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Practitioners' and Parents' Perspectives of Nature-Based Early Childhood Education: Practice, Space and Outdoor Play

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Abstract

Global concern surrounding declining outdoor play, physical activity, and children's engagement with natural environments has prompted increased interest in nature-based early childhood education (ECE). Within such settings, outdoor spaces are positioned as central to learning, supporting embodied and authentic interaction with the natural world. Despite expansion in provision, limited research has examined how parents and practitioners conceptualise the value of nature-based ECE or how their perspectives intersect across ecological contexts. This qualitative study investigated the key perspectives of parents and practitioners in nature-based ECE settings in England. Following institutional ethical approval, 16 participants were recruited: seven parents (all female) of children aged three to five years attending nature-based ECE settings and nine practitioners (eight females, one male). Data were generated through in-depth semi-structured interviews and analysed using reflexive thematic analysis. Five themes were identified: Protecting children's rights; Nature as a context for whole-child development; Risk, resilience, and physicality; Communities of learning; and Beyond the setting: systemic pressures and parental fears. Choosing nature-based ECE reflects a proactive, health-promoting decision grounded in parental values concerning children's rights to nature and outdoor play. Practitioner commitment was similarly values-driven, centred on children's freedoms and positioned in tension with prevailing societal norms. Key findings illuminate practitioners' concerns regarding the perceived absence of outdoor-based provision across mainstream ECE and schooling, highlighting the need for clearer regulatory frameworks to establish quality outdoor play in nature as a systemic entitlement.

Keywords: nature-based early childhood education; outdoor play; parental perspectives; children's rights; physical activity; risk and resilience; early years; socio-ecological

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1. Introduction

Nature-based early childhood education (ECE) is characterised by regular time outdoors in nature and includes provision such as nature-based preschools, forest schools or forest kindergartens. This alternative to traditional ECE has expanded internationally over the past two decades as educators and families seek developmentally rich alternatives to more traditional provision [1–6]. The growing interest in this alternative provision is likely driven by mounting evidence of benefits [1,7]; these include social, emotional, cognitive and physical development as well as mental health and wellbeing [1,7,8]. As children are spending more time in formal care [9], ECE settings are well placed to deliver nature-based

learning at a critical developmental window and to compensate for the broader decline in outdoor play opportunities for young children [10–14].

Understanding why parents choose nature-based provision and how practitioners enact their role in this setting requires examination of multiple interacting levels of influence that shape experience and decision-making. Thus, a socio-ecological approach provides a contextualising lens for understanding these levels of influence. Originally developed by Bronfenbrenner [15] and subsequently adapted in health promotion and physical activity research [16,17], the socio-ecological model (SEM) conceptualises behaviour as a result of layers of influence: from individual beliefs, interpersonal dynamics, and organisational structures to broader policy and societal influences [3,18,19]. Applying SEM to nature-based ECE acknowledges that children's engagement with outdoor environments can only be understood across ecological contexts. This contextualising lens guides both the review of existing evidence and the discussion of outcome themes of this study, enabling a more systemic account of values, tensions, and structural issues that characterise nature-based provision in England.

The benefits associated with nature-based ECE are well documented [1,2,20,21], with studies evidencing stronger social, emotional, cognitive and physical development outcomes, more diverse play types and longer play engagement compared with non-nature settings [22–25]. This hands-on approach to learning is considered to be as effective for promoting school readiness and achieving academic skills [3,19]. Outdoor nature play frequently involves risky play, and with appropriate mediation, children develop autonomy, physical competence and learn to assess and navigate exciting challenges [3,8,23,26]. However, these benefits are not a direct result of merely being outdoors [27]; developmental gains emerge from how practitioners and ECE settings design, resource and mediate children's outdoor play and learning experiences [1,3,23,28,29]. Furthermore, across the research evidence, there is much heterogeneity in what constitutes nature-based practice, the quality of spaces used and pedagogical approaches [1,21,29,30]. Adults act as gatekeepers, and their beliefs, routines and attitudes shape children's daily opportunities for outdoor play, exploration of the environment and engagement in risky challenges [2,3,7,30,31]. Previous qualitative studies show that while practitioners and parents broadly endorse nature play, practitioners cite institutional constraints and scheduling pressures, while parents raise concerns about dealing with mess [7,31,32]. Adult risk reasoning directly shapes the intensity and diversity of movement and play activity available to children and therefore has implications for motor development and other related outcomes of risky play [1,3,6,21,33–35]. Understanding practitioner–child interactions, as well as how such learning may extend into family time outside the ECE setting, is therefore integral to ensuring that quality outdoor nature play is realised. Yet existing UK-based qualitative work examining these stakeholder perspectives remains fragmented and split across stakeholder groups and age ranges and often confined to specific pedagogical approaches, such as forest school [32,36,37]. Harris [36] and Kemp [37], for example, explored practitioners' perspectives on the nature of children's learning and staff engagement with forest school provision, respectively, in primary school settings. While offering meaningful insights into the perceived value of the forest school approach, both studies represent a single pedagogical model and viewpoint that are more transferable to primary schools than early years settings. From a parental perspective, Arvanitis et al. [32] examined perceptions of forest school through thematic analysis of an online discussion forum, offering insight into parental evaluative framing; however, this relied on secondary, self-selected data rather than direct engagement, and educational stages or age ranges were not specified. With reference to the early years stage, Cronin de Chavez et al. [38] combined parent, staff and forest school practitioner interviews, alluding to the potential developmental benefits, nature connectedness, and school readiness. However,

this study was an evaluation of a discrete, short-term forest school intervention delivered off-site, rather than an exploration of nature-based provision integrated into everyday early years practice. Together, these studies demonstrate the value of qualitative approaches to understanding nature-based provision, but none integrate multiple stakeholder perspectives within an early years context, and most focus on a single model of provision (forest school). Further research is therefore warranted to examine nature-based approaches more broadly within early years settings and to gain multi-stakeholder perspectives on the value and implementation of such approaches.

Further to interpersonal factors, ECE setting arrangements reflect practitioners' values in everyday practice. Qualitative research with early childhood professionals engaged in outdoor spaces reports practical challenges such as health and safety, resourcing, and team processes that can limit the frequency and quality of outdoor play and learning [18]. Similarly, emphasis on embedding nature-based outdoor pedagogy requires time, risk–benefit policies, professional learning in an early years context, and appropriate outdoor spaces [3,8,31]. Previous reviews report high-quality spaces typically being diverse in natural elements, varied topography, loose parts, micro-habitats, and places for refuge and challenge, each supporting different play types and weather conditions [3,29]. When aligned with staff ratios and routines that prioritise outdoor time, spaces become places conducive to child-led exploration and active learning [20,28,39]. Despite this growing evidence base, questions remain about what conditions, values, and organisational factors enable nature-based learning to be effectively embedded in ECE settings and how parental perceptions and decision-making interact with and support or constrain these efforts in practice.

Beyond the ECE setting, in the UK, early years provision is shaped around different statutory frameworks, resulting in variation in how outdoor and nature-based education is implemented [20,40]. For instance, in the UK, the Early Years Foundation Stage (EYFS) applies only in England [41], with Scotland and Wales following their own early years standards, creating differing structural expectations [41]. The EYFS statutory framework requires that children have daily access to outdoor environments but does not prescribe the pedagogical nature of this outdoor provision, leaving considerable room for interpretation by practitioners [20,40]. Despite the statutory requirement for daily outdoor access, evidence suggests significant variation in the quality of outdoor provision across these settings [42], with many providers operating with inadequate or insufficient space to deliver high-quality outdoor play and learning [40]. The expansion of funded hours has been identified as a further pressure on outdoor space, as settings accommodate greater numbers of younger children within existing physical infrastructure [43].

Alongside statutory frameworks, practitioner-led outdoor professional bodies, such as the Forest School Association [44,45], sit outside statutory policy, leaving practitioners to navigate multiple sources of guidance and self-fund specialist outdoor training and qualifications [46]. As a result, outdoor play and nature-based practice in early childhood education often relies heavily on practitioners' interpretations, values, and practical constraints, shaping practice [46]. Further to educational frameworks, there is a growing recognition of the wider value of nature-based ECE across intersecting policy agendas. Reviews of early childhood environmental education highlight increasing attention to nature connectedness, pro-environmental behaviours, and environmental literacy [19,47], while physical activity research supports the contribution of outdoor play for meeting young children's physical activity guidelines [21,27]. Together, these agendas strengthen the case for nature-based provision in ECE, with emerging calls for a nature premium [48] and movement towards embedding nature-based approaches within mainstream early years policy. As these positions gain traction, understanding what practitioners and parents perceive to be valuable and what they identify as needed becomes particularly timely. Their

voices may offer important insight into whether and how these emerging directions are reflected in practice and parental decision-making.

Despite growing research several gaps remain. The perspectives of parents and practitioners, the adults who gatekeep and mediate outdoor play and learning, remain fragmented in the literature, particularly in integrated analyses that compare both groups within shared early years contexts in England [1,3,6]. There is limited qualitative depth on how adult values, routines, and organisational practices influence outdoor play in nature-based ECE provision [3,19]. The design and perceived quality of outdoor spaces warrant closer practitioner- and parent-level analysis [3,22,26,49]. And within the broad age ranges typically covered by reviews, preschool-aged children (3–5 years) receive insufficient dedicated attention, especially as outdoor play-based approaches are seen to be most crucial at this stage [1–3].

Reflecting on the fragmented evidence base, the present study examines the perceptions of caregivers and practitioners regarding nature-based ECE settings. Guided by a socio-ecological perspective, the aims of this study were:

1. To explore practitioners' and parents/caregivers' values and attitudes towards children's access to outdoor play in the ECE context.
2. To examine practitioners' experiences and perspectives of facilitating outdoor play at ECE provision.
3. To identify key influencing factors for parents/caregivers when selecting ECE provision.
4. To explore perceptions of what constitutes a high-quality ECE outdoor play space.

