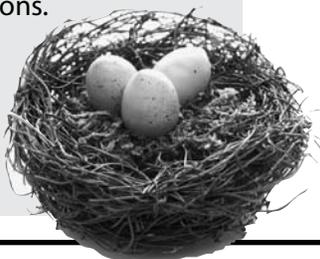


Outdoor Spaces

Nature has given us the gift of beautiful, exciting, outdoor spaces, but are we using it? Our role as early childhood practitioners is to be sure outdoor spaces are safe, thought-provoking, and are able to meet children's developmental needs – and fun!

Safe Space

Carefully walk through your outdoor space and check all vegetation, terrain, equipment, materials, and boundaries for safe play. Toddlers will need constant supervision as they are becoming mobile and are unaware of many dangers. Preschoolers are adventurous and will need freedom to explore and move, but also need close supervision. Review and plan for all safety precautions.



Think about it:

Although children should have outdoor time everyday, research suggests that American children, on average, are spending only 30 minutes of unstructured time outdoors each week. Spending time outdoors is said to lower stress levels, encourage the opportunity for physical exercise, and build strong immune systems (not to mention a sense of wonder!).

Thoughtful Space

A good way to plan thoughtful outdoor space is to identify permanent spaces and temporary spaces: What already exists in your outdoor space and how can it be used? What could temporarily be added to enhance outdoor space?

Permanent spaces:

Open areas – Is there is enough room for all children to move around comfortably?

Natural elements – Have a variety: grass, trees, shrubs, plants, etc.

Building places – Offer areas where children can build with nature's treasures, such as sticks, rocks, leaves, pinecones, and snow.

Quiet sitting area – Use grass, stumps, large rocks, benches, or chairs for sitting. Quiet areas should be away from the busier activities.

Nature and weather observation stations - Create an area with a good view of the sky for weather watching and space for nature observations. Offer tools such as magnifying glasses, binoculars, paper towel rolls for telescopes, hand shovels, various containers for collections, and bird feeders. For weather, offer materials such as a rain gauge, measuring cups, wind chimes, or streamers (to see which way the wind is blowing), homemade sun dials, and thermometers. Consider journals, paper, and pencil to record ideas and possibly stumps, decks, or climbers to allow for higher views of observing.

Meeting place - Create a meeting place for reading a story, having discussions, and coming together as a group.

Great Outdoor resources:

Children and Nature Network <http://www.childrenandnature.org/>

National Wildlife Federation: Be Out There <http://www.nwf.org/Get-Outside/Be-Out-There.aspx>

PA ECELS- Healthy Child Care www.ecels-healthychildcarepa.org , Safety Checklist for Active Play Areas <http://www.ecels-healthychildcarepa.org/content/Safety%20Checklist%20for%20Active%20Play%20Areas.pdf>

Temporary spaces:

Garden area (seasonal)

Add planter pots with easy-to-grow seeds, plants, shrubs, and vegetables that are safe for young children. Create a vegetable garden with children if you have the space and time.



Water play

Plastic bins, buckets, funnels, plastic piping, hoses, plastic gutters, spray bottles, paint brushes, sponges, etc. all can be kept in a large plastic bin, preferably with a lid.

Tents, "caves," and cool small spaces

Interesting spaces can be created from tarps or blankets draped over areas, large cardboard boxes, or the undergrowth of a pine tree. Children love interesting nooks.



Mud play



Set up an area where children, with supervision, can dig in the dirt and add water to make mud. It should be in an area close to clean-up supplies and away from busy play. Give children clear rules before mud play, such as where the mud may be taken and what toys may be used.

Art area

Bring an easel and paints outdoors or set up water colors on a table or sidewalk. Provide a box of art materials to create nature collages and sketches.



Tip:

Wading pools can spread germs. Early Childhood Linkage System (ECELS) suggest sprinklers and individual water play containers instead of wading pools. Whenever infants and toddlers are in or around water, an adult should be no more than an arm's length away, close enough to provide touch supervision.

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