



Looking for the wow and the wonder

Supporting babies to be outdoors in urban Early Childhood Education and Care (ECEC) settings

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June 2024



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Introduction to the authors

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Acknowledgements

This report is the fourth in a series that explores opportunities for babies and toddlers outdoors based on research projects funded by the Froebel Trust. We would like to thank all the Bright Horizons settings that have taken part in our research; pseudonyms have been used for their settings. Image used with kind permission from Jack and Sang Bolshaw.



Executive summary

This report is the fourth in a series that explores opportunities for the youngest children outdoors based on research projects funded by the Froebel Trust. Engaging with nature is at the centre of Froebelian educational philosophy and practice. However, we know that outdoor provision in English babyrooms varies significantly¹ and that nature-based pedagogies for this age group are rare. The data in this report is drawn from initial research visits to five babyrooms in London (all part of the same nursery chain) undertaken in Spring 2024 and includes interviews with managers and babyroom practitioners, observations of the outdoor spaces and researcher reflections.

Outdoor spaces: There are differences in the types of outdoor spaces provided for babies and toddlers although they tend to be artificial, flat and bounded. The urban context of the settings demands a creative approach to garden design and use, and educators share a desire to understand how to create more natural garden environments.

Getting outdoors: Care routines and physical accessibility challenges can limit the time babies, and to a lesser extent, toddlers, are able to spend outdoors. Transitions between indoors and outdoors are emotional as well as physical for babies and toddlers and are a critical part of outdoor pedagogy. Parental attitudes to the outdoors can either support or limit babies' outdoor experiences in the setting.

Being outdoors: Being outdoors supports child AND practitioner well-being, particularly for those without access to a garden at home. Setting gardens are recognised as being calming and soothing spaces for babies. For toddlers, the emphasis is on the outdoors as a space to be physically active.

Outdoor pedagogies: Engagement tends to be focused on taking indoor activities outdoors. Nature engagement presents a critical pedagogical (risk/benefit) tension for practitioners and sleeping and eating are not routinely part of outdoor pedagogies. However, there is a shared desire to understand how to extend and develop outdoor pedagogies.

¹ Kemp, N. Durrant, I. and Josephidou, J. (2020) *Making Connections with their World*. Research Report 2. Available at: <https://www.froebel.org.uk/uploads/documents/Froebel-Trust-Research-Making-Connections-With-Their-World.pdf>

Implications and recommendations

These findings highlight the significant challenges and potential for developing more inclusive nature-based pedagogies in urban contexts. Guidance is needed that can support both nature engagement and the enhancement (naturalising) of outdoor spaces for babies and toddlers in ECEC settings. We suggest the Froebelian qualities of being attentive, being responsive, nurturing and questioning could encourage practice that:

- is **attentive** to what babies are interested in, follows their lead and tunes into natural processes and cycles (such as weather, light and the seasons) and supports practitioners to become familiar with what their outdoor environment offers;
- is **responsive** to babies' needs outdoors, valuing passive and slow ways to facilitate feeling, thinking, sleeping and sensory engagement whilst responding to the specific needs of the outdoor environment including adding natural elements;
- **nurtures** babies' interests outdoors, observing and valuing the connections they make, helping them to understand how everything links whilst modelling caring behaviours towards the environment;
- **questions** who belongs outdoors and what counts as nature.

Introduction to the project

This report provides new knowledge about how urban Early Childhood Education and Care (ECEC) settings make provision for babies and toddlers outdoors. It is part of a research project funded by the Froebel Trust that explores the potential of a Froebelian inspired nature pedagogy in urban babyrooms in collaboration with Bright Horizons nurseries. Connecting with Nature is an important part of the Bright Beginnings Curriculum offered at all Bright Horizons settings. The data presented comes from five settings in London.

Our previous research found that babies and toddlers are marginalised in research, policy, and practice and often have limited opportunities to be outdoors and in nature. One reason for this exclusion is the idea that the outdoors is seen as a place to be physically active whilst at the same time there are health and safety concerns regarding babies' inclusion in these spaces².

In this project we wanted firstly to understand the specific challenges and opportunities for providing inclusive nature-based pedagogies for babies and toddlers in urban areas before collaboratively designing an intervention.

