



“The babies, they’ve noticed”

An evaluation of a Froebelian inspired nature-based pedagogy in urban babyrooms

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Introduction to the authors

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Nicola works as Director of Insight and Impact for The Froebel Trust and is a Visiting Reader in Education for Sustainable Futures at Canterbury Christ Church University. With an academic background in rural and environmental geography, her research interests include children's connection with nature, outdoor learning and sustainability education. She led the Froebel Trust funded research project 'The potential of a Froebelian inspired pedagogy "in, with and for nature" in urban babyrooms' on which this report is based.



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Executive summary

This report provides an evaluation of a Froebelian inspired nature-based intervention that took place in five urban babyrooms in London that are all part of the same nursery chain

Changes to babyroom gardens: All the settings engaged in a co-design process to enhance the naturalness of their babyroom gardens. This mainly involved modest changes such as incorporating habitats and feeding stations to encourage wildlife and planters for growing herbs and flowers. Although the organisational approach to garden design meant that more fundamental changes weren't possible, the settings concluded that small steps make a big difference.

Changes in practitioner understanding and awareness: Practitioners' interest in developing their outdoors for babies was ignited by the project, particularly through the opportunity to engage with an environmental specialist. This project demonstrates the value of creating spaces for knowledge exchange and collaboration between early childhood and environmental specialists.

Changes in attitude: Practitioner attitudes to the outdoors have changed from a place to 'do' to one in which just they can just 'be' with babies. Spending time outdoors and engaging with nature is perceived as both enjoyable and beneficial for adults and babies alike. This points to the value of Continuing Professional Development (CPD) that is experiential.

Changes in practice: Practitioners evidenced the changes they have made in their nature-based practices with babies, in ways that align to the Froebelian qualities of being attentive, responsive, nurturing and questioning. They also reported the ways in which the behaviour of the babies has changed - 'the babies, they've noticed.' This demonstrates the potential and value of our Nature Enhancing Nature Engaging (NENE) pedagogy within babyroom contexts.

Organisational change: Navigating health and safety concerns remains a challenge. However, the project has created a space to acknowledge and talk about ways of managing the tension. Understanding the benefits of NENE for babies means that practitioners and managers now perceive it as a question of balancing benefit and risk and communicating this with families.

Implications and recommendations

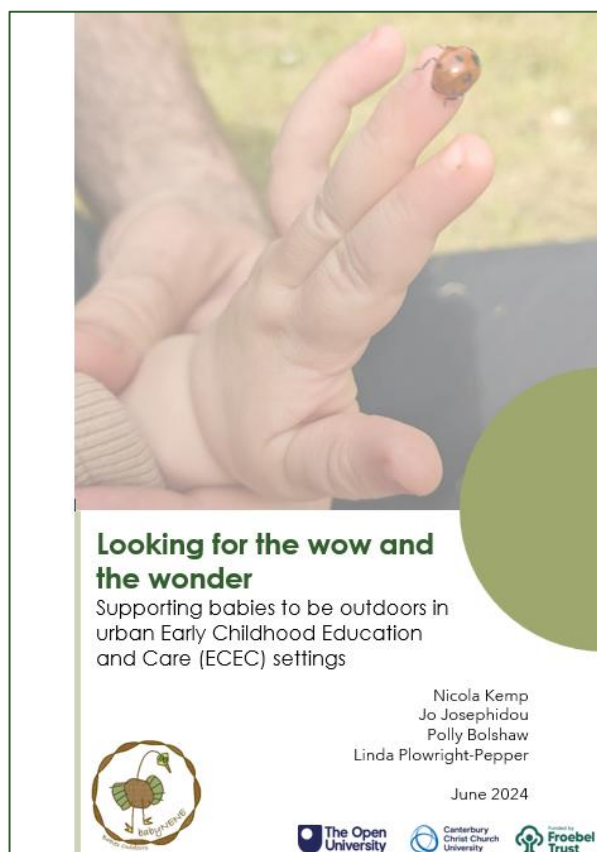
These findings demonstrate the potential and value of our Nature Enhancing Nature Engaging (NENE) pedagogy within babyroom contexts.

We will be launching a babyNENE toolkit that has been co-designed with the practitioners and our Advisory Group. You can access the toolkit via our website: www.babiesoutdoors.co.uk.

1. Introduction to the project

This report provides an evaluation of a Froebelian inspired nature-based intervention that took place in five urban babyrooms in London that are all part of the same nursery chain.

Initial baseline visits (2024) highlighted the challenges and opportunities faced and are detailed in a separate report¹. The key messages are summarised below.



