XV. THE OUTDOORS

Children at Play: The Outdoors

The outdoor environment includes not just play areas but also parks, neighborhoods, lakes, and small gardens. It is an exciting place where children can learn and grow.

Children show a natural enthusiasm and curiosity when they play outside. In space that is not enclosed by four walls, things are always changing. Here, children can learn in all the developmental areas, and teachers can enhance their growth through observation, interaction, and planned activities.

Weather is an important feature of the outdoors. It can be experienced by children during every season. Young people love to be outside in the rain or during a snowstorm (it is often the adults who are skeptical about going out in harsh weather).

Any outdoor area can become an exciting space for children. Watching baby birds leave their nest, rolling in grass, smelling the air after a spring rain, and watching the snow melt are all fascinating outdoor experiences. Even indoor activities can be brought outside and experienced in a different way. Hearing a story about a windy day while sitting under a tree when the wind is blowing is different from hearing that same story indoors. The outdoors add textures, colors, smells, and sounds to all activities. It provides a concrete link to nature and awakens the senses.

The outdoor environment also adds balance to the day. It is healthy for both children and their teachers to breathe fresh air, feel the weather, enjoy the freedom of open space, and use muscles in a new ways. Movement and a change of atmosphere reduce stress.

Using both the outdoors and indoors as a classroom builds a bridge between the two environments. An empty bird's nest brought indoors offers children the chance to touch it, study how it is built, and learn more about birds through books. Taking paint, crayons, trucks, or water outside allows children to experience them in new ways. The difference between drawing with crayons on paper at a table and doing the same activity while sitting on the sidewalk is exciting to children; it also offers teachers a chance to teach new concepts and

expand children's language. Teachers are often surprised at the skills children use outside skills that they have not noticed children using in the classroom.

Impact on Developmental Areas

All areas of a child's development are enhanced through interacting with the outdoor environment. This includes physical development, social skills and cultural knowledge, and emotional and intellectual development.

Physical Development

The outdoors can be the site of many exciting activities and learning opportunities for children; however, for a majority of children, its most important role is to stimulate physical growth and development. Physical education activities also give children an opportunity to be social, learn rules, learn interdependence, develop self-confidence, grow intellectually, and solve problems. A planned program for physical exercise is an important part of the early childhood program.

The outside environment invites large muscle development. The freedom of space offers children a natural opportunity to run, skip, jump, and move their entire bodies in uninhibited ways. Basic playground equipment encourages climbing, the development of upper- and lower-body strength, balance, and coordination.

Small motor skills are also developed as children dig in sand and dirt, pour water, pick up and collect stones, leaves, or other small objects, and play outdoor games like marbles.

When outdoors, children become aware of how their bodies operate in different spaces by feeling what it's like to be on top of a climber, to swing high on the swings, to crawl through a tunnel, or to roll in autumn leaves.

Physical strength, coordination, balance, and endurance are slowly developed with daily practice. The outdoor environment offers a special place for children to build these skills.

The physical skills that older children need for sports and physical activities can be learned and practiced in the early years. It is important that these skills be learned in a fun, noncompetitive manner so the children learn to enjoy sports and feel comfortable participating. Avoid games where one person or group

wins and one loses. Children who continuously lose at games or competitions often do not feel good about their abilities and will soon stop participating. The goal of physical education for young children is to develop skills and a life-long interest in being physically active.

Physical development occurs at a different pace in each individual. Some four-year-olds can skip easily, while others may not skip until they are five or six. Some may be able to jump and catch a ball easily while others may only be able to catch a very large ball or to roll a ball back and forth. Teachers must observe children's developmental level and plan activities appropriately.

The Development of Social Skills and Cultural Knowledge

The outdoor environment naturally encourages interactions among children as well as between adults and children. "Outside voices" are allowed, and singing and shouting provide different ways of interacting. Some children who are quiet inside may be more gregarious out of doors. Because the atmosphere changes between the outside and inside, teachers are able to observe children in different social situations and to learn more about them.

Children build their social skills as they negotiate with others for tricycles or for a turn on the swing and as they play outdoor games. Negotiation skills are learned when trading the tricycle for the wagon. Children learn to compromise when they have to take turns, "It's my turn to fly the kite; you've been playing with it a long time." Cooperation is learned as children push each other on the swings, fill a pail with sand, pull a wagon, and play on the climbing equipment. Through these activities, children make friends and enjoy each other in a relaxed atmosphere.

Children learn about their community by taking walks, visiting a fire house, asking about a dump truck, seeing a person in a wheelchair, or talking to the mail carrier.

Emotional Development

Mastering the many challenges offered in the outdoor environment enables children to develop positive self-esteem. Children feel good about themselves when they reach the top of a slide, see a plant grow from the seed they planted, or build a wooden structure with some friends.

