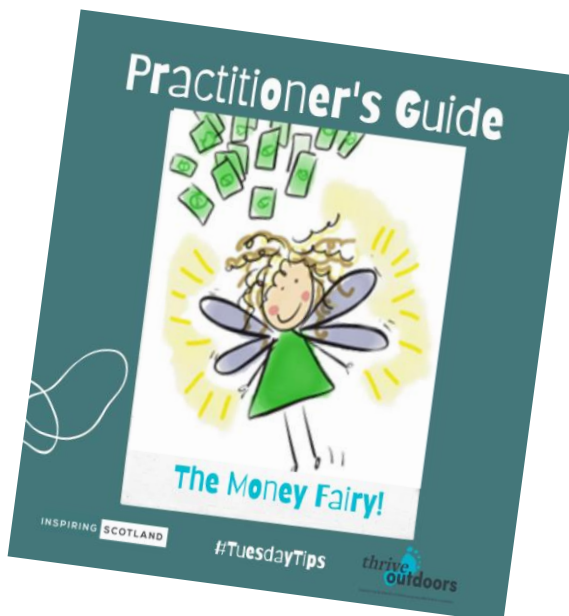


**A Practitioner's Guide  
to  
OUTDOOR PLAY BASED LEARNING  
GETTING STARTED**  
**Guest Blogger: Vicki Shiels-Nursery Manager,  
Edinburgh College Waterfront Nursery**

**So you've got a dream.....**

....an idea of an amazing space where children can learn, explore, be curious and adventurous... You've worked hard with your team of like-minded practitioners who are desperate to get outside with the children in a bigger way than in the garden, local green space or out on a walk.



There's never any money in the Early Years, but this time the planets have aligned to provide a funding opportunity .... and the magic money fairy has waved their wand and it's raining cash (a wee shower) for you to make the dream come true. The question is how do you get started?

**Can you tell us a little bit about yourself Vicki?**

**My name is Vicki Shiels and I am the nursery manager at Edinburgh College's Waterfront Nursery.** We are based in Granton (old Telford College for the locals). I was delighted and slightly apprehensive to be asked to write this blog entry, considering the people who have gone before me!

I am here to talk about our latest outdoor adventure and to give anyone **getting started** on their outdoor learning journey some insight on how we got to where we are, and hopefully it might help or inspire you.

One of my favourite things about working in Early Years, is the huge amount of collaboration that happens regularly so I am happy to be able to contribute.

So, we are currently in the middle of opening an outdoor satellite site to our nursery. We will apply for a variation to our Care Inspectorate registration, to increase the number of children we can take each day and expand our offer of outdoor experiences for our children.

## So how DID you get started Vicki?

I am a huge fan of the **Scandinavian approaches** to early years in general and in particular to outdoor learning, so I researched different settings, theories and general ethos and started creating plans and ideas in my head.

Now, as my team will verify, a lot of stuff happens in my head. I begin a lot of conversations with the phrase:

**“So, I was thinking last night ...”**

And I hear the gentle sigh and that look that says:

**“Here she goes again, which means here WE go again!”**

But I am very fortunate to work with a great team of dedicated practitioners and a particular few who just get me, and go with it.

We got involved with Thrive Outdoors and they have been a great help to us and continue to be so. We are fortunate to have a space on the College grounds where we will be able to have a permanent structure and outdoor space with the opportunity to use the great



local spaces around us on a nomadic basis. This was a massive achievement for us and the start of a really exciting project that is very close to my heart.

We received funding from the college and now that we have got to the point of actually spending the money and making the dream come alive.....we got a bit stuck!!!

We have a blank canvas and **SO** many ideas from the children, the staff team, the parents, the college lecturers and students and it all got a bit overwhelming. So how did we move forward?

## Getting unstuck!

**This is the space we have to work with...As you can see it really is a blank canvas!**

The first thing we needed was to actually create a workable vision statement to help us really focus on what we wanted this addition to our early years provision to achieve.

## Ethos, Values and Aims

**This then led us to rethink our whole setting**

**ethos, values and aims.** As this will be a branch of our existing nursery, we felt that everything should tie together so we are creating a new set to reflect our changing provision.

I would suggest that this is a really good starting point. It gives clarity and focus and a set of points to always come back to. There is an opportunity to get staff, parents and children involved and stakeholders. It also makes you really think about what outdoor learning is all about and reminds you that there is legislation and guidelines from the UNCRC and within the National Health and Social Care standards about children's rights to play outdoors.





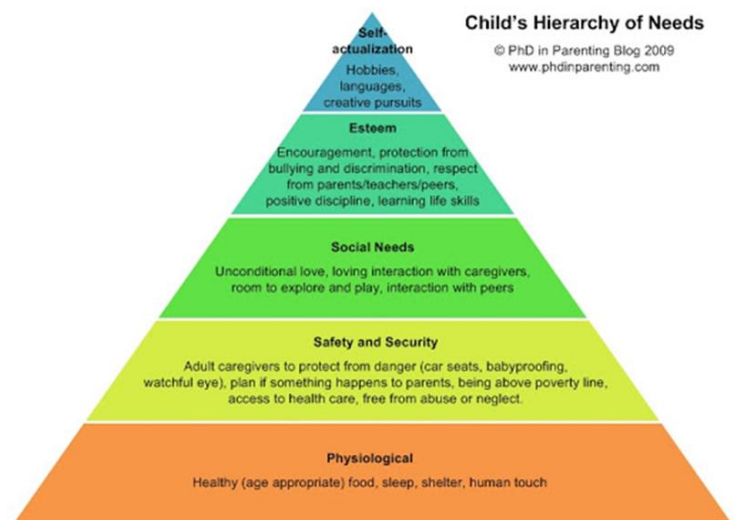
I should say before anything else, that “**Out to Play**” the practical guidance for outdoor play in early years created by the **Care Inspectorate, Inspiring Scotland** and the **Scottish Government** will be your constant companion when creating your outdoor setting!