Key Messages

Outdoor spaces: Tend to be artificial, flat and bounded.

Getting outdoors: Care routines and physical accessibility are challenging to manage. Transitions between indoors and outdoors are emotional as well as physical.

Being outdoors: Is important for child AND practitioner well-being, particularly for those without access to a garden at home.

Outdoor pedagogies: Focus is on taking indoor activities outdoors. Health and safety concerns limit opportunities for nature-based pedagogies.

Our Nature Engaging Nature Enhancing Intervention

In response to these needs, the project team developed a year-long programme of support for the settings in collaboration with Derbyshire Wildlife Trust, which has expertise in supporting [nature connection for very young children](https://www.derbyshirewildlifetrust.org.uk/nature-tots)².

Our approach was based on a Froebelian commitment to nature engagement and recognises the reciprocal opportunities for nature enhancement within Early Childhood Education (ECE) settings – we call this Nature Engaging Nature Enhancing (NENE) pedagogies³. NENE is focused on four qualities that can be considered in relation to both babies and the outdoor environments in which they spend time.⁴

¹ Kemp, N., Josephidou, J., Bolshaw, P. and Plowright-Pepper, L. (2025) *Looking for the wow and the wonder: Supporting babies to be outdoors in urban Early Childhood Education and Care settings*.

² Derbyshire Wildlife Trust (2025) *Nature Tots*. Available at: <https://www.derbyshirewildlifetrust.org.uk/nature-tots>.

³ Josephidou, J. and Kemp, N. (2022) 'A life 'in and with nature?' Developing nature engaging and nature enhancing pedagogies for babies and toddlers', *Global Education Review*, 9(2), pp.5-22. Available at: <https://ger.mercy.edu/index.php/ger/article/view/594>

⁴ Josephidou, J. and Kemp, N. (2024) 'Developing nature engaging/nature enhancing pedagogies for babies and toddlers', *New Zealand Journal of Infant and Toddler Education*, 26(1), pp.23-28.

Educators following a NENE pedagogy:

- are **attentive**⁵ to what babies are interested in, follow their lead and tune into natural processes and cycles (such as weather, light and the seasons) and develop a familiarity with what their outdoor environment offers;
- are **responsive** to babies' needs outdoors, facilitating feeling, thinking, sleeping and sensory engagement whilst responding to the specific needs of the outdoor environment including adding natural elements;
- **nurture** babies' interests outdoors, observing and valuing the connections they make, helping them to understand how everything links whilst modelling caring behaviours towards the environment;
- **question** and challenge barriers that limit opportunities for babies to spend time outdoors in nature-rich environments.

Evaluating Change

One year after our initial baseline visits, we returned to the five urban settings to find out what, if anything, had changed in their outdoor provision for babies as a result of the intervention. We collected data by:

- conducting individual interviews with staff including the manager, baby and toddler room leads and practitioners
- audio-recording shared professional conversations between practitioners and managers from the five settings
- observing and taking photos of the outdoor spaces that babies and toddlers regularly access
- recording written fieldnotes about how the outdoor area is used by babies and toddlers
- audio recording reflections on the visit via a debrief with the research team

In this report, we provide an overview of the intervention and the resulting changes.

⁵ Kemp, N., Josephidou, J., and Watts, T. (2022) *Developing an ECEC response to the global environmental crisis: The potential of the Froebelian-inspired NENE Pedagogy*. Available at: <https://www.froebel.org.uk/uploads/documents/FT-NENE-Pedagogy-report-Dec-2022.pdf>.

2. Our Froebelian inspired nature-based intervention

2.1 Nature Enhancing Strategies for Outdoor Spaces

A bespoke range of nature enhancing strategies for their outdoor spaces was developed for each setting in collaboration with an environmental advisor.

Each setting received a half-day visit from an environmental advisor during which they were encouraged to audit their babyroom gardens, discuss the specific characteristics, needs and interests of their babies and consider opportunities for nature enhancement. They were then sent a detailed report with suggestions including photographs of their garden to illustrate where new features would be best placed.

Suggestions included:

- Bird houses
- Bog garden
- Butterfly and bee homes
- Butterfly and bee homes
- Edible or pizza pallet
- Herb and salad hanging baskets
- Herb pallet
- Herb planters
- Minibeast hotel
- Pot pond
- Seasonal climbers
- Tall plants and seasonal planters
- Tree stumps

Figure 1 shares an excerpt from one of the reports.

