

Teacher-tested ideas for outdoor fun

by Karyn Wellhousen and Rebecca McMahon Giles

The children in Ms. Johnson's room seem especially restless. Jason wanders from one center to another looking for something to do. Caroline and Abby have started quarreling again over who's going to be mommy. Morgan's block tower falls, and he sits forlorn, tears welling up in his eyes.

Ms. Johnson glances at the clock. It's 9:50—10 more minutes until outdoor play. Forget the schedule, she thinks. "Children, let's go outside."

Whoops of joy fill the room. Jason scurries to the door, and other children follow closely behind. "Let's ride the trikes!" "Can we play kick ball again?" "I want to build a sand castle."



Children love outdoor play. A classroom, even though filled with interesting activities, can sometimes feel confining. Children need the freedom of open spaces with only the sky overhead. They need to give in to the urge to roll on the grassy lawn, or run with the wind in their hair. But often that's difficult.

Why outdoor play

We live in an era in which children lead sedentary lifestyles (Pica 1997) and spend little time outdoors (Rivkin 2000). This inactivity, coupled with poor eating habits, is leading to lower levels of fitness and higher levels of obesity for American youth (Sutterby and Frost 2002; Sothorn 2001).

Despite the serious health risks from a lack of exercise (Huettig 2004), schools continue to reduce recess and other forms of outdoor play (AACRPA 2004). We need to reverse this trend. We need to advocate for outdoor play and

make the most of the time children spend playing outside.

Early childhood teachers play a vital role in children's learning on the playground. By effectively using available space to provide a range of learning experiences, teachers can offer endless and evolving options for play (McGinnis 2002). Ideally, teachers provide an assortment of materials for use outdoors, such as balls, jump ropes, dramatic play props, tools, and construction items. This assortment allows for a broad range of developmental abilities while increasing children's interest and activity (Shaw 1987; Griffin and Rinn 1998; Wellhousen 2002).

With a little ingenuity and a strong conviction in the need for outdoor play, teachers can make the experience even richer and more fulfilling. Here are some ideas for adding zest to traditional outdoor play. These activities require nominal, if any, expense, minimal preparation, and little



cleanup. In exchange, they increase children's curiosity and the potential for learning in the great outdoors.

Play it safe

Safety is a primary concern, and supervision, a must. In fact, lack of adequate supervision is a contributing factor in 40 percent of all reported playground injuries (NPPS 2000). Supervision is most effective when adults position themselves in different areas of the playground rather than standing in a cluster where they may be distracted by conversation. Teachers can prevent accidents by intervening when play becomes too rough or a child is taunted into trying a too risky physical challenge.

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Supervision is effective only when all children can be seen. Teacher must patrol blind spots, spaces where they cannot easily see children. Teachers must also be alert to children playing near a water source. Water tables offer many exciting and varied experiences for children but can be dangerous if not carefully supervised.

Outdoor play equipment should be kept in good condition to prevent injuries. Grounds should be kept free of insects and rodents (see pest control information on page 4), and fences and gates should be in good repair.

Materials used for activities, such as those that follow, should be selected with safety in mind. Over time and with repeated use, however, materials may crack, break, or become too worn to be

useful or safe. Teachers need to check materials often, dispose of those that may put children at risk, and replace them as needed. Storing materials in sealed, watertight containers often extends their life.

Outdoor play activities

Take the outdoor play challenge. Move your classroom outside and explore these activities—and the ones you create on your own.

Spray bottle art

Here's what you need:

- plastic pump spray bottles
- food coloring
- old sheets or mural paper
- tape
- clothespins

Fill pump spray bottles with water and a few drops of food coloring. Hang old sheets or tape mural paper to a fence or the side of the building. Invite children to "spray paint" the fabric or paper by simply squeezing the trigger.

Variations: Invite children to spray sidewalk chalk pictures and watch what happens. If you live in an area that gets snow during the winter, invite children to paint snowdrifts.