There is a huge range of guidance available and once you start with one you find others, usually through a hyperlink in the text!

The next thing you might need to decide on is where and what your outdoor setting is going to be. There are different types of outdoor provision and “Out to Play” has a great section on things to think about and lots of useful information and resources on who to speak to, do you need permission and other things I hadn’t even thought about before I read it!

For us, we needed to think about how to make the site safe and operational for the children. We could have the best ideas, but if the children and staff are not having their basic needs met, they won’t fully enjoy the experiences.

**So I revisited my theorists and got Maslow involved.** I’ve always found the Hierarchy of Needs a really useful visual to remind me that strong foundations are the bedrock of everything and this picture from PhD in Parenting’s blog is a lovely example of a child’s hierarchy of needs.



Right at the bottom of Maslow's Hierarchy are the physical needs of food, shelter and sleep so we had to get that right before anything else.

## We need to buy resources for outdoor learning....

### But do we really??!

We have a permanent site AND have been gifted a log cabin as part of our project! This was a really exciting development however, as soon as it became known we had this, the focus became on what we needed to buy to put in it.



We all got very carried away with kitting out this log cabin and there were conversations about where the construction area would be and what furniture we needed to buy!! An IKEA trip was imminent!!

This is a natural reaction, as EYP's when we get some money we want to get **EVERYTHING** for the children and stretch every last penny as we are a thrifty bunch!

I have a spreadsheet for the costs and budget spend and I was getting to line number 156 and had bought half of the catalogue of dreams!! You know the one, Early Years version of the Argos catalogue!

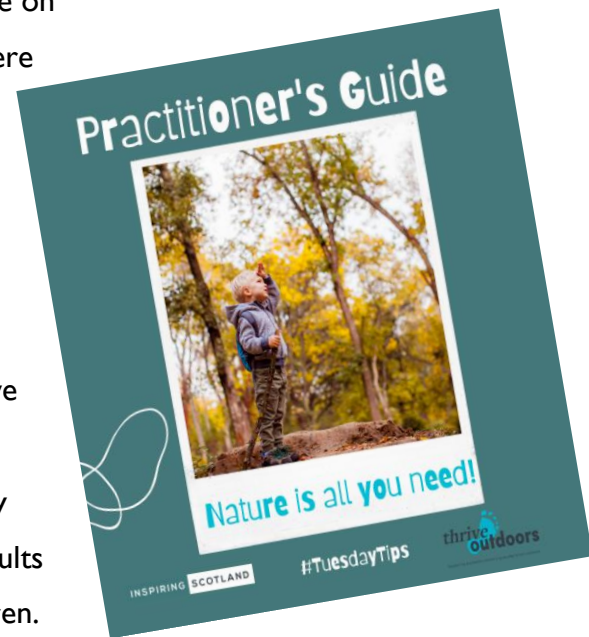
**But we needed to stop getting carried away!** We needed to revisit the purpose of this project and all of the ethos of outdoor learning. I am very inspired by Juliet Robertson and find her website Creative Star Learning ([www.creativestarlarning.com](http://www.creativestarlarning.com)) really useful and informative. I found lots of inspirational pictures from established settings and useful tips and advice. I also contacted our Early Years team at Edinburgh council for some guidance as to the kit for their outdoor settings. Needless to say, their kit list was **about a third** of what we had!!

## Nature is all you need!

**We are not creating an outdoor classroom** and that is a really important distinction for me. I don't want another playroom that happens to be outside.

The log cabin is a base, nothing more and the focus has to be on the practical side. Where are we storing wet clothes? Where will the wellies go? How are we drying things? How will we warm everyone up?

There are things you will need. But there are many websites and guidance which will give you kit lists and important things to buy. There is sometimes a feeling that we must need "stuff" to "provide" outdoor learning, but for us we needed to remember that most of the "stuff" has already been provided by nature and the children and supportive adults will do the rest. Just open the doors and listen to the children.



**I really hope that outdoor learning becomes a normal, everyday part of children and young people's lives** and that respecting our environment and engaging with nature means that the world will be better looked after by the children in our care. I am very pleased and proud to have any kind of role in that and I know my team are too.

**Enjoy this blog? Do you have top tips that you would like to share?**

**Join in the conversation, add your pictures, or just chat with us at:**

**Facebook @ThriveOutdoorsScot,**

**Twitter @Thrive\_Outdoors**

**Instagram @thrive\_outdoors**

**or by email to [jo@inspiringscotland.org.uk](mailto:jo@inspiringscotland.org.uk)**

### Useful Links

Out to Play <https://bit.ly/3IEPwoy>

Creative STAR Learning <https://creativestarning.co.uk/>

Care Inspectorate Delivering High Quality Play & Learning Environments Outdoors  
[https://www.careinspectorate.com/images/ELC\\_practice\\_note.pdf](https://www.careinspectorate.com/images/ELC_practice_note.pdf)