

Outdoor Learning

Activities to Prepare Nursery Children and Preschoolers for School

What does it mean to be School Ready?

There is of course some professional debate surrounding the term “school readiness”, as it is broadly based on performance indicators and outcomes.

Children develop at their own pace and each child is different, so there is a wide gap in abilities between the ages of 4 and 5 in that fact alone.

A child born in September will be almost a whole year older than their classmate born in August, but joining reception in the same academic year, so it is impossible and incorrect to compare the two. To most parents, the direct question would be “Is my child ready to start school yet?”

A primary school headteacher defined their view of School Readiness in the Ofsted guide:

“By four, we would expect children to be ready to be separated from their parent or carer, to be able to demonstrate listening skills in being able to show interest and pay attention to a subject or stimulus. To have enough language to be able to express themselves if they need something and be able to communicate something about what makes them who they are, such as name, age and something about family or relevant factors in their life. To be able to interact with an adult and/or a peer. For example, during play to be able to take turns and take some responsibility for their actions. We think that children should be able to focus on, and show interest in, their work and the world

around them. To make observations, notice things and ask questions. To be able to hold a book, understand some aspects of narrative and respond to some boundary setting.”

Another important factor is whether or not a child is able to follow age appropriate instructions. Schools have rules and routines to follow, and children have to learn how to fit in with their systems and follow instruction. And their level of physical development is crucial.

They need to have fine motor skills at a level that allows them to hold and manipulate a pencil for learning to write. They need to be able to care for themselves in terms of dressing, getting changed for PE and putting coats on to go outside, taking themselves to the toilet, eating and drinking throughout the day. They will be participating in all sorts of physical activities whether at playtime or through interactive learning.

Nurseries and preschools offer essential opportunities for children to prepare for school.

A good setting will provide the ideal environment for children to grow and learn, as well as being able to identify any difficulties that a child may be having, where they might need additional support in order to become school ready.

What matters most is that children are supported in developing physically, with good social and emotional well being and an ability to communicate their needs, listen to others, take an interest in and question the world around them. If an Early Years setting can achieve this, then their young pupils will be raring to go by September!

Ready with Physical Development, Strength and Fitness



Physical activity for young children is key if they are going to have any chance of becoming school ready. The school day can be extremely tiring for young children when they are first getting used to it.

Ask any parent who has a child in reception how their child is feeling after the first term and their guaranteed answer will be that they are exhausted! It's a huge change to their lifestyle not to mention the new people and surroundings to get to know.

Having to behave, sit nicely, try new activities, make friends, get to know staff, fit in with school routine, cope at lunchtime etc is a massive challenge for any four year old! It's little wonder they become tired and often run down after the first term.

Opportunities for physical activity in the fresh air are essential for helping children to develop physically, to build and strengthen muscles and develop coordination, and to develop physical stamina.

A child's level of physical strength and development influences whether or not they are going to be able to cope with starting school.

The government investigation and report on children's health and wellbeing called specifically for physical skills to be taken into account when examining children's school readiness, and made clear that the national curriculum should incorporate physical activity into traditional classroom learning, with Ofsted challenging ineffective delivery.

It recommended that every Early Years setting should provide high quality outdoor play provision, and suggested that there should be more movement between indoor and outdoor space during all activities.

Ofsted say that best practice nurseries are the ones who look to develop the quality of the environment both indoors and outdoors and provide access to a broad range of materials to develop both children's fine and gross motor skills.



In the report on school readiness, Ofsted highlighted examples:

"Physical development in terms of children's fine motor control and ability to care for themselves in toileting, dressing and drinking from a cup was a priority focus area for three pre-school settings. In one pre-school, staff rearranged the outdoor space because the majority of three-year-old children were behind in their physical development, some by up to 12 months, and could not manage activities like riding a trike or scooter, or throwing, catching or kicking a ball.

The pre-school provided high quality materials and resources. They reported that many children were unused to playing outside, so they placed particular emphasis on developing the pre-school's outdoor areas. Resources were altered frequently to help children develop their motor skills using cones, hula hoops, balls and large trikes. Additional staff were deployed to play outdoors and to show children how to use the equipment."

It does seem to be a common problem in the UK that very young children are not used to playing outdoors. Good nurseries and preschools are making a real push to try and improve this. They allow free flow access to the outdoors wherever possible to allow children to make the choice to go outside throughout the day.

