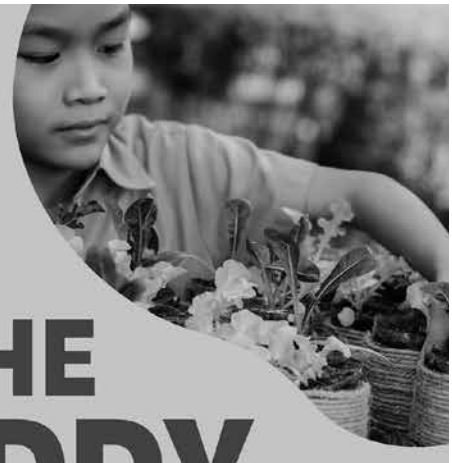




THE MUDDY PUDDLE TEACHER





A PLAYFUL WAY TO CREATE AN OUTDOOR EARLY YEARS CURRICULUM





SARAH SEAMAN

FEATHERSTONE

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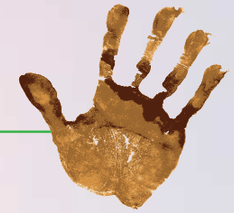
This book is dedicated to Andrew, my husband and best pal, and two adorable rebel and wild girls, Sienna and Florence. You are perfect just the way you are!

And to every single child I have ever been blessed to teach. All of you have a special memory in my heart and have made me the teacher I am today. Always believe in yourselves because I certainly always will! Remember what I have always said to all of you: 'Try, try then try again!'.

'Look deep into nature, and then you will understand everything better.'
Albert Einstein



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Introduction

muddy fact

Honeybees are great pollinators; they help our flowers, fruits and vegetables to grow!



A little introduction to me, Sarah Seaman. I'm a mum to two beautiful girls, a wife and I was a class teacher for around 12 years.

So how did I get here? I have worked with children from a very young age. I have always had a lot of time for children and have a talent for making ordinary things really fun for them. I was an asset at family weddings and birthdays as I would step in to organise games for the children and just have a great time with them. As a teenager, I volunteered and taught lessons at a riding stables, which is where I found my 'outdoorsy' side. I loved horses so I would turn up in all weathers.

I struggled a lot at school and I never dreamed I was clever enough to be a teacher. I have dyslexia and writing was super hard work for me. I say that while writing this book with ease now! But it has been a long hard personal challenge to get here. Life has changed compared to my school days, and people are so much more supportive of differences now.

While at college, I was also a nanny for the owners of a riding stables and I had the pleasure of caring for their two children. We would spend our days having 'bear' picnics, going swimming and having a kitchen disco while we ate lunch. This was my first experience of caring for children, learning about their behaviour and discovering how to overcome tantrums in positive, fun ways. Caring for them made me realise that children just want to have fun, and if you make things enjoyable they are perfectly happy to learn, eat and try new things. While this is not the case all the time, usually with a bit of effort and entertainment, the kids are with you!

After school, I went to Nottingham Trent University where I did a multimedia degree and then I worked in TV for a short time, one of my jobs being on Fame Academy for CBeebies. I then returned to my home town of Sheffield to be a teaching assistant and I loved every minute of it. I plucked up the courage to do my PGCE and, following that, an MA in Education, and the rest is history! I worked hard, loved my job as a teacher and met some of the most inspiring kids and families.

After five years of teaching, I became my school's outdoor learning coordinator (or better known to the staff as 'The Outdoor Princess'). I then came across Forest School and it blew my mind. I loved how off-curriculum, practical and real it was. I managed to convince my headteacher to send me on Forest School training and I trained as a Level 3 Forest School Leader. I loved everything that the approach promotes, and it opened my eyes up to the many advantages the outside space brought to the children and to the quality of my teaching.

I often looked to the Scandinavian countries who do Forest School all day, every day with their children up to the age of seven. I thought about how we could do the same, and I realised there was a need for an outdoor learning approach that was curriculum linked. The challenge would be doing this without adding extra work for teachers. In 2018, while raising my two small girls Florence and Sienna, I decided to start experimenting with this idea of blending the outdoors with the curriculum. So, I left teaching! My husband almost had a heart attack when I told him, but I just knew this was something I had to do.

