

Take It Inside!

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Going outside should be part of the daily routine when caring for infants and toddlers, but bringing outside elements indoors can allow learning experiences to continue. For example, a few large shells on a table become objects of inquiry and observation for toddlers to really focus on and explore. Outside, stones are so common that you might never notice the features that define individual stones. Some are big, some are small, most have more than one color on them, they may be smooth or rough—there are so many ways that one stone can be different from another and yet the same.

In this News You Can Use, we discuss just a few ways to enhance your indoor environment to help children learn about nature—even when you are inside.

Bring Nature In!

It is autumn. The leaves outside Arianna's family child care program are beautiful shades of yellow, red, and orange. While outside, the children find many ways to play with the natural wonders that fill their space! They make piles, fill and dump buckets, and throw, scrunch, smell, and sometimes even try to taste the leaves. Arianna is wondering how to expand on the children's obvious interest in the materials so abundantly supplied by nature. She decides to bring leaves inside and add them to the sensory table for children to scrunch and rustle. For the young infants, she places individual leaves in clear, plastic containers with the lids glued on to encourage close inspection without danger of babies breaking or eating small pieces. She places leaves under a large piece of paper for scribbling. The children become excited when they recognize the shapes of the leaves that "appear" within their drawings.



Arianna comes up with creative ways to expand on what the children have found outside and deepen their learning about leaves. The leaves on the sensory table provide an opportunity for them to focus deeply on the dry, crinkly leaves. Laminated leaves or leaves in a plastic container allow even very young children to handle and look closely at the veins and patterns found in the leaves. When the children scribble, they are so familiar with the shapes and textures that they recognize immediately what is under the paper.

If you observe what the children in your program are interested in while they are playing outside, you can find ways to expand their learning by bringing these (or similar) materials inside. Always keep safety as your top consideration. When deciding if an object should be inside, or even if it should be outside, test it with a choke tube first. If it's too small, it should not be accessible to babies. If it has

loose parts that are sharp or could come off and be eaten, it is not a good choice. A few "outside" items that can be brought inside and used under adult supervision are as follows:

- Pine cones
- Snow
- Sticks
- Nontoxic plants
- Bugs, snails, other outside "critters" can come inside for a short time to be observed. Be sure to let them go where you found them!

Play with natural materials should always be closely supervised. Items such as pine cones, plants, bugs, and sticks provide experiences that cannot be manufactured, but they may also present safety hazards. Any danger of sharp or small pieces hurting a child can be nearly eliminated by providing appropriate adult supervision. Always wash hands thoroughly after play.

Understandably, parents and family members, as well as some staff, may have concerns about using items that are not made to safety standards with young children. This is an excellent topic to discuss in a health advisory committee or with policy council. Engaging families in planning for natural experiences can help everyone think through both the safety issues and the learning opportunities.



Let It Grow!

Teachers Denise and Nikki and the infants and toddlers in their group are all feeling cooped up by the cold weather! They go outside every day but there are times in the winter when outside time is very short. They think about how to bring some of the sensations of nature into their classroom. Although neither teacher is a gardener, they decide to grow some grass in a tray. The grass grows quickly, and the babies delight in touching, pulling, and smelling it. Before long, they have a windowsill full of herbs and other nontoxic plants that bring life inside despite the cold outside!

There are many benefits to growing live plants inside. Plants bring color, life, and cleaner air, and they contribute to a homelike environment. Even if you have never successfully grown anything before, it is worth trying! Spider plants (which have nothing to do with spiders) are an easy, nontoxic house plant that anyone can grow and few can kill. This is why they are a popular choice for classrooms. Be sure to include children in the care of the plants. Toddlers can help by pouring small amounts of water into plants.

When the grass is grown, children can practice their fine motor skills and snip it with scissors. It can also be a fun platform for play with plastic animals or insects.

When young children have the opportunity to care for living things, they are building their understanding of what is alive and what is not. Plants are alive—they grow, they need sun and water to make their food, and they can die. Infants and toddlers may not be old enough to understand how this can generalize to other things like people and animals. That's okay. They are storing up experiences that will later fall into place as they construct a broader understanding of the world.

Stack It Up!

Two-year-old Jonah and his mother, Elaina, have just returned from the park in time to meet their home visitor, Shelby. As they all walk into the apartment together, Shelby notices that Jonah has a bucket of stones he found on their way home from the park. "It looks like he's picked up quite a collection!" says Shelby. Elaina agrees and wonders aloud what she will do with all of these stones as they enter the home. The stones are about the size of Jonah's hand, and some are even bigger. Shelby wonders with her as they watch Jonah sit and begin stacking the stones. He can only get two or three stones high before they fall over, and he stacks them again.

Wooden blocks are wonderful to have in classrooms but expensive and bulky to have at home. Luckily, children are collectors and will often find building materials for you! Natural materials are irregular and require a different set of play skills to stack and balance. They have the added benefit that they are free! When a child has fully explored them, they can be returned to where you found them.

Children can often come up with creative ways to use materials if we let them. They have not yet learned that "stones are not for stacking," so they go ahead and try it! Bringing stones inside might seem dirty. Try putting down a large rag as a play mat, and wash hands when play is done. Alternatively, stones may be soaked in a solution of bleach and water then dried before play.





Dig It!

During the last outside socialization, the children loved digging in the dirt. Home visitors Patty and Tina asked the parents what they would like to do next time. One mother said that she would love to see the children have more opportunities to play with dirt, but she suspected that the weather was getting too cold to plan an outside socialization. A father thought that they might be able to bring dirt inside if they put it in concrete mixing tubs (inexpensive and found in home improvement stores). Patty and Tina figured that they could sweep a little dirt if it meant the children could continue their experience next time!

Dirt, sand, water, and other outdoor elements should be standard materials when young children are having a group experience. During the socialization, Patty and Tina observe the children. As they gather around the tubs, there are negotiations for space and items. Children are taking turns and offering trades; a shovel for a spoon, sticks for wood chips. Younger toddlers are engaging in parallel play, each building a sand “mountain,” watching each other to see what works, and copying each other’s successful actions.

The father’s idea to use the inexpensive mixing tubs instead of a commercial sand and water table makes this experience something that families could do at home. These types of opportunities allow children to engage with nature when the weather isn’t cooperating.

Conclusion

Bringing natural materials inside can enhance young children’s exploration and learning. As you observe children engaging with “outside” materials in “inside” spaces, you will probably come up with many ideas of your own to support their play. Here are a few more to get you started:

- Include small baskets or bins for collecting and sorting.
- Make tree cookies—sanded slices of tree branches. These make excellent blocks!
- Instead of “no,” say “maybe.” Sometimes an idea seems too difficult to do (e.g., bringing dirt inside). Before you say no to a family or child request, think through the possibilities. Could you take the idea and do it more simply?
- Most important – how can you help families bring these ideas into their homes?

As you learn and explore along with your children and families, you will all become more and more aware of the joy nature can bring—both outdoors and in!

For more great resources on nature play visit the Early Childhood Learning and Knowledge Center nature landing page at <http://eclkc.ohs.acf.hhs.gov/hslc/tta-system/teaching/eecd/nature-based-learning>