

NORTH CAROLINA CHILD CARE HEALTH AND SAFETY BULLETIN

NORTH CAROLINA CHILD CARE HEALTH AND SAFETY RESOURCE CENTER

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About The Resource Center

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Outdoor Learning Environments for Infants and Toddlers. (Insert)

Outdoor Learning Environments in Child Care

Spring is a time of year when most of us enjoy the beauty of nature and time spent outdoors. In child care, the outdoor program is as important as the indoor program. Playing outdoors as a child is something most of us remember fondly and take for granted as a normal part of growing up. Maybe the memory is of swinging in a park, exploring the woods, playing ball with some friends, turning rocks in a creek, riding in a wagon, or rolling in the grass. Maybe it is playing on a dirt lot, or enjoying jump rope along a sidewalk under a brilliant sky. Most of us, whether growing up in a big city or in a rural area have fond memories of playing outdoors as a child.

We are fortunate in North Carolina to have four distinct seasons, that provides unavoidable changes to the outdoors weather, temperature, and natural processes. If the outdoor environment is limited to a few pieces of playground equipment used every day in the same way, other opportunities for learning are missed. Caregivers can do much more with the outdoor environment in child care settings. The outdoor learning environment can be used to extend indoor learning to the outdoors. It can be used as a stage for every child to explore, expand, treasure, and enjoy.



There are many approaches to enhancing an outdoor program in child care. This issue of the Child Care Health and Safety Bulletin will address how child care programs can take advantage of the healthful benefits of being outdoors. It will provide ideas, resources and facts to guide you as you make decisions about how to utilize your outdoor environment.



Bringing the Classroom Outside: Loose Parts

Moveable equipment defines items that are not stationary or anchored in the ground. "Loose parts" is the term often used for moveable equipment and materials. The activities that loose parts generate are endless and can be child or teacher directed. A few examples of loose parts:

balls	woods	sawhorses
art easels	zoo animals and props	tires
tricycles	water	buckets
hula-hoops	small vehicles	dishes
large activity blocks	wooden boxes	dolls
small tubs for water exploration	cardboard boxes	carriages
toy animals	blankets	tables
dinosaurs	boards	chairs
farm animals and props	crates	mats

Loose parts require storage. Teachers and children can share the responsibility of bringing the equipment to and from storage. Lesson plans should include rotating materials, the introduction of different materials, and a new ways to use old materials. Broken equipment must be removed immediately.

Family Child Care Homes

Family child care homes provide child care for over 20,000 children in North Carolina (North Carolina Partnership for Children, 2001). The outdoor environments in family child care will vary widely depending upon the ages of children in care. Often family child care providers care for children of all ages, birth to 12 years and older. It is a challenge to develop an outdoor learning environment that is appropriate for all ages, yet the family child care provider must supervise all of these children, a maximum of 8 (5 preschool age and 3 school age children), often alone.

Consider how family child care homes are different from child care centers. They may have smaller yards, fewer children, and fewer neighbors. They can be farms, apartments, mobile homes, suburbs or in a city. Each home has unique characteristics and offers unique opportunities such as gardening, picking berries, painting with water, collecting rocks, digging areas, pets, sprinklers, stepping stones, walks in the neighborhood, visits with neighbors, a hike in nearby woods or to the corner

store. Each child care home setting should be explored to consider what special features it has to offer and how additional learning opportunities can be developed.

Equipment considerations for the family child care provider are particularly challenging. When equipment is purchased, problems with supervision, age appropriate activities, and safety can result. Swings, climbers, slides, and platform structures may not be appropriate for some of the children in care.

How can the family child care provider offer an experience outdoors to a variety of ages that is safe, challenging, interesting, and filled with opportunities to learn? Utilizing parents, volunteers, and/or additional teachers to assist during outdoor time can expand the possibilities. Building on the interests of the group in care and utilizing their talents and expertise also helps. For example, a school age child who enjoys the younger children could interact with them and engage them in guided activities such as ball rolling or bean bag toss under the supervision of the family child care provider. The child who has a strong interest in reading, music, animals, soccer or jumping rope can bring his or her interests and skills to the group to offer these opportunities outdoors. For regular daily outdoor learning child care home providers often develop other types of activities relying more on age appropriate loose parts in their home outdoor learning environment.