Pentagon Recommends:

Free-flow Canopies and covered [Outdoor Classroom](#) areas are undoubtedly the best way for nurseries and preschools to ensure year round access to the outdoors, so that children have daily opportunities for outdoor activities and physical development to get them physically ready for school.

[Active play equipment](#) such as age appropriate Trim-Trails, Climbing Frames and Play Towers present all sorts of different physical challenges for young children. Of course they are a lot of fun too! But they also require children to use, stretch and work all different parts of their body to move around in different ways, whether climbing, balancing, jumping, swinging or sliding across them. They are ideal for developing muscle strength and coordination to ensure that young children become physically ready for school.

Good surfacing for young children to run around on is paramount. Slippery, muddy and wet grass often leaves outdoor spaces unusable for much of the year. Old concrete play areas have a lot to answer for when it comes to sore knees, scrapes and bruises! Surfacing such as [Artificial Grass](#) are clean and safe, easy to maintain and use year-round, and help to prevent injuries. [Wet Pour](#) and [Saferturf](#) can be installed in different bright colours and with all sorts of interesting and beautiful markings to create an attractive and inspiring outdoor area that draws young children to play and be active. Tracks and pathways designs within the surfacing create flow and add interest. Road markings, for example, are perfect for riding trikes and other play vehicles along, helping to develop gross motor skills and coordination. Larger areas of artificial grass are brilliant for running and ball games.

Contours, tunnels and bridges built into the play area landscape present different and fun physical challenges that children love to experience. They encourage different types of movement across the levels, contributing to broad physical development of the whole body.

Ready to Write

In a recent Bold Beginnings report by Ofsted, they highlighted the requirement that EYFS children in England should be taught how to grip a pencil properly and how to sit correctly at a table.

It was also clear that EYFS providers should ensure that when children are learning to write, resources are suitable for their stage of development and there are frequent opportunities for children to practise and consolidate their skills.

There is of course much more to learning to write than just picking up a pencil and moving it across a piece of paper. Children learn through movement and play.

It's an essential part of their physical development, and is necessary if they are going to develop the muscles required to hold a pencil, and also to sit comfortably at a table for any period of time to write.



EYFS activities need to provide plenty of opportunity to work on fine motor skills, children using their hands in different ways to build strength and dexterity to support a pencil, grip it properly and move it in the direction they want it to travel to mark the page. Hand to eye coordination is involved too.

Nurseries and preschools that provide time and resources for children to use their hands help to lay the foundation skills that allow children to go on to write.

Some children naturally enjoy sitting down to draw, colour and write. Others just really aren't interested.

And they are the ones who will struggle more to use their hands when they really have to get writing in school.

There is no questioning the fact that EYFS settings need to offer limitless opportunities for mark making. And good outdoor spaces can make this so much more fun and enjoyable for those who need a little more encouragement!

Pentagon Recommends:

- ☀️ Messy play that involves lots of lifting and moving materials to develop body strength for sitting upright at a table. Messy play requires hands to manipulate materials, sand, water and mud, which is crucial for working smaller joints and muscles, developing fine motor skills and improving dexterity. Children need to do this in order to develop the control needed to grip and manipulate a pencil for writing, or to complete smaller motor tasks such as fastening buttons or holding and drinking from a cup. A [Water Wall](#), where children can design and adjust the channels to divert the flow of water as they choose, manipulate the water with their hands, squeeze and turn the pumps to move water back up the wall, are ideal for working all the relevant muscles. Sand and water play undoubtedly achieves these aims. A Mud Kitchen is a favourite resource for many Early Years settings as there are so many things that you can do with it, physical lifting and mixing materials such as mud with their fingers being just one.



- ☀️ [Tuff Spot Tables](#) are brilliant for presenting and working with a whole range of resources, and allow children lots of opportunity for using their

hands. They can hold and explore natural resources discovered outside as well as man made materials, they can use tools such as tweezers or chopsticks to transfer items of differing sizes between containers around the table, all good for hand to eye coordination as much as for strengthening hands.



- ☀️ Big mark making exercises on the ground or on [Mark Making Panels](#) such as a Giant Chalkboard or Giant Whiteboard attached to the wall. Children can incorporate smaller fine motor movements, such as holding a piece of chalk to form marks, with much bigger gross motor movements, moving their entire arm up, down and across the board to create their mark. This is good fun even for those who wouldn't normally choose to draw!
- ☀️ Interactive Activity Play Panels that require little hands to grip, push and pull objects along the panel help strengthen the hands ready for writing and other fine motor activities.
- ☀️ Gardening activities using [Planters](#), which involve gripping tools, digging with hands, holding lifting and pouring heavy water containers, pulling out weeds, planting different size plants, are wonderful activities for very young children on so many levels, and build fine motor skills too.

