

**A Practitioner's Guide
to
OUTDOOR PLAY BASED LEARNING**
The Joy of Wintertime Outdoor Play
Guest blogger: Dr Claire Warden

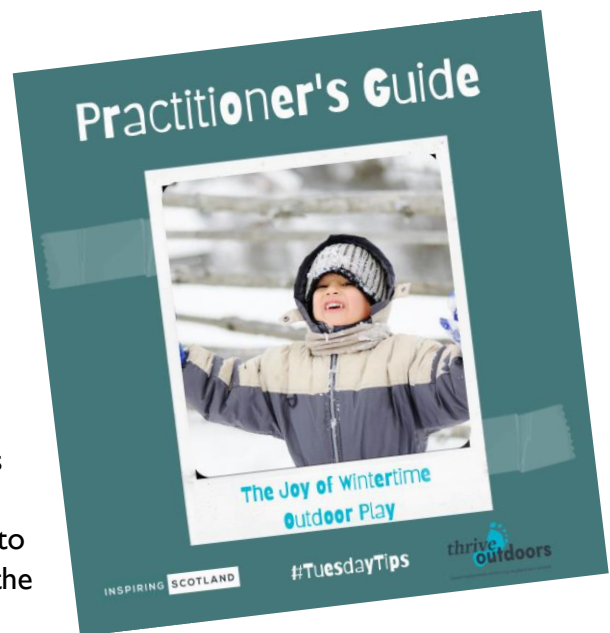
Embracing Winter

As I sit here and look at a snow-covered space, being outside in the wintertime appears idyllic. Sunshine bounces off the snow-covered garden, birds fly by and the first snow drops are pushing their way up, but this is actually only my reality for a few weeks a year. The challenge for us working at Auchlone Nature Kindergarten for the last 12 years has been wet (really, very wet) winters. In these winters the ground is waterlogged, and mud is everywhere, the wind is cold, the trusted canopy of leaves has all gone, and the odd cold droplet of dripping rain seems to land efficiently and run down your neck. It begs the question, is it worth it?

It comes as no surprise that my answer will always be 'yes'. There are ways that we can make the challenging parts of being outside in the winter fade into the background so that we can focus on the wonderful moments that this time of year brings in Scotland. Let us consider the list I noted earlier.

Winter fun!

The waterlogged ground offers a new surface ready to slide on. The mud itself becomes a new material that, although around all year, can now be found frozen into weird shapes that seem to have trapped all manner of objects, like sticks and leaves, in abstract forms of

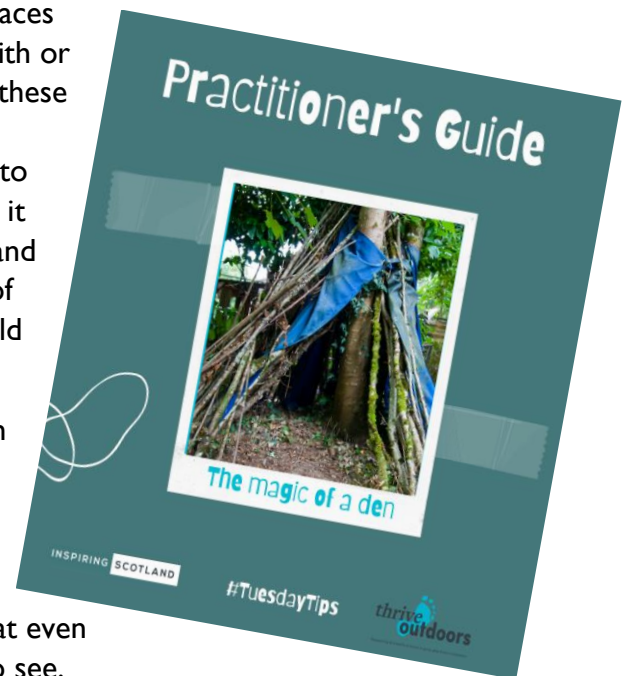


sculpture. Mud faces created on the trees in the autumn now have a frosty cover and have been transformed into Jack Frost look-alikes. On a lucky day, the footprints we left in the mud occasionally fill with water and freeze overnight allowing us the opportunity to crunch through our own footsteps, retracing our journey in a completely different way.

The wind can certainly rattle through outdoor spaces but the chance to build a den or find a shelter (with or without a fire) feels like a greater adventure. On these wilder days we come together as a group, talking animatedly about how the wind tried to push us, to lift our hair and how good it is that we overcame it and found a place to rest. The joint experiences and journeys in the wintertime have a greater sense of urgency, whether we go to a park, around the field or play in the garden.

The wintertime light is different, a bluer light with longer shadows that seem to highlight new spaces, especially in the forest, which when it snows provide the opportunity to engage in giant shadow games. The sunrises and sunsets often provide glorious hues of red and orange that even those people who get up later have the chance to see.

And then there is the rain... a friend once said to me that the only difference between Scotland in the summer and the winter was the temperature of the rain. It is true that we if we are to be outside, we need to embrace the rain since it gives us our landscapes, from puddles to leap into to rivers and lochs to admire. The research does suggest that wintertime in Scotland sees a drop in the amount of time children spend outside and part of that is due to the challenges of keeping warm and dry, finding the motivation as an adult, and lastly thinking what you might do when you are out there.