2. Materials and Methods

2.1. Design

An interpretive qualitative design was adopted to explore practitioners' and parents' values, perspectives, and experiences of outdoor play and learning in early childhood education nature-based settings. Semi-structured interviews were used to enable in-depth exploration of participants' meanings while maintaining flexibility to probe issues relevant to practice contexts [50]. A contextualist epistemological stance underpinned the study [51], recognising that participants' accounts reflect lived experiences of nature-based ECE and are shaped by the social, cultural, and relational context in which they were generated. In practice, themes were treated as credible, context-bound interpretations of participants' experience, rather than generalisable truths. The SEM [15] was used as a contextualising lens to situate these accounts, rather than an analytical framework applied to the data. Rather than coding data deductively against ecological levels, the model provided a conceptual backdrop for understanding how individual, interpersonal, organisational, and societal influences might shape participants' meaning making, while the analysis remained grounded in participants' accounts.

Data were analysed using reflexive thematic analysis [52–54], adopting an interpretative and iterative approach to identifying patterns of shared meaning. Analysis involved themes being actively generated through sustained engagement with the data and informed by the researcher's theoretical positioning. Coding was flexible and iterative, with themes developed through a recursive process of refinement and interpretation (see Table S1). Consistent with a contextualist epistemology, researcher subjectivity was acknowledged as a resource in the co-construction of knowledge, enabling a nuanced understanding of how outdoor play and learning are valued and enacted within ECE contexts and perceived by caregivers.

2.2. Sampling and Recruitment

A purposeful convenience sampling approach was used to recruit ECE practitioners and parents of attending children. Purposive sampling means that participants have

specific experiences of a subject matter to communicate, and these experiences are central to understanding a unique phenomenon. Eligible practitioners were from nature-based ECE settings which, for the purpose of this study, were nurseries or preschools that provided access to nature spaces, outdoor play and learning as part of their everyday practice.

Participants were recruited via multiple channels, including social media advertisements, professional networks, purposive sampling based on publicly available provision listings, and word of mouth. Settings were eligible for inclusion if they self-identified as delivering nature-based or outdoor-focused provision as a core part of their pedagogy. After expressing their interest, participants were then contacted via an email address they voluntarily provided. A brief introduction to the study and interviewer was provided, along with participant information. Additional email follow-ups were sent at two, four, six and eight weeks after the initial invite.

Inclusion criteria required that participating centres provide children aged 3–5 years with a minimum of two hours of daily access to outdoor, nature-based environments. This self-reported criterion ensured that participants had ongoing, substantive engagement with outdoor pedagogies rather than ad hoc or incidental exposure. Participant interviews provided the opportunity to confirm and further explore the characteristics of their outdoor nature-based practice. As the purpose of this study was to examine the nature-based ECE context, recruitment was focused on settings already committed to this approach. Consequently, the study's findings should be interpreted as offering insight into the lived experience and meaning making within outdoor nature-based contexts. This boundary is consistent with the study's contextualist epistemological stance, in which findings are understood to be situated and specific to the context of nature-based ECE.

2.3. Participants and Setting

A total of 16 participants were interviewed. The practitioner sample comprised nine professionals, one male and eight females, working full-time in nature-based ECE settings from across the Midlands, England. All participants worked in centres that incorporate elements of nature-based education, ranging from full-time access to outdoor spaces in nature or settings that offered at least an average of two hours per day of outdoor nature-based play. In addition, seven parents, all female, whose children attended nature-based ECE provision were recruited. Despite the neutral framing of the recruitment materials, all respondents were mothers; no fathers participated, and only one male practitioner took part. This gender imbalance is consistent with a broader pattern in early years research and is discussed in later sections of this paper.

2.4. Data Collection

Data were collected through one-off, one-on-one, semi-structured interviews with participants lasting approximately 45–60 min (see Table S1 for interview guides). Flexible interview guides were used to ensure coverage of key topics while allowing participants to elaborate on context-specific practices and experiences [50]. Two interview guides were produced, one for practitioners and one for parents, each with questions and prompts and used as a guide for the researcher; and they were not provided to participants. The interview questions were centred around the perceived value of nature-based ECE, the practice and experiences of practitioners and parents, and the attitudes towards various aspects of nature-based pedagogies. Previous research closely related to this area of inquiry was used to guide interview schedules such as Dankiw et al. [6]. Demographic information was collected via Microsoft Forms; this information included gender, role, qualification, years of experience and location. The interviews were conducted face-to-face or via online Microsoft Teams; all interviews were audio-recorded with consent. The interviewer had previous

qualitative research experience, including conducting interviews. At the beginning of each interview, participants were reminded that there were no correct answers, and the aim was to examine their true perspectives and experiences, and that we were not testing any knowledge. The researchers had no prior relationship with the participants in this study.

2.5. Researcher Positionality

The lead author is a doctoral researcher and lecturer in physical education and physical activity, holds an MA in Outdoor Education and has 25 years of professional experience in outdoor education and physical education across the further and higher education sector. While the research team has no prior experience delivering nature-based provision within the early years sector specifically, the lead author acknowledges a longstanding interest in nature-based outdoor pedagogies, having previously conducted master's-level research on nature connectedness in outdoor practice with adolescent students.

This professional and academic background may have shaped analytic decisions in several ways: familiarity with outdoor and nature-based sector terminology and practice likely informed the framing of interview questions and the pace and depth of rapport-building with practitioner participants. Conversely, the absence of early years sector experience may have positioned the researcher as a relative outsider to this specific context, prompting more clarification-seeking during interviews and a sensitivity to sector-specific assumptions during coding, rather than allowing familiarity to go unexamined. The researcher's existing interest in nature connectedness may also have predisposed attention toward themes relating to children's engagement with the natural environment during analysis. To manage this influence, the researcher maintained a reflexive note taking throughout data collection and analysis, used to document assumptions and analytic decisions. Interpretations were also discussed with supervisors, who are also co-authors; these reflexive practices aimed to surface, rather than eliminate, the researcher's influence on the analytic process, consistent with the study's contextualist epistemological stance.

2.6. Data Analysis

The audio-files were transcribed verbatim. Data were analysed using reflexive thematic analysis, following Braun and Clarke's [52] iterative, flexible approach to coding, theme development, and reflexive engagement throughout the analytic process [52]. Analysis proceeded through familiarisation, systematic coding, generation and review of candidate themes, and ongoing reflexive notes and discussion to refine theme boundaries and consider researcher positionality [52]. Throughout the data collection and analysis, trustworthiness was upheld using several methods. The reflexive thematic analysis [52] procedure was followed through an iterative backward and forward process to ensure that codes and themes were a true reflection of the participants' responses. To uphold the trustworthiness of this research, Nowell et al.'s [54] criteria were considered, as such transferability was achieved through provided thick, rich descriptions for those seeking transfer of findings. Dependability and confirmability are addressed through full reporting of the research process [54] and ensuring that the findings are clear in how they derive from the data. Participants in this study were invited to read back through their transcribed interview to ensure credibility or "fit" between participants' views and representations made by the researcher. In this study, participants did not take up this opportunity.

2.7. Ethical Considerations

This research was approved by the University of Derby, College of Science and Engineering Research Committee (Ethics Application ID: ETH2425-2500). All participants provided informed consent prior to participation and were provided with a participant information sheet with the purpose of the research and what was required. Participation was voluntary,

and participants were provided instructions for withdrawing from the study at any time without consequence. Participants agreed to participate by signing a consent form prior to the interview commencing. Identifying information about the participants and ECE centre characteristics was removed during transcription, and pseudonyms are used in reporting.

3. Results

Of the 16 participants, nine were ECE practitioners, and seven were parents of children attending a nature-based ECE setting. All parents who participated in this study were female. Table 1 provides an overview of participant and ECE characteristics. Thematic analysis of the interview data identified five key themes (see Table 2): Protecting Childhood Rights; Nature as a Context for Whole-Child Development; Risk, Resilience and Physicality; Communities of Learning; and Beyond the Setting: Systemic Pressures and Future Fears. Subthemes were generated to further categorise clusters of codes under each theme heading (see Table S1).

Table 1. The demographic characteristics of participants (N = 16).

	***N* (%)**
Age Range (years)	
20–30	2 (12)
31–40	7 (44)
41–50	7 (44)
Role	
Parent/caregiver	7 (44)
Early childhood educator	7 (44)
Reception teacher	2 (12)
Length of time working in ECE	
0–3 years	1 (11)
4–10 years	4 (43.5)
10+ years	4 (43.5)

Table 2. Summary of themes, subthemes and illustrative quotes.

