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## Take It Outside

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Take a look at your lesson plan. What is written under the section “outside time”? What? There is no place on the lesson plan for outside time? Well, then this is a great opportunity to learn about planning for time spent outside with infants and toddlers.

Infants and toddlers are very sensory learners. Babies will often look intently at an object, hold it, shake it, taste it, and smell it as they explore something (or someone). Learning about the natural world and what happens out of doors engages all of a young child's senses. The light, air,

and space invite different kinds of play and new ways to interact with materials and each other. These experiences can give teachers and families opportunities to observe children exploring and discovering.

Infants and toddlers learn so much each day that it is important to make the most of every moment. Often, we think of being outside as a time for gross motor play. Having time and space for very active play is great, but being outside also offers rich opportunities for language, social, and nature learning! Observe what children are interested in both indoors and out, and then plan to expand their experiences in ways that will engage and delight their senses.

## Outside Curriculum

*Family child care provider Kayla watches 9-month-old Daphne as she stares intently while a gentle breeze rustles the leaves of a tree.*

*Daphne points at the tree and says, “Da!” Kayla says, “You see the leaves move, don’t you Daphne? That’s the breeze.” On the next day, Kayla brings wind chimes outside. She holds them up for Daphne and the other babies to see and hear the movement of the chimes. As the children watch, Kayla hangs the chimes on a tree branch. The next breeze causes them to ring alongside of the rustling leaves while the children watch in wonder. “The breeze is moving those chimes; can you hear them?” Kayla says to them.*

The planning process for infants and toddlers is similar for inside and outside experiences. Decisions for what experiences to offer should be based on family input, individual child goals, and observations. When Kayla observed that Daphne was interested in the breeze moving the leaves, she saw an opportunity. She was able to provide an experience that would build on Daphne's interest and learning. By adding wind chimes to the tree, she was helping Daphne form her understanding of the word *breeze*, of music, and of cause and effect. Kayla is using the outdoor environment to create learning experiences. Over time, the experience of feeling and seeing the effect of a breeze will lead Daphne and her friends to an understanding of this abstract concept.



Observing what infants and toddlers are interested in is the beginning of planning. Daphne was watching Kayla and thinking about what Kayla might be experiencing and what might interest her. When children have time outside, it is great to include free play, but free play still involves teacher observation and participation. Watching what children choose to do, whether they prefer the sandbox or the push toys, can lead to individualized child-directed and teacher-facilitated activities.

## Planning With Parents



*Christina, mother of 6-month-old Anthony, has heard that it is important for young children to spend time outside. She takes him for walks in his stroller, but she would like more ideas for spending time outside. Christina has asked her home visitor, Anita, to help her come up with some ideas. While planning for the next visit, they discuss how much Anthony likes splashing water during his bath. Anita suggests going outside with a small tray of water for Anthony to play in.*

*When Anita returns the next week, Christina brings out a jelly-roll pan and a cup of warm water. Anita spreads a blanket out on the ground and has a towel nearby. Anthony watches as his mom pours water in to the pan, barely half an inch deep, and puts a tentative hand out to touch it. Soon he is splashing and giggling, enjoying the sensation of the water*

*droplets as they fly from his fingers to his face. Seeing how much Anthony enjoys the water helps Christina and Anita plan their next home visit!*

Taking babies and toddlers outside can be as simple as opening the door. Talk with families about the value of spending time outside with young children and ask what they think children might be interested in doing outdoors. Work individually with each family to plan activities that will most interest their child. Here are some fun things to do with infants and toddlers outside:

- Take a very slow walk. Often, when we walk, we are trying to get somewhere. The cracks in the sidewalk with weeds peeking through or the woodchips around a tree are details we barely notice, but to young children they are new experiences! Imagine the wonder of a flower growing up through a sidewalk when seen for the first time. Think of the questions that a pile of wood chips might generate for a curious toddler. Take a walk with no destination and allow children to stop and explore the world around them.
- Blow bubbles. Bubbles are a wonderful way to enjoy being outside. Watching them grow, float gently around, and then pop can be endlessly entertaining. Want to make your own bubbles? Mix one part liquid dish soap to 10 parts water and one teaspoon of liquid glycerin (or corn syrup). Allow the mixture to sit overnight, and you have homemade bubble solution!
- Engage in water play. You don't need a fancy water table to enjoy outdoor water play. A jelly-roll pan, plastic container, or small bucket can provide a lot of entertainment. Add some sponges, plastic spoons, plastic cups, measuring cups, funnels, or other unbreakable items from around the kitchen, and children will make up the activity themselves. (Make sure the water is shallow—less than half an inch for young infants. ALWAYS supervise water play.)

