Book review

Outdoor learning through the seasons: An essential guide for the early years by Ann Watts

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Outdoor learning is an integral part of a child’s development process, where the natural world can enhance experience and awareness. *Outdoor Learning Through the Seasons* provides advice to practitioners on how they can encourage young children to engage and learn from the natural environment. The book highlights the need to offer young children natural experiences that schools should offer children everyday within their grounds. The author, Ann Watts, suggests ways in which teachers and children can enjoy and interact with the natural world throughout the year. The book has many suggestions for settings that do not have adequate space for children to explore, and also provides suggestions about layout and design that maximises children’s learning.

Part one of the book is concerned with the revised Early Years Foundation Stage (EYFS). Chapter one focuses on the need for practitioners to understand how children learn, rather than what they learn. The recommendation is for practitioners to foster their learning by planning and providing opportunities outdoors. Watts continues by discussing the importance of sensory learning and sharing experiences like throwing leaves in the air or rolling down the hill. The author suggests that children should also be encouraged to take risks in a safe manner and that, perhaps, adults should offer new experiences like growing their own food. Children learn actively in the natural environment when they plant and grow their own crops. The next chapter is all about designing outdoor space, spaces for movement and planting the outdoor space. Here, the author offers practical suggestions for sand, water and mud play. The author also gives ideas for planting in different seasons for both small and large spaces. Chapter three focuses on curriculum areas and offers some exciting experiences for children to develop their socio-emotional, physical and language development. The author has suggested some additional resources and experiences to achieve this, including: adults could draw children’s attention to different sounds in different seasons, like rain pattering on the roof; or outdoor natural experiences provided to children so as to develop specific areas of learning, like mathematics, literacy, technology and the arts.

Chapter four has some interesting ideas for parents taking young children outdoors. In chapter four, Watts discusses the importance of working in collaboration with the parents. She emphasises the need to include the voice of parents when making any changes or development of the outdoor environment. Here, Watts offers some strategies like researching holiday programmes and informing parents about this facility. The staff at centres might also arrange family visits to places of interest in the local area. The chapter includes a case study, which discusses the benefits of such regular outdoor excursions for children and their parents.
Part two and three of this book aim to help parents to feel confident about providing outdoor childhood experiences in nature for their children. The author reinforces the beauty of adults sharing and exploring the natural world and keeping alive the sense of wonder with their children: “We need to enter into the world of the child and see the world around us through their eyes” (p. 57). Part two of the book has four chapters, one for each season. It analyses common features of each season and each chapter offers resources and various ways in which children can interact with the environment and develop their awareness of the natural world. There are suggestions for conversations and ideas about how to extend children's play, followed by additional resources to extend children's experiences according to each season. For example, Watts discusses ideas like summer-themed role play, imaginary picnics, supplying children with sand and water, beach hats and growing fruits and vegetables. The book highlights the importance of engaging with the natural world and elements like water, earth and air through the four seasons. Part three describes experiences that can be offered by the four elements in nature.

Some of the important features of the book are that it gives practical guidance for encouraging effective learning outdoors. It gives advice on working collaboratively with parents and provides a list of resources, including poems, books, stories and websites. Most importantly, it provides an appendix of seasonal recipes. This book is for all adults who are involved with young children, encouraging us to pass on an appreciation of the wonders in the natural world around us.

References