

# THE GREAT OUTDOORS

EXPANDING CHILDREN'S LEARNING AND DEVELOPMENT BEYOND THE PRESCHOOL CLASSROOM.

**A WORTHY EFFORT**  
Some 49,000 children from over 820 preschools collectively contributed 1.4 million hours on community service and raised over \$300,000 for charity in 2019.

**O**utdoor learning is not just about physical activity. While promoting physical development and health is one of the key benefits, it goes beyond that. Research shows that outdoor experiences stimulate the brain, strengthen young children's language and cognitive foundations, increase focus and concentration, and fortify emotional well-being. It also gives children the opportunity to practise their critical thinking and problem-solving skills, as they explore, discover and engage in discussions with adults on what they see, hear, touch, smell and even taste.

The theme of the 2019 Early Childhood Conference, "Beyond the Classroom: Take Learning Outdoors", is timely. Organised by the Early Childhood Development Agency (ECDA) on 13 and 14 September at the Suntec Singapore Convention and Exhibition Centre, the two-day conference and exhibition attracted over 10,000 early childhood educators, experts, parents and their preschool children, as well as community partners.

At the conference, Dr Jane Waters from the University of Wales Trinity Saint David, United Kingdom, presented her keynote on the benefits of outdoor learning and strategies for promoting children's playful activity and socio-emotional learning in outdoor spaces. Dr Hanin Hussain from Singapore's

National Institute of Education discussed how educators could design and enact outdoor learning experiences with children.

The conference was an opportunity for early childhood educators to come together to network, share and gain insights from over 50 hands-on workshops and learning journeys. The bevy of exhibition booths set up by community partners and award-winning preschools showcased good practices and practical tips so that parents and educators could learn to create meaningful and fun outdoor learning experiences for children.

Three signature sector events also took place in conjunction with the Conference. The "Start Small Dream Big" 2019 Finale, where President Halimah Yacob was the Guest-of-Honour, showcased and celebrated the efforts and contributions of the children, their teachers and parents, as well as community partners in implementing community service projects. The annual ECDA Awards Ceremony recognised leaders, teachers, educators and centres for their exemplary teaching, learning and innovative practices, with Minister for Social and Family Development, Mr Desmond Lee, presenting the awards. The Singapore Preschool Accreditation Framework (SPARK) Certificate Presentation Ceremony, graced by the Senior Parliamentary Secretary for Education and Manpower, Ms Low Yen Ling, acknowledged and applauded preschools for their quality programmes, structures and processes.



## A BIG THANK YOU

Thank you to the **1,500**

EC educators who attended the conference;

Over

**10,000**

EC educators, parents and the general public who visited the exhibition;

**60**

ITE student volunteers;

**150**

presenters, partners and preschools, and all who had contributed towards a successful 2019 Early Childhood Conference

PAGE 2 (from left) On Elisabeth: Outfit: Gingersnaps. On Joby: Shirt & pants: Zara. On Idris: T-shirt: Puma, Cap: Kidstyle/Kidsport. On Thaddaeus: Pullover: Mothercare. On Tom: Shirt: Gingersnaps. On Alethea: Shirt: Gingersnaps. Dress: Kookies + Milk. Straw hat: Mothercare. On Kerline: Trench coat & dress: Esprit.

## LET KIDS LOOSE!

Dr Jane Waters spoke about the merits of outdoor play in her presentation, "Learning Outdoors Is Fantastic! Exploring the Benefits of Playful Activity Outside for Babies and Young Children". She offered suggestions on how to set up outdoor spaces using loose parts play such as pebbles, flowers and leaves, wooden blocks, forks and spoons, plastic containers, fabric scraps, cardboard boxes and other knick-knacks.

### WHAT IS THE BIGGEST MISCONCEPTION ABOUT OUTDOOR PLAY?

The perception is that outdoor spaces pose a threat or a risk to babies and toddlers. Most children are actually very robust. Falling down is part of the process of learning to crawl or walk. Protect children from sunburn and make sure they do not fall out of a tree, but there is no need to be overprotective. Children can tolerate minor bruises or scrapes from stumbling over a tree root or tripping.

