

A Practitioner's Guide  
to  
OUTDOOR PLAY BASED LEARNING  
Children's Mental Health Awareness week  
The power of play  
Blog: Thrive Outdoors team

## Children's Mental Health Awareness Week

As some of you may know it is [Children's Mental Health Awareness Week](#) and we thought it might be useful to offer up some handy tips and activities for practitioners with a special focus on allowing children to express themselves through play or indeed relax and quieten an anxious mind. It's no secret that outdoor play can be incredibly beneficial for children. As we shared on our social media yesterday Time spent playing outdoors is thought to help decrease levels of anxiety in children. A recent study in the UK found that even just five minutes of exercise in a natural outdoor environment can rapidly improve self-esteem and mental health and wellbeing in young people. (NHS study-Green Exercise and Mental Health) So there is some real evidence to back up why outdoor play is so important! Part of a practitioners role is being aware of a child's mental wellbeing as well as their physical. It's a lot easier to notice when a child is hurting physically but its sometimes trickier to notice when a child is struggling mentally. But the good thing is there is no right or wrong in outdoor play and the benefits of **just playing** are immense!

## Express Yourself..... through Play!

This years theme for Children's Mental Health Awareness week is **Express yourself!** It's all about encouraging children (and adults..yes we mean YOU practitioners) to explore the different ways we can express ourselves, and the creative ways that we can share our feelings, our thoughts and our ideas. Here are some useful tips to try out which might help with this!

### 1. Free play

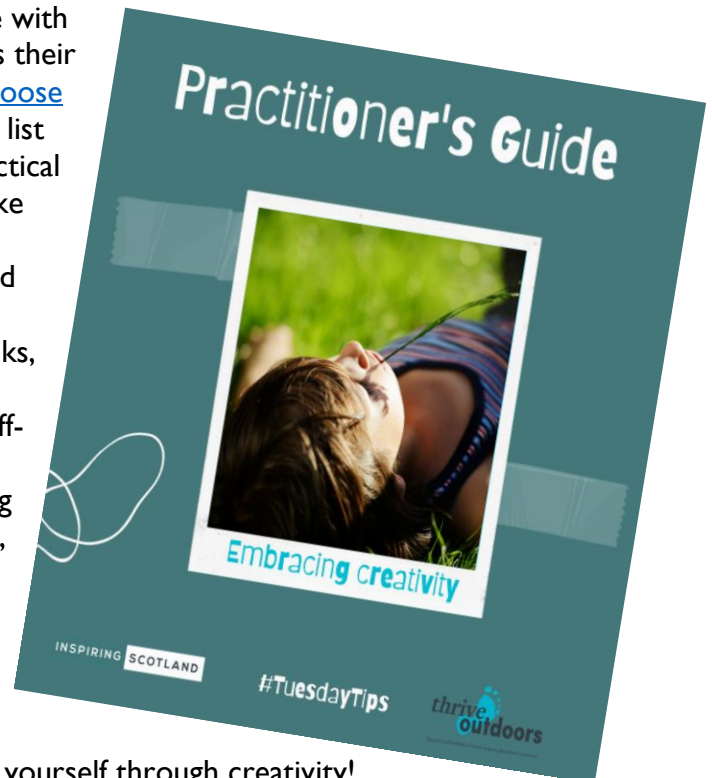
Free play Free play can be described as unstructured and child-initiated activity that allows children to use their imaginations and creativity while exploring the world around them. In other words free play means **unstructured play** so while planned and organised activities definitely have a place, unstructured play allows children the

freedom to choose what they want to do. It can sound daunting to simply announce 'go play' but children can come up with so many fun and creative games that really engage their imaginations this way. Keep praising the play and try to resist the urge to give suggestions. It's also important to try not to set any guidelines or rules just simply let them play. A great tool to help free play along is utilising loose parts....that brings us on nicely to our next tip.

## 2. Loose Parts Play

Loose parts are a set of objects with no defined purpose. And that is where the magic lies-it's what children do and create with these objects and 'things'. Again it engages their creativity and imagination. We have our [Loose Parts toolkit](#) if you want to learn more. A list of possible loose parts is endless, 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 tyres and off-cuts of guttering
- naturally occurring and disappearing phenomena like water, ice, snow, shadows, cobwebs, dappled light and rainbows
- random found objects



## 3. Get creative!

As this year's theme encourages- express yourself through creativity! Encouraging children to engage in creative outdoor play could be a great way to do this. Some of our Friday Outdoor play tips could be a great place to start- activities such as making [nature mandalas](#) or [leaf printing](#) all require creativity!

## And Relax.....

There might come a time in the day where its important to create a more 'zen' and relaxed vibe! Perhaps there's been a commotion or a child is upset and crying. These tips could be a great way to quieten an anxious mind!

### 1. Engage their senses.

This is a mindfulness based technique that can be used if a child is feeling anxious. It's super easy to do and helps both distract and ground a child. Simply:

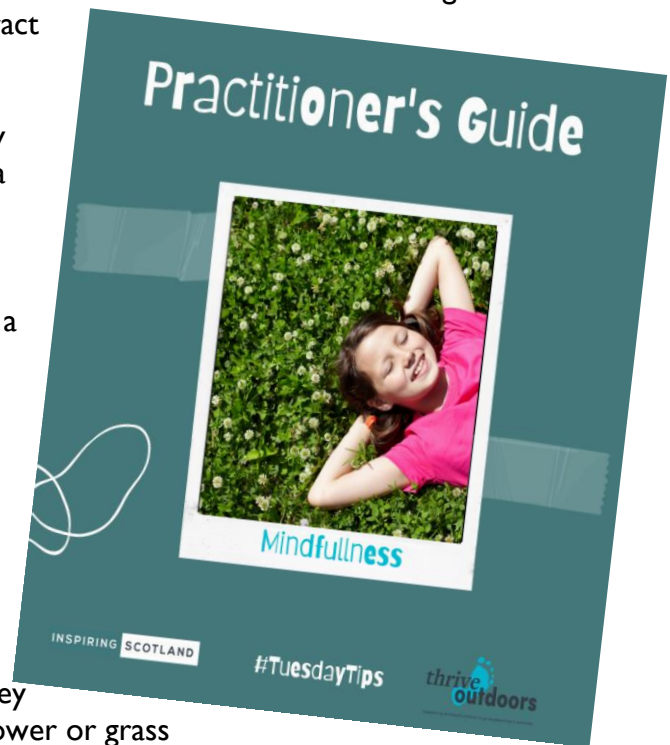
5: Ask them to name FIVE things they see around them. It could be a tree, a rock, a bug.

4: Ask them to name FOUR things they can touch. It could be the grass, a rock, their hair.

3: Ask them to name THREE things they can hear. This could be any external sound. If you can hear your belly rumbling that counts! Focus on things you can hear outside of your body.

2: Ask them to name TWO things they can smell. Maybe it's the smell of a flower or grass

1: Ask them to name ONE thing they can taste. What does the inside of their mouth taste like—what they had for lunch or drink recently?



## 2. Cloud gazing

This is a great activity to allow children to simply be. Get them to sit outdoors, they can lie on their backs and gaze at the sky and look at the different shapes that might appear out of the clouds. Again they might see different animals or shapes in clouds -encourage them to share what they see and express themselves. Find our cloud gazing tip [here](#).



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### Useful Links

**Our handy hints and tips on #outdoorplay**

<https://www.inspiringscotland.org.uk/thrive/>

**Loose parts toolkit:** <https://www.inspiringscotland.org.uk/wp-content/uploads/2019/07/Loose-Parts-Play-Toolkit-2019-web.pdf>