

Outside Spaces

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Setting up indoor spaces for infants and toddlers works well when there are defined areas for each activity. While blocks may travel to the pretend play area and books are welcome in the cozy corner, it is helpful when children know where to find the things they enjoy. The same is true for outdoor spaces! Organizing your outdoor space will enrich play. As you observe what children are most interested in, you can add or change materials to support further learning.

Socializations for families and prenatal groups are wonderful opportunities to support spending time outside. Your program may create spaces for families outside or use community resources such as parks, gardens, and nearby schools. This *News You Can Use* gives you some ideas around how to set up outdoor areas for infants and toddlers, their families, and expectant families.



Pretend Play

Early Head Start teachers Derrick and Theresa create an area for pretend play outside. They simply put out a small table, tree stumps for chairs, and a collection of donated pots, baking pans, and utensils. As soon as the toddlers see the materials, they begin making "snacks" for each other while others work hard to move the tree stumps. As Derrick and Theresa observe, they think of more ideas to enhance the space to support the children's complex play.

photo courtesy of Louis Torelli, Spaces for Children

If the most popular play area inside your classroom is for pretend play, then it is likely to be just as big a hit outside. Rather than plastic food, encourage pretend play with sand, leaves, sticks, and dirt. Having real kitchen items can bring a whole new dimension to the ever-present "birthday cake" baking that is typical of sandbox play! Some ideas for creating an outdoor kitchen are as follows:

- Use your imagination! You don't need a plastic kitchen, table, and chairs. Try using a wooden crate or even a cardboard box for a temporary kitchen table. Use what is easily available and be creative.
- A mortar and pestle for grinding leaves, dirt, and flowers makes a lovely addition to an outdoor kitchen. They come in all sizes and price ranges.

- Thrift stores can be an excellent source of outdoor kitchen materials. For next to nothing you can outfit your play space with baking pans and utensils.
- Use wooden stumps as tables and chairs. Not only are they naturally beautiful, but they also encourage large muscle exploration when they engage the toddlers' inner drive to move large things.
- Watch the children to see what they play with. Do they need shovels? More dirt? A small, supervised tub of water for rinsing hands? Or are they ready to take it to the next level and make mud pies?

The opportunities for enhancing your outdoor space are endless! Use your imagination and follow the children's lead. Most important, have fun!

Sound Exploration

Cecilia's backyard is where she and the children spend much of their time in her family child care program. She has set up a music area with homemade and found "instruments." She created a PVC pipe "xylophone" that infants enjoy banging on to make pleasing sounds. A colorful wind chime hangs above the shady area where babies rest on blankets. Various containers stand at the ready for children to add and remove found objects such as dirt and sticks to make shakers.



photo courtesy of Louis Torelli, Spaces for Children

Young children enjoy music and music making. Whether it is banging a wooden spoon on a pot or clapping their hands along with a song, young children are eager participants in musical experiences.

Cecilia believes that experiences with sound have an important role in infants' and toddlers' exploration of music. She created an outdoor space full of opportunities for children of all ages and abilities to engage with sound makers and instruments. Creating sounds also contributes to children's understanding of cause and effect. It is very powerful to know that, when I move my arm to bang on a pot or shake a maraca, I can create a loud sound! Also, for those of us with sensitive ears, it feels more comfortable to have children making those loud noises outside!



photo courtesy of Louis Torelli, Spaces for Children

Water

During an outdoor home visit, 12-month-old Sophia holds the edge of the water table as she practices her walking skills. Her feet are bare; her toes curl with each step, providing sensory input to her brain for balance. On her next step, her foot lands on a wet spot where water has splashed onto the ground. Sophia stops. She looks down. What just happened? She slowly takes another step, and now both feet are on the wet spot. She looks up to see her mother and home visitor watching her, quietly sharing the experience. She looks back

down and eases herself into a sitting position. She touches the ground, feeling the difference between what is wet and what is dry. She looks at her hands, noticing how small pieces of dirt have stuck to them. At that point, she reaches for her mom to help her wipe her hands.

Being outside is a sensory experience that can be made more meaningful through intentional planning. Sometimes when families and teachers plan something—such as an outdoor water table—children will explore and learn in unexpected ways. The intention of the experience was to provide an opportunity for children to play with water. What Sophia discovered went much deeper than water play. Sophia's experience of feeling the wet ground under her bare feet, seeing the wet area, and then exploring further with her hands might not have been planned but is an incredibly valuable learning experience. Sophia is beginning to form important questions such as the following:

- Where does water go when it falls to the ground?
- How are the properties of wet and dry ground different? How are they alike?
- Why does the dirt stick to my hands when it is wet?

When she is older and learning more formally about the properties of water, she will have this experience stored up in her mind to draw on.

Another great way to explore water outside is to create a “water wall.” A water wall is made of containers attached to a fence (or to a stable piece of plywood). The containers can be fastened with screws, zip-ties, or even adhesive hook-and-loop fasteners such as Velcro. The containers should be able to move so they can catch and dump water as it goes down the wall. A container at the bottom can catch the water for reusing a few times!

Garden

During a prenatal group meeting focused on nutrition, prenatal coordinator Liana is joined by the program nurse to talk about nutrition. As the group discusses the importance of a healthy diet during pregnancy, including foods to include and foods to avoid, they also talk about using fresh food as much as possible. Because fresh herbs are an easy way to add flavor to healthy dishes, they are planting seeds as the group activity. Cilantro, basil, dill, and oregano were chosen by the group during the last time they met. They put seeds and soil into pots that, with care, will provide readily available ingredients.



photo courtesy of Louis Torelli, Spaces for Children

Herbs are a wonderful (and nontoxic) introduction to the world of gardening. They are easy to grow, they smell wonderful, and it is so satisfying to create a dish with something that you grew yourself. Pregnancy is a time of learning to nurture yourself and figuring out how you will care for a new human being. Starting seeds can help provide a conversation around what it means to take care of something else. Just like babies, plants are different: Some need a lot of light; some, just a little—some need a lot of water; others, not so much. Learning about the individual needs of a plant is a simple way to introduce the idea of understanding the individual needs of a baby.

Conclusion

Clearly defining your outdoor play spaces can make planning for outdoor time easier, and children will find the space more engaging. When looking for ideas, start by observing the outdoor spaces that families already use. Talk to families and find out how they spend time outside. You may find that families have wonderful ideas for outdoor play spaces in every program option. Here are some ideas to get you started:

- Grilling and picnic area: Include a pretend grill, some spatulas, plastic dishes, and a bench for a “picnic in the park.”
- Things-that-hang area: For young infants, create natural mobiles that hang from trees or structures in the area.
- Block area: Use natural and found materials or blocks created and sold for outside use.
- Book area: Bring a blanket and a bag of books outside.

Keep in mind the following considerations for outdoor health and safety:

- Make sure you can see all of the children all of the time.
- Avoid standing water. This includes containers, puddles, and water tables. Standing water poses drowning hazards, provides breeding grounds for insects, and can house bacteria.
- Be aware of choking hazards such as pea gravel, mulch, or broken pieces of larger objects such as sticks.
- Make sure there is adequate shade.
- Gardening and plants are great, but do your research to ensure that your plants are not poisonous.

There is no substitute for the experience of being outside. The open spaces, natural objects, living creatures, and opportunities for movement cannot be re-created indoors. When you plan for learning in outdoor spaces, you maximize these experiences for infants, toddlers, and their families.

Are you still reading this? Put it away and go play outside!