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Holly Hooven

Northwestern College - Orange City

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Outdoor Learning in Early Childhood

Holly Hooven

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Northwestern College

Abstract

Play is a skill that comes naturally to every child. Children love to explore and investigate. They do this to find answers to the questions they have and obtain through other experiences such as talking with parents, other children, as well as reading through books. Play is important for many developmental skills such as building on fine motor, cognitive development, and more. While many parents and teachers observe their children, or students, play within the indoors, many children are not getting a lot of outdoor time. Outdoor play is as important as indoor play. Outdoor play allows a child to be one self and take lead of his or her own learning. Children are also building on large motor skills as they jump, skip, and hop around the outdoor play area. Teachers can also bring their indoor tools outdoors to provide children with additional experiences such as looking at a bug through a magnifying glass.

Through outdoor play, children's learning does not stop. Many teachable moments can happen in different content areas such as math, science, and literacy. When a child notices a bug flying a teacher can ask open-ended questions such as, how many wings does this one have? Why does this bug have four wings and this one only has two? What would happen if this one had four instead? The options, with outdoor learning, are endless.

Outdoor Learning in Early Childhood

A normal part of every child's life is play. Children use play indoors and outdoors. Play comes naturally and children do this without question or guidance. Research has shown us that play is an important part of every child's growth and development.

National Association for Young Children (2008) states,

Children of all ages love to play, and it gives them opportunities to develop physical competence and enjoyment of the outdoors, understand and make sense of their world, interact with others, express and control emotions, develop their symbolic and problem solving abilities, and practice emerging skills. Research shows the links between play and foundational capacities such as memory, self-regulation, oral language abilities, social skills, and success in school (p.2).

While play is an important part of a child's growth and development research also shows us that many children today are in early childcare centers, in home daycares, and of elementary schools. Mia Pasima (2015) also shares that new information was found in research stating, "The American Journal of Preventive Medicine, showed that only three in ten children in full-day child care programs got at least 60 minutes of outdoor recess" (para. 1). While 60 minutes is better than nothing, children should spend more time outdoors as outdoor play offers a wide variety of learning opportunities.

One will find that play is a major part of the day for children in early childhood education classrooms, but play should also be provided in the outdoor environment as well. Learning through play in the classroom is expected and teachers observe and assess children through play each day. Play helps children build on many skills, which allow them to learn in the most natural

way possible. However, many students in early childhood classrooms spend most of that play time inside their own classroom. Play within their own classroom does not allow the children to be one self to the fullest way possible. Outdoor play can provide children with endless opportunities to create, imagine, socialize, and express emotions. Play, for children, is pleasurable experience. Children enjoy the play experience and should be provided many opportunities to just play. Play helps a child to fuel and strengthen the development of many learning skills such as cognitive, social and emotional, as well as physical skills (Duerr Evaluation Resources, n.d.).

In the outdoor environment children can catch bugs, dig through the dirt, they chase each other playing tag, and many times they are creating. Their play outdoors is fully child-driven and should remain child-driven. When children are outside, they are free to roam and explore. They are free to be themselves and shape their outdoor space into a space that is all their own. They create new games, new adventures, new obstacles, as well as new ways to learn. While the children do not think about the learning aspect while being outdoors, they are they are learning without even knowing it. Learning, in this case, comes natural to them. In return, they are growing a love for learning.

Teachers can bring their inside teaching and learning outside to help children continue building on their learning skills? Throughout this literature review teachers will view the outdoor environment as an additional learning space. Teachers will learn what types of activities and projects can be done outside that will be engaging and motivational to their student's learning.

What is Outdoor Learning?