1.1 What we did: Visits to five urban early childhood settings

We worked with Bright Horizons who helped us to identify five settings located in London who wanted to develop their outdoor provision for babies and toddlers. Each setting was visited by one of the research team for a day in Spring 2024. Specifically, we wanted to know:

- what their outdoor spaces for babies and toddlers are like
- how and when they access the outdoors
- what they do when they are outdoors
- about their pedagogic strategies.

Data collected and presented in this report include:

- individual interviews with staff including the manager, baby and toddler room leads and practitioners
- observations and photos of the outdoor spaces that babies and toddlers regularly access
- written fieldnotes about how the outdoor area is used by babies and toddlers
- audio recorded reflections on the visit via a debrief with the research team.

² Kemp, N. and Josephidou, J. (2020) *Where are the Babies?* Research Report 1. Available at: <https://www.froebel.org.uk/uploads/documents/Report-1-Where-are-the-babies.pdf>

2. What we found out

2.1 Outdoor spaces

There are differences in the types of outdoor spaces provided for babies and toddlers although they tend to be artificial, flat and bounded.

Although part of the same nursery chain, the five settings vary significantly in key characteristics. In terms of capacity for up to twos, this ranges from 11 to 48 children. Some settings are purpose built whilst others have been converted from residential or business premises. Three settings have outdoor spaces that are shared by all age groups with scheduled time slots, another has a separate area for up to twos, whilst another has three separate outdoor spaces for babies and toddlers (one of which has direct access from the indoor rooms). Each garden has a very different feel, influenced by its physical size and location, but also which age groups it serves.

The outdoor environments are referred to as gardens but the surfaces in the spaces accessed by the babies and toddlers are all either artificial grass or a rubberised/soft surface. They tend to be flat and surrounded by a fence; a blank canvas with natural features designed out. One practitioner (Rowan Setting) reflected that experiences for the children might be different *'if it was a proper garden... where things are not actually synthetic'* suggesting a subconscious acknowledgement of the limitations of what is provided.

The urban context of the settings demands a creative approach to garden design and use.

At Hazel Setting, the manager reflected on the challenges of their urban location:

...the environment. It's not very inspiring, is it? You know, you've got the grey kind of prison looking doors...there is a lack of nature ... they can do different activities ... But they struggle to have that wow, that wonder. ... kind of thing that you would get in a forest that you would get kind of in those forest school kind of environments.

She regrets the lack of wildlife in the garden and recalled unsuccessful attempts to attract birds by introducing bird feeders *'we tried about a year ago. ... I think if you hang it up, it's the location. It doesn't really work'*. However, they have found alternatives that suit their context:

we get our own caterpillars and we kind of release the butterflies and kind of watch that process and that's where we can incorporate into the garden.

Similarly, the manager at Rowan Setting has worked hard to actively create *'those cosy kind of compact spaces that make it feel a bit more like a home from home'*. Although she has introduced natural resources like mud, rocks, logs, sticks, leaves and flowers she reflects that *'I don't even think the garden is where I want it to be'*.

At Fir Setting, the manager cited their garden as their weakest point and something they sought to improve. She alluded to the unconscious tendency for outdoor spaces to be primarily seen as a place where children can expend their energy, where it is

valued only as space where greater physical freedom is possible compared to indoors. This is perhaps unsurprising given the design of the spaces which mimic playgrounds:

For me, I do feel like it's kind of samey in the garden. It's very much a physical place and I think it's important that we don't only kind of have a vision of the garden being somewhere to just kind of run around and, you know, go crazy. I want it to be a place to like, enjoy.

Managers have design ideas about what would work at their specific setting to improve their gardens for the youngest children. For instance, at Fir Setting, the priority is providing a dedicated outdoor space for babies within the existing garden which could be used *'when it's convenient for them and their routine'*, simultaneously enabling the free flow of older age groups in the garden space. For Yew Setting an *'outdoor sheltered play area for days it is raining'* could encourage all-weather use of the garden.

There is a shared desire to understand how to create more natural garden environments

Practitioners and managers want to do more and had ideas about what could work at their settings:

more planters, grass and 'natural things'

planting, with soil, you know I even saw a flower carpet with long grass and the children can feel it.

There was though a sense of wanting and needing support, a sentiment summed up by this practitioner's plea to *'tell us what to do for a natural garden area!'* (Fir Setting).

