

The Importance of Increasing Children's Outdoor Play Opportunities

How Outdoor Play Environments Contribute to Children's Development

We often hear adults saying – “oh, the children are just outside playing” or children saying “I don't want to go outdoors. I want to play with”. We also hear many adults suggest that children learn far more indoors than outdoors. Research is telling us that outdoor play offers children far more learning opportunities than indoor environments. Below, I provide an overview of some of the key attributes that children gain from outdoor play.

Physical literacy– Running, jumping, swinging, climbing and moving bodies in unique way is necessary for children's physical development. When children are engaged in play that requires them to use their bodies in multiple ways such as big body play, they are intuitively learning about reflexes, movement control, how to balance, and how to use their bodies within the space.

The level of physical activity begun in childhood has a significant influence on later life. Children who develop strong balancing skills will be better prepared for body movements in later life. Strong muscles and bone density decrease the severity of an injury and healing time in case of injury. Physical and active outdoor play improve heart and lung function, reduces overweight and obesity issues, as well as high cholesterol.

Children require environments where they can engage in outdoor play that builds upon both their fine and gross motor development. Construction play, games, and physical motion including pushing, pulling, stretching upwards and downwards, climbing, squatting, and speed are essential for physical activity

Emotional development is complex. During the early years, children are developing the framework to manage feelings about one's self and others. Outdoor play experiences influence children's ability to build self-confidence. A child's self-confidence strongly influences their desire and ability to take risks in their play and learning environments. When there are outdoor play options, children are better able to experiment with various emotions such as joy and fear. Children who experience stressful or traumatic living environments, such as child abuse or changes in family units or disasters, they benefit from having active outdoor play environments that allow them to formulate a variety of play options that they can use to work out aspects of stress that they are dealing with. This helps them to work through the trauma

Social development occurs more naturally in outdoor environments than indoors because of peer play, the space and options to move, create, and explore within the environment. Outdoor play is where children learn to take turns, self-regulate, interact with peers, and understand social norms such as what behaviors are acceptable and what ones require refinement. They determine when to engage in group play options and when they wish to be alone and enjoy solitary play.

Early learning environments that have places for children to engage in solitary play are supporting them in developing their sense of being – which is associated with independence and independent thinking. Solitary play helps children develop their creativity, problem solving, ability to be alone, being comfortable playing alone and building upon their interests and strengths on topical issues. Children may engage in solitary play at times when they wish to observe how others engage in a particular task or activity. The learning that occurs through their observations may become part of their plan as to how to tackle a new experience.

When children engage in group play, they are also developing important life skills. Group play influences children's knowledge about and behaviors related to social norms, cultural rules and diversity in ways of knowing. Group play, such as rough and tumble and big-body play not only contribute to children's physical development, this play helps them with developing cooperative skills and learning cues about acceptable body language and communication skills. Outdoor play environments that provide children with options such as exploring den making or shadows and mud puddles, and having adults within the environments that encourage them to test and develop relationships, contribute to children wanting to explore, connect to their environments and actualize their sense of curiosity. Children require places

where they can test strategies with peers, learn self-control and engage in negotiation skills. This can best be achieved in environments where adults support them in testing relationships and becoming involved only when children's self-esteem is at risk.

Children require space to move around and to use different parts of their body. Social development occurs on climbers, bridges, platforms, ramps, and with materials that require children to work together to create, take turns, and problem solve.

Inclusion: Outdoor play environments that have multiple places and spaces for all children to experience inclusion off equality to all. Inclusion occurs in spaces and places where children and adults advocate to celebrate the skills and abilities of all people in the setting. Often, it is the design of the play spaces, including the equipment and surfacing, rather than children that influence exclusion of children with disabilities. When children with disabilities are in environments that support their development, positive self-esteem and an understanding of diversity is developed among all children and families.

Cognitive: Studies have shown that outdoor play affects a child's neurological development and how the neural circuits of the brain become wired. Brain development affects all aspects of development. Children who are exposed to outdoor environments that require them to move physically, participate in exploratory experiences such as putting things together and taking them apart, figuring out how to accomplish climbing to the top of the tree, or making the sand wet enough to mold particular shapes, all contribute to the critical thinking and problem-solving skills used later in academic environments. Outdoor play environments provide children with new words, which in turn increases their vocabulary, reasoning skills and thinking strategies. When language, movement, and self-regulation skills are combined, children increase their abilities to focus and control their behaviors, including how they problem solve and work with their peers. Challenging outdoor play opportunities increase children's manipulative skills, their abilities to make appropriate judgments and reasoning, and use their creativity to support their ideas and perspectives.

Children's cognitive skills can be enhanced when they have access to outdoor experiences such as climbing and swinging to support perceptual processes. Spatial orientation can be achieved through areas that require children to climb, crawl under and over, and build vertically and horizontally. Scientific principles including gravity and spatial awareness is gained from outdoor play that includes speed, height, and rapid movement.

Outdoor play and games are essential to children's development. Whether the games are individually played or are group games, are traditional ones, or those that children create, games support children in acquiring skills needed to make decisions, make up and/or follow rules and begin to understand strategies and consequences. Games create a sense of peer cooperation, success and failure, and risk and problem solving. These skills transfer to later academic learning.

Environmental citizenship refers to the perspective that children and adults are an integral part of the environment and how we interact, engage with, care for and protect the ecosystems will impact the future of living space. Becoming a positive environmental citizen begins with the role modeling that children are exposed to during their outdoor play experiences. Outdoor play environments that provide children with space, time, and natural environments for activities and exploration and that supports them in engaging in discoveries that move from simple to more complex, contributes to them learning to become more focused. The more play that includes exploring their environments and building an appreciation for items such as rocks, water, bugs, and trees, the more children begin to develop skills and attitudes of environmental citizenship (Blanchet-Cohen & Elliott, 2011).

Think about indoor and outdoor environments. When you think about indoor play experiences how does it compare to what children gain outdoors? Why, if children gain so many benefits from outdoor play, is it such a small portion of their daily routine? How can we support parents and educators in advancing the outdoor play movement so that we contribute to the health and wellness of children and society?