

Play and the Outdoors: What's New Under the Sun?

by Susan J. Oliver and Edgar Klugman

A generation "at two" with the outdoors?

Are today's ever more plugged-in young children developing "nature-deficit disorder"? (Louv, 2005). Will they grow up associating bugs with computers rather than the great outdoors? Do they prefer to play indoors because, in the words of one child, "that's where all the electrical outlets are" (Louv, 2005)?



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Whatever the reality, many parents and teachers feel instinctively that childhood today is very different from what it was for previous generations, and a sizable part of the difference has something to do with the changing amount of outdoor play time. Where are the lazy afternoons of exploration in the backyard or local park, lifting up rocks and watching ants race out of sight? What happened to long days in the summer sun, making up games, and setting off on outdoor adventures with neighborhood play-mates? Today's children, noted a recent *New York Times* article, increasingly are "at two" with nature. "The days of the free-range childhood seem to be over," noted *The Times* (McKee, 2005).

Changes in outdoor playtime for today's kids

While a bike ride around almost any neighborhood on a sunny Sunday afternoon may leave you asking, "Where are the kids?" there are few studies to confirm that children are getting less play time than a generation ago, says Dorothy Justus Sluss, associate professor of Early Childhood Education at Clemson University. "Because we did not document the amount of time children spent in various kinds of play fifty years ago, it's hard to establish a reliable comparison with today's kids," Sluss explains.

Some researchers, however, are making attempts to understand changes we're seeing by asking parents to think back to their childhoods and report their perceptions about what's different for their own kids. In a nationwide study of a geographically representative sample of over 800 mothers of children aged three to twelve, Professor Rhonda Clements of Manhattanville College and immediate past president of the American Association for the Child's Right to Play found that 70% of mothers reported they played outside every day when they were their child's age, compared to 31% of their children who have everyday outdoor opportunities (Clements, 2004).

Moreover, a recent study at the University of Michigan looked at the time-use differences between children in the early 1980s and the late 1990s and found that kids aged three to five have one-third less free play time (indoor and outdoor) than a generation ago and nearly triple the amount of time in organized sports (Hofferth & Sandberg, 2001a; Hofferth & Sandberg, 2001b).

According to an April 2004 study of 300 parents of children under five years old conducted by Youth Pulse, a marketing services company that monitors youth behavior, only 39% of children aged two

to five “run around or play outdoors” every day or more often. For children under age two, only 19% have daily outdoor playtime (Youth Trust, 2004).

Helping young children experience “the natural classroom”

As an early childhood educator, you are in a powerful and unique position to make sure that children’s exposure to the outdoors and its ever-changing wonders is woven into the core of your curriculum — and the fabric of their day. The many sights, sounds, smells, and textures of the outdoors make it a natural classroom, and one that fits the exuberant gross motor, construction play, and symbolic play instincts of preschoolers. In fact, research indicates that preschoolers engage in richer symbolic play outdoors than indoors (Shin & Frost, 1995) thanks to the relatively greater availability of low-realistic, low-structured, natural materials, spaciousness, and teacher involvement” (Frost, Wortham, & Reifel, 2005) found outdoors as compared to indoors.

Other advantages you’ll find when you step outside with your class include greater opportunities for children to engage in: 1) free play, because adults tend to control indoor play more closely than outdoor play; 2) different types of social arrangements, because the nature of outdoor games and exploration offer children chances to break away from their regular alliances; 3) play that contributes to their movement skills and physical fitness (Sluss, 2005).

Best practices for your outdoor time with children

Whether you let children simply enjoy free play or offer teacher-directed

activities, teacher educators and consultants on outdoor play Barbara Crossley and Beverlie Dietze suggest these six areas of best practice for outdoor play:

■ **Attitude:** Educators should have a positive attitude about outdoor playtime, be ready and willing to work with the weather, children’s interests, gender differences, and more — and should create a play climate that is flexible and supportive.

■ **Health and safety:** Obviously, the physical environment needs to be safe and adequately supervised, with children appropriately dressed for the day’s conditions.

■ **Program planning:** Outdoor play time should be structured so children have sufficient time and facilitation to engage in complex, integrated, in-depth activities or explorations; can exercise their sense of curiosity and creativity; and can participate in a range of developmentally appropriate experiences.

■ **The environment:** Materials and equipment should be open-ended, and the play space should offer variety that can accommodate individual and group play, dramatic play, spontaneous play, gross motor activity, exploration of nature, and more.

