

Listening to Children, Listening to Trees

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How can outdoor spaces with trees underpin early childhood practice, and support wellbeing, play, communication, learning and development for young children?

Could playing with, and being in the presence of trees of all kinds (whether bushy shrubs or great big oaks), nurture feelings of being part of nature rather than growing up feeling apart from it?

And what is it about these experiences that might support better relationships between people and the planet?



Illustration by [Maisy Summer](#)
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The ideas in this booklet are drawn from a three year research project, called Voices of the Future, that explored these questions in collaboration with very young children and families.



The research involved paying attention to children and trees:



making observations, photographs and videos.



The recommendations and findings offered in this booklet are, therefore, based on what we learnt from the children and the trees. We learnt from slowing down, paying close attention, and spending time with children and trees.

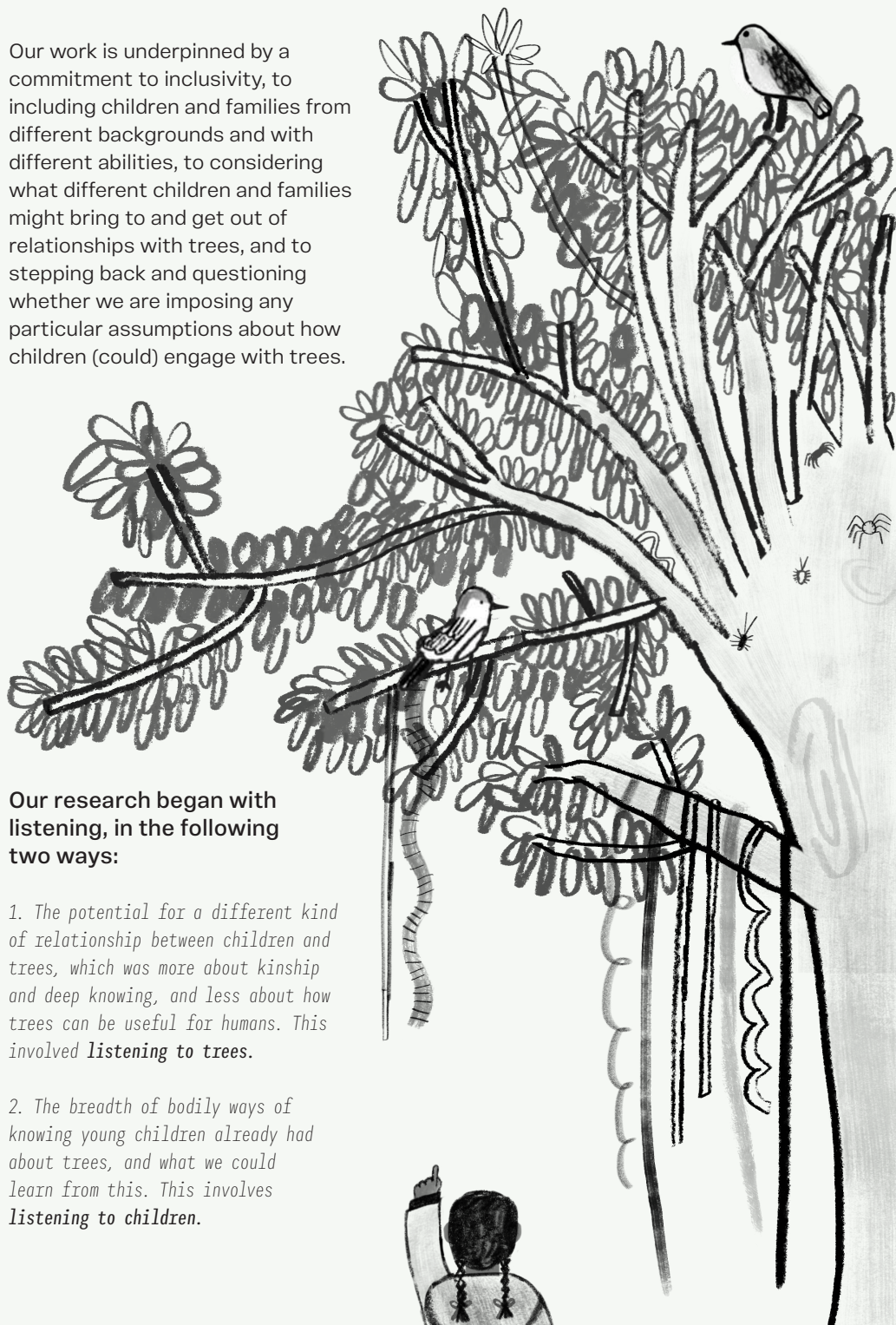


Our work is underpinned by a commitment to inclusivity, to including children and families from different backgrounds and with different abilities, to considering what different children and families might bring to and get out of relationships with trees, and to stepping back and questioning whether we are imposing any particular assumptions about how children (could) engage with trees.

