

Outdoor Play

Source: The following summary is largely based on the article by Betsy Thigpen (Western Kentucky University) called, *Outdoor Play: Combating Sedentary Lifestyles* which was published in the ZERO TO THREE publication September 2007.

The Trend toward Less Physical Activity

In the U.S., play has become less valued, with more focus instead on skills traditionally thought of as supporting academic achievement, such as math and literacy. This is true even during the infant and toddler years, which many view as a critical window when children who are developmentally delayed or are at risk of falling behind in school can “catch up” with peers. While children’s early care experiences affect later school performance, infants and toddler need early care environments that holistically support all of their developmental needs, including physical development.

Despite the benefits children receive when they move and play, caregivers may not know the importance of or how to incorporate physical activity opportunities into child care programming and family routines. Adults frequently caution children to move less; for example, telling them to sit quietly and be still, to slow their fast pace, and not to run. While these practices and rules have good intentions, that is, to keep children safe, minimal opportunity to play outdoors and engage in unstructured free play while indoors results in less overall physical activity for children, which may lead to an unhealthy sedentary lifestyle (*source: <https://medlineplus.gov/healthrisksofaninactivelifestyle.html>). These children may then face the consequences of being overweight or obese as well as other concerning developmental issues. Today, some are also concerned about the negative social and emotional effects that occur in children when they spend less time playing and interacting with peers and others outdoors.

Making the problem of inactivity even worse are poor practices such as the use of devices that limit children’s movements for long periods of time such as: infant seats, swings, bouncy chairs, walkers, etc. Rather than allowing toddlers to use their muscles to walk and run in a safe and contained area, caregivers may instead transport children ‘on a walk’ in a wagon or buggy. Infant walkers pose a risk to young children’s safety, do not promote learning to stand or walk, and should not be used at all. Other devices such as swings, should be used very sparingly, if at all.

An Opportunity for Child Care Programs

Millions of children in the U.S. spend more than 35 hours weekly in child care. Thus, child care programs have an opportunity to instill more active habits in children, habits that may last beyond their time in the program and have long-lasting benefits. Using their knowledge and within enriching early care environments, infant and toddler caregivers can foster children’s physical development, instill a love of active play, and help prevent children from becoming overweight and obese. Outdoor play is an accessible way for infant and toddler caregivers to achieve these goals. SHAPE America (Society of Health and Physical Educators, formerly National Association for Sport and Physical Education) provides general guidelines for children from birth to five: <https://www.virtuallabschool.org/infant-toddler/physical-development/lesson-5/act/14971>

The Benefits of Outdoor Play

Spending time in the great outdoors allows children to explore and learn about the natural world. As they spend time outdoors, very young children can exercise their sense of smell, hear new sounds, see the natural world, and touch new and interesting textures. These experiences provide natural opportunities to expose children to new vocabulary and problem-solving scenarios they may not otherwise have. Children are more likely to play more energetically when outdoors and use their muscles, hearts, and lungs in ways that encourage physical fitness.

Spending time outside benefits infants and toddlers as much as it benefits older children. When young infants and toddlers go outside, the outdoor environments should be comfortable and interesting, and the outdoor environments should challenge children in ways that encourage their physical development. You can think of creative ways to integrate natural elements into outdoor play by using leaves, water, sand, and the landscape of the terrain.

Outdoor environments that are well designed can influence a child's interest in that environment and the activities that take place there. View the website of the Natural Learning Initiative (NLI) at North Carolina State University to see well-designed outdoor learning environments: <https://naturalearning.org/programs-projects/>. You can also find recommended readings, links to other well-designed built environments, and other resources on topics related to the importance of children participating outdoors in nature.

Outdoor areas for infants and toddlers should:

- Take into consideration all stages of infants' and toddlers' physical development including spaces for young babies, crawlers, new walkers, and climbers
- Include soft surfaces to land
- Not contain any choking hazards
- Contain a safe space for exploration
- Provide an area to play with peers
- Contain a comfortable place for adults to sit

Enhancing Outdoor Play Areas

While it can be expensive to redesign a child care program to enhance outdoor play environments, these easy and cost-effective changes can have an impact:

- In a shady area, add a porch swing or hammock to give caregivers a comfortable setting to feed and nurture infants
- Encourage gross and fine motor development with engaging sand and water activities. For example, use slices of logs, large pebbles, and places to hang shovels, pails, and other items in an outdoor play area
- Create a natural habitat with plants (for example, butterfly bushes) or bird feeders to engage children in the outdoors and learn about plants and animals
- Hang wind chimes or mobiles to engage the eyes and ears

Safe Outdoor Environments

To keep children safe, it is important to understand how developmental skills are different among children younger *and* older than 3. These developmental differences may require: different outdoor equipment and different kinds of experiences and activities.