Themes	Subthemes	Illustrative Quotes
Theme 1: Protecting Childhood Rights	Right to outdoor free play	"Children shouldn't be inside for too much, and they definitely need to be outside. Moving, exploring, getting muddy, getting wet." (Meg, Parent)
	Rights-based advocacy	"That actually breaks the human right, the Children's Rights Act, that children have to have freedom, they have to have time outside. . . they should be allowed to roam. They should be allowed to explore." (Katie, Practitioner)
	Pedagogical flexibility	"Forest school is a pedagogy, a scheme of work that you deliver. I'd say that is one element of what we do. . . what we do is very child-centred and child-led. It absolutely gives us more freedom, but it makes it more personalised curriculum for those children." (Katie, Practitioner)
	Child-led practice	"Giving children ownership over their space but also giving them the freedom to explore and experiment with their own capabilities. We're facilitators, you know. We give them the resources and open their eyes to what they can use as those resources. And they do it." (Trish, Practitioner)

Table 2. *Cont.*

Themes	Subthemes	Illustrative Quotes
Theme 2: Nature as a Context for Whole-Child Development	Regulation & wellbeing	"You need to have children well-regulated and feel comfortable and safe before they start to do that deep self-actualisation stuff. . . outdoor gives a real opportunity for that regulation in a lot of our children." (Janet, Practitioner)
	Real, unmanufactured learning	"Outside, and they've just got rocks and sticks and sand. They're suddenly construction workers. . . you see that imagination come through and the only difference is the resources are natural, they're not predisposed and they're outside." (Katie, Practitioner)
	Nature connection & empathy	"The care and concern these children show for living things, habitats. . . they know what to look for and they know where to look for it and they'll talk about everything that they can see and do." (Amelie, Practitioner)
	Language & communication	"Speech and language have been a massive issue in early years nationally. . . you take away the walls, children make noise. And suddenly these children start to speak because the background noise is birdsong." (Katie, Practitioner)
Theme 3: Risk, Resilience and the Body	Risky play as pedagogy	"Risk is everything. The children's safety is more important to me than anything, but that doesn't mean they can't take risk. It's about calculating that risk and allowing them to test limits whilst being there to support them if it goes wrong." (Katie, Practitioner)
	Physical & motor development	"By the time they leave us, their physical capabilities are unmatched really. And actually, that's the feedback we've had from schools when children have transitioned, their physical capabilities and confidence far outweigh others." (Trish, Practitioner)
	Parental tension & acceptance	"I am inherently a worrier. . . if I'm watching him climb on something, I'm always ready to step in. But weirdly, when he's at nursery, I'm not as bothered. They surprise me all the time. They're a lot more capable than I quite often give them credit for." (Pam, Parent)
	Practitioner skill & calibration	"As long as you're there to support them and make them aware of the risks, they've got to learn to manage their own risk. If they do it from an early age, they'll learn to build on that through life." (Ashley, Practitioner)
Theme 4: Communities of Learning	Knowledge transfer	"I find that we coach parents as much as the children. Sometimes not all parents, but certainly a good handful of them that haven't had that experience, yeah, I do feel that we're coaching them and helping them." (Trish, Practitioner)
	Child as agent of transfer	"I think the fact that we are in the woodland, even getting parents to go, right, do you know what, you've got an annual pass for here now, come down at the weekend, let them show you the adventures they've done, let the children lead." (Katie, Practitioner)
	Practitioner identity & mission	"You've got to love it, you've got to believe it, because if you don't, it won't work, you're just paying your lips. Our staff constantly train." (Katie, Practitioner)
	Inadequate training provision	"It's very difficult to find the relevance because most of the training comes from our local authority, which is for your bog-standard day nursery." (Katie, Practitioner)

Table 2. *Cont.*

Themes	Subthemes	Illustrative Quotes
Theme 5: Beyond the Setting: Systemic Pressures and Parental Fears	Transition fears (school)	"I do have apprehensions about what comes next year because of how happy she is in this kind of provision and how mainstream schools are. It's just such a disconnect." (Pam, Parent)
	Mistrust of mainstream ECE	"Although some nurseries would say they access outdoors in all weather, when you ask them what I need to pack. . . it was never waterproofs and change of clothing for weather reasons. So, I was just like, how do you go outside when you're not asking for wellies and waterproofs?" (Meg, Parent)
	Policy gaps & inconsistency	"Children are expected to have free flow into an outdoor environment, that is what the early statutory framework requires. But from my experience it is sporadic and still very much dictated by whether the adult wants to go out." (Katie, Practitioner)
	Erosion of outdoor childhood	"It really, really frightens me because people don't have access to outdoor space. People are going to have to use it creatively if they're going to give children the space they need to develop physically and learn." (Katie, Practitioner)

3.1. Theme 1: Protecting Childhood Rights

Both parents and practitioners articulated a strong appreciation for the freedoms afforded within nature-based early childhood education (ECE) settings. Freedoms were seen as intertwined with the opportunity to engage in regular unstructured outdoor play, the right to express themselves through movement and the right to explore the natural world and outdoor spaces. Parents frequently cited these reasons to explain why they chose nature-based ECE provision for their child:

> "And I wanted to make sure that they didn't just go outside in nice weather. One of the questions I asked was, do they access the outdoor space in all weather? Is that normal practice and what kind of stuff do their kids need to bring in? Children shouldn't be inside for too much, and they definitely need to be outside. Moving, exploring, getting muddy, getting wet." (Meg, Parent)

> "Well, the outdoor bit because he just loves being outside and I just see how much he loves that. So as soon as they say forestry mornings, I was like, well, absolutely no brainer." (Daisy, Parent)

> "Everything's very wooden nature based. They do a lot of that. They're outside whenever they can. You know they live in their wellies and the and the rain suits if need be. And a lot of the activities, even indoor activities, are still kind of nature based and orientated around that. Absolutely a 100% this is part of the decision why I've kept my daughter there." (Pam, Parent)

> "Well, initially my first thoughts were because she got ill quite a lot. I put I was looking for a setting with less children and then I thought, well, we'd look and see what it was about. And then obviously looking into it being outside all day, every day. I didn't really want her to be stuck in a classroom. From such an early age, she's got lots of that to come. Yeah, outside all day, learning about life around you." (Lilly, Parent)

> "Parents might not be as comfortable, but they know that this is good for them. Inherently they know it's good, but they're not actually that comfortable." (Trish, Practitioner)

> "Yeah, I think it kind of helps them connect that. It's not just their world and their interactions it's that they actually interact with creatures, they interact with the plants, they interact with the environment and all that has sort of knock-on effects. And I think starting that early is really, really important." (Meg, Parent)

Both parents and practitioners expressed a belief in young children's intrinsic need for regular movement, outdoor play and contact with the natural world as fundamental to a child's wellbeing and development. This was understood not only as beneficial for learning but as a right in itself and as something inherently valuable during the early years, independent of any measurable outcome. Parents and practitioners described a deep desire to protect this dimension of childhood, expressing concern that opportunities for children to simply be in the world were becoming increasingly rare:

> "Let them be children while they can. And I think that's really important. Those crucial years, they need to get, you know, have life experiences and we can offer that through the outdoors." (Mandy, Practitioner)

> "Just let them, please, you know, do not just stress. Let them be. Let them explore... I think the kids should have the choice of if they wanna play outside, they can play outside, not this whole, 'oh, it's wet play, play books out'." (Ashley, Practitioner)

> "As an adult we feel the cold, we can't be bothered, we seek comfort from being indoors generally. Children aren't designed that way, children are born to explore, to be curious with the world." (Katie, Practitioner)

> "Yeah, I think it's fundamental to their development. I think it helps them sort of connect with the outside world. That's beyond their normal." (Meg, Parent)

Parents and practitioners appeared to share a mutual understanding that protecting children's right to outdoor experience was a collective responsibility, reflecting shared values across home and setting. While some participants explicitly referenced formal frameworks such as the Children's Rights Act, others conveyed a more implicit belief that childhood should be characterised by active, outdoor and nature-rich experience:

> "I would say it's very much about a rights-based approach, children have a voice, children need to be acknowledged, their needs need to be met, and how do we nurture and care for children in everything that we do so that they can thrive." (Janet, Practitioner)

> "That actually breaks the human right, the Children's Rights Act, that children have to have freedom, they have to have time outside. And we take that away. If you think about new designs, there's always a rather naff little fenced off park and rather than allowing, and it's like that is the expectation where children should be rather than allowing them the equal access that everyone expects for themselves like they should be allowed to roam. They should be allowed to explore." (Katie, Practitioner)

Nature-based ECE settings were positioned by practitioners as spaces that actively uphold children's rights, in deliberate contrast to more restrictive environments. At the policy level, referring to the Children's Rights Act suggests that some practitioners drew on formal frameworks to legitimise and advocate for outdoor play, framing their practice as not just pedagogically sound but legally and ethically grounded. This dual positioning as both a moral and a legislative imperative gave a rights-based discourse, advocating for the child's right to play and the right for space to move and explore:

> "I think people need to go back to seeing play as a right, not a privilege." (Katie, Practitioner)

> "Free range chickens need something like 20 m squared to be classed as free range, but currently children need 3.5 m and they're trying to change that to 2.5 m." (Katie, Practitioner)

Practitioners often expressed this protection of freedom through their pedagogical approaches which was explained as a fusion, rather than being restricted to a single model. This was seen as a benefit as it allowed child-responsive practice as opposed to being constrained to specific frameworks. Forest school was frequently cited as a pedagogy that legitimised some aspects of outdoor practice but was best used as a resource to guide elements of practice rather than fully prescribe. Being pedagogically flexible further endorsed practitioners' commitment to allowing children's freedom of expression and a practice that centred on the child's needs:

> "So, Forest school is a pedagogy, a scheme of work that you deliver. I'd say that is one element of what we do. So, the reason it's one element is because Forest school is very adult-led, whereas what we do is very child-centered and child-led. So, we will lead through children's ideas and imagination because we are fundamentally a play school, not a forest school. It absolutely gives us more freedom, but it makes it more personalised curriculum for those children, so therefore learning is more meaningful." (Katie, Practitioner)

> "….and giving children ownership over their space but also giving them the freedom to explore and experiment with their own capabilities. We're facilitators, you know. We give them the resources and open their eyes to what they can use as those resources. And they do it. And you know, quite often when we're in the forest, we can just stand back. You know, we don't actually have to do anything because they create their own play in the areas that are around them." (Trish, Practitioner)

> "There's a less of a feeling of being observed and of being watched while you're working or being, you know, or for the children, you know, being kind of constant supervision. There's a kind of a freedom that comes from getting out that that that I love. And I think children really respond to that." (Janet, Practitioner)

Several expressed concern that opportunities for children to simply '*be children*' are being steadily diminished. In this context, nature-based ECE was viewed as a setting that actively preserves children's spontaneity and connection to the outdoors during a formative period of development. In summary, this theme illustrates how the protection of childhood rights operated across levels, from individual children's developmental needs, through the shared values of parents and practitioners, to the pedagogical practice of nature-based settings.

