Let’s Play: Outside!

Benefits of Outdoor Play

The benefits of outdoor play have been well documented. Natural play spaces stimulate the child’s imagination and engage his innate sense of curiosity that sparks and supports learning. Children who play in nature experience numerous benefits to their physical, social, and cognitive development. The benefits include:

- Better health; reduction in obesity
- Better understanding of the natural cycles of life
- Sense of themselves as nurturers with responsibilities for caring for living things
- Positive attitude toward nature; decrease in fear of weather changes and insects and dislike of the outdoors
- Pride in being stewards of the environment
- Increase in pro-social behaviors; decreased aggression
- Strengthened visual-spatial thinking and body competence as a result of increased physical activity
- Development of mathematical and science concepts
- Enhanced language and literacy skills.

Often children with special rights seem to benefit from the calming influences of being in nature. Individuals with attention-deficit disorder tend to have fewer symptoms in natural settings where they may be better able to focus. Children with cognitive or processing

Sense of Wonder through Outdoor Play

Nature offers endless opportunities to explore, discover, and use each one of the senses to the fullest. In the modern world of increasing connections to electronics and decreasing access to nature, there is a need to create intentionally designed outdoor spaces that provide opportunities for preschool children to play and develop a sense of wonder about the natural world. Children who play outdoors display delight in observing, building, creating, and simply having a positive connection with nature. Often described as emotional responses, children experience the pleasure of spinning around with arms extended, the exhilaration of chasing lizards, the excitement of rolling down hills, the intricate details of dandelions and leaves, and the reassurance of the sun’s warmth.

Written by: Sylvia Velasco-Saiz from Family Development Program, College of Education
issues can experience cognitive weariness that can result in irritability. Spending some time in natural settings during the day can clear the mind and bring about a sense of renewal.

**Designing Outdoor Places for Learning**

Every space will look different, but consider these points when designing your outdoor environment:

- **Indoor-Outdoor movement is encouraged.** Consider the outdoor space as an extension of the classroom. When possible, the outdoor play areas should be adjacent to the classroom to allow for easy access between both areas throughout the day. For the visually impaired child, access might involve placement of textured strips on the floor within a few feet of an entrance to alert her of the areas where doors swing open and shut, as well as to signal the door to the outside play space.

- **Use materials found in nature in addition to non-natural materials.** Natural materials are unique and beautiful. Healthy development of the whole child should not only include open areas that promote physically active play, but also provide opportunities to interact with natural materials in order to explore, manipulate, sort, create, and measure as well as stimulate the imagination. Props and open-ended loose materials brought from indoor spaces can be included to stimulate representational play and enhance dramatic play out of doors.

Areas that are already covered with hard surfaces (ex. concrete, rubberized, or hard plastic surfaces and equipment,) may require more creative approaches. Planting container gardens with a variety of planting materials with even minimal plant life can soften the look of the area and provide natural items to investigate.

- **Outdoor play is accessible to all.** The use of equipment, fencing and landscaping are used as ways to designate areas for activities and to provide safety and security, but these should not be at the expense of providing warm, welcoming, and child-centered environments. Consider building pathways to draw in children to discover specially designed areas for investigation and adventure or to reach defined spaces to engage in specific activities. Meet the needs of children who might get over-stimulated by too much noise, commotion or visual distractions by creating cozy places for solace and relaxation.

Accessibility may present more of a challenge for some children. Forming wheelchair paths that are at least 3 1/2 feet wide will provide access for children in wheelchairs. Including ramps and transfer points like platforms in the garden or around trees, as well as adjusting the height of tables, will help encourage interactions. Children with visual impairments benefit from the use of chimes, music, or other sources of sound to indicate entrances and as a guides to help them return to designated areas.

- **Outdoor space is a learning space.** Play settings for specific group activities are set up to develop the social skills of negotiation, language, and cooperation. Settings such as a storytelling circle, a sand and water play area, a tricycle path, a vegetable garden, puppet theater, and a gathering area support interactions among children and adults. As with indoor learning spaces, the role of a teacher is crucial. Effective outdoor programs include
planned activities to maximize social interactions and learning experiences. Teachers who closely observe and listen to children playing are more successful in prepare the learning space, as they are responding to children's interests and inquiries.

The environment, which is sometimes referred to as the third teacher, provides unique opportunities for children to seek new challenges, gain confidence, and use their imaginations. There is an undeniable beauty in nature and the aesthetic dimension of creating outdoor learning spaces is appreciated by children. However, creating outdoor spaces involves more than simply sending children outside to play. For many children, the appeal of “screen time” and diminished access to nature has decreased the time that children spend outdoors. Children who are inexperienced with nature may initially be disinterested or even fearful and may require the support and encouragement of teachers to enter into that natural world. If, indeed, children deserve and have the right to experience the benefits of outdoor play, there must be as much attention and thoughtful planning for these play experiences as there are to any other aspect of learning and teaching in our preschools.
Family Development Program and the Center for Development & Disability invite you to take advantage of the Developing a Strong Image of the Child webinar series.

To register: http://www.cdd.unm.edu/ecln/psn/ChildWebinars.html

- One professional development hour will be provided for each webinar

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Webinar Date/Time</th>
<th>Topic</th>
<th>Conference Call Date &amp; Time</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>April 23, 2014, Wednesday 1 – 2pm</td>
<td>Power of Relationship: Where Learning Begins</td>
<td>May 21, 2014 1-2pm or 7-8pm</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>June 11, 2014, Wednesday 1 – 2pm</td>
<td>Children as Citizens of Our Community: A Sense of Belonging</td>
<td>July 9, 2014 1-2pm or 7-8pm</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>July 23, 2014, Wednesday 1 – 2pm</td>
<td>100 Languages of Children: How Young Children Read the World</td>
<td>August 20, 2014 1-2pm or 7-8pm</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Webinars made possible through the generous support of The Brindle Foundation, offered in partnership with

**Preschool Network Staff**

Sophie Bertrand  
Division Director  
(505)272-1506  
sbertrand@salud.unm.edu

Kimberly Summers  
Training Specialist  
(505) 272-9924  
kisummers@salud.unm.edu

**Newsletter Editor/Design/Layout:** Carly Miller