Confidence is built in the out of doors. Children realize what their bodies can do and how to control their movements. They come to feel good about themselves as their confidence in their new physical skills grows.

Trust in self and others is fostered through real-life experiences. A child who needs help getting down from the swing has to learn to ask for it and then to trust it when it is offered.

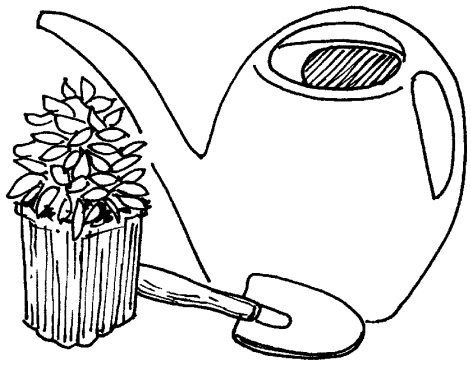
The dramatic play that takes place outdoors helps children reenact life experiences much as it does inside. However, because outdoor space is less restrictive, dramatic play can focus on different things such as pretending to travel using roads, tricycles, signs, boats, planes, trucks, spaceships, and their imaginations.

Talking about feelings also can happen naturally in the outdoor environment. For some children, sitting on a swing with a teacher makes it easier to talk about why he or she feels bad or good. Joy, anger, and competition are sometimes more easily given voice to out-of-doors.

The outside environment fosters an appreciation of beauty. Children learn through all of their senses: They enjoy the smell of flowers, the feel of dirt, the sound of crickets, and the comfort of sun on their faces. This appreciation leads to environmental awareness.

Intellectual Development

Children learn through direct interaction with objects and ideas. The outdoor environment offers teachers the opportunity to reinforce concepts such as colors, numbers, shapes, and sizes. There are many natural colors outdoors for children to observe (leaves, flowers, sky, buildings). There are objects to count and categorize (the number of flowers that have bloomed since yesterday, the number of pieces of litter that need to be picked up in the playground, and how many times the swings go back and forth).



Some concepts are taught more naturally outdoors than indoors. The wonders of science can be observed directly. The changing of the seasons can be documented every day. Clouds moving in to produce a rainstorm can be observed, as can squirrels burying nuts. Planting, watering, and weeding a garden throughout the summer teach the concepts of cause and effect, principles of growth, names of new tools, plants, colors, and shapes.

Children learn to observe and analyze outdoor situations. The interactions of nature are questioned and basic intellectual skills are challenged. When children ask, "Why is the snowman smaller?" they learn about temperature changes and evaporation.

Language development is expanded in the outdoor environment. There are so many things to look at, touch, smell, and be curious about that children naturally want to talk and hear about them.

The outdoor environment enables children to expand their imagination and creativity. They engage in dramatic play, a way of helping them understand the world. While swinging, children may pretend they are flying. While riding on their tricycle, they act out driving a truck. These opportunities to stretch, move, touch, feel, smell, and experience the outdoor environment help children develop.

By thinking of the outdoor environment as another classroom, teachers can provide opportunities for children to grow in all the developmental areas.

Setting Up the Outdoor Environment

Ensuring Children's Safety

Safety should be the primary concern in looking at the play area that already exists or in designing a new one. Below are some things to consider when analyzing play spaces for safety:

- Is the area laid out so that a teacher or volunteer can see the children at all times?
- Is there an area where children can be by themselves and engage in quiet activities?
- Is there soft ground cover under swings, climbing toys, and slides?
- Are the boundaries of the play area well-defined?
- Is there enough equipment so that children don't have to stand in line for a place to play?
- Are all drainage areas, electrical wires, and other hazardous equipment well-covered?

- Is there a water fountain and a bathroom available?
- Is there first-aid kit nearby to handle minor scratches and cuts?

Need for Supervision

Supervising children while they play outdoors is the best way to guarantee their safety.

To ensure that outdoor activities are safe, use guidelines such as the following:

- Assign an adult to the active area of the play space. (This area includes climbing equipment, slides and swings, and the building area.)
- Do not actively participate in the activities, but rather watch carefully and interact with the children.
- Designate an adult to watch the children in the sand and water area as well as on the tricycle path.
- Do not use outdoor play time for adults to rest; rather, it is a time to stimulate children's learning.

