

# Outside Nature Based Learning

What do children learn?

A conversation with Bowdoin College Children's Center staff  
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## Standards

Standards are created by national or statewide professionals.

## Children's Experiences

Children in the first five years learn best when their learning is self-led. They appear to fail or need remediation when they are taught through instruction. When a child enters an environment that reflect expectations and outcomes in the context of play, they thrive.

## Curriculum

Teachers use the standards to create curriculum, set environments and carry out lesson plans. These plans instruct children about what to play with, which activities to engage in, and ultimately what to learn during certain times of the year.

Insights on Creating Experiences for Children

Using teacher-led learning and standards to set curriculum

## Children's Play

Teachers create safe relationships between them and their children, and rich, well thought-out, designed space for children to engage freely in true play. Materials are offered with an eye on open-ended use and extending their play interests.

## Curriculum Planning

Careful observations and intentional planning creates an environment that extends children's natural play through preparing investigations, collecting and arranging materials, and fostering a sense of inquiry.

## Documentation of Learning/Assessment

Teachers, document play over time, noting interests, skills, abilities, and where children are meeting national/state standards as they play.

# Insights on Creating Experiences for Children

Using child-led interests and curiosity that threads back to the standards

# Implications for Educators

The body of research on play and learning suggests that school readiness occurs when play is a valued and intentional part of the curriculum rather than early instruction.

When educators begin with direct instruction in the early years, the child's brain is less developed because of the lack of context and interest-initiated play.

Current 'schooling' is a work motif, not a play motif so our work in preschool is to preserve play as the path to preparedness.

Work motif includes outcomes, rewards, consequences and an ability to hold on to the outcome while participating in a "fun-less" activity.

Until a child shows mixed emotions/thoughts (the 5-7 shift) they are not ready for the work motif as they can't see other's perspectives or understand "on the other hand".

# The Role Of Play In Intrinsic Learning

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The National Science Foundation (2001) suggests that active learning involves a process of exploring the natural or material world and triggers questions leading to discoveries to reach a new level of understanding.

Through active exploration children seek information and insight about their questions and interests in things that matter to them. They construct meaning and resolutions about their area of curiosity rather than being focused on the right answer or outcome.



# Four considerations for today's conversation

How is the environment designed for rich and deep play?

How do the caregivers' relationships secure the children in play.

How is curriculum designed to be authentic and responsive to learning standards.

How is risky play nurtured in the play space with materials?

How is the environment designed for rich, deep play?