Field Trips: Many family child care providers choose to take occasional field trips and use public parks to provide play utilizing traditional anchored equipment. Field trips to parks can provide a special adventure, and a park may be close enough to be a regular activity.

Nature Walks: Family child care homes may offer good opportunities for nature walks. Encouraging providers to develop nature paths for children to explore can expand their activities and learning opportunities. Nature paths can include planned observation points such as bird feeding stations, a bench or stump to stop and rest, plantings, a picnic table, and feeding stations for other wildlife. It can also incorporate existing features — a walk to a particular rock or tree, creek or beaver dam depending upon the location. Planning ahead to clear tripping hazards or other obstacles will help to make nature walks a safe and enjoyable activity for children. Taking along snacks and/or drinks is also fun for children.

Each family child care home will have its own age grouping which will change and present its own challenges and its own possibilities. Child Care Resource and Referral Agencies located throughout the state employ technical assistance staff that can be a tremendous resource to family child care providers who can become isolated in their work. Family Child Care Provider Associations, located throughout the state, allow networking among providers, provide an avenue for sharing of ideas and

opportunities to utilize each other's talents and interests, to visit each other, and to take field trips together.

Activity

A Talking Tube: A simple, fun, homemade toy

A talking tube can be used to enhance dramatic play. Children can string along in different places: from the bench to a shrub, from the playhouse to the riding path, create a drive through window for a restaurant or bank. Children can stand at either end of the tube where they can't see each other and talk to each other through the tube.

Age appropriate for 3 years and up

Materials:

- 3 or 4 yards of clear plastic plumbing tubing about 2 – 3 inches in diameter and flexible, from the hardware store
- Two funnels that will fit snugly into the ends of the tube



What to do:

- Push the funnel into the ends of the tube and talk, sing, whisper, and laugh.

What children can learn:

- Cooperation — it takes two to make it work.
- Listening
- Talking, communicating
- Taking turns

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Miller, K. (1989). *The Outside Play and Learning Book: Activities for Young Children*. Beltsville, Maryland, Gryphon House, Inc.



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Health Benefits of Outdoor Play

Physical health benefits

- ❑ Active physical play
- ❑ Physical development
- ❑ Physical fitness
- ❑ Large muscle development
- ❑ Fresh air exchange and an environment more free of germ containment
- ❑ Sunlight providing a source of vitamin D that aids in the absorption of calcium.

Mental and emotional health

- ❑ Stress reduction among children, teachers, directors, and parents.
- ❑ Less depression, especially if the outdoor space encourages exercise.
- ❑ Independence.
- ❑ Higher parent satisfaction with the program and perhaps provider.
- ❑ Increased job satisfaction and retention of staff.

Spiritual health

- ❑ Aesthetic and spiritual meaning and satisfaction.
- ❑ Tranquility.
- ❑ Beauty and peace.

Environmental health

- ❑ Children learn about nature and caring for the environment from direct experiences.
- ❑ Children become involved in the task of caring for the environment and keeping it healthy for generations to come.

Reference:

Marcus, Clare Cooper, and Barnes, Marni. *Healing Gardens: Therapeutic Benefits and Design Recommendations*, New York: John Wiley and Sons, Inc., 1999.

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At Your Service

1-800-246-6731
North Carolina Child Care Health & Safety Resource Center

Providing Training, Consultation & Resources for North Carolina's Child Care Community

New Resource Available

Much of the information in this issue of the Health Bulletin was drawn from a new resource, *Children's Outdoor Environments: A Guide to Play and Learning*, which can be purchased or viewed at the website of the North Carolina Partnership for Children:

<http://www.ncsmartstart.org>

The resource guide provides additional information and guidance to help develop safe, interesting, and challenging outdoor learning environments in child care. These are a few additional health and safety issues discussed in the resource guide: supervision, concerns and precautions for sand play, water play and sun exposure, reducing the spread of infection outdoors, dressing safely for outdoor play, lead contamination, and more.



