



## Summary Brief

# Why outdoor play?

## Why is outdoor play important?

Outdoor play supports children's development in many ways, including physical, social and emotional, psychological, and cognitive. For example, outdoor play contributes to:

- Motor development and higher activity levels
- Strengthened immune systems
- Improved attention and focus
- Reduced stress, depression, and anxiety
- Risk assessment and management skills, resilience, and self-regulation
- Creativity and curiosity
- Cooperation and collaboration

## Why is outdoor play decreasing?

Children today have fewer opportunities to explore nature and play outdoors, which has resulted in lower activity levels and increased health problems. Some of the social and political factors contributing to decreased time outdoors include:

- The public education belief that children need more academic learning in the early years

- Misunderstanding of the benefits of unstructured outdoor play time
- Emphasis on adult-structured activities such as team sports rather than free play
- Fear of injury and related legal actions
- Perceived danger
- Pervasiveness of technology and screen time

## What can we do?

- Partner with organizations that help children and families reconnect with nature.
- Incorporate meaningful outdoor experiences into early learning programs by bringing curriculum activities outside and creating time for outdoor free play every day.
- Learn more about nature-based play and learning.
- Find out how nature preschools and forest kindergartens design their programs, and increase access to these programs.

**For more information and resources, check out the full research brief at:**

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# Health and developmental outcomes of nature play

## Summary Brief

Even young children feel the negative effects of stressful and busy lives. Active and unstructured daily outdoor play supports children's physical, cognitive, and social-emotional development and provides many health benefits.

### Physical benefits

- More vigorous, varied, and sustained play
- Gross and fine motor development, including muscle and bone health, balance, coordination, endurance, spatial awareness, core strength, and posture
- Development of all five senses
- Strengthened immune systems
- Lifelong engagement in physical activity

### Cognitive benefits

- Self-directed and imaginative play supports creativity, language learning, and abstract reasoning
- Executive functioning and self-regulation abilities
- Observation and problem-solving skills
- Attention and focus

### Social and emotional benefits

- Challenging outdoor play opportunities support children's resilience, independence, and self-confidence
- Practice with collaboration, negotiation, and conflict resolution
- Improved well-being — reduced stress, anxiety, and depression
- Empathy for the natural world and emotional connection with special places, which lay the foundation for environmentally responsible attitudes and behaviors

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## Summary Brief

# Educator well-being

## Why does educator well-being matter?

- Educators who are exhausted and burned out leave their jobs. High turnover rates are a serious problem in the early learning field.
- Educators who find healthy ways to deal with stress and cultivate their own well-being can better support children's learning and well-being by developing high-quality teaching practices, managing their early learning environments more effectively, and building high-quality relationships with children.

## What supports educator well-being?

- Strong social and emotional support systems
- A sense of belonging and respect within the early learning community
- Opportunities to connect and learn with other early learning professionals
- Appropriate coping strategies
- The ability to make decisions and take action in the early learning environment

## What is the relationship between nature and well-being?

The natural world has a powerful influence on human health and well-being. Experiencing nature increases well-

being in the moment and contributes to deeper long-term wellness. Human relationships with nature include:

- *Nature contact* — experiences and interactions with nature
- *Nature connectedness* — the complex healing relationship with nature that is built over time with multiple experiences

## How do nature contact and connectedness support educators?

- Educators respond more favorably to playspaces with more natural elements.
- Nearby green spaces increase educators' motivation to teach.
- Teaching in outdoor environments can build educators' confidence and enthusiasm and lead to the development of more innovative teaching practices.

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## Summary Brief

# Risky play and risk management

## What is risky play?

Risky play is not the same as dangerous play. Risky play is when children practice a new skill or try something new. What makes it risky is that children don't know what might happen, so they're taking chances, knowing they might not get it right the first time. Risky outdoor play might include:

- Handling tools like hammers and screwdrivers
- Playing near fire or water
- Climbing walls, cliffs, or trees
- Running and rough-and-tumble play
- Playing alone, away from direct adult supervision

## The research on risky play

Research tells us that children are capable of making choices and decisions. They need practice learning to assess risk in everyday play. They can decide for themselves *if* and *when* they want to participate and will usually be able to decide *how* they will play. For example, imagine a child climbing to the top of a slide. They are up high, and the sense of risk makes them pause. There are several choices to consider:

- *Will they slide down as they have seen others do?* Children often use risky situations to test their own courage or learn a new skill.
- *Maybe they will use their feet as brakes to control speed.* Decreasing the sense of risk helps them build courage as they learn.
- *Maybe they will slide down head first.* Increasing the sense of risk gives them new ways to challenge themselves.
- *Maybe they ask an adult to hold their hand or catch them at the bottom.* Children gain confidence as they move between risk and safety.
- *In the end, they might decide not to slide down at all, and this is an important choice, too.* Their courage got them to the top, but they aren't quite ready to slide down.

