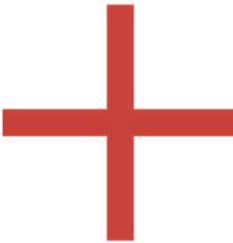


Mobile PLAY Hub



BY   Y
FOR INCLUSION

Operating Guidelines

Acknowledgments

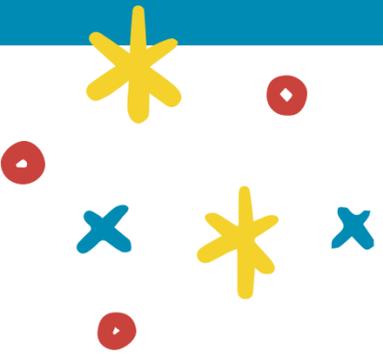
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1. Introduction



INTRODUCTION

1.1.Guideline aims

These guidelines have been developed for the project: *"Mobile Play Hubs for Ukrainian refugee children in Hungary and Slovakia"* funded by the **European Programme for Integration and Migration (EPIM)**, a collaborative initiative of the **Network of European Foundations (NEF)**.

The project aims to set up two Mobile Play Hubs, one in Hungary implemented by Partners Hungary and one in Slovakia run by Skola Dokoran. These Play Hubs offer regular activities and provide a welcoming and playful space for refugee children and families.

The **aim** of these guidelines is:

- * To provide **theoretical background and practical guidelines** to set up Mobile Play Hubs
- * To increase **knowledge about different forms of outdoor play and bring it closer** to children and families

1.2.Who are these guidelines for?

These guidelines are intended for Coordinators and Local Action Teams (LATs) of Mobile Play Hubs. However, the content of these guidelines is also useful to regular Play Hubs and other non-formal ECEC settings that want to make outdoor play more accessible to children of all ages.

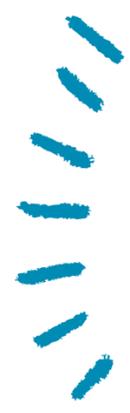
2. Mobile Play Hubs



2.1. What are Mobile Play Hubs?

Mobile Play Hubs are an alternative to regular permanent Play Hubs – located in a physical space in a (pre)school, a community centre, a library, or a refugee camp - to create pop-up community-based inclusive non-formal educational spaces for children and families. Like the regular Play Hubs, the Mobile Play Hubs also ensure to include and engage young children (0-10 years old) from vulnerable minority groups and those growing up in difficult circumstances.

With these Mobile Play Hubs, we can reach small and medium remote, rural and underserved communities and provide a space where relationships between young children and families from all backgrounds are built through:

- 
- **playing together,**
 - **borrowing toys,**
 - **organising workshops for children and caregivers, and caregivers only**
 - **connecting services and sharing information about childrearing, health, early learning and development.**

Mobile Play Hubs are a more flexible solution for children in remote areas who are often excluded from formal educational services, to access non-formal educational opportunities. They are also for children who are too young to start formal schooling and might find the transition into education difficult.



Mobile Play Hubs are also an optimal **solution to bring the joy of play, learning and connection to refugee children who are displaced in their own country and other countries**, often scattered in small and large communities. The focus of humanitarian assistance to refugees is often focusing primarily on health, food, housing, legal support and psychosocial first aid.

— ” —
Access to playful activities that can support psychosocial well-being, inclusion and belonging is not offered in every refugee camp
— ” —

Additionally, given the provisional nature of refugee camps, there isn't always the opportunity nor the budget to establish proper play and learning environments for children. This is especially true in small communities that are hosting a limited number of refugees.

It is in this context that Mobile Play Hubs can have an important role and bring play and learning to refugee children, serving more than one refugee camp or community with the same equipment and staff.



Families:

Parents, caregivers and other family members participate in the Mobile Play Hub, since they come with the child. Activities can be designed in a way that promotes intergenerational learning and strengthens the bond between the adult and the child. Additionally, not only do Mobile Play Hubs allow quality time between the child and the adult but they also provide opportunities to connect with other families. Parents can share their parenting experiences with their own unique cultural and educational perspectives. They also have the chance to socialize and receive parenting tips in a more informal environment.

2.2. Who participates in a (Mobile) Play Hub?

Children (0-10 years old):

the Mobile Play Hub is designed to reach young children from different backgrounds, especially the most vulnerable ones in smaller to medium communities that often don't have these services. Mobile Play Hubs are also an option for children that don't participate in formal education yet since it provides a more flexible setting and the opportunity to play with other children in a safe environment, supported by staff members.

Local Action Teams (LATs):

These are a group composed of representatives of education, social and health services together with local authorities. As a team, they run activities at the Play Hub to promote cognitive and relational skills while encouraging inclusion and social integration of families of various ethnic backgrounds. Each Team has a coordinator, who is employed part-time by the project and/or the municipality. Generally, the coordinator of the Local Action Team also runs and coordinates the Play Hub. He/she organizes activities in collaboration with volunteers and services from the community. Coordinators are often supported by a Play Hub assistant. Some activities are directly facilitated by the coordinator and/or the assistant, others are offered by volunteers or professionals.

2.3. How does a Mobile Play Hub look like?

Every Mobile Play Hub is different. Unlike regular Play Hubs, Mobile Play Hubs are equipped vans or mobile trailers that can be attached to any car. Depending on the context, they can also be cargo bikes or other environmentally friendly means of transportation.