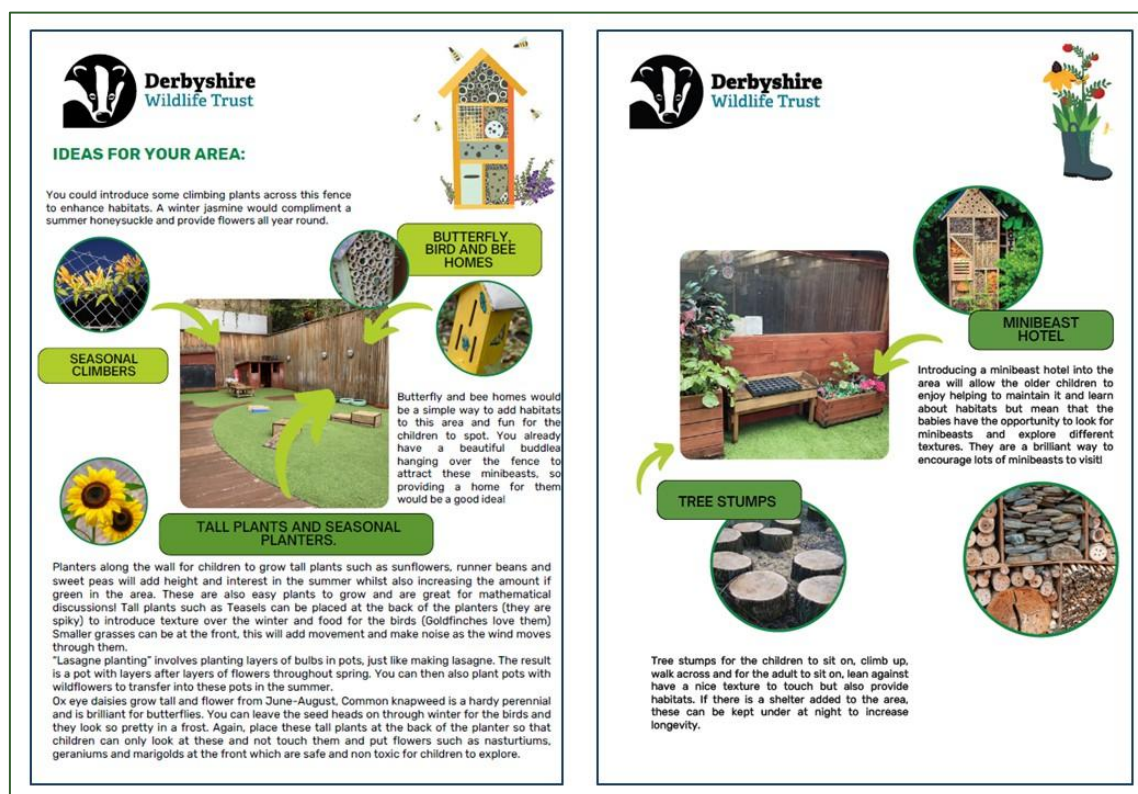


Figure 1: Excerpts from a setting report

Each setting received a second visit from the environmental advisor to help them complete a costed action plan (up to £500) for their outdoor spaces for babies and toddlers. Table 1 shows what was suggested to each setting, and which of these ideas each setting decided to take forward in their action plan. Figure 2 shows one of the setting's action plans as an example.

		Yew	Hazel	Fir	Rowan	Chestnut
Habitats and feeding stations	Butterfly and bee home					
	Bird house					
	Minibeast hotel					
	Hedgehog house					
	Frog house					
	Bird feeder					
Plants	Tall plants and seasonal planters					
	Seasonal climbers					
Natural features	Bog garden or pot pond					
	Tree stumps					
Herbs and edible plants	Herb planters					
	Herb pallet					
	Edible or pizza pallet					
	Herb and salad hanging baskets					
Sensory engagement	Nature connection box					
	Mirror					
	Solar panel water fountain					

