



Creating an Outdoor Learning Environment

THE START OF A NEW YEAR is the perfect opportunity to design or reorganize the outdoor area in your childcare program to make it more engaging and educational.

Children should spend at least 60–90 minutes a day outdoors, not only involved in physical activity, but also discovering the natural environment



around them. Traditional children's outdoor areas focus on play equipment, which may limit children's creativity. In contrast, Outdoor Learning Environments are designed as a biodiverse educational space that combines playing, learning and nature

amongst natural elements like sand, plants, trees, dirt, logs, gardens and more.

No matter if your outdoor space is big or small, there are ways in which you can add elements without committing to a huge and costly project. The goal is to find simple ideas to add to what you already have, any positive changes to your setting can have a tremendous impact. Remember to consider all ages and abilities of the children in your care.

ACOUSTIC PLAY

Children enjoy making music or noise, so for this activity you will repurpose everyday materials like pots, pans, bells, chimes, plastic bottles filled with beads or dry beans and PVC pipes. Old or unused musical instruments are welcome as are sticks, spoons and spatulas that can be "drumsticks." Instruments can be secured on a fence, post or wooden structure with industrial zip ties, hooks or brackets. A wooden pallet offers a movable "music wall." Lastly, consider installing your acoustic area in the shade, for hot summer or rainy days.

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Healthy Hydration

Water: It's a Great Choice

The human body needs water for day-to-day survival. We may be able to live without food for a week but without water, we won't even survive 3 days. According to the Mayo Clinic, water is the body's principal chemical component and makes up 50% to 70% of body weight.

Water is vital for health and plays a key role in many of our body's functions, including bringing nutrients to cells, getting rid of wastes, protecting joints and organs, and maintaining body temperature.

Water should always be your go-to beverage. Choose it over beverages like soda and juice, which can be high in simple sugars and calories.

According to the Institute of Medicine, the amount of water you should drink varies depending on your activity level, health conditions, height, weight, gender and other factors. Daily water recommendations are approximate:

- Men, 13 cups (about 3 liters).
- Women, 9 cups (just over 2 liters).
- Pregnant women, 10 cups and breastfeeding women, 12 cups.
- Kids and teens, 6–8 cups.
- Children ages 1–3 years, 4 cups but milk can replace water.*
- Infants, introduce water at around 6 months, 4–8 ounces per day until a year old because the rest of their liquids are coming from breastmilk or formula.*

*healthychildren.org

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OUTDOOR ART

Use items found in nature for art projects. Threading leaf necklaces strengthens children's fine motor skills and builds their hand-eye coordination. They are encouraged to practice problem-solving and decision-making skills as they design and choose different leaf patterns. Use leaves of different shapes, sizes, and colors, a hole puncher, twine and acrylic paint and brushes if you decide to color the leaves.

OUTDOOR READING NOOK

Old sheets can hang from walls creating rooms, small tents or a low hanging hammock can create a cozy space. Add plants and greenery and some loose materials such as rocks, sticks and pinecones to naturalize the area. In this space, books on outside related topics such as animals, flowers, insects, produce, water or the sky can be the focus. Pillows, cozy rugs or any other comforting elements are welcome!

SPROUTING OR GROWING SEEDS

For this activity simple materials will do. Select a few seeds or dry beans to start. Use small plastic, see-through bags, cotton balls and water and add the seeds or beans. Tape the bags to a window or patio door for a hands-on, clear view of the sprouting process. If space permits, set up a gardening station outside where children can be involved in all steps of gardening.

FAIRY VILLAGES

Individually or as a group, children can create homes for elves, fairies and other imaginary beings. These enchanted places stimulate creative, dramatic play in make believe settings while offering an opportunity for natural building. They can be any scale, created inside a hollow log, on top of a tree stump, in a planter, on a patio or in a quiet corner of the outdoor area. Small furniture, figurines, twigs, shells or any other small items work great. Children's creativity is driven by anything that can be manipulated, changed, or moved around. *Be mindful of choking hazards if there are any toddlers in your group.

LOW-COST GARDEN

Container gardening is a practical, low-cost, space-efficient and child-friendly approach to growing fresh produce in



your program. Research shows that repeated experience with healthy food options increases the likelihood of learning healthy eating habits. Using containers such as recycled yogurt cups, milk and egg cartons, newspaper pots or plastic pots/buckets/kiddie pools are a great way to grow tasty herbs, greens, or strawberries. This is also a great way to learn about seasonal foods!

LOOSE PARTS AND NATURAL CONSTRUCTION

This activity might be the simplest one to try. Gather some of nature's loose parts, such as pinecones, leaves, acorns, rocks and sticks, in your yard or on a walk to add to a sandbox, art project or play area. For building structures such as forts, clubhouses, hideouts and dens, consider using branches, stumps, boulders and other natural materials.

Daily access to nature gives children an opportunity to develop their creative capacity and problem solving skills while cultivating their intellect and love of nature. Studies show that contact with nature reduces stress, enhances peace and may reduce ADHD symptoms in children as young as five years old. Children will be more focused, screen time may be reduced and in turn, rates of nearsightedness (myopia) lowered. Finally, children and adults will get along better with others and feel happier!