Features they have in **common with regular Play Hub** are:

- They are **family- and child-friendly safe spaces**, where both adults and children feel welcome and are free to move and explore.
- They are **accessible** to all including children and adults with special needs and/or disabilities.
- **Parents (or other carers) are required to stay** with their children while they are at the Play Hub – this is different to regular ECEC centres, where parents leave their children in the care of a staff member





carpets and mats to create a safe and soft play area for younger children

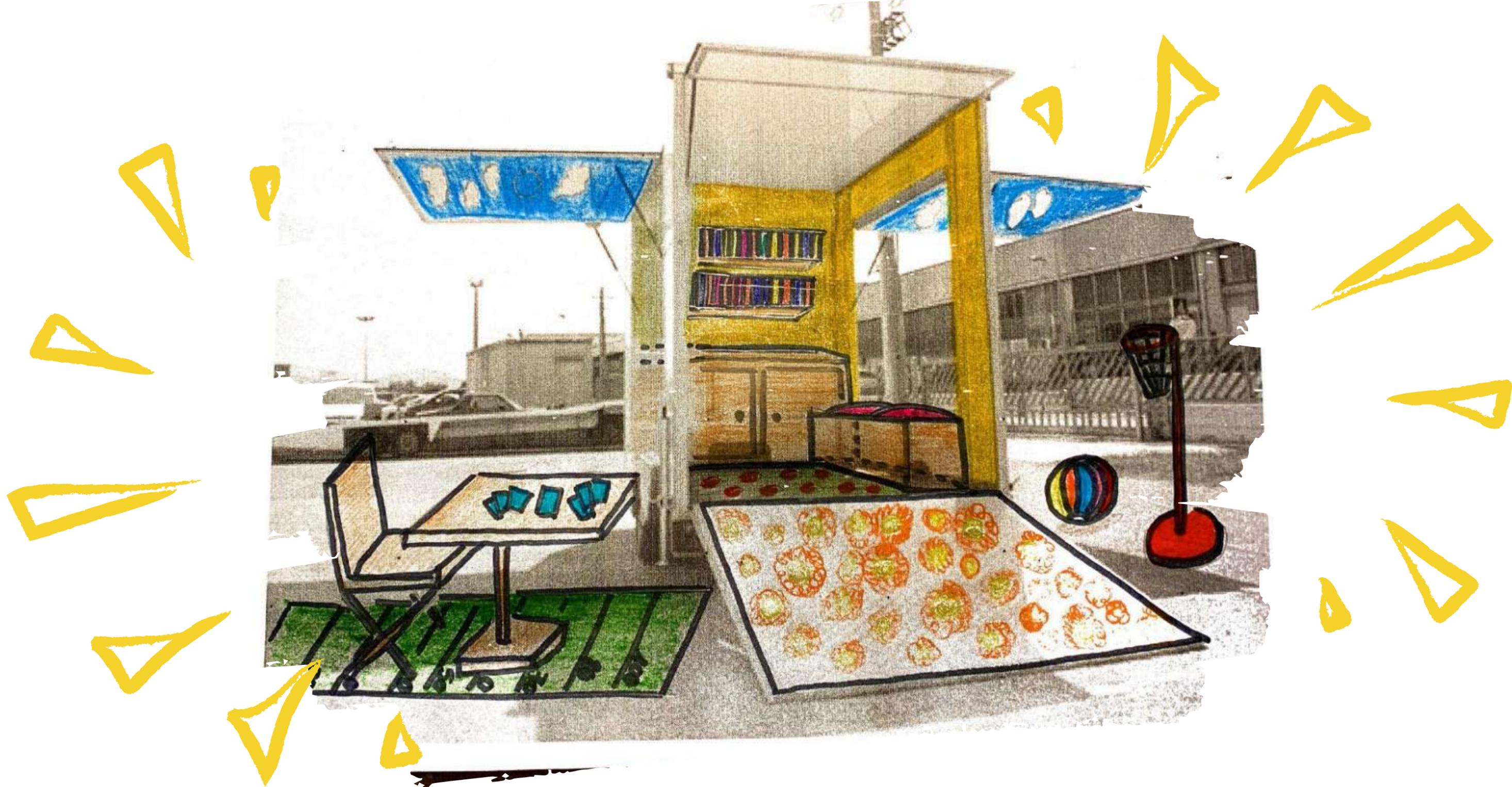


modular and light furniture to set up a play area in parks, squares and community buildings



boxes and cupboards for toys, materials and books

Ideally, a Mobile Play Hub should be like a **surprise box** that opens to the surrounding environment, creating a play and learning space around the Hub as well as allowing children to go inside the Hub to play or look for toys and books they like



2.4. What is inside a Mobile Play Hub?

Mobile Play Hubs contain **age-appropriate toys** and materials with which to organize inclusive play activities for children of all backgrounds and abilities aged 0 to 10. They have a selection especially made to allow outdoor play and activities.



Water toys



Paints and chalk



rainbow blankets, hula-hoops, balls



Different craft materials like pencils, scissors, glue, paper



Puppets and Puppet Stage



Educational materials like books

2.5. What activities can be done in a Mobile Play Hub?

Examples of activities may include:

- Stay-and-play sessions
- Group games and competitions
- Parent-child reading sessions
- Intergenerational activities
- Handcraft and toy-making activities
- Nature walks
- Parent clubs
- Workshops or info-sessions for parents in
- cooperation with other services in the community



Looking for **more resources**?

To get some inspiration for activities all year round look at the **Activity Cards** of this Toolkit.

You can also look at other resources developed for regular Play Hubs and other non-formal Early Childhood Development provisions:

- [Activities Card: "Play-based activities for children with and without disabilities"](#)
- [Play for Inclusion Handbook](#)
- ["Let's Play" Activity Cards: Play-Based Activities for healing and learning - ISSA](#)
- [Free Therapeutic Stories for Ukrainian Children](#)



2.6. Mobile Play Hubs: not only outdoors

Mobile Play Hubs that are **connected** to a regular Play Hub in the same region don't necessarily need to have a full selection of toys and games. They can and should, in fact, **borrow these materials from the regular Play Hubs** and their toy libraries, and change their 'catalogue' on a regular basis to bring new and different kinds of activities to children and families.

If a Mobile Play Hub is not linked to a regular Play Hub, it needs to have an exclusive supply of materials. You can consider accepting toy donations from members of the public and local businesses. You could host a community drive or combine this with a fundraiser event.

After donations are made, be sure to go through all collected toys and select age-appropriate and safe/clean toys to include in your selection.

For a list of age-appropriate toys, please see **Annex 1**.