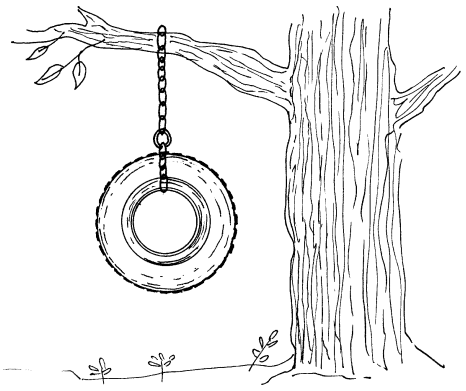
Teach children about safety both in the classroom and while they are outdoors. Encourage them to think about safety and to take personal responsibility for it.

Playing Areas

The outdoor environment, like the indoor environment, requires careful planning. An ideal outdoor play area has several different types of play spaces that are inviting to children and that stimulate them to learn in a variety of ways.

Be sure that the traffic patterns among the outdoor areas are easy to follow and safe so that children are not running into each other. If areas are not clear, put up signs, rope the areas off with string, or have adults give instructions. Having clearly designated areas will help avoid accidents, confusion, and hurt feelings.

Climbing Area



Most playgrounds have some type of climbing equipment. Children of all ages love this area. Younger children may climb only a little way off the ground, while older children may climb to the top and swing "like a monkey."

It is important to allow children to learn at their own pace and not force them to go beyond their ability. Most accidents occur in this area, so it must be well-supervised and have a soft ground cover, if possible.

Equipment found in the climbing area may include:

Hanging bars
Jungle gyms
Logs
Obstacle courses
Over/under platforms and bridges
Ramps
Slides
Swings
Teeter-totters/seesaws
Tire structures.
Trees
Tunnels
Wooden climbing structures

Digging, Water Play, and Mud Area

This part of the playground needs to be large enough so several children can comfortably play either alone or together. It is ideal to have this area close to a water supply. If you have no outside faucets or water fountains, haul water in plastic jugs. Putting the jugs in a wagon and letting the children help pull them is an entertaining and educational way to transport water.

Cleanliness is an important consideration for the sandbox. If possible, have a locking top over the box. This will stop cats and other animals from using it as a litter box. If you do not have a lid, rake the sandbox each day before it is used and discard any garbage.

Basic sand, water, and mud toys include:

- Plastic and metal buckets, bowls, and pails with handles
- Shovels, spoons, and scoops of all sizes

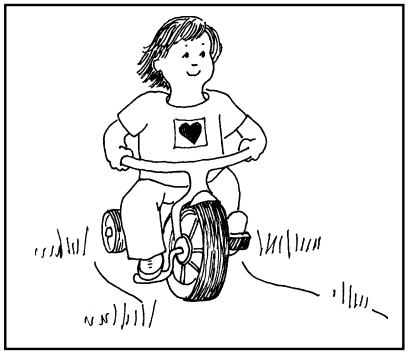
- Old trucks, cars, fire engines, trains
- Funnels, sifters
- Pans and molds
- A wheelbarrow
- Small cardboard boxes
- Old wooden or plastic blocks
- Natural objects like shells, sticks, stones, or leaves.

Transportation Area

This is the only area in the outdoor environment that should have a hard surface. Riding or pulling on a hard surface is easier for children as they learn to balance, pedal, negotiate turns, start, and stop.

Using the riding areas builds large-motor strength and allows children to practice balance. The transportation area is also a place that is used for dramatic play. Encourage this by adding hats, signs, or dress-up clothes. If the children are interested in hospitals, put red crosses on a tricycle or wagon and bring out hospital props. This will encourage them to act out their feelings and think about adult roles.

Be sure to include riding toys for children of all ages. Wagons, tricycles, and pull toys are appropriate for younger children, while bicycles, scooters, and skates are suitable for older children.



Falling over is the major hazard in this area. Have a first-aid kit on hand. Some accidents can be avoided if the area is well marked. Chalk, moveable signs, arrows indicating "One Way," and use of adult monitors will help children avoid running into each other.

The transportation area may also be used for other activities, such as balls, jump ropes, hopscotch, or art activities. These activities should not be done while wheel toys are being used.

Quiet Area

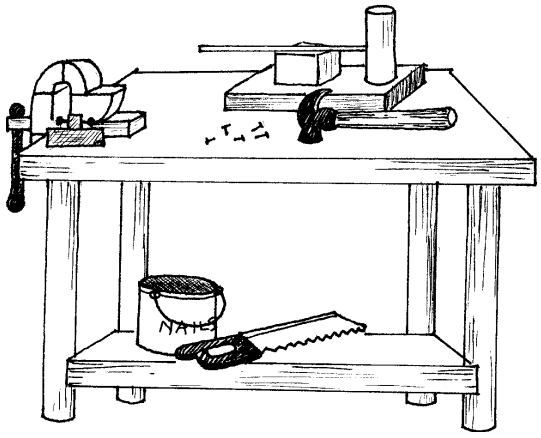
Every outdoor area needs a quiet space. If possible, part of this area in the shade so children can cool off. Ground covers can be brought from the classroom for children to sit and lie down on.