— *Alejandra Marín Santos*
Child Health & Nutrition Specialist
CocoKids

KIDS' HEALTH & SAFETY

Physical Activity Policies

A CHILD'S EARLY YEARS are a critical time for developing healthy physical activity habits and these habits can contribute to a lifetime of good health. Well written physical activity policies provide an educational resource for parents and staff while the clear and consistent guidelines express the commitment a child care has made to support physical activity practices and promote good health. Consider adopting the following sample physical activity policy for your business or use it as a guideline to write your own.

SAMPLE PHYSICAL ACTIVITY POLICY

- Children are provided with numerous opportunities for physical activity throughout the day.
 - Preschoolers have at least 60 minutes of structured physical activity and at least 120 minutes of unstructured physical activity daily with opportunities for “breathless” moderate to vigorous physically active (MVPA) play.
 - All children are provided outdoor time at least twice daily, weather and air quality permitting.
 - In the case of severe weather similar activities are provided inside.
 - Equipment and materials are provided for active play and movement that supports the development of gross motor skills and are appropriate for all children. During outdoor play, children practice gross motor skills with a variety of activities, such as running, skipping, kicking and throwing balls.
 - Children with special needs have opportunities to participate in physical activity routinely with their peers.
 - The facility is regularly inspected to ensure the safety of all children. The outdoor environment is safe from broken materials, and is cleaned, swept and raked regularly.
 - There is adult participation in physical activity with the children to increase child participation and model healthy levels of activity.
- Parents are asked to dress their children for safe outdoor playtime.
 - Opportunities for physical activity are not taken away from children as a punishment.
 - The American Academy of Pediatrics recommends that children under two years old do not engage in any screen time at all and older children watch no more than 1–2 hours per day. Because children watch television and play on electronic devices outside of child care, no screen time is offered in child care.



Adopting and implementing a physical activity policy will help to solve and avoid problems while providing the best child care environment for children.

— *CocoKids*

Good Luck Black-Eyed Peas & Greens with Sausage

Olive oil	2 Tbsp	Chicken broth	4 cups
Onion, chopped	1	Balsamic vinegar	1 Tbsp
Bacon, chopped (optional) ..	2 slices	Sugar	1 tsp
Thyme	1 tsp	Black-eyed peas, frozen or canned	6 cups
Red pepper flakes	1 tsp	Tomatoes, diced	1 (16 oz) can
Salt and pepper	1 tsp each	Beef Kielbasa, sliced	12 ounces
Garlic, minced	4 cloves		
Turnip greens, chopped	1 bunch		

1. Heat olive oil in a large stockpot. Sauté onion and bacon until onion is tender. Add spices and garlic.
2. Add the greens a little at a time, cooking each addition until wilted. Add chicken broth. Once the greens are cooked down, add balsamic vinegar and sugar. Cover and simmer 5 minutes.
3. Gently stir in black-eyed peas, tomatoes and kielbasa. Cover and simmer until liquid is reduced by one-third, about 45 minutes. Uncover and simmer until desired consistency is reached, add water if needed.

Yield: 14 servings

Meets requirement for vegetable and meat/meat alternate

— Melissa Corbin

Veggie Frittata

Olive oil	1 Tbsp	Green onion, chopped	1
Veggies, fresh or leftover: cooked zucchini, broccoli, cauliflower, carrots, potato, bell pepper, artichoke hearts, squash	2½ cups	Eggs	6
Tomato, chopped	1	Milk	¼ cup
		Seasoned salt	½ tsp
		Pepper	½ tsp
		Cheese	¼ cup

1. Sauté veggies in olive oil until tender, if uncooked or if using leftover cooked vegetables, just warm in oil in a pan.
2. Add tomato and green onion and continue cooking for 2 minutes.
3. Beat the eggs with milk, seasoned salt and pepper. Pour egg mixture over veggies in pan. Let cook over medium low for 5–7 minutes until set on bottom. Tilt pan occasionally to have loose egg run under frittata. Top with cheese, cover and cook until cheese is melted. Cut in wedges to serve.

Yield: 6 servings

Meets requirement for vegetable and meat/meat alternate



Kickin' it in the Kitchen

MISE EN PLACE

Mise en place is the restaurant technique every home cook should know. This French term is just a fancy name for “everything in its place.” Having all of the ingredients gathered and prepped before beginning to cook can seem a bit fussy but it will make you a better, more efficient cook.

1 Start by reading the recipe, this will ensure that you have all the ingredients and tools you will need.

2 Restaurants dedicate hours to prepping ingredients ahead but you can do the same by utilizing meal prep techniques for ingredients you use often during the week, by storing them washed, chopped and recipe ready.

3 Clean as you go can feel excessive, but it makes cooking easier and more enjoyable. A clean work space helps you focus on the task at hand and keeping things tidy as you cook frees up valuable counter real estate and there won't be mountain of dishes afterward to wash, rinse, dry and put away!



Child Health & Nutrition Program
1035 Detroit Avenue, Suite 200
Concord, CA 94518
(925) 676-6117 (Fax) 676-5829

Program Director Catherine Stafford
Co-Editor Donna Green
Graphic Designer Abe Cruz

CHILD HEALTH & NUTRITION SPECIALISTS
Co-Editor Rachel O'Neal
..... Alejandra Marín Santos
..... Cecilia Sequeira
..... Vicki Leslie
..... Xiuling Goble
..... Yuanwei Jia

GRANTS COORDINATOR
..... Kathryn Lenhart

Food
Funny

Q. What is the most cowardly and fearful of all foods and does it's best to run away?

A. Chicken!