Much of today's learning for young children is happening inside a classroom. Think about being inside a classroom and having so many learning tools easily accessible. Now take a moment to think about being outdoors with those same tools. Think about using a magnifying glass to look at two different caterpillars or using a ruler or measuring tape to measure the height of several different logs or flowers. Taking the tools from within the classroom into the outdoor play space creates a place for outdoor learning. However, outdoor learning opens up so many more opportunities because children are free to play and express themselves in ways they cannot inside the typical classroom. Children are also able to choose activities, which interest them rather than activities a teacher sets out. Because children are doing things that interest them during the time of play, they are engaged and in return, they are learning while doing. Berkly and Edgar (n.d.) shares, "Learning by doing, creates more neural networks in the brain and throughout the body, making the entire body a tool for learning" (p.4). When children have control over their own learning they tend to build on many different learning skills. Children, in this case, are very engaged in their own learning because they are taking lead of what they explore, create, and dream.

Although children are taking lead of their own learning, teachers still play a big responsibility in teaching. While children are outdoors teachers can help guide children through their learning while they leave children in the lead. When children have questions, teachers can take a moment to help support them and guide them in finding answers they seek to the questions they have. Children are not only learning when teachers are working with students. They are also building connections with the world around them as well as their teachers. "With teacher support, nature-filled outdoor spaces become safe places where children can express positive emotions, begin to manage negative emotions, learn courage and confidence, and explore the

wonders of nature with others” (Wirth & Rosenow, 2012. p.43). With these connections children are better able to control their emotions when speaking to other students during different situations. Teacher and student connections are not the only benefit to outdoor learning. When teachers take part in the learning of their students, students are eager to impress and they dig deeper into their own learning as well. Students also build on many learning skills such as math and literacy as well as physical motor development and more.

Benefits of Outdoor Learning

Physical activities for children should not only remain in the classroom. In many early childhood classrooms teachers provide physical motor development that help children to build skills needed to perform different tasks. However, many of the physical motor development is fine motor. Children in early childhood classrooms do not get a lot of large motor activity indoors. When young children are not provided with enough outdoor play, the chances of obesity are greater. Brown, Gooze and Rathel (2009). Due to a lack of large motor activity, obesity in children is increasing due to a lack of outdoor physical play. Statistics show us that more than four percent of children are obese between the ages of two and five. Getting the children outdoors to build on large motor activity is extremely important. “Children who play outdoors are generally more fit than those who spend the majority of their time inside” (Cooper, A. 2015, p. 88). Getting fit does not mean children need to run a race or jog 10 laps around the field. Getting fit is as simple as building on large motor skills and staying active as often as one can. Teachers can demonstrate to students the importance of getting fit simply by walking around the playground and stopping to talk to children providing them with questions as the children take part in their own learning through child-directed play is happening.

Outdoor learning is and should remain child directed. Play is an unstructured experience for children. They take lead, find what is of interest to them, and dig into their own learning by asking questions and finding answers. When children direct their learning, they are engaged in their learning and often remember what they learn. They are open to seeking answers to questions and continuing until they have found them. While they are in “charge” of their learning, they are also building on skills that are essential to their growth and development. While children are taking lead in their own learning teachers should guide children when and where needed. As children find answers to their questions, they become proud of what they have accomplished and in return, they continue to build on their confidence and self-esteem. When this occurs, children are willing to take on a task or activity that is more challenging to them. When children reach a time that becomes challenging to them they express their emotions, seek help from other peers, and are open to sharing and listening to ideas from others. Children are continuing to build on their social and emotional skills during their outdoor learning experiences.

Social and Emotional Skills

Being outdoors children are playing and learning with many other children. During this time, they are sharing ideas, stating their feelings about particular thoughts and comments, and open to discussion. They feel a sense of pride when they, or someone they are playing with, has come up with an idea that works. Imagine being on the playground with a group of three to five year old children. One child finds a shedding skin of a cicada. He or she gets so excited they yell out to the other students to look at what was just found. Together they are examining the shell and talking about what the shell came from. One of the boys picks up the shell and wiggles it toward the young girl. She screams out saying that she does not like it. He then moves the shell away from her. During this experience, students are building on their social skills as they talk

about what the shell is and where they feel it came from. The young girl also builds on her emotional skills as she tells the young boy that she does not like it and to keep it away from her.

