Virtual Lab School



Welcome!

Live Webinar will begin at 11:00 EST

Fostering Learning in the Outdoor Environment

September 18, 2025

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To support your learning...

- ☑ All participants have been muted
- ☑ Please type questions or comments into Chat
- ☑ We will monitor the CHAT and answer questions throughout
 the training
- ☑ This session is being recorded to share on the Virtual Lab School site
- ☑ We encourage you to participate in the polls throughout the training
- ☑ If we disconnect please log back in

LEARNING OBJECTIVES

- Discuss the benefits of outdoor play and learning for children and child and youth professionals
- Address common barriers and challenges to outdoor learning
- Reflect on personal and professional beliefs about learning and outdoor play
- Identify ways to integrate common curriculum models and VLS resources into the outdoor learning environment

SHARE OUT

What does quality outdoor learning look like?



What is outdoor play and learning?







Chawla, 2015; HealthyChildren.org, 2023; Kellert, 2002; Puhakka et al., 2019; University of Missouri-KC, 2016

Benefits of outdoor learning: Implementationrelated considerations

Outdoor Learning in Early Childhood Care and Education (adapted from Kiviranta et al., 2023)

Opportunities for a child

- Holistic development of children
- Social and personal development
- Diverse learning
- Multimodal hands-on learning opportunities
- Enhancement of creativity
- Use of senses
- Hands-on learning

Natural environments as a resource

- Health and wellbeing
- Enhancement of health, activity level, joy, and satisfaction
- Experiences in and of nature
- Learning about nature
- Materials in nature
- Caring for the environment

Pedagogical preconditions

- Teachers as mediators
- Teacher's role and competence: need for knowledge and motivation
- Organisation
- Space and equipment
- Weather and conditions
- Safety and prevention
- Use of digital devices
- Administrative work
- Positive relationships with parents and community



SHARE OUT: POLL

What is the biggest barrier or challenge your program faces with learning outdoors?

Common barriers or challenges expressed by educators



Fear and concern about health and safety



Lack of confidence in teaching outdoors



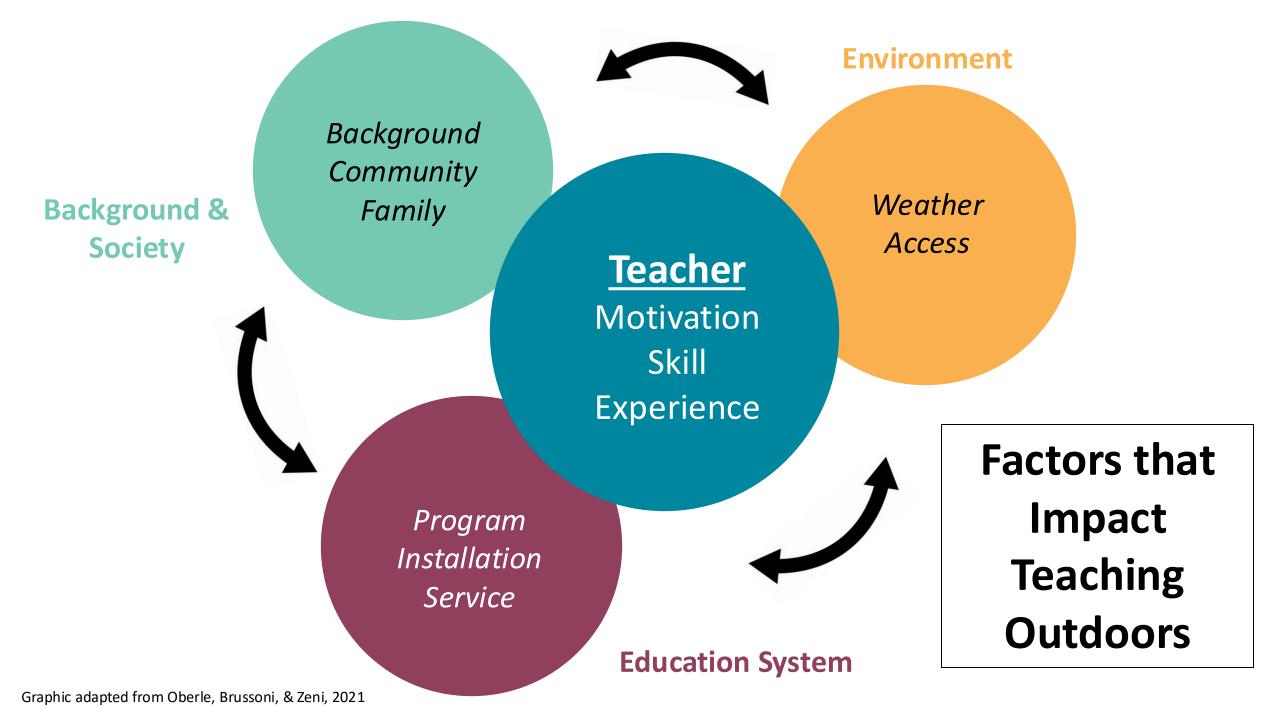
Program & curriculum requirements limit opportunities for outdoor learning



