



# Early Childhood NEWS

## Explore, Discover, Create! Fantastic Outdoor Activities Across the Curriculum

By Susan Miller, Ed.D.

Do you remember when your very favorite part of the school day was recess? Many of the reasons that outdoor play was so exciting then have not really changed over the years. Outdoor play is still a time to interact with friends, to run and stretch big muscles, to yell out loud, to let the imagination soar, to be messy, to fly like the wind, or to sit quietly in the tall green grass while being a seamless part of the natural environment.

However, some things have changed. Today, many parents are afraid to let their children play outdoors unless they can be right there next to them. As a result, outdoor activities at school, the child care program, after-school program, and summer camp have taken on a new and special meaning for young children today.

Most young children think of the playground as a fun place to be! And, it is. However, in addition to the usual exciting activities on the standard equipment, such as the jungle gym and slides, and besides the typical rousing games of chase and kick ball, there is so much more to do to enhance all areas of the early childhood curriculum. And it is during the summer months that teachers have the greatest flexibility to move favorite classroom centers and activities outdoors. Children love to paint at the easel and build with blocks outside. It is fun to bring the water and sand tables out for a stimulating, natural extension of tactile indoor activities. Excitement is heightened when dramatic play props, like gas pumps or toy farm animals, are added to the wheeled toys.

You may want to think about including many of the following suggestions to enrich your curriculum outdoors. And be sure to encourage parents to try some of these ideas with their children when they play together at home.

### Language Arts

Take books outdoors to read. A shady spot under a tree is a cozy place for an individual child to read his favorite story, or a blanket spread on the grass sends an invitation to a small group to participate in a shared reading experience. Read wonderful books about things you might see or do outdoors. For example, *Planting a Rainbow* by Lois Ehlert (Harcourt Brace Jovanovich) encourages children to beautify their play yard with colorful bulbs and seedlings. And, after reading about all of the colors, a color walk would certainly be in order.

Play games that promote children's verbalizations. In "Red Rover," children may "come over" if they are wearing the color \_\_\_\_\_. In "Giant Steps" they call out fascinating movements, such as "umbrella steps" and "monster steps." Besides fostering the children's listening and speaking skills, their large muscles are developed in the outdoor space on which to move around.

Provide fun opportunities for writing outdoors, too. Try magic writing that can disappear – have children use their fingers as pencils in the sandbox and then wipe away the marks with their hands. Or, use brushes dipped in buckets of water to write on the sidewalk. The sun and wind will soon "erase" (evaporate) the marks!

### Art

Consider using clay, a natural product from the earth. Give children lumps of clay and let them press on items outdoors (pine needles, swing chain, etc.) to make interesting impressions. Create imaginative creatures by adding found materials (pebbles, leaves, and twigs) to the clay for eyes and legs. Use these fantasy critters for a little skit or showcase them in a shoebox diorama.

Have the children investigate their own shadows by tracing around them on the blacktop or sidewalk in various positions and movements. Use colored sidewalk chalk to decorate these shadowy folks with colorful outfits and interesting expressions. Try group shadow paintings with some playground equipment added in for twice the fun!

## **Music**

Create some chimes to hang in a tree so that when the wind blows, musical sounds will drift across the play yard. Use old metal spoons or jingle bells suspended with fish line or yarn. Brainstorm with the children other items to use for chimes.

Use songs and chants outdoors. Chant a rhythmic jingle, like "A my name is Alice..." when jumping rope, bouncing a ball, or swinging on a swing. Develop a class song to sing so everyone knows when it's time to go back inside or pick up equipment. Sing songs while going for walks. Make up new verses to favorite tunes about what you see along the way ("Row, Row, Row Your Boat" – "Look, look, I see a bird...")

## **Movement**

Encourage children to pretend to move like animals or people in their natural environments. For instance, read a book such as *Where Butterflies Grow* by Joanne Ryder (Lodestar Books) as a springboard for crawling like a caterpillar in the grass then hatching from a cocoon, and flying like a swallowtail butterfly. Cheer them on as they slide down the jungle gym pole like a firefighter on the way to a fire.

Set up an obstacle course with cones, boards, blocks, tires, boxes, and barrels. Take turns running, skipping, walking backwards, etc. through this fascinating maze. For a bigger challenge, try navigating trikes and scooters through the course. Play tape-recorded music with varying tempos to suggest moving slowly or very fast along the pathway,

## **Math**

Write signs with numbers for the trike gas station, or create numbers on paper money for a drive-through bank. Make sure cardboard and markers are readily available outside so children can quickly make up numbered materials like speed signs (30 miles) for their dramatic play.

See how high the children can count. Blow bubbles and count them as they drift by. When the children have counted as high as they can go, begin again! Or, count just the bubbles that pop. See how many more things they can find outdoors that are the shape of a bubble. Then, use plastic food containers as molds to make bubble-shaped creations with damp sand.

## **Science**

Have individuals, or the class, pick a special spot outside and observe and discover what happens or changes there each week. Just like investigating scientists, encourage the children to make drawings or write their findings in a journal (take dictation if the children cannot write). With a disposable camera, take sequential seasonal photos (of an apple tree, for instance) to create a class documentation panel.

Try some hands-on experiments with the playground equipment. Roll a ball or push a wooden block down the slide. Try other toys, too, like a miniature car or a baby doll. See what conclusions the children can come up with about force and gravity and the shape or size of the items.

## **Social Studies**

Help the children to develop their map reading skills. To assist the children in getting to know their outdoor neighborhood, design a picture or simple word treasure map to follow incorporating the playground equipment and natural landmarks (maple tree, over the hill, branch with a bird's nest). Encourage them to make their own

treasure maps for friends to follow.

Create a community or farm (places where people live and work) in the sandbox. Use figurines for people and animals. The children can design buildings with rocks, boxes, or blocks. Let them have fun dramatizing daily scenes and interactions.

Encourage patriotism with an outdoor parade or flag ceremony for special days or holidays, like Memorial Day. Invite someone from the military or police to demonstrate for the children how to care for the flag.

### **Health/Safety**

Promote a bike/trike safety campaign. Check to make sure all the children understand why they need to wear bike helmets. Help the children develop safety rules (don't ram other's trikes, stay on the bike path). Talk about how bike riding is wonderful exercise and makes children strong and healthy.

Set up a dramatic play campsite outdoors. Ask a parent who goes camping to help set up a tent and picnic area. Dramatize campfire safety (putting out fires with water) and ways to care for and help keep the environment healthy (picking up litter).

### **Nutrition**

Support good nutrition by having the children grow their own snacks in a garden. Dig up the earth and plant some seeds. Water the plants and watch them grow into delicious vegetables. Make a yummy class salad and talk about "good for you" foods. If you have a blacktop playground, use "Grow Bags" (available at a nursery) for dirt.

Create a healthy snack for the birds by pressing seeds into peanut butter spread on pinecones, then placing it into a mesh bag and hanging it from a tree on the playground. Have the children observe how the birds eat with their bodies.

And for a really special afternoon, have the children invite their teddy bears to a picnic outdoors. Encourage the children to stir sandy batter with sticks and bake delicious "sand" pies, tarts, and muffins. Serve them up on leaf plates and enjoy!

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