

Making the Most of Outdoor Play

As warmer weather approaches in much of the country during springtime, children (and probably you) are ready leave the stuffy indoors and go outside to play. Benefits of outdoor play abound—so you should!

Benefits

At the physical level, outdoor play provides for and maintains an activity level that is necessary for children to burn calories and prevent excess weight gain. In addition, outdoor play reduces body fat in a balanced way, without the risk of impeding a child's normal growth. Outdoor play also promotes muscle strength, bone density, lung and heart health, and gross and fine motor skills (Sutterby and Thornton, 2005). The neurological benefits of outdoor play are as compelling as the physical ones. The growth of sensorimotor cortex, the first region of the brain to fully develop, does not develop as an autonomic response. Rather, its growth depends on gross motor activities such as running, bending, climbing, and throwing. This sensorimotor cortex contains neurons for spatial relations as well as sensory functions such as vision, hearing, and touch, making its full growth, and the physical activity that promotes it, of great importance (Sutterby and Thornton, 2005).



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Techniques

What are some ways to make the most of this important outdoor playtime? First of all, it is important to provide daily outdoor play that is both unstructured (free play) and structured (games, parachute play, and so on), weather permitting (NAEYC, 1998). In addition, consider these techniques:

- Provide for dramatic play. Add props such as play houses, sand and water areas, toy and ride-on wheeled vehicles, containers, toy tools, and so on. Keep in mind the need for realistic props for three-year-olds and a combination of realistic and abstract, open-ended props for four-year-olds (Brown, Sutterby, and Thornton, 2006).
- Create space and make time for structured outdoor activities, such as non-competitive group games and guided investigations such as nature walks. Also consider the implementation of the .big job. approach for structured outdoor play. For example, grow a class garden and engage the children in "big jobs" such as planting, watering, hoeing, and weeding. Or work together to uncover the sandbox, rake the playground, or shovel the walk in winter. An added benefit is that when children work together on "big jobs," they know they are making a positive difference (Jones, 2005).

- Maintain safe, good-quality large stationary equipment and routinely interchange small equipment. Avoid getting everything out at once, and exchange it frequently to maintain children's interest. If possible, provide tricycles with and without pedals, different-sized balls, and access to climbing structures by ramps and ladders.

Equipment Considerations

If your school or center is considering adding playground equipment to enhance outdoor play, consult safety-minded experts and keep in mind the following considerations presented by Sutterby and Thornton in "Essential Contributions from Playgrounds" (2005):

- Consider children's experience and skill in addition to their chronological age. Obtain equipment that is accessible to children with health or motor skill issues.
- Carefully observe children's outdoor play—you can learn a great deal about their physical and mental development. Given the wide variety of skill levels, be sure to match children's abilities to the challenges of the equipment.
- Choose equipment that is creative and interesting enough to maintain children's interest. Pay attention to social play, dramatic play, and game space. Carefully choose equipment types, the amount of equipment, and the amount of space equipment will occupy.



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Inform Families

As you're working to establish quality outdoor play, be sure to inform families of the benefits of unstructured outdoor play, including these facts: "unstructured physical play is a developmentally appropriate outlet for reducing stress in children's lives, and research shows that physical activity improves children's attentiveness and decreases restlessness" (NAEYC, 1998). By employing the outlined strategies, you can promote children's physical, neurological, social, and emotional growth. You can feel free to gather children, go outside, and enjoy the fresh air!

References

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