A Mobile Play Hub, as the name “Hub” suggests, facilitates the encounter of a variety of services. Unlike regular Play Hubs, Mobile Play Hubs have the opportunity to move around and reach out to different communities, bringing pop-up workshops and play-based activities to children and families in remote, underserved and rural areas. However, **Mobile Play Hubs are not to be thought of as only being outdoors.** The weather year-round doesn't allow us to spend all our time outside.



Mobile Play Hubs can be understood as an outdoor extension of other services too. They can be arranged near schools, churches, community centres, libraries, refugee centres and other places that are already running and have an indoor and heated location, but where children and families don't have access to play.



By setting up the Mobile Play Hub regularly next to another local service, high-quality play-based activities are brought closer to children and families, while at the same time promoting access to local formal services. According to the weather and the needs and desires of children and families, activities can be conducted indoors or outdoors. Mobile Play Hubs are equipped with materials that are flexible and can be adapted to different contexts, whether we play under a roof or in nature.

For example, during colder days, Mobile Play Hubs can be set in a nearby refugee centre and activities can be organised in an available room indoors. The toys and furniture in the Mobile Play Hub can be brought inside for the day. Specific activities can also be done outdoors (for inspiration for winter activities look at the Activity Cards).

2.7. Connecting with other local services

One of the features of the Mobile Play Hub is to be a **one-stop shop** where parents and family members can meet with different professionals individually or in group activities. The function of the Local Action Team is to ensure that services from the community are involved in the design and running of the Play Hub and to organize activities and workshops for children, caregivers and other professionals. Play Hubs are a bridge between home and health, education, social, and cultural services, as well as other services in the community.

It is recommended that Play Hub staff conduct a **community mapping activity** to identify the potential people, organizations, groups and structures that could be involved in the success of your Play Hub in some way. An example table that could be used in this process is shown below:

Name and Surname	Job Position	Job Description	Organisation	Institutional Partner	Known ECEC Projects	Contact

This list could include **early years projects, child and family centres, school mediators, educational facilities, counsellors and guidance teams, other toy libraries, kindergartens and schools, neighbourhood project teams, social services, health workers, and local municipalities.**

Ensure that information about these services is clearly displayed and easy to access for families. Information should be **visually attractive**, and key information should be made available to parents who lack literacy skills. For example, photos of staff members could be displayed with names, and photos of useful contacts and locations (e.g. the local kindergarten displayed with a phone number).

All Play Hub staff should be familiar with the *UN Convention on the Rights of the Child* and should be willing to support children in their rights to be protected from all forms of violence, exploitation, punishment and cruelty. If staff see or hear anything of concern for the safety and well-being of the child, it is important that they are aware of child protection services in the region, utilise their community mapping information, and uphold their responsibility to contact these organizations on behalf of the child. For more information on detecting the signs of child abuse, see the ***“Domestic violence, child abuse and neglect Guidelines for Play Hub staff”***

Want to learn more about the Play Hubs?

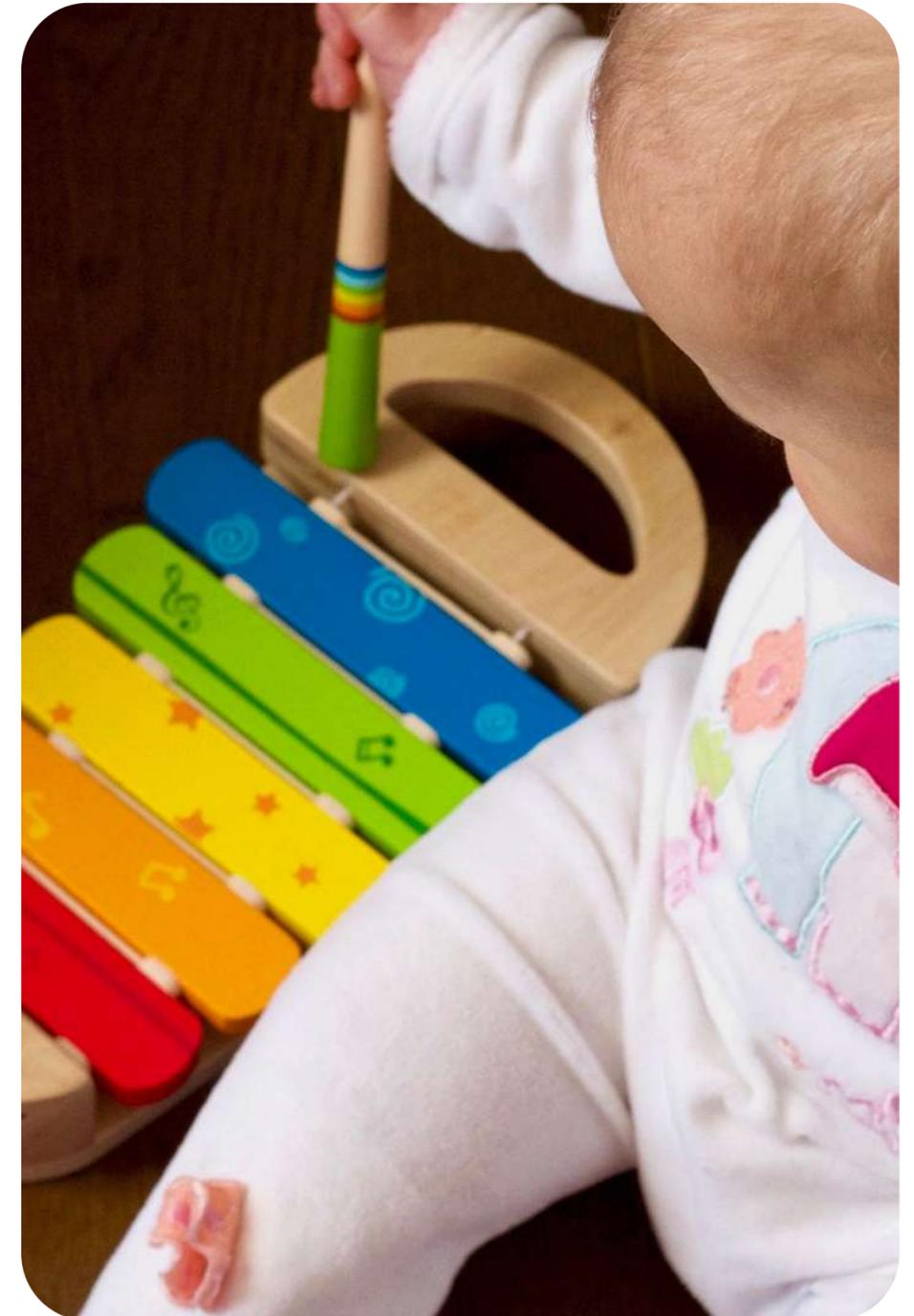
Check the following resources:

- **Operating Guidelines for regular Play Hubs** **This guide includes crucial information to set up a Play Hub.** We recommend that you access them before setting up a Mobile Play Hubs as well, as many general principles and recommendations apply also to the mobile version
- **What Works Guide**: This guide gives recommendations to practitioners and local authorities on how to implement Early Childhood Education and Care (ECEC) Play Hubs at best.
- **Frequently Asked Questions**: This document summarizes information related to the Play Hubs in an easy and accessible way, answering frequently asked questions.

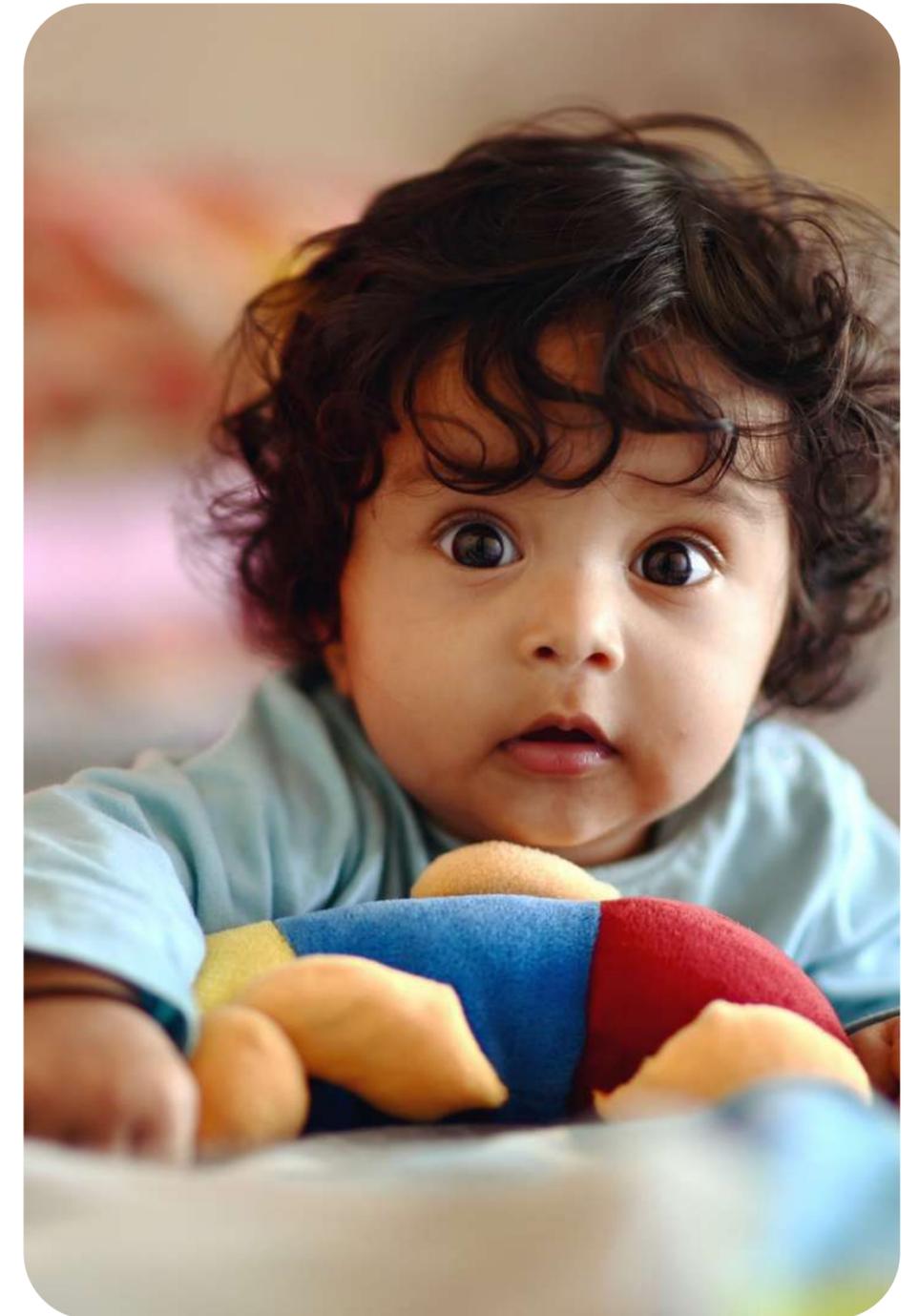


2.8. Example toys suitable for each age group

Age	Type of Toy	Skills
6 months	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> -Action/reaction toys -Stacking toys -Textured ball -Music -Toys to encourage crawling 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> -Begins to control their body -Only slight support is needed when sitting up -Simultaneous actions (e.g. bang a rattle and shout at the same time) -Begins to look for things they drop



