and cities)
- **Local useable, suitable greenspace** – any suitable space, emphasis on locality and community (rather than further afield); Being outdoors, Nature, Nature/woodland based – wide range of places – **continuum of spaces.**
- **‘Suitable space’** – a) has *boundaries* that enable children to engage, explore and play; b) are *malleable* and can be acted upon by children.
- Building relationships with locality and community – **interaction with people and place.**
- **Building good relationships (people and place),** community – reciprocal (community gets to know and accept the children)

4. Local Nature Play equally emphasises close relationships with the natural world in providing firm foundations for feelings of belonging in nature and planet Earth as a whole.

Nurturing deep relationships with all elements of the living and physical world around them is an equally significant purpose and intended outcome, for both children and practitioners, ensuring that connection with and love of the local natural space is woven throughout the practice. Working *with* the natural world, rather than *making use of* it, places visited will be rich in living and non-living nature and experiences will center on natural materials meeting children's individual play drives.

It is vital that these relationships are fostered in a way that respects the balance between what is good for the children and what is good for nature, nurturing care and respect for the place and for nature. This includes actively building children's agency in acting for regeneration and sustainability for the future.

As well as experiencing nature at work, playing extensively and openly *with* nature will nourish the deep feelings of friendship and kinship that cultivate 'ecological identity' (belonging to nature, not separate from it) as part of young children's emerging sense of self.

- **Nature connection and ecological identity** – natural setting and feeling of belonging to nature and wider world. Building ecological identity – *working with* natural world, not *using* it.
- **Nature experience**, Nature play, Life cycles.
- Reciprocal relationship with natural world - **care and respect for the place and nature** – respects the balance between what is good for the children and what is good for nature.
- **Regeneration for the future**, Green, Environmental principles, ensuring that a **connection with and love of the natural space** is woven through the practice.

PEDAGOGY - EARLY YEARS

5. ***The value and benefits of playing in nature for child wellbeing, holistic development and citizenship are well understood by the facilitator and made explicit throughout the training.*** [underpinning knowledge and expertise for children's learning & development]

A core purpose of Local Nature Play experiences is supporting all children to thrive, to grow and to participate in environment and society, which means that three equally significant themes are attended to in all aspects of the training:

- The benefits and impact/outcomes of self-directed (child-led) play with nature in a natural setting as providing firm foundations for thriving in the present and throughout life, including the curiosity and confidence necessary for life-long learning;
- Strong understandings of childhood, child development and research-informed, inclusive early years pedagogy underpin content and delivery;
- Implementing children's rights (as stated by the UNCRC¹ and IUCN²) to play, participation, a healthy environment, access to nature and involvement in decision making are explicitly woven throughout the course and drive future Local Nature Play activity.
- **Children's rights** to play, healthy environment, participation, involvement in decision making (UNCRC) and access to nature (IUCN Right to Nature) are explicit and woven throughout.

- Child development and fundamental good EY pedagogy strongly underpin the training, **Child-led/ child development through active play** – understand child development and learning
 - **Benefits/outcomes for children** and basis of thriving throughout life (child development, EY pedagogy) – and **impact of EY for life** (curiosity and confidence are keys to life).
6. ***Well-informed and robust Early Years, Play and Nature pedagogy guide all of the activities, experiences and planning that participants undertake in training and subsequently offer their children in Local Nature Play.*** [process of learning through play for children]

The Natural Play Principles (White et al 2019³) provide the agreed guidance for the playful learning in and with nature processes of Local Nature Play.

These particular elements are at the heart of the Local Nature Play experiences that are encouraged and enabled:

- Wellbeing and nurturing of the whole child - mind, body and spirit;
 - Play, as enjoyable, personally motivated, self-selected and open-ended activity, belongs at the centre of children’s lives;
 - Immersion, curiosity, exploration, discovery and self-set challenge in all domains (rather than ‘risky play’);
 - Real world, active, whole-bodied and hands-on experiential and socially interactive contexts;
 - Peace, calm, reverie and being present with the natural world;
 - Adults bring their own interests and fascinations to children, and genuinely share awe and wonder with them.
- **Wellbeing, play and learning** through whole-bodied, experiential, active play.
 - **Immersion, discovery and exploration** should be at the heart. Sustained shared thinking.
 - Wellbeing, **Nurturing the child**, self-regulation, confidence.
 - **Play**, Fun, Enjoyment, Whole body, experiential, interactivity – playful learning in and with nature.
 - **Curiosity**, Awe-inspiring and eye lightening, Awe and wonder.
 - **Challenge** rather than risk – pushing at edges of experience and understanding (all domains)

PEDAGOGY - ADULT PROFESSIONAL DEVELOPMENT

7. ***Facilitators of Local Nature Play training have extensive, appropriate experience in both early years and play-based education and in outdoor/nature practices.*** [underpinning knowledge and expertise for adult training]

Local Nature Play courses provide high quality training facilitated by experienced early years educators with a range of professional expertise that includes robust pedagogical understanding and significant relevant experience of working in the outdoors. With substantial experience in the fields of both nature play and early childhood development and education, they will know the realities of taking 3–5-year-olds out of settings into community green spaces and understand practitioners’ needs for doing this with confidence and success. This combination may be achieved by facilitating training in partnerships.

- Quality training from **highly experienced trainers** using effective CPD for outdoor training and strong EY pedagogy.
- Quality people, experienced trainers, partnerships, **range of professional expertise** (EY practice & Nature learning); led by **experienced early years educators with significant relevant outdoor experience**.
- **Quality pedagogy and delivery** – quality of people leading the training – trainer’s knowledge and experience in both EY and nature play practice (nature pedagogy) – recent relevant experience of taking 3–5-year-olds outside into community greenspace. **Experience in 3 fields of Nature, Play and Early Years**.

8. Local Nature Play facilitators are experienced and effective in using experiential adult learning methods that enable and empower practitioners to implement and sustain their own changes in practice. [process of learning for adults]

Highly experienced Local Nature Play trainers also know how to facilitate a well-informed, flexible, and effective *experiential* professional learning process that focuses upon experience with reflection, personal development and confidence building, and empowering participants to move their practice forward as a team. Ensuring that early year’s educators can do this for themselves in their own setting enables new practices that will be sustainable over time.

The current and newly emerging research and evidence base in both young children’s learning and development and adult learning must continually underpin and update Local Nature Play practices. Therefore, as they facilitate others, course leaders see themselves as learning also.

- Quality training from **highly experienced trainers** using effective CPD
- Quality practice, **Research-driven, Evidence-based practice** – for children’s learning & development as well as adult learning.
- **Experiential, facilitative, reflective approaches, Enabling & Empowering**, Confidence building, Developmental, Sustainable (can be sustained), confident to develop in own setting = ensure that practitioners can **do this for themselves**.
- **Trainers as facilitators and learners** – all see themselves as learning also as they facilitate others.

[Note 1: These principles are aimed at the trainers, rather than the participants, and would form a major part of the ‘train the trainer’ training; so that trainers absorb them and are fully guided by them.]

[Note 2: I have included the Scottish FK principles into this version]

[Note 3: This document has been co-produced by a Forest Kindergarten working group during April 2020 – May 2021 including: Jan White, Marina Robb, Louise Hack and Joanna Ling]