

Learning from Other Programs

Not all outdoor spaces are perfect, but they're best when they're an extension of the learning environment. Watch the videos from a program that has made its outdoor space an inviting learning environment, then answer these questions about what you see.

1. What are the strengths of the outdoor space? Think about safety, design, space, and accessibility.

There are a wide variety of environments for children to explore. Activities that traditionally occur indoors (like homework and sewing) take place outdoors, as well. The space has been designed with safety in mind: there are clear paths and boundaries between areas, structures and materials are checked continuously. There are also materials that allow children to be creative and explore their world: hay bales, insects, chimes, water spaces, and plants. Children can meet their needs in the space. There are spaces for relaxation and privacy, spaces for art, spaces for reading, spaces for constructing, and spaces for active play.

2. What concerns do you have about the outdoor space? What challenges do you think the program faced when creating the outdoor learning space? Again, think about safety, design, space and accessibility.

Maintaining the safety of the environment is something the staff must be constantly attentive to. They bring in natural materials that must be checked and monitored for safety risks. They also must consider the logistics of bringing some materials (like sewing machines and other electric devices) outdoors safely and conveniently. There might be children or youth enrolled in the program who are not used to spending so much time outdoors; they might prefer indoor activities like video games and might need support and encouragement to engage in active play.

3. How have the staff members made this an integral and rich learning environment across the curriculum?

- Language and literacy: *Signs and pictures are provided for the different areas; children can work on homework in the outdoor area provided.*
- Math: *Children explore math concepts like patterning and geometry in a variety of spaces (blocks, art)*
- Science: *The natural world is a science lab for the children. They can investigate insects, conduct experiments with water and other natural materials, and grow a garden.*
- Social studies: *Children can learn about their communities and resources available to them as they plan new features of their space and seek materials, volunteers, etc.*
- Social-emotional: *Children work together to build and maintain spaces like the garden. They also build self-regulation as they encounter challenging tasks outdoors.*

4. What features of this environment would work in your program or the programs you work with? That is, what lessons can you learn from this program?

5. What challenges do you notice related to outdoor spaces? Can you think of some possible solutions to these challenges?