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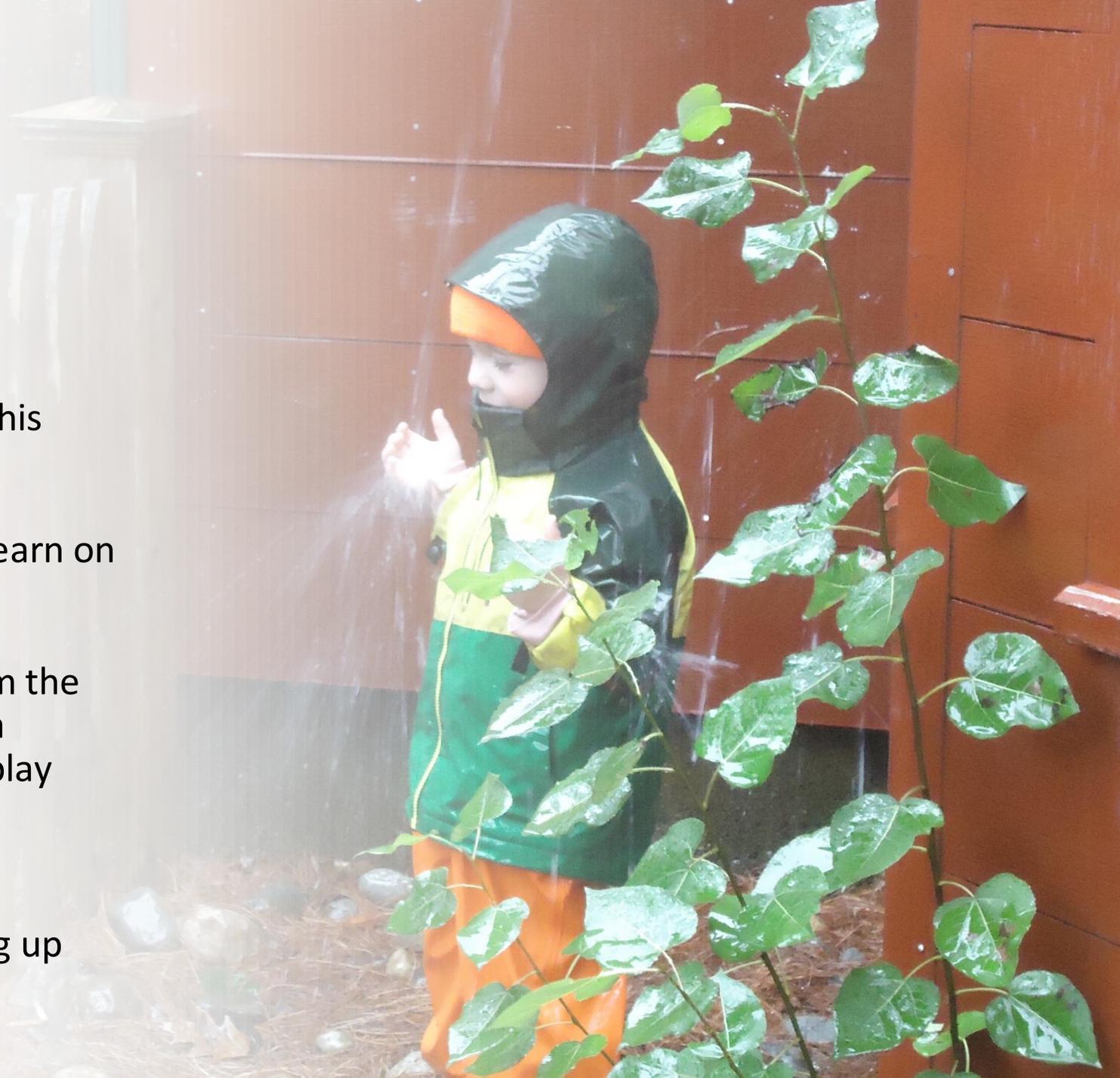


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# Getting back to the simplicity of free play

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- We know free play is good, but how does this translate to daily activities?
- When children have room to explore and learn on their own, amazing things happen.
- Children extend and deepen their play from the previous days and weeks. It's important for a teacher to provide opportunities to deepen play already occurring.
- Teachers can provide those invitations to investigate or ask questions by silently setting up the environment or by directly engaging with children.





# Considerations when designing the environment

- The environment offers space and choices for play with a variety of invitations for play in groups or individually.
- A flexible plan is created to ensure the schedule is set for children's play to deepen and extend.
- The materials are gathered and refreshed weekly
- The curriculum is in sync with the seasons
- How children interact and engage with each other
- How the space will be maintained

When children have room to explore and learn on their own, amazing things happen.



# Play-Based Teaching Continuum

*How do educators support children in play-based learning?*

*Educator-led*

*Child-led*

## Non-Playful Instruction

Educator provides a structured experience for children with little or no play, though the educator may be engaging and enthusiastic

## Playful Instruction

Educator guides learning towards an explicit goal through playful, experiential activities and games

## Supported Play

Children freely choose and explore; educators provide opportunities to extend and deepen the exploration