One manager explained the challenge of knowing HOW to bring more nature in. There is the herb patch but it's *'not at their height, they can't go and jump in'*. Previously *'we did try and buy some flowers with petals and everything, but the younger children just grabbed them'*. She also said that they are lacking sensory exploration and opportunities to take risks by balancing on things and experiencing different natural surfaces.

2.2 Getting outdoors

Care routines and physical accessibility challenges can limit the time babies, and to a lesser extent, toddlers, are able to spend outdoors.

At some settings the babyrooms are located on upper floors which creates a logistical challenge of getting them outdoors whilst maintaining staff ratios. The transition to the outdoor space often requires borrowing of staff or managers from other rooms and was described at Rowan Setting as *'a rigmarole'*. Where outside space is shared between different rooms or age groups there is also pressure on outdoor garden time. For instance, at Fir Setting, six rooms share a garden space, each with a half hour slot in the morning and another in the afternoon.

Particularly in settings where the garden space is shared, everyday care routines such as sleeping and eating can significantly limit the time the youngest children spend outdoors:

we've got our routines here that when we have snack at 10:30, then in the morning, we're not able to go out. So, we do try and go in, go in the afternoon if we're able to depending on the time they wake up (Practitioner Yew Setting).

This means that although the aspiration is that babies have consistent daily use of the garden, the reality is that they don't go outside every day because it's just too difficult.

Taking babies and toddlers outdoors beyond the setting is recognised as challenging due to the additional staffing requirements. There are also additional health and safety concerns with going off-site. One practitioner (Fir Setting) reflected that despite having 'this lovely park' there's 'loads of dog poo' and 'there's no boundary, it's nothing. And it's right next to the main road, isn't it?' This means staff need to go out and do a risk assessment of areas to be used before they can take the children out. Two settings (Hazel & Fir) gave examples of trips to local parks and green spaces, with one that included parents with toddlers encouraged to 'collect things for, like loose parts or like twigs, leaves and things like that' (Manager Fir Setting) whilst the 'babies equally enjoyed going to the park to see the ducks on the pond' (Hazel Practitioner). However, counter-intuitively, the Covid pandemic was reported as having stopped this practice.

Transitions between indoors and outdoors are emotional as well as physical for babies and toddlers and are a critical part of outdoor pedagogy.

Practitioners and managers at Fir Setting referred to the excited anticipation of babies who learned that the appearance of their transporting cot meant that they were going outdoors:

That's what the, the cot is for. So, when they see the cot, they get excited. Put them in the cot when they see the cot and they know they are going to the garden, so they get excited (Practitioner).

Conversely, babies can become upset if it's not their turn to go out:

So sometimes if they're like not taking all of them, taking part of them, they get stressed. They want to push themselves through, you know, they understand it's garden time. So, they get very, very excited and they're happy (Practitioner).

In contrast, at Yew Setting, the babyroom is located on the top floor and so the babies must be carried down two flights of stairs which can trigger a more negative affective response. Babies could become upset if they associated going outside with going home:

sometimes babies may get quite upset so when they go outside because I think they think they're going home, and you know when we take them down the stairs, they might have that sense of why am I going down?' (Manager).

This idea that the transition to the outdoors can be emotionally difficult for babies was also picked up at Chestnut Setting *'because where the parents have left them, they like to stay in the room so they can keep an eye on the door'* and can be upset and unsettled by being taken out.

Whilst the focus may be on the practical challenges of ensuring babies are moved safely from the inside to outside, these perceptive reflections demonstrate the emotional significance and the need to incorporate transitions into outdoor pedagogy.

Parental attitudes to the outdoors can either support or limit babies' outdoor experiences in the setting.

One manager (Hazel Setting) felt they were *'constantly'* addressing parental concerns about whether their child was well enough to go outside. They also described the sense of anxiety staff can feel when children get muddy shoes or clothes parents and they don't have time to change them before they are picked up by their parents. They painted a picture of parents with busy working lives who were concerned about how they would deal with their child being unwell or coming home muddy.

Another (Yew Setting) noted that parents of babies asked less about the garden experience than parents of toddlers and appeared surprised that babies would go outdoors daily - rather their concerns focused upon whether their baby would settle, eat and sleep (all concerns that they did not associate with the outdoors). This contrasted with Fir Setting where the manager felt that parents see the garden as part of their child's overall experience of ECEC and want them to be *'out as much as possible'*. Practitioners gave examples of parents encouraging nature engagement with their babies and toddlers, by collecting natural resources on their walk through the park to the setting and commenting positively on photos they are sent when their child had been outside. There are clearly significant differences in how parents view the outdoors and the importance of this in their child's ECEC experience.