Our research began with listening, in the following two ways:

1. *The potential for a different kind of relationship between children and trees, which was more about kinship and deep knowing, and less about how trees can be useful for humans. This involved **listening to trees**.*

2. *The breadth of bodily ways of knowing young children already had about trees, and what we could learn from this. This involves **listening to children**.*



This resource introduces five key principles, showing how they connect to research and practice:

1. *Hold the Space*
2. *Deepen kinship relations with trees*
3. *Know through the body*
4. *Learn from children, learn from trees*
5. *Language comes from bodies and place*

These principles for Listening to Children / Listening to Trees are informed by Natural Environment Research Council funded research 'Voices of the Future'. You can read more about the research by following some of the links and resources at the back of this booklet.

1 | Hold the space

Holding the space creates the conditions for both children and educators to slow down and listen with our bodies. This principle is underpinned by a respect for and commitment to what is already there. Outdoor spaces are different from indoor classrooms; focussing on this specialness, rather than

trying to recreate the indoor learning conditions, is the best approach. At the same time, all outdoor spaces hold interesting possibilities; a small patch of trees can be just as special as a pristine forest, especially for young children. Holding the Space is the most important principle, and the other principles flow from it.



Stories from our research

Alex runs his hand in an elegant sweep over a snow-covered fallen log. He brushes some of the snow down onto the floor, coating his woollen gloves in snow in the process. A few moments later, I notice his Gran has removed his wet gloves and replaced them with a pair of spare socks.



Putting this guiding principle into practice

Holding the Space might involve standing back, mooching or pootling. It might involve not over-planning or over-explaining but keeping open a possibility for something unexpected to happen. Being alongside, present and available can be the most useful role for adults to take. Make sure you feel comfortable and confident with the safety of the environment and conditions, so that you can be relaxed and attentive to the experiences children are having:

- Slow right down and tune into the detail of all the varied sensory information the child is gathering, including through movement.
- While being ready to respond, resist speaking or reacting too quickly (unless the situation is harmful) and allow it to play out.
- Give plenty of time for children to experience, process and decide what to do next.



2 | Deepen kinship relations with trees

What happens between children and trees is most exciting, expansive and transformative when deep relationships are able to develop between them, grounded in curiosity and respect. **We call this kinship.** Kinship is about learning, playing, experimenting and growing **with** the more-than-human world. This contrasts with learning 'in' nature (nature is a backdrop to the action),

'about' nature (facts and names) or 'for' nature (environmental education aimed solely at creating children willing to 'save' nature). A view of the world as passive and separate does not support deep and enduring relationships between them. These kinds of connections with nature, that extend beyond 'knowing about', are absolutely key.



Stories from our research

Hiding under a tree in the rain. We wrap our arms around the trunk, Madi balances on a tree root and steps carefully from one to another, moving around the tree. His feet slip off the wet roots.

Baby Luke's mum tells me he likes the breeze. She carries him to a nearby sycamore tree and holds him upwards where the branches hang lower and move in the wind. He reaches his arms up towards the leaves.



Putting this guiding principle into practice

Whilst there is not one set formula for observing or creating a sense of kinship between children and trees, in these stories from our research, we see bodies (human and tree) opening towards each other, playfully, experimentally and without judgement. Kinship opens up different possibilities for listening to trees.

- Notice the role the trees in this space might be taking - how are they creating the conditions or influencing the joint experience?
- Pay attention to how the trees or parts of trees attract individual/groups of children and suggest or invite playful responses, even if they are sometimes momentary.
- Allow this noticing of children and trees actively 'talking' to each other to affect how you look at and respond to trees too!

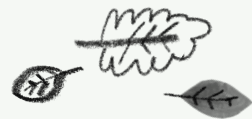
3 | know through the body



In our research, we noticed children 'getting the measure' of the places they are in, by feeling what their bodies can do and how they relate to the other aspects of the world they find themselves entangled with.