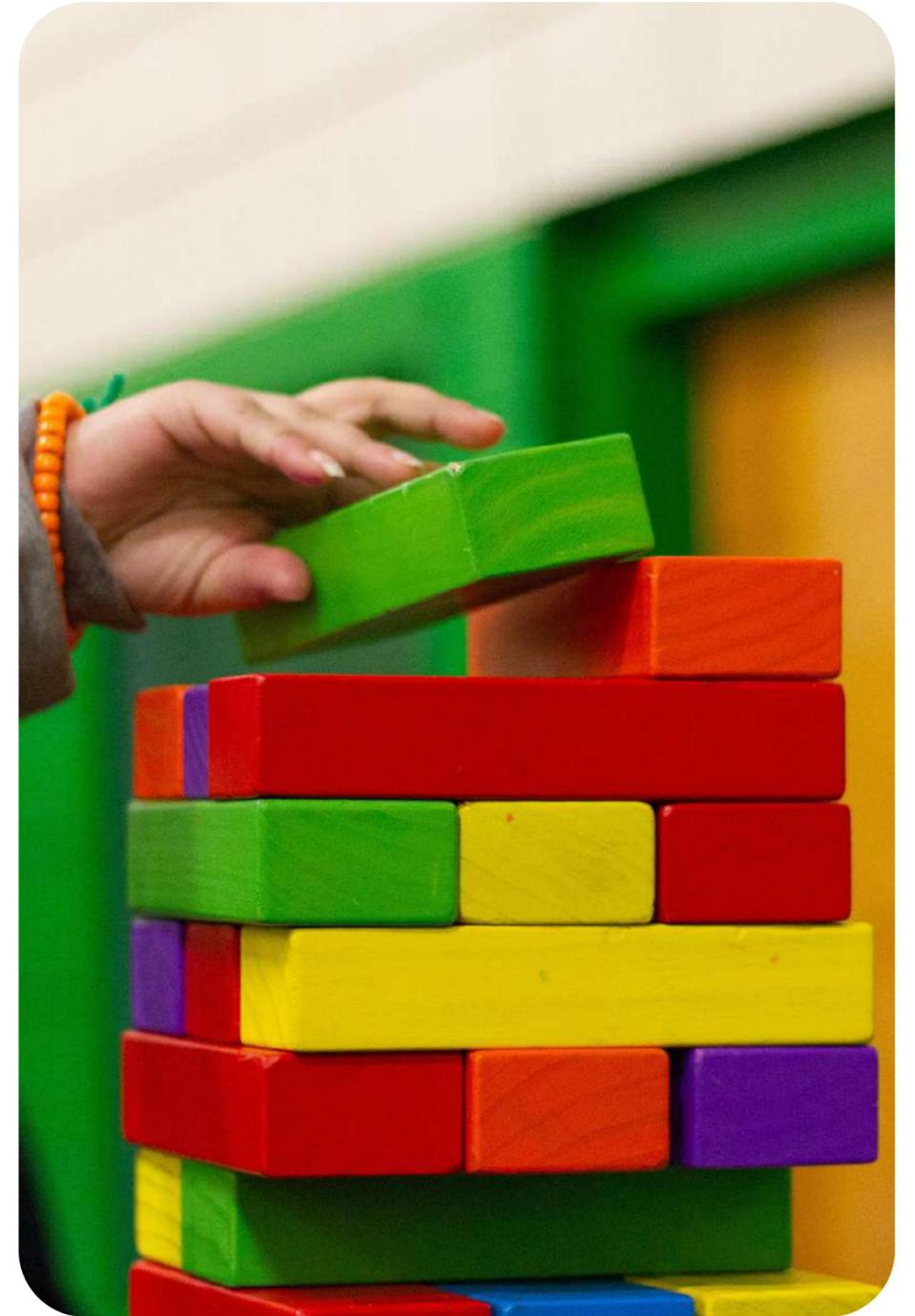
Age	Type of Toy	Skills
7– 8 months	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> -Toys that encourage physical development such as walking/crawling -Shape sorters -Surprise sounds -Action/reaction toys -Stacking toys -Containers with items to fill and empty -Toys with dials and levers (pretend phones) -Sorting and building toys -Easy to activate pop-up toys 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> -Supports their own weight and stands when holding something -Recognises voices and their name -Starts to poke and prod -Grasps by cupping the entire hand around an object -Likes looking at complex objects -Changes position to get a better view -Begins to develop small motor skills (e.g. picking up small objects with the thumb and index finger) -Knows that toys don't disappear when hidden; they still exist somewhere -Starts to investigate the world -Begins making sounds



Age	Type of Toy	Skills
9 – 11 months	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> -Stacking, sorting and building toys -Toys that encourage crawling/walking -Toys with dials and buttons -Language development toys -Books -Basic role-play toys -Shape sorters -Stacking toys that encourage hand-eye coordination -Toys that encourage early learning -Sports-themed toys -Large plastic snap-together beads 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> -Sits alone -Stretches to reach toys without falling over -Can catch a suspended object or a ball rolled directly to them -Can pass a toy from one hand to another -Begins to make signs (e.g. lifts arms to request being picked up) -Knows that smaller objects fit in larger ones -May walk if you hold both hands -Can perceive depth if crawling -Can respond to one or two commands -Begins to imitate, watch and copy actions



Age	Type of Toy	Skills
12 - 18 months	<ul style="list-style-type: none">-Push and pull toys-Construction playsets-Playsets-Dollhouse-themed playset-Musical instruments-Building blocks-Puzzles with knobs or a few large pieces	<ul style="list-style-type: none">-Begin to walk, but still falls over easily-Can put together two ideas so plans and behaviour begin to flow-Starts to treat objects in the appropriate way (e.g. cuddles teddy bears)-Says the first word



Age	Type of Toy	Skills
18 – 24 months	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> -Toys that help refine eye-hand coordination -Cars, trucks, trains and other vehicles -Toy housekeeping tools -Dolls and doll accessories (carriage, cradle, highchair) -Books with different textures and brightly coloured pictures -Wagons -Large crayons -Playdough 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> -Very mobile -Can pull and push things -Can throw a ball -Can put one block on top of another -Can follow simple directions -May know 50 – 200 words



Age	Type of Toy	Skills
2-3 years	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> -Themed playsets -Race-themed small vehicle play -Role-play toys -Sports toys -Toy boxes -Pretend play -Stuffed animals & dolls -Building blocks -Books -Crayons, colouring books, non-toxic paints and playdough -Simple puzzles -Basic counting and number toys -Music-making toys -Play kitchen with pretend food and utensils 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> -Begins to jump and hop -Understands what is safe and what is dangerous -Enjoys playing with other children -Good hand-eye coordination -Happy rolling and breaking playdough -Should be able to put toys away -Good hand-eye coordination -Puts words together to make simple sentences -Tells you what they are going to draw before they start -Likes to have a choice of colour when drawing -Can play alone, putting pieces into a puzzle



