



Outdoors

How Outdoor Play Promotes Development

Outdoor play is essential for children's health and well being. The sense of peace and pleasure children experience when they take in fresh air, feel the warmth of the sun on their backs, and watch a butterfly land gently on a flower is immeasurable. What is very evident is how much children enjoy running, jumping, climbing, and playing outdoors. The time children spend outdoors every day is just as important to their learning as the time they spend in the classroom. For teachers, the outdoors offers many ways to enrich the curriculum and support children's development and learning.

Social/emotional development. Children experience a sense of accomplishment and growing competence when they spend time outdoors every day engaged in purposeful activities. You can see the sense of pride a child feels when she can keep a swing going on her own, climb to new heights, throw and catch a ball, and complete an obstacle course. Social skills grow as children share equipment such as tricycles and shovels, work together to build a tunnel in the sandbox, and follow safety rules.

Physical development. Many reports suggest that the number of children who are overweight is increasing steadily. One factor contributing to the problem is that children do not get the large muscle activity essential for their healthy development. Part of the problem is that in many places it is not safe for children to play outdoors and children spend too much time watching TV. Thus, it's even more important to make the most of outdoor time while children are at school. Children develop their gross motor skills as they run, leap, hop, jump, swing, slide, and climb. These activities allow children to take risks and try out new skills. Children also use their fine motor skills outdoors to weed a garden, collect bugs, and pour sand through a funnel.

Cognitive development. The outdoors is a natural laboratory for scientific explorations as children observe and explore nature firsthand. They find and study bugs and butterflies, plant seeds and watch vegetables grow, observe leaves change color, taste snow, touch the bark of a tree, hear crickets, and smell the air after a rain shower. They count the seeds they plant and the number of petals on a flower; measure how tall a sunflower grows and calculate how long it takes for a flower to appear; note patterns on the bodies of caterpillars and butterflies; and solve problems, for instance, how to make water or sand run through a plastic rain gutter.



What Children Learn Outdoors

When you think about children’s time outdoors, you don’t necessarily focus on its value for teaching academic content. Nevertheless, there are many ways to connect content, teaching, and learning outdoors. As you become knowledgeable about each of the components of literacy, math, science, social studies, the arts, and technology, you will find many ways to promote children’s learning outdoors.

Literacy

Expand children’s **vocabulary and language** by asking questions and encouraging them to describe what they see. Use a variety of adjectives when you observe with children: slimy, bright, bold, glowing, rough, furry, prickly, and so on.

Promote **understanding of books and other texts** and **literacy as a source of enjoyment** by including resource books such as guides to living things. Children can use them to find pictures of what they discover outdoors. Read stories such as *The Very Busy Spider* and *The Very Hungry Caterpillar* (Eric Carle), *The Carrot Seed* (Ruth Krauss), *Miss Emma’s Wild Garden* (Anna Grossnickle Hines), and *Where Once There was a Wood or In the Small, Small Pond* (Denise Fleming).

Teach children jump rope rhymes and clapping games to promote **phonological awareness**. Have them tune into the sounds and sights around them: how the horn on a car sounds vs. the horn on a truck or bus; identifying animal sounds—crickets, birds, mosquitoes, frogs, and dogs.

Teach children about **print and letters and words** by providing traffic signs for wheeled toys. Provide clipboards for children to record observations, cardboard to make signs to identify plants in the garden, or paper to leave a message for the custodian.

Mathematics

Promote **problem solving** by guiding children to find solutions to problems they encounter (e.g., What can we do to keep the balls from going over the fence?).

Teach **number concepts** by talking with children about how many seeds to plant, and helping them mark off the days until the seeds sprout. Use numbers and counting in games such as “Hide ‘n’ Seek,” “Hopscotch,” or “Mother, May I?” Reinforce one-to-one correspondence by having each child find a partner for an activity or a game such as “Squirrels and Trees.”

Encourage children to explore **patterns and relationships** by noting the patterns on caterpillars, flowers, and leaves. Suggest making a design with the leaves or shells a child has collected. Play follow the leader and have children replicate a movement pattern such as jump, jump, clap, jump, jump, clap.

Emphasize concepts about **geometry and spatial relationships** by taking a shape walk, for example to find triangles or rectangles. Provide boxes, tubes, and other containers for children to use in building projects. When children are on the climbing equipment, use words to describe their position in space (e.g., under, over, inside, next to).

Expose children to **data collection, organization, and representation** by having them sort and classify the objects they find outdoors and making a graph where they can organize and compare the items in their collections.

Nurture children's interest in **measurement and graphing** by including string and yardsticks so they can measure the plants in their garden or the distance between structures outdoors.

Science

Guide children's development of **process skills** by posing questions such as: What would happen if . . . ? How can you find out? What did you learn? Encourage children to be good observers by showing them that you too are interested in finding out what is waiting for you each day outdoors.

Expose children to **physical science** concepts by offering them balls, ramps, tubes, water wheels, funnels, and sifters and by taking an interest in how they use these materials. Set up water tables or plastic pools so children can explore the properties of water.

Encourage children to explore **life science** by putting up bird feeders and keeping them stocked all winter; keeping pets outdoors if feasible and teaching children how to care for them; maintaining a worm farm; taking an interest in all forms of life outdoors. Collect caterpillars and study their eating habits and their life cycle. Bring out a stethoscope so children can listen to their heartbeat after running around the yard.