April

 is

National Child Abuse Prevention Month
National Autism Awareness Month
Alcohol Awareness Month
National Youth Sports Safety Month

May

 is

Asthma and Allergy Awareness Month
Better Hearing and Speech Month
Skin Cancer Awareness Month
Clean Air Month

May 10 Provider's Appreciation Day

May 12 Mother's Day

May 5 – 11 National SAFE Kids Week

May 20 – 27 Buckle Up America Week

May 25 National Missing Children's Day

May 31 World "No Tobacco" Day



Why Go Outdoors?

The outdoor environment offers a sense of freedom for both children and teachers. There is often more space to move around, shout, sing, leap, roll, stretch, fling, throw, run, and release energy — *without* the fear of breaking something. A well-planned outdoor learning environment offers many choices for play outdoors, and many opportunities for children to make their own decisions. Children may have the opportunity to speak to each other differently outdoors, to tell secrets, or to yell and use their “outdoor voices.” They have more privacy (while still supervised), chances to choose their playmates, or be alone for a while.

The outdoor environment offers many possibilities for expressing feelings and energy. Throwing can be a release. Tumbling, running, rolling, and tussling can also release energy. Children and adults also experience being out of the owned space of the child care program when they go outside into nature. The sky belongs to everyone, as do the birds, butterflies, and sunshine. Outdoors children have the clouds, the wind, the rain, and the bugs. These do not belong to anyone (Rivkin, 1995). So much is orchestrated for children in child care; this opportunity for freedom becomes very important. No wonder they love to go outdoors!

The outdoors, however, sometimes seems to present difficulties. Children and teachers have to contend with the elements — rain, heat, cold, snow, sleet, bees, mud, wind, and sun. All of these things are part of the

outdoors and may be viewed as positives by some and by others as annoyances by others — obstacles to going out, — reasons to stay indoors.

Teachers in child care programs, are in a unique position to utilize the outdoor environment for learning and playing. The N. C. Division of Child Development requires that children in licensed child care programs spend time outdoors every day, weather permitting. In too many cases, time outdoors is limited, when in fact, nearly an entire curriculum could be implemented outdoors.

“There is no bad weather, only bad clothes.” Parents can help their caregiver by bringing clothes that are appropriate for all kinds of weather, and a clean change of clothes for when the children get dirty outdoors.

“Weather permitting” is also subject to interpretation. Thelma Harms’ work has taken her on several trips to Sweden. She speaks of an old Swedish saying, “There is no bad weather, only bad clothes.” Parents can help their caregiver by bringing clothes that are appropriate for all kinds of weather, and a clean change of clothes for when the children get dirty outdoors.

How better to learn about rain than to splash around in puddles with rubber boots? How can the outdoor environment be established to



best support children’s emerging creativity, children’s play, children’s learning? What can teachers do? By evaluating each of the elements, we can begin to identify and find solutions to barriers to going outside.

Children need physical challenge from a playground, but they need so much more. “A playground should be like a small-scale replica of the world, with as many as possible of the sensory experiences to be found in the world included in it. Experiences for every sense are needed, for instance: rough and smooth

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objects to look at and feel; light and heavy things to pick up; water and wet materials as well as dry things; cool materials and materials warmed by the sun; soft and hard surfaces; things that make sounds (running water) or that can be struck, plucked, plinked, etc.; smells of all varieties (flowers, bark, mud); shiny, bright objects and dull, dark ones; things both huge and tiny; high and low places to look at and from; materials of every type; natural, synthetic, thin, thick, and so on. The list is inexhaustible, and the larger the number of items that are included, the richer and more varied the environment for the child." (Greenman, 1988).

How can we create a reflection of what Greenman is advocating? Consider that we have a world of time in the lives of the children. Every day your outdoor environment can change, sometimes in major ways and sometimes in subtle ways, to offer new experiences, a variety of learning opportunities for children. What do children need from their outdoor experiences? Here's a partial list from Jim Greenman's *Caring Spaces, Learning Places* (1988, pp. 179 - 186):

- Places for active motor play
- Places for swinging
- Places for sliding and rolling
- Places for jumping
- Places for climbing
- Places for running
- Places for throwing and kicking
- Places for bouncing and balancing
- Places for traveling, riding, and transporting
- Places to move slowly
- Places to watch, to wonder, to retreat
- Places to sleep
- Places to eat
- Places to be diapered and go to the bathroom
- Places to discover
- Places for building
- Places for machines
- Places for creative expression
- Places to pretend
- Places to dig



- Watery places
- Places for growing things
- Places for animal life
- Places for collecting and carrying
- Places for measuring
- Sheltered places

The outdoors is a place to be loud or quiet, active, observant, creative, and risk-taking. It's a place to create memories. The outdoor learning environment may not offer all of these opportunities every day, but it can incorporate most of these things throughout the year, over a period of time, with the changing seasons, and sometimes by inventing more opportunities as we go.