## Free Play

Children freely choose and explore without interference from educators

Gray, P. (2008). The Value of Play I: The Definition of Play Gives Insights. *Psychology Today*.

<https://www.psychologytoday.com/us/blog/freedom-learn/200811/the-value-play-i-the-definition-play-gives-insights>

Miller, E., & Almon, J. (2009). *Crisis in the kindergarten to play in school: Why children need to play in school*.

Zosh, J. M., Gaudreau, C., Golinkoff, R. M., & Hirsh-Pasek, K. (2002). The Power of Playful Learning in the Early Childhood Setting. *Young Children*, 77(2).

# Abundant Play

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How do the caregivers' relationships secure the children in play.



# Some thoughts about allowing children to have agency in their learning

When we make rules, we need to ask ourselves:

- Why am I driven to make this rule,
- What does it do to support the child,
- How might it stop the child's plan,
- Would this rule stifle creativity?
- Do the rules come from observation and a need to offer guidance
- Risk vs hazard/danger
- We often think of risks and hazards/danger as one category

## As children grow, they develop “focused attention” and so, their play deepens

- The term “focused attention” refers to a designated activity during which “attention is directed exclusively to one task.”
- As children develop cognitively and acquire language, this leads to longer episodes of “focused attention”.
- Group-care, by definition, can be disruptive and distracting so caregivers work to minimize the impact of group care on children’s attention and so, their learning.
- Time for child-led, outdoor play needs to be abundant ensuring long stretches of child-directed time outside for deep play to unfold in between rhythm and routine touchpoints.



