



Outdoor Mark Making and Art

In this case study, Lisa Nelson, from St Edwards Primary School, Darwen, shares with us the resources she used to encourage outdoor mark making and art with her children in Reception.



Developing mark making and art in the outdoor area

Following a full audit and review of our Early Years provision, we identified that one area for development was the art and mark-making opportunities we offered outdoors. Whilst these experiences were well embedded across our indoor provision, we had more limited resources available outside. With a large outdoor area dedicated to Reception, we recognised that we had plenty of space to enhance these opportunities.

This quickly became a priority for us, not only to provide more creative experiences outdoors but also to encourage greater engagement from boys in creative activities as we noticed that many shied away from this area indoors.

As we continue to see children starting school with less experience of mark making and less developed gross motor skills, we also wanted to strengthen this aspect of our provision in preparation for our next cohort in September.

As soon as the TTS resources arrived, the children were instantly curious. They were eager to explore the new equipment, asking what everything was and when they could start using it.

Resources that we added to our outdoor provision

Mark making mirror trees – AR02101	Giant Outdoor Weaving Shapes - EY01156
Clear Acrylic Nature Art Easel – AR10451	Fine Motor Weaving Numbers - EY01081
Tuff Tray Paper Insert - EL48540	Weaving Frame Tree - AR01659
Tuff Tray Clear Acrylic Insert - EL48544	Exploring Paint and Patterns Outdoor Kit - AR01648
Chalkboard Table Cover - AR02167	Chalk Marker Pens - AR03190
Egg Shaped Chalk - AR01696	Chalk paint - AD48139
Mixed Paint - AD48608	Paint Sticks - AR02582

How the resources were used

The open-ended nature of the resources means they can be used in a wide variety of ways, both independently and in combination with one another.

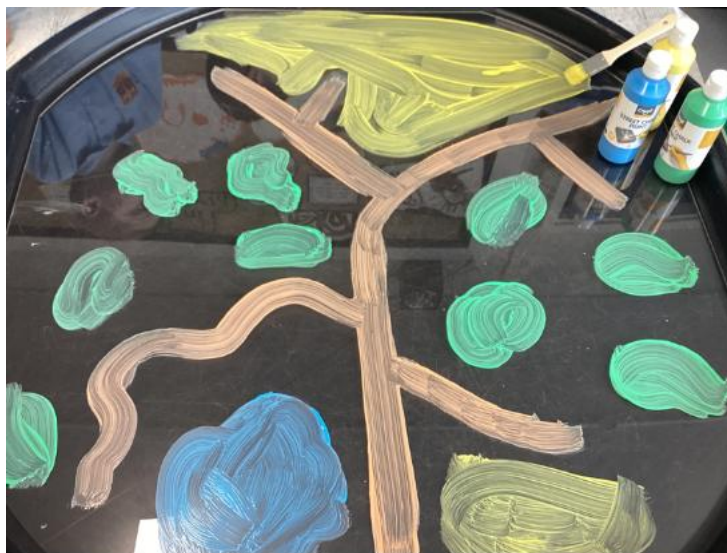
When introducing the resources, we did so one at a time. This gave us the opportunity to model their use, support the children in exploring the different possibilities, and establish some simple expectations, such as replacing the lids on the chalk pens when they were not in use to help preserve them.

Initially, we set up provocations and simple challenges to inspire the children and demonstrate the potential of each resource. Now that they are familiar with them, the children use the resources independently and in open-ended ways, incorporating them into their play. For example, they recently used the acrylic easel to create a ticket office as part of their large-scale construction play.

Learning with the resources

When we first introduced the resources, we linked them to our current weekly or termly learning. This provided meaningful opportunities for children to extend their understanding, consolidate new vocabulary, and see how the resources could be used with a clear purpose.

Some of the most successful activities were collaborative projects. For example, we used the chalkboard table cover to create the outline of a simple map for the children to develop together. This generated lots of opportunities for communication, collaboration and language development as children added places and features they had seen on their journey home or in stories they had recently shared, such as lighthouses. We also created the beginnings of a beach and under-the-sea scene on the large easel, encouraging the children to add their own ideas. This inspired creativity, an opportunity to develop drawing skills on a large scale and also provided valuable opportunities for vertical mark making.



The children have particularly enjoyed using the chalk paint and tray inserts to create their own small world scenes. During our learning about pirates, they decided they wanted to make a pirate island and asked to paint waves around the tray to bring their ideas to life. We have also painted zoo layouts and maps to encourage outdoor small world play. The children added their own signs, labels and designs, allowing the play to develop in their own direction.



Another firm favourite has been the creation station, stocked with a wide range of recycled and junk modelling materials in different shapes, sizes and textures. Alongside these, we provided a variety of mark-making and painting resources, enabling the children to experiment with different tools and techniques, including brushes, paint sticks and rollers. This encouraged creativity, exploration and discussion about the different effects each resource could create.

Impact on learning

Having such a wide range of resources available has allowed us to be much more intentional with our outdoor provision planning, creating increased opportunities for children to develop their Expressive Arts and Design (EAD) skills as they progressed towards the Early Learning Goals.

Previously, our indoor creative table tended to be accessed by a relatively small group of children with an existing interest in creative activities. Since introducing these opportunities outdoors, we have seen far greater engagement across the cohort. Children who may not previously have chosen creative experiences are now developing mark-making and artistic skills through play, giving staff more opportunities to observe, support and extend their learning in a way that would have been more difficult indoors.

One of the most noticeable impacts has been the increased engagement from boys, who often shied away from traditional mark-making activities. By embedding the resources into their play, they began using them with a clear purpose, for example, writing scores on the easel during games, drawing treasure maps to support pirate role play, or creating road maps for their vehicles. This has made mark making feel meaningful and relevant to their own interests.

We have also seen a significant increase in collaborative learning outdoors. The larger-scale resources naturally encourage children to work together, sharing ideas, solving problems and creating collaboratively. Whilst independent creative work indoors continues to have many benefits, these outdoor experiences provide additional opportunities to develop communication skills and their Personal, Social and Emotional Development (PSED) through teamwork and shared decision-making.

The increased availability of EAD resources outdoors has also had a positive impact on staff confidence and creativity. Educators are now more confident in following children's interests, using spontaneous opportunities to extend learning and support progression in EAD skills. It has also prompted greater reflection on the importance of providing rich creative experiences outdoors, particularly as we prepare to welcome a new cohort where developing gross motor skills will once again be a key priority.

Staff comments:

"It is so nice to see more children engaged when using the outdoor area".

"B wouldn't usually choose to mark make; it is great to see him so engaged in drawing a map and talking to his friends about it".

"I have never had so many children want to clean up – give them a squeegee and a spray bottle of water and they'll clean-up for ages".

"Their drawing skills have really progressed, I think they feel less confined than when using a sheet of paper. It's also easier for them to borrow ideas from what others have drawn".

With thanks to Lisa Nelson from St Edwards Primary School for writing and sharing this case study with us.