Shortage of time, resources, and support



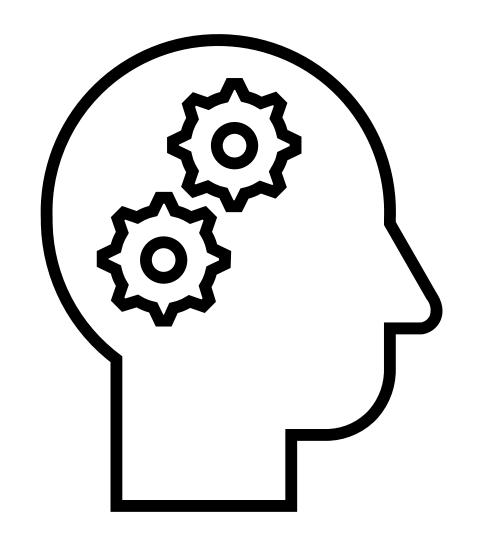
Teacher/ caregiver perspectives



Shifting Perspectives

"Outdoor time is not *real* learning or teaching."

"A caregiver's primary role is one of monitor and guide."





The benefits of being in nature

Benefits to Children

Increase physical activity

Promote gross and fine motor development

Support immune system

Support mental & emotional health

Help develop social skills

Promote creativity

Enhance readiness to learn

Learning Benefits



Energy Release Gross Motor Development



Cognitive Development Emotional Development Social Development

Benefits to the Professional

More child-led, flexible activities

Better availability to support all children

Increased teacher motivation

(Simkin et al., 2020; von Hertzen et al., 2011; Lee et al., 2012; Dowdell et al., 2011; Robertson et al., 2020; Bento et al., 2017)

Supporting CYP Professionals



Reflection

Family Child Care / Learning Environments / Lesson 3

Resource List: Outdoor Spaces in Child Care Settings

Visit the following online resources for ideas about different ways to use outdoor spaces with mixed-age groups of children. Make notes or bookmark the sites. You may find other online resources to add to your list.

- Cities Connecting Children to Nature
 Nature Connection in Early Childhood Education
- The Imagination Tree

https://theimaginationtree.com/inspiring-outdoor-play-spaces-kids/

- The Artful Parent: Outdoor Play and Play Spaces
 Pinterest images of creative outdoor play spaces
 https://www.pinterest.com/jvanthul/outdoor-play-spaces/
- 10 Ideas to Get You and Your Child Exploring Outdoors: https://www.naeyc.org/our-work/families/ideas-exploring-outdoors
- National Wildlife Federation and Natural Learning Initiative
 Nature Play at Home: A Guide for Boosting Your Children's Healthy Development and Creativity

FCC, Learning Environments, Lesson 3, Explore

Considerations for Extending the Curriculum Outside

Safety

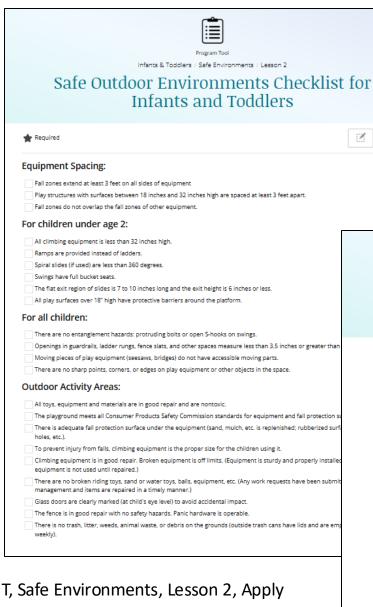
Accessibility

Design

Materials

Learning Areas

Activities



IT, Safe Environments, Lesson 2, Apply

SA, Safe Environments, Lesson 1, Apply



Each year more than 200 000 children go to U.S. hospital emergency rooms with injuries associated with playground equipment.