## Take It Outside!

*Jason and Audrey have noticed that the older toddlers in their group seem bored outside. The children are fighting over the many push toys, wandering aimlessly, and whining more than usual. The teachers discuss what they can do to make outside time more engaging. Inside, the children have been doing a lot of painting and playing with toy animals during free play. The next day, Jason tapes large paper to the fence and provides some diluted liquid watercolor and large paint brushes while Audrey brings the tub of animals out to the sandbox. The teachers and children are so engaged with these “new” materials that they spend much more time outside than usual.*



Just about anything that can be done inside can be done outside. Consider what “indoor” materials could easily be brought outside for a completely different experience. On the basis of their observations of the children in the classroom, they decided to expand their learning by bringing the materials outside. It's very possible that the animals might get dirty and the paints might spill, but these teachers are comfortable with that. Families and teachers can decide together what they are comfortable with for outside activities. Once you start bringing experiences outside, observing and documenting what happens, and then sharing your information with families, you may find that everyone has some amazing ideas for outside time!

## Conclusion

Spending time outside is an important part of how infants and toddlers may learn about their world. Finding ways to support this learning is a gift that families and staff can give young children. As you head outside to explore, remember these things:

- Everyone should wear appropriate clothing—including adults! If it's snowing and the children are in snowsuits but the adults are in jeans, the adults are likely to get cold long before the children are finished exploring.
- Do safety checks every day. Make sure that the environment is free of any garbage and that paths do not have sand or other items that could slip up a running toddler.
- Have fun! Enjoy digging in the sandbox, peeking through the fence, watching birds, and whatever else you notice through a child's eyes.

## Take It Inside!

Take It Inside

Bring Nature In

Let It Grow

Stack It Up

Dig It

Conclusion

Going outside should be part of the daily routine when caring for infants and toddlers, but bringing outside elements indoors can allow learning experiences to continue. For example, a few large shells on a table become objects of inquiry and observation for toddlers to really focus on and explore. Outside, stones are so common that you might never notice the features that define individual stones. Some are big, some are small, most have more than one color on them, they may be smooth or rough—there are so many ways that one stone can be different from another and yet the same.

In this News You Can Use, we discuss just a few ways to enhance your indoor environment to help children learn about nature—even when you are inside.

## Bring Nature In!

*It is autumn. The leaves outside Arianna's family child care program are beautiful shades of yellow, red, and orange. While outside, the children find many ways to play with the natural wonders that fill their space! They make piles, fill and dump buckets, and throw, scrunch, smell, and sometimes even try to taste the leaves. Arianna is wondering how to expand on the children's obvious interest in the materials so abundantly supplied by nature. She decides to bring leaves inside and add them to the sensory table for children to scrunch and rustle. For the young infants, she places individual leaves in clear, plastic containers with the lids glued on to encourage close inspection without danger of babies breaking or eating small pieces. She places leaves under a large piece of paper for scribbling. The children become excited when they recognize the shapes of the leaves that "appear" within their drawings.*

Arianna comes up with creative ways to expand on what the children have found outside and deepen their learning about leaves. The leaves on the sensory table provide an opportunity for them to focus deeply on the dry, crinkly leaves. Laminated leaves or leaves in a plastic container allow even very young children to handle and look closely at the veins and patterns found in the leaves. When the children scribble, they are so familiar with the shapes and textures that they recognize immediately what is under the paper.

If you observe what the children in your program are interested in while they are playing outside, you can find ways to expand their learning by bringing these (or similar) materials inside. Always keep safety as your top consideration. When deciding if an object should be inside, or even if it should be outside, test it with a choke tube first. If it's too small, it should not be accessible to babies. If it has





loose parts that are sharp or could come off and be eaten, it is not a good choice. A few “outside” items that can be brought inside and used under adult supervision are as follows:

- Pine cones
- Snow
- Sticks
- Nontoxic plants
- Bugs, snails, other outside “critters” can come inside for a short time to be observed. Be sure to let them go where you found them!

