Outdoor Activities

Children need and deserve time to play and explore outdoors every day unless the weather is severe. Outdoor activities are crucial times for adults to interact with infants and toddlers and encourage their development in all of the domains, including language, mathematical, scientific, social-emotional, physical, and self-help development.

You can carry infants or hold toddlers’ hands as they walk about a safe outdoor area. Encourage them to look at interesting sights, listen to birds, traffic noises, the wind, etc., and touch a variety of surfaces such as leaves, tree trunks, and grass.

For toddlers, schedule time for outdoor play at least twice each day. Provide a changing variety of outdoor play materials for ball play, sand play, water play, art activities and pretend play. Allow the children plenty of time to play on their own, but provide occasional teacher-guided activities such as those in this section.

Each of the following activities includes related competencies in the Mississippi Early Learning Guidelines (Mississippi Head Start Collaboration Office, 2010) and related items on the Infant/Toddler Environment Rating Scale (Harms, Clifford, & Cryer, 2006).

References
Ball Play

Provide a large basket or box containing a variety of balls so that each child will have at least one. As each child chooses a ball, encourage her to roll or toss it, depending on how much skill she has, to you. When she does, roll or toss it back to her.

Variations

- Encourage the child or children to toss the balls into the basket or box.
- Encourage children to “pass” the balls by rolling or tossing them to each other. The more balls, the merrier!

Materials

- Assortment of balls
- Large basket or box

Reference


Related Standards

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Boats

Provide plastic tubs partially filled with water and a variety of toy boats. If more than one child will be playing with the boats, wash their hands before and after play. Allow the child or pairs or small groups of children to play with the boats, encouraging them to share and take turns. Talk about the boats being on, in, and under the water. Watch carefully so children do not fall into the water or drink the water. Dispose of the water and sanitize the washbasins after play.

Materials

• Washbasins
• Toy boats
• Waterproof smocks (optional)

Related Standards

| MS I-T ELG Competencies: 1.2, 2.5, 3.3, 4.2, 5.2 |
| ITERS-R Items: 21, 26 |
Feed the Wildlife

This activity should take place on two consecutive days. Give children the choice of free play if they are not interested in feeding wildlife.

Early one morning, scatter sunflower seeds on the ground or on an open feeder where the child or children can observe the feeding station from inside. Watch for birds, squirrels, and chipmunks to visit and encourage children to come to the window to see them. Talk about the birds being on the feeder and flying up in the air or down to the ground. Compare the sizes and colors of birds and other animals.

Materials

- Black-oil sunflower seeds (these cause less mess than birdseed mixes)
- Platform bird feeder (optional)

Related Standards

MS I-T ELG Competencies: 1.2, 2.3, 2.5, 3.1
ITERS-R Item: 22
Hide and Seek

Show children how to play Hide and Seek by being “it” first and hiding in an easy-to-find place. (Make sure you can still see the children when you hide.) Repeat several times, encouraging the children to look for you. Then invite another child to “be it” and hide with him or her.

Related Standards

MS I-T ELG Competencies: 1.2, 4.2, 4.3, 5.1
ITERS-R Items: 16, 31
I See

Say “I see ...” with anticipation and look dramatically around the outdoors, up in the sky, down on the ground, behind a tree, etc., before finishing with an object that is in plain sight, such as “This tiny plant!” Repeat with other objects until children ask for a turn.

Reference

Related Standards
| MS I-T ELG Competencies: 1.1, 1.2 | ITERS-R Items: 22, 27 |
Insect Trap

This activity should take place on two consecutive days. Give children the choice of free play if they are not interested in the insect trap.

Choose a clear container such as a plastic cookie canister or peanut butter jar. Poke air holes in the lid before introducing this activity (so children do not handle the screwdriver). With the child or children, place a moist piece of bread in the container. Add a little honey or sugar. Turn the open container on its side and place it on the ground outside.