Key

 Suggestion offered and taken forward

 Suggestion offered but not taken forward

 Suggestion not offered

Table 1: Suggestions offered to and taken up by each setting

Action plan for introducing natural elements to outdoor area for babies and toddlers					
SMART ¹ action (Choose 3; say what you will do and why)	Resources needed	Amount of funding requested (up to £500)	Who is responsible	Timeframe (to be completed by March 2025)	How we will know this has been achieved
Add seasonal plants that encourage wildlife and enhance sensory experiences. Climbers along the fence in the new plant area.	Plants ordered and compost	Plants (see attached list) £84.00 Rectangular planter: £124.99		Bulbs in by December. Winter herbs in by January Plants in from March-May ECC to have fixed broken planter for use and to have put new planter in place.	Children will be able to see a range of seasonal plants and adults have access to herbs.
Introduce habitats and feeding stations to attract insects and wildlife to the areas and raise children's sensory engagement with nature.	Habitats- extra resources- hooks and screws to secure, bird food.	Ladybird tower: £14.99 Insect hotel: £42.99 Bee B&B: £19.99 Bird box: £14.99 2 x bird feeders: £13.99		Items purchased by December and in place by January (ECC to put up by the end of January) Bird feeders to be placed in situ by December and birds to be fed throughout the winter.	A range of animals to be encouraged to the area- children and adults will be able to witness how the animals use the areas. An audit of creatures seen before could be carried out in November and then again in June The older children and adults could take part in the Big Garden Birdwatch and record how many birds visit the station. Photos and pictures of the wildlife that visits could be recorded and shared.
Make a nature connection box for babies that is easily accessible when outside so that adults are encouraged to talk to the babies about the nature around them.	Box with lid to add items- extra sensory items such as scarves, and other natural textures	8 x treasure blocks: £51.59 3 x nature soft toys: £44.97 Sensory leaf tiles: £35.40 Pine cone: £2.51 Bug sensory stones: £26.40		Items purchased by December Babies using resources to explore textures and practitioners to talk to the babies about nature.	Adults regularly engage with the babies in talking about what they can see outside and using the props in the basket to connect with nature.

¹ Specific, Measurable, Achievable, Relevant, Time-bound

Figure 2: Example action plan

2.2 An outdoor experience day for practitioners to develop nature-based pedagogies

Whilst being outdoors supports practitioners' wellbeing, opportunities to spend time outdoors are often limited. So, in March 2025 we held an outdoor experience day for babyroom practitioners, which took place at one of the settings. Led by the project team in collaboration with Derbyshire Wildlife Trust, the day provided opportunities for practitioners:

- To learn about why spending time outdoors is beneficial to babies and toddlers
- To take part in experiences designed to support their engagement with nature, such as an outdoor mindfulness breathing exercise and off-site sensory walk
- To be introduced to the idea of a Nature Engaging and Nature Enhancing (NENE) pedagogy for babies and toddlers (see Figure 3)
- To participate in shared reflective discussions about their existing practice and their ideas for how this could be developed.