■ **Curriculum support:** Materials are sufficient for the number of children, support different types of play, and include some that are interchangeable between indoors and outdoors.

■ **Role of facilitator:** Adults understand the developmental needs of individual children and help children integrate knowledge from various settings and developmental domains. Adults help children accommodate their behavior to the outdoor setting rather than using removal from the setting as punishment.

Nurture with nature: Tips for teachers on making the most of outdoor play

The outdoors is an educational tableau that offers endless opportunities for creative early childhood educators. Here are a handful of ideas for maximizing outdoor time and learning experiences. You’ll have many more. If you would like to share them, send your ideas to Playing for Keeps at info@playingforkeeps.org and we’ll add the best ones to our web site. (Be sure to include your name, title, organization, and address.)

■ **Don’t let the outdoors keep you indoors.** As our colleagues in Scandinavia often say, there is no such thing as bad weather, only bad clothes. If the weather keeps you indoors too often, your children may miss important experiential learning about rain or wind or snow. Work with their parents to provide outdoor clothing that offers the option of going outdoors nearly every day.

■ **Make friends with three square feet of . . . something . . . outdoors.** Have you ever stepped outdoors and focused on a small area — say, three square feet — and spent some time just watching and exploring? What’s happening on the surface? What lives there? What’s growing there and what eats it or sleeps in it or plays in it? What color is it and does it always stay that color? Does it look different at different times of day? What happens when the weather changes or seasons come and go? Does your adopted spot change?

Whether your class has grassy areas to enjoy or piles of dirt or plain cement sidewalks, the kinds of questions children can answer (and ask!) are endless. Encourage the development of their sensory and deductive skills. Pick

small areas to monitor and explore for a fun and educational long-term project — and one easily connected with art, science, and literacy components in your curriculum.

■ *Be responsive to changing outdoor conditions.* So you weren't expecting to talk about rainbows today? If one shows up, are you prepared to make it a magical moment — along with a science lesson? In keeping with your philosophy of a child-influenced curriculum, have books about natural phenomena, science supplies, and art materials ready for those times when Mother Nature serves up a not-to-be-ignored lesson that engages the imagination of your children . . . even if it's as mundane as a snake slithering across the playground or a puffy cloud that looks like a teddy bear.

■ *Move indoor activities outside.* If the weather looks cooperative and the children are settled enough in the classroom for a change of routine, why not take some of your indoor day outside for a change? Are there activity centers you generally keep indoors? If you are in a climate that changes with the seasons, consider moving some of your indoor play centers and materials outdoors at appropriate times of the year.

■ *Bring the outdoors back inside.* What did you see outdoors today? Bulbs half nibbled away? By whom? Seedlings growing through a crack in the sidewalk? How do they do that? A bunny running across the grass? Where was it going? Can you tell a story about it? Draw a picture? Act it out?

What's happening in outdoor play that impacts early childhood educators?

As early childhood educators, what trends can we expect to see in outdoor

play? What can we do to make outdoor play more meaningful and useful to healthy child development? Here are a few directions that we expect outdoor play will take — and ways that early childhood educators can respond:

■ *Assessment will follow you outdoors.* Teachers have long been encouraged to take advantage of the enhanced opportunities outdoor play offers for assessment of each child's development. (You'll find some good strategies and tools in *Outdoor Play Every Day* by Karyn Wellhousen (Wellhousen, 2002.) In our culture of measurement and accountability for kids and teachers alike, however, we can expect that each aspect of the curriculum will be evaluated in some way. Because outdoor play can be an easy target for administrators and others who are looking for more "instructional" time in a child's day, it's a good idea to carefully document the ways that outdoor time is promoting the development of kids in your class *because* they are outdoors.

■ *You need to take an active role in helping parents understand outdoor play.* Parents, of course, harbor many fears for the safety of their children and concerns about the quality of their education. As an early childhood educator, you can expect to play an increasingly central role in assuring parents that their children are reasonably safe outdoors (from strangers, bugs, sunshine, bullying . . . you name it) and in communicating to them the importance of outdoor playtime.

Today's parents hear many media-based messages that heighten their concerns about safety — even though statistics don't warrant the concern — and that promote a highly academic approach to early childhood education.

You can help parents understand how outdoor play, especially free play, is a valuable part of their children's day. If

parents are skeptical about play, sell the idea by sharing information about ways outdoor time helps children focus on more "academic" work when they return indoors (Bogden & Vega-Matos, 2000). Not only will you be building support for your curriculum, you may be training grassroots advocates for recess who will become active if their child's future elementary school threatens to eliminate daily outdoor play.