The next morning, take the children outside to see if the bread attracted any insects. If there are insects in the container, tightly screw the lid on the container and bring your Insect Trap inside. Place the trap where children can observe the insects throughout the day. At the end of the day, take the container back outside and release the insects.

Materials

• Clear plastic container
• Screwdriver (for poking air holes)
• Moist bread
• Honey or sugar

Reference


### Related Standards

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Jumping Joan

Turn the classic Mother Goose rhyme “Little Jumping Joan” into a name game and movement activity. Instead of “Here I am, Little Jumping Joan,” substitute “Here I am, Tall Miss [your name],” and make a rhyme with your name. Example: “Here I am, jumping Miss Talia / When nobody’s with me, I’m always a dahlia!” (Use a made-up non-word if no real word comes to mind.) Invite the child or children to play, too, and help them think of rhymes. Example: “Here I am, big jumping Jarrod / When nobody’s with me, I’m always a pod!”

Related Standards

MS I-T ELG Competencies: 1.1, 1.2, 4.3, 5.1
ITERS-R Items: 12, 16, 18
Leaf Pile / Follow Me

If the curriculum includes this activity on a day when dry leaves are not available, substitute the Floor Tme activity “Follow Me.”

On a dry day after leaves have fallen in the autumn, provide toy rakes and engage the child or small groups of children in helping you rake leaves into a large pile. (Make sure no one rakes sharp or hard objects into the pile.) Talk about the colors, shapes and textures of the leaves. Talk about someone’s foot or leg being under the leaves and about someone sitting on top of the leaves. Invite the children to jump in the pile and toss the leaves about. Encourage children to take turns raking and tossing the leaves and jumping in the pile.
If you don’t have access to a pile of leaves, substitute the “Follow Me” activity:

Gather an assortment of objects in different colors, shapes, and/or textures and place them in a basket. Ask the child or children to “Follow Me” and demonstrate a simple action, describing it as you do so. Examples:

“Put something blue beside your foot.”
“Find something soft and put it behind you.”

Before children grow restless, announce that it’s time to play “Follow Molly” (using one of the children’s names). Give each child a turn to lead the game.

Variations
- Lead the child or children in movements such as clapping hands, patting knees, and wiggling legs.
- Gather in front of a full-length, unbreakable mirror and invite children to mimic your poses, such as holding your arms above your head, standing on one foot, or placing one hand on a hip.

Materials
- Adult rake(s)
- Toy leaf rakes
Listen to That

Invite one or more children to sit on your lap or close to you and listen to the outdoor sounds. Point out distinctive sounds, wiggling a finger in time with the sounds so the children can tell which sound you mean. Encourage them to talk about what they hear: “Joseph, do you hear that bird? Troya, can you make a sound like that car horn?” Ask them to point out sounds to you, too. Look for the sources of hidden sounds: water dripping from a gutter, a bird in a tree.

Related Standards

| MS I-T ELG Competencies: 1.1, 1.2, 2.2, 2.5, 3.3 |
| ITERS-R Items: 12, 22, 27 |

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Parade

Provide props such as funny hats, noisemakers, or child-made signs and lead children in a parade around the playground.

Variations

• Lead children in a parade while reciting lines from the book *Jamberry*: “One berry, two berry, pick me a blueberry.”
• Have an indoor parade up and down the hallways.
• Play marching band music for your parade.
• Invite a member of a local marching band to visit and demonstrate in uniform before leading the children in a parade.
• Invite a local bagpipe player to visit and demonstrate in uniform before leading the children in a parade.

Materials

• Funny hats
• Noisemakers
• Child-made signs
• Lengths of crepe paper in red, blue, and purple
• A variety of funny hats
• Noisemakers and musical instruments
• Portable tape or CD player
• Recording of marching band music

Related Standards

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Puddles

If the curriculum suggests this activity on a day when there are no puddles, substitute the Outdoor Activity “Streamers.”