Ready with Good Personal, Social and Emotional Development

Personal care is a big part of school readiness. Being able to get dressed by themselves, put their own shoes and coat on, take themselves to the toilet and wash their hands, use a knife and fork to eat a meal, are essential life skills that they need to get them through the day.

Of course these are all skills that require fine motor skills and hand to eye coordination, which can be improved through the activities mentioned above. But they also require practice! Reception teachers have reported new school starters not being able to do all or any of these tasks independently when they start school.

Role play is a learning tool that covers so many EYFS learning and development areas, and is perfect for giving young children plentiful opportunity to try out all sorts of different tasks.



It is also essential for developing social skills, interacting with others and learning how to foster relationships, exploring boundaries and forming an understanding of their own thoughts and feelings, their interpretation of daily life events and roles of people around them.

Daily activity in the fresh air is not only important for physical development and fitness, but it is also imperative for good mental health and happiness.

Being out in natural light, open green space, helps children to feel better in themselves and so better able to cope with all the new changes and challenges they are facing. Which is why it is so very important that EYFS settings have good outdoor provision.

Pentagon Recommends:

- Role Play resources such as [Mud Kitchens](#), Dens, Playhouses, and a selection of Activity Play Panels are essential equipment for any EYFS playground.
- Our range of [Themed Playground Equipment](#) includes play ships, towers, treehouses and castles and is absolutely fantastic for encouraging imagination and creativity, bringing young children out of themselves and letting them explore all sorts of different scenarios together.
- Quiet zones such as covered Gazebos and Outdoor Seating areas complemented with Planters to create a Sensory Garden, offer a space of calm and quiet away from the buzz of the main play area. These are particularly helpful if children become overwhelmed and need some time out, as well as offering a place for social conversation and building relationships.
- Wildlife and planting areas connect children with nature and help to encourage strong emotional development.

Ready to Read and Communicate



Opportunities to engage children in conversation and read to them from a very young age are vital, and according to Ofsted, should be at the heart of the EYFS curriculum.

Providing children with the right reading books to practise what they are learning in their phonics lessons will make sure they start to recognise sounds and letters, so they can be really ready to learn to read by themselves.

It is important that young children hear new vocabulary and have opportunities to practise new words and phrases.

Research shows how beneficial to language development it is for children if adults around them, parents and Early Years professionals, speak clearly and offer children opportunities to speak, be imaginative, construct sentences and ask questions.

This all counts towards school readiness in terms of children being able to express themselves, make their needs known, understand instructions, make friends and settle, and succeed in learning.

Outdoor reading should be encouraged wherever possible as it is known to help bring books to life, creating a sensory reading experience that captures a child's imagination, and bringing with it a deep-rooted love of reading. Developing an interest and enjoyment in books makes a huge difference when it comes to children learning to read for themselves.



Pentagon Recommends:

Inspiring Outdoor reading areas are central to a good EYFS outdoor learning area. A Gazebo provides shelter from the elements so it can be used throughout the year, and can be transformed into a wonderful cosy reading nook with the simple addition of a few cushions, blankets and a well stocked rotating book box!

We have designed a beautiful wooden [Storyteller Chair](#), where teachers can read aloud to children outdoors, and where children can take the stage and have a go at speaking aloud too. It's friendly and inviting and adds an element of magic and mystery to any outdoor reading area. Add to it

some outdoor seating for class groups, whether colourful wooden stools, bench seats or a maze bench, and you have a fabulous informal learning environment that encourages children to have the confidence to speak up in a group, join in the conversation, practice good listening, or simply sit back and enjoy a favourite story.

Our unique range of [Outdoor Performance Stages](#) provide a superb forum for young children to have a go at drama and speaking aloud in front of others. Stepping outside of the confines of the indoor environment brings a sense of freedom. Children feel less inhibited and more able to have a go at expressing themselves, trying out new vocabulary and finding their voices. This builds self esteem as well as improving language and communication skills, which will stand them in good stead as they make their way through school.



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 [EYFS page](#), [case studies](#) and educational [blogs](#), make sure to visit our website at www.pentagonplay.co.uk