Most injuries occur when a child falls from the equipment onto the ground. Many backyard playsets are placed on dirt or grass-surfaces that do not adequately protect children when they fall.

> MAKE YOUR BACKYARD PLAYGROUND A SAFE PLACE TO PLAY!



U.S. Consumer Product Safety Commission



visit the CPSC website at www.cpsc.gov to check out the Handbook for Public Playground Safety and other publications. Or, call the toll-free CPSC Hotline at 1-800-638-2772



KaBOOM! is the national nonprofit organization committed to building safe playgrounds for Americas' children through

IS YOUR HOME PLAYGROUND A SAFE PLACE TO



U.S. Consumer Product Safety Commission www.epse.gov



Program Tool

School-Age / Safe Environments / Lesson 1

Sample Playground Checklist

-		tdoors. Mark if a hazard is no u have completed the checkl		_		nt the
Program/Facilities:		Reviewer:		Review Date:		
List here notes,	action-required, or any issu	ues not listed below:				
Cleared / Flagged / Date-Fixed	General Hazards					
	Playground is free from	debris or litter, such as brar	nches, cans, glass, a	nimal waste, etc.		

Equipment is free of sharp points, dangerous corners or edges.



FCC, Safe Environments, Lesson 4, Learn









Safety: Navigating Risks

MGT, Learning Environments, Lesson 6, Apply



Program Too

Management / Learning Environments / Lesson 6

Action Planning for the Learning Environment

If there are children in your program who struggle to be successful, there are likely environmental factors contributing to the challenges they are experiencing. Use this tool to address issues in your program that stem from accessibility within the learning environment.

What's the problem?

What are the solutions we want to try?

What are the steps we need to follow for each solution?

What materials will we need for each step?

PS, Learning Environments, Lesson 3, Apply

Outdoor Accessibility



Guide

Preschool / Learning Environments / Lesson 3

Making Your Outdoor Space Work for All Children

Outdoor play and gross-motor play are important for all children. Some children have difficulty using equipment or engaging in play, but there are many things you can do to help them. The VLS Cognitive Development course offers more information about adapting your space for learners with disabilities.

Try the following to help children be successful in the outdoor space.

Adapting Equipment

- If a child cannot reach the pedals on a trike, attach blocks to the pedals to make them taller.
- . Try attaching a soft Velcro loop or strap to bike pedals if a child is unable to keep their feet on the pedal.
- · Ask a volunteer or your maintenance team to build a ramp and handrails on all equipment and at all doorways.
- Provide smaller, individual buckets of water and sand for children who are unable to reach the table. Place the buckets on the child's
 wheelchair tray, a lower table, or the ground.
- If a child cannot catch the balls other children throw, make the balls easier to catch. You can let a little air out of the balls or buy different kinds of balls. Koosh balls, beach balls, textured balls, balls with bumps or ridges, and soft cloth balls can all be easier to catch.
- . If a child has trouble seeing the ball, consider purchasing balls with bells inside them.

Relationships with Peers and Adults:

- Consider pairing a child with disabilities with a social peer. Encourage children to pull one another in a wagon, wait for each other at the bottom of the slide, and play buddy games together.
- . Plan your staffing patterns so an adult can stay near a child who might need extra help.
- Encourage children to help one another.

Making the Environment Work:

- . Use colorful tape or chalk to help children know where to play with certain toys (e.g., make a track for trikes).
- . Set up a sensory zone where children can explore a variety of textures, smells, sights, and sounds
- . Ensure that there are quiet spaces to go to if a child gets overwhelmed.

