

Playful Childhoods

Top tips for playing with earth, water, fire and air

From jumping in puddles to chasing leaves in the wind, children are natural explorers of the elements – earth, water, fire and air. Opportunities for play with – and in – the elements are all around us in everyday life.

Play that involves the elements helps your child understand the world around them. It gives them the chance to find out how the world works, what it feels like, what it can do and what they can do with it. As well as learning about the world around them, playing with the elements can also be lots of fun and very satisfying.

Children learn from real-life contact with the world around them

They use their hands, bodies, minds and all their senses. When they are playing like this, they are exploring, discovering and experimenting.

Children can play with the elements almost anywhere

Children can play with the elements in all sorts of spaces, such as parks, woods, beaches, gardens, allotments, small patches of grass, clumps of trees, and sandpits. You will find some of these kinds of places in your neighbourhood, whether you live in a village, town or city.

Weather is the elements in action

One of the easiest ways to explore the elements is to get outdoors in all weathers. Weather shows us the power and effect of nature. It changes almost every day and it's free to play in.

Dressing for the weather lets you play out for longer

Sunhats, sunscreen, wellies, waterproofs, and warm layers are all useful. Playing in the elements can be messy, so keep some old clothes that you don't mind getting wet or muddy. Going barefoot or wearing a swimming costume for playing in water, sand and mud feels good and saves on laundry, too.



Trust your judgement

You know your own child and you know what they can manage safely. Trust your own judgement about the level of supervision and support your child needs to play safely. Children learn from trial and error and it's good for them to try things for themselves.

Start simply – for example, playing with mud and sand or blowing bubbles. Then, as your confidence – and your child's – grows, move on to more challenging things like toasting marshmallows or playing on water slides.

Playing with the elements outdoors

Here are a few suggestions:

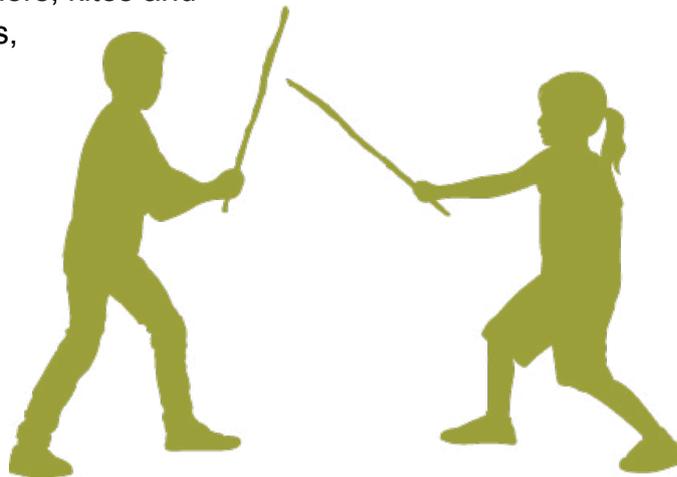
- **Earth** – making mud pies, having a mud bath, digging, planting seeds, making moats, 'painting' with earth and soil, building sand castles, burying things
- **Water** – paddling, damming, making bridges and stepping stones, swimming, playing with water balloons, water pistols, water slides, puddles, toy boats
- **Air** – playing with flags, spinners, kites and balloons, going to high places, climbing trees

- **Fire** – building and sitting around campfires, toasting marshmallows, barbecues, watching bonfires.

Playing with the elements indoors

If you can't get outside, then bring the elements in. Planning ahead will help you manage the level of messiness – for example, you may have one room that's better for messy or wet play, or you may be able to cover the floor or a table with old sheets, cloths or newspaper.

- **Earth** – planting seeds in pots and window boxes, growing cress in an eggshell, clay modelling, sand tray
- **Water** – bath toys, bobbing for apples, washing up, water tray
- **Air** – streamers, balloons, paper airplanes, telescopes, fans
- **Fire** – tealights and candles in a tin so you can play safely with fire indoors.



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Playful Childhoods is a Play Wales campaign