Play with natural materials should always be closely supervised. Items such as pine cones, plants, bugs, and sticks provide experiences that cannot be manufactured, but they may also present safety hazards. Any danger of sharp or small pieces hurting a child can be nearly eliminated by providing appropriate adult supervision. Always wash hands thoroughly after play.

Understandably, parents and family members, as well as some staff, may have concerns about using items that are not made to safety standards with young children. This is an excellent topic to discuss in a health advisory committee or with policy council. Engaging families in planning for natural experiences can help everyone think through both the safety issues and the learning opportunities.



## Let It Grow!

*Teachers Denise and Nikki and the infants and toddlers in their group are all feeling cooped up by the cold weather! They go outside every day but there are times in the winter when outside time is very short. They think about how to bring some of the sensations of nature into their classroom. Although neither teacher is a gardener, they decide to grow some grass in a tray. The grass grows quickly, and the babies delight in touching, pulling, and smelling it. Before long, they have a windowsill full of herbs and other nontoxic plants that bring life inside despite the cold outside!*

There are many benefits to growing live plants inside. Plants bring color, life, and cleaner air, and they contribute to a homelike environment. Even if you have never successfully grown anything before, it is worth trying! Spider plants (which have nothing to do with spiders) are an easy, nontoxic house plant that anyone can grow and few can kill. This is why they are a popular choice for classrooms. Be sure to include children in the care of the plants. Toddlers can help by pouring small amounts of water into plants.

When the grass is grown, children can practice their fine motor skills and snip it with scissors. It can also be a fun platform for play with plastic animals or insects.

When young children have the opportunity to care for living things, they are building their understanding of what is alive and what is not. Plants are alive—they grow, they need sun and water to make their food, and they can die. Infants and toddlers may not be old enough to understand how this can generalize to other things like people and animals. That's okay. They are storing up experiences that will later fall into place as they construct a broader understanding of the world.

## Stack It Up!

*Two-year-old Jonah and his mother, Elaina, have just returned from the park in time to meet their home visitor, Shelby. As they all walk into the apartment together, Shelby notices that Jonah has a bucket of stones he found on their way home from the park. "It looks like he's picked up quite a collection!" says Shelby. Elaina agrees and wonders aloud what she will do with all of these stones as they enter the home. The stones are about the size of Jonah's hand, and some are even bigger. Shelby wonders with her as they watch Jonah sit and begin stacking the stones. He can only get two or three stones high before they fall over, and he stacks them again.*

Wooden blocks are wonderful to have in classrooms but expensive and bulky to have at home. Luckily, children are collectors and will often find building materials for you! Natural materials are irregular and require a different set of play skills to stack and balance. They have the added benefit that they are free! When a child has fully explored them, they can be returned to where you found them.

Children can often come up with creative ways to use materials if we let them. They have not yet learned that "stones are not for stacking," so they go ahead and try it! Bringing stones inside might seem dirty. Try putting down a large rag as a play mat, and wash hands when play is done. Alternatively, stones may be soaked in a solution of bleach and water then dried before play.





## Dig It!

*During the last outside socialization, the children loved digging in the dirt. Home visitors Patty and Tina asked the parents what they would like to do next time. One mother said that she would love to see the children have more opportunities to play with dirt, but she suspected that the weather was getting too cold to plan an outside socialization. A father thought that they might be able to bring dirt inside if they put it in concrete mixing tubs (inexpensive and found in home improvement stores). Patty and Tina figured that they could sweep a little dirt if it meant the children could continue their experience next time!*

Dirt, sand, water, and other outdoor elements should be standard materials when young children are having a group experience. During the socialization, Patty and Tina observe the children. As they gather around the tubs, there are negotiations for space and items. Children are taking turns and offering trades; a shovel for a spoon, sticks for wood chips. Younger toddlers are engaging in parallel play, each building a sand “mountain,” watching each other to see what works, and copying each other’s successful actions.

The father’s idea to use the inexpensive mixing tubs instead of a commercial sand and water table makes this experience something that families could do at home. These types of opportunities allow children to engage with nature when the weather isn’t cooperating.

