

Exploring in the Wonderful Outdoors!

Young children who spend time interacting with nature on a daily basis benefit in many ways from these experiences. Adults who encourage children to master new challenges, develop complex skills, and closely observe the natural world, give children gifts that will last their lifetime.

Children need to master physical challenges in order to gain self-confidence and a sense of control over their environments. Learning how to maneuver their bodies in a variety of settings helps children gain skills that keep them safer. Adults are encouraged to role-model interest and curiosity, so that children feel free to express themselves. Admit if you don't know an answer. Provide abundant resource materials about the outdoors and use them constantly, indoors and outdoors.

Hands-on Activities and Material to Encourage Children Outdoors

Make space for gardening and growing plants to develop new skills and to explore the senses:

- Make a path lined with herbs to touch and smell, and ornamental grasses that move in the breeze
- Observe the natural life cycle of plants, plant for butterflies and hummingbirds
- Encourage language development by recording, writing, labeling, using books for reference
- Foster science and math through observation, counting, measuring, estimating

Bring all types of art, music and movement outdoors:

- Measuring cups, ladles, rocks, artificial flowers, pinecones, shells for sand and water play
- Paintbrushes with water or paint for concrete painting, and large paper for murals on the fence
- Homemade musical instruments, drums, cymbals, bells, pots and pans (with wooden spoons)
- Lightweight fabric or ribbons to move in the breeze or create a "stage" area for "performances"

Create separate spaces to meet individual needs:

- Devise sheltered spaces for children's planning, sitting, hiding out, getting away
- Use an old kiddie pool to plant soft grass as a protected soft space to lie down

Take advantage of weather for new play opportunities:

- Wind – hanging items that move in the wind such as cloth, wind chimes, streamers
- Rain – go out and play in the rain, observe toy floats, splash in the puddles, play in the mud

- Sun – observe and chase shadows, watching evaporation of painted water, “bake” clay art in the sun, place objects on light-sensitive paper to make “solar prints”, plant summer flowering vines to make shaded spaces, get wet with spray bottles and sprinklers
- Clouds – Observe different types: sizes (big, fluffy, thin, wispy), colors (gray with rain, pink with sunrise or sunset). Read *It Looked Like Spilt Milk*, by Charles G. Shaw; make your own clouds with cotton or torn paper, estimate whether it will rain on our school

Encourage parent participation:

- Discover any gardeners who will donate plants or knowledge, or woodworkers who could contribute to projects
- Ask for “loose parts,” found objects, cardboard boxes, tubes, old wooden serving trays, bowls, dividers, baskets to provide challenges that will keep children motivated and engaged

Sources of additional ideas:

Deb Curtis and Margie Carter, *Designs for Living and learning*

Rusty Keeler, *Natural Playscapes*

Richard Louv, *Last Child in the Woods: Saving our Children from Natural-Deficit Order*

Robin C. Moore, *Natural Learning: The Life History of an Environmental Schoolyard*

National Arbor Day Foundation, *Learning with Nature Idea Book*

Sara Starbuck, *Hollyhocks and Honeybees: Garden Projects for Young Children*