2.3 Being outdoors

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

'It's good for them, and good for us' (Practitioner, Yew Setting).

Many of the children attend full-time, so the bulk of their outdoor opportunities take place at the setting. Spending time outdoors whilst at the setting is recognised as necessary since some babies and toddlers attend 11 hours a day, 5 days a week and so, especially in the winter, it may be their only opportunity to be outdoors:

So, it's just an opportunity for them to explore the environment outdoors.

Obviously, physically develop their muscles, get a bit of fresh air and just kind of break up the day really (Practitioner, Chestnut Setting).

The urban context of the settings means that many children do not have access to a garden at home. The manager at Hazel Setting reflects that *'many children don't have*

gardens at home: it's probably just the windowsill.' At Fir Setting, for example, this figure is around 50%:

we know a lot of our children don't have access to gardens and we want to make it a special place for them (Manager).

Led by the toddler practitioner, a keen gardener, babies and toddlers at this setting are involved in planting, watering and harvesting edible plants. Since many live in flats and would have more limited opportunities to garden, this is recognised as an important experience by the whole team. Even though gardening was something one of the baby practitioners admitted that *'I don't really enjoy doing,'* she recalled how the children had enjoyed digging up the potatoes they had grown and those who did not like to eat 'greens' grew watercress and enjoyed eating it and *'they were proud of themselves'* (Practitioners, Fir Setting).

Both practitioners and managers spoke positively and enthusiastically about engaging with the outdoors and its importance to their own wellbeing.

Yeah, that's why for us as well, it gives a break. It's, like, fresh air (Practitioner, Fir Setting).

Just being outdoors, I guess the energy is just different. ... it does change the mood of us adults a bit and the babies and toddlers (Practitioner, Rowan Setting).

But staff members as well, especially when the room's busy and as I said children are crying because they're unsettled or they're tired and you know staff need that outdoor environment as well for their well-being not just the children (Manager, Yew Setting).

Setting gardens are recognised as being calming and soothing spaces for babies.

Practitioners found the garden could be soothing if babies were upset due to the sights and sounds outdoors:

When they're suffering in themselves, I want to [take] them to the garden. They're happy. They love it. They love the space; they love the open air. And then they just stop crying (Practitioner, Fir Setting).

This linked to observations that the outdoors invoked a sense of calm upon babies:

For babies, I think they are a lot calmer outside...I think they're, yeah, calmer, happier...I feel, like they're a little bit more, I don't know, zen I guess in the garden I think (Manager Fir Setting).

The calming influence of the outdoors was recognised as important in supporting new babies to settle into life in the setting:

They really like it. And we often find it quite calming, actually, when children are settling. ... when they're just starting sometimes, ..., somebody will just take them, walk around with them outside and it does seem to calm them (Practitioner, Chestnut Setting).

For toddlers, the emphasis is on the garden as a space to be physically active.

The outdoors was associated with opportunities to be physically active, moving expansively and freely in the spaces available. This was linked to outdoor spaces being safe whereas the indoors could not accommodate increased mobility running and climbing. Toddlers can mobilise their energy outdoors:

It's more physical outside. They're building their gross motor skills (Practitioner, Yew Setting).

I would say a focus more on the physical, that's what we will look at because it's a nice flat (space). There's not really much, anything in the babies' way or toddlers' way to kind of like run off or walk (Manager Yew Setting).

The same setting instilled the idea of 'walking feet' indoors and 'running feet' outdoors; 'feet on the floor' indoors and climbing outdoors allowing the toddlers to 'be a bit more wild' in the outdoor setting (Manager, Yew Setting). Here the outdoors was seen as a place for 'a lot of physical play' which was reflected in the way it was set up with a small tunnel and hill in the centre of the garden to encourage physicality. At Rowan Setting being outdoors allow toddlers to let off steam:

Things that they can do that they're not mainly allowed to do in the classroom, say like running a lot ... kind of be free in a way, but also for them to explore more and like be less contained with like being messy (Practitioner).

