

Tip Sheets

Outdoor Learning

Outdoor learning is beneficial for the health and wellbeing of both children and caregivers.



Time outdoors:

- Reduces stress
- Restores attention
- Increases enjoyment and engagement

Active play in outdoor spaces also promotes physical health.

As with indoor spaces, a child's behavior outdoors is influenced by factors such as the physical environment and caregiver attitudes. When caregivers take an active role in setting up the outdoor learning environment and preparing to meet everyone's needs, they will learn how to support children's success and increase their own enjoyment of being outdoors.

Preparation

Practitioners need to be proactive in order to meet the unique needs that can arise in outdoor spaces. For example:

- Changing weather conditions can impact planning for health and safety from day to day.
- Shared use of outdoor spaces might require caregivers to be on the alert for safety hazards such as trash or broken equipment.

In the case of changing weather conditions, consider creating a supply of seasonally-appropriate clothing that can be borrowed by

children or caregivers as needed. With planning and preparation, everyone can be safe, comfortable, and enjoy outdoor learning time.

Attitudes

Attitudes are key. Identify areas where caregivers often limit outdoor learning due to their concerns about issues like safety. Seek additional education to increase comfort and confidence.

For example, learning the signs of heat exhaustion or frostbite may help reduce worries about weather-related health and safety. Training about first-aid for insect stings can help caregivers feel more comfortable bringing children to gardens and more natural spaces.

Outdoor Classrooms

Outdoor play spaces should be thought of as "outdoor classrooms." Like indoor classrooms, these learning environments can support many different types of activities—not just physical play. It is worthwhile to assess your outdoor classroom to ensure a diverse range of experiences is available.

Introduce additional materials as needed to expand children's activity choices. This can include:

- Bringing indoor materials outdoors, such as the easel, dolls, instruments, or costumes to increase children's choices for creative play.
- Providing spaces that support children who need quiet/alone time. One way to do this is by creating tents by hanging sheets or fabric.
- Increasing the outdoor play space's *loose parts*, such as sticks, rocks, sand, and

pinecones, etc. These materials are low maintenance and low cost (or free) and support exploration and problem solving.

- Offering sensory experiences like sand, water, and mud play. Outdoor spaces are ideal for this kind of messy play that children crave.
- Creating an outdoor library. Choose a small collection of books that can get dirty or worn.

Variety

An outdoor classroom that never changes is likely to cause challenging behaviors due to boredom. Offer children new and interesting outdoor learning experiences by taking advantage of seasonal changes as a way to bring in new opportunities. For example, rake up piles of leaves for children to use as nests in pretend play. If it's windy, try making kites with whatever art materials are on hand.

Sometimes a change of scenery is good for everyone. Incorporate walks as a regular part of outdoor learning time. Take advantage of "nearby nature" opportunities such as local parks, and consider alternate outdoor spaces on-site. For example, have children decorate the entrance sidewalk with chalk or plan special outdoor events like closing off a parking lot for a bike party.

Go Green

Each setting is different, but nature is all around us. Encourage children to connect with nature to increase the benefits associated with outdoor play. This could include:

- Putting out bird feeders and watching what visits.
- Studying ants as they emerge from cracks in the sidewalk.
- Planting a garden.
- "Adopting" a nearby tree and observing as it changes through the seasons.

Additional Resources

Children and Nature Network | Green Schoolyards for Healthy Communities

<https://www.childrenandnature.org/schools/greening-schoolyards>

Teach Outdoors! Minnesota

<https://www.teachoutdoorsminnesota.com>

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