



Making the Most of Outdoor Time with Preschool Children

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Think back to your childhood. What did you enjoy most when you played outdoors? Maybe you made messy mud pies by the creek bed, swung on a vine, or played hide-and-seek among the willow trees. Together, play and the outdoors uniquely contribute to learning in young children.

Therefore, it is critical to look at the entire child care environment where children learn, play, and grow. This includes not only the classroom inside, but also the outdoor space. Although the field of early childhood education has defined quality in child care settings, it has given the greatest attention to indoor space, group size, teacher qualifications, and using developmentally appropriate practices with young children. Now it is time to turn our attention to the world of learning opportunities waiting outdoors.

Recent work (DeBord, Moore, Hestenes, Cosco, and McGinnis, 2002) describes five domains for consideration when planning outdoor play and learning spaces for young children. These domains include the physical outdoor environment, interactions, play and learning settings, program, and teacher/ caregiver role.

Physical Outdoor Environment

The physical outdoor environment provides a special stage for action and can stimulate children's play, learning, and physical activity. The environment includes both the context of the outdoor play area and how the childcare building and play space sit on the lot. Outdoor spaces, however, must be designed in a way that allows children to take safe risks while testing their emerging abilities. A safe, well-planned environment provides opportunities for children to seek new challenges as they master old ones.

Natural play spaces can stimulate children's imaginations and engage their sense of curiosity as they explore their physical surroundings and learn in ways beyond what they can experience indoors. Often child care programs are located in space that was designed neither for a child care program nor for outdoor learning. Certainly some barriers exist that prohibit teachers from making major changes, but envisioning an evolution of the space is critical. Changes cannot occur overnight, but certainly incremental change can be incorporated into a longrange plan.

A few factors should be considered when evaluating the space for the outdoor learning areas. Consider these questions:

1. Is the outdoor space well-integrated with the building and other areas such as the parking lot and entranceways?
2. Is there a sense of connection and flow from parking to the building entrance? And is there a flow from the exit to the play area?
3. What are the children's traffic patterns in the play yard? Do the circulation pathways make sense?
4. Are areas near the facility buffered with fencing or landscaping to provide safety and to ward off air pollution (such as dust, fumes)?
5. Does the center look welcoming and child-centered when one approaches?
6. Is there adequate drainage in the play areas so that rain does not cause soil erosion or wash away mulch?



7. Is there a long-range plan for making major adjustments, such as changing the orientation of the play space (how the play yard faces or is planned) or redrawing the pathways for walkers and pedalers?
8. Does the area have an overall warm, natural feel?
9. Does the placement of manufactured play equipment overwhelm and focus play in only one location?

Teaching Example

After attending a seminar about outdoor learning, the teacher in the 3- to 4-year-old classroom decided that several small changes could be made without a huge budget. The changes would make the play space more inviting and maximize the use of the area. After competitively pricing the items, the teacher proposed this budget to the center administrator:

Wooden benches
6 stepping stones
2 large tubs for water play
Potting soil
Supplies to make bird feeders
Old tires and paint for planters
Materials to make giant wind chimes
Fabric for banner
Clothesline/clothespins for art display

\$40.00
\$15.00
\$15.00
\$8.00
\$6.00
\$5.00
\$5.00
\$5.00
\$3.00

Total
\$100.00



Interactions

Children learn social skills by interacting with other children, with adults, and even with objects and natural materials found in the environment. The environment can serve a valuable purpose when it is set up to expose children to opportunities to explore, question, and develop theories about how things work. Negotiation, language, and cooperation are all skills that develop through diverse opportunities. Adults who are overly intrusive or not involved at all with children are not able to notice what children want to explore and learn about in their surroundings.

Here are some key questions to consider in assuring your play space provides opportunities for interactions:

1. Is the site safe and scaled to a child's size?
2. Is outdoor time maximized through an intentional, well-planned approach to arranging the space and using the time?
3. Does the program create a positive tone supporting a child's natural curiosity in playing outdoors?
4. Are there opportunities for children to encounter each other (on a bench, along a pathway intersection, in a play store, or on a puppet stage)?
5. Do children have the freedom to select safe materials to use outdoors to build upon their natural sense of exploration?
6. Does this outdoor space offer enough choices for children?
7. Are there adult-sized places for parents and other visitors to interact with children?
8. Do child and adult *interactions* seem natural and relaxed, allowing for more creative approaches to learning and problem solving?
9. Are adults following the lead of the child?

Play and Learning Settings

Play and learning settings are defined spaces that support specific activities or groups of activities with specific toys or play materials. Examples might include an active play area, a storytelling circle, a sand and water play area, a tricycle path, a vegetable garden, and/or a puppet theater.