# Known caregivers make a difference

When the caregiver is known by the children, attentive to their needs and connecting interactions with them, those children engage in meaningful play.



# Children need to be in proximity with their teachers

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- It is important that the teacher's structure of the environment offers children the possibility to control the physical distance of them from the teacher: to be nearby in case they need physical contact or to distance themselves when they want to play with peers without teacher involvement.
- Consider having smaller groups within larger groups
  - So, there is a plan for "taking time", which reduces waiting time and manages the potential mismatch of pacing for each child





## Interruptive effects of adult's involvement in children's play

- Direct involvement of teachers in young children's play can have a negative impact on children's play engagement .
- Teachers may disturb children's engagement with objects and peers by being too directive without responding to children or by being intrusive and taking over children's initiatives.
- Although teachers believe that children have the competence to control their play, it is not uncommon to see adults unknowingly interrupting children's play with arguably inappropriate engagement.
- Teachers must look for appropriateness of fit between their responses and the level of support that children need.

# Teacher work

- When teachers are outside near children and do not want to interrupt their play or be called in to entertain them, they do “teacher work”. These are chores or tasks that offer involvement in the outside world for the teacher as they model enjoyment of their time outside.
- It may be necessary to support teachers in reimagining their professional identities to include comfort and confidence in being outdoors. Encouraging them to embrace the outdoors and the varied weather can be an opportunity to enrich children’s play and learning experiences.
- Support comfort outdoors by offering clothing lists and sources for warm, water-resistant clothing.



# How is curriculum designed to be authentic and responsive to learning standards.

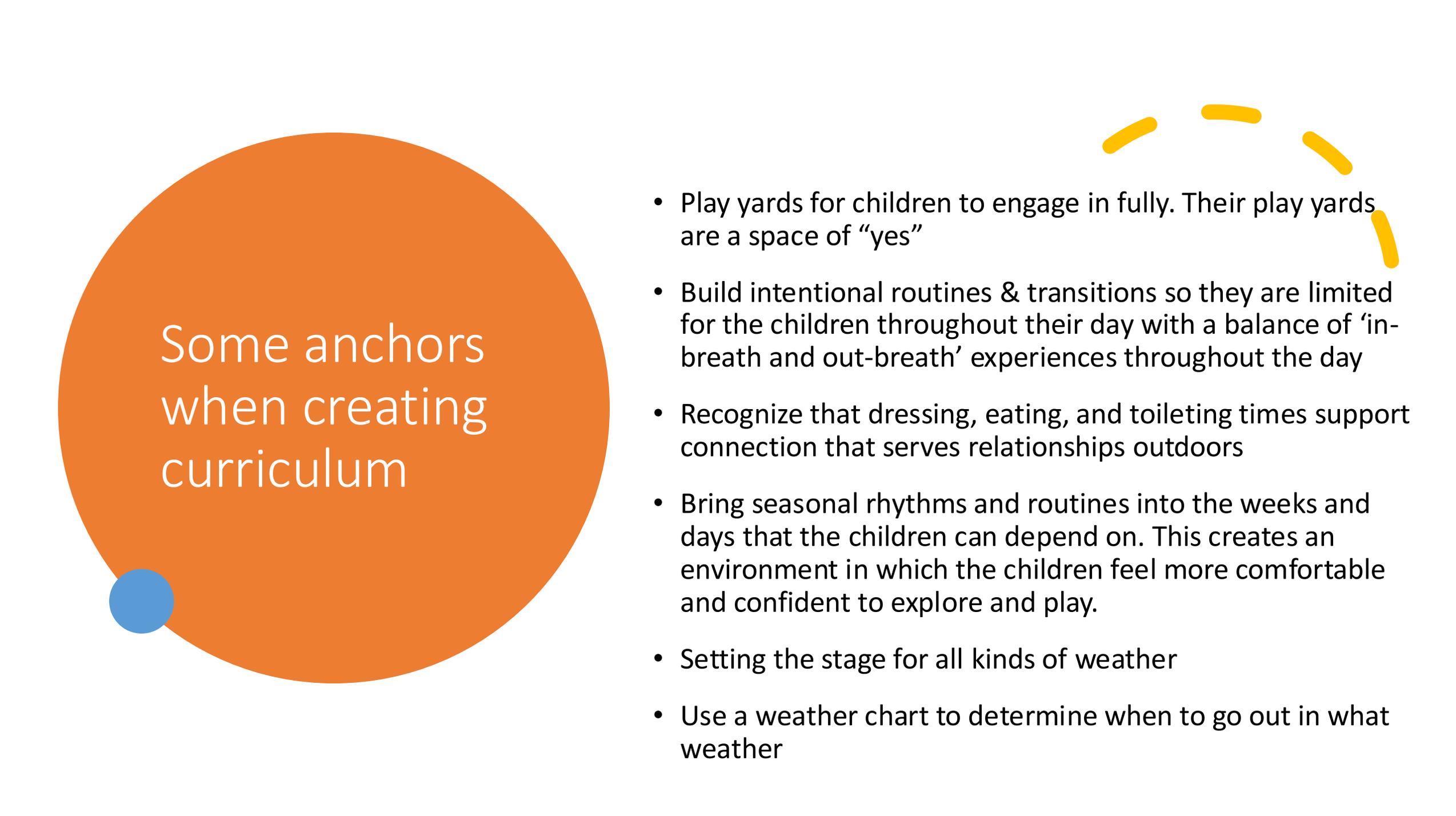
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# The day-to-day routine is part of the curriculum and can interrupt children's play