This area should have rotating activities. Some, like relaxation or imagery, require no props or materials. Others may require teacher preparation and planning. Some of the prepared activities may include coloring, reading books, collecting objects, and listening to music. This may also be the area where group games can be played.

Some of the basic materials needed for the quiet area include:

- A blanket or towels to sit on
- Chalk
- Measuring sticks and games.
- Paper
- Science objects (e.g., magnifying glasses)
- Books
- Crayons
- Paints and easels
- Picnic and snack foods

Woodworking Area



A woodworking activity center can be set up both inside and outside. In either case, it should be in an out-of-the-way place so the children and materials will not be disturbed.

Children often spend their whole outdoor time in this area. This area needs careful supervision, since children will use tools. Careful instruction, rules for using tools, and supervision by adults will help avoid accidents.

This area challenges children's creativity. Language is developed and children are challenged to develop small and large muscles.

Some materials you may want in the woodworking area include:

- Blocks
- Cross-cut saws
- Packing and other cardboard boxes
- Saber saws
- Short ladders
- Wire spools
- Boards
- Hammers and large-headed nails
- Packing boxes
- Scrap pieces of soft wood.
- Steering wheels
- Wood sawhorses

Garden Area

Planting seeds and watching things grow is a wonderful learning experience. Look around the outdoor space you have available and see if there is a small, sunny area where the children can plant a garden or grow flowers.

Materials needed for a garden include:

- Several sets of garden tools
- A wheelbarrow
- Seeds or plants
- Bags of dirt and fertilizer
- Access to water
- Watering cans, hoses
- String and wood to mark off the rows

Storage

Depending on the configuration of outdoor space, the nature of any built-in equipment, and ease of access to the classroom, teachers may have to transport some materials daily from the inside to the outside area. The ideal situation is to have a storage shed. Assembling a shed can be a wonderful activity for the children to be involved in. Sheds can be built by volunteers, parents, senior citizen groups, or a nearby industrial arts class. If a shed is available, a basic set of outdoor toys can be stored in it. If the shed is built of wood, it can serve as a built-in easel and can give the children a chance to "paint" it with large paint brushes and buckets of water.

Summary

The areas discussed are ones that all outdoor environments should have. However, all programs may not have enough room or enough resources for every one of these spaces. If everything is not possible, alternate some of the outdoor activities from day to day. For example, you can use the riding area for woodworking and the quiet area for group games.

The Teaching Team's Role

Playing outdoors should be part of each day's schedule. Teachers should plan for outdoor experiences as they do for indoor experiences. Schedule outdoor time for the same time each day so that it becomes a routine.

This can be accomplished by carefully planning the transition times as well as the outdoor activities. Plan approximately forty-five minutes for the whole process. This should allow enough time for children to get ready, walk to the outdoor play space, get involved in several activities, and return to the classroom. As the children become familiar with the routine of getting ready to go out, the transition will go more smoothly.

Be flexible so that you can take advantage of outdoor opportunities. It is wonderful and magical to take a walk during the first snowfall. On a hot summer day, it's fun to go out and play in the sprinkler for the afternoon or surprise the children with a picnic under the trees.

When scheduling outdoor activities, several factors should be considered. If classrooms are divided by age, three-year-olds should go outside later in the morning if possible; it is warmer outside, and they will be more comfortable. Consideration also has to be given to the number of other classrooms using the outdoor space. Schedules may have to be staggered; another option is to join two classes.

It is important for teachers to discuss the scheduling with other teachers ahead of time to ensure children's safety as well as optimum use of the outdoor space. The teaching team can also plan with other teachers how to transport materials.

Special Considerations for Outdoor Activity

Weather

Unlike the indoor environment, the outdoors is constantly changing and weather influences outdoor activities. The basic rules regarding the weather are to be flexible and to use common sense.

Children need to experience all types of weather. Some programs cancel outside time completely when the weather is not "perfect." However, a walk in a warm spring rain shower is the time to listen to raindrops on an umbrella, smell the fresh air, and learn about flowers. Outside time can be extended on a warm, sunny day or shortened on a blustery day. Be reasonable, but daring. All weather can be enjoyed.

Clothes

If children and adults are going to enjoy the outdoors in all seasons, they must be appropriately dressed. When you explain the program to families, tell them that the children will go outdoors each day unless the weather conditions do not permit. Newsletters or parent conferences can be used to emphasize the importance of outside play. It is important for parents to know about outdoor play ahead of time, so they are not surprised when a child comes home talking about walking in the rain.

