

# Beyond Recess:

## Creating An Outdoor Classroom

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It is estimated that 58% of young children growing up in the United States are in care outside of the home. Coupled with this statistic is the knowledge that modern children spend less than ½ the time outdoors that their parents did. **Technology, safety issues, and the urge to make every moment count in educating and preparing young children for skills and knowledge that will be used much later in their lives have continuously eaten away at the joyous experience of outdoor play.**

At birth a child begins striving to make sense of his world. When his emotional and physical needs are met he begins to understand the order of things and develops security and later independence and an eagerness to learn. In order to read, children must be able to classify objects using a minimum of three variables and they must see what goes together and the patterns of words and letters.

*Play is the answer to the question: How does anything new ever come about?*

*—Jean Piaget*

Adults help children develop these skills by providing predictable environments that evidence obvious classification and organization of the materials the children use. Young children are also natural scientists. They love novelty, animals of all kinds, and messy things such as mud. Only the outdoors can provide the opportunity to experience all of these and there should be no safer and more appropriate space for these experiences than the outdoor classroom in an early care and education center.

When “day care” centers began to pop up all over the United States in the late 60’s and 70’s they appeared then and continue today to be designed and operated without an awareness of the behaviors, learning, and needs of young children. Little attention is paid to the amount of space that will be available for outdoor experiences. The public school model used for the design and implementation of many of these

*The outdoors absorbs mess and noise and provides open space for play. Research shows that more symbolic play can be seen in children’s outdoor play (Frost, et. al. (2001).*

programs was intended to prepare workers for the factories in the late 1800’s. This dull, regimented approach provides a view of classrooms of children divided into groups by chronological age and sometimes ability with a small portion of each day set aside for RECESS.

Anyone who has ever been with a child, raised a child, or taught a child knows that they are happiest outdoors. Researchers who asked adults to remember their favorite experiences during childhood discovered that the majority of these experiences took place outdoors.

Researcher Michael L. Henniger asked adult undergraduate and graduate students to remember a favorite play experience from their childhood. He found that 40 percent of the participants indicated they engaged in dramatic play more often than other types of play. They described acting out roles of real and imagined people and animals, and indicated they used naturally occurring items as play objects (trees, rocks, dirt, and water) more often than commercially produced toys. The study results also found that the older adults (graduate students) had no memory of playing with commercially produced toys, but the younger adults (undergraduate students) do remember playing with toys. Finally, playing outdoors was recalled with greater frequency among older adults than younger ones. The undergraduates indicated their parents were afraid they might be kidnapped or be victims of molestation, and were not eager to let them play outdoors alone (Henniger, 1994).

Taken from Child's Play by Debbie Reese, NPIN Parent News.

Studies on obesity in young children have pointed out the tendency for more sedentary behaviors of children in childcare (Pate, Pfeiffer, Trost, Ziegler, & Dowda, 2004). Many programs have minimized outdoor time supposedly in order to invest more of each day to the acquisition of standards, which will prepare the children for later school success. Usually the reason is to meet the personal needs of early educators, many who do not like hot or cold weather. The result is more behavior problems in the classroom but there never seems to be a mental connection about this probable cause. Usually it is just thought that the children are "bad".

*"Without play, peak performance is impossible," quoted from a book written by Edward Hallowell called Shine: Using Brain Science to Get the Best from Your People (Boston, Harvard Business Review, 2011). "Play is the activity of the mind that allows you to dream up novel approaches, fresh plans."*

A director who regularly guides tours through her school is often asked how she disinfects the outdoor equipment. She answers with a roll of her eyes, "The Universe takes care of that for us." Recently an early education and care provider asked this same director how she disinfected the mud in the mud kitchen area after a rain. These questions show how off the mark some of us have become. We are so overly concerned about germs and disinfecting everything that we forget that children have happily played in the outdoors since the beginning of mankind's presence on the earth. Medical research shows that over concern for germs can prevent the development of healthy immune systems.

