

## Tip Sheets

### Outdoor Learning

Head outside to play and learn! Outdoor learning is beneficial for the health and wellbeing of both children and caregivers. Time outdoors can:

- Reduce stress and help regulate emotions.
- Restore attention.
- Promote physical health through active play.
- Increase knowledge about nature and provide opportunities to be curious.

As with indoor spaces, a child's behavior outdoors is influenced by factors like 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

Be proactive to meet the unique needs that can arise in outdoor spaces. With planning and preparation, everyone can be safe, comfortable, and enjoy outdoor learning time. For example:

- Shared use of outdoor spaces might require caregivers to be on the alert for safety hazards such as trash or broken equipment.
- Establish an area to have parents sign children in and store personal items, such as coats and water bottles.
- Children thrive on routine. Make going to the outdoor learning space part of each day.
- Changing weather conditions can impact planning for health and safety from day to day. Consider creating a supply of seasonally

appropriate clothing that can be borrowed by children or caregivers as needed. Having extra clothing, towels, pop-up shelters, bins, tarps, and mats may be helpful.

#### 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.

#### Safety

- 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.

#### Remember, grownups can play too!

- Show children it is okay to get messy.
- Be their learning partners. Show curiosity with children and help them deepen their learning.
- Let the outdoors and the children guide learning. Children may enjoy watching insects and worms move about. They may enjoy planting seeds, watching birds, or collecting leaves and stick. The opportunities are endless!

#### 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. Assess your outdoor classroom to ensure a diverse range of experiences are 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.
- Creating an outdoor library. Choose a small collection of books that can get dirty or worn. You may want to utilize natural cozy spots to read books, like a section of grass next to flowers or plants.
- Promoting fine motor skills by having writing and art materials. There are endless opportunities for inspiration for both writing and art while outside.
- Increasing 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.
- Giving the children magnifying glasses to look more closely at nature. There will be so much to count and investigate outdoors.

Most playgrounds have sand or a sandbox, which is great for dramatic play. Laminated play money and cash registers or boxes can quickly turn the space into a restaurant, ice cream or flower shop, and more. There could be a car wash, trip to the ocean, or dessert? So many fun adventures will be had!

## 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. 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, take advantage of "nearby nature" opportunities such as local parks, and consider alternate outdoor spaces on-site. Have children decorate the entrance sidewalk with chalk or close 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.

- Put out bird feeders and watch what visits.
- Study ants in the sidewalk cracks.
- Plant a garden.
- "Adopt" a nearby tree and observe as it changes through the seasons.

## Additional Resources

Green Schoolyards for Healthy Communities  
<https://www.childrenandnature.org/schools/greening-schoolyards>

Teach Outdoors! Minnesota  
<https://www.teachoutdoorsminnesota.com>

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