Each child should have a set of clothes for each season. Occasions on which children bring in the new season's clothes and take home the old season's clothes can be good teaching tools. As the season begins to change, talk about the next season's weather, and have children make a list of what they will need and why they can take some clothes home. Send a list home with the children requesting the next season's set of clothes. Children may need jackets, sweaters, hats, mittens, boots, swimming suits, towels, raincoats, rubbers, and umbrellas. Each program should have extras, in case someone doesn't have something.

Teacher should have extra clothes for outside play, too. Teachers often get cold before the children do because they are less active. Finally, when inviting parents or other adults to participate in an outdoor activity, be sure to inform them of what type of clothes to wear.

Other Considerations

Some children may be afraid to go outside; others may be incapable of becoming fully involved in outdoor activities because of illness or a disability.

Children who are afraid of dogs, or something else outdoors, should be encouraged to join the others outside while receiving the special support of an adult. Never force them to go out. Allow them to stay inside and play if they want too. Eventually, most children who have fears of the outdoors will feel comfortable enough to join the others.

Often, children with health conditions can go outside, but may not be able to do all the outdoor activities. Teachers have to make sure they have planned a variety of activities. It is also important to talk to the child's parents to find out exactly what they allow the child to do. Careful planning ensures that children with a range of abilities can enjoy the outdoors. Children who have health conditions that absolutely prohibit them from going outside should be given an opportunity to engage in indoor activities of interest to them. It is best if some other children also stay in so the child does not feel so different.

Expanding Children's Learning in the Outdoors

The key to expanding children's learning outside is to:

- Observe what interests the children.
- Catch a teachable moment.
- Ask open-ended questions.
- Provide the vocabulary to describe new things.
- Be curious about things yourself.

The outdoor environment offers a rich opportunity to catch the teachable moment. "Why," "how," and "where" questions allow children to think about what they see, to answer your questions, and to ask questions themselves. Many times children will not have the vocabulary to describe what they see. The teacher can give them the words to use. For example, in planting the garden, the children may become interested in the different sizes of seeds and how they will grow. Their questions offer the teacher a whole range of teaching responses: from learning the names of the flowers and vegetables to measuring the seeds and developing a chart so they can follow the growth of the plants and compare them with the original size of the seeds.

Children will always ask questions that you may not know the answer to. Finding the answers to unknown questions is part of the challenge of teaching. By telling the children you do not know the answer but will find out, they learn two things. It tells them that no one, even teachers, have all the answers. It also allows them to learn how to find answers to questions. A trip to the library or looking through science books can be an enjoyable learning experience for everyone.

Intervening in Children's Outdoor Play

The outdoor area is a busy place. Children are often intensely engaged in building a space shuttle in the woodworking area, creating a gas station in the riding area, and weeding the garden. It is easy for the teacher to intervene and say such things as, "Ivan, be careful with the hammer" or "Eva, don't you think you've climbed high enough?"

It is instinctive to be protective of children as they try new skills and take risks. This is particularly true outdoors, where there is a lot of activity and children are moving from one area to the next. Teachers learn to trust children and let them explore. Children know when they need help and will usually ask for it.

The basic rule of intervening in children's outdoor play is, therefore, **not** to intervene unless it is necessary for safety reasons. Especially when children are playing on equipment, they have to concentrate, think, and problem solve, and any interruption disturbs their concentration.

When you do intervene for a reason of safety, be sure to give clear specific directions. Yelling, "Klara, watch out!" will not help Klara understand she is in danger of being hit. Saying, "Klara, move back, Tibor is coming on his bike!" will help her understand and move out of the way of the bike.

Many adults are overprotective because of fears that carry over from their childhood. If you believe that this is a problem for you, make a record of each time you intervene in the children's play for "their own safety." Then look at it and determine whether it was appropriate or not. If you are uncomfortable watching children climb on the jungle gym, maybe you could supervise a less active area.

Helping Children Share and Take Turns

Children often argue about whose turn it is to ride the bike, use the hammer, or go down the slide next. Even when there are enough toys for everyone, someone will be upset. It is best to let children solve these problems themselves. If not, a good solution is to use a kitchen timer. Set the time for a specified period (usually not more than five minutes.) When the timer goes off, the next child can use the toy. This method offers a concrete explanation of time. Children can understand it, watch it, and hear it.

Having Fun with Children Outdoors

The outdoor environment lends itself to having fun. It is less formal than the indoors and teachers can relax more. It's fun to be outside with children and listen to their explanations of the world. It's enjoyable to teach them new things and answer their questions about natural things. Children love to play games with teachers.