As children play, they talk and express feelings. They take part in large motor activities and move about freely. In one study, teachers examined movement and how movement affected the learning of their students. “Teachers felt that the main time when children learned social-skills was when they were engaged in movement experiences during unstructured play” (Gehris, Gooze, & Whitaker (2015) p. 125). Teachers throughout the study learned that movement is beneficial to the social and emotional development of young children. Researchers also show us that with play children do better in the higher grades. Jon Hamilton (2014) states, “Researchers found that the best predictor of academic performance in eighth grade was a child’s social skills in the third grade” (p. 5). The best time to begin helping children build on their social skills is as early as the possible. During outdoor play are free to share their thoughts and feelings. Children are free to be themselves and take lead in their learning. In doing so children are also building on their critical thinking and problem solving skills.

While on the playground, children also come up with games they create. During this time, children are using their creativity as well as building on social skills as peer interaction is happening as rules are being discussed, ideas about how to play are being shared, and emotions are being expressed as children may share their thoughts and feelings about the rules and expectations of the game. (Duerr Evaluation Resources, n.d.). At any time, children are open to creating a new game or participating in others that are common to them. In any regard, peers are speaking and socializing their thoughts and feelings.

Critical Thinking Skills

Being outdoors provides children time to think about what they are doing and how to overcome challenges that may come their way. During an observation four children (ages 4 and 5) were observed building a log house out of twigs. During their structure, they realized the house was shorter on one side. One of the children stopped the others and stated what she had noticed about the house. The others came over to her side, lay on the ground beside her, and found that she was correct. Together they shared their thoughts and went about finding more branches to help ensure the house was not “lopsided”. They took down the house they were building and rebuilt it using the new branches along with the branches they had. One of the young boys stated, “Why don’t we just do a little first? Then we can look at it to see if the house is the same on the sides.” As the children built the house they continued to make changes where needed to ensure the house was not going to be lopsided. During this activity, the children used their critical thinking and problem solving skills to solve their problem. Being outdoors provides children with a wide variety of opportunities to build on these skills.

Children will have so many questions about what they find and do during their outdoor playtime. They will want to dive in and solve challenges they come across to ensure their results are what they feel it should be. In play, there is no right or wrong answers. There are questions, exploration, discovery, and finding answers. Not every child will have the same answer or idea to over a challenge. However, in the end all children involved in the challenge will come to end result that they feel works best for them.

Bring the Learning Outdoors

As children get to learn more about his or her students they better understand what interests their students have. Understanding the interests of the students can enable a teacher or a

group of teachers to plan outdoor learning activities. Activities can be as simple as measuring flowers, counting how many butterflies children seen, or naming the colors of different birds. Teachers, while not taking lead, can help children lead their own investigations as they explore by asking open-ended questions. For example, a student is looking at two different birds. The birds are different sizes and different colors. The teacher can ask a student, “How much faster do you think this bird can fly compared to this one? Why do you think these two birds have different colored feathers?”

Teachers can also bring out tools that are used in the classroom by many of the students. One favorite in many early childhood classrooms is the magnifying glass as well as binoculars. As children are using these tools, a teacher can question how the tools had better help scientists understand what they are looking at. There are many teachable moments for teachers to help children build on many of the learning skills mentioned above. Teachers can also help students build on their language and math skills. Open-ended questions about what children are looking at and doing help children to build on their critical-thinking skills.

Outdoor play and learning is not only a task for young children to build on learning skills and large motor skills, but a task for teachers as well. Outdoor learning begins with teachers and what teachers add to their outdoor learning space to ensure children are building on learning skills as well as physical skills. “Teacher enthusiasm for and participation in activities appears to be especially critical in attempts to enhance children’s effortful physical activity” (Cooper, 2009). When helping children learn, teachers must keep in mind that they are where the learning begins. Children are known to look at and do what they see their own teachers do as teachers are role models for young children. Children usually want to please their teachers and those adults they come to know and love.

