



Eric Nelson, M.A.
Director, Consulting and Educational Services, Child Educational Center
Director, Outdoor Classroom Project
web pages: www.outdoorclassroomproject.org / www.ceonline.org
email: outdoor-classroom@caltech.edu

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Why Outdoors? – The Silent Emergency

Children and Early Care and Education Outdoors

Young children who lack a high quality outdoor experience suffer from a wide variety of challenges including:

1. Physical health challenges such as obesity and poor physical development.
2. Obsession with electronic media.
3. Lack of a safe outdoor space to play.
4. Isolation from and fear of nature.
5. Lack of understanding of the interconnectedness of things.
6. A narrow and limited educational focus.
7. The epidemic use of drugs / mental and emotional health challenges / ADHD.

What is the Outdoor Classroom?

Education is not the filling of a pail, but the lighting of a fire.
– Plutarch / Yeats

Goal

Increase the quantity, quality, and benefit of outdoor experiences for children

Principles

- TIME - Children benefit from spending substantial time outdoors.
- ACTIVITIES - Even with a minimally developed yard, there are very few children's activities that cannot be done outside.

- INTIATION - Children’s development is optimized when they spend a significant amount of time participating in child-initiated activities that are teacher-supported.
- NATURE - Children need a connection to nature in order to be whole.

Key Elements

- Teachers and program directors must *be interested* in the Outdoor Classroom and *committed* to making it happen.
- Teachers and program administrators must have the *skills and knowledge* to make it happen.
- There need to be *physical resources* that support the Outdoor Classroom (toys, equipment, etc.).
- Parents, executive management, and owners or governing boards of centers must *allow*, and hopefully *support*, the Outdoor Classroom.

Characteristics

- Children spend substantial *periods of time* outside, and it is easy and safe for them to get there; they are free to move easily between the indoors and outdoors.
- There is *space* for all activities including for running.
- There is a full range of *activities* for children to participate in, including many activities that are traditionally thought of as “indoor activities,” even when there isn’t a fully developed yard.
- While outside, children frequently initiate their own activities.
- Children are engaged with their activities and the teachers are actively engaged with them.
- The outdoor program supports continuous learning and the fact that children are learning all the time.
- The outdoor curriculum is a distinct and robust part of the overall program and changes with children’s changing needs and interests

Tenets

- Learning occurs everywhere and all the time.
- Outdoors, the process of mastering the fundamentals of literacy, math and science is greatly enhanced in a curriculum that is holistic and complete.

- The foundation of cognitive development and success in later life begins with, and relies upon, physical activity during the critical first five years of brain development.

Outdoor programs facilitate activities that are:

Hands-On & Interactive - Children learn through physically acting on their environment. They need to handle, manipulate and experiment in order to learn.

Child-Initiated - Child-initiated activities have no substitute; they optimize learning and build self-confidence, teaching responsibility and self-control

Engaging - The level of engagement with an activity determines when learning takes place.

Examples of Engagement:

By producing engaging learning opportunities, the outdoor program and environment address the wide variety of children's learning and development needs.

- They provide frequent opportunities and lots of time.
- They provide projects and group activity that help children build communication skills and attain social / emotional mastery.
- Outdoor environments help children to build a healthy internal psychology with time alone.
- Being outdoors increases the ways of developing an interest in reading and writing.
- It fosters an interest in science and math.
- It creates a successful learning environment for the active learner.
- It helps to meet the health challenge by establishing a pattern of vigorous physical activity.
- By including space largely comprised of natural elements the outdoors enables children to connect to the natural world and learn from what nature has to teach us.
- Outdoor programs produce classroom harmony.

How Can a Center Cultivate or Enhance Its Outdoor Classroom?

- Review perception survey results and discuss similarities / differences.
- Make easy changes
- Create an ideal scene.
- Categorize components of the ideal scene.
- Establish individual priorities of the ideal scene components.
- Establish group priorities of the ideal scene components.
- Develop outcomes based on ideal scene components.
- Develop an action plan.
- Implement your plan.
- Review, revise, and make course corrections to your plan.
- Acknowledge everyone's efforts

Recommended Reading

Cultivating Outdoor Classrooms, Eric Nelson – (how to create a natural outdoor classroom)

Last Child in the Woods, Richard Louv – (coined the term “nature deficit disorder”; started the “new nature movement”)

The Importance of Being Little: What Preschoolers Really Need from Grownups, Erika Christakis – (challenges the trend of academics in early childhood education)

The Courage to Teach, Parker J. Palmer (a classic on educational reform and heart-centered teaching)

Your Child's Self Esteem, Dorothy Corville Briggs – (foundational to understanding the critical importance of self-esteem in ECE)

Theories of Childhood, Carol Garhart Mooney – (concise explanation of the essential ECE theories we use in daily practice of the outdoor classroom)

Notes