Go outside during a light rain or after a heavy rain and look for puddles. Pat the water with the child or children and talk about the puddles.

Reference

Related Standards
MS I-T ELG Competency: 3.2
ITERS-R Item: 22
Pull-Toys

Pull-toys are fun for children and encourage them to practice standing, walking, fine-motor skills, and even sharing and taking turns.

Provide a changing selection of pull-toys during free play times inside and outdoors.

Variation
- Use all of your facility’s pull-toys in a Pull-Toy Parade.

Materials
- A variety of pull-toys

Related Standards

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Ring the Bell

Stand or crouch behind a tree or playground structure and ring a bell. Wait for the child or children to hear the sound and find you.

Variation

• Invite individual children to hide and ring the bell.

Reference

Sandbox

A sandbox or sand table is a wonderful part of the outdoor play area for toddlers because it encourages children to experiment with science concepts, practice sharing and cooperation, and practice fine motor skills. A sand table offers less space than a sandbox for building roadways, riverbeds, mountains, etc., but is easier to keep clean. Offering both, at different times, is ideal. Always securely cover sandboxes and sand tables when not in use so they do not become contaminated by animals.

Show 1 child at a time how to pat and handle dry and damp sand. Watch closely so the child does not put sand in his mouth or eyes. Talk with the child as you play: “Can you pat the sand with me? The sand feels cool, doesn’t it? Here’s how you can scoop up the sand with your fingers.”

Provide a changing variety of sandbox toys and allow the children to make up their own play activities. Provide small amounts of water for children to pour over the sand. Choose heavy-duty plastic toys and tools that can be rinsed with water. Talk with the children about their sandbox activities:

*Jolene, I see you are dumping the sand out of the bucket. Trey, you filled up your scooper with sand, didn’t you. What happens when you pour water on your sand mountain?*

**Materials**
- Toy shovels, rakes, etc.
- Durable plastic scoops, bowls, cups, cookie cutters, etc.
- Heavy-duty plastic toy cars and trucks
- Small figures of people and animals
- Small plastic jugs or bottles for pouring water

**Related Standards**
MS I-T ELG Competencies: 1.1, 2.4, 2.5, 3.3, 4.2, 4.4, 5.2
ITERS-R Items: 20, 21, 26
Snow Play

If the curriculum suggests this activity on a day when there is no fresh snow, substitute the Outdoor Activity “Parade.”

If your community is lucky enough to have a fresh snowfall, let the infants and toddlers experience this rare event as much as they can.

Carry infants outside to see, feel, and hear the sounds of a snowy day. Encourage them to touch the snow and bat at leaves or branches covered with snow. Talk about the experience: “Look at the snow! It’s white and fluffy. It feels cold. Look at it falling down.”

For toddlers, allow free play outdoors for as long as possible. Allow them to get wet. Afterwards, dress them in their “emergency” or “accident” clothes. Show them how to make footprints in the snow.

Variations

- Use sandbox toys to scoop and build with the snow.
- Take photographs of the children at play in the snow and use them in a Make a Book activity later.

Materials

- Changes of clothes, including shoes, for all children
- Sandbox toys
- Camera

Related Standards

MS I-T ELG Competencies: 1.1, 2.4, 2.5, 3.2, 3.3, 4.2, 4.4, 5.2
ITERS-R Items: 16, 22
Streamers

On a windy day, provide 18-inch crepe paper streamers in a variety of colors. Invite the child or children to choose one streamer for each hand and run with them on the playground or hold them in the wind. Talk about the colors each child chooses. Talk about the wind that blows the streamers.

Variations

- Push children in wheelchairs while they hold streamers.
- Aim an oscillating fan toward the children while they hold their streamers aloft. (Make sure the fan is safely out of reach of the children.)
- Attach streamers to plastic drinking straws.