Children feel comfortable asking teachers questions or talking about themselves while sitting under a tree or setting the picnic table. Children are

curious about the teachers and can ask them questions about where they live and what their kitty's name is. Children and teachers can giggle together or make up jokes or songs as they walk to the park. This informal time makes children feel special and important.

Activities and Projects

The activities that children engage in and learn from in the outdoors are limitless. Many can be expanded and changed as the seasons and children's interests evolve.

Dramatic Play

The climbing area encourages language development, social interactions, and dramatic play. Some children will be quiet on the climbing equipment, because they are concentrating so hard on getting their body to do what they want it to. Others will comfortably climb all over, pretending that they are mountain climbers or explorers.

Imaginations are alive outside. There are places to be active and places to sit and watch others. Usually few materials are needed to encourage dramatic play: a blanket, a hat, or a board can transform climbing equipment into a jungle or a space craft.

Digging and Water and Mud Play

The sandbox area is a wonderful space for children to learn and explore. Cities, castles, rivers, towers, and even gourmet meals, are made and destroyed in one play period. Small children sit and watch it sift through their fingers. Walking on sand, either in bare feet or with shoes on, offers children a challenge in balance and footing. Young children love to shovel sand into buckets. Be sure the buckets have handles so they can be carried from place to place.

Adding toy cars, dump trucks, trains, boats, and other vehicles to the sandbox provides the opportunity to design highways, buildings, fishing villages, and construction areas. Children can use bowls, sticks, and plates for igloos, fishing poles, or flying saucers. Any child-safe object that is big enough to find again in the sand can be brought to the area.

If the sand is dry, or if you want to add another dimension to the area, bring some water to the play area. The water makes the sand stick together and lets the children build more elaborate roads and structures. In the spring, you may

not have to add water. During or after a rain, children can observe the rain patterns in the sand, see how far down the rain was absorbed, make rivers, and watch the water flow.

In the winter, digging in the snow and sand adds to the fun. Tunnels, bridges, and giant pizzas can be made with snow and sand. Bowls left in the sandbox with water can be watched for ice formations and for melting. Sand and snow structures can be watered down and frozen. In the fall, the sand area will be cluttered with different objects that the wind sweeps in each day. These can be collected and used for building, left in place for the next day, or taken inside to the science table. All these objects are starting points for teachers to encourage children to watch and observe their environment and nature.

A word about mud. Its texture is very different from that of sand, and children should have the opportunity to feel it and play in it. Mud is usually available in the spring after a warm rain. If you have a garden space that hasn't been planted, let children walk in it. They love to feel and watch the mud squish between their toes and cover their feet. Mud pies and cakes are fun, too. Making them is messy, and you may want to set this activity up for a summer day when the children are wearing their bathing suits.

Don't avoid mud because it's messy! It is fun and uses all the senses.

Art

Creative art projects can be done outdoors. For example, foot and toe painting are great fun. You can either use long paper for the children to walk, run, skip, or draw on with their toes, or let them use the sidewalk or asphalt. Mix the paint with liquid soap and it comes off easily. Finger and brush painting are fun to do outside. The texture of the pavement, grass, or sand adds a new dimension to the activity. Brushes and paper of many sizes can also be used. The size of the outdoor space easily enables children to work together on large projects. Using large house-painting brushes and water is fun on a warm day. Children can "paint" the building or trees. Bring old paint cans and painter's hats. In the winter, take out brushes and water with food coloring in it and paint pictures on the snow, or decorate snow and ice sculptures you've made.

Real paint and brushes can be brought out to the building area so children can paint their creations. Be sure you use latex paint, and make the children wear "paint clothes" or coveralls.

Water play is another art activity. It can be done in the quiet area or the riding area when it is not being used. A hose and sprinkler will add laughter and coolness to a hot summer day. Water and bubbles are a winning combination

with children. Straws and pans of water with soap provide lots of fun. Other things to consider bringing outside for art experiences include:

- Glue and paper for natural collages
- Clay
- Large and small colored and white chalk
- Easels and paint
- Crayons and paper
- Materials to make kites
- Sponges to use with paint and water
- String and wire to make wind chimes
- Water to turn snow sculpture into ice sculptures

Science

Along with the planned science activities that are part of the curriculum, everything in the outdoors is science. Take time to look at water running in the gutter after the rain. Throw a stone and a leaf in the water and watch what happens. Show children the new growth on tree branches or the effect of sun and water on the siding of a house.

When planning the outdoor environment, include things for the children to use that encourage scientific exploration. Examples include measuring tapes, yardsticks, magnifying glasses, collection cups, binoculars, string, and science books.

Physical Activities

Activities that develop fundamental motor skills for young children include:

Moving. Helping children to move their body in all types of ways. Activities include moving like animals, moving fast, moving on one foot, stretching, moving with a partner, moving to music or rhymes, moving slow, moving like a truck—let your imagination go!