This idea of the outdoors as a place for being more physically active was also reflected at other settings, although in terms of supporting the child's holistic wellbeing:

when they're outside we tend to see where they are a little bit more physical, it tires them out a little bit more. They sleep more, sometimes they tend to eat better (Practitioner, Chestnut Setting).

they become themselves when they come outside (Practitioner, Fir Setting).

Toddlers increased mobilities is perceived to enable them to access a greater range of activities and no longer needing afternoon sleeps released more time to be outdoors.

2.4 Outdoor pedagogies

Engagement tends to be focused on taking indoor activities outdoors.

Across settings, there was an emphasis on the activities that practitioners set up for babies and toddlers before they go outside. Floor based activities were important in all settings for babies and pillows, mats, beanbags and blankets were used to make cosy spaces 'for like circle time, story times, music' (Manager, Hazel Setting). Toys and equipment such as construction toys (Chestnut Setting) and chalk boards to do mark making (Hazel Setting) were often brought outside:

...we do bubbles. Sometimes we put things on the floor like things for them to like jump on like hoops, say hula hoops or like a ball or things that they can

grab and like to use to like coordinate their body and like hit like, I don't know, say a stick or a pan or, you know, like even a magnifying lens with like a small ball ... anything that will get them moving and just keep them engaged (Manager, Hazel Setting).

whatever we are doing inside, we tend to bring it outside as well (Practitioner, Fir Setting).

There is a strong emphasis on 'doing' as another practitioner explains:

For the babies I have resources ready to, like, be used, but I also put, like, the parachute so like things to play, or the bubbles or like some toys, some extra toys that are in my room (Practitioner, Rowan Setting).

Nature engagement presents a critical pedagogical risk/benefit tension for practitioners.

On the one hand, all the settings provided examples of nature engagement activities both outdoors and indoors. On the other, naturally occurring features outdoors (such as fallen leaves and puddles) tend to be removed due to safety concerns. The following examples demonstrate the ways in which practitioners feel the need to manage nature and render it safe, rather than capitalising from the affordances offered by the outdoors.

Practitioners often talked confidently about taking water play outside. It appeared to be a core activity with a well understood space in the ECEC setting:

Water play I would say. They like filling and emptying pots... (Practitioner, Hazel Setting).

However, at this setting when it rains, water collects in the dips of the rubber surface that covers the garden. Rather than seeing the puddles as an opportunity for nature engagement, the practitioners are required to sweep the water away and make sure it is all removed before the outdoor space can be used.

So, they said that and what's kind of challenging is that the playground material it's, it's kind of got dips in like that. So, when it rains, the water kind of congregates there. So, it doesn't matter if it's not raining now, it can take them an hour to sweep that rain away (Researcher reflection, Rowan Setting).

Similarly, whilst some gardens are overlooked by large trees, that provide welcome shade during hot summers, they are also seen as a problem since the autumn leaves must be swept up and removed before taking the babies outdoors due to concerns that they present a slip hazard. Instead, natural resources like leaves, pinecones, sticks, and flowers (often things that aren't naturally there) are brought in and placed in tuff trays for the babies to explore either whilst outdoors or indoors.

One practitioner reflected on the ways in which she engages babies with nature both inside and outside seeing little difference in the experiences:

So, we have opportunities in the room as well, especially if it's a particular activity we might bring in flowers or smelling cones, things like that. So again, I wouldn't say that is any different outside other than the fact that you've got

the natural trees around. You know, which I suppose does bring a different dimension in (Practitioner, Chestnut Setting).

Whilst such examples of nature engagement indoors are to be encouraged, there are clearly opportunities for practitioners to harness the opportunities that being outdoors naturally offers:

So we...make sure that...that some things that is not harmful for them to choke on, that they can touch and feel as well, in the garden...we've got some who can pull themselves up, they pull themselves up to reach the plants that we've got there to see (Practitioner, Fir Setting).

At Rowan Setting, the baby and toddler room are given opportunities to grow *'although we limit them to herbs and they're not as successful, but they enjoy watering them a lot... if they do happen to... break them off and put them in their mouth, it's not gonna harm them or anything'.*

However, overall engaging with nature as a fundamental part of being outdoors is muted in the overall observation and discussions.

Sleeping and eating are not routinely part of outdoor pedagogies.