In Western education, we tend to think of the brain as separate from the body. However, increasingly, research shows that the entire body is involved in thinking and learning, as one integrated whole. Therefore, as children's bodies become embedded in place, this process shapes what it means to know. Children's bodies can develop a certain kind of 'know how' in relation to trees and outdoor places: a deeply held 'knowing' rather than more

superficial 'knowledge'. Memories can become attached to being in a place, or bodily experiences can spark the imagination. Memories can also come from longer ago and further afield, and may be culturally specific: how children use their bodies and how children come to 'know' trees could be learned from stories, values or habits passed on from family members.



Putting this guiding principle into practice

Can you plan your experience or visit *with* place? This could involve visiting a place beforehand, to consider its possibilities. We could think about this as listening to place, and listening to our own bodies.

- As you consider what experiences your children could have in this particular place and time, foreground ways that children might be able to move and use all parts of their body: fingers, hands, upper arms; feet and legs; torso and bottom; everything at once!

- Tune into how children are using their moving bodies to 'get the measure' of this environment: can you see embodied knowing taking place?

- Notice too, the huge amount of bodied feedback each child receives about themselves from all the non-human others they are interacting with. Through 'rubbing up' against it, they also get to feel themselves in, with and of the world, becoming embedded as part of it.

Stories from our research

Aisha is holding, running and then throwing a stick. As she runs, she chants 'uh, uh' and then throws the stick, body and stick propelling forward. Picks it up and does it again. She waves around the stick, runs saying 'mm mmm mmmmmm', and on the long 'mmmmm' makes as if to throw, yet she follows the stick and falls on her stomach on the grass, still holding the stick.



4 | Learn from children, learn from trees

Where does knowledge and expertise sit when we work with young children and trees? Asking this question invites us to shift our focus from the role of humans (teachers, parents, the children themselves) to consider what else might be involved, and what other kinds of wisdom are present, when children move, make, run, vocalise and play in treescapes.

Might trees be experts in being and responding to a place – and how might we listen to their expertise, with children? Learning from trees involves attending differently, being curious and getting comfortable with not-knowing everything. Children are often particularly good at these skills, so we grown ups can often learn from them.

Putting this guiding principle into practice

We are lucky to have the chance to learn from both children and trees when we work in outdoor spaces with young children. What does listening mean to you? How might you listen to trees? How might we learn from children?

- *Can being with trees offer different kinds of knowledge about being in the world, providing other perspectives than our statutory curricular frameworks? Consider what knowledge actually matters for your children when they are in this place.*
- *Instead of taking ideas, activities and objectives into this space, pause and slow down to really listen to what is already here: young children are very good at paying this kind of attention, so do allow them to help you with this!*
- *A nature-filled place is a wonderfully enabling environment with great expertise in supporting learning: could you think of Nature as a co-teacher working with and alongside you?*



Stories from our research

I see Ursula standing alone in the wide grass. Her gaze follows a curve upwards as she watches a bird fly across the blue sky. She walks to the edge of the grass where the trees are clustered and again her gaze seems to cohere with the movement of the world, moving with the tree branches as they sway.

5 | Language comes from bodies and place



We can think of language as the way sound and movement emerge from bodies and create relationships – both with each other and with the world. A number of research studies have demonstrated how beneficial outside

spaces are for children's physical and verbal communication; this is because being outdoors offers different potential for moving, sensing and communicating.

Stories from our research

We lay down under a tree watching the branches and leaves moving in the wind. Omar comes to lie down next to us, and the three of us stare up at the sky. Earlier in the session, we tied ribbons into the tree branches, and now they dance on the breeze. Omar does a happy babbling commentary, very musical and repetitive, he says 'wow ribbons, they're fighting, they are running away!' with exclamations and babbling mixed in between.

Putting this guiding principle into practice

Listening to children's voices means paying attention to their moving bodies. Different places invite different kinds of movement and sound. Listening to children whilst they listen to trees, is a special and particularly fruitful time for experimenting with joyful and powerful forms of communication.



- Try thinking of movement as children's first and most fluent language: young children are often so much more liberated with movement and gesture than they are in any verbal language!
- It's fascinating to start noticing children having 'conversations' with trees/tree parts and other non-human entities: how are the children you work with doing this?
- What is it about being outdoors that seems to stimulate children to use body and voice to communicate? How could you make more of this 'special nature' to encourage even more relationship building?

