

# Enhancing Outdoor Provision in ELC Settings: Practical Steps and Approaches

Established in 2021, [Little Bugs Nurseries](#) launched its first site at Fordell Firs, registered to care for up to 52 children. In 2022, they expanded with a second site on the Hopeton Estate, registered for 42 children.

Both locations offer early learning and childcare provision, out-of-school care, and flexible schooling opportunities for children aged 2 to 12 in a fully outdoor environment.

The transformative power of outdoor learning in promoting children's curiosity, resilience and independence is recognised across the early learning and childcare sector (ELC). Aligned with national approaches including [Realising the Ambition: Being Me](#), the Curriculum for Excellence and [Out to Play: Caring for our Outdoor Spaces](#) - outdoor provision is not an extension of indoor learning but a core element of high-quality ELC experience.



This case study explores the practical steps and approaches implemented by Little Bugs Nurseries to develop, integrate and deliver high-quality outdoor ELC provision.

Little Bugs recognise that the foundation of high-quality outdoor ELC provision is based on a belief that views nature as a primary environment for learning. Much of the methodology applied at Little Bugs is based on [research conducted by Richard Louv](#), focussed on “nature deficit disorder”, which highlights the importance of reconnecting children with nature to support physical, cognitive and emotional development. This is further supported by play-based pedagogy approaches and the aspiration to provide children with rich, experiential learning experiences.

During the development of the Fordell Firs and Abercorn sites, the Little Bugs team quickly identified one of the biggest challenges they faced was **parents' concerns**. Common worries included children getting too cold, being too exposed to the elements, or not being able to focus on their learning. However, Little Bugs demonstrated that with the right equipment, outdoor learning is not only possible, but for a number of children is often more beneficial than an indoor learning environment. Children attending the settings are taught to self-regulate: if they are cold or upset, they can communicate this, and staff are trained to respond appropriately; emphasising

child-led communication and self-assessment of risk. By taking children outside, Little Bugs not only encourage children to better assess risks, but also teaches them how to be more independent, adaptable, and resilient.

Acknowledging that outdoor learning isn't just about putting children outside, Little Bugs developed a comprehensive **training programme for practitioners**, some of whom were not initially familiar with outdoor learning. Therefore, the settings continue to provide ongoing support, translating indoor policies and practices to make them suitable outdoor settings. For example, concepts like a rocking horse in a playroom are re-imagined into a tree swing outdoors, both providing a sense of motion and height. This helps staff to understand that outdoor learning doesn't require a complete shift in beliefs, but simply an adaptation of existing methods.

To further support staff, Little Bugs introduced **visual tools** like flowcharts, mind maps, and colour-coded dynamic risk assessments to make complex policies more accessible. The goal of this was to ensure that staff felt empowered rather than overwhelmed and could focus on providing the best possible outdoor learning experience for children.



A key part of the Little Bugs approach was to involve children in their own **safety and risk assessments**. Children were encouraged to actively participate in identifying hazards and assessing whether certain areas or activities are safe. For example, when a new outdoor space is introduced, children are asked to assess the risks themselves. This empowers them with responsibility, builds their confidence, and demonstrates how to navigate risks in real-world environments.

This dynamic approach to risk assessment enabled staff to observe, intervene when necessary, and reflect on what worked for each child. It also promotes a hands-off

approach from adults, allowing children to take the lead in their own learning and development. The process also helped staff identify potential issues were not always immediately obvious from an adult perspective, like low-hanging branches or hidden obstacles.

The impact of Little Bugs' outdoor learning model continues to be extremely positive. Teachers fed back that children transitioning from a Little Bugs nursery setting to primary school tend to have a better ability to adapt to surroundings and problem solve. The outdoor setting allows for a more flexible, adaptable learning style that benefits children in their transition to more formal education.

Beyond academic outcomes, the benefits of outdoor learning on children's mental health and well-being are clear. Anecdotally, Children who have attended a Little Bugs settings tended to show higher levels of resilience, improved social skills, and an ability to cope better with the challenges of school life.