Age	Type of Toy	Skills
3-4 years	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> -Dollhouses & accessories -Playsets and action figures -Roleplay -Cars, vehicles & RC toys -Creative activity toys -Science-themed entertainment toys -Simple hand puppets -Dress-up clothes and props -Picture books and storybooks -Toys for learning shapes, colours, numbers and letters -Intermediate puzzles -Simple board games -Variety of sports balls, e.g., soccer, football, kickball, super bounce ball -Dress-up clothes and accessories 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> -Can jump and hop -Likes ball games, running and chasing -Realises drawings can look like faces and people -Can make shapes of people out of playdough -Often pretends to be someone else during play and enjoys dress-ups -Likes to hear about friends and relatives and loves that lots of people love them -Begins to show sympathy and empathy for characters in stories -Prints names on paintings and drawings -Understands that other people have thoughts and feelings different from their own



Age	Type of Toy	Skills
5-6 years	<ul style="list-style-type: none">-Toys that encourage creative expression-Entertainment toys-Framed puzzles with 25 to 50 pieces-Picking up or balancing games-Simple card games and picture bingo	<ul style="list-style-type: none">-Draws recognizable pictures-Gives reasoning and solves problems-Can put some objects in order and sort items into simple categories-Can explain games to other children-Indicates when something is “pretend” and when something is “real”



Age	Type of Toy	Skills
7-8 years	<ul style="list-style-type: none">-Toys that allow experimenting: Science materials such as magnets, binoculars, magnifying glass-Jump rope and swings-Art supplies-Books-Construction sets	<ul style="list-style-type: none">-Children gain more and more independence, exploring the world around them.-Can understand more complex rules needed to engage in group play



Age	Type of Toy	Skills
9-10 years	<ul style="list-style-type: none">-Outdoor sports toys such as balls, bicycles, scooters-Board games such as scrabble, monopoly-Strategy games such as chess-Card games-Books that can be more complex-Musical instruments	<ul style="list-style-type: none">-Children this age particularly enjoy outdoor sports-Children this age are developing a sense of mastery and competence, so competitive games and musical instruments can be fun.-Motor skills are being developed-Strategic skills



3. Outdoor Play



INTRODUCTION

Only for a few moments, let's **connect with our childhood**. You might be imagining one of your favourite places to be outdoors. Think of a fond memory and try to remember any special smells, how the **light** was around you, how the **temperature** felt, and the **sounds** that surrounded you.

The delights of the outdoors are among the deepest, most passionate joys of childhood and many adults hold strong memories of being outdoors as a child. For many, it was an **invaluable place of learning, that provided us with the world to explore and discover**.

Sadly, outdoor play is not encouraged as much as before, and children have less and less access to these connections with nature.

However, **Mobile Play Hubs can provide the opportunity to connect children and adults with nature again**. They have the flexibility of setting up and organizing activities in a variety of places both indoors and outdoors. Playgrounds, parks, squares, forests, and schoolyards are perfect spaces to visit with the Mobile Play Hub on a regular basis, and if the weather allows, they offer an important opportunity to promote outdoor play and learning.



3.1. Definitions of play

Play is **chosen freely, self-directed**, and **intrinsically motivated**. No external goal or reward is gained from this activity, and it is a **fundamental and integral part of healthy development** - both for the individual child and the society at large. A key characteristic of play is that it is fun, uncertain, challenging, flexible, and non-productive. Children can play in different settings: indoors or outdoors, with or without the supervision of an adult, in everyday spaces, special play environments or places chosen by them.

Play can also take many forms, and it is important to distinguish different types of play and processes that happen while children play outdoors. For this, we have presented a few useful **definitions**, that will be a key part of the Handbook:



Outdoor play

Outdoor play can be considered as any type of play that is conducted in the open. Play is a motor for the healthy development of every child, and outdoor play provides unique opportunities to learn, which may not be possible the same way during indoor play. Outdoor learning is not just taking indoor activities and doing them outside. It is not simply letting children outside for playtime. Outdoor learning is a process where theory and practice are integrated into nature and outdoor environments. Outdoor education allows children to have a wide perspective of the world. There are **six features of outdoor education programmes** (Gair, 1997):

1. It occurs outdoors, not necessarily in a classroom
2. Children are directly involved
3. Real objects are used and all senses are integrated
4. Relationships between objects and events are discovered instead of memorizing knowledge
5. Learning occurs through practice and experience involving different senses
6. Children can have fun in a different environment

Free play

Free play is considered any type of play initiated by children and where they have free choice about the materials, setting and plot. Children can intuitively choose learning content appropriate to their developmental stage since they are inherently active and eager learners.



Risky play

Risky play is a thrilling and exciting form of physical play that involves uncertainty and a risk of injury. Risky play is less and less common nowadays, but very important for children. It allows them to learn how to stay safe by developing risk assessment skills, persistence, entrepreneurship, self-knowledge, and problem-solving skills. It also provides children with a greater sense of agency and curiosity and it can have a positive impact on self-esteem. There are several types of risky play, which can be:

- **Great heights:** eg. Climbing trees and being exposed to the danger of falling
- **High speed:** eg. Swinging at high speed
- **Dangerous tools:** eg. Playing with knives, axes or ropes where there is a risk of injury
- **Dangerous elements:** eg. Playing near cliffs, water and fire pits, in which children could fall into
- **Rough play:** eg. Wrestling or play fighting with other children and adults
- **Disappear:** eg. Play where children disappear from adult's supervision like exploring alone or playing unsupervised

Literature reveals that gender roles play an important part in risky play, as parents are more likely to encourage boys to engage in risky behaviour and allow greater exploration, than girls (Brussoni, et al. 2015).