Splish splash

Here's what you need:

- freezer and containers
- three plastic tubs or other shallow containers
- food coloring (optional)

Freeze water in ice cube trays, plastic freezer bags, or plastic containers to make ice blocks of various sizes. Place three plastic tubs side by side on the ground or on a table outdoors. Add a little water and the various size ice blocks to each. Encourage children to observe, touch, and hold the ice as it melts. Ask them to predict which block will melt first and why.

Variation: Add food color to water before freezing. Encourage children to build ice sculptures with the frozen shapes.

Trim the trees

Add to the wonder of nature's own sights and sounds by decorating trees in the outdoor play area. Some suggestions:

A spring ring. Have children tie metal washers of different sizes at intervals along varying lengths of string, twine, or yarn. Hang the finished products close together from low branches to create wind chimes. For a more natural look, use seashells instead of washers. Shells with pre-drilled holes are available at many craft stores.

CD sun catchers. Recycle old compact discs or use the ones that come free in the mail to add some shine on sunny days. Tie a piece of fishing line through the center hole for easy hanging. Adding small silver bells can provide a little extra jingle.

For the birds. Spread pine cones with peanut butter (if food allergies are a concern, use humus instead) and roll them in birdseed. Hang the pine cones from tree branches. Make necklaces from O-shaped cereal to serve as bird feeders during the winter.

Note: Hang all items out of the reach of jumping children.

Trike wash

Here's what you need:

- smocks from the art center
- rubber gloves
- plastic pump spray bottles
- sponges and old towels
- play money and cash register
- receipt book

Set up a car wash for all wheeled toys, such as tricycles and wagons. Car wash workers can wear smocks and rubber gloves. Children can form an assembly line and wash vehicles with pump spray bottles and sponges, and use old towels to dry. Provide play money, cash register, and a receipt book for customers to pay.

Dig in!

Here's what you need:

- sandbox and sand
- archeological tool kits that include a trowel, magnifying glass, sieve, and brush
- small items, such as toy cars, magnetic letters, plastic counters, and crayons
- rebus card to represent each item

Conceal small items in the sandbox. Give each child a rebus card and tool kit. Invite children to find the items. After finding the item on a card, children bury the item again and trade cards.

Bull's-eye!

Here's what you need:

- empty dishwashing soap bottles with tops intact
- buckets or dishpans of water
- funnels
- cups
- lids from margarine tubs, sour cream cartons, yogurt cups, and other refrigerator containers to serve as targets

Give each child a rinsed-out soap bottle. Have children fill the bottles with water using the cup and funnel and screw on the tops.

Invite children to squirt the water at various size targets attached to a wall or fence.

Rock hunt

Here's what you need:

- mild detergent
- scrub brushes
- cleaned egg cartons or other divided containers

Suggest that children gather rocks from the play yard. Children can use water, detergent, and scrub brushes to clean their finds while noting differences in appearance when wet and dry. Once the rocks are spic and span, children can sort them into egg cartons using their own criteria, such as big, bumpy, reddish, or heavy.





Preschool idol

Here's what you need:

- battery-powered compact disc or tape player
- assortment of music CDs or tapes
- toy microphones

Create a makeshift stage or designate an area of the playground for performances. Move benches or chairs to the theater area to create seating for an audience. Children can entertain friends and teachers as they perform their favorite tunes.

Box extravaganza

Here's what you need:

- large, empty appliance boxes
- heavy-duty scissors or knife, for adult use only
- tempera paints

Large boxes offer endless possibilities for imaginative young children. Boxes with holes cut out of sides can become a house with a door and windows, or an outdoor puppet theater. Turn the box on its side and it becomes a bear cave for hiding. Children can use tempera paints to decorate the box. When tattered from use, this free material can simply go in the trash.

Sheets ahoy

Here's what you need:

- old sheets or tablecloths
- balls or bean bags

Use an old sheet or tablecloth to capture the fun of traditional parachute play. Different size balls and bean bags as well as music can add variety. For specific activities, see "Plunge into parachute play: Great games for large groups" in the Fall 2004 issue of *Texas Child Care*.

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