

The Outdoor Classroom: “No Child Left Inside”

by Eric Nelson

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“I only went out for a walk and finally concluded to stay out till sundown, for going out, I found, was really going in.” These words were written nearly 150 years ago by the great American conservationist, John Muir, credited with inspiring the creation of our system of national parks. Muir understood the profound impact being outdoors has on human development. Contrast his words with those of a 4th grader in 2005, “I like to play indoors better 'cause that's where all the electrical outlets are.” Those words, one example of a number of disturbing trends, reveal an immense, largely unrecognized challenge facing early care and education.

The consequences of a childhood lost

Childhood today is a dramatically changed landscape, not just from John Muir's day, but from 50, 30, or even 10 years ago. It is not easy to understand just how much conditions have changed without gathering together the individual threads of change and seeing how they operate as a whole to conspire to keep children indoors. In addition to obsession with electronic activity, consider the current push-down of academics into the preschool years, elimination of recess and physical education, an increasing generalized fear of nature and being outdoors, as well as the dramatic reduction of parks and wild areas accessible to children. As Richard Louv so brilliantly details in his seminal work, *Last Child in the Woods: Saving Our Children From Nature Deficit Disorder*, this generation of children is in danger of being completely detached from nature and missing the value of experiences found in being outdoors.

These trends become more ominous when joined with current health data. A recent report by the California Center for Public Health Advocacy indicated that 28% of the state's children were overweight and that 1/3 of the children born in the year 2000 can expect to develop diabetes;

nationally, eight million children are on some type of drug to modify behavior. Getting children outdoors and active is literally a matter of life and death. It is also, not incidentally, a matter of sound education and sound social policy. In this context, programs of early care and education are uniquely positioned to address these disturbing developments; but not without some work.

The difference ECE outdoor programs can make . . . and the challenge

The quality of our involvement with the outdoors is established in the early years; this includes our attitude toward being outdoors, our pattern of physical activity, and our interest in understanding the world outside. Programs of early care and education are mandated to have an outdoor environment and outdoor activity. They are uniquely positioned to benefit millions of young children and to counteract many of the negative trends that currently assault childhood. They are also well-placed to educate parents and raise the visibility of these dangerous trends to the entire community. With this opportunity comes a challenge, however — most programs are not prepared for the task at hand. We must reframe our curricular thinking and refocus implementation of our programs in order to increase the quantity, quality, and benefit of children's outdoor experience.

For many programs, compared with the indoors, the design and use of the legally required outdoor space is an afterthought; little is provided in terms of design of program and physical environment, not to mention allocation of funding. It doesn't have to be that way. The outdoor environment and program, along with the philosophy that guides it, can be the centerpiece of quality early care and education. A simple way to make it so is to think of it as “the outdoor classroom.” The concept is simple: “Everything you do

inside, you can do outside.” Being outdoors is not “recess,” it is an essential learning experience — and critical to child health and development of the whole child. While the concept is simple, manifesting it is a process requiring clear intention, problem solving, and action.

Creating the optimum outdoor classroom

Since virtually every ECE program has an outdoor environment and activities, initially, it may not be evident what, if anything, needs to change. *Evaluation* of both the outdoor environment and the outdoor program is an essential first step in creating the optimum outdoor classroom. Looking at NAEYC guidelines or ECERS can be a place to start. A recently developed evaluation tool, POEMS (Kaplan Early Learning Company), provides a much more comprehensive and focused method of evaluation. Whether or not a specific evaluation tool is used, the following areas need to be evaluated:

- amount of time children spend outdoors
- frequency with which children are outdoors
- types of activities in which children are engaged and the frequency and duration with which they engage in them
- quality of children’s outdoor play
- attitudes of staff toward the outdoor program and being outdoors
- behavior of the staff outdoors
- quality of the outdoor environment.

The process of evaluation should be conducted by each staff person individually, so that honest perceptions are shared. They then can be discussed in a group, so that the entire staff can “get on the same page” regarding their perceptions of the program. Perceptions often vary, so making certain there is a safe space for conversation is vital.

With an agreed upon assessment of current conditions, staff can take the next step of collectively developing a vision of how they would like their outdoor classroom to look, feel, and operate. This visioning process is sometimes called creating an “ideal scene.” The ideal scene should include desired developmental outcomes, child behavior, teacher

behavior, design of the environment, and implementation of activities. It generally takes 2 to 4 hour-long staff meetings to develop an ideal scene. Throughout this period, centers frequently make many small changes that are easy, inexpensive, and uncontroversial. For the remaining changes, planning and implementation of plans is required. Like producing the ideal scene, establishing the overall action plan must be a full staff activity. The keys to effective action planning are:

- clear definition of the task and the objective
- assignment of responsibility to a particular individual to monitor the execution of the task and make sure it is being carried out
- periodic review of the task implementation with adjustment in the implementation process as required
- acknowledgment of success when the task is completed.