Materials

- Lengths of crepe paper in a variety of colors
- Plastic drinking straws
- Masking tape

Reference


Related Standards

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Tent Time

Involve a child or children in helping you pitch a pup tent outside. With groups of children, let pairs play in the tent, encouraging children to take turns. Talk about going inside and outside the tent. Encourage the children to imagine that the tent is a house, a tree house, an animal’s home, or other dramatic play setting. Keep a clear view of children at all times while they are inside the tent.

Variation

• Take photographs of the children at play in the tent and use them in a Make a Book activity later.

Materials

• Pup tent with large mesh window and door openings for easy visibility

Reference


Related Standards

MS I-T ELG Competencies: 1.2, 2.5, 4.2, 4.5, 5.1, 5.2
ITERS-R Items: 20, 25, 26
Umbrellas

If the curriculum suggests this activity on a clear day, switch “Umbrellas” with another Outdoor Activity.

Turn a rainy day into an outdoor play activity that toddlers will remember for a long time. Provide 1 or 2 small umbrellas and show 1 or 2 children at a time how to carry the umbrella. Encourage them to test the umbrellas in the rain. Watch the children closely so they do not accidentally hurt themselves or each other. Talk about the rain coming from the sky. Talk about the colors of the umbrellas and about when they are open and closed and held up and down. “What shape is the umbrella when it is open? What about when it is closed?”

Variations

• Plant a large umbrella in the ground as a “tent” or “house” for pretend play outdoors.
• Take photographs of the children at play with the umbrellas and use them in a Make a Book activity later.

Materials

• A variety of umbrellas in different sizes and colors

Related Standards

MS I-T ELG Competencies: 1.2, 2.4, 3.2
ITERS-R Item: 22
Wagon Train

Collect a variety of toy wagons. If you buy or accept donations of used toy wagons, make sure the parts are all firmly attached and working smoothly. Engage the child or children in filling the wagons with assorted items and pulling them in a “train” around the outdoor play area. (It’s okay if the wagon-pullers break rank and go in separate directions.) Talk about putting the items in and taking them out, pulling or pushing the wagon, and who will go first and next.

Materials

- A variety of toy wagons
- Assortment of safe, small objects to place in toy wagons

Related Standards

MS I-T ELG Competencies: 1.1, 2.1, 2.5, 4.2, 4.5, 5.1, 5.2
ITERS-R Items: 15, 16, 26
Wash and Dry

Provide a plastic smock and a small plastic tub for each child. Put a small amount of water and dishwashing soap in each tub. Provide an assortment of toy dishes or small real dishes in each tub. Dispose of the water and sanitize the washbasins after play.

Variations

- Provide dishcloths, doll clothes, socks, and other small washable items and a clothesline and clothes pins. Show children how to wash, rinse, and hang the items to dry.
- Provide a variety of kitchen tools, such as slotted spoons, whisks, ladles, and basting tubes. Encourage the child or children to play at scooping, stirring, and squirting the water. Talk with them as they play. Examples: “You are pouring the water out of the cup. You are scooping the water into the ladle.”

Materials

- Washbasins
- Small washable items:
  - Dishcloths
  - Doll clothes
  - Socks
- Clothesline and pins
- Kitchen tools:
  - Slotted spoons
  - Whisks
  - Ladles
  - Basting tubes

Reference


Related Standards

| MS I-T ELG Competencies: 1.2, 3.3, 4.2, 5.2 |
| ITERS-R Items: 20, 21 |
What’s on the Ground?

Provide each child with a small paper lunch sack, labeling the bag with the child’s name. Guide children in pairs or small groups on a brief walk along a path or sidewalk where they will be able to collect interesting objects such as leaves, twigs, and pebbles. Encourage the children to show others their nature collections during Floor Time, Gathering Time, or free play. (Watch to make sure the children do not place small objects in their mouths or noses.) Talk with the children about what they found. Examples: “These twigs are straight, aren’t they?” and “Most of your leaves are green.” and “These pebbles are hard.”

Reference