The *Community Investment Collaborative for Kids Resource Guide* (Pardee, Gillman, & Larson, 2005) offers these recommendations for the younger than 3 age group:

- Places to spend time eating or relaxing outdoors in shaded areas;
- Easy access to diapering area and handwashing;
- Safe areas to crawl in, for example in grass, or other safety surface (such as Trex);
- Strong ledges or railings at a height of 14–16 inches for mobile infants to pull up to stand;
- A non-metal slide with a gentle angle that can be approached by a low climbing ramp with steps and a handrail;
- Bucket swings positioned far enough from other play to avoid injury;
- Short tunnels and areas to play peek-a-boo places;
- Seating at different heights;
- Rocking toys that have room for children to sit inside;
- Push toys or riding wheeled toys; and
- Safe area to explore and play with water and sand and toys to help explore these elements (funnels, cups)
(Pardee et al., 2005, p. 13)

For playground and outdoor safety, consult:

- U.S. Consumer Product Safety Commission
https://www.cpsc.gov/search?site=cpSC_site&output=xml_no_dtd&getfields=*&tlen=120&client=ek_drupal_01&proxystylesheet=ek_drupal_01&filter=p&query=playground
- National Program for Playground Safety
<https://www.playgroundsafety.org/>
- National Resource Center for Health and Safety in Child Care and Early Education
<https://nrckids.org>
- The National Association for the Education of Young Children (NAEYC), page 64
https://www.naeyc.org/sites/default/files/globally-shared/downloads/PDFs/accreditation/early-learning/standards_and_assessment_web_1.pdf#page=64.
- Your state child care licensing regulations, local building codes, and other applicable regulations

Program-Wide Support for Outdoor Play & Physical Activity

Consider these suggestions for ways to create a program community that supports children's outdoor play:

- Provide families opportunities to learn how to balance time spent indoors with time outdoors and how to give infants and toddlers many chances to move their bodies
- Serve as a resource for families who want to learn more about healthy choices including physical activity and selecting proper foods to eat
- Share with families how you align your curriculum and learning objectives to outdoor activities
- Collaborate with families on ways you provide physical activity even during inclement weather

- New and future child care centers can incorporate thoughtful concepts into the design of their centers to foster physical activity and outdoor play
- Existing child care centers can start the process to naturalize their play areas, and use their outdoor environments more for learning and development. They can work to substantially increase time and activity spent outside, and help teachers and caregivers learn how to better use outdoor play areas, incorporating these areas into the curriculum

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Other Resources

American Academy of Pediatrics. (2001). *Injuries Associated with Infant Walkers*. Retrieved from <https://pediatrics.aappublications.org/content/108/3/790>

Community Investment Collaborative for Kids Resource Guide 4 Creating Playgrounds for Early Childhood Facilities: http://www.lisc.org/media/filer_public/c6/c8/c6c8b045-d3c9-46ad-ab6d-65d6b807a666/2005_cick_guide_vol4_playgrounds.pdf

Garvin TM, Weissenburger-Moser Boyd L, Chiappone A, Blaser C, Story M, Gertel-Rosenberg A, et al. Multisector Approach to Improve Healthy Eating and Physical Activity Policies and Practices in Early Care and Education Programs: The National Early Care and Education Learning Collaboratives Project, 2013–2017. *Prev Chronic Dis* 2019;16:180582. DOI: <http://dx.doi.org/10.5888/pcd16.180582>

National Institute of Building Sciences: <http://www.ncef.org>

The Natural Learning Initiative: <https://naturalearning.org>

National Program for Playground Safety: <https://www.playgroundsafety.org>

SHAPE America, Society of Health and Physical Educators: <https://www.shapeamerica.org/>

U.S. Consumer Product Safety Commission's Handbook for Public Playground Safety: <https://www.cpsc.gov/s3fs-public/325.pdf>