Getting children outdoors and active is literally a matter of life and death.

The outdoor classroom in action

Every outdoor classroom will look different, but there are features that should be similar to all. Every classroom should have the following 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



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The outdoor environment and program, along with the philosophy that guides it, can be the centerpiece of quality early care and education.

outdoors for significant periods of time during the day.

- There is a full range of activities for children outdoors, including many activities that are traditionally thought of as “indoor activities,” even when there isn’t a fully developed yard.
- While outside, children frequently are engaged in learning that they have initiated and that the teachers actively support; children develop their activities while the teachers supervise and facilitate as necessary; the length or frequency of children’s engagement with an activity is sufficient for children to discover “problems” in the activity that they must solve in order to master skills required for the activity; teachers are sufficiently engaged with children’s activities that they are always available to answer questions and otherwise support children being successful with the activity.

These characteristics flow from the following tenets:

- “Learning occurs everywhere and all the time.”
- “Learning is much more than ‘reading, writing and arithmetic.’”
- “Frequent opportunities and lots of time are required for learning to occur.”
- “Individual children’s needs are best met when there is flexibility in being in or out of doors.”

Effective outdoor classrooms require adequate outdoor environments. Some recommendations:

- *Play yards should always be adjacent to the classrooms of the children they are serving.* Open indoor-outdoor flow should be encouraged whenever possible.
- *Play yards should always be large enough to contain the full variety of activities children require for healthy development outdoors.* This is a frequently ignored guideline, as yard sizes are usually a minimum based on the number of children multiplied times so many square feet per child. In small preschool programs this creates yards too small to accommodate the full range of activities children need. Consider these *minimum* playground sizes, irrespective of how small the classroom group size: 1 - 12 months: 700 sf; 12 - 24 months: 2,500 sf; preschool: 5,000 sf.

- *Open space (usually best in the center of the yard) should be large enough for children to run freely, with activity areas placed around the perimeter.* Lack of open running space severely limits the amount of strenuous activity needed for good health.
- *Yard layouts need to separate those different types of children’s activities that might conflict with one another where they overlap, in order to avoid safety risks and supervision challenges.* For example, a common problem is children playing with the same sand that is serving as safety fall zone material.
- *Healthy outdoor development can only happen when there is the full range of activities that is required for development of the whole child.* This means that “indoor” activities need to be outdoors as well. It also means opportunities for physical activity need to be wide-ranging, assisting in all types of physical development.
- *A wide variety of materials/equipment is needed, with emphasis on items the children can manipulate.* Sand toys, large balls, outdoor blocks, milk crates, trikes, and the like provide children with more developmental activities than fixed equipment, while encouraging physically active play.



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possible selection of activities in which to participate, learning through play creates an environment that is at once energetic, engaging, and harmonious. Conflict recedes and the joy and power of learning through doing becomes entrenched. As never before, we need the unique attributes of this curricular approach that can comprehensively address the wide range of childhood challenges our children face in physical health, academic learning, social understanding, psychological well-being, and connection with nature.

The concept is simple: “Everything you do inside, you can do outside.”

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- *There must be adequate outdoor storage to support the full variety of activities children require for healthy development outdoors.* Lack of storage is the single most common playground design weakness discouraging teachers from being outside.
- *Play yards should provide challenge sufficient to support development of the whole child; challenge is defined as “reasonable risk.”* Without a degree of risk, there is no development, no mastery of new skills.
- *Nature and a natural environment should be the dominant environment outdoors.* For many city children, time on the playground in their child care center is their best and often only opportunity to connect with nature, much less be outdoors.

The power of the Outdoor Classroom is grounded concurrently in its simplicity and complexity. When children lead the learning process and have the widest

What’s changed?: Getting a handle on the nature deficit challenge requires an understanding of children’s experiences today. Using the introduction to this article, talk candidly with teachers to assess how the lives of young children have changed in the last two, ten, and 20 years.

Effective action planning: Nelson gives the steps (page 39) to use the discussion as a springboard for making a plan to tackle the nature deficit of children enrolled in your program. Make sure your plan considers the characteristics that every outdoor classroom should have and the tenets that follow. If the list is too long and daunting, take one at a time. Just do it!!

POEMS anyone?: Get a copy of the POEMS assessment tool to find out where your program stands using this new resource.

Using Beginnings Workshop to Train Teachers
by Kay Albrecht