For more information read the academic article: Brussoni, M., Gibbons, R., Gray, C., Ishikawa, T., Sandseter, E. B. H., Bienenstock, A., ... & Tremblay, M. S. (2015). What is the relationship between risky outdoor play and health in children? A systematic review. *International journal of environmental research and public health*, 12(6), 6423-6454.



Loose part play

Loose parts play is a type of free play where children explore and play with the loose parts in the environment. This type of play is based on the theory that loose parts are not prescriptive and offer limitless possibilities, enhancing children's imagination and agency. In a practical sense, the kinds of things that tend to make up loose parts provision include:

- natural resources such as straw, mud and pinecones
- building materials and tools such as planks, nails and hammers
- scrap materials such as old tires and off-cuts of guttering
- naturally occurring and disappearing phenomena like water, ice, snow, shadows, cobwebs, dappled light and rainbows
- people and living things
- random found objects.

Natural environments provide boundless loose parts with more play possibilities than many artificial play spaces.

More details can be found in the following resources:

- Casey, T. & Robertson, J. (2019). Loose Parts Play: A Toolkit by Theresa Case & Juliet Robertson. Inspiring Scotland.
- McClintic, S. (2014). Loose parts: Adding quality to the outdoor environment. Texas Child Care Quarterly, 38(3).
- Robertson, J. (2022) The Ultimate Loose Parts Play Resource List for Developing your Early Years Outdoor Provision. CreativeSTAR



Nature play

Nature play is a type of play that involves direct, multi-sensory, physical interaction with nature. It's about playing with nature, not just in nature. There is no substitute for the experience of hands-on involvement with natural materials even with all the best equipment and materials on the market today. Nature play allows children to explore 'open-ended' materials that encourage them to think for themselves, similar to loose end play. However, other processes also occur when children play outdoors. Free play in the natural world offers a boundless diversity of possibilities for these processes and allows children to develop a closer bond and understanding of nature, their cycles and rules.



It is important to mention, that these types of play are **not mutually exclusive**. This means that for example, loose parts play can be free play when children explore stones and other loose parts that they find in nature. Climbing trees and learning about the textures, width and types of trees that are best to climb can be both risky plays as well as nature play. Even though these types of play are connected and often overlap, they are slightly different and put the focus on different aspects of play.



3.2. Why is outdoor play important?

Societies are facing many changes and time for outdoor play is becoming less and less frequent for children.

Globalization, technological expansion, and urban growth have led to the reality that most children live in cities, with limited access to nature. Playful environments have been moved inside, where adults have greater control and can occupy children with structured activities. Outdoor environments serve merely as recess time, where children can stretch their legs and run a bit.

Too often the significance of outdoor play in children's lives is denied, misunderstood, or ignored, leading to more sedentary lifestyles and a disconnection from nature.

However, outdoor play can have many important **benefits** for children.



Benefits of outdoor play



1 Outdoor play allows contact with the natural elements

When outside, children experience the world through **all their senses**. The warm summer sunshine on their faces, the winter cold on their skin. They can hear how the wind moves the leaves in the autumn and how spring is full of new scents.

By hearing and smelling, children can learn important things that their eyes can't see. Also, play in open environments promotes higher levels of attention and well-being by allowing for free play. Outdoor play can provide unique stimuli. Sticks, rocks, flowers, soil and other elements are open-ended materials, which means children can incorporate them into their imagination. By allowing them to explore nature, skills like divergent thinking, creativity and problem-solving are developed.

By being outdoors, children get to connect with nature. They get to experience natural cycles and how plants and animals are affected by them. By exploring the world, children can develop knowledge and empathy towards other living organisms and develop an emotional attachment to the natural world, which later translates to **ecological understanding and sustainable behaviour**.

2 Outdoor play provides opportunity for free and risky play

Today's society doesn't give enough importance to risk-taking in children's development. A culture of fear has led to underestimating children's capacity and agency creating environments where **children are not able to learn how to stay safe through experience.**

In risky play, children get the opportunity of thrill and excitement while having to assess the risks involved.

This promotes important skills of persistence, entrepreneurship, self-knowledge and problem-solving. Free play also provides children with a greater sense of agency and curiosity.





3 Outdoor play provides new opportunities of socialisation

Outdoor play provides new socialisation opportunities, that are only possible in free environments. Since outdoor space is open and unpredictable, it **promotes greater opportunities for children to develop joint goals, leadership and companionship among peers.**

Being in a group outdoors means that children **need to find solutions to problems together which strengthens their social competencies.** When discussing how to use natural materials for play or crafts, children practice expressing their opinions and needs.

Challenges such as occasionally demanding weather conditions call for mutual support. Overcoming these challenges strengthens group bonds. Additionally, outside space allows children to choose when they want to connect with others or play individually, giving them **a greater choice than in small and crowded rooms**

4 Outdoor play can improve children's physical and mental health

Evidence shows that children suffer today more than ever from childhood **chronic diseases such as obesity, asthma, as well as attention-deficit/hyperactivity disorder (ADHD) and vitamin D deficiency**, which are closely linked to the expansion of technology and sedentary indoor lifestyles. Several studies also affirm that children who spend more time outdoors are more active, which has the potential to improve **children's physical and mental well-being** (McCurdy, et al. 2010; Bento & Dias, 2017).

Regarding **physical health**, time outdoors can increase physical activity, thus reducing the risk of obesity for children (Stone and Faulkner, 2014). Open spaces allow children to move more freely and stimulate movement, which also improves motor skills. While playing outside, children benefit from being exposed to sunlight, natural elements, and open air, which contributes to bone development, a stronger immune system and the habit of physical activity (Dyment et al; 2008 in Bento & Dias, 2017).



Mental health is also greatly benefited from being outdoors. Studies show that being close to nature can significantly reduce symptoms of depression and anxiety, acting as a natural moderator of the impact of stressful life events on children. Natural environments may also improve attention, being especially beneficial for children with ADHD. A key idea behind these studies is that nature can restore the mental fatigue experienced after prolonged concentration, which can manifest as difficulty focusing on tasks, irritability, and distraction (Bento & Dias, 2017).