Promote understanding of the **earth and environment** by learning about trees and plants in your outdoor area and planting a garden with children. Explore shadows: what makes them, how they move, how long they are. Encourage children to collect all sorts of rocks and compare them; examine dirt from different locations; measure puddles after a rain and see what happens to them; collect litter and recycle. Study the seasons and the changes that occur in each one.



Social Studies

Encourage learning about **spaces and geography** by talking about distances when you take a walk (e.g., which is further, the neighborhood park or the post office); providing paper and markers so children can draw their playground.

Explore concepts related to **people and how they live** when you take walks. Identify what stores are in your neighborhood and what different kinds of houses, or visit a construction site.

Make children aware of **people and the environment** by taking a trip to a nearby river, lake, or ocean to see how people use water in the environment and to find out about pollution. Plan a project to clean up litter around the school.

The Arts

Promote growth in **dance** and **music** by encouraging children to use their bodies freely outdoors; bringing music outside so children can dance and move to the different beats; encourage children to move like different animals.

Nurture the **visual arts** by bringing paint, crayons, colored chalk, and other art materials outdoors. Encourage children to observe carefully and draw what they see—clouds in the sky, caterpillars, a flower.

Technology

Increase children's **awareness of people and technology** by talking about different tools and machines they see and use outdoors (e.g., trash trucks, pulleys, phone lines, walkie talkies, pipes and elbows, magnifying glasses, camera).

Provide **technology tools** for children to use outdoors such as binoculars, pulleys, microscopes, thermometers, magnifying glasses, cameras, and a digital camera if you have computers in your classroom.

From this sample list, you can see that the outdoor environment really does expand the opportunities for children to learn. We will build on these suggestions in the next section, where we describe in more detail the role of the teacher.



Interacting With Children Outdoors

You have a vital role to play during outdoor time each day. Your attention to what children are doing gives them the courage to try new things and take pride in their accomplishments. The outdoor environment provides a natural setting for children to learn to appreciate nature and develop a sense of responsibility for taking care of the environment. Even if your space is less than ideal, you can take children on walks and field trips to expand their world. The important messages children need to learn about the environment don't just happen; you need to make them happen.

Outdoor time can be a little intimidating for some children.

Encouraging Children to Explore and Take Risks Carefully

Outdoor time can be a little intimidating for some children. They are not quite sure what to do with such open spaces, challenging play structures, and other children, who are happy to be active and noisy outdoors. These children will need your help as well as your encouragement. Some want to feel your hand on their waist as they climb to the top of the slide or to have you stand at the bottom to catch them. Others just want to know you are nearby. You can ask, "What can I do to help you feel safe?" Climbing up one rung of the jungle gym may be as big an accomplishment for one child as climbing to the top is for another.

Sometimes a situation becomes too challenging for a child. He may get scared suddenly and ask to be helped down or off a piece of equipment. Such an incident can be an opportunity for encouraging the child to problem solve, or for simply offering help. You can use it to problem solve by first acknowledging that the situation is scary, then providing a way for the child to handle it. "It's a little scary being up so high, isn't it? Is there a way you can come down that won't feel so scary?" If you determine that the child is really scared, it is not a good time to problem solve; just help the child down. As you observe children outdoors, you will have a clearer sense of what challenges each child is ready to tackle, and you can determine the appropriate amount of encouragement a child needs to try something new.

As much as possible let children experience a sense of their own competence without relying on a teacher's praise.

Children often seek reinforcement from their teachers. "Look at me!" or "Watch what I can do!" are often heard on the playground. Some children ask for constant acknowledgment. For these children you might try saying, "Wow! You climbed to the top of the slide all by yourself. How does that make you feel?" or "I bet you're pretty proud of yourself right now." As much as possible let children experience a sense of their own competence without relying on a teacher's praise.

The one place you must always intervene is when children's safety is jeopardized. If a child is standing dangerously close to a swing, or if a child is using woodworking tools in a dangerous manner, you need to step in immediately.

Give clear, specific directions for safety purposes.

When intervening for safety purposes, be sure to give clear, specific directions. If you say, “Be careful with the hammer!” you don’t tell a child what he is doing incorrectly; you only interrupt his concentration. More to the point, if he is pounding with the wrong end, you might say, “Zack, turn the hammer over and pound with the flat side.” If you get no response, you should show him what you mean. Similarly, calling out a child’s name if she is standing in front of the slide and another child is about to slide down and hit her may not have much of an effect. She is likely to stand there and look at you, but she will not necessarily move. She will be likely to move, however, if you say, “Sonya, move out of the way. Tyrone is coming down the slide.” After the incident is over, you can remind Sonya of the rules for safe play and of what could have happened.

Nurturing Children’s Appreciation for the Natural Environment

One of the greatest benefits of taking children outdoors is the opportunity to nurture their appreciation for the natural environment. You don’t have to be a naturalist yourself to instill in children an awe of the world and a desire to discover and uncover what is around them. Even the most urban environment offers elements of nature to study and enjoy. Also, as we have noted already, you can bring nature into the environment you are given.



Today, more than ever before, including some form of environmental education in all programs for young children is vital. Children have fewer opportunities to be exposed to nature firsthand. Many children have never experienced the joy of tramping through the woods, rolling down a grassy hill, looking for life in a pond of water, digging their hands into mud, or turning over rocks to discover insects. If we want children to grow up to be people who care about preserving the environment, we have to start early to cultivate an appreciation for nature.

Teachers are models for children, especially when it comes to appreciating nature. You can nurture children’s interest in nature simply by demonstrating your own excitement and curiosity. Focus on having fun with children when you go outdoors and share your enthusiasm for making discoveries.