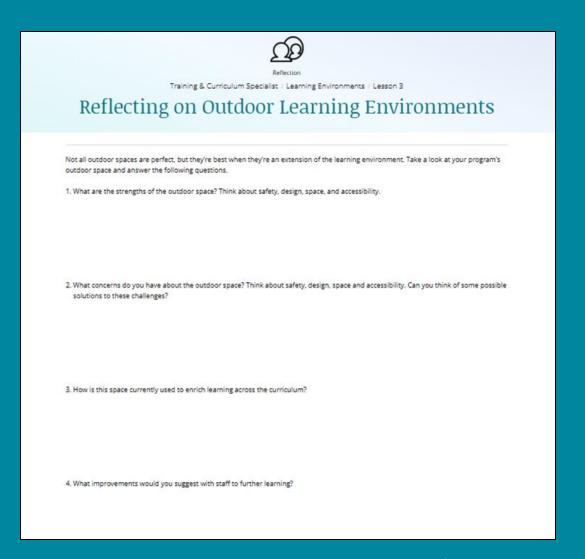
- ✓ Ensure children have access to resources they need outdoors.
- ✓ Ensure the environment is accessible to all children.

Design for Learning

- A calming, quiet space
- Dramatic play
- Art
- Literacy
- STEM
- Sensory
- Motor skills



Outdoor Design





Management / Learning Environments / Lesson 3

Outdoor Learning Environment Inventory

Directions. One this checklist to help you evaluate the outdoor learning environments for child-development and school-age programs. Share your observations with staff and Program Managers to discuss what you observed and brainstorm ideas for making any needed Space and Design There is an unobstructed view of the children at all times. There is easy access to and from the indoor space used by the There is easy access to restrooms. There is a drinking fourtain. There is a reater spigot for attaching a hose. there is age-appropriate equipment for dimbing, swinging, and There is a storage shad. There are soft materials like sawdast, sand, or back under swings, slides, and dimbers. There are surery and shady areas. There are paved or hard surfaces for riding, chalk, etc. There is a covered area for use in wet weather. There is an open, grassy space for running, kicking, throwing, etc. There is an area for digging. Safety The area is free from litter. There are no damaged materials and/or equipment. There are no signs of rust, splinters, and/or cracks in any equipment. There are no obvious hazards (s-hooks on swings, sharp edges, place to pinch fingers). There are no large rocks or roots that may trip children. There are protective surfaces under climbers, weings and slides. Spaces for Learning There is a sand or water area. There is a space for sitting and reading books. There is a dramatic play materials (kitchers, house, contumes). There are blocks. There are props for imaginative play (tubes, buses, camps). There are balls, bean bags, or other objects for throwing. There are sand and water toys. There is chafe or material for art and writing, There are opportunities for music (bells, cymbals, materials that make none when struck, radio for danong). There are tools for exploration (binoculars, magnifying glasses, There are tools or objects for exploration goalleys, namps, pipes? The children are encouraged to take care of plants.

There are opportunities for taking wells.

Considering Outdoor Materials

- Loose parts
- Open-ended
- Developmentally appropriate
- Based on children's interests







Outdoor Experiences for All

Infants & Toddlers

- Outdoor tummy time
- Neighborhood walks
- Outdoor story time
- Sensory
 experiences
 (water, sand,
 mud)