I rented a bit of woodland behind my house and started to run a little outdoor toddler group for parents. I had the best time doing this and it gave me the creative freedom to teach just the way I wanted. The children got so much from my sessions and the parents just loved it. I did Muddy Maths and Muddy Phonics sessions and held imaginative play days such as Dino and Unicorn Day. One parent said to me 'It's a teacher gone wild'. I really was, and it felt amazing! Imagine it: you can create sessions any way you want. What this time experimenting showed me is that it really is possible to cover the whole Early Years Foundation Stage framework outdoors. I once held a 'Bug's Life' day and covered it all in one day!

I ran the group for a year, teaching in all four seasons. I learned and experimented with the vision that this now needed to be used in educational settings. I thought of my own children, I thought of children I have taught in the past, I thought of me as a struggling dyslexic child. With my new-found realisation that I do not have to teach inside, from a board, using and throwing away lots of glue sticks and whiteboard pens, I took to spreading the word on Facebook. Then boom! In three months I had 30,000 followers. I developed my approach into a four-stage CPD accredited training format for Early Years providers on outdoor learning. I registered The Muddy Puddle Teacher as a trademark and educators started to gain 'The Muddy Puddle Teacher Status'. We now also train and consult whole-school settings and I hope that in time teachers like me can find our forever schools that share our visions too.

You may be reading this book with lots of outdoor learning experience, some of you may be in a different country from me, some of you may have not done any outdoor learning and are working in a concrete jungle. Some of you may have had a very 'outdoorsy' upbringing; others may be hesitant to take your teaching outside. Don't worry. To this day I still don't consider myself a wholly 'outdoorsy' person; I love being inside too and believe in balance. What I do know is that going outside makes me feel good and I want to inspire you to let the outdoors help you too.

This is the joy of what I have created. It is for everyone. No matter where you are in the world or what level you are at. You've got this! I muddy promise you!

Chapter 1

The Muddy Puddle Teacher Approach

muddy fact

Butterflies don't live very long; some will only live for 10 days!

What is the Muddy Puddle Teacher Approach (MPTA)?

The MPTA uses outside space as a platform to teach the curriculum. This doesn't have to be green space, but it has to be outdoors and, as much as possible, within your own grounds. Unique to this approach is a conscious effort to improve our carbon footprint and to appreciate and love the world around us by using natural and upcycled materials to learn from and teach with.



The Muddy Puddle ethos: The three muddy 'M's

The three muddy 'M's are at the heart of what we do. They help us to be mindful of the reasons why we are outside and of the benefits that teaching and learning outdoors brings. They are:

- Mother nature
- Mental health
- More kids playing.

The ethos is there to ensure a robust approach and also to remind you why you go outside and what it is about the outside that enhances our teaching and the children's learning. Here is a little more about the philosophy behind our approach.

Mother nature

We will aim to use natural resources to teach with, to help better connect children with nature and to teach more sustainably.

Why?

Caring for the environment is fundamental to the Muddy Puddle Teacher Approach: from treading carefully over woodland habitats to leaving outdoor spaces exactly as we found them. There are rules we must follow if we want to inspire children to look after nature. It is a learning process that takes time for many of us, and I certainly made mistakes when I first started teaching outdoors. Part of our ethos is working alongside nature, and encouraging children to have a real relationship with the world. Many people talk about nature being the second teacher in the outdoor classroom, and it really can be! I would recommend reading the book *Back to Nature: How to love life – and save it* by Chris Packham and Megan McCubbin.

How?

It's time to get your equipment ready. No fancy veg patches, grassy fields or lush woods are needed to embrace nature in your outdoor space; try sourcing three tyres from a local garage and fill one with stones, one with sticks and one with leaves. These are your teaching tools now! No whiteboards, computers, tables or paper are required.

Mental health

We will use the tranquillity and calmness of the outdoor space to help surround us all in a peaceful environment to learn and teach in.

Why?

Being indoors more and the rapid development of new technology is, in my opinion, having an impact on all of us and we need to discover ways to find balance. Spending time outside benefits mental health. But why? For me, it's the non-judging environment, the neutral ground, the space, the weather, the views, the chats, the bugs, the birds, the colours and the smells. Fresh air and muddy boots are all we need sometimes. In my experience, children talk more outside to each other and adults. They laugh more,



they move more and they socialise more harmoniously, which all contribute to happy kids and a happy Early Years teacher. Try taking a moment to monitor children's behaviour as you introduce a lesson outdoors versus when you do it indoors. It is likely you will notice a difference in engagement, excitement and concentration. It is also well worth watching some clips from Richard Louv, author of *Last Child in the Woods*, who speaks of nature-deficit disorder and how less outside time for children can lead to anxiety, depression and other mental illnesses.

