

# Growing Up Outdoors

**By: Dr. Suzanne Egan and Dr. Jennifer Pope**

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Did you know that nearly one in six Irish parents don't think it's safe for their five year old child to play outside at home during the day? Irish and international research indicates that neighbourhood safety has an impact on levels of outdoor play in young children. We recently analysed data from the Growing Up in Ireland study and found that more children engage in daily outdoor activities, such as games of chasing, bike riding or playing with a ball, in neighbourhoods parents think are safe for children than in neighbourhoods parents don't think are safe.

We all know that there are many benefits of outdoor play for physical and mental health and wellbeing; particularly for children's development. However, bad weather and neighbourhood safety can act as barriers to outdoor play for young children. The children in preschools and schools come from a variety of neighbourhoods. Some of them will be city dwellers, some will live in suburbs, and some in rural locations. Some will have access to a large private garden while others may live in an apartment. The amenities and safe outdoor play spaces will be different in the home life of every child, with some being rich in opportunities for outdoor play and others less so.

Our analysis of the Growing Up in Ireland data showed that for 22% of families, rubbish or litter in the neighbourhood is fairly/very common. 30% (nearly a third of parents) indicated

that there is heavy traffic on their street or road. For a minority of families (approximately one in every fourteen children), people being drunk or taking drugs in public in their neighbourhood is also fairly/very common (7%), as is vandalism and deliberate damage to property (8%).

However, in early childhood settings, all children have the chance to access safe outdoor play spaces, regardless of their home or neighbourhood environment. It is important that early childhood practitioners and teachers provide opportunities for the children in their care to play and learn outdoors. International research shows that outdoor play enables children to move more freely, explore nature, and also supports cognitive and socio-emotional development. In recent research conducted by Safefood (2017), parents identified playing outside with friends or neighbours as the most successful method to increase the amount of physical activity their child gets.

Aistear, the Early Childhood Curriculum Framework in Ireland, notes the importance of the outdoor environment to promote all aspects of children's learning and development. Siolta, the National Quality Framework for early childhood education, also makes specific reference to the outdoor environment, as do the Early Years Services Regulations governing early childhood settings. Therefore, it is important that the outdoor environment in early childhood settings facilitates wellbeing, exploring and thinking, communication, identity and belonging for every child.

On short, dark, cold days it is tempting to minimise time outdoors for ourselves, our families, and the children we care for. But given the benefits of outdoor play, and the challenges some children may face in accessing safe outdoor play spaces at home, it is worth trying to

incorporate it into daily preschool activities whenever possible. Maybe there are more ways you can support outdoor play for children. Perhaps snack time or story time could take place in the great outdoors - there are so many opportunities to utilise the outdoor space.

So whatever the weather, wrap up and go have fun outside!

## **Bios**

*Dr. Suzanne Egan is a researcher and lecturer in the Department of Psychology in Mary Immaculate College, Limerick. She graduated with a PhD in Psychology from Trinity College Dublin. 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 the factors that support cognitive development in young children.*

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