Advice from the project – what we learnt from children and trees

Keep it simple, don't plan something too elaborate. This is part of Holding the Space (working principle 1).

Offer a simple activity or proposition – it is helpful for grown ups, in particular, to help them join in and know how to get started. A couple of propositions that worked well for us are;

- Offering a paper bag for collecting 'woodland treasures' such as leaves and twigs. Children can use these for art later.

- Simple 'scavenger hunts' where children search for textures or shapes in nature.

- Opened ended art materials such as large sheets of paper, charcoal or paint.

Make activities invitational - you can do them, but also it is fine to do something else.

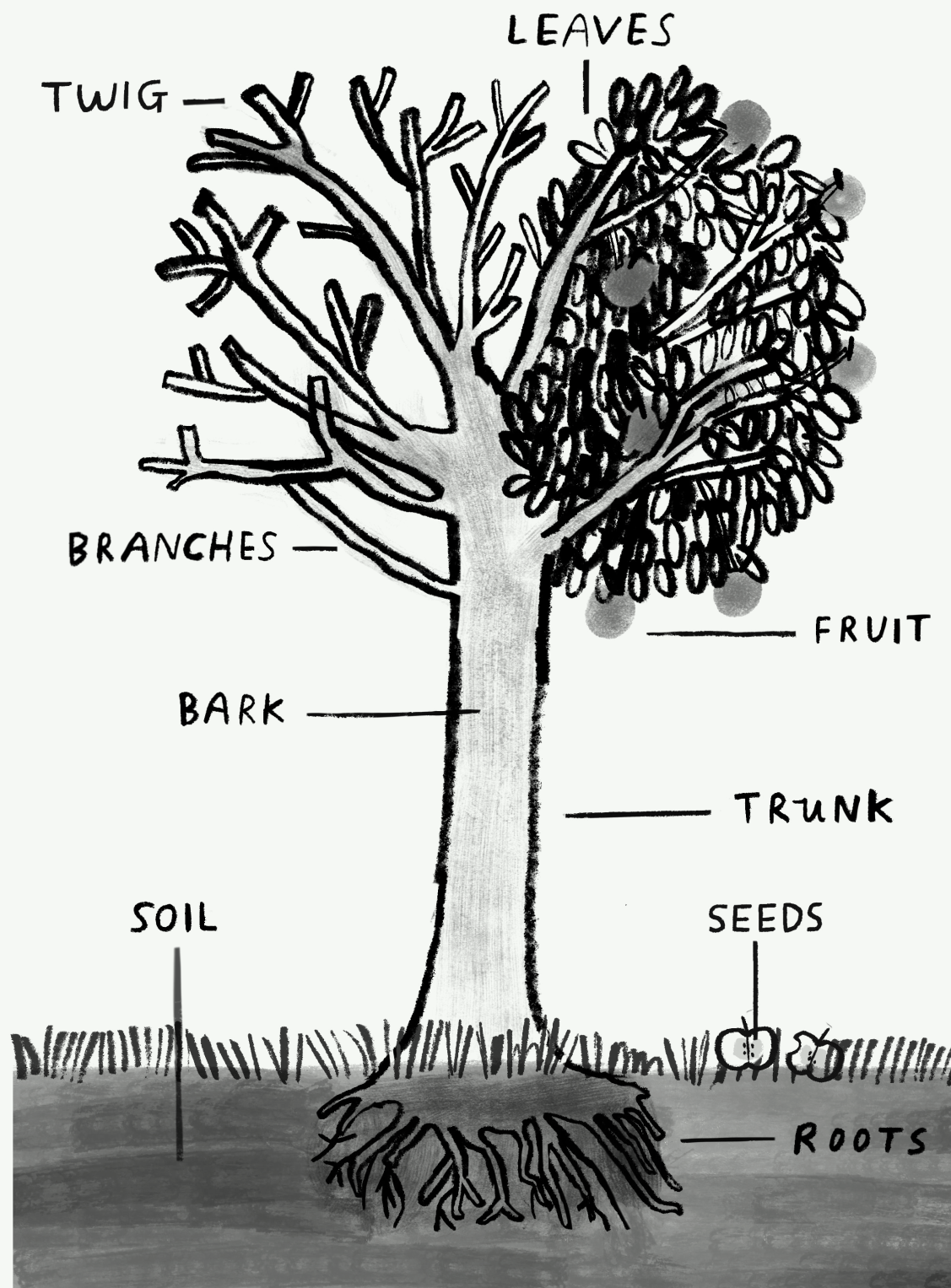
Hospitality is important. One way to create a sense of belonging is by creating a central point for people to just be (and leave their stuff!). This could be picnic blankets or a shelter for example.

