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WHEN LESS DOES MORE

RETHINKING OUTDOOR ENVIRONMENTS

FOR INFANTS AND TODDLERS

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Infant and toddler environments often fail children in two predictable ways...

Some are crowded with purchased resources spread across large, open spaces. Mats, blocks, balance beams, and equipment sit everywhere at once. The intention is abundance. The result is constant interruption. Children move through one another's play. Focus fragments. Regulation becomes hard work.

Others are stripped back to the point of emptiness. Few materials. Limited movement. Children contained on mats or in chairs. Exploration is constrained rather than supported.

At opposite ends of the spectrum, both environments miss the same truth. Infants and toddlers do not need more things or fewer things. They need environments that support emotional safety.

Too often, infant and toddler spaces are treated as smaller versions of kindergarten environments. This assumption is flawed. Infants and toddlers are not simply younger children. Their development is faster, more sensitive, and deeply relational. Their learning is shaped by proximity, repetition, and secure attachment. As Urie Bronfenbrenner's ecological systems theory reminds us, infants and toddlers operate within the most intimate layer of development, where environment and relationship are inseparable.

Infants and Toddlers Experience the World Emotionally First

Before language, before cognition, infants and toddlers experience the world emotionally and bodily. In overstimulating or under-resourced environments, what becomes most visible is children's attempt to co-regulate. Children often arrive from familiar, nurturing contexts and are immediately confronted with larger-scale, higher noise, and increased sensory demand. Their bodies search for grounding.

When environments are cluttered, expansive, or poorly defined, children struggle to settle. Inquiry becomes shallow. Educators become stretched. Regulation is expected to come from adults alone, even as adult capacity is compromised by supervision demands and constant transition.

This is an impossible expectation.

If the environment is truly the third teacher, it must actively contribute to emotional safety. It must support regulation, not undermine it.

Simplicity Is Not Minimalism

Simplicity is often misunderstood as minimalism. Clean, sparse, curated spaces may photograph well, but they are not inherently nurturing.

For infants and toddlers, simplicity is not visual. It is relational. Simplicity reflects the qualities of a nurturing home environment. It provides consistency, predictability, and trust. It meets physical needs for warmth, rest, nourishment, and movement while also meeting psychological needs for affection, acceptance, and security.

Simplicity is also about respect. Infants and toddlers are rarely spoken about in terms of self-esteem, yet self-worth begins here. Confidence develops when children can act on their environment, access materials independently, extend their own inquiry, and have their effort acknowledged.

A simplified environment is not empty. It is intentional. It creates conditions for depth rather than distraction. It allows children to engage fully rather than constantly reset.

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Scale, Boundaries, and the Child's Perspective

Simplicity becomes practical through scale, boundaries, and movement.

One of the most useful lenses is the child's visual horizon. What does the environment look like from the child's height, body position, and pace? Too often, environments are designed from an adult perspective. Materials hang from ceilings. Resources are placed on high shelves. Everything is visible at once.

This buffet-style approach overwhelms rather than supports. Children touch, taste, and move on. Engagement remains surface-level.

Indoors, educators intuitively create consistency. Home corners, sensory tables, and dining spaces invite similar body positions and predictable engagement. Children understand how to enter, remain, and leave these spaces. Outdoors, this clarity often disappears. Movement dominates. Transition becomes constant. Inquiry has no destination.

When outdoor play lacks defined destinations, regulation becomes difficult. Children are required to manage constant disruption. Educators move into crowd control.

Clear destinations restore balance. Defined spaces for sensory play, retreat, construction, or social inquiry give children a sense of certainty. Certainty supports regulation. Importantly, the environment can provide this consistency more reliably than stressed adults can.

Boundaries are not about restriction. They protect inquiry. They prevent play from being walked through, dismantled, or abandoned prematurely. They allow children to move between gross motor play and focused engagement without becoming overwhelmed.





Emotional Safety Enables Risk and Resilience

Emotional safety does not eliminate challenge. It makes challenge possible.

Children take risks when they feel secure. For infants and toddlers, risk is relational as much as physical. It emerges through movement, social interaction and exploration.

Calm, legible environments allow children to persist. They try again. They negotiate complexity. They move from object inquiry to social inquiry without shutting down.

When emotional safety is embedded in the environment, risk becomes a tool for learning rather than a trigger for stress.

The Educator as Part of the Environment

When environments begin to do more of the work, educators change too.

The strongest practice emerges when educators observe children closely and adapt environments in response. Not copying ideas. Not following trends. Watching children and responding to what they seek.

This practice is cyclical: observe, test, reflect, adjust

Over time, the environment becomes a physical expression of pedagogy and relationship. It reflects intentionality, honours difference, and supports a diversity of opportunity rather than a single way of engaging.

When environments support regulation and inquiry, educators experience less emotional load. Supervision becomes less reactive. Confidence grows. Educators begin to trust their professional judgement.

Standardised, institutional approaches overlook this entirely. Development is personal.

Character is shaped through experience. Children and educators alike grow when environments allow individuality to emerge.

Choosing simplicity is not about doing less

It is about doing what matters most.

Lukas Ritson is the Founder of Wearthly and the creator of the Ecology of Play philosophy. His work champions adventurous, nature based play that builds resilience, confidence and connection.

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children need three essential elements to flourish...**

**Unstructured Time
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Lukas Ritson