- Children are competent interpreters of their situations, and should be free to make choices, self-regulate, and make and break their rules as they learn from their own hands-on experiences. The mismatch between the child's and the adult's perspective can bring an interruption of their play.





## Some anchors when creating curriculum

- Play yards for children to engage in fully. Their play yards are a space of “yes”
- Build intentional routines & transitions so they are limited for the children throughout their day with a balance of ‘in-breath and out-breath’ experiences throughout the day
- Recognize that dressing, eating, and toileting times support connection that serves relationships outdoors
- Bring seasonal rhythms and routines into the weeks and days that the children can depend on. This creates an environment in which the children feel more comfortable and confident to explore and play.
- Setting the stage for all kinds of weather
- Use a weather chart to determine when to go out in what weather



# Open-ended materials offer inspirations

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- Nicholson (1971) coined the term loose parts to articulate the idea that children benefit from being given open-ended materials.
  - Loose parts are materials that can be moved, carried, combined, redesigned, lined up and taken apart and put back together in multiple ways.
  - They are materials with no specific set of direction that can be used alone or combined with other materials.

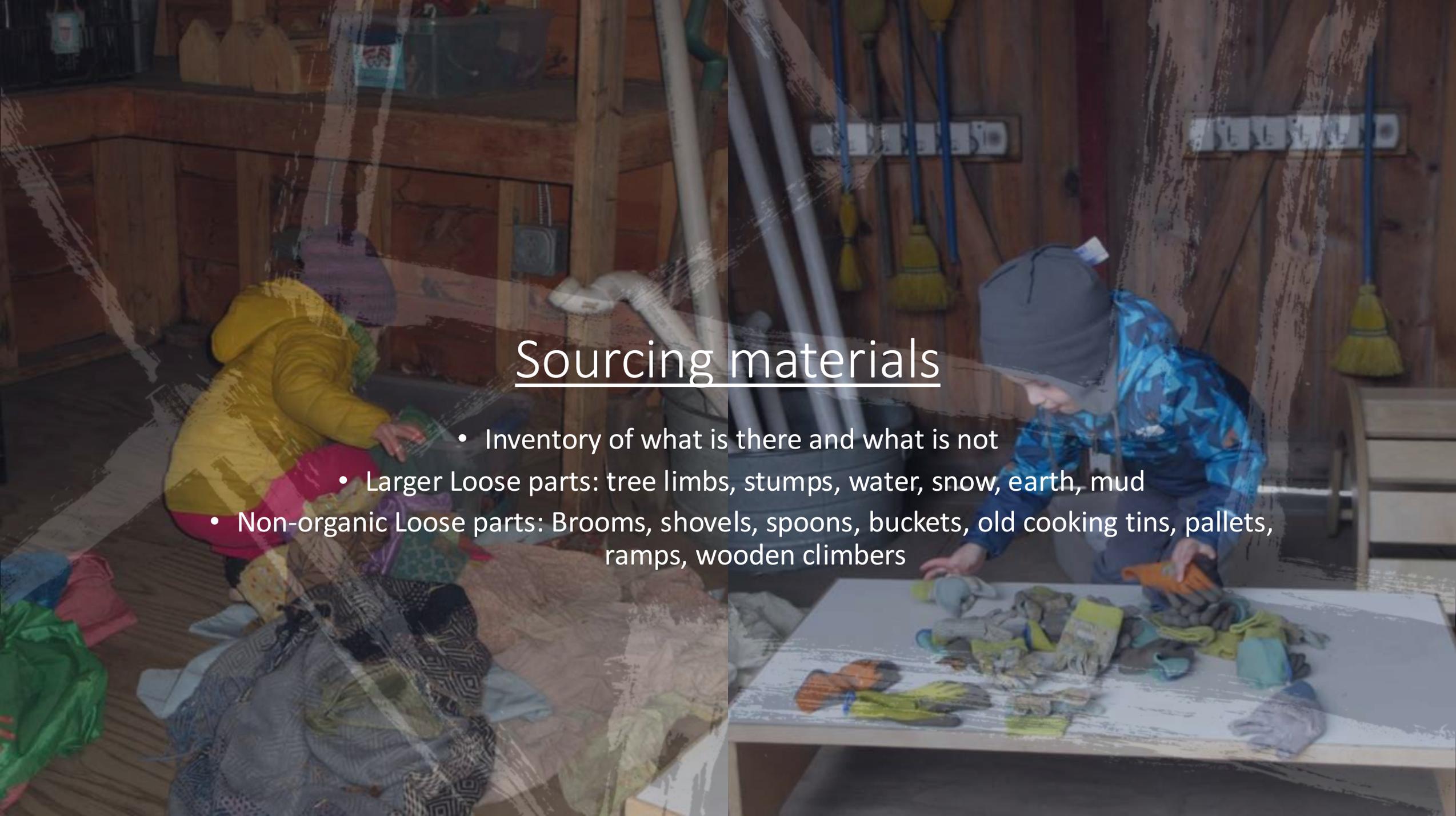
## Loose parts appear spontaneously outside

# What opportunities do loose part materials offer?

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- Open ended play
- Captivating invitations
- Natural or Synthetic materials
- Sensory: Color, Texture, Sound
- Creative: Art, Design, Symbolic Play
- Action: Movement, Transportation, Connecting/Disconnecting
- Inquiry: Construction, Investigation, Correlation





## Sourcing materials

- Inventory of what is there and what is not
- Larger Loose parts: tree limbs, stumps, water, snow, earth, mud
- Non-organic Loose parts: Brooms, shovels, spoons, buckets, old cooking tins, pallets, ramps, wooden climbers

Small Loose parts: cloth, ropes, pinecones, stones, acorns, pine needles, sand, woodchips, leaves



This is gas.



Time + Loose  
parts = creative  
play

- The beauty of having a myriad of loose parts in a play yard - and the time and freedom to use them as they please - is that the children can carry out their complex play scenarios in endless creative and imaginative ways.



# “Messing about” leads to “finding out”

- When materials do not have a specific purpose, children feel invited to be curious about the items in their environment and then *mess about* with them.