Preschoolers

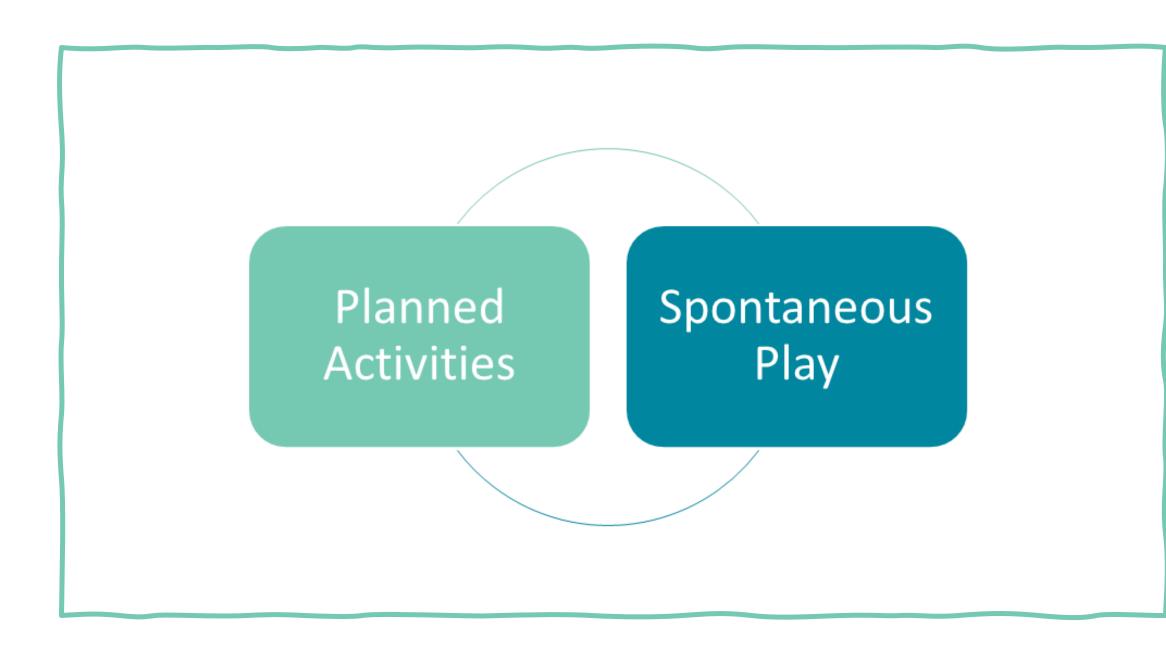
- Build nature sculpture
- Water flowers
- Gross motor games (Simon Says & Hopscotch)
- Dramatic play ideas

School-Agers

- Outdoor art
- Nature scavenger hunt
- Build a bird feeder
- Play frisbee or catch

Youth

- Sketching in nature
- Organized sports
- Community Clean-up
- Picnics



Outdoor Activities Based on Interests or Subject Areas



Science	Use your surroundings to discuss scientific concepts, such as the water cycle, plant species or solar power. Discuss hydropower by using miniature tools to harness the power of water at the water table.
Math	Use the environment and measure cups of dirt or diameters of tree trunks. Discuss patterns by using those found in nature. You can also use tools to measure the field or playing spare for different sports.
Language Arts	Take children outdoors for story time—especially when reading a story that discusses wind, sunshine, or other natural elements. Provide books that help children and youth identify wildlife in your outdoor space. If you plant a garden, ask them to create labels for the different flowers, herbs, or vegetables.
Creative Writing	Use the outdoors as a prompt for creative-writing topics. For example, have school-age children go outside and spend time watching the clouds. They can write a story about the images they find there.



Incorporating Curriculum Plans

- ☐ Promotes Quality
 - ✓ Efficiently used by all staff at various levels of experiences
 - ✓ Promotes responsiveness to children's interests
- ☐ Prepares Children
 - ✓ Developmentally appropriate
 - ✓ Supports broad range of skills
- ☐ Empowers Staff
 - ✓ Support staff to adapt and individualize learning experiences

Adapted from Early Learning Matters, 2024

Language/Literacy

- Oral language
- Phonological awareness
- Letter knowledge
- Print knowledge
- Writing

Mathematics

- Number knowledge
- Geometric and spatial knowledge
- Pattern knowledge
- Measurement knowledge

Self-Regulation

- Self-control of behaviors, emotions, thoughts
- Concentrate on experiences, self, others
- Executive functions

Social-Emotional

- Relationship skills, including social problem-solving skills
- Emotion knowledge
- Perspective-taking
- Personal responsibility

Social Studies

- Positive sense of self
- Knowledge of social and physical environments
- Concepts of time

Creative Expression

- Appreciation of art, music, drama, and dance
- Knowledge of creative processes
- Skills that support creative expression

Science

- Inquiry skills, including use of the five senses and tools
- Knowledge of
- Living things
- Animal habitats
- Life cycles
- Earth and space

Physical/Health

- Motor development
- Good health practices



Understanding Words



Small Group



Skill and Goal

Print knowledge, Letter knowledge

Children will understand the concepts of alphabet and letter.



