

# How Nurseries Can Support Babies Learning to Walk Outdoors

## The First Stages of Walking

Babies have to learn to control their bodies before they can walk. It all starts with the head, lifting and holding it up, which strengthens back muscles so they can sit up and crawl.

Then after a few months they will be ready to start pulling themselves up into a supported standing position.

Once a baby has started to pull up into a standing position and has got used to the idea of standing up, they will begin to “cruise” around furniture, holding on with both hands and taking sideways steps, exploring the idea that they can move around in a standing position.

As they grow in confidence, they will let go of the furniture and before long they will be taking their first unaided steps across the floor.

Every child develops at their own pace and the entire process, from lifting their head to walking independently, generally develops over the course of a year from when a baby is 4 months to 16/18 months old.

Each new movement has to be practised until it becomes natural and controlled. Simple games and words of praise from a carer can really boost a baby's confidence and make a big difference when it comes to helping them take their first steps.

It really is a case of trial and error and something that babies have to learn for themselves, but nurseries can help by making the environment safe and offering lots of encouragement.

Babies will be very wobbly at first and move with their feet placed wide apart for better balance.

Their legs will be bent and they need to get used to the feeling of bending and straightening their knees, and the sensation of their feet flat against the floor. Sitting down again is difficult at first too.

Once a baby is up, they need to work out how to get down again! At first they are likely to just let go of the furniture and fall down with a bump, or become upset, freeze into position and cry for help.

This is all part of the learning process and carers can help by showing a baby how to bend their legs and lower themselves to the ground without getting hurt. This also really helps to ease falls when babies start taking steps independently



# Why Outdoors is Best

As with many things, a nursery's outdoor play area can be the very best environment for allowing babies to practice standing up and taking their first steps. Babies and young children love being outside.

The feelings of joy and happiness, the sense of calm contentment that they draw from a natural outdoor environment, exposed to healthy fresh air, natural light patterns and all the stimulating natural sounds such as birdsong and rustling leaves, play an important role that should never be overlooked.

The influence of these many wonderful and appealing outdoor elements really boost a baby's mood and confidence, and if a baby is in a "happy place" they will feel much more supported as they learn to face new challenges.

Confidence is key when it comes to learning to walk. Many parents have reported that while babies seem to be fine having a go at walking at home, it is often a different story when they step outside in public.

If babies don't have enough opportunity to spend ample time outside during the day, which sadly is often the case in the UK, then it is no great surprise that they might feel nervous or intimidated when they are suddenly expected to put their feet on the floor in a relatively unknown environment.

The space seems bigger, the ground feels a bit different, and that in itself can be enough to knock their confidence and set them back.

Nurseries that allow babies to venture outside regularly throughout the day, surrounded by other children going about their business and enjoying themselves playing, really help to normalise the outdoor environment, and allow babies to foster a real love for the outdoors.

It is important that babies are allowed to build their confidence in open outdoor spaces where, at nursery, they are completely safe and supported. From this they can gain confidence in their walking whether at home, nursery, or out and about.

There are numerous other significant health benefits to being outdoors too, which are particularly relevant to babies.



Nurseries that embrace opportunities for baby activities, such as learning to walk, to take place outside in the fresh air, simultaneously support a baby's overall good health and development:

- Cognitive development is supported through plenty of exposure to all the different and wonderful sensory experiences that the outdoors has to offer.

- Natural sunlight is an essential source of Vitamin D, which babies need for healthy bones, teeth and muscles. It is a vital vitamin which by law is added to all infant formula milk in the UK and is included in dietary supplements for babies too. However, for most of the year, given the opportunity babies should be able to get all the Vitamin D they need from the sunlight.

- Outdoor activities help babies to sleep. Studies have shown that babies sleep longer and better when exposed to plenty of natural light during the day. The stimulus of sunlight helps babies to establish their circadian rhythms, promoting daytime alertness and bringing on sleepiness at night time. Learning to walk is hard work and with plenty of practice in the fresh air babies will be ready for their nap!

- More recent studies have shown that spending time outdoors in natural daylight improves a baby's vision, lowering the risk of nearsightedness by regulating the rate of eye growth. Learning to walk outside in an open space means that a baby is naturally exposed to a range of close and long distance objects to focus on, so their eyes get a good workout at the same time!

## Optimize Your Outdoor Play Space to Help Babies Learn to Walk

There are many ways in which nurseries support babies who are learning to walk.

Optimizing your outdoor play area to encourage babies to stand up on their feet and start stepping out for themselves, is arguably the most effective.

Not only do they get to enjoy all the benefits of being in the great outdoors, but they are stimulated, interested, curious to explore and feel ready to go. And if they are happy to give it a try, then they are halfway there already.

## Playground Surfacing

First and foremost, it is important to make the play area safe and secure. Good playground surfacing is essential.

Saferturf and Artificial Grass not only bring an otherwise dull area to life with bright and engaging colours and different textures to explore, but they provide a safe, clean and comfortable landing to help prevent bumps and bruises if babies are wobbly or take a tumble.

Areas that are prone to mud or water pooling can easily be dealt with by laying a more suitable surface.

## Going barefoot, even outside!

Healthcare practitioners recommend that babies should be barefoot as much as possible when they are first learning to walk.

It helps babies to stretch out the muscles in their feet and toes, feel the ground directly beneath them and improve proprioception, posture, balance and coordination.

They suggest that babies do not need proper shoes until they can walk independently, and even then, shoes should only be worn to protect their feet outside.

Babies can learn to walk more easily when they are barefoot, because their feet can grip a surface far better than they can when wearing slippery socks.