For many children in child care, their primary experience of the outdoors may be what they experience outside in their child care program. In early childhood, children learn to love being outdoors so that in later childhood they will retain outdoor life. Child care programs should strive to provide an outdoor environment that will give children the opportunity to explore, learn and experience the outdoors in as many ways as possible

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Reference:

Greenman, Jim. *Caring Spaces, Learning Places: Children's Environments that Work*, Redmond, WA: Exchange Press, 1988.

Rivkin, Mary S. *The Great Outdoors: Restoring Children's Right to Play Outside*, Washington, DC: National Association for the Education of Young Children, 1995.



Balancing Safety and Risk

Children need to take risks to learn and grow and develop into healthy adults. Children seek challenges and learning experiences in play, and need opportunities to take risks. There is a difference between a "risk" and "hazard" (Recreation Resources Services, NCSU, in cooperation with N.C. Division of Child Development, 1997.)

- A risk involves a decision or judgment. A driver decides that he can make a left turn across traffic safely by making a judgment of the distance and speed of oncoming cars. Likewise a child swinging decides to jump out because she has judged herself to be not too high above the ground to hurt herself when she lands.
- Hazards cannot be seen by a child and therefore cannot be judged. Adults say that a blind corner is a driving hazard because presence and speed of approaching traffic cannot be seen and therefore cannot be judged. An example of a hazard on a playground would be a worn-out S-hook, connecting a swing to its supporting structure. The child who falls in this situation could not see or evaluate the condition of the S-hook. Therefore, no judgment on the part of the child was involved.

Risk-taking during play is part of the learning process. An outdoor learning environment that has eliminated all elements of risk will not be a successful one and can probably only exist in theory. What we want to do in offering a "safe play environment" is to remove the *hazards* (Play it Safe, 1995, p. 9).

In an old favorite, *Mud, Sand, and Water* by Dorothy M Hill, (1995), editor Carol Copple notes, "The challenge is to provide a safe play environment and yet ensure that children do not lose out on some of childhood's finest experiences: squeezing mud through their fingers, blowing bubbles, creating

worlds in the sand. The many joys of mud, sand, and water, after all, remain unchanged!" (p. 2). She points out that children's play, especially in group settings, just isn't as simple as it once was.

Balancing safety and risk is perhaps the biggest challenge faced when developing outdoor learning environments, and there are no universal answers to the questions that arise. Safety involves much more than the physical environment. A safe environment results from a well planned design, proper installation of developmentally appropriate equipment and activities, close supervision of children, and from providing planned activities and opportunities for guided learning.

Staff of early childhood programs have the responsibility of educating themselves about potential safety and health hazards in the outdoor learning environment. Support for this education is needed as well as support for setting the stage for caregivers to seek out expertise in their community, partner with parents, and design the best strategies they can for their particular setting and for the children in their care.

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- "Play It Safe - Playground Safety Training Program." Raleigh, NC: Recreation Resources Services, NCSU, in cooperation with N.C. Division of Child Development, 1997.
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Value vs. Risk

Continued from Page 7

• Water — value vs. risk

Value: cools bodies in warm weather, science — experiment, measure it, weigh it, what floats, what sinks, set up currents, dams. Wash dolls, paint with water, color water with food coloring, splash, clean play dishes . . .

Risks: risk of spreading infectious disease, drowning, skin infections, slippery surfaces. To reduce risk of infection: provide running water, potable drinking water or city water, as water source, or chlorinated recycled water. (Bleach in water will not work because it deteriorates upon exposure to sun and air).

• Bare feet — value vs. risk

Value: Feeling mud, sensory input, freedom, taking risks, learning limits, goot grip, manipulation, slows down running.

Risks: Cuts, parasites (remote risk), skin infections, injuries to feet, burn to feet from hot surfaces.