3.2. Theme 2: Nature as a Context for Whole-Child Development

Both parents and practitioners understood nature as an active context that shapes and enables children's development across multiple domains. Central to this was a shared emphasis on the realness of nature-based experience and the idea that learning in and through the natural world is real, naturally differentiated, unmanufactured, and therefore uniquely valuable. Positioned alongside this idea was the belief that nature spaces were better for children's wellbeing and hence readiness to learn. This was frequently noted as especially relevant and effective for children with additional needs. Therefore, nature spaces were valued for the perceived psychological benefits conducive to emotionally safe learning environments:

> "You know, a bit of a cliche, but I always talk about Maslow before Bloom. You know, the idea that actually you need to have children here, well-regulated and, you know, feel comfortable and safe before they start to do that deep, you know, self-actualisation stuff. And before they can start to sort of really respond to, you know, effective questioning and all these things. And for me, outdoors gives a real opportunity for that regulation in a lot of our children. So that's, that's I've very much come to it from a kind of practice perspective." (Janet, Practitioner)

> "There's a freedom that comes from being outside that children don't associate, necessarily always with the indoor spaces. You know, noise dissipates in a way that it doesn't indoors. And so, for those children who maybe have are looking for less sensory input, you know, taking them to an outdoor space can really benefit those children. My experience has been that when I've worked with children with particular Autism Spectrum Disorder (ASD) or Special Educational Needs and Disabilities (SEND) needs." (Janet, Practitioner)

Practitioners described their pedagogy as child-led and grounded in the outdoor spaces and natural environments of the ECE setting. The diversity and richness of natural outdoor spaces were understood as a generative environment that did not need to be manufactured for learning because it already provided endless variety and naturally differentiated. Both parents and practitioners placed particular value on the realness of these spaces such as the presence of living things, wildlife and animals; the unpredictability of weather and terrain; and the way in which natural materials had no predetermined function. Rocks, sticks, water and mud were described as the most flexible and imaginatively rich materials available because children brought meaning to them rather than receiving it ready-made. Practitioners and parents articulated a belief in the value of this realness:

> "They let the kids try things. So, you know, if the kids want to dig with sticks, they dig with sticks. You know, one of the key workers was saying to was, oh he picked up sticks and he was playing the drums. And we just let him, you know, kind of have a little play. And I think that just that for me, that that freedom to just dig the hands into mud. Pick up leaves, throw leaves in the air or whatever. It just gives them that opportunity to explore the world in their own hands, rather than being guided to do specific activities or guided to do something to like a certain model or do you know what I mean? It's just I think it just gives them that freedom to explore things themselves." (Sue, Parent)

> "Outside, and they've just got rocks and sticks and sand. They're suddenly construction workers. They're working together to add the cement to join the blocks together. It looks nothing like a road or a tower, but in their head it is. So, you see that imagination come through and the only difference is the resources are natural, they're not predisposed and they're outside." (Katie, Practitioner)

> "It's just totally different environment in it to learn and play there. There're so many different things that can be exploring in the forest and the trees and different sensory things around them that they wouldn't. They wouldn't get it sat in the front room or anywhere playing with their normal plastic toys, it's their imagination as well. The nature. It could be whatever they want it to be. So, the fresh air, the sunshine, the just the whole surrounding is quite serene and calming." (Ashley, Practitioner)

Children's sense of ownership over and identification with the outdoor spaces in which they learned was a further dimension of this theme. Parents and practitioners described children forming meaningful connections with the spaces of the ECE setting and natural environment itself. Out of this sense of ownership and nature connection,

practitioners observed children developing empathy, environmental citizenship and a felt responsibility to care for places and living things that mattered to them.

> "And kind of like, you know, that thing around instil caring and empathy and connection with the natural environment and again is that something that you see in this kind of provision aligns with that. Yes, I don't think I can really develop on that. Yeah, it is important. Yeah. I think that that teaches you humanity." (Pam, Parent)

> "But the biggest thing is that they can learn to respect and appreciate their natural environment and how we can look after it and what we can do to ensure that it may, you know, stays and develops." (Trish, Practitioner)

> "I mean, the care and concern these children show for living things, habitats. I didn't do it as a kid, but they do, and they know what to look for, and they know where to look for it and they'll talk about everything that they can see and do. And it's just lovely to see them be able to engage with the natural world". (Amelie, Practitioner)

> "It's also about opportunities for them to go off and explore. And maybe build dens and connect with nature and see the different aspects of that nature has to offer." (Meg, Parent)

Practitioners believed that nature offered a uniquely differentiated environment for learning because it already provided endless variety, sensory richness and challenge. Practitioners frequently noted that the sounds, textures and rhythms of the natural world appeared to encourage children to communicate, respond and regulate their emotions more effectively. Children were described as more settled, more ready to learn, and more expressive when outdoors, suggesting that nature itself functioned as a co-regulator of children's physical and emotional states:

> "You know, with SEND children that we've had, they flourish in the outdoors and having that freedom, you know, if you've got children who don't like noise, actually, when they're outside, it doesn't matter, because when they're in a building, it echoes and then amplifies it, doesn't it? But the outdoor space, it just disperses and so it doesn't hold them back." (Trish, Practitioner)

> "It's incredible the difference you see in those children, the kind of the, the variety you see in their, you know, language the, you know, the confidence that comes out and just a kind of a just the way that they can regulate themselves in a natural space that seems less available to them, often in an indoor space with hard, hard surfaces that, you know, the sound bounces off and things like that. So, I really see the benefits." (Janet, Practitioner)

> "Speech and language, for example, has been a massive issue in early years nationally for as long as I can remember in teaching. But you take away the walls of the, I call it the pressure cooker or the cabin fever. You take away those walls, children make noise. And suddenly these children start to speak because the background noise is birdsong, so it's just white noise to them. So actually, children that came to us with speech and language difficulties are suddenly then talking." (Katie, Practitioner)

> "And it's fascinating to watch them actually and to hear their voices, children that have come in before and have, you know, we've had selective mute children before. And to watch them flourish and grow in confidence, to communicate, and they don't always do it with adults. Start off with they do it with their

peers, but then their communication with the adults comes quite swiftly behind." (Trish, Practitioner)

Parents similarly emphasised their appreciation for the realness of nature-based pedagogy. They highlighted their belief in their child's need for engagement with the natural world, physical immersion and sensory exploration. Both parents and practitioners articulated the belief that the outdoor environment influenced children's behaviours in a positive manner and felt this was not possible in more conventional environments. For parents and practitioners, observing children in these contexts appeared to reinforce and deepen their own belief in the value of this approach:

"Yeah, it's just made me thought, actually as well, like his behaviour is completely different. Like, if he's stuck inside, you can tell he's bored and he will start, like, acting out. With things that I would just never expect him to act out before. Whereas he's completely stimulated outside, like it's like he's got his fix in a way." (Daisy, Parent)

"We build confidence, yes, but how do you build confidence? You can empower them by saying nice things to them and giving them praise and reward, but ultimately, it's an intrinsic thing, it's confidence that comes from yourself and how you feel in the space around you." (Katie, Practitioner)

This theme illustrates how parents and practitioners viewed nature as an active, generative context for whole-child development. Participants described the outdoors as supporting wellbeing and emotional regulation, with natural spaces perceived as calming and sensory rich; this was seen as particularly beneficial for children with SEN. Learning was characterised as real and unmanufactured, particularly because it was seen to be grounded in direct encounters with nature. Nature was also framed as fostering nature connectedness with participants perceiving children's care, respect and sense of belonging to the outdoor spaces of their ECE setting. Finally, participants described how nature was seen as a facilitator for supporting language, communication and expression.

3.3. Theme 3: Risk, Resilience and the Body

Central to this theme was the value that both parents and practitioners placed on risk engagement as developmentally important in the early years. Across accounts, the ability to assess, negotiate and manage risk was understood as a fundamental component of children's development. Nature-based ECE settings were positioned to offer these experiences through environments where risk was pedagogically intentional:

"So yeah, that's intrinsic. Yeah, risk is everything. The children's safety is more important to me than anything, but that doesn't mean they can't take risk. It sometimes sounds like I don't take it seriously, which I absolutely do. So do the benefits. It's about calculating that risk and it's about knowing and understanding that child. Allowing them to test limits whilst being there to support them if it goes wrong, because it will go wrong." (Katie, Practitioner)

Practitioners understood children's bodies as active sites of learning. Physical experimentation in the outdoor environment, climbing, balancing, using tools, building fires were seen as the means through which children discovered their own capabilities, developed motor skills and physical competency. Practitioners valued the natural environment, describing it as exciting and appealing to children and beneficial for their development:

"And giving children ownership over their space but also giving them the freedom to explore and experiment with their own capabilities, on a level that you