Think about trees all year; this could involve being aware of the seasons, but also thinking beyond seasons to consider constant change over time.

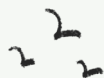
Go with the weather – if it rains play with the rain!

Think about elements of trees, including roots, sticks, leaves, seeds. These are rich resources to use both indoors and outdoors.

Start with the special nature of the outdoors – focus on what is different, rather than trying to replicate the indoors.



Resources | Children's Picture Books



If you would like to find out more or gain more inspiration, we have collated a set of resources that you might find useful.

Ferdie and the Falling Leaves by Julia Rawlinson and Tiphany Beeke (2006, Gullane Children's Books)

As the Autumn season sets in, Ferdie is very worried - his beautiful tree has begun to lose all of its leaves. Whatever Ferdie attempts to do to save them, it's simply no use.

Leaf Man by Lois Ehlert (2005, Harcourt)

Autumn has come, the wind is gusting, and Leaf Man is on the move. No one's quite sure where he will go, but this much is certain: A Leaf Man's got to go where the wind blows.

Leaves & Pods by Josie Iselin and Mary Ellen Hannibal (2006, Abrams)

A lovely non-fiction book filled with close up photos to peruse, enjoy and celebrate the diversity and beauty of both trees' leaves and the protective pods that cradle their seeds.

Little Evie in the Wild Wood by Jackie Morris and Catherine Hyde (2013, Frances Lincoln Children's Books)

Little Evie ventures into the wild woods with her basket of jam tarts, walking further and further into the trees and far from home. A valuable and joyful shift in messaging from an old fable.

Not A Stick by Antoinette Portis (2008, HarperCollins)

A really simple and stimulating take on the exciting open-ended possibilities for a stick, when in the imaginative hands of a young child.

Scaredy Squirrel by Melanie Watts (2006, Happy Cat Books)

Hilarious detailed planning by Scaredy to avoid all risks including germs and bears at all costs, fearing life beyond the safety of his home tree - until...

Stanley's Stick by John Hegley and Neal Layton (2011, Hodder Children's Books)

Stanley's stick is not just a stick. With a stick in hand, Stanley's options are endless - his imagination takes over and the magic begins.

The Bad Mood and the Stick by Lemony Snicket and Matt Forsythe (2018, Andersen Press)

A stick wreaks havoc, passing a bad mood on as it moves from person to person, leaving an unexpected trail of surprise in its wake.

The Conductor by Laetitia Devernay (2011, Chronicle Books)

Beautiful, simple artwork sequences a musician conducting the transformation of falling leaves into birds that fly away from the tree.

The Oak Tree by Julie Donaldson and Victoria Sandoy (2024, Alison Green Books)

A thousand years ago, a tiny acorn fell to the ground. As the years pass, it grows . . . and GROWS into an enormous oak tree! Children play games around it, families dance about it and the tree gives food and shelter to a host of animals, from squirrels and badgers to birds and beetles.

The Tree: An Environmental Fable by Neal Layton (2016, Walker Books)

The tree is home to a family of birds in their nest, squirrels in their drey and rabbits in their burrow. But what happens to the animals when a man and woman decide to cut it down to build their dream house?

The Tree Keepers: Flock by Gemma Koomen (2020, Frances Lincoln Children's Books)

At the edge of the woods, there is a great tree. Peep through the branches and you might just see some little people who stand as tall as your thumb and have heads the size of hazelnuts....

The Wild Woods by Simon James (2008, Walker Books)

Grandad and Jess are walking together in the woods when they see a squirrel pass by. As Jess follows the creature deeper into the woods, she comes to understand that her Grandad is right - the squirrel's proper home is the wild woods.

Tidy by Emily Gravett (2017, Two Hoots)

Pete the badger likes everything to be neat and tidy at all times, but what starts as the collecting of one fallen leaf escalates and ends with the complete destruction of the forest!

Find out more

The Voices of the Future project website contains further resources and toolkits, plus publications and other materials that provide more details about our research;
www.treescapes-voices.mmu.ac.uk

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