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HEALTH BULLETIN

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Babies Get Outdoors!

Outdoor Learning Environments for Infants and Toddlers

Infants and toddlers, like all children, love to be outdoors. Irritable infants and toddlers are soothed as they enter the outdoor world. Perhaps they sense the freedom. Perhaps it is the change of scenery, the smells, sights and sounds they experience. Perhaps it is the fresh air. In high quality child care programs this need is recognized and respected. The lesson plans include outdoor experiences, the daily schedule includes outdoor times, and the teachers plan how to take infants and toddlers outdoors each day. Every day throughout the day infants and toddlers need opportunities to be physically active both indoors and outdoors.

When working with infants and toddlers, there may be a tendency to be protective and to keep the infants and toddlers indoors if the weather is not

Infants Can Do Many Things — These Are Only A Few:

see
look
hear
smell
feel
mouth
reach out
knock away
hold
pull up
clap together
look for
put in
grasp
kick

sit up
crawl to, in, out, over
turn
drop
shake
roll
creep around, in, under
react to others
recognize people
and things
experiment endlessly

(Greenman and
Stonehouse, 1996,
p. 36)

mild and sunny. Parents may ask teachers to keep their infants and toddlers indoors because the child has a cold or they do not want their child exposed to wind, hot sun, the cold, or other elements. Parents must understand that very young children should be and will be taken outside except in extreme weather conditions. Teachers can stress to parents the health benefits of taking infants and toddlers outdoors, such as being outdoors can result in less sickness.

Infants and toddlers require constant supervision outdoors. They need to explore the grass, the plants, rain, and



wind. As they get older and develop the skills to dig they need to be able to explore dirt and sand. Infants and toddlers explore the world through all their senses. They often experience the world by tasting it and exploring through the mouth, making choking and exposure to germs very real hazards. It is necessary to stay in close proximity of the infants and toddlers to help them remove unwanted objects from their mouths and to take this into consideration when designing the area, choosing adequate surfacing material, and selecting materials and equipment.

Infants and toddlers also need safe places to move around. They fall

Continued on **Side B**

Continued from Side A

easily, and they move over surfaces by crawling. Surfacing for the outdoor learning environment designed for infants and toddlers presents unique challenges specific to the age group and needs careful consideration.

- ❑ Surfaces should provide comfort.
- ❑ Surfaces should protect children when they fall.
- ❑ Surfaces can provide tactile diversity and exploration opportunities.
- ❑ Surfaces should be accessible.
- ❑ Surfaces should reflect heat to avoid getting too hot.

"Toddlers are child care's equivalent of young adolescents. Their behavior is uneven, often giving the appearance of more maturity than the children actually possess. The frequent result is that adults expect them to act maturely all the time. The tendency in many toddler programs is to treat the children as if they were preschoolers, only smaller and less competent." (Greenman and Stonehouse, p.37). Challenging the toddler outdoors should be balanced with realistic

expectations with regard to behaviors and skills.

Far too often, the activities on toddler playgrounds are beyond children's skill level. If anchored stationary equipment is used, it should be designed specifically for toddlers. As the toddler learns to walk, a skill that will emerge is stepping up. Toddlers do not need ladders, climbers, or high equipment. Stepping up onto a stage is challenging. Walking across an arched bridge is challenging, as is the physical challenge of building with blocks, carrying things, using riding toys and balls. This is an age that will benefit greatly from an environment

that changes frequently and offers variety in toys and play experiences.

Supervision is particularly challenging with toddlers who have many interests and who roam with alarming speed from activity to activity. Toddlers have access to more areas than infants and continue to explore their environment with their mouths. Selecting appropriate surfacing continues to be challenging and, as with all ages in the outdoor learning environment, supervision continues to be important.



Toddlers Can Do All The Things Infants Can *plus*:

walk in, out, up down, over, under, around through
climb in, up, over, on top
swing
jump
stack
take apart
examine
sort
order
transport
hide
mix
pour
cuddle
investigate by trial and error

label
kiss
put together
set up
collect
match
rearrange
imitate adult behavior
paint
draw
separate
help themselves to wash, eat
adjust their behavior to others

(Greenman and Stonehouse, 1996, p. 37)

