

**A Practitioner's Guide
to
OUTDOOR PLAY BASED LEARNING**
Storytelling, Drama & Creativity Outdoors
**Guest Blogger : Emily Reid,
Artistic Director and Founder of Eco
Drama**

This week's guest blog is from Emily Reid – Artistic Director and Founder of Eco Drama. In this blog she shares her thoughts on taking a creative, arts-based approach to outdoor learning and shares tips and ideas from Eco Drama's Out to Play project which has been running in school and nursery playgrounds across Glasgow since 2015.

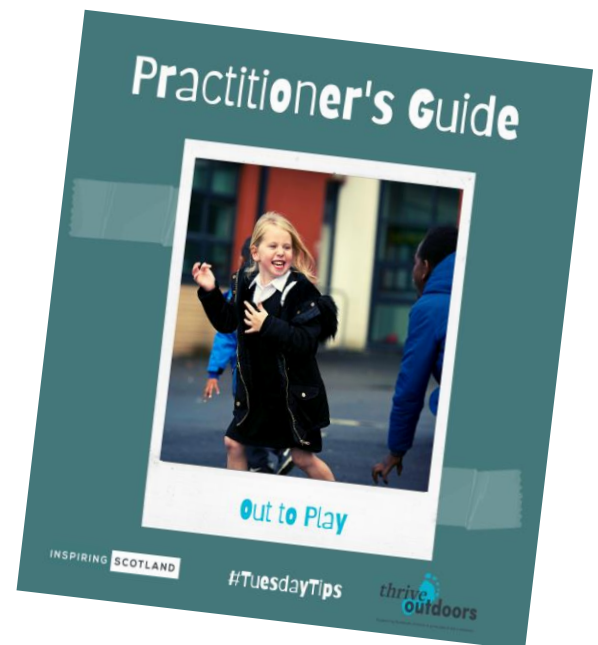
Out to Play!

What does the phrase **Out to Play** mean to you? What images or memories does it conjure? You might think back to your childhood and time spent playing outside after school, or at weekends and during the school holidays. Where did you go – what did you do?

You might also think of your time at school, the time 'in between' lessons - playtimes and lunch times where you and your fellow classmates were released into the playground to take a break from learning – to play freely in an unstructured manner either with your friends, or on your own. Whatever you think of and wherever you went 'out to play', hopefully thinking about it conjures for you **a sense of freedom, possibility and adventure.**

It is these qualities of freedom, possibility and adventure which embody 'Out to Play', a creative outdoor learning project first piloted by Eco Drama in 2015 and which is now in its sixth year of delivery.

The Out to Play project began with a question – **how can we develop the role of the arts and creativity in outdoor learning, particularly in urban areas?** Around 2014, I was having conversations with teachers in Glasgow who spoke of their remit to develop



outdoor learning with pupils, with one teacher poignantly asking, ‘how can I develop outdoor learning and promote nature connection in a concrete playground?!’ I started to think about Eco Drama’s specialisms, drama, theatre and storytelling, and how these could be developed and advanced within the world of Outdoor Learning & Learning for Sustainability, and specifically, what role **imagination** could play, particularly in urban playground spaces with little to no green spaces. If there aren’t any trees, could we imagine a forest? If there aren’t any noticeable signs of wildlife, how could we ‘become animal’ in playground adventures?

Along with lead drama artist Ben Mali, we started to think about the ‘What Is’ versus What If’ as a way to begin. In Out to Play the ‘IS’ is the everyday classroom world & ‘IF’ the re-imagined outdoor world. What IF our playground space looked like this...



Of course, many schools in urban areas do have trees and lots of green space (or have developed their concrete spaces into creative ‘wonderworlds’ in the example of Westerbraigs Nursery in the east end of Glasgow), and these are equally great settings to incorporate the arts.

However, for those with wide stretches of concrete around their school which perhaps doesn’t feel that inspiring, creating a newly imagined world together at the start of an Out to Play residency not only helps to stimulate the imagination and provide a rich setting for the stories and creative, play-based activities to come, but by focusing in on the playground space and exploring its qualities in more detail, this encourages participants to notice and appreciate nature on their doorstep. For even in a concrete playground, nature exists when looking closely.