Running. Variants include free running outside, running like animals, running to a target, or in pairs.

Jumping. Jumping is a wonderful outdoor activity—teachers should follow the children's lead. Children can jump over boards on the ground, jump from one circle to another, follow footsteps, turn as they jump to the rhythm of

music, jump like animals, jump off low objects (sturdy boxes), jumping on two feet, jump on one foot, or jump with a partner.

Throwing a Ball. Young children should practice throwing and catching large (5" diameter), soft balls. Older children can use smaller balls. Kicking a ball is a fun outdoor activity and children can practice kicking at a target. Children can toss balls as high as they can, catch them with two hands or one hand, or play catch with a partner. Bouncing balls of all sizes increases eye-hand coordination; tossing bean bags at small targets is also appropriate. Rolling balls inside in a circle game is an enjoyable activity.

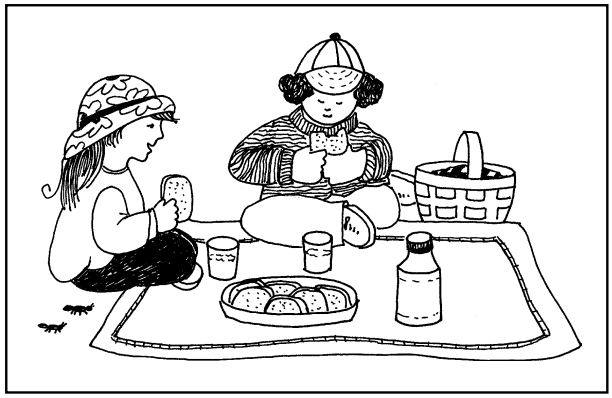
Obstacle Courses. Obstacle courses to climb through, climb over, hop over, roll through are fun for all children. Adults and/or children can create obstacle courses together. These can be created either indoors or outdoors, as space and equipment permit. Teachers must be present to assist children and to monitor safety. Obstacle courses can be simple or complex, depending on the interest and developmental level of the children.

Games. Young children like games, and the best games are those in which all the children are actively involved. Circles games where only one child is "it" can be frustrating for children, because they have to wait for a turn. Good choices involve games that include the whole group. Teachers modify traditional games to make them more participatory. For example, a game of tag may have several people who are "it" so that more children are involved.

Quiet Activities

Create a quiet place for children to cool off, or be by themselves. Children and adults can sit and talk. Teachers can lead activities like yoga, reading, and role-playing. Activities like counting branches, watching ants, or feeling the wind are all fun. Singing and music can be nice quiet activities. Teachers and children can sing and make up songs together or sing the old favorites. Children will come in and out of the quiet area during the time they are outside. In addition, the quiet area is a good place to gather the children and do a quiet activity to calm them down before returning to the classroom.

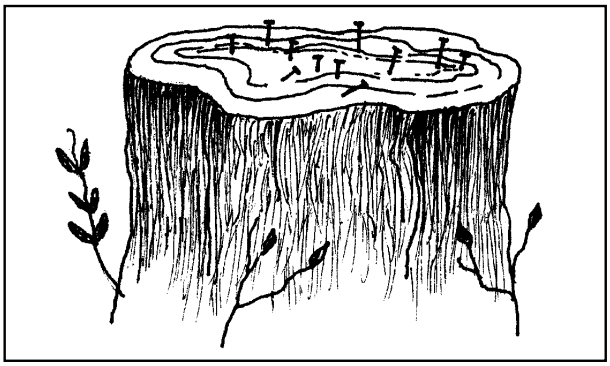
Eating Outdoors



Both children and adults enjoy a picnic in the park or a surprise snack outside. Make sure foods are easy to prepare and carry. Children will enjoy helping prepare the picnic foods. If you are growing a garden, have children pull the carrots, wash them, and put them in a salad. It is a thrill for children to prepare and serve what they have grown. Invite families and other site staff to join in the fun.

Woodworking

Children think, design, experiment, and work with others to construct art forms, buildings, obstacle courses, and moon rockets in the building area. Some children may spend the whole outdoor time in this area and come back day after day. Certain children may build by themselves and make a structure they can take home. Others may build a large structure as a group and decide that it is a hospital, dungeon, farm, or an imaginary palace where only children are allowed.



Children who have highly developed eye-hand coordination and upper-arm strength, and feel comfortable creating something out of nothing need no special assistance in this area. Other children need encouragement and instructions. Children using saws, hammers and nails, screwdrivers, and other tools need close supervision at all times. They must know and follow the rules so no one is injured.