> don't normally get in other settings, climbing trees, doing fires, using tools." (Trish, Practitioner)
>
> "We want them to swing; we want them to turn themselves upside down. There're proprioceptors in the brain that need them to spin. So yeah, it's very much part of what we do, the physical development, developing their core strength." (Katie, Practitioner)
>
> "And I just think sometimes you watch him in an indoor environment and there's just, there's just not the free space for that, whereas you put them outside. And yeah, do you know what? There isn't the same amount of space because they're in a, you know, like a tree setting where there's other little bits around, but he can just sprint to his, like, his life. And I think that from his motor skill perspective, I mean, there's two things. One, he just gets the space and the capacity to do it, but also just seeing his coordination, he's so skilled in balancing. And I would say that's probably part and parcel to some of the some of the outdoor environment has been exposed to." (Sue, Parent)
>
> "They learn how to be hardy. They're moving more. They're getting fresh air; they are obviously their eyesight is not just looking at things close up or just in a room. They're engaging things that are further away." (Meg, Parent)

Practitioners emphasised that their own experience and competence were central to enabling risky play safely and effectively. Rather than removing risk, skilled practitioners worked to calibrate challenge to the appropriate level for each child, facilitating situations where children could learn to self-manage and negotiate physical challenges with guidance and support, rather than adult control:

> "As long as you're there to support them and make them aware of the risks, they've got to learn through taking risks. As long as they're safe in doing so, they've got to learn to manage their own risk, and if they do it from an early age, they'll learn to build on that through life." (Ashley, Practitioner)
>
> "The risk is pretty low in comparison to a lot of other things, but again we learn from not being able to do it if they feel it's too risky for them, then we'll support them in whichever way we can. To me, risky play is how we learn, you've got to understand that it's OK to fail. It's OK to not get it right the first time, because if you keep trying, then the risks will no longer be a risk because you'll master what you're trying to." (Amelie, Practitioner)

Parents recognised the developmental importance of risky play and revealed a more nuanced tension between the protective instincts of parenthood and the desire to allow children the freedom to engage with physical challenge. Several parents openly acknowledged their own over-protectiveness and at times admitted awareness that their child was more physically capable than they had given them credit for. This honest self-reflection suggests that parents' accounts reflected a shift in their perceptions of their children's confidence and competence and of what their children were capable of:

> "Obviously I don't want him to get hurt, but I also do think you kind of have to be exposed to that as a child, it will help you develop certain attributes and be able to handle stressful situations. By developing those skills early on, he's going to grow up to be a much more resilient child." (Sue, Parent)
>
> "But I think I think it is still quite a big thing where children are being managed too closely. I mean I am a parent as well, and my child has just turned 4 and I am guilty of it as well like because they're precious things and you love them,

but they need to be able to manage themselves. And yeah, I think that a lot of children nowadays don't have that opportunity, and learning outside is the place for them to be able to do that." (Jase, Practitioner)

"I am inherently a worrier, so I suppose like as a parent, if I'm watching him climb on something, I'm always ready to step in and I think it comes with being a coach. You sort of risk assess in every situation, aren't you? And seeing what could potentially go wrong. Oh my God, he's running with a stick. He could poke his eye out. But weirdly, when he's at nursery, I'm not as bothered. I think if he's with me, I'm probably a little bit more restrictive." (Sue, Parent)

"And even though I do let them take the risks, it doesn't mean that my heart isn't in my mouth. Sometimes when I'm watching them and I am tense in preparation for stepping in. But yeah, they surprise me all the time. They're a lot more capable and a lot more able than I think we quite often give them credit for." (Pam, Parent)

"The parents want their children to be outdoor and to be exposed to risk and to be active. Yeah. And all that type of thing." (Ashley, Practitioner)

"They learn to see how capable their children are. They learn to see what we mean by risky play, and they're like, OK, so we're not actually, absolutely. You're like, no, we're just we've tied our rope around that thing, and there's a bit of a we ditch. And actually, they're like climbing back up again, you know." (Janet, Practitioner)

For several parents, the opportunity for children to engage in physically active, risky play was a core reason for selecting a nature-based ECE provision in the first place. Their desire to develop motor skills, physical competence and resilience in their children, qualities that they felt were insufficiently nurtured elsewhere, evidences a values-led choice of setting:

"They're allowed to explore. They're allowed to climb, but there's always someone there watching. And I think, like I've just said, I think sometimes allowing them. To take some risks but doing it from a supervised point of view I think it is healthy for them to learn what they're capable of and to learn what their limits are. But yeah, I've never, never had any concerns over the safety aspects. They're all very, very much on it in terms of making sure they've got the right equipment, the right clothing." (Meg, Parent)

"So, I think it's, it's definitely been a nice, nice transition to watch how he is at nursery and interact with, you know, kind of the key workers because again, just taking the climbing for example, you know, historically I'd be like over him, and then just trying to take a step back to make sure he could do it. Whereas the nursery workers within reason are just let him go." (Sue, Parent)

"And I think for me like also just seeing his coordination, he's so skilled in balancing. And I would say that's probably part and parcel to some of the some of the outdoor environment he's been exposed to and whatever terrain he's on, he's just really, he's just really, really capable of moving over different terrains." (Jess, Parent)

Practitioners frequently championed the physical opportunities their settings afforded, frequently identifying physical development as central to how young children learn and interact with the world. The long-term impact of this was reflected in practitioners' own accounts of transition outcomes, who reported that children leaving nature-based ECE settings demonstrated physical capabilities and confidence that stood out markedly:

> "By the time they leave us, their physical capabilities are unmatched really. And actually, that's the feedback we've had from schools when children have transitioned, their physical capabilities and confidence far outweigh others." (Trish, Practitioner)

> "So physical development is intrinsically linked into everything. That's the one area we kind of like smash. In early years you have PSED, well it's switched now, it's communication and language, then PSED, then physical development. We have physical development first, then communication and language, then PSED. Yeah, the physical first." (Katie, Practitioner)

Practitioners also framed their commitment to risky play as a response to what they perceived as a wider cultural erosion of children's freedom to engage in free, physically challenging play. In this sense, nature-based ECE was positioned as an antidote to risk-averse societal norms that they felt were increasingly limiting children's opportunities for physically active outdoor play, outside of the setting.

> "It sounds horrible, but our parents, especially grandparents, are our biggest barrier because they're the ones that undo everything. And of course, they're emotionally attached. I'm not saying we're not, but it's not the same as it being your own child. And we have to spend much of the time educating the parents. So, if they're climbing at home, instead of telling them to get down you'll fall, try and approach it this way." (Katie, Practitioner)

> "And actually we have a lot of grandparents pick up and it tends to be grandparents who, we hand them the bag of dirty clothes from their adventures today and they'll be like, you know, roll their eyes, which surprises me because obviously their generation would have been playing out in the streets till the lamp lights came on. You know what I mean?" (Trish, Practitioner)

The core concept of this theme illustrates how both parents and practitioners perceived risk, physicality and resilience as central to children's physical development and capability-building. It was evident that while parental concern for child safety remained prominent, parents acknowledged that exposure to risky play within ECE contexts offered meaningful benefits and that their children frequently demonstrated, in parents' accounts, a level of competence that surpassed their expectations. The ECE organisational values were expressed in practitioner approaches that deliberately used risk, reflecting an ethos that contrasts to a broader cultural context where opportunities for risky play are seen to be diminishing.

3.4. Theme 4: Communities of Learning

Nature-based ECE settings in this study were considered more than just spaces for children's learning; they functioned as communities of learning in which knowledge, values and attitudes circulated between children, parents and practitioners. Learning was understood as multidirectional, extending outward from the child to the family and from the setting into home life, as several practitioners illustrated:

> "And I think the fact that we are in the woodland, even getting parents to go, right, do you know what, you've got an annual pass for here now, come down at the weekend, let them show you the adventures they've done, let the children lead. And the parents that do that, it always comes back positive." (Katie, Practitioner)

> "And the parents have, like, never thought that their child would do it. I can't believe we've done that. How can we do it? And like we'll say, look, you, you don't need to go out and buy anything. Sticks, mud. That's all you need some

> mud pile of stones. Go to the park, go to the do whatever. You know it's all there and they'll be like, oh wow. Wow. Yeah. And then they'll send us photos of what they've done and then we can show everybody at group time and stuff and it's really nice. I don't think the parents should feel bad about asking. It's not like they're failing at all." (Mandy, Practitioner)

Parents frequently expressed their own limitations in providing outdoor nature-rich experiences for their children. Time, confidence, knowledge and access were all cited as constraints, and for many, the nature-based ECE setting was chosen, at least in part, to fill a perceived gap. Parents conveyed a trust of practitioners in their specific skills, expertise and judgement of working in the outdoor environment with early years children:

> "It's just not my bag at all; I can't bear the mess and dirt. But I know it's good for them, so I can't give it. So, I want you to give it." (Trish, Practitioner, reporting a parent's words)

> "But yeah, I've never, never had any concerns over the sort of the safety aspects. They're all very, very much on it in terms of making sure they've got the right equipment, the right clothing, and there's regular reminders about making sure people bring in their waterproofs and things like that." (Meg, Parent)

Across accounts, there was also evidence of knowledge and attitude transfer between practitioners and parents. Practitioners described coaching parents alongside children, modelling positive attitudes towards nature, normalising outdoor play in all weathers, and encouraging families to take nature-based activities back into their home lives:

> "I find that we coach parents as much as the children. Sometimes not all parents, but certainly a good handful of them that haven't had that experience, so yeah, I do feel that we're coaching them and helping them." (Trish, Practitioner)

> "They wouldn't normally go and do stuff like this, but because they had done it with me, they felt confident to actually go and do it and they would tell me about going out at the weekend, and they never would have done before." (Jase, Practitioner)

> "And they, yeah, they took their kids out to do these things because they were like, they felt like, oh, I kind of know what I'm doing now. Like, I don't need to be scared of going for a walk in the forest or, like, getting lost. And they were just like, no, it'll be fine." (Jase, Practitioner)