Why the arts? The need to nurture creativity and play in learning

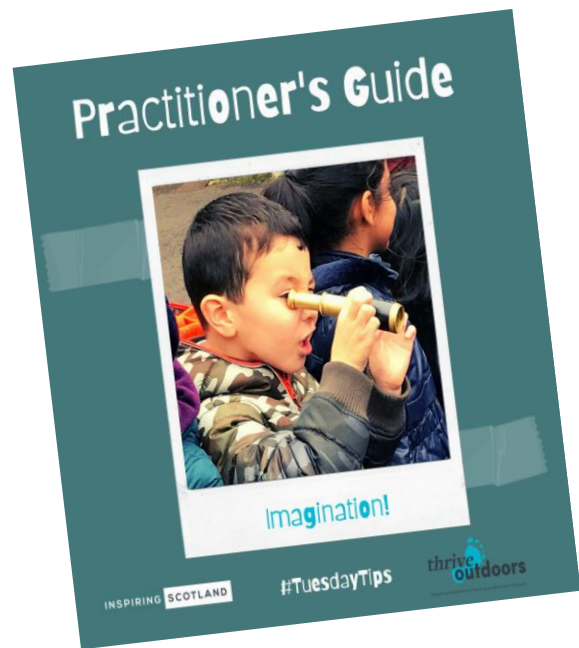
Eco Drama’s Out to Play approach encourages the idea that everyday learning experiences can incorporate the arts, creativity and play in one holistic way of working.

Perhaps most notably, the arts have the unique ability to engage children emotionally as well as intellectually in their learning and play, and the development of emotional intelligence in our children is the gateway to being, and becoming, well-rounded, healthy individuals. As the late Ken Robinson said:

“Creativity is as important now in education as literacy, and we should treat it with the same status.”

In this light, we must create the conditions for creativity to thrive in all levels of education, and the world of outdoor learning is rich in possibilities for imaginative enquiry. As educators and facilitators, we have a significant opportunity to create the circumstances where children’s natural creative abilities show themselves.

As advocates for the power of story, drama and creative play, Eco Drama have seen firsthand the benefits of this way of working, and nurturing children’s creativity is key to helping them live their best lives during early childhood and beyond. Through creative learning, through play and time spent outdoors in nature, we set the scene for children to be children, enabling them to celebrate the wonder of being three, four, five or eight - not simply preparing them for school or adulthood. We believe this helps to lay the foundations for a healthy, creative, resilient journey into adulthood. Moreover, if children see themselves as storytellers of their own lives, this develops great confidence in knowing they can shape their future as well as a more sustainable collective future on Earth.



What is Out to Play?

Drama Artists from Eco Drama collaborate with partner primary schools and nurseries to design and deliver five-week long creative outdoor learning residencies tailored to the unique surroundings of each school playground, with a goal to notice and appreciate nature within urban environments and deepen children’s connection with the natural world.

Out to Play uses the arts - **Storytelling, Drama and Creative Play**, to bring to life nature themes and learning for sustainability topics to create meaningful, creative outdoor learning experiences. The drama artists are also storytellers and incorporate engaging stories from around the world, which inspire wonder, curiosity, care and respect of nature.

The project has a strong CPD element including twilight training sessions in drama and storytelling skills, plus teacher led weeks where staff design and deliver their own ‘Out to Play’ session, incorporating arts-based learning, creativity and play with a nature theme or topic, and the project’s legacy is that schools and nurseries continue to deliver arts-based