## Conclusion

Bringing natural materials inside can enhance young children’s exploration and learning. As you observe children engaging with “outside” materials in “inside” spaces, you will probably come up with many ideas of your own to support their play. Here are a few more to get you started:

- Include small baskets or bins for collecting and sorting.
- Make tree cookies—sanded slices of tree branches. These make excellent blocks!
- Instead of “no,” say “maybe.” Sometimes an idea seems too difficult to do (e.g., bringing dirt inside). Before you say no to a family or child request, think through the possibilities. Could you take the idea and do it more simply?
- Most important – how can you help families bring these ideas into their homes?

As you learn and explore along with your children and families, you will all become more and more aware of the joy nature can bring—both outdoors and in!

For more great resources on nature play visit the Early Childhood Learning and Knowledge Center nature landing page at <http://eclkc.ohs.acf.hhs.gov/hslc/tta-system/teaching/eecd/nature-based-learning>



## Outside Spaces

Outside Spaces

Pretend Play

Sound Exploration

Water

Garden

Conclusion

Setting up indoor spaces for infants and toddlers works well when there are defined areas for each activity. While blocks may travel to the pretend play area and books are welcome in the cozy corner, it is helpful when children know where to find the things they enjoy. The same is true for outdoor spaces! Organizing your outdoor space will enrich play. As you observe what children are most interested in, you can add or change materials to support further learning.

Socializations for families and prenatal groups are wonderful opportunities to support spending time outside. Your program may create spaces for families outside or use community resources such as parks, gardens, and nearby schools. This *News You Can Use* gives you some ideas around how to set up outdoor areas for infants and toddlers, their families, and expectant families.

## Pretend Play

*Early Head Start teachers Derrick and Theresa create an area for pretend play outside. They simply put out a small table, tree stumps for chairs, and a collection of donated pots, baking pans, and utensils. As soon as the toddlers see the materials, they begin making "snacks" for each other while others work hard to move the tree stumps. As Derrick and Theresa observe, they think of more ideas to enhance the space to support the children's complex play.*



*photo courtesy of Louis Torelli, Spaces for Children*

If the most popular play area inside your classroom is for pretend play, then it is likely to be just as big a hit outside. Rather than plastic food, encourage pretend play with sand, leaves, sticks, and dirt. Having real kitchen items can bring a whole new dimension to the ever-present "birthday cake" baking that is typical of sandbox play! Some ideas for creating an outdoor kitchen are as follows:

- Use your imagination! You don't need a plastic kitchen, table, and chairs. Try using a wooden crate or even a cardboard box for a temporary kitchen table. Use what is easily available and be creative.
- A mortar and pestle for grinding leaves, dirt, and flowers makes a lovely addition to an outdoor kitchen. They come in all sizes and price ranges.



- Thrift stores can be an excellent source of outdoor kitchen materials. For next to nothing you can outfit your play space with baking pans and utensils.
- Use wooden stumps as tables and chairs. Not only are they naturally beautiful, but they also encourage large muscle exploration when they engage the toddlers' inner drive to move large things.
- Watch the children to see what they play with. Do they need shovels? More dirt? A small, supervised tub of water for rinsing hands? Or are they ready to take it to the next level and make mud pies?

The opportunities for enhancing your outdoor space are endless! Use your imagination and follow the children's lead. Most important, have fun!

## Sound Exploration

*Cecilia's backyard is where she and the children spend much of their time in her family child care program. She has set up a music area with homemade and found "instruments." She created a PVC pipe "xylophone" that infants enjoy banging on to make pleasing sounds. A colorful wind chime hangs above the shady area where babies rest on blankets. Various containers stand at the ready for children to add and remove found objects such as dirt and sticks to make shakers.*



*photo courtesy of Louis Torelli, Spaces for Children*

Young children enjoy music and music making. Whether it is banging a wooden spoon on a pot or clapping their hands along with a song, young children are eager participants in musical experiences.