Finally, access to natural environments may **reduce health inequalities** by promoting physical activity and **offering protection from the biological effects of poverty-related stress** (Bento & Dias, 2017).

Summary of health benefits

- increases physical activity
- reduces obesity
- improves motor skills
- bone development
- strengthens immune system
- reduces depression
- reduces anxiety
- improves ADHD
- reduces mental fatigue

3.4. Outdoor play for children with disabilities

Even though the benefits of outdoor play have been researched thoroughly, children with disabilities are often ignored or not included in studies. Some materials or infrastructural barriers appear “trivial” or “invisible” for most but are experienced as deeply frustrating for children with disabilities. There is **typically limited supervision and limited skills of staff to facilitate the inclusion** of children with disabilities into natural spaces (Horton, 2017). Other barriers include **overprotective caregivers** that limit the ability of children to engage in outdoor play, as well as the design of toys and tools that may not be easy to manipulate for some children.

However, for outdoor spaces to be inclusive they must accommodate those who are active and enjoy risky play, as well as those who are more tentative and wish to observe, test the water, and then gently begin to participate as their courage grows.

The wider variety of play and ways of playing that the environment supports, the more inclusive it becomes towards children with a wide range of abilities and needs (Casey, 2011)

Outdoor play needs to consider the needs of all children

For example, a quiet, **sheltered area with smooth surfaces** and contrasting colours may be preferred by **children with cognitive or sensory impairments**; **different surfaces and levels** can facilitate participation for those with **mobility impairments**; **face-to-face seating** will be more comfortable for children with **hearing impairments**, by allowing them to communicate with others easily.

By improving accessibility, children with disabilities can also benefit from outdoor play. **Improving motor skills** such as **balance, body awareness and spatial skills** might be difficult for children with disabilities, due to reduced mobility. Offering options to play outdoors in a free way may allow them to develop these abilities without feeling it like a chore.

Outdoor activities **can reduce symptoms of stress, anxiety and depression**. Children with disabilities and special needs may experience more stress being in an environment very different from their homes. **Spending time outdoors on a regular basis can make a big difference.**





Being outside also provides opportunities to develop socialization skills. Open spaces promote opportunities for children to strengthen peer bonds and develop joint goals. Open spaces are also more flexible and allow children to choose how much exposure they want. For example, **children on the autism spectrum might need more time alone to regulate sensory input, and the outdoor environment allows them to choose more freely how much exposure they have to others.**

Children with autism may struggle with structured play and generally prefer the freedom of outdoor spaces that offer opportunities for a physical challenge, sensory input and social interaction. Children on the autism spectrum especially enjoy sensorimotor play, which has a cause and an effect, is repetitive and ritualistic (Fahy, Delicate & Lynch, 2021). These children can experience great pleasure in sensory play such as running, twirling and watching items spins, which is easier to do while outdoors than in a constrained setting, with artificial light and noisy classrooms. Electric lights can create a buzz unnoticeable to some, but that can cause distress for children on the spectrum.

3.5. What is the role of the Play Hub Staff?

Before we plan any outdoor activity, it is important to consider the role of the staff at the Mobile Play Hub.

Enable contact

The natural world is a place of learning for children that cannot be replaced and our responsibility as adults is to enable them to have access to the outdoors. It is important that adults value the role of outdoor play and can also provide opportunities for children to play in nature as much as possible.

Consider the risk

Children need additional protection – both physical and psychological – in the natural world. Rather than just restricting play, adults have an important role in making the play as secure as possible. Whenever an activity exceeds a child's ability to move or understand, it could become a genuine hazard or danger. Every child is unique, and the risk that is acceptable for one may become unacceptable for another depending on their capabilities. It is important to ensure that children are properly dressed to play outside (consider the warmth and resistance of their clothes) and that adults can provide them with important information to stay safe. For example, this can mean explaining that some berries and mushrooms can be poisonous and that certain animals should be left alone. Interrupt play only when it is absolutely necessary.

Value outdoor learning

Outdoor learning is not just taking indoor activities and doing them outside. It is not simply letting children outside for playtime. Understanding this difference is key to good practice. Try to ensure that every practitioner understands the rationale and vision for outdoor play so that everyone is able to implement this experience for children.





Create trust

Children learn best when they feel safe and secure. A trusted adult can make them feel comfortable enough to explore their surroundings. Learning processes are interpersonal processes, and this general principle is even more relevant outdoors. Play Hub staff can play an important role in finding appropriate places and materials to support exploration and experimentation according to the seasons, weather and interests of the child.



Nurture free play

Nurture children's curiosity and agency by allowing them to discover the diversity of possibilities in nature during the process. When children are able to move through the natural world playfully and independently, their curiosity is awakened, and learning is set in motion. The natural world invites creativity and offers plenty of space for children to indulge in their need for movement. Children learn that there are things in nature that remain constant – like the location of a tree or landscape features – and that other things change, such as the seasons, the weather and the light.



Engage as many as possible

Planning, creating and providing an outdoor experience for the children in the Play Hub does not have to be done by one or two staff members only. It can be developed and maintained with the help of parents, grandparents, and the wider community. Engaging adults with outdoor activities can also be a positive opportunity for them to (re)connect with nature.



3.6. Principles of outdoor play in nature

- * **Outdoor Play can happen every week**
Repetition makes connections stronger. The experience of being surrounded by nature can occur frequently to foster a love of nature and firsthand knowledge of the earth that we live on.
- * **Outdoor Play can endure all weather:**
Nature offers a host of experiences and different weather is a large part of that; the sound of the wind in new leaves, the smell of wet undergrowth, and the taste of wild blackberries. A change in conditions can provide a whole new play experience in the same spot.
- * **Outdoor Play happens in all seasons:**
The changing seasons can influence the mind and body. What better way to understand the seasons than to experience them, observe them, feel them, and be a part of them?
- * **Outdoor play should be accessible:**
Nature is available to everyone; a first-hand connection to the earth is every child's right.



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