Despite the amount of time up to twos spend sleeping or eating, these tend to happen inside the setting and are not part of outdoor pedagogies. At two settings (Yew & Hazel) managers reported that they encourage outdoor sleeping during the warmer months. At Yew Setting, mattresses are taken outside for the children to lay and sleep on if they need to which enables them to spend more time outdoors:

So those ones who would need to be sleeping and technically missing out on the garden time will be experiencing the fresh air while they're asleep on the mat in the garden... they may just have a little play and then they get too tired rather than taking them upstairs and we will put them down and the staff member just keeps an eye on them (Manager).

This more fluid management of sleeping time contrasts with the dominant perspective that prioritises scheduled and uninterrupted sleep. Indeed, there was a sense of reticence about the idea of outdoor sleeping amongst practitioners. One practitioner at Rowan Setting, had attended a seminar which had promoted the idea of sleeping outside, however she felt she would not do it with her age group of babies. At Chestnut Setting, although there is a cot for outdoor use, another practitioner reflected that *'we haven't even thought of that'* (i.e. sleeping outdoors) although was open to trying it.

Eating outdoors provided greater challenges. For at least one setting the problem of infestation of rodents made them reluctant to take any food outside. Only one setting (Chestnut) had snacks outdoors in the general course of the day and this applied to both babies and toddlers: *'we've got these nice rugs that we can take out and we have had snack out in the garden'* (Practitioner).

There is a shared desire to understand how to extend and develop outdoor pedagogies.

I want a bit more inspiration (Manager, Yew Setting)

In one setting (Fir) both the manager and practitioners felt the need for the coordination of a vision for the use of the outdoors:

although they are outside, they might not be getting the full experience of outdoors compared to indoors...I'd love for everyone to understand a bit better how to use the space as not just a physical space (Manager).

Someone to come and help us to, like, implement, have a vision and, yeah, we will do it together, yeah, like work together (Practitioner).

This Manager wanted to try to inspire their staff team to 'bring a bit of passion' into the development and use of their garden. They had identified potential 'garden champions' to help everyone 'thinking that [the outdoors] is just as important as all the lovely things you do in your room. To bring it outside' and this included using the outdoors in poorer weather conditions and involving parents.

Managers raised concerns about the lack of CPD for babyroom practitioners recognising 'there isn't much training on outdoor play' (Hazel Setting).

Whilst the desire for support in developing their outdoor pedagogies was shared, there were notable differences in the perspectives of managers and practitioners. In some cases, it appeared to be manager who was the pedagogical leader advocating for greater consistency in getting children outdoors and in extending practice. In others, the roles were reversed with practitioners taking a much more proactive role.

3 Implications and recommendations

As we reflect on our findings, we recognise both the significant challenges and potential for developing more inclusive nature-based pedagogies in urban contexts.

3.1 Reflections on outdoor spaces for babies

The tendency to provide flat and artificial outdoor spaces is at odds with research that emphasises the benefits of spending time in green spaces with varied natural features to young children's physical, psychological, social, and emotional health³. Natural features such as slopes, uneven surfaces, grassy areas, plants and trees are also recognised as offering diverse learning and development opportunities for babies and toddlers⁴. The reality of the provision is also at odds with the preferred term of 'garden' for the outdoor area as reflected by practitioners. However, there is a tension here – even in these urban settings 'nature' infiltrates the outdoor spaces, but this nature is perceived as problematic (rain, leaves, rats, birds) and is rendered 'safe by removal.' Whilst there is clearly a desire on the part of the settings to develop their outdoor babyroom provision, environmental advice and support is needed about how to safely and appropriately naturalise the often very limited spaces.

3.2 Reflections on getting outdoors with babies

In the context of the ECEC setting, babies' specific care needs are seen to require more routine, which creates a tension for practitioners when they want to take babies outdoors. There are also significant practical challenges in getting outdoors at some settings. Practitioners in the baby room need practical support from managers and their practitioner colleagues if they want to change or enhance their practice with babies outdoors. They also need the support of their colleagues who work with older children to join them in advocating for babies and ensuring that their needs are seen as important as the older age groups. Providing opportunities for baby room practitioners to share practice with other settings could develop confidence, enthusiasm and creative ideas about possibilities. At the same time, it is vital that practitioners are supported to tune in to what babies may be trying to tell them about how they feel, not just about being outdoors, but also the transition from inside to outside. Parents could be encouraged to share family outdoors experiences and their child's preferences.

