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Outdoor Learning

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Spending time outdoors should be an important part of every childhood. Fresh air, sunshine, open space to explore; outdoor learning provides so much joy for young children...and adults! There are so many ways to incorporate outdoor time into your daily schedule as both a learning experience and free play. First, let's look at the many benefits of outdoor experiences.

Benefits of outdoor experiences

- Nature/Science-One of the most obvious benefits to outdoor experiences is exposure to nature and science topics. Use outdoor time as an opportunity to talk about different concepts such as, the weather, insects, plants, seasons, etc. Even babies can have a sensory experience by feeling the grass, leaves, or other objects.
- Risk-taking behavior-Outdoor play also encourages appropriate risk-taking. This may sound a little scary but risk-taking is actually crucial to a child's development! Now while we definitely don't want to see children attempting to fly off the top of play equipment, we do want to encourage them to do things like climb a little higher, or ride a tricycle on their own. We spend so much time indoors asking children to use their walking feet, and not to climb on furniture, it is important for them to learn to do these things in the appropriate place.
- Daily schedule benefits-Getting children outside helps to break up the day. It is a concrete transition time that may be easier to understand than perhaps moving from art to another activity. If you are having a challenging morning regarding behaviors, sometimes getting outdoors will help reset things. This is true for teachers as well. Going outdoors can give teachers a chance to catch their breath and re-frame their perspective on the day.
- Social and emotional development-Outdoor play provides many opportunities for social and emotional development. Older children may start to organize games with little support needed from educators. This gives educators a chance to observe. For younger children, this is a great time to work on turn-taking on play equipment or with outdoor toys.



Reframing our thoughts on outdoor time

It can be common for educators to consider outdoor time to be a “break” from learning but this could not be further from the truth! Children learn best when they are doing more hands on, physical activities. What a better place for this type of learning than outside!

In addition to exploring, climbing, running, and other more typical outdoor experiences, educators can bring additional learning opportunities to the outdoor space. Think of outdoors as an extension of the classroom: many activities that are done inside can also be done outside.

Sometimes bringing an activity outdoors can bring new life to old materials. Think of an old set of blocks or connecting toys that the children seem to neglect. What would happen if you brought them outside? The children may discover different ways to use old toys in the new setting. It can be refreshing to let go of the idea that learning has to occur within the walls of the classroom. Think about your daily lesson plans. Are there activities or experiences that you could bring outside?

Here are some ideas to get you started.

Ideas for outdoor learning

- If your program has a playhouse outside, add some play food and dishes. No need to buy anything new, just divide what is in the classroom. This will add a new dimension to their imaginary play. To take it a step further, consider bringing out some baby dolls or even some dress-up clothes.



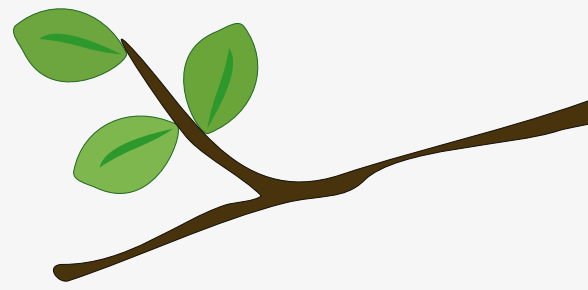
- Create a music wall! Gather some different instruments and other materials that the kids can use to create music. If you have a fence you can just attach everything with zip ties. See the examples below for more ideas!

- If you are working on learning the alphabet with preschoolers, have them make letters out of leaves, sticks, rocks, and whatever else they can find. Try encouraging them to make the first letter of their name.



- Bring your art materials outdoors. This is a really simple idea but can be a big hit! Children may be more inspired to paint or draw outdoors. If you have an easel, a small table, or anything the children can lean on, bring it outside and let them create.

Outdoor experiences in an urban setting



There are many early childhood education programs that are working with a small outdoor space, a mostly concrete outdoor space, or even no outdoor space. However, there are still ways to access the benefits of the outdoors!

- If your program has a concrete outdoor space, consider a raised bed garden. This can be a larger wooden structure or even a few large flower pots. The children can take part in planting and harvesting different plants and vegetables. You can even try to grow and care for plants in your classroom.



- If your program is not able to get outside, try to bring some nature into the classroom. Collect items such as pine cones, leaves, stones, sticks, etc. and let the children explore with them. They can use them for counting activities or to make nature collages.
- Another fun activity that works perfectly on concrete surfaces is painting with water. All you need is some buckets of water and paintbrushes. Children can use the brushes to paint pictures or even practice making letters, numbers, or shapes.

Time spent outdoors is beneficial to both children and adults. And remember, outdoor learning does not have to be reserved for warm weather. Winter weather also provides opportunities to bring learning outside. We challenge you to take some of your learning experiences outdoors this month. Visit our social media channels and let us know how it goes!

Resources

[NAEYC: No Playground? Find Other Outdoor Learning Environments Around Your Program!](#)

[Head Start ECLKC: Outdoor Experiences for Infants and Toddlers](#)

Professional Development

Connecting Children with Nature- DIEEC PD (Online)

Outdoor Classrooms: Wonder, Explore, Learn (Virtual, Self-paced)

The Wonder of Outdoor Learning PLUS (Virtual, Live)

to register for any of these workshops visit: www.dieecpd.org