In the interest of providing valuable insights for others passionate about enhancing outdoor provision locally, Little Bugs have identified key practical steps for enhancing outdoor provision:

**Create a meaningful outdoor space** in a well-designed environment that offers diverse learning experiences and meet children's development needs.

Settings should explore and make use of local green spaces, woodlands and community environments to extend children's learning experiences beyond the main nursery setting.

- ✓ Include features developed from natural resources such as mud kitchens and log seating to encourage sensory evaluation and creativity.
- ✓ Ensure a mix of open ended play spaces, that encourage curiosity alongside structured areas for specific activities such as story telling areas or vegetable patches, are available.
- ✓ Adopt a risk-benefit approach to design that encourages opportunities for climbing or loose parts play while ensuring safety through dynamic risk assessments.

**Embed child-led risk assessments** that encourage children to take an active role in risk assessments, where they are empowered to assess and manage potential hazards, and promotes autonomy, decision-making and an awareness of safety.

- ✓ Facilitate group discussions where children identify risks in their outdoor space e.g., slippery logs, fallen trees, uneven terrain, and consider approaches to manage them.
- ✓ Use visual aids to help young children articulate their understanding of risk.
- ✓ Encourage practitioners to model safe risk-taking, demonstrating safe practice.

**Align outdoor learning with the curriculum for excellence** to ensure that experiences across outdoor learning activities correspond with National Policies and Guidance such as [Being Me: Realising the Ambition](#), the [Curriculum for Excellence](#) and [Caring for Our Outdoor Spaces](#).

- ✓ Build lessons around nature's seasonal changes, allowing children to connect learning to real-world experiences (e.g., plant life cycles, weather patterns).
- ✓ Encourage children's natural curiosity through open-ended questions that spark their exploration and learning in outdoor settings.

**Invest in staff training and professional development** to support staff effectively implement outdoor learning. By investing in robust training, practitioners feel confident in delivering high-quality, outdoor experiences for children.

- ✓ Facilitate regular training opportunities that help staff understand the benefits of outdoor learning and how it can be practically integrated into daily practice
- ✓ Provide resources, such as dynamic risk assessment templates, child-centred observation techniques, and nature-based activity ideas.
- ✓ Encourage reflective practice that encourages staff to consider what went well, what could be improved, and how the children engaged with the environment.

**Engaging parents and overcoming their concerns** about outdoor provision is key. Many parents worry about their children being exposed to the elements, particularly in colder or wetter weather. By addressing these concerns and explaining the long-term benefits of outdoor learning, settings can build support for this approach.

This helps parents overcome fears and reassure them that children will communicate their needs.

- ✓ Provide information sessions that demonstrate the benefits of outdoor learning, referencing research on nature deficit disorder and its impact on child development.
- ✓ Offer practical solutions, such as guidance on appropriate outdoor clothing and how to prepare for different weather conditions.
- ✓ Encourage parents to participate in outdoor activities, building a sense of community and shared commitment to the children's outdoor learning experiences.

**Make use of technology and communication tools** to enhance outdoor learning and facilitate communication. For example, Little Bugs uses apps for tracking observations, ensuring that educators can monitor children's progress and development without relying on paper-based systems. Additionally, walkie-talkies help staff communicate efficiently across large outdoor spaces.

- ✓ Utilise digital tools to track and document activities and achievements, ensuring that staff can assess progress without being restricted by location or weather.
- ✓ Use apps to create digital portfolios for children, which can be shared with parents to showcase their child's learning journey.
- ✓ Ensure that communication tools, such as two-way radios, are used for safety, especially in large outdoor environments where staff may be separated.

Enhancing outdoor ELC provision requires both practical measures and a shift in mindset. By enabling enriching outdoor environments, supporting children to develop confidence in assessing and managing risks, embedding outdoor learning across the curriculum, investing in high-quality staff development, and engaging families as partners, settings can fully embrace the benefits of learning in and with nature. The experiences of Little Bugs Outdoor Nurseries highlight that, with thoughtful planning and commitment, outdoor learning can be a cornerstone of high-quality ELC, ensuring children develop a deep connection with the natural world while building the resilience, curiosity, and problem-solving skills needed to thrive.