

A  
Guide To...

Mark  
Making  
and  
Art

Outdoors in Early  
Years



# Things to consider

**Storage** - Consider how / where you are going to store things like chalk pens, paint etc. as these will likely need to be brought inside at the end of the day.

**Natural materials and seasons** - Supplementary resources for weaving, transient art etc. will change throughout the seasons. Materials we have used include; conkers, pinecones, cut grass, pebbles, herbs, flowers, pumpkins, twigs, and leaves.

**Cleaning** - To maintain resources like the mirror trees and acrylic easels, they will need cleaning regularly. The children can help with this. All they need is a spray bottle of water and a shower squeegee.

**Weather** – This can be a friend and a foe! Be prepared to change your activity or take it in a new direction.

**Clothing** - Children can and will want to get messy! This is all part of the sensory exploration process. Think about how you will protect clothes and uniform.

Ask parents  
to donate old  
T shirts to  
use as art  
tunics.





# TTS resources we recommend...

**Mark Making Mirror Trees - AR02101**

**Clear Acrylic Nature Art Easel- AR10451**

Writing surfaces like these are an excellent addition to the outdoor learning environment as they can be easily attached to walls or fencing to create inviting, accessible spaces for mark making. They provide open-ended opportunities for children to explore early writing skills, develop fine and gross motor control, and express their ideas creatively. By offering a range of mark-making resources, such as paint sticks, paint, and chalk pens, educators can support children's curiosity, encourage experimentation with different media, and promote meaningful opportunities for communication, self-expression, and early literacy development through play.

Vertical mark making also has lots of developmental benefits. Working on an upright surface encourages children to cross the midline and strengthen the muscles in their shoulders, arms and wrists, helping to develop the stability and control needed for later handwriting. As children stand and move freely while creating marks, they are also developing core strength, posture and spatial awareness within a purposeful and engaging context.





Giant Outdoor Weaving Shapes - EY01156

Fine Motor Weaving Numbers - EY01081

Weaving Frame Tree - AR01659

Weaving provides children with lots of opportunities to develop fine motor skills and hand eye coordination. Incorporating shapes and numbers encourages children to recognise, name and discuss mathematical concepts in a meaningful context, supporting early mathematical development through play. The open-ended nature of the activity also promotes communication, problem-solving, perseverance and collaborative learning as children explore patterns, sequences and different ways to create and organise their designs. There are also lots of opportunities for creating patterns and using mathematical language related to length and size.

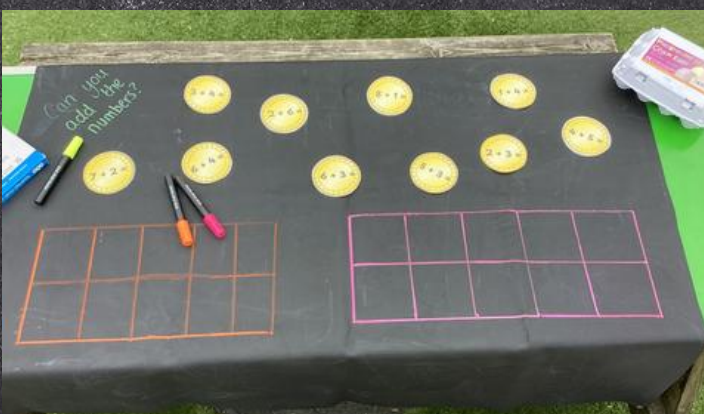
Weaving on an upright frame such as the tree provides opportunities to develop core and shoulder strength.





Tuff Tray Paper Insert - EL48540  
Tuff Tray Clear Acrylic Insert - EL48544  
Chalkboard Table Cover - AR02167

Providing children with a variety of writing textures and surfaces encourages them to experiment with different media and discover their own preferences. Large-scale tuff tray paper, chalkboard table covers and clear acrylic tray inserts create inviting opportunities for mark making using a range of resources, including paint, chalk pens and paint sticks. The different surfaces offer unique sensory experiences and encourage children to adapt their movements, developing control, coordination and confidence as they explore how different tools and materials respond. Their versatility also enables educators to create engaging provocations for learning, such as drawing challenges, pattern-making, letter and number prompts, or small world scenes. These can be used to inspire children to revisit the area, extend their thinking and continue to develop their mark-making skills through meaningful play. Large writing spaces encourage broad, purposeful movements that strengthen the muscles needed for later handwriting while supporting creativity, communication and self-expression. By offering open-ended, accessible experiences, educators can encourage curiosity and a positive attitude towards early writing.





# Mark making...

Exploring Paint and Patterns Outdoor Kit - AR01648

Chalk Marker Pens - AR03190

Egg Shaped Chalk - AR01696

Chalk paint - AD48139

Mixed Paint - AD48608

Paint Sticks - AR02582

Providing a wide range of mark-making tools within the outdoor environment enables children to explore and develop their skills in different and meaningful ways. Resources such as paintbrushes in a variety of sizes, chalk pens, egg-shaped chalk, spray bottles, paint rollers, paint sticks and chalk paint each offer unique opportunities for exploration and creativity. As children experiment with different media, they learn to adjust the amount of pressure needed to achieve the desired effect, developing hand strength, control and precision. The varied shapes, sizes and textures of the tools also encourage children to use different grips and movements, supporting the development of fine and gross motor skills, bilateral coordination and the muscle strength required for later handwriting. Educators can also plan for progression by introducing different tools throughout the year.