Here are a few key questions for planning play and learning settings:

- Is there an array of play and learning settings within the outdoor physical play space? If only large equipment is available for outdoor play, children's experiences and opportunities for well-rounded development are severely limited. Boredom and negative social behavior may result.
- Is there adequate storage for outdoor play items?
- Are there enough materials to eliminate potential arguing over supplies or toys?
- Are there constructed play settings, such as a stage, deck, playhouse, sound wall,¹ or animal habitats?
- Are there natural "loose parts,"² such as acorns, pine cones, vegetables, or shells?



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- Are there manufactured “loose parts,” such as blocks, balls, digging utensils, sand and water toys, pieces of cloth, or chalk?
 1. A sound wall is a collection of devices, such as pots, pans, metal tubing, triangles, or bamboo that make various tones and sounds. These items are generally hung freely at the child’s level so that children can use them to explore sound.
 2. Loose parts help children manipulate their environment to stimulate imaginary and dramatic play. These parts may include a wide variety of small natural and synthetic items, such as sticks and stones, bottle tops and Popsicle sticks, and sand and dirt, as well as larger items, such as logs, wheeled toys, tires, large blocks, and boards.

Teaching Example

One spring, the teacher noticed that the children were very curious about nature. They picked up worms, they heard the spring birds singing, they picked the first crocuses of the season, and they warmed their shoulders in the sun. To build upon their curiosity, the teacher decided to place several items about the play yard to encourage exploration. He placed plenty of small shovels and seed packets by the four tire gardens, placed several other buckets and shovels near a dirt pile, put magnifying glasses and collecting trays on the picnic table, and placed five sets of binoculars and bird books on the deck. As the children rotated around the play area, teachers asked questions about what the children were noticing or making.

A collecting tray is any tray—even a plastic microwave dinner tray—in which children can collect things like twigs, leaves, or bugs.

Program

The outdoor space is an extension of the classroom and should be considered another space for learning. The outdoor program should address the child as a whole (physically, emotionally, cognitively, and socially). Teachers who understand children’s developmental needs and who recognize their curiosities offer many opportunities for children to learn about themselves, each other, and their environment. Teachers may include planned activities, as well as let ideas emerge from interactions that occur while outside. Teachers who closely observe children playing and learning, and who listen to see what children are inquiring about, are better able to plan an effective program. They can use the outdoors effectively as a learning space by preparing it to maximize learning opportunities. Diverse



settings within the environment extend child investigation, encourage spontaneous exploration and movement, and enrich interactions. Diverse materials provide children with stimuli for new discoveries and new ways of expressing themselves.

Here are a few key points for teachers to consider when planning an outdoor learning program for young children:

1. Does the program allow children to choose from activities and materials that are rotated for a variety of experiences?
2. Are choices provided beyond playing extensively on basic, anchored equipment and open play areas? Diverse choices help children learn problem solving.
3. Are teachers facilitating play and learning while also ensuring safety rather than directing the children's play, intruding on their play, or judging their ideas?
4. Are outdoor special events and seasonal activities planned to enhance children's connection with the regional culture and the environment (plants, animals, meteorological phenomena, customs)?
5. Has consideration been given to each curriculum area (such as art, music, science, language, math) to be explored outside?

Teaching Example

Two teachers planned a picnic outside, but when they began to eat, the children noticed that there were ants. Instead of picking up the blanket and moving the group, the teachers let the children encounter the ants and listened intently to their questions. The teachers decided to build upon their curiosity by planning to capture their questions on a large easel and to discuss their comments the next day. They also planned to bring in large picture books about insects and to provide clay to children who wanted to make their own ant models. These experiences might lead to building an ant farm or other projects.

Teacher/Caregiver Role

Teachers of young children who apply what they know about children's development are better able to create effective outdoor programs. Teachers who are either uninvolved or too intrusive, judgmental, or focused on rules limit the creative learning opportunities that children seek. It is the role of the teacher to think ahead and to prepare the space for children's play and learning.

Teachers who are willing to explore and have a personal sense of wonder are better able to engage children in the world. Responsive teachers ask open-ended questions to stretch the ability of children to wonder even further and to learn by testing the limits of thinking and problem solving through trial and error.

Some considerations for teachers include:

1. How do teachers incorporate outdoor play and learning as a regular part of the program and daily schedule?



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2. Are teachers learning how to establish quality outdoor play and learning environments?
3. Are teachers planning particular and intentional opportunities for outdoors that build on children's interests, potential to learn, and curiosity?
4. Do teachers refrain from overuse of teacher-led activities that limit the possibilities for individuals, pairs, or larger groups of children to engage in their own self-directed learning?
5. How are teachers missing opportunities to engage with children in play and learning activities by being involved in unrelated tasks (like reading a novel or a newspaper)?

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