<b>Outdoor Play Space: Inside the Fence</b>	We have a fenced in area that is all pavement and/or wood chips with only stagnant play structures.	We have a fenced in play yard with mostly pavement/woodchips and some grass and plantings. There is only play structures to use.	We have a fenced/or sectioned in play yard with a mix of grass, hills, sand, and woodchips. There are minimal materials for play.	We have a fenced/sectioned play yard with a mix of grass, plantings, hills, sand, and woodchips. There is an assortment of materials for play such as shovels, buckets, balls, ramps, kitchen items, etc..	We have a natural playscape with trees, ground undulation, climbing, and boulders with materials for games, imaginative play, loose parts and natural materials. There is water and digging available in fair weather.
<b>Rules &amp; Guidelines for Outdoor Play</b>	Materials and/or play structures have definite rules, often many, that are enforced with rigidity and little explanation. Some of these rules are decided on by those not engaged with the children or spending time in the space.	Rules for how to use materials, move in the space or utilize play structures are created by teachers using the space but these expectations stay stagnant and are enforced with rigidity. Some explanation is available for children but little to no flexibility exists to allow children freedom in their play.	Rules and expectations are created by the teachers who are spending time in the space, with children when appropriate. These rules are revisited throughout the year and on occasion exceptions are made to allow for creative play but usually they are enforced rigidly.	There are just a few, basic rules or expectations decided on by teachers and children together and revisited throughout the year. Explanations are made to children regularly and flexibility exists for children to have some freedom in play.	There are principles (respect, safety, responsibility) that teachers use to make decisions, with children when appropriate, about how materials are used. These decisions are often made day to day or in the moment. Risk assessment is used to create boundaries for safety. Teacher proximity and presence is used to guide children prior to enforcing hard boundaries or rules.
<b>Outdoor Play Space: Beyond the Fence</b>	I do not have access to any land that is outside the fenced play area	I have access to school grounds around the building but they do not have natural elements or are unfit for free play.	I have access to some small areas of land with natural elements but it has not been assessed or prepared for children's play.	I have access to some neutral land, trails and/or gardens from our school building that are moderately set up for play.	I have access to ample outdoor space with a variety of natural elements. The area is fit and safe for play. There are also options off of school property such as trails or nature preserves that we can get to easily.
<b>Beyond the Fence: Teacher Preparedness</b>	I do not have training or skills to take a group of children into an open and natural play space. I do not feel comfortable with this practice.	I have some training and skills to take children into unbounded play areas but I do not feel comfortable doing so.	I have some training and skills to take children into unbounded play areas and have been developing a comfort with this practice. In certain areas we visit regularly I feel more comfortable than traveling to new wild spaces.	I feel quite confident being in open & natural settings but still need some practical training on being in wild spaces with children. Especially if I am going to explore new, unbounded areas.	I have experience and training working with children in open & natural settings. I feel comfortable with this practice throughout seasons, in a variety of areas and across different groups of children.
<b>Scheduled time for open-ended, outdoor play</b>	I have at least 30 minutes of scheduled uninterrupted time for outdoor play but I do not supervise it.	I have at least 30 minutes of uninterrupted time scheduled for outdoor play each day and I do supervise it.	I have the flexibility to arrange my schedule to allow for longer periods of uninterrupted outdoor play time	I have administrator and/or team support to create more time for children to play outdoors and to conduct portions of my instruction time outdoors.	I have 60+ minutes of uninterrupted outdoor play, sometimes multiple times a day. This time includes some intentional provocations or material selection to extend learning outdoors.
<b>Child Driven Learning</b>	I follow a set curriculum that requires me to teach certain things at certain times of year.	I have a set curriculum that I can use flexibly in conjunction with play based learning.	I practice a play based approach and then fit what occurs into a set of standards that I need to teach.	I have administrator and/or team support to think critically about children's play and how to scaffold learning through play	We use a fully play based pedagogy
<b>Child Driven Learning: Teacher Preparedness</b>	My training is in teaching methods and lesson plans. I feel most comfortable teaching a set curriculum.	My training is in teaching methods and lesson plans. I feel comfortable with a set curriculum but do practice some flexibility within it.	My training is in child development and emergent teaching practices. I feel most comfortable with a plan for our day that I will follow through on, touching on developmentally appropriate projects, themes and activities.	My training is in child development and emergent teaching practices. I always have a plan for our day with developmentally appropriate activities, games, supplies but easily divert from that plan when children's play goes in another direction.	My training is in child development and emergent teaching practices. I have a 'toolkit' of seasonal songs or activities that I can utilize as needed. I plan out what I will do outdoors and how I might set up the environment while children play. I feel most comfortable observing play and creating emergent curriculum from those observations.



# RISK-TAKING

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How is risky play nurtured in the play space with materials?

“Risk is essential to  
childhood”  
The outdoors is key in  
offering risk.



# Knowing the difference between hazards and risk

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- Danger and risk are different, and we need to teach children about the difference between hazards and risk.
- Risky play is synonymous with child-led play and a significant aspect of any nature-based program which needs to be consciously managed.
- We minimize danger while maximizing learning.



# There are short-term and long-term effects for children who do not experience risk-taking.

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When risk-taking is limited, children will create ways to challenge themselves. This can result in an increase of unsafe risk, a lack of desire to engage in curious, creative and challenging play; and the lost opportunity to build confidence, judgment, competence, and self-esteem through kinesthetic and physical play.

In a safe and conducive environment, children are capable and creative enough to engage themselves in a variety of activities, including the risky ones.