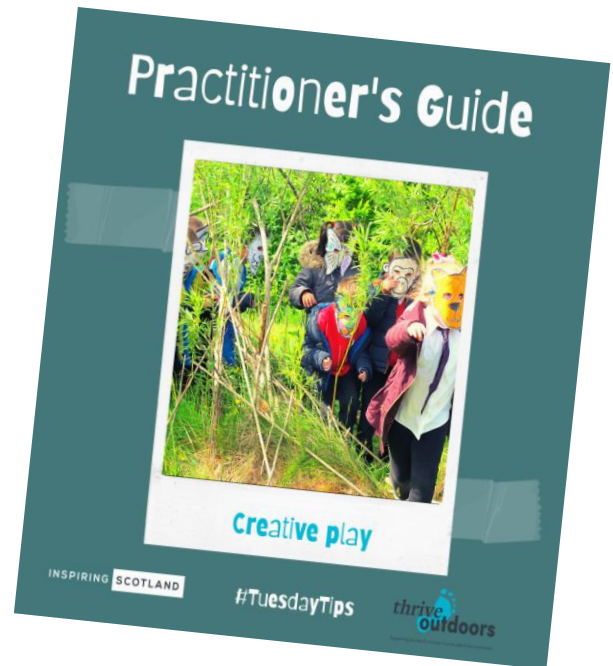
'Out to Play' sessions after the project ends. In many partner schools, teachers have gone on to use storytelling and drama across all areas of the curriculum, and now take their children outdoors to learn on a more regular basis.

"I hadn't realised the power of imagination within outdoor learning." -Teacher, Corpus Christi Primary

"I have gained openness to taking children outside for outdoor learning which will stay with me for the rest of my career." -Teacher, Dalmarnock Primary School

6 years on from the pilot in 2015, the Out to Play project has to date worked in-depth with 26 primary schools and nurseries across Glasgow, reaching almost 5,000 children and 700 teachers and early years practitioners with arts-based outdoor learning residencies delivered in school playgrounds. We have also delivered extensive [CPD sessions](#) across Scotland and produced [3 hard copy Out to Play resource packs](#) tailored to primary and early years practitioners that have been used in settings across Scotland, the UK and Europe and as far away as Canada, USA and Australia.

Due to ongoing interest in the project, Out to Play will now extend for a further 2 years throughout 2021-2023 and we are delighted to continue building on the momentum of the work.



Out to Play for all 236 Nurseries in Glasgow City Council

After launching the [Early Years Out to Play Resource Pack](#) in February 2021, we attracted the interest and support of Glasgow City Council. Every nursery in Glasgow has now received a hard copy of the pack as well as the opportunity to send 2 staff from each nursery to an Out to Play CPD Webinar delivered by Eco Drama during April – June 2021 which introduces the pack content and Out to Play approach.

We are excited and honoured to have our work reach practitioners on this scale and to see the arts and creativity being valued within the world of outdoor learning at council leadership level. We look forward to contributing more to the burgeoning outdoor learning movement across the city and Scotland over the coming years and continuing to champion the role of the arts and creativity in this field.

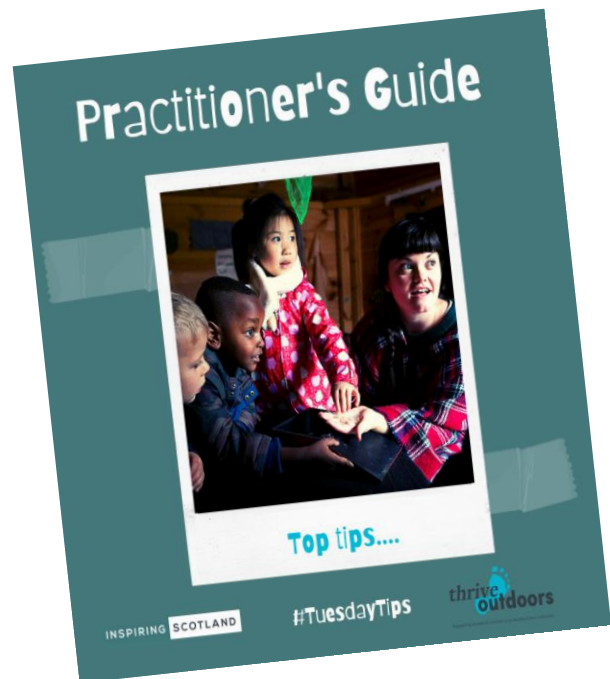
Top Tips: How to bring creativity and the arts into outdoor play and learning!

