

Encouraging Natural Play Spaces

An outdoor learning environment in an early childhood setting is defined as an outdoor space that incorporates components for both structured and unstructured physical movement; promoting children's play and learning. Providing opportunities for outdoor learning and play environments with varied natural elements support and can enrich all developmental domains of children's learning. "Children that are most likely to benefit from an outdoor play and learning environment **are less likely to have access to one**" (Cooper, 2015) due to increased use of technology, lack of availability and opportunity for outdoor play (Benefits of Connecting Children with Nature, 2017).

Natural play spaces have positive effects on children's development across various domains. "These spaces allow children to be creative, inventing their own games, touching and feeling natural objects, developing balance, coordination, and problem solving skills. Naturalized outdoor learning environments stimulate the diversity of children's play experience and contribute to their healthy development. They are safe and accessible and allow children to develop their own sense of care, safety, and individual ability" (Indiana Children and Nature Network, 2019).

Likewise, Flannigan & Dietze assert that outdoor play is a critical component of early childhood and influences children's learning and early dispositions for learning; risk-taking, attention, negotiation, collaboration, fine and gross motor, emotional/social, language and cognitive development (2017). Additionally, "as children explore and observe nature, they become more aware of, and empathetic to, the plants and animals who share the natural world. This larger awareness shifts focus from an "I" mentality to

a broader understanding of "we" as it relates to sharing the land and resources. By becoming more aware of our relationship with other living things as part of a community, children are more likely to reign in their impulses. When children repeatedly consider the needs of others (plants, animals, or other people), they form a mindful, loving mindset that respects all members of the learning community - no matter how helpless or small" (Wiedel-Lubinski, 2019, NAEYC Blog).

Naturalizing outdoor learning environments ultimately means bringing back trees, shrubs, plants, grass, and other naturalized materials that will enhance children's outdoor experiences related to the natural world we live in.



Children watering class flower garden.

Benefits of Natural and Outdoor Play and Learning Environments:

- Connects children learning to something that is familiar to them
- Supports learning in multiple developmental domains: intellectually, emotionally, socially, spiritually and physically
- Promotes language development
- Supports creativity and problem-solving
- Increases children's ability to focus
- Increases physical activity and supports a healthy environment
- Improves nutrition as children are more likely to eat fruits and vegetable that they grow
- Improves eyesight, reduces rates of nearsightedness
- Improves social emotional skills and encourages interactive play
- Improves self-control and self-discipline
- Reduces symptoms of attention deficit disorder
- Build's understanding, connection and appreciation for environment
- Reduces stress

(Benefits of Connecting Children with Nature, 2017)



Art materials are provided outside.
(photo credit, Eva C. Phillips Consulting, LLC)



Butterflies were released on the playground after reading the book, *Gotta go, Gotta go to Mexico*, as children wished butterflies to have a safe journey. The sign in the background was created by the children to tell others to be careful of flowers in their garden, planted below the sign.



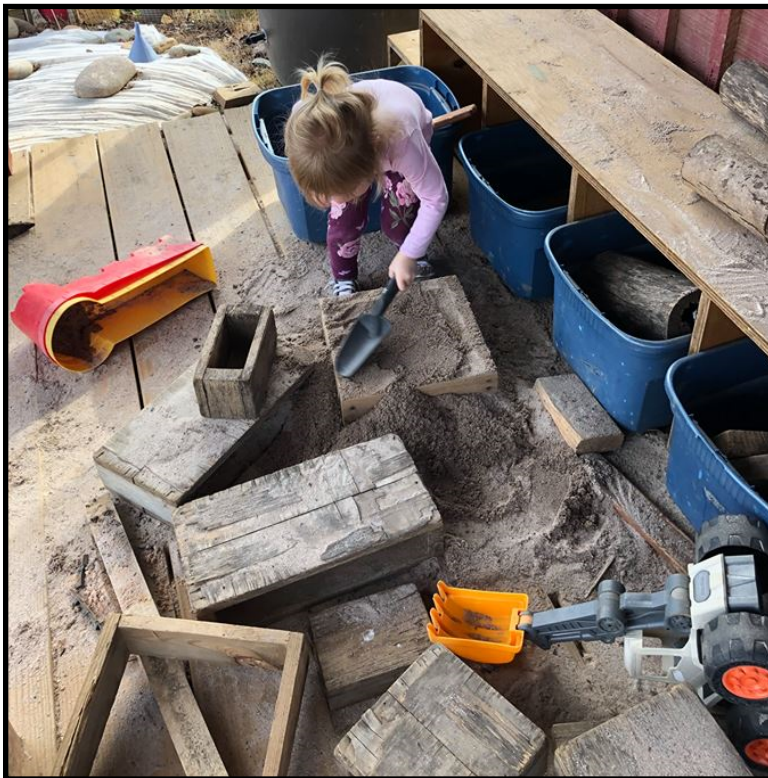
Children were asked to go on a Color Hunt as they explore & observe nature. Then, document what they find.