### WHAT DOES IT MEAN TO ADVOCATE A "RESPONSIVE, RELATIONAL PEDAGOGY" IN OUTDOOR SETTINGS AND HOW CAN WE SUPPORT THIS?

Allow some time every day for children to play freely outside. Observe attentively, respond to their interests and build on these — whether they are chasing leaves or looking at birds. Engage in shared attention with the child by looking at an object together or talking about it. Ask open-ended questions such as "I wonder what will happen if..." or "What is this?" to ignite their curiosity. Introduce loose parts into outdoor play spaces and observe the children's imaginations run wild as they structure complex narratives or stories out of these materials.

### CAN YOU IDENTIFY SOME OPPORTUNITIES AND CHALLENGES ASSOCIATED WITH OUTDOOR PLAY IN SINGAPORE?

Like all urban areas, Singapore has limited access to nature. Nonetheless, preschools are making good use of the outdoor spaces available, such as bringing children to community spaces and gardens regularly. Perhaps, one way is to consider setting up "natural" play areas in HDB void decks, or organising frequent trips to parks and other green spaces. Educators should



Dr Jane Waters spoke about the benefits and challenges of outdoor learning in her presentation.

“Most children are actually very robust. Falling down is part of the process of learning to crawl or walk.”

## ALL-ROUND BENEFITS

Outdoor play, including loose parts play, can have a positive impact on children's holistic development, as Dr Waters explained. By spending time outside, and playing with flexible loose parts, supported by responsive adults, children can develop the following.

- **Social skills** such as sharing and cooperating with peers.
- **Physical attributes** like balance and coordination, gross and fine motor skills, as well as protection against myopia.
- **Cognitive functions** such as attention, working memory and problem-solving skills.
- **21<sup>st</sup>-century dispositions** including curiosity, exploration, inquiry and creativity.
- **Emotional well-being** as they will feel less fearful of the outside world, and handle challenges.
- **A sustainable mindset** as they are more likely to care about the environment.



**DR JANE WATERS**  
Associate Professor in Early Years Education, Yr Athrofa: Institute of Education, University of Wales Trinity Saint David, Wales, UK

also talk to parents to address their concerns about outdoor safety and cleanliness. Loose parts can look messy, and children will dirty their clothes from playing outside, but it is also important to highlight the wonderful learning opportunities in these materials, as well as how parents can facilitate conversations with their children.





## GOING ALL OUT

Dr Hanin Hussain's presentation on "Designing and Enacting Outdoor Learning Experiences with Children" offered practical strategies to early childhood educators who believe in the benefits of outdoor learning, but are not confident of how to plan outdoor experiences for children.

Dr Hanin discussed a four-phase approach to designing an outdoor learning plan that is meaningful, engaging and balances risk-taking and safety.

### STEP 1: FIGURE OUT YOUR STARTING POINT

For teachers to feel confident and competent in the outdoors, they first need to ask questions such as "How comfortable am I in the outdoors?" or "Do I like sitting on the grass?" If teachers are not comfortable in the outdoors, they are unlikely to take the children out or weave this into their curriculum. Teachers can similarly pose these questions to the parents and children, and take the opportunity to address their concerns or worries. Self-reflection is an important part of the process, if outdoor learning is to become part of our lives or a norm in the early childhood curriculum.

### STEP 2: PREPARE TO START

List the possible outdoor learning spaces and activities in the neighbourhood. If there is a grassy area near the centre with clear boundaries, children can sit on the ground, sing, play circle games or explore nature. Next, develop meaningful routines and consider how these can support positive learning outcomes, such as developing safety awareness in public places. To ensure safety and address parental concerns, develop centre procedures and communicate regularly with parents.

“ Identify the links between children's outdoor learning experiences and your curriculum frameworks.