## Why risky play is important

Instead of trying to eliminate all risks, adults can support children in learning to build their courage and trust their own instincts. In risky play, children:

- Learn to manage risk and make decisions
- Build resilience, perseverance, confidence, and self-reliance by overcoming challenges
- Explore their own physical abilities and limits
- Engage with scientific concepts such as force and movement
- Practice social skills like taking turns and encouraging each other

## How to support risky play

Educators can find ways to embrace risky outdoor play as an opportunity for learning and healthy development. To support risky play without putting children in danger, you can:

- Scaffold children's ability to assess risk, which supports the development of observation, decision-making, and planning skills.
- Nurture children's sense of responsibility by talking with them about safety rules.
- Develop an attitude of "as safe as necessary" rather than "as safe as possible."
- Use a combination of risk management strategies, including keeping a close eye without interfering, choosing to sometimes be distant or not present, joining or even initiating risky play, and interrupting play if necessary for children's safety.

## For more information and resources, check out the full research brief at:

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# STEAM outdoors and standards

## Summary Brief

The natural world is a rich resource for early childhood learning, especially in building a strong foundation for science, technology, engineering, art, and mathematics (STEAM) thinking. Outdoor play provides opportunities for children to learn STEAM concepts through active, hands-on exploration and prepares them for later learning.

### Through outdoor play, children learn:

- Comparing and classifying
- Measuring and counting
- Exploring and manipulating physical properties
- Collaborative investigating, problem-solving, and other scientific practices
- Real-world understandings of movement, spatial relationships, and more
- Appreciation of natural colors, patterns, and textures

### How do children learn best in nature?

- Active exploration using their whole bodies
- Plenty of time and space to engage in meaningful, self-chosen experiences and repeated experimentation

### How can educators support children's STEAM learning in nature?

- Provide rich environments and open-ended materials that allow children to explore scientific ideas such as classification, part-to-whole relations, structures and functions, patterns, cycles, and systems.
- Focus on close-to-home settings and phenomena.
- Cultivate children's love and empathy for the natural world rather than focusing only on facts. Positive emotional experiences support wonder, curiosity, and lifelong STEAM learning.
- Scaffold and extend inquiry as it naturally arises according to children's interests.
- Offer questions rather than answers.
- Encourage children to describe and investigate their noticings.
- Offer children many different ways to record and represent their observations (for example, draw, write, build, photograph, sing, or dance).

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# Garden and farm programs

## Summary Brief

### How do garden and farm programs support young children's play and learning?

- Fulfill children's natural curiosity about living things and developmental need for rich sensory stimuli
- Build knowledge about nutrition and healthy eating
- Cultivate understanding of ecosystems and food systems and development of environmental values
- Provide real-world opportunities for experiential learning of math, science, and language
- Increase motivation, pride, and positive social relationships in the early learning program

### How can educators plan for a garden or farm program?

- Enlist children's help in the planning, building, and planting of the garden or farm space and encourage their independent maintenance of the space.
- Collaborate with others in the program and community to define goals for the garden or farm space. For example:  
Will you create a garden of native species, edible food, or beautiful plants? How will you design a sustainable ecosystem?

Will the space be used primarily for structured learning or unstructured play?

How will children of different ages and abilities engage with the space?

How can you include a variety of features (eg. open areas and private spaces)?

How can you provide different types of play opportunities (eg. water play, sensory play, and exploration)?

How will you balance the interests of the children and the space? For example, tearing apart plant parts can be a developmentally appropriate form of sensory play, but it may impede the long-term sustainability of the garden.

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# Translating to local contexts

## Summary Brief

Natural play spaces are wonderful for guided learning as well as the unstructured play that is crucial for young children's health, well-being, and learning. Each early learning program has unique opportunities and resources, so the outdoor play environment will look different at every site.

Ideally, each outdoor space will reflect the needs, objectives, and values of the program's families, children, and staff. Nature-based early learning can take many forms. For example:

- Nature preschools, where children spend 25-50 percent of the day outdoors and the natural world is used intentionally as a classroom
- Forest schools, where children are outside for 70-100 percent of the day regardless of weather conditions and learn through an emergent, child-centered curriculum
- Community partnerships and regular visits to nearby natural spaces
- Introduction of natural materials and loose parts in the program's existing outdoor play area

### Important features of a natural play space include:

- Purposeful design
- Abundant choice
- Child-sized spaces
- Pathways and borders that provide play spaces and connections
- Flexible spaces that can change over time
- Opportunities for children to challenge themselves and manipulate the environment
- Community engagement and stewardship

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