How?

Going outside is a mental health boost on its own, but it can also help to drop things that affect confidence such as competitions, star of the day, etc. Some children are not affected by these, but some are. You can try starting outdoor lessons with yoga and ending with meditation. Or you can use the outdoors as an antidote when classroom teaching isn't working so well; if you feel the mood dropping in the classroom, take learning outside.

More kids playing

We will strive to make our lessons as active as possible by incorporating more play into our curriculum.





Why?

Our approach only uses active, engaging, playful ideas because children benefit from moving! It makes us all feel better and I see more engaged learners when we make our teaching more active. When I visit Early Years settings it is fabulous to see that most now have indoor continuous provision so that children can learn and play and move, but do the children get out of breath? Outdoor spaces usually have more room for children to move and this makes lessons a good workout for us all.

How?

Thinking of active lessons that maintain a high quality of learning is easier said than done. One way of achieving this is to think like a child: think back to the games you played when you were younger and how these could be incorporated into achieving your learning objective. Fun games for children often involve active play such as chasing, jumping, running or skipping. This book is full of ideas to get children moving and learning. Sometimes teachers find it trickier to manage behaviour outside. My advice to practitioners is to develop an outdoor learning behaviour policy; this helps everyone to understand what is expected when we take learning outside. Try wording the policy with 'do's rather than 'don't's, e.g. 'We do shout and show excitement, but we stop and listen when the teacher or facilitator is talking'.

How to get started

Gaining momentum

If you haven't already, set up a social media page such as Instagram to involve parents and carers in your journey (email the Muddy Puddle Teacher team and we can help spread the word too). Sharing pictures of your progress may even inspire families to do similar things at home. If you are starting from scratch and developing your outdoor space then show this too, and parents and carers may even help by bringing in things you need. It is also a nice way of keeping a record for you to use and show the children at the end of the year.

Clothing

The right clothing is needed to go outside, but it does not have to be expensive. Here are some options depending on your budget:

- **Big, juicy budget.** There are plenty of shops selling insulated all-in-one suits. These are the dream: fleecy on the inside and waterproof on the outside. Find suits with hood attachments if possible, and make sure they are tight around the ankles and wrists. Get one for each child and keep them in your setting. Try www.muddypuddles.com or www.spottyotter.co.uk for some great options.
- **We have a bit of a budget.** Get one class, age range or group a set of ski suits as described above but share with another class. If you get them the age older, the children could potentially share over two year groups.
- **No budget – help me!** Call charity shops up and ask them to keep aside any waterproof items including trousers, jackets and hats. Also go on a hunt for onesies (the fabric versions). They are not waterproof but are useful as an added layer for warmth and can go over uniforms to keep mud off clothing. Then place coats on top. This, of course, is if you have very few other options. You can also ask parents or carers to donate spare clothes to keep in your setting for spontaneous outdoor learning. You could even hold a 'hand-me-downs' day where parents swap outdoor clothing amongst different age groups. Some schools also now have waterproofs as school uniforms but this option may not be appropriate in deprived areas. Some funding is available for sports, and pupil premium can support your outdoor learning if you're in England.





Your confidence levels

The Muddy Puddle Teacher Approach is about getting everyone outside more. No matter your confidence level, this book is here to help you take your teaching outside step by step.

So here are many ways you can make a start teaching outside depending on your level of confidence:

I am new to this!

- Try doing a weekly phonics activity that is fully outside, then start to build this up to two or three times a week.
- Try taking a 10-minute maths session outside once a day.
- Make Muddy Puddle time part of your morning routine. Try starting the day with yoga or mindfulness outside.
- Search for online resources on the Muddy Puddle Teacher website. You may want to take simple worksheets out for now while you gain confidence, such as butterfly spotter or 'signs of spring' worksheets.

I have done a bit of outdoor learning and need help moving to the next step

- Start to look at and build your continuous provision. Is it following the three muddy 'M's?
- Are children having a lesson outside daily? Try building in daily phonics or maths sessions outside, and marking outdoor lessons in green on your lesson planning so you can keep track.
- Have you now moved to using just natural resources and limiting the use of any worksheets outside?
- Think about which subjects you could concentrate on taking outside next.