Materials Needed

- Child names (see Be Prepared)
- Small cups—1 per
- *Small letter tiles (see Be Prepared) *Printables provided

Concepts

New:

- Letter Fewer
 - Alphabet
 - Spell
 - Uppercase
 - Lowercase
 - Review:
 - Share Cooperate

Be Prepared: Print each child's first name on an individual piece of paper. Also prepare for each child a cup containing small letter tiles of the child's first name. Use an uppercase letter for the first letter in the name and lowercase letters for the remaining ones. Print the child's first name on the outside of the cup. In addition, prepare a cup and individual piece of paper with the one-word name of a



classroom pet or a character known to the children, such as Oscar or Bob. Finally, write the words "share" and "cooperate" on separate pieces of paper. This activity is best done at a table where children can sit to use a flat work surface.

The center activity for today and Day 4 is an opportunity for children to personalize the cover of their letter journal that will be used each week a letter is introduced, beginning in Week 7. Suggestions are offered in the Center Activity description for today and Day 4. Encourage all children in your classroom to spend some time at the center to make the cover of their journal.

Week 8: Day 4

Counting Things

123

Small Group



Skill and Goal

Number knowledge

Children will form equal groups.



Materials Needed

- *2 sets of small dot cards 1-8
- 20 toy pennies



Concepts Review:

Equal

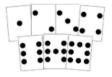


Optional Reading

 Counting Crocodiles by Judy Sierra

Let's try counting to 10 and tapping our knees at the same time. We will say a number each time we tap our knees. Where are our knees?

[Lead children in counting to 10 while tapping their knees each time they say a number.]



Today we are going to use dot cards and pennies to do a counting activity. I am going to put the dot cards on the table face down.

- · When it is your turn, you get to pick a dot card. Then please count the dots out loud and say how many there are.
- · After you've said the number, you may count the same number of pennies. You'll keep those pennies next to the first dot card. You will have an equal number of pennies and dots. Remember, equal means they
- . Then you will pick another dot card and do the same thing. You will count the dots on the second dot card out loud and say how many there are.
- . Then you will count out the same number of pennies for your second dot card and put them next to the second dot card.

RECAP: Today we practiced counting by choosing a dot card and counting the number of dots on the card. Then we counted the same number of pennies. We did this with two different dot cards.

Examples from **ELM**

Examples from The Creative Curriculum

The Creative Curriculum® for Preschool Intentional Teaching Experiences

Drop, Pick Up & Count



M79

Objective 20

Sand and Water

What You Do

Materials: table tennis balls, each with a numeral written on it; tongs; small net; ladle; water for the water table

- Show the numerals on the table tennis balls. Name the numerals and trace them with your finger.
- 2. Talk about the features of a numeral, e.g., curved, straight, or diagonal lines, and how it's formed.
- "This number has all straight lines. It's a 4. Let's count to 4 together: one, two, three, four."
- Explain that you are going to drop the table tennis
 balls into the water table. Demonstrate how to pick
 up a table tennis ball from the water using either
 your hands or another tool. When you pick a ball
 from the water, name the numeral and count to it.
- Give each child a chance to pick multiple balls from the water. Assist the children, as necessary.
- Continue for as long as the activity interests the children. Tell the children that they can use the table tennis balls and tongs in the Sand and Water area during choice time.

English-Language Learners

 Invite English-language learners to count in their first languages and in English.

Related Objectives: 7a, 8b, 9a, 11a, 26, 28

Uses number concepts and operations c. Connects numerals with their quantities

- When needed, use simple sentence structure and short sentences with easy vocabulary.
- Ask children to repeat a simple phrase, such as "This ball has a 4," that you have said and modeled.