When teachers view their students outdoors, they often see students that are happy, energetic, and lively. Many classrooms will have a diverse group of behaviors. Some of those behaviors include Autism, Attention Deficit Hyper Activity Disorder (ADHD), depression, and more. Studies have been done to show us that as children and adults spend time outdoors, the behaviors they do have are reduced. “A similar study of over 450 children diagnosed with ADHD showed a greater reduction in attention deficit symptoms after the children engaged in activities in natural green spaces compared to indoor and constructed outdoor spaces” (Greenleaf, Bryant, & Pollock, 2014). Outdoor learning does not only change the behaviors of students during the outdoor learning environment. A change in behaviors can be seen once children arrive indoors as well.

While many teachers do not stop to consider play as a reason why behaviors are happening the classroom, behaviors could be due to a lack of large motor activity. Shannon Murphy (2017) states that, when she takes her students outside there are less negative behaviors inside. She is able to reinforce the positive behaviors, which encourage the students to continue to do well when in the classroom. The researcher is only able to provide her students with a maximum of 25 minutes of outdoor playtime. When the children return indoors, the researcher sees many negative behaviors in the classroom. The negative behaviors range from running around the classroom, climbing on shelves, and students not following teacher redirection. Outdoor spaces provide children with many opportunities to do the above. However, when children are not getting enough time outdoors the actions children should do outdoors is happening indoors.

Literacy Outdoors

Literacy is a skill that many children learn as infants. While many adults do not necessarily understand what babies are saying, the babies are learning and building on their literacy as they listen to adults and talk back to them. In the preschool environment, teachers can help children build on their literacy as they speak. Children, while engaged in what they are doing, are listening to not only their peers, but also teachers as they speak to the students. Using new and unheard words help children to build on their literacy skills. A teacher may often hear a child say, “What does that mean?” One can reply with a definition or put the word in a sentence and ask the student if he or she knows what the word means.

Some literacy activities can be brought outdoors such as books about what children are studying outdoors. As teachers observe students at play, they should take note of what children are interested in. With the notes, they can put together a list of books and bring these themed books outdoors. When children ask questions, a teacher can guide the students to the books and review the books with them. Children then learn more about what they are studying (exploring and or investigating).

Math Outdoors

While on the playground, children have the ability to use mathematical skills in a variety of ways. According to McLennan (n.d.) “Early math is not about the rote learning of discrete facts like how much $5 + 7$ equals. Rather, it’s about children actively making sense of the world around them” (p.1). Children can count flowers, compare and contrast different objects, and they are the ability, measure the length of different items, and of course sort items by different shapes, colors, sizes, and more. Teachers can bring out rulers, magnifying glasses, scales to weigh

different objects, and more. Counters can also be used giving students the opportunity to count out different objects and state which has more or less.

Conclusion

In conclusion, outdoor play can offer children many opportunities for growth and develop. Play is a vital role in the growth and development of the brain helping children build on many learning skills from social and emotional to large and fine motor skills. Children are also building on problem solving skills and have a greater opportunity to use critical thinking skills as they ask questions and search for their own answers. In the outdoor environment, children are free to be themselves as they become creative in many different roles. Children may take on roles such as pirates or geologists looking at different types of rocks. They may become florists and compare and contrast different kinds of flowers. Children are open to discover and lead their own learning, which is limitless and engaging to them. “The Great number of policy instruments that have been developed to improve the quality of ECE consistently underutilize the outdoor learning environment and nature inquiry” (Cooper, 2015, p. 94). With the help of teachers, children can and should get as much time outdoors as possible to grow in their development and learning. As stated, the children’s learning begins with their teachers. When teachers do not care, there are noticeable effects of this.

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