I am a Forest School Leader or I have done lots of outdoor learning

- Use this book for fresh new ideas and to save you time!
- Once you are experienced using leaves, stones and sticks, move to differing lengths of bamboo canes and experiment with other natural resources.
- Have you now taken every area of the curriculum outside? Have you taken a full unit of a subject outside?
- Does your planning work around the seasons? How is your outdoor learning sustained all year round?
- Start recording the impact it is having on the children as a whole.
- Think about the ways you are supporting children with special educational needs and disabilities in their outdoor learning.
- How can you ensure children's transitions are supported in terms of how much outdoor learning they then do in the following year?



Your space

The Muddy Puddle Teacher Approach is inclusive to all practitioners, no matter what sort of outdoor space you have. Below are some typically challenging spaces and ideas I have suggested to schools and nurseries that worked well for them.

- **Concrete jungle.** Get more trees in your setting by upcycling tyres and using them as planters for the trees. Contact a local engineer to get any spare tyres they may have, then visit the Woodland Trust website (or other nature charities) for some free trees. Stack two tyres on top of each other, fill them with compost and tuck them away into corners.
- **Very small spaces.** Head to vegtrug.com which has some amazing wall planters to hang on walls and fences. They will give you an extra planting space you didn't even know you had! Plant beautiful flowers in them for natural colour, or herbs and small vegetables work well too. They also sell raised beds that can be very versatile and taken inside too.
- **We have lots of traffic around us.** If you have lots of traffic around you it can be hard to find tranquillity outside. Look at taking a speaker outside and play natural sounds such as birdsong. There is lots of music out there for meditation and mindfulness that can help.



Materials

Whatever your budget, you can access our approach. Sticks, stones and mud can be found anywhere! As much as we would always suggest using natural resources and what's native to you in your country, sometimes we do get the gift of a budget to spend on resources and you would be right to spend it on your outside space. My favourite place to head for almost all of the big outdoor learning equipment is cosydirect.com. You can get milk crates, small and large loose parts play items, seating, large play equipment, small maths games, etc. You name it, they have it!

The website muddyfaces.co.uk also has a range of inspiration in all areas of outdoor learning and Forest School.



Chapter 2

Safety

muddy fact

Mud makes kids super happy because of the Mycobacterium vaccae (bacteria). It's this that is said to increase serotonin levels in humans.

How can we safely teach outdoors?

The ideas in this book will work in whatever outside space you have, so the boundaries of your standard risk assessments and health and safety reports should suffice. It is important to inform managers if you are adopting this approach and make them aware of what is involved, as well as training other staff you work with. You can find sample risk assessments, policies and more ideas for games relating to health and safety on the Muddy Puddle Teacher website.

We recommend that educators work mainly within their grounds to reduce their workload. We know that by doing so, you are more likely to go out more. Leaving the premises involves extra work and doing this every time you want to go outside would put a strain on staff. The Muddy Puddle Teacher Approach works because you can go out regularly, whether this is structured time or spontaneously. No additional health and safety reports or risk assessments are required as you should already have these in place and be regularly updating them. You can deliver our activities on all outdoor surfaces, big or small.

Here are some helpful Muddy tips to ensure that you're up to speed on safe practice.



Checking your space

It's a good idea to check your space *every* time you take the children outside. You can never be sure that your area has not been tampered with overnight. For example, litter may have appeared on the floor or animals may have defecated somewhere very well camouflaged.

There are two ways of checking the space: staff can either spot check every morning or get the children involved, encouraging them to look for dangers themselves. At Muddy Puddle HQ, I prefer involving the children in the process. Not only does it save time, but it also makes the children responsible for their outdoor space and ensures that the checks are more thorough. You do need to keep to some rules if the children are going to be involved. Be sure that the mini-muddies know how to check for dangers by using their feet first, then their hands. I've come up with a rhyme to make this memorable for children: 'When picking items off the floor, check with your foot just to be sure!'. Check out the weather with the children and discuss how different weather types change how we use and move in our spaces. On rainy days we may prefer not to use wooden planks as these can be harder to grip onto, and on icy days, we may take smaller steps and run less. Let the children be part of the planning and make their own decisions. If you start to incorporate loose parts and natural resources into your practice, make sure to highlight this in your risk assessments.

Young children are often great ambassadors of safety. Involving them in the process offers some peace of mind that children will practise safe behaviour outdoors once they leave your care.

