

## Take It Outside

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Take a look at your lesson plan. What is written under the section “outside time”? What? There is no place on the lesson plan for outside time? Well, then this is a great opportunity to learn about planning for time spent outside with infants and toddlers.

Infants and toddlers are very sensory learners. Babies will often look intently at an object, hold it, shake it, taste it, and smell it as they explore something (or someone). Learning about the natural world and what happens out of doors engages all of a young child's senses. The light, air,

and space invite different kinds of play and new ways to interact with materials and each other. These experiences can give teachers and families opportunities to observe children exploring and discovering.

Infants and toddlers learn so much each day that it is important to make the most of every moment. Often, we think of being outside as a time for gross motor play. Having time and space for very active play is great, but being outside also offers rich opportunities for language, social, and nature learning! Observe what children are interested in both indoors and out, and then plan to expand their experiences in ways that will engage and delight their senses.

## Outside Curriculum

*Family child care provider Kayla watches 9-month-old Daphne as she stares intently while a gentle breeze rustles the leaves of a tree.*

*Daphne points at the tree and says, “Da!” Kayla says, “You see the leaves move, don't you Daphne? That's the breeze.” On the next day, Kayla brings wind chimes outside. She holds them up for Daphne and the other babies to see and hear the movement of the chimes. As the children watch, Kayla hangs the chimes on a tree branch. The next breeze causes them to ring alongside of the rustling leaves while the children watch in wonder. “The breeze is moving those chimes; can you hear them?” Kayla says to them.*

The planning process for infants and toddlers is similar for inside and outside experiences. Decisions for what experiences to offer should be based on family input, individual child goals, and observations. When Kayla observed that Daphne was interested in the breeze moving the leaves, she saw an opportunity. She was able to provide an experience that would build on Daphne's interest and learning. By adding wind chimes to the tree, she was helping Daphne form her understanding of the word *breeze*, of music, and of cause and effect. Kayla is using the outdoor environment to create learning experiences. Over time, the experience of feeling and seeing the effect of a breeze will lead Daphne and her friends to an understanding of this abstract concept.



Observing what infants and toddlers are interested in is the beginning of planning. Daphne was watching Kayla and thinking about what Kayla might be experiencing and what might interest her. When children have time outside, it is great to include free play, but free play still involves teacher observation and participation. Watching what children choose to do, whether they prefer the sandbox or the push toys, can lead to individualized child-directed and teacher-facilitated activities.

## Planning With Parents



*Christina, mother of 6-month-old Anthony, has heard that it is important for young children to spend time outside. She takes him for walks in his stroller, but she would like more ideas for spending time outside. Christina has asked her home visitor, Anita, to help her come up with some ideas. While planning for the next visit, they discuss how much Anthony likes splashing water during his bath. Anita suggests going outside with a small tray of water for Anthony to play in.*

*When Anita returns the next week, Christina brings out a jelly-roll pan and a cup of warm water. Anita spreads a blanket out on the ground and has a towel nearby. Anthony watches as his mom pours water in to the pan, barely half an inch deep, and puts a tentative hand out to touch it. Soon he is splashing and giggling, enjoying the sensation of the water droplets as they fly from his fingers to his face. Seeing how much Anthony enjoys the water helps Christina and Anita plan their next home visit!*

Taking babies and toddlers outside can be as simple as opening the door. Talk with families about the value of spending time outside with young children and ask what they think children might be interested in doing outdoors. Work individually with each family to plan activities that will most interest their child. Here are some fun things to do with infants and toddlers outside:

- Take a very slow walk. Often, when we walk, we are trying to get somewhere. The cracks in the sidewalk with weeds peeking through or the woodchips around a tree are details we barely notice, but to young children they are new experiences! Imagine the wonder of a flower growing up through a sidewalk when seen for the first time. Think of the questions that a pile of wood chips might generate for a curious toddler. Take a walk with no destination and allow children to stop and explore the world around them.
- Blow bubbles. Bubbles are a wonderful way to enjoy being outside. Watching them grow, float gently around, and then pop can be endlessly entertaining. Want to make your own bubbles? Mix one part liquid dish soap to 10 parts water and one teaspoon of liquid glycerin (or corn syrup). Allow the mixture to sit overnight, and you have homemade bubble solution!
- Engage in water play. You don't need a fancy water table to enjoy outdoor water play. A jelly-roll pan, plastic container, or small bucket can provide a lot of entertainment. Add some sponges, plastic spoons, plastic cups, measuring cups, funnels, or other unbreakable items from around the kitchen, and children will make up the activity themselves. (Make sure the water is shallow—less than half an inch for young infants. ALWAYS supervise water play.)

## Take It Outside!

*Jason and Audrey have noticed that the older toddlers in their group seem bored outside. The children are fighting over the many push toys, wandering aimlessly, and whining more than usual. The teachers discuss what they can do to make outside time more engaging. Inside, the children have been doing a lot of painting and playing with toy animals during free play. The next day, Jason tapes large paper to the fence and provides some diluted liquid watercolor and large paint brushes while Audrey brings the tub of animals out to the sandbox. The teachers and children are so engaged with these “new” materials that they spend much more time outside than usual.*



Just about anything that can be done inside can be done outside. Consider what “indoor” materials could easily be brought outside for a completely different experience. On the basis of their observations of the children in the classroom, they decided to expand their learning by bringing the materials outside. It's very possible that the animals might get dirty and the paints might spill, but these teachers are comfortable with that. Families and teachers can decide together what they are comfortable with for outside activities. Once you start bringing experiences outside, observing and documenting what happens, and then sharing your information with families, you may find that everyone has some amazing ideas for outside time!

## Conclusion

Spending time outside is an important part of how infants and toddlers may learn about their world. Finding ways to support this learning is a gift that families and staff can give young children. As you head outside to explore, remember these things:

- Everyone should wear appropriate clothing—including adults! If it's snowing and the children are in snowsuits but the adults are in jeans, the adults are likely to get cold long before the children are finished exploring.
- Do safety checks every day. Make sure that the environment is free of any garbage and that paths do not have sand or other items that could slip up a running toddler.
- Have fun! Enjoy digging in the sandbox, peeking through the fence, watching birds, and whatever else you notice through a child's eyes.