It was evident that children themselves were also agents of transferring learning within the family, carrying the values, curiosity and enthusiasm of the setting back into their home environments. This child-to-parent learning added a further dimension to the community of learning, where children were active participants in shaping their families' relationship with the natural world:

> "And I think that's just as important as it is for the children because actually, we're only here for that small part of their lives, and the rest of the time they're with their parents, and they're their first educators." (Trish, Practitioner)

> "Spaces that makes sense to them that they might visit again with family and things like that. So, it's it that that kind of idea of going to local green space and kind of giving children ownership of these kinds of spaces as well or at least a sense of belonging in those kinds of spaces." (Janet, Practitioner)

Alongside shared learning, practitioners also reflected on the emotional and wellbeing benefits that nature-based ECE appeared to offer parents as a source of reconnection, regulation and community for adults themselves. Several practitioners observed that for

some families, the experience of being part of a nature-based ECE community appeared to be as transformative for the parent as for the child:

> "For a lot of parents, they actually got more out of it than the children did, almost. But I always say to staff that's OK, because well-regulated adults help children become better regulated too. So, you work with the families as much as you do the little ones." (Janet, Practitioner)

Nature-based ECE settings were understood as actively bridging gaps created by contemporary life. Practitioners positioned their settings as counter-cultural spaces, offering children and families something they recognised as increasingly rare for some:

> "With technology being used at such an early age now, outdoors is more important than ever. Some children are living in houses without gardens so at least we're bridging that gap and giving them that opportunity." (Mandy, Practitioner)

> "But you would be amazed at the amount of children even that come to our school that don't go out. Hardly ever. And I feel like that's part of why they send them here." (Jase, Practitioner)

When discussing their practice, practitioners drew a distinction between two ways of working: the practitioner who, once children moved outdoors, stepped back into a supervisory role, watching from the margins, and the practitioner who remained active, curious, and intentionally engaged within the outdoor space itself. Katie described the first orientation as widespread and troubling:

> "What you tend to see, and again it's the same in schools, children go outside, practitioners stop playing, they stand back and supervise. And it still baffles me, why is that? Is that their perception of risk that they suddenly need to watch over and make sure everything's okay The quality environments that I see are when children are outside, they're free, they're on their agenda and staff are actively taking knowledge to them." (Katie, Practitioner)

Deliberate practice, and a collective sense of mission, was evident through nature-based ECE practitioners in this study. That sense of mission was evident from the explanation of new staff inductions, described as:

> "So, they kind of learn our way of doing things from the start. They have a rigorous induction programme, which means that they understand these policies, they understand why. And then we've got to see that in their practice, that they can promote it, promote a love for what we're doing. It's not just a case of teaching them skills, you've got to love it, you've got to believe it, because if you don't, it won't work, you're just paying your lips. Our staff constantly train." (Katie, Practitioner)

However, sustaining that commitment through formal training proved difficult. Despite a strong drive to develop professionally, practitioners found that the training landscape did not reflect the realities of their work. Provision designed for mainstream day nurseries felt ill-fitting, and courses aimed at older children required considerable adaptation:

> "It's not just a case of teaching them skills, you've got to love it, you've got to believe it, because if you don't, it won't work, you're just paying your lips. Our staff constantly train. But I'll be honest, it's very difficult to find the relevance because most of the training comes from our local authority, which is for your bog-standard day nursery." (Katie, Practitioner)

In the absence of a clear professional pathway, practitioners found their own way, drawing on networks, personal experience, and a self-directed commitment to the field.

Jase, for instance, had arrived at nature-based practice not through formal forest school training but through years of experience as an early year's teacher combined with his own expertise as a bushcraft practitioner:

> "I've not had any formal forest school training, but I've kind of found my own way to that same point through being an early years teacher and being quite a proficient, experienced bushcraft practitioner myself. So, I've come into that without actually doing any formal forest school training." (Jase, Practitioner)

Together, these findings position nature-based ECE settings as communities of learning, spaces in which values, knowledge and identity were actively co-constructed across children, families and practitioners. Learning was multidirectional and relational, extending beyond the setting into home life and, in many cases, transforming families' relationship with the outdoor world. Practitioner identity in these settings was shaped by a shared sense of mission, sustained through collective commitment rather than formal infrastructure. These findings illustrate communities of learning that were built largely without adequate training provision or structural support. Nature-based ECE, as these accounts demonstrate, is a value-driven way of working that connects children, families and practitioners in a shared mission for children's right to outdoor and nature experiences.

3.5. Theme 5: Beyond the Setting: Systemic Pressures and Parental Fears

Across all interviews, both parents and practitioners expressed a shared awareness that the values and experiences central to nature-based ECE existed in tension with the broader educational systems into which children would eventually move. This theme captures the anxieties, frustrations and resistances that emerged when participants looked beyond the boundaries of their nature-based setting towards formal schooling, mainstream ECE provision, and the structural constraints of the wider early years landscape. Parents articulated a sense of fear when contemplating their children's transition to formal schooling. This was a specific concern as parents feared the sitting, the stillness, the academic pressure, and the loss of the outdoor freedom their children had come to thrive in:

> "I just feel like his capacity to learn is going to be dictated by how active he is. And I do think that's going to be dictated by. I just don't think he can sit for 8 h a day and learn in a school environment so. You know, we're quite fortunate that a lot of the schools around us also have things like forest school provision. It's going to be really important to me when we choose a school that is somewhere that has, you know, kind of physical activity embedded into the really well embedded into the curriculum, but also outdoor time as well." (Sue, Parent)

> "But she is not made to be told to sit down all the time, to be told to sit still, sit still. That's going to be torture for her." (Pam, Parent)

> "But it's like when they go from that reception environment into class one. It's there's no transition. It's like, well, that was reception. This is class one. You now sit down. You now stay still. You now focus on your academic achievements and that all that." (Meg, Parent)

> "Goodness just disappears over the course of six weeks, and I just feel like older children are let down by that and our school has some amazing grounds. It's beautiful. Apparently, there's a pond somewhere, but I've never heard my elders even talk about it. Yeah, and I just feel like it's a missed opportunity to connect the curriculum with the outdoors and with movement. Whereas they almost take and they take the outdoors away from them if they if they've misbehaved or been naughty, the first thing they yeah, the first thing they do is take outdoor play away." (Meg, Parent)

Practitioners shared these concerns, though their perspective carried an additional professional dimension. While they were accepting that transition to formal schooling was inevitable, there was a sense of reluctance and discontent about what that next stage entailed. Practitioners described an obvious mismatch in values between the movement-rich, outdoor, child-led ethos of their settings and the sitting time, academic pressures and limited outdoor provision they associated with formal schooling. Nature-based ECE was understood as offering children a precious window of freedom before the constraints of the formal system:

> "And having the freedom to do that before they have to head off to the big world of school." (Amelie, Practitioner)

> "Beyond the early years, I think is where it's lacking and I don't think all nurseries and all preschool settings are created equal. I think it depends on the ethos of that nursery and the practitioners within it." (Meg, Parent)

> "I do have apprehensions about what comes next year because of how happy she is in this kind of provision and how mainstream schools. It's just such a disconnect." (Pam, Parent)

A common thread among parents was a deliberate rejection of mainstream ECE provision in favour of nature-based settings. Parents expressed negative perceptions of more conventional nursery and early years environments, citing insufficient movement opportunities, too much indoor classroom time, and scepticism about claims made by some settings regarding how much outdoor time was provided. This choice of setting reflected a broader distrust of mainstream early years practice and a desire to protect their children from what they saw as a premature formalisation of learning:

> "Connecting with the outdoors and being outdoors should be a fundamental part of the curriculum, with acknowledgement that it is just as beneficial to children's wellbeing and development as sitting down and learning how to write their name." (Meg, Parent)

> "She's a very free-spirited child. Free spirited, high spirited, adventurous. She'd live outside if she could, and this preschool suits her down to the ground. If I felt more aligned with the nursery, she was already at, I would have kept her there. I wouldn't have had, obviously, that unsettled time taking her out and starting somewhere else. But seeing just how fantastic and well suited this preschool was, is. There're planned activities, of course, but it is very child led and child focused." (Pam, Parent)

> "And I wanted to make sure that they didn't just go outside in nice weather. One of the questions I asked was, do they access the outdoor space in all weather? Is that normal practice and what kind of stuff do their kids need to bring in? So, I found that although some nurseries would say there was access or weather, when you ask them well, what do I need to pack in terms of the bag? It was never waterproof and change of clothing for weather reasons. It was more for accidents and messy clothes from food and things like that. So, I was just like, how do you go outside when you're not asking for wellies and waterproofs?" (Meg, Parent)

Practitioners echoed this mistrust, with several expressing doubts about the consistency of outdoor provision across the wider ECE sector. The gap between policy expectation and everyday practice was identified as a significant concern, with outdoor and free-flow time understood as technically required but inconsistently delivered, often dependent on individual adult willingness rather than genuine organisational commitment:

> "Children are expected to have free flow into an outdoor environment, that is what the early statutory framework requires. But from my experience of working in nurseries and doing auditing, it is sporadic and still very much dictated by whether the adult wants to go out." (Katie, Practitioner)

Early years policy was experienced as a double-edged instrument. On one hand, the flexibility afforded by early years frameworks was valued as it created space for nature-based practitioners to develop their own interpretations and approaches. On the other hand, this same flexibility was seen as a weakness, enabling inconsistency across the sector and allowing settings to fall short of meaningful outdoor provision without consequence. Several practitioners expressed a desire for more mandatory guidance on free-flow, space and outdoor time, feeling that voluntary commitment was insufficient to drive change:

> "So, it's understanding that they've got the policies there to protect them but with risk assessing, it's almost like the more you record, the more you tie yourself to the fact that you've documented it." (Katie, Practitioner)