Teachers should recognize that capability and let the children try out activities they invent. If they attempt risky activities, the adult can monitor the situation to ensure safety.



Exposure to healthy risk, particularly physical risk, enables children to experience fear, and learn the strengths and limitations of their own body.

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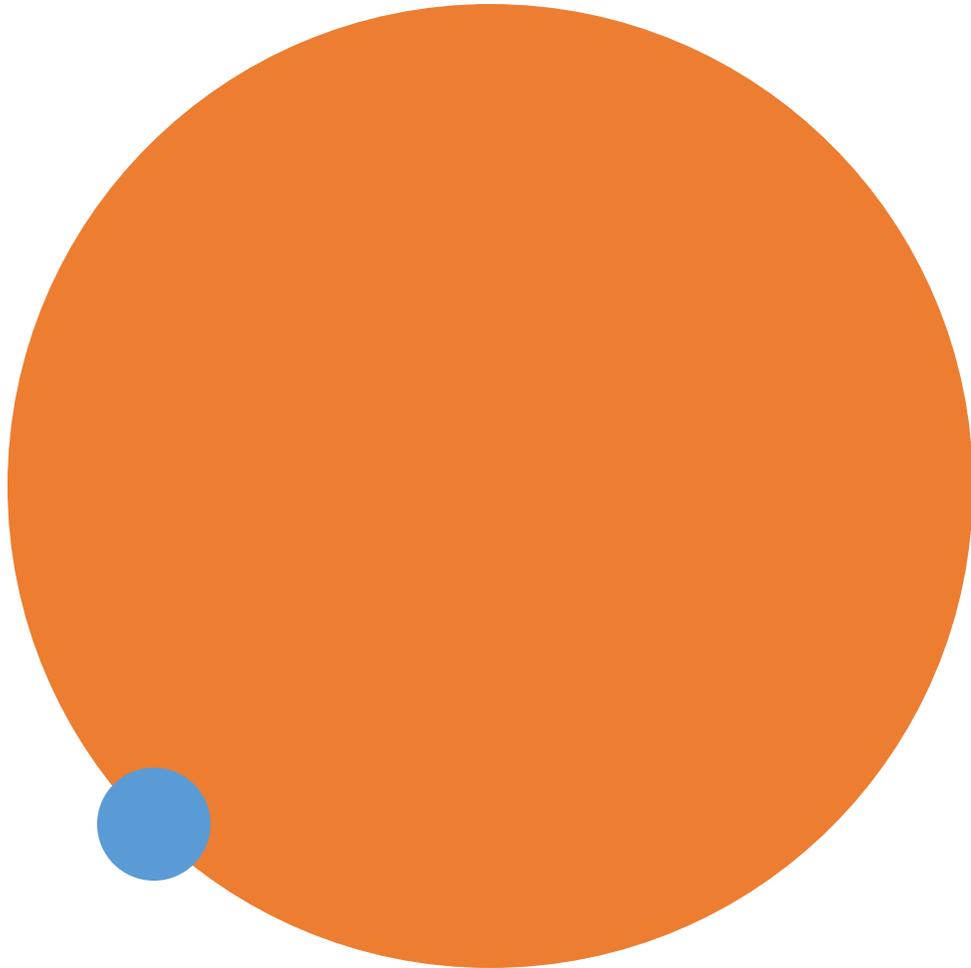




# Risk perception is like a muscle that needs to be developed and flexed

Outdoor time every day is essential. Not just in the neat and controlled environment. Encourage children to poke around under hedges and permit them to leave you in a safe area.