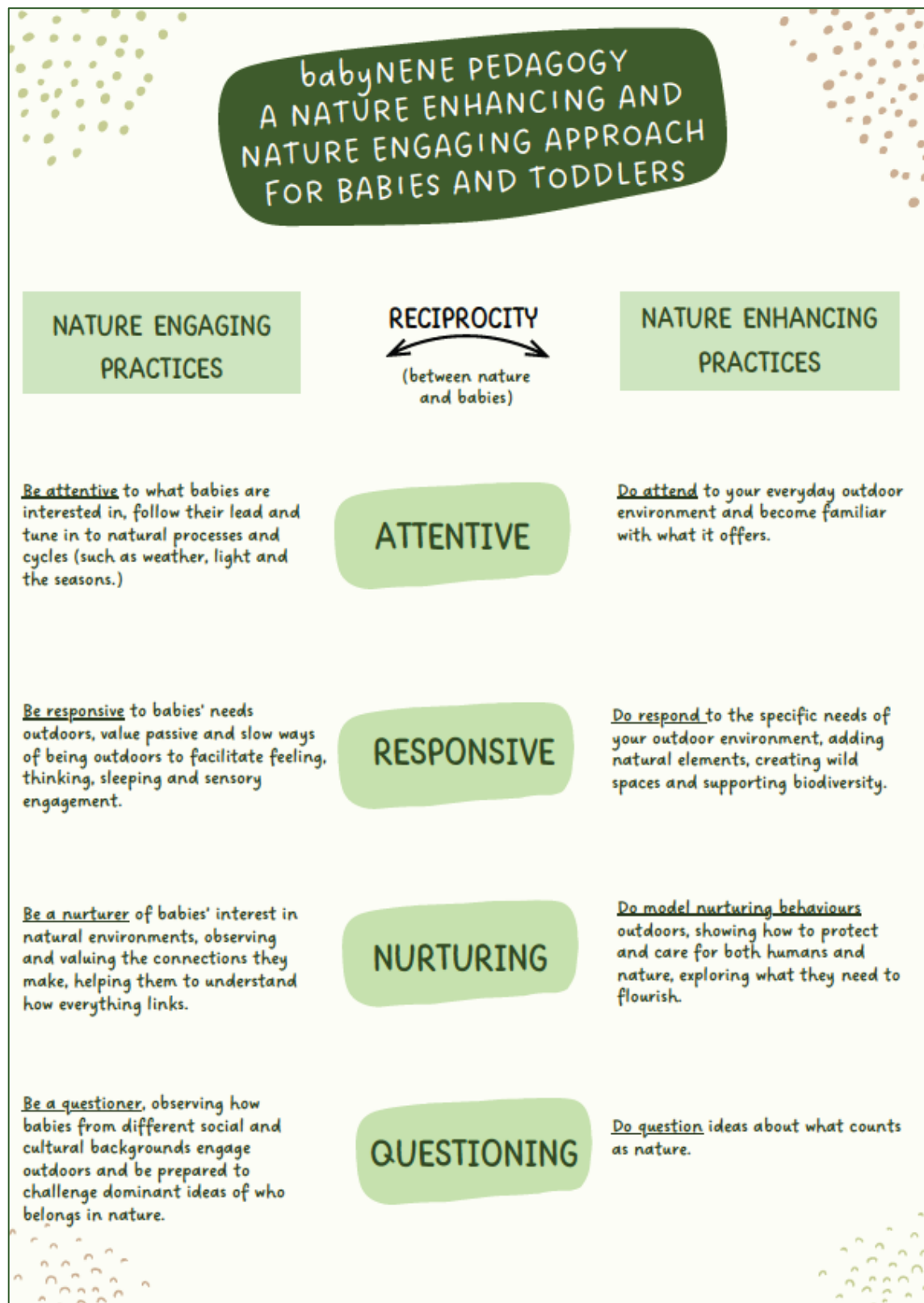


Figure 3: An introduction to a Nature Enhancing and Nature Engaging Approach for Babies and Toddlers

3. What changed

3.1 Settings engaged in a co-design process to enhance the naturalness of their babyroom gardens.

Whilst not all settings had completed all the planned changes to their outdoor spaces, Figure 3 demonstrates some of the nature enhancing changes they had made by the post-intervention visits. Most popular were habitats and feeding stations to encourage wildlife, as well as planters.