How we  
used the  
resources...





# Shape tracing

The mirror trees are a fantastic open-ended resource that provide endless opportunities for mark making and early writing. We began by exploring simple mark-making patterns, such as zigzags as the smooth surface allows the chalk pens to glide easily, making it inviting for children to experiment with different movements.

We also introduced tracing by encouraging the children to outline shapes and the leaves they had collected during their woodland adventures. This helped to develop pencil control and hand strength in a meaningful, play-based way, while making links to their outdoor learning.





# Letter writing

As the year progressed, we placed a greater focus on letter formation. Working on a vertical surface encouraged the children to use the movements and pressure needed to form letters correctly, while also supporting shoulder and arm strength. We also spent time developing a correct pencil grip. Being able to see their own hand in the mirror helped some children notice and adjust their grip independently. They especially enjoyed watching themselves as they worked, making the experience motivating, engaging, and full of opportunities to build confidence in their early writing skills.





# Collaborative Artwork

Outdoors is the perfect place for large scale collaborative art.

We used a range of resources for these projects; acrylic art easel, chalkboard table cover, clear tuff tray insert and tuff tray paper with a variety of mark making tools.

Adult set up an invitation to collaborate that linked to our theme of learning e.g., a simple map layout, beach scene, zoo map, treasure island etc. The children were then invited to add to the art project.

This resulted in lots of mark making and conversation opportunities.





# Collaborative Artwork





# Collaborative Artwork





# Child Led Play

Whilst it can be beneficial to provide a stimulus or starting point to hit key learning or provide opportunities for specific vocabulary, following the children's needs is also a key priority.

On one occasion some children had built a large train out of loose parts, crates and planks etc.

Some children then decided to create a ticket office and began writing a list of all the 'train stops' on the acrylic easel. Having the board and chalk pens there at the time provided an instant extension to the play, an ideal opportunity for writing and a chance for the Educator to extend children's understanding on the spot.





# Creating Large Maps

In a similar way to the collaborative art, adults drew out a simple outline for children to add to.

This linked to both our map work and the stories we had read.

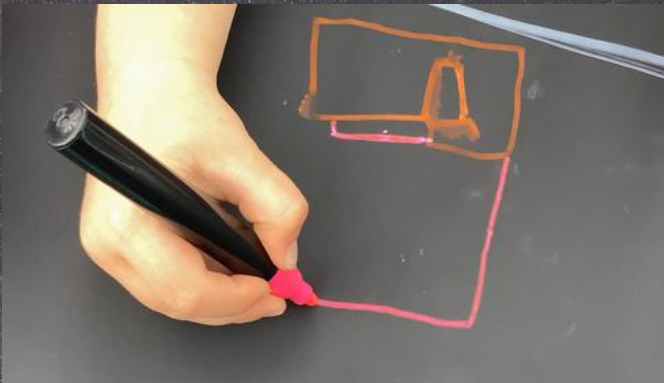
There was lots of opportunities for communication and collaboration as children discussed things they see in the local area or on their way home.

The children were then keen to use the map as part of their small world play with cars and figures.





# Creating Large Maps





# Weaving

Weaving is a great way to develop fine motor skills in a playful way.

We tended to leave the weaving shapes, numbers and tree out as an open-ended activity for the children.

We used pink and green ribbon on the tree to represent the blossom trees we had seen in the playground. In the Autumn we plan to use orange, red and brown ribbons.

We also tried weaving with long strands of grass, which led to some fantastic problem solving.





# Weaving

We used the shapes on flat surfaces and vertical for an extra challenge.

The weaving shapes also doubled up as shape finders when covering shapes in the environment.

The children also enjoyed weaving ribbon through the numbers and hanging them in order on a washing line. They then created their own 'missing number' game by unpegging and removing numbers.





# Weaving





# Transient Art

The weaving shapes also became photo frames for transient art. The children enjoyed weaving the frame in their chosen colour ribbon before creating their own picture within, using natural materials.





# Word Recognition

To make word recognition a little more fun we painted them on to a tuff tray using chalk paint.

The children were then told a specific word to find, spray and wipe off with a paintbrush or spray bottle.

We had a line of children wanting to have a go!





# Small World Set Ups

The bottles of chalk paint are great for creating your own small world scenes straight on to tuff trays or on the underside of the clear tray insert so that children can draw above.

Creating scenes is something the children loved getting involved with!





# Large Scale Creation Station

This was incredibly popular with the children and was an activity we revisited several times.

We used a large cardboard box as the frame and stapled a variety of 'junk recycling' materials to it. We included a mix of shapes, textures and materials, such as plastic etc so the children could explore how the paint covered each surface differently. We also provided a range of painting tools, including different-sized brushes and rollers. This allowed the children to experiment with different techniques and discover their own preferences.

This open-ended activity created lots of opportunities for discussions around colour mixing, mark making, texture, and the natural world, while encouraging creativity and exploration.





# Large Scale Creation Station





## Note to remember:

Even though you may have carefully planned a set up, the children may take it in a different direction. This provides perfect opportunities for you to follow their lead and support their learning.

Your beautiful set up may appear 'destroyed' within minutes. This is normal, the children will still enjoy it - sometimes more!

Most importantly, have fun!



With many thanks to Lisa Nelson at St Edwards Primary School for creating this guide.