Informing parents and carers

Most parents and carers love our Muddy ways, but it is always a good idea to keep them fully informed. Here are some tips:

- Set up a social media page and start promoting your hard work to parents.
- Send out a letter in advance that describes what kind of activities the children will be doing, with an explanation as to why they're doing them.
- Be clear on the weather. Parents and carers often worry about this, and you'll inevitably have different understandings of what's too much and too little, so give them some examples for context. For instance, 'If it rains for more than "x" minutes, the class will return inside', 'If it's below freezing, the children will only go out for a maximum of "x" minutes at a time'.
- Check out our safety videos on the Muddy Puddle Teacher YouTube channel to help you communicate with parents and carers.

Using natural resources

The initial big difference for many of you now converting to Muddy Puddle Teachers is that you will use more natural resources. The initial 'what can I do with just sticks and mud to make a full day of learning' thoughts will fade and be replaced with with 'what can't I do?'. But it takes time. All good things do. So, use these helpful tips as standard everyday practice.



Picking off the floor

Children need to know that they must check the floor for dangers before picking anything up from the ground; glass and other harmful litter may be hidden, and we don't want the children ever touching rubbish, no matter how safe it seems. This rule is essential because it helps us to prevent accidents. The children must only pick something off the floor if they have used their feet first to check for dangers. If there's something unknown on the ground, they need to call an educator to collect it. If the child checks the object with their feet and all is fine, they can pick the item up. Encourage children to repeat the rhyme: 'When picking items off the floor, check with your foot just to be sure'.

Sticks and leaves

The main message you need to get across to the children is that sticks do not go above their waist. They need to get used to keeping them at a low level. Some games may require the children to raise their stick above their waist. In such cases, ensure that you supervise them carefully.

Use this rhyme to help the children remember: 'Sticks stay low so they tickle our toe; if you put them high, they poke you in the eye'.

Leaves are generally safe, although you'll need to know what species of plants and trees you have around you and that there are none that can lead to skin irritation.

Mud and clay

When you are collecting mud, be sure that it is mud and not anything else (like animal faeces). Foxes may dig deep and cover it up, so always ask children to be cautious first and to wash their hands after. This goes for clay as well. Pre-bought clay is excellent and easy, but if you use natural clay from your grounds, check it's safe and encourage children not to put their hands in their mouths.

Rocks

Rocks are a handy resource when it's windy and rainy, BUT you must be sure that children know how to use them safely. You can show children how to do this through an activity called 'Rock babies':

- Explain to the children they need to scoop their rock up gently using two hands.
- Show them how to walk with the rock, cradling it with two hands.
- When the children are ready, invite them to put their rocks down. Ask them to treat the rock like a baby and bend their legs as they gently place it on the floor. Doing this prevents trapped fingers.



It's typical for young children to pick up the rock, walk and then throw it on the floor when they're ready to put it down. By encouraging them to treat the rock like a baby, you'll remind them of the care they need to take when handling it.

Allergies

There is a possibility of allergies when working with natural resources. Check with parents and carers if the children have any allergies to natural items and check which species of plants you are using. Be aware that there is a risk of allergic reactions when using upcycled items too: some children can have allergies to rubber tyres, for example. You could ask parents and carers to sign an agreement that they have been informed of your use of natural resources.

Safety games

Here are a few games to help practise useful safety tips every time you walk out of those classroom doors.

What is the world like today?

This mud-tastic two minute activity allows children to embed a lot of early science as they start to talk about and understand how weather and seasons change. It also reminds children of all the ways they should be careful when exploring outdoors in different weather.

1. Each time you step outside, ask the children to walk around and find something natural to share with the group.
2. Talk to the children about how they should walk if it's icy, snowy, windy or wet. Think about what is OK to climb on today.
3. Encourage the children to look for what is natural on the floor, such as conkers and blossoms, and remind them that surfaces can sometimes be slippery.
4. When the children return, ask them to share what they have found.
5. Discuss how the weather has changed from previous days and what has changed as a result of this. For example, are the leaves wet, or are they dry and crunchy? Is this typical of the season?

Caterpillar crawl

1. Ask the children to line up and put one hand on the shoulder of the person in front.
2. Can they all walk around the outdoor space like this, looking for dangers but making sure no one trips up?
3. Invite them to explore the whole outdoor area, into every pocket, crouching down low and standing on tiptoes.
4. Encourage them to look at the space from different angles, lying on their backs and look at the sky.
5. Talk about the weather. What is the weather like today? How have the surfaces changed from yesterday to today? How can they check if surfaces are safe?
6. Discuss the season and what weather we would normally expect.

