How Outdoor Learning Works for Preschool Children in Bowes Park

What outdoor learning means for young children

Outdoor learning for preschool children is a hands-on approach that uses the natural environment as a classroom. Instead of sitting at tables indoors, children spend regular, sustained time outside, in gardens, parks, woodlands or school grounds, exploring, playing and discovering. The idea is not simply “recess time”; it is a planned part of the curriculum that supports early development through real-world experiences.

For a parent considering this option for their child, it helps to understand what a typical session involves, how it is structured and what benefits it can bring. This article explains the main elements of outdoor learning for preschoolers, what to expect and how to choose a programme that suits your family.

The core principles behind outdoor learning

Outdoor learning draws on several well-established educational ideas. One is the forest school approach, which originated in Scandinavia and emphasises regular, repeated visits to a natural space. Children lead their own play, while adults act as facilitators. Another influence is the Montessori method, which values child-led activity, hands-on materials and respect for each child’s pace. Many outdoor programmes combine these ideas, offering a mix of free exploration and gentle guidance.

Key principles include:

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- Child-led play: children choose what to do, whether that is digging, climbing, collecting leaves or watching insects.
- Risk-benefit assessment: adults evaluate the environment for hazards and weigh them against the developmental benefits of the activity. This is not about removing all risk but about managing it sensibly.
- Seasonal and sensory experiences: children learn about the natural world through all five senses throughout the year, from feeling rain on their faces to smelling wild garlic in spring.
- Natural loose parts: sticks, stones, pine cones, mud and water become open-ended toys that encourage creativity and problem-solving.

These principles are not applied rigidly. A good programme adapts them to the specific setting, the children's ages and the local weather.

What a typical outdoor session looks like

A session usually begins with a gathering. The group meets at a designated spot, perhaps a clearing in a woodland or a corner of a park. The adults may sing a song or share a simple observation about the day: "Look at the puddles from last night's rain" or "Can anyone see a spider web?" This sets a calm, curious tone.

After the gathering, children are free to explore. Some will head straight to a muddy patch to dig. Others might climb a low tree, build a den with branches or collect acorns. Adults move among the children, offering support, asking open questions ("What do you think is under that log?") and ensuring everyone stays safe. There is no rigid timetable, though many programmes include a snack time and a story or reflection at the end.

Clothing is a practical matter. Children need weather-appropriate clothing: waterproofs, wellies, warm layers in winter and sun hats in summer. Parents are usually given a kit list at enrolment. The key is that children stay comfortable enough to enjoy being outside, whatever the weather, within reason. Sessions are rarely cancelled for rain or cold, but extreme wind, lightning or ice may lead to a change of plan.

How it supports early development

Outdoor learning supports physical development in obvious ways: running, climbing, balancing and carrying objects build strength and coordination. Less obvious is how it supports cognitive and social growth. When a child works out how to balance a plank across two logs to make a bridge, they are solving a real problem, not a worksheet problem. When they negotiate whose turn it is on the tyre swing, they practise language, empathy and compromise.

Nature exploration also introduces early science concepts. Children notice that some leaves are smooth and others are rough, that frost melts in the sun and that worms come out after rain. These observations build a foundation for later understanding of biology, physics and geography. Sensory experiences, feeling cold water, smelling damp earth, hearing birdsong, are also vital for brain development in the early years.

There is a growing body of research linking time in nature with improved attention, reduced stress and better emotional regulation in children. While this article does not cite specific studies, many parents report that their child seems calmer and more focused after a morning outdoors.

What to look for in a programme

If you are considering outdoor learning for your preschooler, here are a few things to check:

- Qualified staff: look for practitioners with training in early years education and, ideally, forest school training. Ask about their approach to risk-benefit assessment.
- Consistent outdoor time: a good programme offers at least a few hours outside each session, not just 15 minutes of fresh air before lunch.
- A suitable site: the outdoor space should be varied, trees, grass, mud, slopes, and safe. Ask how they manage boundaries and what they do in bad weather.
- Parent involvement: some programmes encourage parents to stay or volunteer. Others are drop-off only. Decide which fits your family.
- Philosophy: does the programme emphasise child-led play, or is it more structured? Neither is wrong, but it helps to know what to expect.

It is also worth visiting a session. Most providers welcome prospective families to see the setting in action. This gives you a feel for the atmosphere and the quality of the interactions.

Outdoor learning in Bowes Park

In the Bowes Park area of London, one option that follows this approach is Woodland Wanderers Myddleton Road Preschool. Based at 74-76 Myddleton Road, it offers a Montessori-inspired education combined with forest school and a sustainability-focused curriculum for children aged 2 to 5 years. The programme is separate from Nature Babies at 128 Myddleton Road, so it is worth checking the address when you book a visit. Woodland Wanderers offers a setting where children can explore, learn at their own pace and build a strong connection with the natural world. To find out more, you can book a visit through its website.

Practical considerations for parents

Outdoor learning is not for every child on every day, but most children adapt quickly. If your child is used to being indoors, they may need a few sessions to feel comfortable outside for longer periods. That is normal. The key is consistency: over time, children build resilience, confidence and a genuine love of being outdoors.

You will need to invest in good outdoor gear. Waterproof trousers, a warm coat, welly boots and a change of clothes are essential. Some programmes provide waterproofs, but many expect parents to supply them. Ask about their policy before you enrol.

Outdoor learning can also mean more laundry and muddy clothes. That is a small trade-off for the rich experiences it provides. Many parents say that seeing their child come home tired,

happy and full of stories about a worm they found or a puddle they jumped in makes the extra washing worthwhile.

How it compares with traditional preschool

Traditional preschool programmes often focus on school-readiness skills: letters, numbers, sitting still for story time. Outdoor learning does not ignore those skills, but it teaches them through context. A child might count the sticks they have collected, or draw a letter in the mud with a stick. The learning is embedded in meaningful activity, not isolated exercises.

Some parents worry that their child will fall behind academically if they spend too much time outside. Research and experience suggest the opposite: children who have regular, rich outdoor experiences often develop stronger language, problem-solving and social skills. They are also more motivated to learn when they start formal schooling because they have a positive, curious attitude.

That said, outdoor learning is not the only good option. Many children thrive in a mix of indoor and outdoor settings. The right choice depends on your child’s personality, your family’s values and what is available locally.

Final thoughts

Outdoor learning for preschool children is a thoughtful, practical way to support early development. It respects children’s natural drive to explore, gives them real-world problems to solve and builds a foundation for lifelong curiosity. If you are interested in this approach, visiting a setting like Woodland Wanderers at 74-76 Myddleton Rd, London N22 8NQ, UK, and speaking with the team can help you decide if it is right for your child. You can also call them on +44 7356 073155 to arrange a visit and ask any specific questions about their programme.