

OUTDOOR ENVIRONMENTS AND CHILDREN'S LEARNING AND DEVELOPMENT

Prepared by: Betsy Thigpen, Early Education and Management Specialist

Maria Montessori in her book, To Educate the Human Potential, says that only when the child is able to identify its own center with the center of the universe does education really begin. Such a comprehensive context enables *“the mind of the child to become centered, to stop wandering in an aimless quest for knowledge.”* The child needs to build a foundation of how all things are related and how the relationship of things to one another is so close that *“no matter what we touch, an atom, or a cell, we cannot explain it without knowledge of the wide universe.”*

Children need to hear the *“voices of the rivers, the mountains, the sea, the trees, the meadows,”* water fountains, dirt, and all the other innumerable mysteries of the earth available to them in their native and natural locales. The purpose of this paper is to explore how we can support the beginning of this important journey in a child's life, as we plan learning activities throughout the day and implement our curricula for every child.

We have a unique opportunity to infuse young children with an appreciation for and enjoyment of the natural world, to connect them to nature, and to immerse them in the mysteries of the great outdoors. The childhood obesity crisis has brought much needed attention to the importance of outdoor physical activity in the lives of young children, but little focus has been given to the outdoors as a learning environment on par with the indoor environment.

Eric Nelson in his article, The Outside Classroom: No Child Left Inside, agrees with Montessori, and says that *“being outdoors is not recess; it is an essential learning experience – and critical to child health and development of the whole child.”* Nelson helps us to ponder our current practices and warns that *“since every early childhood program has an outdoor environment, initially, it may not be evident what, if anything, needs to change.”* He strongly recommends that we begin with an evaluation of our outdoor environments and our outdoor programs. *“Looking at NAEYC guidelines or ECERS can be a place to start. A recently developed evaluation tool, POEMS (Kaplan Early Learning Company), provides a much more comprehensive and focused method of evaluation.”*

We are fortunate that the Office of Head Start has recently recognized this need to evaluate our current outdoor play spaces. They are providing an opportunity and evaluation tool through *Head Start Body Start National Center for Physical Development and Outdoor Play (HSBS)*, to evaluate our outdoor play areas, and also to provide special funding for programs to redesign playgrounds and transition playgrounds into what Robin Moore at North Carolina State University calls *“natural learning environments.”* In a well-planned, naturalized outdoor environment, children do much more than run, climb, and ride wheel toys. *“They notice the*

weather, insects, plants, and everything going on around them. Their curiosity is stimulated as they seek answers to their questions about new discoveries.” Outdoor learning centers offer learning opportunities just as they do in an indoor classroom. Centers focus on literacy, language, art, math, and science... just as they do inside.

The place for Head Start teachers and education staff to begin is with the recognition of the current reality that Richard Louv calls to our attention, *“Never before in history have children been...so out of touch with the natural world.”* Louv calls this alienation from nature a nature-deficit disorder and brilliantly details this conclusion in his book, Last Child in the Woods: Saving Our Children from Nature-Deficit Disorder. He helps us to see what is so apparent - that this generation of children is in danger of being completely detached from nature and missing the value of experiences found in being outdoors.

So what do Head Start programs need to do? Hopefully, many of you responded to the Head Start Body Start request for proposals and will be hearing soon that your program will receive funding to begin this exciting journey of moving children outside. For those of you who did not participate in this round of funding, another opportunity to apply for a grant will be offered next year.

All of us can look at our outdoor environments through a new lens and begin to assess our outdoor play areas and activities and how they support children’s learning and development:

- How much time do children spend outside each day?
- What types of activities are provided outdoors to engage children in learning and development in the eight domains of the Head Start Child Outcomes Framework?
- What is the quality of play among children when they play outdoors?
- How is the outdoor environment designed?
- Are there enough “reasonable risks” to challenge children sufficiently?
- Are there recognizable “learning centers” for children’s learning and development?
- Are outdoor environments naturalized? Are children able to experience changing seasons on their playground?
- How many observations for child assessment are done outside?
- Are teachers actively engaged with children in the outdoor environment?
- Do lesson plans reflect multiple learning opportunities in the outdoors for individualized child goals?

Eric Nelson says it so well, *“Everything you do inside can be done outside.”* But the opposite is not true. There are many activities that can be offered outside that cannot be offered inside. Let us all commit to moving our children outside and connecting them with the naturalized world.

In conclusion, take a look at the beautiful photographs and illustrations in Rusty Keeler’s new book, Natural Playscapes: Creating Outdoor Play Environments for the Soul. And then ask yourself: Do my playgrounds look like this?

References

- Louv, R. (2005). Last Child in the Woods: Saving our Children from Nature-Deficit Disorder
Head Start Body Start National Center for Physical Development and Outdoor Play.
www.HeadStartBodyStart@aahperd.org
- Keeler, R. (2008). Natural Playscapes: Creating Outdoor Play Environments for the Soul
- Montessori, M. (1948). To Educate the Human Potential
- Moore, R. www.naturalearning.org
- Nelson, E. (2006). The Outdoor Classroom: No child Left Inside, Beginnings Workshop, Nature and Young Children, Child Care Exchange
- Studer, M. (2006). Developing an Outdoor Classroom: Blending Classroom Curriculum & Outdoor Play Spaces, Texas Child Care Quarterly