

A Hop, Skip and a Jump to School!

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As we come towards the end of the preschool year, parents may now be focused on the summer holidays and making the transition to primary school. Parents may be asking you what they should be doing over the summer to prepare their children for school. Based on our research, our advice is to encourage them to get their children outside to play, to climb and enjoy the outdoors...

We all recognise the importance of playing outdoors and may remember from our own childhoods being told to ‘go out and play’ or calls of ‘come in for your dinner’. The importance of outdoor play has been well-documented in research. The positive effects are wide-ranging and not only limited to health and well-being but for social and cognitive development too. Playing outdoors gives opportunities for young children to move around more freely, to take risks and explore the natural environment. Social interactions and how children work together can really be enhanced through outdoor games, depending on the type of games that children play and the level of cognitive challenge (e.g., organising and agreeing on the rules, taking turns, the steps required in an activity, building dens, etc.).

In early childhood practice, the outdoor environment plays a prominent role. Aistear strongly advocates the use of the outdoor environment to promote all aspects of children’s learning and development. It draws on experiences from countries such as Norway, where the outdoor environment plays a crucial role with the children spending most of everyday outside embracing the concept of the outdoor classroom. Siolta, the National Quality Framework for

early childhood education (CECDE, 2006) also has ‘environments’ as a key standard for quality and makes specific reference to the outdoor environment.

But how do children play at home? Using the Growing Up in Ireland data, based on 9000 children, we examined how young Irish children play outdoors at home when they were 5 years old. Most children ride a bike, tricycle or scooter several times per week. The most popular daily activity is playing chasing (64%). Climbing on things such as trees, climbing frames or wall bars is engaged in much less frequently than the other forms of outdoor play as only 27% do this sort of activity daily which means that almost 3 out of 4 children do not. Sport or physical activities are a daily part of life for 22% of 5 year olds in Ireland while 42% engage in this type of activity once or twice a week. In their recent study, Safefood (2017) found that parents reported that bad weather (44%) and spending time on screens (26%) are barriers to promoting physical activity with their children.

How young children play and engage in physical activity should be a prime concern, both at home and in early childhood settings, given the evidence we have that the foundations of lifelong health and well-being are laid early on. Play has a significant role in all aspects of health for young children and physical, mental, social and emotional health are inextricably linked. How and where our children play may also have an impact on their developing immune systems. Playing with friends and developing relationships is important both for our physical and emotional health, and for navigating the school environment. Given the prevalence of obesity in very young children in Ireland, physical activity and play outdoors needs to be nurtured in the earliest years and children should have opportunity to play outdoors each day.

We need to encourage parents to support and allow their children to engage in various forms of outdoor play including climbing, jumping, chasing and having fun. Building resilience,

strengthening social connections with other children and exploring the natural environment are key skills our children need, not just for school but for lifelong learning and well-being. Playing outdoors is crucial so spread the word, especially when school is but a hop skip and a jump away!

Bios

Dr. Suzanne Egan is a researcher and lecturer in Psychology in Mary Immaculate College, Limerick. Her main research interests lie in the area of social cognition and cognitive development. Her research examines the processes involved in imagination, thinking and reasoning and in supporting cognitive development in young children, particularly through outdoor play and the home learning environment.

Dr. Jennifer Pope is a researcher and lecturer in Early Childhood Care and Education in Mary Immaculate College, Limerick. She has a particular interest in promoting the health and well-being of young children.