3.3 Reflections on being outdoors with babies

A step in developing ways of being outdoors with babies is to support practitioners both practically and emotionally to ensure that their outdoor experiences are calm and soothing. This might mean thinking (as a whole organisation) about providing appropriate outdoor clothing, seating, shelter as well as encouragement for

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.

⁴ Kemp, N. Josephidou, J. and Bolshaw, P. (2023) *From Weeds to Tiny Flowers: Rethinking the Place of the Youngest Children Outdoors*. Research Report 3 Available at: <https://www.froebel.org.uk/uploads/documents/FT-From-Weeds-to-Tiny-Flowers-Midway-report-Nov-23-Kemp-Josephidou.pdf>

practitioners to go outdoors at and beyond the setting. One way to do this would be to provide suggestions of different things practitioners could themselves do outdoors (e.g. look for 'hidden' nature, find unexpected colours in nature) so that they do not have to succumb to an emphasis on seeing and experiencing the outdoors as a space for 'doing' or be physically active⁵. This could also support their sense of nature connectedness.

3.4 Reflections on outdoor pedagogies

Whilst the nursery chain has a well-established nature connection policy, it is the strong H&S policy context which appears to drive outdoor pedagogy. This creates a tension for practitioners as they are obliged to remove natural elements because of health and safety issues, but they also are keen to provide them and so end up 'buying nature' through purchasing natural elements such as pinecones etc. An observed focus on taking indoor activities outdoors may also suggest that either practitioners believe this is the most effective practice or that they feel there is a lack of natural resources outdoors. Within this context, they can be supported by strong leadership⁶ which understands the complexity of the issues.

3.5 The potential of a Nature Engaging and Nature Enhancing Pedagogy (NENE)

This suggests that guidance is needed that can support both nature engagement and the enhancement (naturalising) of outdoor spaces for babies and toddlers in ECEC settings^{7 8}. We suggest that both these perspectives could be addressed by providing pedagogical guidance which focuses on the Froebelian qualities of being attentive, responsive, nurturing and questioning^{7 8}. These qualities could encourage a practice that:

- is **attentive**⁹ to what babies are interested in, follows their lead and tunes into natural processes and cycles (such as weather, light and the seasons) and supports practitioners to become familiar with what their outdoor environment offers;
- is **responsive** to babies' needs outdoors, valuing passive and slow ways to facilitate feeling, thinking, sleeping and sensory engagement whilst responding to the specific needs of the outdoor environment including adding natural elements;
- **nurtures** babies' interests outdoors, observing and valuing the connections they make, helping them to understand how everything links whilst modelling caring behaviours towards the environment;
- **questions** who belongs outdoors and what counts as nature.

⁵ Kemp, N. and Josephidou, J. (2021) 'Babies and toddlers outdoors: a narrative review of the literature on provision for under twos in ECEC settings', *Early Years*, 43(1), pp.137-150. DOI: 10.1080/09575146.2021.1915962

⁶ Kemp, N. and Josephidou, J. (2023) 'Creating spaces called hope: the critical leadership role of owner/managers in developing outdoor pedagogies for infants and toddlers', *Early Years*, 43(3), pp.641-655.

⁷ 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.

⁸ Josephidou, J. and Kemp, N. (2023) 'A life 'in and with' nature in the period of earliest childhood' in T. Bruce,, H. Wasmuth, Y. Nishida, S. Powell, and J. Whinnett (eds) *The Bloomsbury Handbook to Friedrich Froebel*. London: Bloomsbury Handbooks.

⁹ 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>.

4. Conclusion

These five settings, whilst not representative, offer important insights into the challenges of developing nature-based pedagogies for babies and toddlers in urban contexts. There is a sense from across settings that nature is to be found elsewhere (beyond the setting garden). Despite this there is strong desire to find ways to bring nature (and the associated 'wow and wonder') into their everyday practice.

As we move forward, our interest is in developing outdoor pedagogic guidance of the kind that this report suggests practitioners and ECEC settings want and need, particularly in challenging urban contexts. We have previously proposed a Froebelian inspired approach that not only seeks to engage very young children with nature but will, at the same time, enhance the outdoor environment, through taking steps to increase biodiversity and understand how to act in caring ways towards nature - a Nature Engaging, Nature Enhancing (NENE) pedagogy. In the next stage of the project, we will continue to work with these five settings to co-design what this might look in practice - a babyNENE.

