



Outdoor Play Environments

Outdoor play encourages physically active play and contact with nature and its changing seasons and weather conditions.

A natural or traditional outdoor play space should be open and large enough for children to run, roll, skip, ride, climb, jump, sit and even daydream. The optimal space accommodates children's different developmental processes and abilities. It offers the potential for experiences, materials and design components that are appropriate for all children. Like indoor play spaces, outdoor play areas can be used for both physically active play and quiet reflective activities. When active, noisy play is kept separate from quiet, reflective play, activities are not bumped or interrupted by children moving about the rest of the outdoor space.

The ideal physical activity space includes:

- a flat portion of ground to allow for the construction of climbing apparatus and balance configurations that the children build themselves
- a flat space intended for musical games, musical movement, non-competitive active games, dance and running about
- an additional space of uneven ground for experiences in balance
- an outdoor storage shed to house materials and props for physical activity play
- places and opportunities for the child to control the experience including building, rolling, collecting, and digging
- places for fantasy play such as platforms, tunnels and props
- natural elements such as hedges and small trees where children can experience nature and enjoy some privacy to make mistakes, stumble and create their own rules, all with minimal adult supervision
- choice of experiences so that children have options to select those that have the level of risk they are prepared for
- clear, low boundaries between play spaces and clear paths for movement between them
- a balance of materials that are familiar to the children and novelty items
- sheltered places where children can experience various weather conditions
- a drinking water source
- commercial equipment and surfacing *support* children's physical and social play are not the central focus of the outdoor play



Take a close look at the available physical activity space in your child care setting (environmental scan) and assess what opportunities it currently offers for children to experience outdoor physical activities. First, identify the outdoor space's potential. How is it being used successfully? What are some other possibilities? Second, identify the challenges to physical activity play and find effective ways to overcome them.

Flexible play structures are key

Most traditional playground structures are stationary and offer only one play experience for children. There is no way to adapt them as children grow, or to make them more challenging as children develop their skills. Often they do not facilitate child-initiated or practitioner-initiated play. Ideally, play structures, materials and equipment contain components that can be moved and changed to accommodate imaginative, child-initiated play, inclusive play and the opportunity for "authentic" play experiences i.e. "piloting an airplane," "serving food at a restaurant."

The practitioner's role

By thoughtfully selecting and displaying these components in the outdoor space, you invite the children to use a broad range of materials in a variety of ways either individually or in group play. Likewise, using materials (such as balls, beanbags, hoops and other play props) in a well-planned outdoor space, you encourage children to manage, move and employ the materials in ways that support their need for comfort and for challenge. Making materials accessible and storing them close to the play area helps to promote active play.

Children depend on adults who support their need for exuberant play and who value and understand the intricacies of such play. As a practitioner, you continuously observe, assess examine and improve the outdoor play environments. Your role modelling of active play can lead children to expand their learning through play and to become comfortable in taking safe risks. Consider the outdoor play environment a developmental workshop. Truly the sky is the limit!

References:

Van Hoorn, J., Monighan Nourou, P., Scales, B., & Alward, K. (2003). *Play at the centre of the curriculum*. Upper Saddle River: Prentice Hall.

Wardle, F. (2003). *Introduction to early childhood education*. Boston: Pearson.