

# Creating Inclusive Outdoor Play and Learning Spaces:

A Guide for Schools Supporting Pupils with SEND



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# 1

# Introduction

## Why Inclusive Outdoor Play and Learning Matters

Outdoor play and learning are vital for all children—but especially for those with Special Educational Needs and Disabilities (SEND).

Well-designed outdoor environments support physical development, sensory regulation, emotional wellbeing, and social inclusion.

Yet, many outdoor spaces still present barriers: uneven surfaces, inaccessible equipment, and a lack of sensory-friendly features. Schools play a crucial role in creating environments where every child can thrive.



# The Benefits of Outdoor Play and Learning for Pupils with SEND

Outdoor learning offers rich opportunities for all pupils—but especially for those with SEND—to connect with nature, build confidence, and develop key life skills. Through **structured activities** and **free play** these opportunities can:

- **Support emotional regulation** – Pupils learn to explore, express and manage emotions, and develop sensory needs in a safe space.
  - **Build social skills** – Play invites interaction, collaboration, or parallel play
  - **Boost independence and confidence** – Children make their own choices, follow their curiosity, and develop life skills like problem-solving and risk-taking.
  - **Encourage physical development** – Activities such as balance, movement, climbing, or digging help develop motor skills while teaching children how to coordinate their bodies.
  - **Increase engagement with the curriculum** – Making learning more interactive boosts interest and understanding, especially for those who find traditional classroom settings challenging.
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## The Purpose of this Guide

This guide helps schools adapt their outdoor spaces to support pupils with SEND. It offers:

- Practical design strategies and inclusive equipment tips
- Curriculum-linked outdoor activity ideas
- Advice on staff training and collaboration
- Real-life case studies showcasing successful approaches

By making thoughtful changes, schools can create welcoming, inclusive environments where every child can play, explore, and learn.

# 2

## Understanding the Needs of Pupils with SEND

Creating inclusive outdoor spaces starts with recognising the diverse needs of pupils with SEND. Children may face barriers related to mobility, sensory processing, learning differences, or emotional regulation—so outdoor environments must be thoughtfully designed to support every learner.



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## Key Needs to Consider



### Physical disabilities

Ensure accessible pathways, supportive play equipment, and rest areas.



### Sensory impairments

Use visual contrasts, textured surfaces, and minimise noise.



### Neurodiverse needs

Offer both stimulating areas (e.g. musical play) and calming zones (e.g. sensory gardens).



### Speech and communication

Include visual cues and communication aids.



### Social and emotional needs

Provide quiet retreats and structured group play opportunities.

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## Engaging with the Whole School Community

Inclusive design works best when everyone is involved:

- **Pupils:** Ask children what they enjoy and observe how they use existing spaces.
- **Parents and carers:** Gather insights through forums, visits, and written feedback.
- **Staff and specialists:** Collaborate with SEND teams, SENDCos, therapists, and playground supervisors to enhance accessibility and inclusion.



# 3 Designing Inclusive Outdoor Spaces

Inclusive design means creating outdoor areas where all children can play, learn, and explore with confidence—whatever their needs or abilities.



## Key Principles of Inclusive Outdoor Design

- **Equitable access:** Everyone should be able to use the space independently.
  - **Variety and choice:** Offer active, sensory, social, and quiet zones.
  - **Safety and comfort:** Use safe surfaces, clear routes, and encourage appropriate risk-taking.
  - **Multi-sensory design:** Include features that appeal to all senses.
  - **Social inclusion:** Support both solo play and positive interactions.
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## Accessibility Essentials

<b>Pathways and movement</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• Wide, smooth, non-slip routes</li><li>• Ramps for any level changes</li><li>• Clear signs with symbols or visuals</li></ul>
<b>Play equipment</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• A mix of activities: climbing, spinning, imaginative play</li><li>• Ground-level options and adapted equipment</li><li>• Opportunities for children to play side-by-side</li><li>• Specific equipment, such as roundabouts with wheelchair bays or swings with supportive harnesses</li></ul>