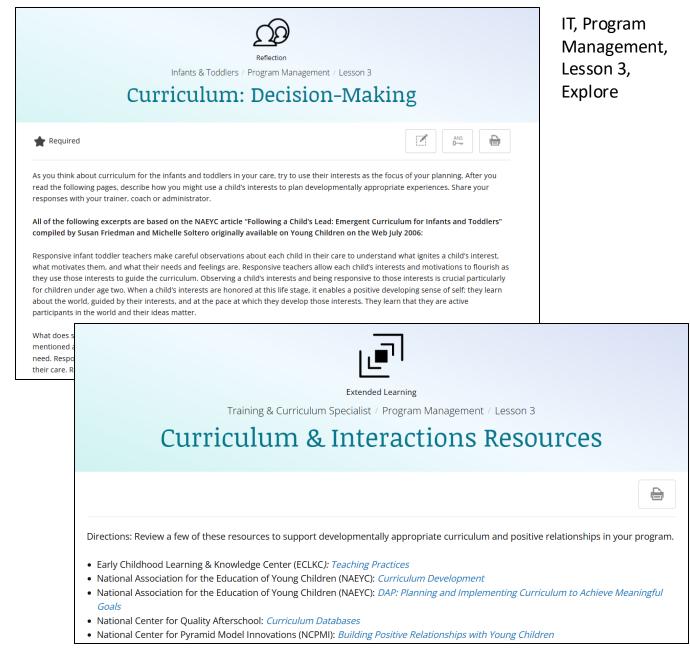
Including All Children

- Pair children of different skill levels. One child can pick a ball from the water; the other can name the numeral.
- Use larger balls with larger numerals on them.
- Record numbers into a communication device for a child to count aloud.



Integrating Curriculum Outdoors

- Which of these experiences will happen outdoors?
- Where did you get your ideas for your outdoor experiences this week?
- How will these outdoor experiences help children meeting their learning goals?



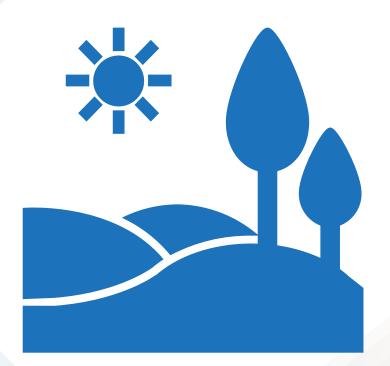


SHARE OUT: CHAT

What do you do to create a program culture that values outdoor learning?

Think about it...

- Reflect on your feelings about being outside. What do you enjoy or dislike about being outdoors?
- What are your goals for outdoor play? (These can differ from day to day, depending on children's needs, the season, and the spaces and materials you have access to for structured versus unstructured activities.)
- What routines can you create that will assist you in getting children outdoors? (Some programs have outdoor time at the beginning and end of every day so they don't have to deal with coats and hats in the middle of the day.)
- What classroom/programmatic roadblocks exist that may make it harder to get children outdoors? How might you tackle them?



(NAEYC, 2019)

Additional VLS Supports

If you are interested in learning more about ways the Virtual Lab School supports learning in the outdoors, we encourage you review these VLS courses more deeply:

Lessons & activities referenced in today's session

□ Infant & Toddler, Safe Environments, Lesson 2 (Apply)
 □ Infant & Toddlers, Program Management, Lesson 3 (Explore)
 □ Preschool, Learning Environments, Lesson 3 (Apply)
 □ School-Age, Safe Environments, Lesson 1 (Apply)
 □ School-Age, Learning Environments, Lesson 3
 □ Family Child Care, Safe Environments, Lesson 4 (Learn)
 □ Family Child Care, Learning Environments, Lesson 3 (Explore)
 □ Training & Curriculum Specialist, Learning Environments, Lesson 3 (Explore)
 □ Training & Curriculum Specialist, Program Management, Lesson 3 (Explore)
 □ Managements, Learning Environments, Lesson 3 (Apply)
 □ Management, Learning Environments, Lesson 6 (Apply)

Additional courses for review

- ☐ Learning Environments, across all tracks
- ☐ Safe Environments, lesson regarding outdoor environments (varies among tracks)
- ☐ Program Management, Lesson 3 (IT, PS, SA, FCC, TCS) and Lesson 4 (MGT)

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SHARE OUT: CHAT

What has been your biggest takeaway from today's session?



Thank you again for joining us today!

Any questions?

Please complete the QUICK feedback survey— What future training topics would be helpful?

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