Cecilia believes that experiences with sound have an important role in infants' and toddlers' exploration of music. She created an outdoor space full of opportunities for children of all ages and abilities to engage with sound makers and instruments. Creating sounds also contributes to children's understanding of cause and effect. It is very powerful to know that, when I move my arm to bang on a pot or shake a maraca, I can create a loud sound! Also, for those of us with sensitive ears, it feels more comfortable to have children making those loud noises outside!



photo courtesy of Louis Torelli, Spaces for Children

## Water

During an outdoor home visit, 12-month-old Sophia holds the edge of the water table as she practices her walking skills. Her feet are bare; her toes curl with each step, providing sensory input to her brain for balance. On her next step, her foot lands on a wet spot where water has splashed onto the ground. Sophia stops. She looks down. What just happened? She slowly takes another step, and now both feet are on the wet spot. She looks up to see her mother and home visitor watching her, quietly sharing the experience. She looks back

down and eases herself into a sitting position. She touches the ground, feeling the difference between what is wet and what is dry. She looks at her hands, noticing how small pieces of dirt have stuck to them. At that point, she reaches for her mom to help her wipe her hands.

Being outside is a sensory experience that can be made more meaningful through intentional planning. Sometimes when families and teachers plan something—such as an outdoor water table—children will explore and learn in unexpected ways. The intention of the experience was to provide an opportunity for children to play with water. What Sophia discovered went much deeper than water play. Sophia's experience of feeling the wet ground under her bare feet, seeing the wet area, and then exploring further with her hands might not have been planned but is an incredibly valuable learning experience. Sophia is beginning to form important questions such as the following:

- Where does water go when it falls to the ground?
- How are the properties of wet and dry ground different? How are they alike?
- Why does the dirt stick to my hands when it is wet?

When she is older and learning more formally about the properties of water, she will have this experience stored up in her mind to draw on.

Another great way to explore water outside is to create a “water wall.” A water wall is made of containers attached to a fence (or to a stable piece of plywood). The containers can be fastened with screws, zip-ties, or even adhesive hook-and-loop fasteners such as Velcro. The containers should be able to move so they can catch and dump water as it goes down the wall. A container at the bottom can catch the water for reusing a few times!

## Garden

*During a prenatal group meeting focused on nutrition, prenatal coordinator Liana is joined by the program nurse to talk about nutrition. As the group discusses the importance of a healthy diet during pregnancy, including foods to include and foods to avoid, they also talk about using fresh food as much as possible. Because fresh herbs are an easy way to add flavor to healthy dishes, they are planting seeds as the group activity. Cilantro, basil, dill, and oregano were chosen by the group during the last time they met. They put seeds and soil into pots that, with care, will provide readily available ingredients.*



*photo courtesy of Louis Torelli, Spaces for Children*

Herbs are a wonderful (and nontoxic) introduction to the world of gardening. They are easy to grow, they smell wonderful, and it is so satisfying to create a dish with something that you grew yourself. Pregnancy is a time of learning to nurture yourself and figuring out how you will care for a new human being. Starting seeds can help provide a conversation around what it means to take care of something else. Just like babies, plants are different: Some need a lot of light; some, just a little—some need a lot of water; others, not so much. Learning about the individual needs of a plant is a simple way to introduce the idea of understanding the individual needs of a baby.

## Conclusion

Clearly defining your outdoor play spaces can make planning for outdoor time easier, and children will find the space more engaging. When looking for ideas, start by observing the outdoor spaces that families already use. Talk to families and find out how they spend time outside. You may find that families have wonderful ideas for outdoor play spaces in every program option. Here are some ideas to get you started:

- Grilling and picnic area: Include a pretend grill, some spatulas, plastic dishes, and a bench for a "picnic in the park."
- Things-that-hang area: For young infants, create natural mobiles that hang from trees or structures in the area.
- Block area: Use natural and found materials or blocks created and sold for outside use.
- Book area: Bring a blanket and a bag of books outside.

**Keep in mind the following considerations for outdoor health and safety:**

- Make sure you can see all of the children all of the time.
- Avoid standing water. This includes containers, puddles, and water tables. Standing water poses drowning hazards, provides breeding grounds for insects, and can house bacteria.
- Be aware of choking hazards such as pea gravel, mulch, or broken pieces of larger objects such as sticks.
- Make sure there is adequate shade.
- Gardening and plants are great, but do your research to ensure that your plants are not poisonous.

There is no substitute for the experience of being outside. The open spaces, natural objects, living creatures, and opportunities for movement cannot be re-created indoors. When you plan for learning in outdoor spaces, you maximize these experiences for infants, toddlers, and their families.

Are you still reading this? Put it away and go play outside!