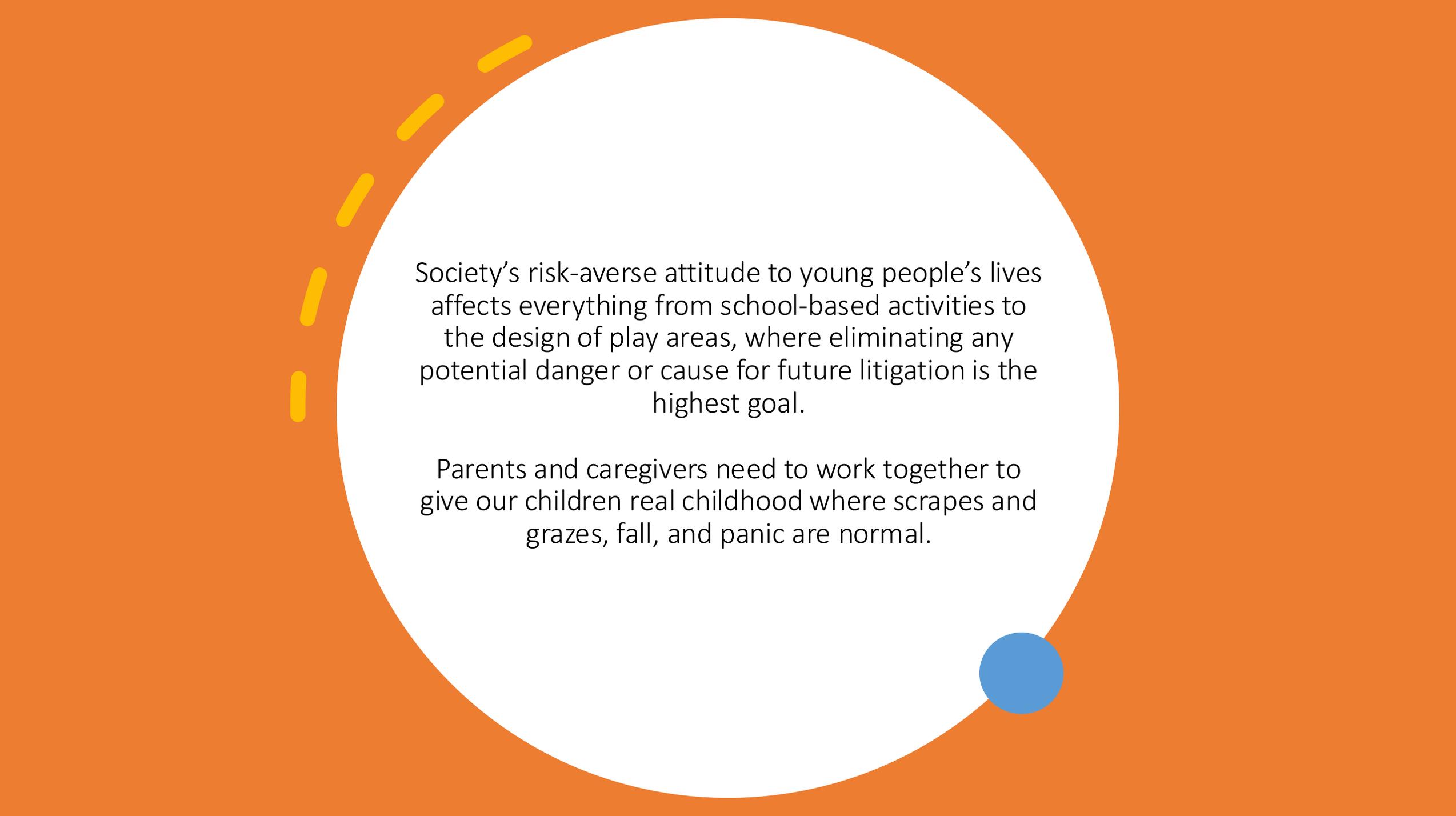
One of the long-term outcomes of limited risk-taking is children who do not experience the lessons and learning gained from risk-taking when it is either positive or unsuccessful, will show poorer risk judgement in the future.



# How to build a secure experience for children

- Consider how your team feels about children's discoveries and the nature of children's learning.
- Does your team appreciate neat and convenient vs offering invitations?
- Is your team collaborative and comfortable trying things out?
- Is your team more curious or more concerned?
- How do you make space for flexibility within the rules?





Society's risk-averse attitude to young people's lives affects everything from school-based activities to the design of play areas, where eliminating any potential danger or cause for future litigation is the highest goal.

Parents and caregivers need to work together to give our children real childhood where scrapes and grazes, fall, and panic are normal.

# In conclusion...

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- The preschool years are the time for the brain to prepare for learning.
- Optimal brain development during early childhood occurs when children have emotional safety and time to play.
- Observation is critical to planning curriculum that supports learning through play. Curriculum planning should be cyclical and aimed to deepen the child's interests and investigations.
- Early Childhood Educators are responsible for understanding the concepts and practices of early childhood development, curriculum, and assessments to measure the quality and appropriateness of learning that occurs through play.
- The use of loose parts and allowance for risk in play is essential for learning to occur and for optimal development.