**DR HANIN HUSSAIN**  
Lecturer,  
Early Childhood  
& Special Needs  
Education,  
National Institute  
of Education



### STEP 3: GOING OUTDOORS

Familiarise the children with routines for going outdoors and back in for the first few outdoor learning sessions. Consider playing teacher-directed games with simple and clear rules. This will enable children to learn that games have rules and that it is important that players agree to abide by them. Children's voices are equally important. Encourage them to contribute towards their experience by sharing ideas or suggestions to vary activities, game rules and choice of spaces. This creates excitement and empowers children, allowing them to take ownership of their experience. Engage them in conversations about the experience, people, places and things.

### STEP 4: LOOK BACK, LOOK AROUND & LOOK FORWARD

After a few weeks of engaging children in outdoor learning, reflect on the outdoor learning journey and append each question with a 'Why'.

- Has the outdoor learning experience been meaningful for children, teachers and parents? Why?
- What did the children learn and what helped engage them?
- Are the routines and established procedures helpful? Why were they helpful?
- Does anything need to be changed? Why?

"It is important to see opportunities in an urban setting. Instead of focusing on the barriers in our urbanised environment, look at the possibilities and opportunities it offers. Even the most limiting of environments may provide an outdoor learning experience. Think about why you selected this particular space, and the type of meaningful activities and experiences that children can engage in that space. More importantly, identify the links between children's outdoor learning experiences and your curriculum frameworks," reminded Dr Hanin.



## IN CONVERSATION

Keynote presenters Dr Waters and Dr Hanin also joined a panel discussion to expound on the benefits, issues and challenges about outdoor learning. Moderating the panel was Mrs Dianne Swee-Seet, ECDA Fellow and Principal of The Ascension Kindergarten. Other panellists were Dr Ho Yin Fong, Chairperson of Evaluation Panel in Outdoor Learning Workgroup 3 and Academic Director, NIEC (City) Campus; Ms Amanda Yap, 2019 Outstanding Early Childhood Teacher Award winner and teacher at The Little Skool-House International (At-Tampines-Junction); and Mr Muhammad Bin Kamit, parent of a preschooler.

Mr Muhammad, an advocate of outdoor learning, described the resource-rich outdoors as a "giant flashcard". Parents can point to anything from trees to a siren-bling ambulance and initiate conversations with their children to share knowledge and exchange ideas and thoughts.

Dr Ho highlighted the importance of parents and educators working together. She called for establishing and maintaining good communication with parents so that they feel assured and are confident that their children are safe in the outdoors.



Dr Hanin shared about the importance of teachers cultivating a positive mindset and advocating for outdoor learning. She added, "Advocacy is about actions as well as beliefs. Teachers who advocate outdoor learning can benefit tremendously from developing their skills and knowledge in the field." The panellists also discussed how teachers should not be afraid of not having the right answers. Dr Waters said, "What is also important is to encourage children to continue asking questions as they explore the outdoors. Teachers and children can then discover the answers together."



Dr Ho Yin Fong talks about the importance of partnerships

## PLAY TIME OUTDOORS

The two-day early childhood exhibition was a vibrant and dynamic giant learning landscape, buzzing with fun and interactive activities for all. Early childhood educators and families discovered that any outdoor space, be it a zoo, park or playground, can be a fun and educational experience for children.

At the Let's Learn Outside! booth, parents and children made paper parachutes and planes together, for the kids to play with when they are outdoors. Mdm Sanny, 32, who took part in this activity with her daughter Khatijah, 5, said, "When the two of us do arts and crafts, we normally stay indoors. With these paper crafts, Khatijah can take what she has made to play with her friends outside. The fresh air and exercise will also do her good!"

Playeum, which runs the Children's Centre for Creativity at Gillman Barracks, demonstrated how natural and man-made loose parts, such as toilet paper rolls, stray leaves and twigs, chopsticks and coloured paper, can be used to create wall games like magnetic marble runs and shadow puppetry.

For Mr William Chin, 40, seeing Playeum's booth gave him practical ideas for an outdoor family activity. "My four-year-old daughter is into role-playing at the moment. She likes getting the whole family to act out different scenarios with her," said Mr Chin, who also has a five-year-old son. "We could walk around our neighbourhood and pick up loose parts, which she could then use as props for her stories."





