



How-To Guide

Outdoor Play with Infants and Toddlers

There are countless whole-child benefits for engaging our youngest learners in play outdoors. From supporting creativity and problem solving, improving social relations, and increasing physical activity, it is critical for infants and toddlers to experience outdoor time daily. Through intentional design and planning, children can experience the natural world through their senses and develop a lifelong love of nature and learning.



Let's Create an Outdoor Play Space!

Following these design considerations will help ensure a safe and engaging infant and toddler play environment.

- Provide sensory experiences that engage the whole body, including smelling, touching, tasting, hearing, and seeing.
- Consider adult and caregiver comfort in infant and toddler spaces. Provide seating, pathways, shade, and storage for easy access to materials for play.
- Young children love gardening! Provide planting experiences including digging, watering, and harvesting.
- Shade is critical to protect young children and provide comfort in outdoor spaces. Incorporate pockets of shade throughout the space so children are protected from the sun.
- Provide a variety of surfacing for infants and toddlers to practice mobility skills. Grass, dirt, bricks, and pavers can ensure young children have experiences learning how to navigate various surfaces.
- Ensure appropriate seating. Infants and toddlers need spaces to sit outdoors that are built for their size and developmental abilities.
- Open-ended surfaces and tables provide great spaces for loose parts play. Loose parts play encourages imaginative play, curiosity, creativity, and problem solving.
- Accessibility is key. Ensure outdoor spaces are easily accessible from indoor classrooms.

Educators and adults can intentionally plan and guide learning by creating engaging experiences for young children to ensure all young children have a variety of opportunities to learn outdoors. Many experiences planned for indoor places can be implemented outdoors, however, the opposite is not always true. There are many learning experiences that can only come through outdoor play!





Diving into Outdoor Play

Adapt outdoor play to a child's development level by considering these examples of activities for each age group.

Birth to 12 Months:

- Place a child on their tummy on a soft blanket. Billow a light scarf in the air above them. Let the scarf gently fall on the child's back and then slowly pull it off them. Wave it in front of the child and see if they follow it with their eyes.
- Gather several pieces of material with different textures—such as a tea towel, grass, leaves, felt, a silky scarf. Holding a child upright (with hands under baby's arms), let their feet touch the different materials. Allow crawling babies to crawl on and over the materials.
- Bundle your children in winter gear and take them on a stroller ride through the snow. Gently shake a tree or bush that is covered in snow and watch the children follow the snowflakes with their eyes.
- Place a baby on their back on a soft blanket under a tree. Let them look at the leaves on the tree above and study how the light and clouds change as the leaves gently blow the branches.

12 Months to 24 Months:

- Give the children some soaking wet sponges to play with outside. Let them wash toys, play houses, or stamp wet shapes onto the sidewalk.
- Bundle your children in winter gear and take them outside to a large open space covered in snow. Provide shovels, trucks, and tools for building snow piles, castles, and towers.
- Give each child a small basket and go on a walk around your neighborhood or school. See if they want to pick up leaves and other "treasures" and put them in their basket. You might be surprised by how long your toddlers will be happy to walk, snapping up leaf after leaf for their collection.
- Plant some seeds that grow in summer, such as grass or flower seeds, in a patch of dirt outside or in a pot to keep inside. This is a fun project for toddlers who love to shovel, pour water, and get messy!

24 Months to 36 Months:

- Gather some paintbrushes of various sizes. Go outside and give the children a small bucket of water and let them "paint" the sidewalk, the side of the building, the fence, the tricycles, or other outdoor toys, etc. Point out how the wet portion looks and feels different from the dry.
- Gather a plastic bin full of fall leaves. Talk about their shapes, colors, and sizes and about how they are the same or different. Then give the children a bucket or plastic basin and let them fill and dump leaves, crumple them, and toss them.
- On a sunny day, take children outside and show the children their shadows. See if they can make their shadows dance, jump, wave, crouch, run, and more.
- Bundle your children in winter gear and take them on a nature walk through snow. Use picture frames to focus your children's attention on tracks, animal scat, or "dropped" objects from trees.

Additional Resources and Ideas:

- Zero to Three, <https://www.zerotothree.org/>
- The Green Desk, <https://naturalearning.org/>
- Natural Start Alliance, <https://naturalstart.org/>
- Virtual Lab School, <https://www.virtuallabschool.org/infant-toddler>
- Head Start, <https://eclkc.ohs.acf.hhs.gov/learning-environments/article/supporting-outdoor-play-exploration-infants-toddlers>

More Ideas for Outdoor Play and Learning Spaces