There is a wealth of ideas, tips, session plans, nature themed stories and creative, play-based activities in the [3 Out to Play Resource Packs](#) (2 primary school versions and an Early Years pack).

We have learnt so much about how to inspire curiosity and elicit imagination with the children and young people we work with, and a few reflections and learnings from the journey so far include:

- Setting up a **lure** - something out of the ordinary to begin a session will instil children with a sense of curiosity and magic, e.g. placing a false door in a wall: who lives behind there? What stories can be found if you journey through? Footprints on the ground – who do they belong to? Revealing a stone, feather or other natural object from a special box, or discovered on a treasure hunt, lures learners into the world you are setting up. Often the simplest interventions are the most powerful – a slight twist on reality that leaves space for the imagination.
- Even the top end of primary will willingly journey into the imagination, and often create the most amazing responses from their creations when given permission.
- When a story is told by a teacher **from memory** rather than read from a book it comes alive in whole new amazing ways.
- **Teacher in role** is a fun and simple technique to bring a bit of magic into outdoor sessions, i.e. a simple cape and you are a friend of Mother Nature, or a hat or jacket can signify you are now a Nature Explorer. Children love seeing their teacher change personas even if subtly.
- Having a **strong structure** to outdoor sessions is essential, e.g., always starting with the same actions or games, creating a nature call, or using different spaces for different qualities of activity, e.g. 'the meeting place', 'the storytelling tree' (also quiet reflection spaces should never be energetic game playing ones!)

We have developed an '**Out to Play**' **workshop structure** for both primary learners and early years learners. E.g. the primary structure begins with **wonder**, moving into **excitement** and **inspiration** (active games, nature exploring, storytelling) then to **collaboration** (developing group performances, co-creating) and ending with **celebration and reflection** (sharing and witnessing each other, saying thank you). An Out to Play session takes classes on inspiring and fulfilling learning adventures and creates a simple structure for teachers and educators to begin taking drama, storytelling and other creative learning possibilities outside.



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 amy@inspiringscotland.org.uk

Useful Links

Further Information / Useful Links

If you are interested in finding out more, you can visit the [Out to Play Project](#) webpage; access [reports](#) on the impact of the Out to Play project; read the [Drama Artist Blogs](#), get copies of the Out to Play [Resource Packs](#) or book [CPD](#) for your school, nursery or council.

Eco Drama are currently delivering **Early Years Out to Play CPD Webinars** which includes a hard copy of the Early Years Out to Play Resource Pack. To register [click here](#).

You can watch the Out to Play films:

- [Early Years Out to Play Resource Pack Mini Documentary](#)
- [Out to Play Short Documentary 2018](#)
- [Out to Play & The Living Stage Documentary 2015](#)

Please follow Eco Drama on [Twitter](#) or [Facebook @EcoDrama1](#) or join Eco Drama's [Mailing List](#) for quarterly newsletters. www.ecodrama.co.uk

Photo Credit: Eoin Carey and E. Reid

Further reading

Some fantastic tips can also be found within the [Out to Play blogs](#), written by the Out to Play Drama Artists. A few tip-based blogs are highlighted below:

- To explore how to create exciting and imaginative outdoor story-led learning sessions, read the following blog by Ben Mali.

[3 STEPS TO MAKING YOUR OWN CREATIVE PLAYGROUND ADVENTURES](#)

- On exploring, the use of special objects, simple trickery and constructing an imaginary world: [AN ADVENTURE CALLS](#)
- On Out to Play in the early years read Sarah Rankin's blog: [OUT TO PLAY FOR NURSERIES](#)
- On leading your own workshop, confidence, and realising we are all storytellers: [A WONDERFUL FIVE WEEKS AT TWO NURSERIES](#)
- To read about how the Out to Play approach was developed for learners with complex support needs during the pandemic read this blog by Sophie McCabe: [OUT TO PLAY AT EAST PARK SCHOOL](#)