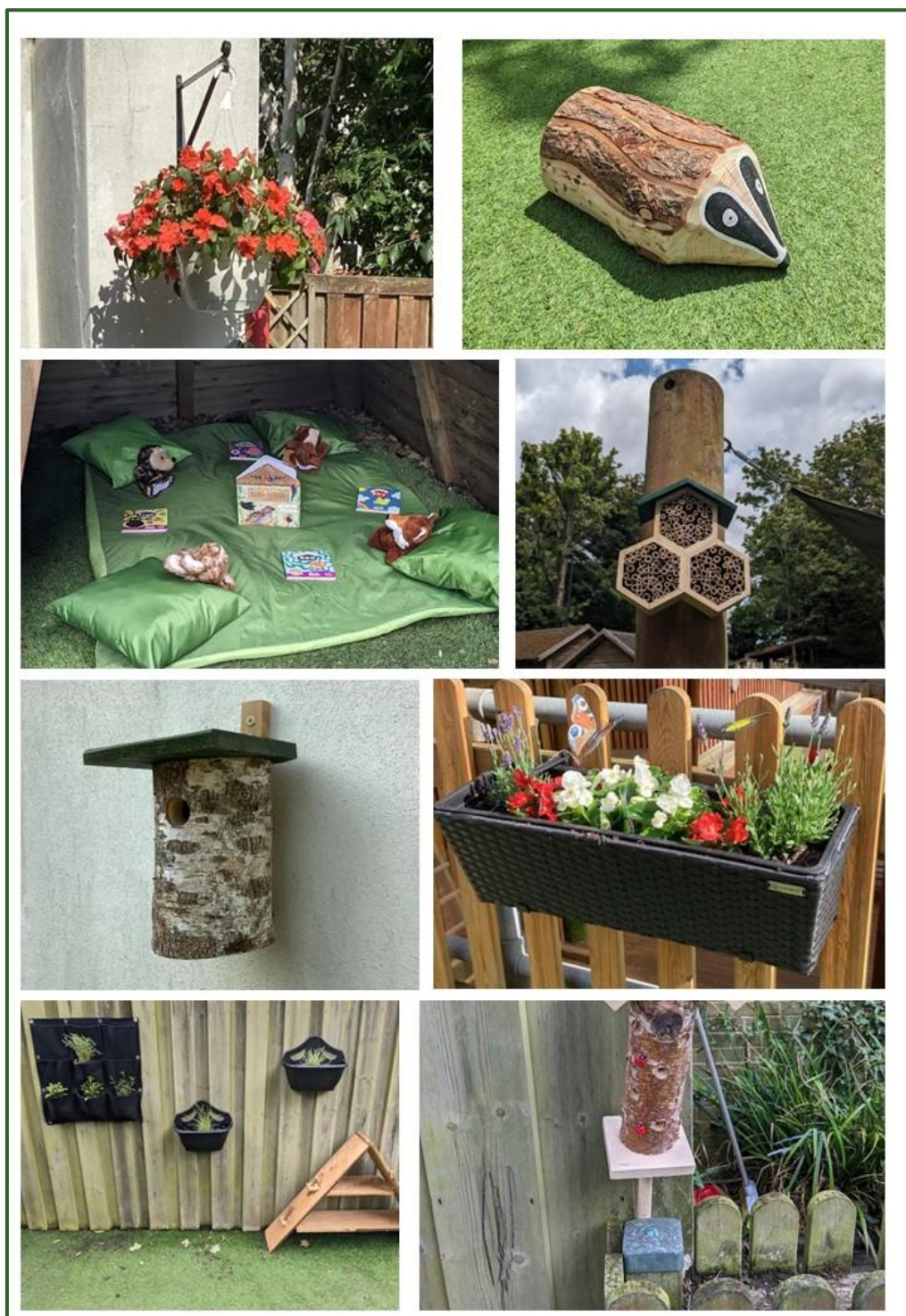


Figure 4: Photos of some of the resources in the settings' outdoor area

The organisational approach to garden design meant that the scope for change was limited even with the support of setting managers. Key features such as surfacing, fencing and larger structural elements are designed and implemented by central teams meaning that these provide a relatively fixed context.

This context meant that practitioners recognised the value of taking small steps. One showed how she had replaced plastic flowers with real ones in hanging baskets which “made an incredible difference”.

3.2 Practitioners’ interest in developing their outdoor spaces for babies

Practitioners spoke about how both the visits from the environmental advisor and the experience day ignited their interest in developing their outdoor spaces for babies.

The opportunity to receive bespoke advice and support from someone who had seen the outdoor space in use was particularly beneficial because it created opportunities for knowledge exchange:

“I think it's always better that someone comes to the setting and has seen it because ideas are great but until you've seen the practice of how it works and the logistics... The idea that you come into the setting, have a bit of a thought about it and how we can implement it and make it work within our structure and what we've got. So yeah, I did appreciate that.”
(Rowan Manager)

The in-person visits also created a better understanding of the barriers faced in making changes due to health and safety concerns:

Even, like, getting, like, this crate thing that we could get and put up and putting hanging baskets on it and these things to make it more of, kind of, a greener outdoor space, which looked, in hindsight, really, really lovely. But then again, there's lots of things that we weren't allowed to do because of health and safety and stuff like that. But yeah, I think those visits with [advisor] were really helpful when she kind of walked through and talked through, like, a lot of things. Once she was here I explained certain things to her.” (Rowan Deputy Manager)

Both managers and practitioners were able to engage in a supported co-design process for their outdoor spaces that created opportunities for genuine knowledge exchange within and between settings. At one setting, the manager found that four of the practitioners have “green fingers” and reflected “they had been there for more than 10 years but we didn't know that – that's one of the things you brought us”

“I think it helped us as well [to] educate the staff on outdoors - because we spoke about it in our meeting, which I told her, that that was part of the action plan: to speak about the outdoor space.... That was part of it - to not only educate myself, let's educate the staff, because what if I'm not here one day? So, yeah, it was quite useful.” (Yew Practitioner)

The importance of being able to spend time with babyroom practitioners from other settings at the experience day was clearly valued. It provided a rare opportunity to

share perspectives, offer ideas and receive encouragement about their plans which generated further motivation.

"There was another, there was a lady I was talking to. I can't remember what setting she was from. She gave a lot of good ideas, and she was like, "Our garden space is like nothing compared to what you guys have." But she actually showed me some pictures, and it was nice to get her view on it and share, like, different opinions and different activities and stuff, which was nice." (Yew Practitioner)

"We've got everyone together and we've had a real discussion. You know, just actually talking to the other practitioner as well, because it's good for us - I know it's good for you to talk to us, but it's good for us to talk to others as well. So, I think that was very useful, and we both came away saying, "Ohh, we could do this, and this, and this."" (Chestnut Practitioner)

"And I think for me, it was just an affirmation. It was, it was like a yes, we can do this in our nursery. We don't have to be stuck with the constraints. You know, we can actually do it." (Chestnut Practitioner)

3.3 Practitioners' attitudes about the value of being outdoors and in nature

Practitioners shared the ways their attitudes about the outdoors have changed from seeing it as a place to 'do' to one in which they can just 'be'. They spoke about the value of watching, listening and learning from nature and of slowing down outdoors.