Strategies for Teachers to encourage outdoor play and learning:

- Extending materials/centers for outside play (bringing science tools outside, etc.)
- Connect on-going lessons to outdoor learning space
- Incorporating reading opportunities (story/circle outside, basket of books, and story props)
- Provide opportunities for authentic writing outside (car repair orders, investigations, creating signs, restaurants, chalk drawings, writing journals). Adding clipboards and paper in areas on the outdoor learning environment encourages writing and drawing to document nature and other observations.
- Outdoor plantings, community gardens, building connections with trees/shrubs/fruits/vegetables
- Creating opportunities for children to create art outside
- Studying/observing nature (trees, leaves, flowers, grass, insects, birds, squirrels, worms, etc.)



Children create observational drawings of trees using homemade clipboards.



Blocks are provided for outdoor play.

- Bring nature into the classroom: hands-on materials to encourage exploration (pinecones, rocks, twigs, tree parts, etc.) and targeted videos (life-cycle of a green bean, etc.)
- Promote and encourage math and science concepts and conversations as children explore and use materials outside
- Listen to children's conversations; support their next steps by use of open-ended questions
- Connect families with strategies to support children's learning using the outdoors

Implementing Loose Parts to the Outdoor Learning Environment

Loose Parts are open-ended materials that children can use in many different ways to transform or create from their imaginations. Adding loose parts to the outdoor play environment enriches children's play experiences. Loose parts are materials that can be moved, carried, combined, redesigned, lined up, and taken apart and put back together in multiple ways. Loose parts can be natural or synthetic. It is helpful to think of loose parts as something that will help children inspire imagination and creativity on their own terms and in their own unique way.



Various loose parts promote open-ended exploration.



An obstacle course is made using tree stumps.

Identifying loose parts:

- natural play area: water • sand • dirt • sticks • branches • logs • driftwood • grasses • moss • leaves • flowers • pinecones • pine needles • seeds • shells • bark • feathers • boulders • rocks • pebbles • stones • twigs • tree slices • PVC pipe pieces • ceramic tile squares
- playground: balls • hoops • jump ropes • tires • sand • water • dirt • straw • boulders • rocks • stones • pebbles • buckets • cups • containers • digging tools • chalk • scarves • ribbons • fabric

-From Penn State Extension, 2019

Resources:

- Cooper, A. 2015. Nature and the Outdoor Learning Environment: The Forgotten Resource in Early Childhood Education
- Flannigan, C. and Dietze, B. ,2017. Children, Outdoor Play, and Loose Parts
- Indiana Children and Nature Network, 2019.
- Natural Learning Initiative, January, 2012. Benefits of Connecting Children with Nature: Why Naturalize Outdoor Learning Environments, *North Carolina State University; Winston-Salem, NC.*
- Penn State Extension, 2019. Loose parts: What Does this Mean?
- Wiedel-Lubinski, M. (2019). Nature-Based Mindfulness for More Calm & Peaceful Kids, NAEYC Blog

Please be sure to also visit the [EESLPD Useful Resources](#) tab of our website to explore the Natural Play Spaces section under Mentor/Evaluator Additional Resources

Special thanks to Rhonda Hamby, our guest contributor to this month's Mentor Minute