<b>Sensory features</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Quiet, calm spaces for regulation</li> <li>• Tactile panels with different surfaces and textured paths</li> <li>• Sand and water trays at different heights</li> <li>• Outdoor musical instruments</li> <li>• Natural features that engage the senses (e.g. sensory gardens, plants, wind chimes)</li> </ul>
<b>Seating and rest</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Plenty of seating for breaks · Shade and weather protection</li> <li>• Different seating styles for different needs, including social interaction · Hammocks or cocoon swings for gentle movement</li> </ul>
<b>Multi-sensory learning materials</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Tactile number/letter boards</li> <li>• Natural materials like leaves and bark</li> <li>• Magnifiers and bug viewers for mini-beast hunts</li> </ul>
<b>Inclusive tech outdoors</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Audio story posts for visually impaired learners</li> <li>• Augmented reality (AR) to explore nature interactively</li> <li>• Switch-adapted devices for children with motor challenges</li> </ul>



## Creating a Welcoming Environment

Beyond physical access, inclusive design means every child feels seen and valued. Consider:

- Signage with Makaton, braille, widgeo or diverse characters.
- Artwork that reflects all children and cultures.
- Peer buddy systems to support inclusive play and promote children's speech and language development.

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## Best Practice in Action

A UK school redesigned its outdoor space by:

- Creating different zones for play and relaxation
- Building a nature-based classroom with raised beds and weatherproof boards
- Involving staff and pupils in inclusive play training
- Using grants to fund improvements
- Working with a local charity to fund specialist equipment







# 4

## Training and Support for Staff

Confident, well-supported staff are key to making outdoor spaces inclusive. With the right training and collaborative systems in place, teachers and support staff can adapt activities, manage challenges, and ensure all pupils—especially those with SEND—thrive outdoors.



# Professional Development

Professional development should help staff feel prepared, not overwhelmed.

## Key Areas to Cover

<b>Understanding SEND outdoors</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• Learn how sensory, physical, emotional and cognitive needs affect outdoor play</li><li>• Explore how nature supports well-being, regulation, and social development</li></ul>
<b>Adapting activities</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• Try practical strategies to tweak lessons or games for different needs</li><li>• Learn about sensory-friendly approaches and adaptive equipment</li></ul>
<b>Inclusive communication</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• Use tools like visual schedules, Makaton, or clear step-by-step instructions</li><li>• Support understanding and participation for non-verbal or neurodivergent pupils</li></ul>
<b>Risk and safeguarding</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• Learn how to balance independence and safety in outdoor spaces</li><li>• Understand how to build pupils' resilience by managing risks without limiting opportunities</li></ul>
<b>Inclusive PE and play</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• Explore ways to adapt games and playground activities</li><li>• Encourage peer interaction and build inclusive social play</li></ul>

## *Training Methods*

- CPD sessions during INSET days
  - Online modules or SEND-specific webinars
  - Peer observation and team coaching
  - Guest input from SEND experts or outdoor educators
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## **Collaborative Working**

Inclusive outdoor practice works best when staff learn from each other and problem-solve together. Encourage collaboration through:

- **Team meetings** – Regular check-ins to share ideas, reflect on pupil progress, and discuss adaptations.
- **Best practice sharing** – Create a shared space (online or on a board) for lesson plans, strategies, and success stories.
- **Peer mentoring** – Pair experienced staff with those new to inclusive outdoor learning.
- **Multi-disciplinary input** – Work closely with SENDCos, TAs, and external professionals, valuing insights from support staff who know pupils best.
- **Feedback loops** – Ask pupils, families, and staff about what is working and what they feel could be improved, and use this feedback to update policies and develop practices.









# 5 Organisations and Support Networks

- Several organisations offer support, guidance and resources to help schools create inclusive outdoor play and learning environments.



### **API – Association of Play Industries**

Promotes accessible play provision and connects schools with inclusive equipment suppliers and funding advice.



### **The Inclusive Play Project**

Offers expert advice, consultation, and funding guidance to make play spaces accessible for children with disabilities.



### **Learning Through Landscapes**

Charity supporting outdoor learning through training, resources, and school projects.



### **Play Scotland**

Provides toolkits, training, and resources to support playful outdoor learning and inclusive play policies.