Many of the materials from the other outdoor play area end up in the building area. If children are building a town, they may borrow trucks and cars from the sand area. If they are designing something big enough to ride through, tricycles

and a wagon may be needed. If they build a perch to sit on, they may borrow a book or stuffed animal from the quiet area. If they want to decorate a structure, they can take paints from the art area. The areas are not distinct, and materials can be used from area to area, as long as there are enough for everyone.

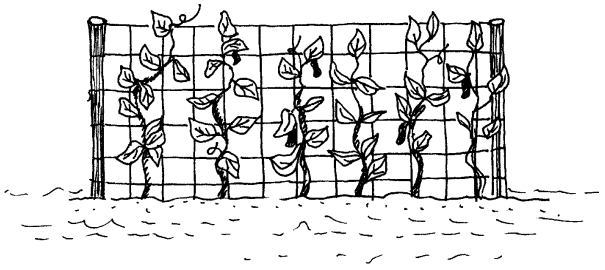
Gardening

Children dig, plant, nourish, water, pick, eat, and enjoy the wonders of their garden. They watch nature first hand and ask questions about the "whys" of the earth. They learn where food comes from and get the joy of giving their parents something they have grown.

A successful garden takes some planning. First, find a flat place in the outdoor space that has at least five hours of sun each day. An 8' x 8' area will allow space for several different plants, however, a smaller space will do. Make sure the soil is good, and add fertilizer or compost.

The following are some guidelines for successful gardening. Children can be involved in all the steps.

- Use good-quality seeds and plants. Plant sturdy plants that young gardeners are less likely to damage.
- Plant a variety of plants and flowers. Some, like radishes and tomatoes, come up quickly; squash can be harvested later.
- Plant for all the senses. Think about brightly colored geraniums, fragrant mint, and silky pansies.
- Plant for more than one season, so that spring bulbs will come up through the snow.



Many things can be taught in the garden. Use graphs and measuring tapes to chart the growth of plants, compare sizes and shapes, learn colors, and discover the facts of nature (for example, what happens when there is too much sun or not enough water). Children learn about taking responsibility and the enjoy the rewards of a job well done. They learn to work and plan together and how seasons affect the garden. Watch it during each season and discover the differences. Bring some plants in for the

winter and compare them to the ones left outside. Gardens are wonderful learning tools. Use whatever space you have to create one.

Community Trips

Visits in the community can expand the children's world and provide exciting learning opportunities. As the trip is being planned, think about its goals. What do you want the children to learn and experience? How can goals be accomplished? What activities can be planned before and after the trip to enhance the experience?

Be sure the trip is well-thought-out. Have a staff planning meeting to discuss all the details. Supervision and safety are the key elements to a pleasant trip. Community trips should not be too far away or in a place that is crowded and noisy. Visit the place ahead of time to discuss your expectations with staff. Be sure that there are things that children can touch, explore, and try on. Ask families to join you. Think about the details of transportation, parent permission, food, bathrooms, and correct clothes.

Below are a few ideas for community trips:

- Art store or gallery
- Bookstore
- Gravel pit or construction site
- Hospital
- Museum
- Theater
- Beauty or barber shop
- Florist shop, greenhouse, or nursery
- Hardware store or repair shop
- Lumber yard
- Nature center or bird sanctuary

Walks

Walks are a wonderful way to explore the outside environment with children. They are easy to plan and do not take as much preparation time as a community trip. The class can take walks in response to beautiful weather (e.g., the first snowfall); the teaching team can also incorporate them into the weekly schedule. Children can learn many things on walks when teachers are observant of the environment and talk to the children about what they see. The teaching team can focus the children's attention by asking them about certain topics such as animals, flowers, buildings, colors, shapes, textures, smells, shadows, and community workers. This increases their attention to details and helps them concentrate.

Items can be collected on walks, too. Many of the objects can be brought back to the classroom and placed in the natural science area or other interest areas. As you are planning your ideas for walks, look for books, songs, poems, and finger plays that reinforce your theme. If you can't find any, create them and have the children help. Use a familiar rhyme and invent your own words.

Involving Families in Outdoor Play

Although most parents appreciate the value of letting their children go outside to play, some do not realize the learning value of the outside environment.

It is part of the teaching team's responsibility to explain outdoor learning opportunities to parents. Most parents already spend some time with their children outside, and when they learn the value of the experience, they will have more fun themselves.

From the very beginning of the year, families should know that their children will spend time outside every day. As a reminder of the importance of outdoor activity, periodically send a note home explaining some things the child has learned outside.

Remembering that the outdoors is an important learning environment allows teachers to look at the outdoor environment with a new perspective and to plan creative and educational ways to use it.

SAND AND WATER