

Go outside! Fundamental and fitting views

Being outside is valuable to everyone. The outdoors offers beauty, and fosters curiosity, physical exercise, and limitless learning experiences. As Children & Nature Network President Cheryl Charles notes:

“We have an opportunity and a responsibility to right the balance in children’s everyday lives. Children who play outdoors in natural areas on a regular basis are happier, healthier, smarter, more cooperative and more self-confident.”

According to *Caring for Our Children, National Health and Safety Performance Standards Guidelines for Early Care and Education Programs, 3rd Edition*, to determine when it is appropriate to play outside, follow Playing Outdoors (Standard 3.1.3.2), partially quoted here:

“Children should play outdoors when the conditions do not pose a safety risk, individual child health risk, or significant health risk of frostbite or of heat related illness. Caregivers/teachers must protect children from harm caused by adverse weather, ensuring that children wear appropriate clothing and/or appropriate shelter is provided for the weather conditions. Outdoor play for infants may include riding in a carriage or stroller; however, infants should be offered opportunities for gross motor play outdoors, as well.

Weather that poses a significant health risk should include wind chill factor at or below minus 15°F and heat index at or above 90°F, as identified by the National Weather Service (NWS).”

As highlighted by PA ECELS-Healthy Child Care, for healthy development, children, including infants, should go outside when:

- The weather seems comfortable and when it is somewhat uncomfortable. People respond to weather based on their experience with different climates. Usually even in extreme weather, children can spend at least 15 minutes outside, and more time if they are dressed appropriately and the play area is protected. In summer, the children should wear light-colored, lightweight, sun-protective clothing and use a play area with shade and a supply of drinking water. In winter, children should dress in warm, dry layers and play in an area with wind barriers.
- It is snowing and raining, or when snow is on the ground and the children are wearing water-resistant clothing so they do not become soaked or chilled. Snow and rain are important materials for learning.
- Children have a runny nose, a cold, or ear infection, unless they have a condition identified by their primary health provider (doctor or nurse practitioner) that the health provider documents can be worsened by cold, wind, or being outdoors. Health professionals try to manage these conditions so they do not interfere with a child’s normal restrictions.

Firsthand experiences with the outdoors are important in creating an understanding of and a bond with the natural world. As David Sobel states in his book, *Childhood and Nature: Design Principles for Educators*,

“One transcendent experience in nature is worth a thousand nature facts.”

Discover the wonders of the outdoors

-  Plan time outside every day. Watch and observe children's interests. Take time to explore the surrounding natural environments.
-  Open the window (weather permitting).
-  Encourage natural collections of outdoor materials and display these inside and outside. Collections spark the interest of "What's out there?", "What will I find?", and "What could this be?"
-  Allow for lots of physical exploration: running, jumping, climbing, digging, etc.
-  Pretend to be animals, bugs, birds, and trees. Use fantasy as "outdoor dramatic play."
-  Let outdoor explorations be supported over long periods of time, not just a two-week unit. Follow the curiosities of the children.
-  Spend time listening to nature. Guess what sounds are heard. Record your own nature sounds.
-  Start an umbrella collection from families so enough umbrellas are collected to go out on rainy days.
-  Go on outdoor walks/hikes; make maps of what was uncovered.
-  Allow inside materials to be used outside, such as blankets or other items of interest, and bring outside items inside, such as interesting rocks.

References:

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