Uncomfortable shoes that act as a barrier to the floor can be a real obstruction for a toddler who is concentrating on learning to walk.

Toddlers keep their heads up more when they are walking barefoot, because the feedback that they feel from the floor means that there is less need to look down to see to what is there. When they have to keep looking down, this puts them off balance and makes them more likely to fall.

Rough, cold and dirty outdoor surfaces make the reality of avoiding shoes very difficult, and hard and slippery floors increase risk of injury.

All the more reason, therefore, that really good quality [Playground Surfacing](#) is laid down. Of course in the winter months children cannot be running around outside barefoot because it's far too cold. But in the warmer weather, for a young child there is nothing better than the freedom of running around outside, feeling the soft ground beneath your feet and not having to worry about putting fiddly footwear on first!

[Artificial Grass](#) is ideal because it can be kept clean and mud free, and provides a beautifully textured soft surface for babies learning to place their feet.

[Sand pit](#) and [Dig Pit Areas](#) are also perfect for babies learning to walk, offering a safe and satisfying surface to explore with tiny toes.





## Shelter from the Weather

Next you need to factor in the weather above. In the UK we can never be sure what the weather is going to offer us from one week to the next.

Rain and wind or bright, glistening sunshine, they form the world around us and learning about their different effects is all part of the learning process for babies and young children.

In an ideal world we would embrace the weather no matter what, but in practice that can be a logistical challenge for most nurseries.

**Outdoor Shelters, Canopies and Gazebos** offer a perfect solution to inclement weather conditions, meaning babies can enjoy learning to walk outside whatever the weather.

Made bespoke to suit your outdoor learning area, you can use them to provide shelter in very exposed areas, act as a barrier to rain and strong winds, to break up large spaces or to create designated themed outdoor areas for inspiration.



## Baby-friendly Outdoor Play Equipment

Baby-friendly, safe and sturdy, **low-level outdoor play equipment** makes all the difference in allowing babies to pull themselves up to standing and then walking.

Traditional walkers and baby bouncers are discouraged as they don't help a baby to learn how to take their own weight and use their feet and legs for balance.

Even some push along toys are discouraged if they are too lightweight and liable to tip over.

The key is to install products that are solid and sturdy, that will support a baby's weight and can't easily be pulled over, and that can easily be reached and grasped by tiny hands.

Babies and toddlers are very wobbly at first and need time to develop the strength and coordination needed to walk securely without regularly tumbling over.

## Outdoor Sensory Interaction

**Sensory play equipment** really has its place outdoors. Low level wooden planters for example, containing safe, baby-friendly, brightly coloured and textured plants and flowers are a wonderful introduction to nature.

Babies will be attracted to them, will be excited to pull themselves up and have a good look at what is on offer.

They will enjoy the experience of cruising along and checking out the sights and smells, strengthening their back and leg muscles, gaining balance and improving sensory perception at the same time.

Medical experts assert that a baby's ambition to reach out and explore things contributes a great deal to their walking skills.

By including play objects that are appealing, brightly coloured, with interesting patterns, shapes and light reflections, at a low level where babies can see them and reach for them themselves (with help in the early days), you include incentive.

Their interest and desire in walking over to explore items is ignited and the fun comes alive.

## Taking it a Step Further

As babies get more used to the idea of standing up and starting to take a few steps, you can use the outdoor play area to set up a **baby obstacle course**.

Installing a few baby-level play pieces at close range, really helps to alleviate a baby's fear of falling. With only a short distance to walk, a few steps between each item, they can gradually build confidence from their own achievement in making it across from one item to the other.

Gradually increase the distance between items along the course to set different levels of challenge, encouraging babies to develop a sense of adventure and helping them learn not to be afraid. Before long they will be charging across the play area of their own accord!

**Split level equipment** is the next challenge. Little **ramps**, **bridges**, equipment that includes a couple of **steps** with something to hold onto.

As babies develop an ability to walk independently, they need to learn to assess risk, and experiment with uneven surfaces at different levels.

Recent studies in the USA have confirmed that babies learning to walk do not have an in-built fear of heights. They are not able to distinguish safe from risky ground.

As humans, in order to stay safe and survive, this risk is something that we have to learn how to assess for ourselves. So, play equipment that helps babies to explore the ground safely, recognise that it comes in all different forms, and helps them learn how to navigate it, are crucial.

Items to climb or step up and over, around and down feel very strange at first, but with practice and through playtime fun they will learn how to recognise obstacles, to feel the changing patterns of the floor under their feet, and how to deal with them safely (even if that means avoiding them!).

**Large Sand Pits** are useful resources too. Walking on sand can be quite difficult as it moves around. It's an

interesting texture for babies to explore, helps with muscle development and proprioception, and always provides a soft landing so they feel supported and safe.

Key workers and nursery staff really make a difference to a baby learning to walk outside.

By making it fun and interactive, supporting them by holding their torso or hands as they begin, offering words of praise and encouragement, babies love to learn.

Playing little games of chase or catch by crawling around the play equipment before they can walk around it is really good practice too. It all helps to improve coordination of their hands, arms, legs and feet, which is needed to move on to walking.

For inspiration and ideas, have a look at our products section on our website to see our range of superb surfacing options, outdoor shelters and outdoor play equipment suitable for nurseries and early years children.



If you are interested in discussing the development of your outdoor environment, simply fill out our [Contact Form](#) and we will be in touch with you to book a free consultation.

To find out more about our unique process as well as view our entire product range, [case studies](#) and educational [blogs](#), make sure to visit our website at [www.pentagonplay.co.uk](http://www.pentagonplay.co.uk)