Top Tips on keeping warm and dry in all weathers!

Let us start with the first challenge around keeping warm and dry. The first secret lies in layers of fluffy clothes to trap the air with a windproof layer on top to keep out both the wind and rain. The areas where blood comes near to the surface, such as feet, wrist, fingers, ears and your neck are the places to focus on as they can make you feel cold very quickly.

- Feet need thick socks, preferably with wool in them, and thick soled boots to stop the cold creeping from the ground into your feet.
- Wrists and fingers are covered by mittens or several gloves (a top tip for keeping them on is to use an old sock over the top with the toe cut off and a thumbhole cut out).
- Ears are more vulnerable than the top of your head, so ear-warmers are a great solution for children who don't like wearing a hat.

- Wearing a fleece buff around your neck is one of our favourites as they can be used as hats, masks and extra hand warming tubes if necessary when we are off on an adventure.

Waterproof suits make the whole process much easier, do check that they are waterproof, not just showerproof, if you choose to invest for the setting. Gather in the waist strap if they have one and use the foot straps as well if they have them.

The second secret lies in working with the weather to keep warm, long blocks of time sitting on a blanket reading books belong to the summer and warmer days. The colder days require us to move, to be active and tell movement stories full of action, like jumping stories, as we leap about outside from puddle to puddle.

Motivation comes from within, and there are days when taking the first step outside can be a challenge for everyone. Holding onto the joyful memories at that point is key, to feel warm yourself and enjoy watching the children play out is central to staying outside for longer periods of time.



Wintertime brings new opportunities!

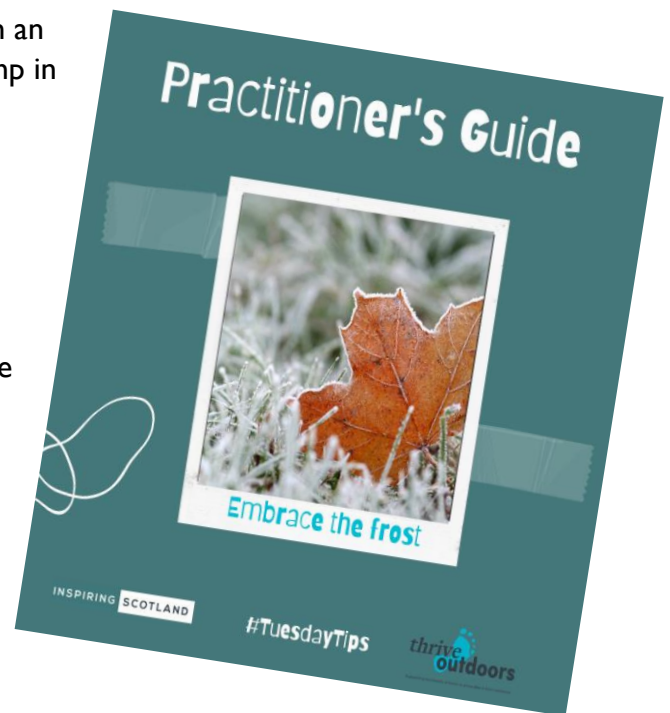
The last aspect is around what opportunities can winter offer? Where do we get ideas from for weeks of rain? This requires us to make a link between pedagogy and practice. Nature Pedagogy for me, is a way of being with children inside and out that centralises the principle of consultation and empowerment. That ensures that we listen and notice what children are exploring and then offer provocations if we feel they need them. Imagine that a frosty day has arrived, and you notice that children are interested in how they can make frost disappear by touching it. There are several options; one is to just enjoy the moment, the second is to think of it as a starting point for a playful inquiry that will last for a few hours. It is in these moments that we as adults need to see the wonderment and possibilities of simple moments as they hold complex learning. In the early years, we do not always need ideas for set adult activities, but we do need the understanding of what resources might be useful, what spaces we can make available and how to interact to help rather than hinder the play. So, with frost it may be that we watch as the sun moves to melt the frost, or we breathe warm air onto the frost to see it melt away. A simple moment with complex learning around temperature.

The joy of wintertime is that it is often the weather that drives what we can do, the rain comes heavily, and the snow comes silently, frost emerges, and icy puddles never freeze the same way twice. The wintertime is a time full of wonder that is balanced by the healthy awareness that humans are at the mercy of the weather. When we learn how to adjust, we

can uncover the joy of cold frosty morning and watch an ice rainbow around the sun or join a child as they jump in the puddle... again.

If you are reading this as a practitioner or parent and would like to explore more about being outside with children in the wintertime, join us on our *Take a Moment* journey to share children's voices about the wintertime from across Scotland in our Facebook group. Watch provocation films on the Virtual Nature School YouTube channel, or chat to us on Twitter.

The Scottish Government funds the Virtual Nature School as a place to explore nature-based pedagogies for families and practitioners in a variety of ways, from projects to provocation films, to support home-based learning and practice in setting www.virtualnatureschool.org



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