One of the highlights of the playground at this school is a large mud kitchen equipped with plastic containers of different colors and textures of sand and dirt (yes, dirt). This knowledge is actually a standard for the four year old in Tennessee, "Recognizes a variety of earth materials by their observable properties (rocks, sand, dirt)." What better place to experiment and explore than in a richly organized "mud kitchen". Children

are present in this area every moment it is available to them making pies and stirring the large soup pot. The joy on their faces, the complete involvement, and creativity oozing from the area is a delight to behold.

The five up-front senses: see, smell, hear, touch, and taste are all heightened during outdoor experiences, but few people think about the other two senses. These two senses are not as obvious but are vital to healthy complete development. These are the two movement senses: proprioception (information received in the brain from muscles and joints) and vestibular processing (information received in the brain about movement of the body through space particularly the head).

Proprioceptive input is vital for optimal functioning of the nervous system (Williams & Shellenberger, 1992, 1996, 2010). This type of input to the brain (back part of the brain) helps children regulate their impulses and it can be used to both increase or decrease a child's arousal. The outdoors provides an excellent opportunity for these experiences. Outdoors children can push and pull, lift and carry heavy objects, and wrestle. The seven senses can all be drawn into enhanced performance during a rich outdoor play experience.

*More social play is also seen in outdoor play areas as compared with indoor classrooms (Hartle, 1996). Free air, sunshine, and the colors of nature are the natural ingredients for true growth and development.*

*The psychological consequences of the failure to engage in spontaneous, self-initiated play are equally serious and equally worrisome. Because children are spending so much time in front of television, as well as other screens, there is little time for exercising their predisposition for fantasy, imagination, and creativity—the mental tools required for success in higher-level math and science (Elkind, 2007).*

Research and theory show that the following three components should be available in a well-planned and implemented outdoor experience:

- Opportunities to engage in the three kinds of play—sensorimotor, dramatic (make believe), and construction.
- Opportunities to experience nature—trees, flowers, etc.
- Opportunities to engage in vigorous activity

An outdoor classroom experience can provide children with opportunities to engage in vigorous activity, the three kinds of play (sensorimotor, dramatic, and construction) and the opportunity to have direct contact with nature.

Research shows that vigorous activity is more likely when there is a supportive adult involved. Games, parachute activities, dance and exercises, which are adult led, encourage children to be involved in vigorous activity. Research also shows that

environments that allow children to be near and interact with the natural world help minimize stress. When children are allowed to engage in dramatic and construction play experiences, the outside classroom becomes a rich experience filled with activities that will support the development of the whole child.

*Earth, water, air,  
and fire present  
new and challenging  
experiences to young  
children and help them  
understand that one and  
the same thing can be  
different at once  
(Elkind, 2007).*

With this research and information supporting our efforts, we must strive to help children experience the outdoors as a safe place that offers a wide array of social, emotional, physical, and cognitive development opportunities.

Today when the majority of children are in care outside their home, childcare centers could easily return them to their natural state. RECESS could be removed permanently from the daily schedules of early education and care programs and replaced with rich outdoor experiences involving nature and play that will fill their days with laughter and happy learning.

Henry David Thoreau wrote many years ago...

*I am struck by the fact that the more slowly trees grow at first, the sounder they are at the core, and I think that the same is true of human beings. Many early educators believe this to be true and worry that our children are being forced into rapid early growth with long-term negative consequences for their mental and physical health, emotional, and social development."*

The pleasures of the outdoors, its beauty and depth for the senses is far more useful to the total development of the child than a day spent indoors completing yet one more work sheet.

Books/Articles worth reading:

Elkind, D. E. 2007. *The power of play: Learning what comes naturally*. Philadelphia: Da Capo Press.

Henniger, Michael L. (1994). Adult perceptions of favorite childhood play experiences. *Early Child Development and Care*, 99, 23-30.

Louv, Richard 2006. *Last child in the woods: saving our children from nature-deficit disorder*. New York, New York. Algonquin Books of Chapel Hills.