At the same time, there was also recognition that not all ECE settings had easily accessible outdoor spaces and, furthermore, not all practitioners are confident to facilitate outdoor play:

> "I think it's probably access to those outdoor areas is probably a major, a major issue, particularly those who don't have it on their immediate doorstep, they can't just open a door and the children go out, they have to maybe walk somewhere locally to engage. That will be a major, major barrier and then I think it's probably the confidence of some of the practitioners to know either how to encourage free play in the outdoors or how to organise activities that link into the curriculum but also sort of support that wider well-being and development side of it." (Meg, Parent)

Practitioners expressed a broader alarm about the state of children's access to outdoor space and nature-rich experience beyond the ECE setting. The erosion of green space, the constraints of urban living and the encroachment of technology into childhood were all identified as forces working against children's right to outdoor experience, forces that nature-based ECE settings were attempting to resist:

> "I think I think sort of if you most of the children now, either they play in play parks, they play in their gardens and when they're in those spaces, they're normally watched closely and kept an eye on by a caregiver by a parent. Whereas I think about when I grew up, although I probably didn't go as far as I say, my mum and dad did, I still probably roamed a good quarter of a mile, half a mile away from my home explore. Going over streams and climbing trees, whereas I don't think that is not necessarily a thing anymore. There's a lot more traffic on the roads. Cars seem to get the priority." (Jess, Parent)

> "It really, really frightens me because people don't have access to outdoor space. But people are going to have to use it creatively if they're going to give children the space they need to develop physically and learn." (Katie, Practitioner)

> "We have sometimes walked to nursery together, but they don't go out and play with each other. You don't see them playing on the road, going up and down on their bikes, throwing balls at the curb like none of that seems to happen anymore. So, in terms of that side of risk taking, there's a lot less that happens now and I think it's part of me wants to be able to, let my children do that. But then it's the trust in drivers and others to respect that, children deserve space as well. And it's not just about adults who get to take up space in in local areas. I think it's been

> lost. I think. I don't know if I don't think it's been intentional. I think the way places have been designed, I think the change in car use, the change in cars been it seems to be a very car-centric society." (Meg, Parent)

These findings reveal a landscape characterised by systemic tension between the values underpinning nature-based ECE and the broader institutional context in which it operates. Parents and practitioners expressed a sustained mistrust of mainstream early years provision and the formal schooling system. Current policy frameworks were perceived as insufficient to address this gap; whilst the flexibility afforded by early years guidance was valued by nature-based practitioners, this also was identified as enabling inconsistency across the sector and failing to embed meaningful outdoor provision more widely. In this context, the choice of a nature-based setting emerged as a deliberate and, for many parents, a counter-cultural act. These findings suggest that without more directive policy frameworks and clearer regulatory expectations, high-quality nature-based experience in the early years may remain inaccessible to the majority of children and dependent on practitioner commitment and parental advocacy rather than systemic entitlement.

4. Discussion

While a small body of UK-based qualitative research has explored stakeholder perspectives on forest school provision [32,36–38], this evidence remains fragmented across single stakeholder groups and across broader age groups. To our knowledge, this study is among the first in England to bring together both parents' and practitioners' perspectives on nature-based ECE, with a specific focus on young children aged 3–5 years. In doing so, it makes a distinct contribution to a field that has, to date, largely examined these perspectives within primary forest school provision. Both groups of participants offered unique and complementary insights into how and why they value nature-based provision, as well as their lived experiences of engaging with young children within these environments.

The key findings that emerge from this study illuminate shared beliefs among both groups: that protecting childhood is of importance, and that this protection is defined by a set of interconnected freedoms. These include the freedom to access outdoor play, the freedom to move, and the freedom to engage with the natural environment. For parents, choosing nature-based provision was not only a decision rooted in children's learning and developmental needs, but was also framed as a health choice, reflecting a growing awareness of the physical and psychological benefits of sustained contact with nature in the early years. Parents additionally alluded to their decision-making processes that led them to select nature-based settings for their children, while practitioners articulated what they understood to be the defining characteristics of their practice and the ECE spaces they curate, environments they perceived as uniquely conducive to learning and development in early childhood.

A notable point of convergence between both groups was a shared recognition of, and concern about, the degree to which wider societal expectations, including those embedded within formal education systems, were progressively encroaching upon what participants perceived to be the rights of young children. Practitioners, in particular, positioned their role as one of actively safeguarding these freedoms, yet this commitment was understood to be driven primarily by the values and professional identities of ECE practitioners themselves, rather than by broader policy or formal qualification structures. This suggests that nature-based ECE in England currently operates as something of a specialist endeavour, sustained by the conviction of those within it rather than by systemic support. This specialism was clearly recognised by parents who placed value and trust in practitioners' ability to facilitate age-appropriate outdoor play opportunities. Beyond provision itself, the nature-based

ECE community was seen to play an important role in fostering parental confidence and competence, extending its impact beyond the child to support the wider family unit.

In the following discussion of findings, the SEM provides an implicit rather than explicit organising framework for the discussion, with its levels of influence surfacing naturally through engagement with the findings.

4.1. Advocating for Early Childhood Freedoms

Reflecting the interpersonal influences, parents in this study made intentional decisions when choosing nature-based provision, and practitioners similarly conveyed a values-based commitment in seeking to work within nature-based ECE settings. Central to both was a desire to protect what was described as a critical window in child development, where children were seen to learn and thrive through regular access to outdoor spaces, spaces conducive to roaming, moving, exploring and connecting with the natural world. These findings resonate with a growing body of research, albeit across different cultural contexts. Parczewska [5], in a qualitative study of Polish parents who had chosen forest kindergarten provision for their children, found that parental decision-making was deliberate and effortful, shaped by a commitment to holistic child development, child wellbeing, and an eco-philosophical orientation. Reflecting a physical environment perspective, parents described the forest kindergarten as a space offering freedom, connection with nature, and positive emotional experiences that conventional settings could not provide. Similarly, but within a UK context, Arvanitis et al. [32] found that nature connectedness, physical and mental health, and the flexible, child-led structure of forest school were consistently valued, with parents framing nature-based provision as meaningfully distinct from, and in tension with, more formal, outcomes-driven educational settings.

In line with current research, participants viewed nature as important for children's health and holistic development outcomes [1,55]. Yet the value placed on nature-based ECE extended beyond such instrumental benefits. Critically, and consistent across both the present study and the wider literature, academic outcomes were explicitly de-prioritised; parents and practitioners articulated a shared belief that sensitivity to others, ecological awareness, and life skills were of greater value at this stage of childhood than measurable attainment [5,32]. For both groups, nature-based practice was understood as intrinsically worthwhile, independent of measurable results [56,57]. This was further legitimised through negative perceptions of the formalised schooling system and what participants described as the pressures of the next steps in education [36,37]. In this sense, nature-based ECE was positioned as a counter-movement and a space in which, as participants expressed it, children could simply be children.

Both practitioners and parents in this study expressed dissatisfaction with what mainstream ECE settings could offer, with concerns directed at the premature formalisation of early childhood education. From a parental perspective, these concerns encompassed restricted movement opportunities, excessive sedentary time, insufficient outdoor play, and limited meaningful contact with the natural world. Such perceptions are not confined to this study; there is a well-documented intergenerational decline in outdoor play, with present generations of children increasingly likely to spend time indoors in sedentary, screen-based activity [13,58]. Against this broader backdrop, the deliberate selection of nature-based ECE provision by parents in this study may be understood as an act of resistance to conditions in which children's access to free outdoor experience has been progressively diminished.

Practitioners in this study expressed a wider scepticism towards the outdoor play provision offered within mainstream ECE, informed by professional experiences, including one practitioner's account of formally auditing ECE settings. These findings align with the body of evidence identifying practitioners as primary gatekeepers to children's outdoor play

opportunities [59–62]. Young children have limited autonomy from adults, and it is parents, early childhood educators, and caregivers who function as the gatekeepers for outdoor active play opportunities in early childhood [31,59]. Turning to the importance of the physical environment, these findings suggest that access to outdoor spaces and movement in early childhood is not structurally guaranteed but is instead substantially mediated by the individual attitudes, values, and professional confidence of the practitioners within a given setting [63–65]. Hence, in this study, parents were actively seeking out provision that they could trust in providing what they deemed priority childhood experiences. Equally, practitioners in this study were able to act out their values and practice in a way that reflects their preferred pedagogical approaches in early childhood without the perceived constraints of mainstream ECE provision [28].

4.2. Outdoor Environment as Pedagogy

Nature-rich outdoor spaces described by participants in this study were understood as active pedagogical environments in their own right. Both parents and practitioners articulated a clear appreciation for the characteristics of natural spaces that distinguished them from indoor or manufactured play environments. Central to this was the unstructured, open-ended quality of natural materials with no predetermined function, inviting children to bring their own meaning and imagination to them. This aligns with Nicholson's loose parts theory [66] and is evidenced in studies [2] which propose that moveable, adaptable materials afford the greatest opportunities for creativity, problem-solving and play types in young children. Practitioners in this study argued that effective nature-based learning spaces do not require artificial construction; instead, they enable play and learning to emerge from reciprocal interactions between child and environment. In doing so, the findings align with Prins et al. [2], framing nature as playing back and relational.

Beyond materials, the spatial and sensory qualities of outdoor environments were identified as particularly significant. Practitioners observed that natural spaces appeared to support children's emotional regulation, noise dispersed rather than amplified, movement was unrestricted, and the sensory rhythm of the natural world offered a calming effect. This was noted as especially meaningful for children with SEND, echoing growing evidence that nature-based environments can serve as co-regulators of children's physiological and emotional states [1,2]. Theories such as the Stress Reduction Theory and the Attention Restoration Theory are commonly used to explain these outcomes; however, much of the underpinning evidence is derived from studies with adults, with comparatively limited research focusing on young children [67,68].

