

How Outdoor Play Promotes Development and Learning

Outdoor play is essential for children's health and well-being. The sense of peace and pleasure children experience when they take in fresh air, feel the warmth of the sun on their backs, and watch a butterfly land gently on a flower is immeasurable. What is very evident is how much children enjoy running, jumping, climbing, and playing outdoors. The time children spend outdoors every day is just as important to their learning as the time they spend in the classroom. For teachers, the outdoors offers many ways to enrich their programs and support children's development and learning.

Social-emotional—Children experience a sense of accomplishment and growing competence when they engage in purposeful activities outdoors every day. You can see the pride a child feels when she can keep a swing going on her own, climb to new heights, throw and catch a ball, and complete an obstacle course. Social skills grow as children share equipment such as tricycles and shovels, work together to build a tunnel in the sandbox, and follow safety rules.

Physical—The number of overweight children is increasing steadily. One factor contributing to the problem is that children do not get the large-muscle activity essential for their healthy development. Part of the problem is that it is not always safe for children to play outdoors and children spend too much time watching TV. Thus, it's even more important to make the most of outdoor time while children are at school. Children develop their gross-motor skills as they run, leap, hop, jump, swing, slide, and climb. These activities allow children to take risks and try new skills. Children also use their fine-motor skills outdoors to weed a garden, collect bugs, and pour sand through a funnel.

Language and literacy—Children expand their vocabularies when they learn the names of insects and plants and use words to describe the characteristics of each, e.g., *fuzzy, fast, shiny, hard, colorful, striped, and slimy*. They learn to read traffic signs and use field guides to identify the leaves, birds, and spiders they find. **Cognitive**—The outdoors is a laboratory for scientific explorations as children observe and explore nature firsthand. They find and study bugs and butterflies, plant seeds and watch vegetables grow, observe leaves change color, taste snow, touch the bark of a tree, hear crickets, and smell the air after a rain shower. They count the seeds they plant and the number of petals on a flower, measure how tall a sunflower grows and calculate how long it takes for a flower to appear, note patterns on the bodies of caterpillars and butterflies, and solve problems like how to make water or sand run through a plastic rain gutter.