"We are so full of do, do, do, busy, busy, busy, you've got to be doing this, you've got to be doing that, but actually you can just lie on the grass and look at the sky" (Yew Practitioner)

"You don't necessarily need to provide activities, it's experiences outside... What we had was an experience and the children should have an experience. They [the practitioners] left that day going 'okay we don't have to have this, and we don't need to spend money, it's literally the trees, the leaves, the smells, the sounds that you hear, so that's what we got out of it.'" (Hazel Manager)

As a result, they have started to think more carefully about the quality and worthwhileness of resources within their outdoor spaces, and to re-value nature.

"now we're actually really looking at our environments and how it actually does support the children's learning. And nature has definitely been brought back. We did have a lot of those fake plants. Now we're trying to move off that way, try and get some healthy fresh bits in." (Chestnut Manager)

Practitioners noted the ways in which babies are responding to the changed outdoor environments.

"after your visit last time we have these planters and we're focusing on herbs...they know now when you touch those leaves, this gives you a good scent on your hands. So, they will go there and gently touch it and smell it, that sensory engagement." (Fir Practitioner)

"The babies, they've noticed"

"Generally, they love being outside. It could be the noises, the hearing, the different senses that are being opened up to, and different smells" (Fir Deputy Manager).

Also notable was the sense of enjoyment that being outdoors now offers practitioners.

"Yeah, I definitely wanna get more out of being outdoors, cause I used to be like, "Oh, we have to go outside, and we have to do this, but I don't really want to stay outside for too long," if you get what I mean. I enjoy it more. Yeah, I definitely do. Even on the weekend, I'm like, oh, I wanna be outside. Like, I do like outdoors a lot more. Yeah." (Yew Practitioner)

For managers, the project was felt to have benefitted everyone within the setting and to have generated a sense of 'uplift'.

"I think it's helped everybody. I think it's helped the children. It's definitely helped staff, and I think being in a nicer environment is better for everyone's mental health, and just being outside is good for, I mean, it's uplifting." (Chestnut Manager)

3.4 Practitioners are incorporating nature engaging and nature enhancing practices with babies

Practitioners spoke about how they were starting to change their outdoor practices, in ways that align to the Froebelian qualities of being attentive, responsive, nurturing and questioning.

They shared examples of how both they and the babies in their care have become more **attentive** when outdoors.

"I think also it's like what you do more - you get into a habit, and it becomes a way of life, doesn't it? And, talking on a sort of more personal level, since my partner was saying, "You notice a lot when we go out for walks, don't you?" And I think it's just 'cause I got into that habit of looking." (Chestnut Practitioner)

"It made us think, oh, wow, yeah, how nice and how lovely it can look. And sort of **the babies, they've noticed. I mean, they notice everything**. So yeah, you know, for them it's been a real game changer for them in terms of them noticing the flowers." (Chestnut Manager).

"We've got a cherry tree that is in the neighbour's garden but hangs over, and it's tall enough for the children to see how it changes through the seasons. And so, it's lovely with the blossom, and the blossom falls into the garden, and sometimes when the wind blows you get that blossom sort of coming down. And then the cherries - you can see the cherries growing." (Chestnut Practitioner).

Practitioners are thinking more about how they can be **responsive** to babies' needs outdoors, for instance through facilitating opportunities to sleep outside. One setting also talked about how they have begun to seek parental permission for the babies to sleep outdoors.

"We talked about sleeping outside, so that's something that we want to really implement here as well. So, I'm just going through the consent with parents. But I would love to see some more children sleeping outside, because that is supposed to be amazing for them, obviously weather permitting. But I know that that is something that I'm quite passionate about, to happen for our children to sleep." (Chestnut Manager)

At Rowan they've changed the layout of their outdoor space to remove a covered wooden tuff tray stand that was at an inaccessible height for the babies, creating more space to place blankets on the ground for babies to look up at trees overhead. Other practitioners spoke about how they had also embraced slow ways of being.