Finally, nature-based ECE settings were transformed into meaningful places for children, rather than spaces they occupied. As children interacted with their environments, they developed a sense of belonging and ownership that was reflected in the compassion and care practitioners observed them expressing towards their surroundings. This emerging interactive relationship with nature was characterised by empathy and a desire to nurture the places they inhabit. This is particularly encouraging because it extended beyond the setting itself. This finding is consistent with evidence that young children can develop empathy for the non-human world and express a desire to protect and care for the natural world [69,70]. Evidence of this was seen in learning that carried into home life, with children encouraging family visits to nearby places or locations they had explored that week. Crucially, this transfer also encompassed attitudes. Parents reported being challenged in their own thinking about spending time outdoors and engaging with nature, suggesting that children had become agents of change within their own families. This ripple effect highlights the potential of nature-based ECE not only to foster children's connectedness to nature, but also to cultivate it within the wider family unit.

4.3. Training and Policy

While the physical environment provides the foundation for nature-based practice, practitioners in this study emphasised that high-quality outdoor experiences are ultimately dependent on knowledgeable, responsive practitioners. Aligning with previous studies, developing practice was seen as a gradual process rather than being an outcome of any formal training [36]. Notably, forest school was not viewed as an overarching pedagogy, but as one tool among many. Practitioners cited the restrictive nature of its activities for very young children and the cost and accessibility of formal qualifications as barriers to adoption, thus perhaps echoing concerns and contradictions highlighted by Leather [71] about the UK adoption of the Scandinavian approach. Instead, participants described an amalgamated, self-constructed practice, affording professional freedom but also raising concerns about consistency and scalability. Similarly, Waite [42] documented the fragmented and highly variable nature of outdoor provision, suggesting that quality remain uneven without shared frameworks.

This tension between individual passion and systemic support was a defining theme. Despite evident commitment, practitioners identified a clear absence of dedicated training pathways for nature-based ECE. Existing forest school qualifications were seen as often ill-suited to early years contexts and, at times, at odds with the flexible, child-led ethos they purport to champion. This tension has been documented elsewhere; for instance Harris and Garden [36,72] allude to the difficulties of adopting child-led approaches for newly qualified leaders operating in educational contexts. Consequently, high-quality outdoor practice risks remain contingent on individual motivation rather than structural provision. This concern is compounded by evidence of significant variation in outdoor provision across ECE settings in England [42], with some providers failing to meet even the basic statutory entitlement for daily outdoor access. Miller and Pound [73] illustrate the gap between the EYFS outdoor policy intent and practice reality, in that even when statutory requirements exist, implementation is inconsistent and dependent on practitioner commitment. Practitioners also raised concerns about the adequacy of space itself, which captures a wider frustration about how little value policy frameworks place on children's right to space and movement. Brussoni et al. [35], whose systematic review demonstrated the developmental significance of outdoor risky play and freedom of movement, lend weight to this concern, suggesting that spatial restriction carries measurable developmental costs for young children. Together, these findings point to a fundamental inconsistency in early years policy, one that recognises the value of outdoor experience in principle and yet undermines the structural conditions necessary to realise it.

4.4. Practical Implications

The growing body of evidence supporting the benefits of outdoor play, regular movement, and contact with nature for children in the early years makes a compelling case for extending the strengths of nature-based provision into mainstream ECE practice more broadly [1,21,35]. Yet the findings of this study suggest that the recognised value of outdoor experiences is not always matched by the structural conditions to support it and that this gap may vary across provision types within the early years sector.

A central implication arising from practitioner and parent perceptions in this research is the potential need for greater parity in outdoor provision across ECE settings. Whilst practitioners in this study demonstrated professionalism and passion, the individual-driven nature of their professional pathways raises questions about consistency and scalability. This resonates with Waite [42], who similarly documented the fragmented landscape of outdoor learning practice across English settings, suggesting that this might not be an isolated finding but part of a broader pattern. Without a dedicated and recognised

training infrastructure, high-quality outdoor practice may continue to depend on individual commitment rather than shared expectation, potentially contributing to an inequitable foundation for young children. The findings also reflect the role of people as decision makers in shaping decisions and investments on policy and programmes.

This has potential implications for early years training and qualification frameworks at a time when the sector is facing a significant workforce crisis [43,74]. These conditions may disincentivise professional development that high-quality nature-based outdoor practice requires. This is against a backdrop of barriers to workforce development: training costs, pay, and qualification accessibility [74]. This study, along with previous authors [36,46,71], suggests that existing forest school formal qualifications are already perceived as inaccessible and not always suited to early years contexts. This points to a potential case for nature-based pedagogy to be meaningfully embedded within initial early years training, as one component of professional development, if outdoor practice is to move beyond specialist provision and of individually motivated practitioners.

Reflecting the role of the policy environment and the key players within it, statutory guidance may also warrant reconsideration. Whilst the EYFS framework [41] mandates daily outdoor access, this study lends further support to existing evidence, suggesting that the requirement alone may be insufficient to ensure quality. A further regulatory gap that may warrant attention concerns the absence of outdoor spaces as a requirement in the ECE setting, as current space requirements are based on indoor areas despite the importance of children spending time outdoors [75]. This is relevant given a recent Department of Education consultation (May–July 2025) which proposed potentially allowing free-flow outdoor space to count toward EYFS space calculations [75]. Sector bodies have cautioned that this risks overcrowding and may further reduce the quality of children's spatial environments. Current requirements stipulate children aged three to five requires just 2.3 square metres of indoor space, whereas outdoor space is not guaranteed. This may represent a significant constraint on movement, active play and learning and runs counter to the evidence base and to developmental needs. As the UN Committee on the Rights of the Child [76] affirms, children hold a fundamental right to play and access adequate space, and regulatory frameworks should reflect this rather than subordinate it to childcare capacity pressures.

External to the setting, this study suggests that nature-based ECE has the potential to function as a catalyst for broader community engagement with the outdoors, where children develop confidence, curiosity, and connection with natural environments influencing family behaviours, attitudes, and engagement with nature more widely. Given the awareness parents in this study already demonstrated, targeted support and communication from settings could serve to amplify this effect, positioning ECE as a bridge between nature-based learning and wider community health and environmental literacy. Realising this potential, however, requires that nature-based practice becomes a structurally supported, consistently delivered feature of all early years provision in England. The inequity of access to nature for children in England represents a significant and growing concern, as the Natural England Children's People and Nature Survey [77] highlights that children from lower income households are significantly less likely to report high nature connection, suggesting that access to nature remains a privilege rather than a universal entitlement. Campaigns such as the Nature Premium supported by the Forest School Association and Institute for Outdoor Learning have called for dedicated government funding to address this disparity, particularly for children in urban and deprived areas. These campaigns reinforce the implications of the present study: that nature-based practice in ECE settings requires investment and policy commitment if the benefits of early nature connection are to be equitably distributed across all children in England.

4.5. Future Directions

This study points to several avenues for future research. Longitudinal research examining children's transition from nature-based ECE provision to mainstream primary education would provide insight into how changes in access to outdoor environments may influence academic, social, physical and emotional adjustment. The potential benefits of nature-based education for children with SEN also remain underexplored; research examining this population would meaningfully extend the evidence base. As acknowledged, this study's parent sample was exclusively females; future research explicitly seeking fathers' perspectives could help build a broader understanding of parental influences on children's engagement with nature-based provision. Relatedly, research into the socioeconomic characteristics of families accessing nature-based provision would help determine equity of access and inform strategies to support it. Finally, as this study was based on parent and practitioner perspectives, future research incorporating participatory, child-centred methods such as the Mosaic Approach, children's draw and talk, or child-led tours would provide complementary insights from the view of the child.

4.6. Limitations and Strengths

This study draws exclusively from nature-based nursery and preschool settings and is therefore not a full representation of early years provision in England. The findings should also be interpreted with caution beyond the English context, given that Scotland and Wales operate under different regulatory frameworks and place notably greater statutory emphasis on outdoor play and learning in the early years. Additionally, whilst the near-exclusively female sample likely reflects the demographic reality of the early years workforce (~97%) [74], the absence of fathers' perspectives among parent participants represents a missed opportunity to capture a fuller caregiver viewpoint. This is a pattern consistent with the broader tendency for mothers to be disproportionately represented among parent participants in early years research. As such, the parent-related findings in this study should be understood as reflecting predominantly maternal perspectives, rather than parents as an undifferentiated category.

Nonetheless, the study offers several meaningful strengths. The application of a socio-ecological perspective enabled a holistic lens through which to examine the interaction of people, place, and policy in nature-based ECE contexts. The inclusion of multiple stakeholder perspectives that extends beyond the ECE setting provided ecological depth and enabled a more nuanced understanding of how nature-based practice operates across different levels of children's environments. Interviews were extensive and in-depth, generating rich data grounded in participants' lived experience and insider knowledge. In doing so, the study makes a timely contribution to an under-researched area, capturing the perspectives of both practitioners and parents within nature-based ECE settings in England and generating findings with potential to inform future intervention and policy development.

Supplementary Materials: The following supporting information can be downloaded at https://www.mdpi.com/article/10.3390/soc16090279/s1, Table S1: Summary of themes, subthemes and example codes.

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Abbreviations

The following abbreviations are used in this manuscript:

EYFS	Early Years Foundation Stage
ECE	Early Childhood Education
PA	Physical Activity
SEM	Socio-ecological Model
SEND	Special Educational Needs and Disabilities
UK	United Kingdom

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