■ *Outdoor play is becoming more connected to childhood health issues.* With a record 8% of our preschoolers and one of five kids in general overweight (U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, 2000), including active outdoor gross motor play in their routine takes on a whole new sense of urgency. We can expect to hear more and more encouragement of outdoor activity from government and private sources, and see more promotional campaigns from companies whose business is tied to children. For example, Nickelodeon has launched a "Let's Just Play" campaign that features a "Worldwide Day of Play" in October — all aimed at getting kids and parents outdoors to play. (See www.nick.com/all_nick/everything_nick/public_ljp_createaday.html for more details and resources.) On its first-ever "Worldwide Day of Play" in October 2004, the network took the highly dramatic step of "going dark", i.e., not broadcasting for that afternoon in an effort to encourage play. This kind of outreach about the importance of outdoor play for physical health can reinforce teachers' efforts to communicate that message for parents.

■ *We're developing better ways to include children of all abilities in outdoor play.* More and better efforts are being applied to recognizing and addressing outdoor play challenges, including better playground design so that children of all abilities can play. According to the National Center for Boundless Playgrounds, five million

American children have some sort of disability that inhibits their capacity to enjoy a traditional playground (www.boundlessplaygrounds.org). Boundless Playgrounds is leading the charge to make more outdoor play spaces universally accessible. As more children with disabilities are included in child care centers and preschools, teachers may be expected to develop skills for helping them fully participate by adapting games, activities, and environments.

■ **Educators are expected to help develop responses to bullying and rough-and-tumble play.** Another playground challenge — children bullying each other — is also becoming a more prominent issue. As a proactive strategy for reducing playground bullying in the elementary years, preschool educators may find themselves expected to address the issue with younger children (Frost, Wortham, & Reifel, 2005).

Another troublesome area for many educators is how to understand the rough-and-tumble play — more characteristic of boys than girls (Smith, 1997) — especially since so many early childhood programs are staffed by women who may have difficulty interpreting the signals imbedded in what might be called “boy culture” (Johnson, Christie, & Wardle, 2005). We can expect to see continued attention on these areas as more research is completed and as more results from interventions (e.g., Operation Respect’s *Don’t Laugh at Me* curriculum, information at www.dontlaugh.org) are available.

■ **Teachers are on the frontlines of addressing “nature-deficit disorder.”** “There’s no way we can help children to learn to love and preserve this planet if we don’t give them direct experiences with the miracles and blessings of nature,” noted Anita Olds, the late designer with a special gift for

child-centered indoor and outdoor environments (Olds, 2000). San Diego-based journalist Richard Louv has researched the relationship many of today’s children have with nature and expresses his concern that our kids are growing up with “nature deficit disorder” thanks to technology, overscheduling, parental fears, and a litigious, rule-bound culture. The consequences, he predicts, may have serious emotional, physical, and cognitive impacts on children who do not learn how to use the outdoors for reducing stress, stimulating creativity, and building strong bodies (Louv, 2005). Early childhood teachers, in the role of child and parent educator, can help children (and their families) establish the habit of — or better yet, a hunger for — being outdoors and the skills for engaging with natural environments.

Imagine young children’s daily lives if the range of their experience began and ended at the door *into* their school or child care center, only to re-emerge when it is time to go home. Certainly many would agree that something important was missing from their education. Yet, when they go home, today’s young children are experiencing more and more of life indoors. As an early childhood educator who has impact on both kids and parents, you can be the first line of defense against a culture-wide loss of appreciation for the whole package of developmental benefits our children can only access if they have a healthy relationship with the great outdoors and its natural wonders.

Spread the word to parents, administrators, and others who make decisions about how children spend their time every day. Outdoor play doesn’t require a playground or a park or an hour or a warm, sunshiny day. It only requires a commitment to kids’ healthy development. Nature is standing by — ever patient, available whenever we want — ready to nurture the young children in our care.

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[www.boundlessplaygrounds.org/
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Youth Trust, April 2004 Youth Pulse proprietary data.

Warm-colors, sun-inspired circular motifs, and youthful contemporary shapes are the main basis of the season's contract fabric collections. Large-scale patterns are becoming more acceptable for the mid-priced range of contract fabrics. Kravet Contract Fabrics has added...
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