## WORKSHOP HIGHLIGHTS



### FOLLOW CHILDREN'S LEAD

Participants gained insights on how to facilitate outdoor learning in the early years at the “Strategies to Promote Discovery and Social-Emotional Learning in Gardens, Playgrounds and Open Spaces” workshop.

The workshop was conducted by Dr Beth O'Brien, a Senior Research Scientist at the National Institute of Education's Centre for Research in Child Development, and Ms Ng Siew Chin, formerly a Research Assistant at the Centre, now an instructor at the Singapore University of Social Sciences.

Based on their research findings, Dr O'Brien and Ms Ng encouraged EC educators to use a range of scaffolding strategies to cater to each child's pace of learning. These include:

- Low-level strategies such as labelling (e.g. “This is a leaf?”)
- Medium-level strategies such as sequencing or enumerating (e.g. “How many petals are there?”)
- High-level strategies such as prompting children to make evaluations (e.g. “Why is this leaf brown?”).

Their research also found that teachers show more support and facilitated opportunities for the children's social-emotional learning — including relationship management and responsible decision-making — during outdoor play than in the classroom. Teachers tend to engage in such behaviours and strategies because outdoor spaces are more conducive for children to engage in free play. This creates opportunities for them to interact with peers and explore activities with minimal inhibitions.

Dr O'Brien and Ms Ng also recommended various strategies to facilitate social-emotional learning:

- **Set a positive tone.** Say “You can do it!” to a child trying to walk on a balance beam.
- **Prompt children to suggest solutions.** Guide other children to assist their friend on the balance beam.
- **Extend children's learning.** Tap on that opportunity to stress the importance of helping one another.
- **Allocate tasks.** Ask children to help maintain the outdoor garden.

“ I learned how to better scaffold children's learning outside the classroom and pique their interest. I also need to let more incidental learning happen — less teacher-directed, more child-initiated.

**REBECA ONG**, teacher, Little Seeds  
@ The Salvation Army (Bukit Panjang)



### CHANGE THE WAY YOU LEAD

Much has been said about the benefits of the outdoors for children. However, centre leaders and educators, too, can harness nature to facilitate self-awareness and develop their leadership and teaching skills.

Time spent in the outdoors, for example, provide opportunities for early childhood professionals to reflect on themselves as leaders. “Looking inward is not something we are comfortable doing and it requires practice. Immersing oneself in nature can have a calming and relaxing effect and it facilitates reflection,” acknowledges Ms Shaireen Selamat, Lead, Sector Leadership, National Institute of Early Childhood Development (NIEC). Centre leaders and educators need to take time out and devote sufficient attention to their well-being as well as spending time developing relational issues, and building camaraderie and trust with each other.

By making participants pair up and stroll in the sky garden, Ms Shaireen, who led the workshop, “Building Self-Awareness Through Outdoor Inspired Activities for Leadership Learning”, showed how an outdoor setting, where people feel less constrained and more relaxed, is a good place to converse and, more importantly, to listen. The outdoors is also a conducive space for deeper and calmer reflection.

Good leaders and educators need self-awareness — the ability to have deep personal insight of one's strengths, weaknesses, values, beliefs and behaviour. “This is critical as leaders can influence others, often through modelling, communication and building relationships,” says Ms Shaireen. The ability to self-reflect by asking questions allows us to self-check our actions, review situations and issues the impact it has on others.

### Ask Yourself...

- How do you see yourself in terms of your strengths and areas for improvement?
- What personal leadership change do you want to achieve?
- What is happening now that bothers you?
- What would happen if you did nothing?
- What training and resources can help you?



ON BACK COVER On Joby: Outfit Zara, Sneakers His own. On Elisabeth: T-shirt Kookies + Milk, Dungarees OshKosh B'gosh, Sneakers His own. On Front Cover (clockwise from left) On Alethea: Dress & headband Kookies + Milk. On Kerline: Shirt Esprit, Straw hat Mothercare. On Idris: Pullover & shirt Kookies + Milk. On Thaddeus: Dungarees OshKosh B'gosh, T-shirt Mothercare. On Tom: Shirt & T-shirt Mothercare. Shorts Gingersnaps, Sneakers His own.