

Back to Nature; the Importance of the Outdoor Environment

“You dream of providing your children with the opportunities to play and discover the world of nature. But you just don’t have the space. You don’t have the right conditions. You don’t have the sunlight or you don’t get enough rain. Don’t let that stop you! Centers all over the world are looking at their outdoor spaces-big and small-and deciding to take the plunge and begin to add natural elements to their yards. It doesn’t take the perfect piece of land or picture-perfect conditions to be able to make beautiful changes to your outdoor space. All it takes is some creativity and helping hands. You can do it. It doesn’t take a magical landscape to crate a beautiful playscape. It just takes a magical imagination and a team of enthusiastic people to make playscape dreams come true.”



By Rusty Keller

Exchange, November/December 2009, Outdoor Environments

How to Get Started:

1. Assess your yard
 - ~look for trouble areas
 - ~unused play spaces
 - ~take into account children’s needs and interests

→Just start



2. Assign a designated area
 - ~Suggested areas
 - a) Sand and water
 - b) Building area
 - c) Nature art area
 - d) Dramatic play
 - e) Messy area
 - f) Garden
 - g) Gathering area
 - h) Music and movement area

→Choose one or two spaces at a time

2. Gather Materials
 - ~Request parent support and participation
 - (e.g., create a letter with background information and suggested materials needed)

- ~Look around your neighborhoods
(e.g., yard sales, fallen trees, parks, city-yard, Christmas tree lots)
- ~Seek low cost stores and magazines that have nature related materials
- ~Examples of materials:

- | | |
|------------------|-------------|
| +pumpkins | +stumps |
| +seeds/seed pods | +logs |
| +pinecones | +leaves |
| +feathers | +corn husks |
| +sand/dirt | +shells |
| +cocoa shells | +twigs |
| +pine needles | +bark |
| +rocks/stones | +hay |



→ Look up, look down, and look all around

3. Select a Timeframe, plan, and implement
 - ~Designate a teacher or team of teachers to take on the project
 - ~Set an ongoing planning schedule to meet and assess progress
 - ~Develop a curriculum for the outdoors
 - ~Implement plans
 - ~Document and observe child's interactions, play, and engagement with new materials and altered play space
 - ~Re-evaluate progress and make changes as needed

→ This is a continuous process; plan, implement, and reassess

4. Words of Encouragement
 - ~Be creative and open-minded
 - ~Seek inexpensive resources
 - ~Learn from bumps in the road
 - ~Enjoy the process
 - ~Involve the children
 - ~Have fun making new discoveries



→ Continue your journey, the trip is worth it



References

Baker, K. (1966). Let's Play outdoors (revised edition ed.). Washington, DC: National Association for the Education of Young Children.

Gelman, R., Brenneman, K., Macdonald, G., and Roman, M. (2010). Preschool Pathways to Science: Facilitating scientific ways of thinking, talking, doing, and understanding. Baltimore: Paul H. Brookes Publishing Co., Inc.

Louv, R. (2005). Last Child in the Woods. Chapel Hill: Algonquin Paperbacks

Nature Education. (n.d.). Learning with nature DVD. www.arboday.org/explore

Nature Education. (n.d.). Learning with nature idea book: Creating nurturing outdoor spaces for children. www.arboday.org/explore

Rivkin, M. (1995). The Great Outdoors: Restoring children's rights to play outside. Washington, DC: National Association for the Education of Young Children.

Waller, T. (2007). The Trampoline Tree and the Swamp Monster with 18 Heads: Outdoor play in the foundation stage and foundation phase. *Education 3-13*, 35(4), 393-407

Ward, J. (2008). I Love Dirt. Boston: Trumpeter (Original work published first)