"We sometimes lie on the floor and look up at the sky and I can be there for hours and they literally love it. They like every plane, aeroplane, bird..." (Yew Practitioner)

"When the ground is dry, we'll put a rug down - a comfy rug - so they could lay down on the rug and have a look at the trees. It's not always, you know, having to do some sort of physical thing." (Chestnut Practitioner)

Practitioners also identified how they had taken opportunities to **nurture** babies' interests outdoors. For instance, a Chestnut practitioner spoke about observing a ladybird:

Yesterday... we were looking at a little ladybird, and it went on one of the practitioner's hands... things like that are really nice (Chestnut Practitioner).

Babies are also being encouraged to nurture the natural world themselves:

"They use the watering cans, they try to water the plants as well now... it's wonderful." (Fir Practitioner).

Finally, the intervention also encouraged practitioners to **question**. They gave examples of how they had started to question what counts as nature, and to change their practice as a result.

"I found myself pulling up weeds that were going through the Astro turf before I saw them. And I'm like, well, why am I doing this? Let's show it to the child, you know, and this is actual nature trying to get through." (Chestnut Practitioner).

"I went on one walk where I said okay I'm going to take pictures of all the forgotten flowers, like the dandelions and the nettles, because nettles have beautiful flowers on them... Looking at the actual petals, some of the flowers are shaped like hearts, and those are the sort of details that you can point out to the children" (Chestnut Practitioner).

"We have a few leaves on the floor, and I often find myself picking them up and like, why am I doing that? It's so normal to have leaves on the floor... So I'm like, why am I picking them up? They should be there so they can learn not to put them in their mouths" (Yew Practitioner)

Other practitioners discussed the way in which they had started to rethink the place of babies outdoors and to change the way they plan:

"The babies, they've noticed"

"When you are looking at the garden I think you do naturally plan for the older groups and babies kind of get a back seat... Definitely looking at adapting to suit the younger years is a good idea." (Fir Deputy Manager).

3.5 Navigating health and safety concerns remains a challenge

The tensions between nature-based pedagogy and health and safety requirements both within individual settings and organisationally was highlighted during the initial setting visits and remains a challenge. Centralised policy guidance was described as 'risk averse' (Rowan Manager) and is still considered to be a key factor constraining what can and cannot be done.

"We've got to be very mindful and very like, you know, safe, health and safety. "Is this a hazard?" "Is this going to be harmful?" And I get it, to protect the children. But I do feel that the world has just gone a bit overboard" (Rowan Deputy-Manager)

"I see the petals falling off the flowers and I think I've got to pick them all up...I still have this mindset" (Yew Practitioner).

Indeed, it was one of the reasons why not all of the suggestions to enhance the nature-richness of the gardens were adopted (see Table 1). Additionally, the requirement to purchase resources through preferred suppliers meant that opportunities for low/no cost enhancements (such as using recycled materials or natural resources such as leaves and pinecones) were limited.

Parental views and attitudes about health and safety are perceived to drive, or at least underpin, this policy stance. For example, at one setting parents requested that their baby was not taken out of their room (Fir Deputy Manager) and more generally parents are reported as expressing concern about their child going outside in wet weather for fear of them getting sick. Practitioners can receive "pushback from parents" (Fir Deputy) about taking the children outdoors, which can make it "tough" for staff.

However, this does not mean that nothing has changed. The project has created a space to acknowledge and talk about ways of managing the tension. Practitioners and managers are more aware that their experience is shared and gave examples of how this has given them a sense of confidence to balance risk with benefit.

"It's trying to find a middle group and sort of having your own risk assessment of what you deem is actually a good risk and you know it's safe" (Rowan Manager).

There is a new awareness that practice should be led by focusing on the developmental value for babies of being outdoors then working out how to do it safely.

4. Implications and conclusions

To help us understand more about the implications of these findings, we organised for all the settings to come together to share their experiences with our Project Advisory Group in June 2025.

Here we present the key messages that practitioners and managers thought are most important to share with others.

- External support is valuable, particularly in developing safe outdoor spaces for babies (for example, providing lists of safe and suitable plants and vegetables)
- Each setting is different, even within an organisation
- Small steps can make a big difference
- There may be expertise within the setting (practitioners and parents) that is not known about
- The outdoors can offer a completely different learning environment to indoors
- You don't have to 'do' activities – just being outdoors can be valuable and enjoyable
- There are benefits of being in and with nature for practitioners and babies
- Practice should be led by focusing on the developmental value of being outdoors then working out how to do it safely.

For the project team, these insights demonstrate the potential and value of our Nature Enhancing Nature Engaging (NENE) pedagogy within babyroom contexts.

We will be launching a babyNENE toolkit that has been co-designed with the settings and our Advisory Group and based on the findings presented here, and the other reports from this project. You can access the toolkit via our website: www.babiesoutdoors.co.uk.

