

The Importance of Taking Infants and Toddlers Outdoors

by Brenda Cobb



One of the more challenging criteria to meet on the Infant-Toddler Environment Rating Scale-Revised (ITERS-R) is taking infants and toddlers outdoors to play for an hour every day. We often hear from providers that “parents don’t want their infant outdoors because they’ll get sick” or that “there’s no time to take young children outside when there are so many routines and individualized schedules.” So why is it important to take infants and toddlers outdoors? How do you set up a safe outdoor environment for them? And finally, what do you do with them once you get them outdoors?

Importance of Outdoor Play

During the first few years of life, infants and toddlers are trying to make sense of their world. One of the ways they do this is by soaking up every noise, every sound, and every experience that they have. They then take this information and come up with ideas about how the world works. So, not only is being outdoors an enjoyable experience for infants and toddlers, it’s critical for cognitive development. During the first three years of life, brain synapses form at a rapid rate. These synapses are formed based on the richness of the child’s sensory environment. So, it would make sense that childcare providers would want to provide a stimulating environment for infants and toddlers, both indoors and outdoors. In addition, the knowledge they gain outdoors

provides a foundation to literacy and science learning (Dewey, 1938/1963). Outdoor experiential learning also promotes early language development. Having a rich sensory experience gives young children something to talk about. When an infant feels the leaves or the toddler notices the airplane in the sky, they are more inclined to verbalize this experience because it will elicit a favorable response by their caregivers. This verbalization to others also promotes social development. Even infants, who do not have the ability to physically play with others, are able to watch others, which is the first step in social development (Oesterreich, 1995). Finally, outdoor experiences are critical for infant and toddler physical development. According to Gabbard (1998), the “window of opportunity” for acquiring basic motor movements is from prenatal to five years of age. During this time the brain gathers and stores information, and a solid foundation for movement activities is built. Infants need interesting things to look at from a horizontal and vertical position. They need materials and space to practice crawling and things to pull up on, so that they can learn to walk. Toddlers need space and materials that will help them act out prepositions-over, under, on top of, inside, outside, behind, in front of, up, and down (Rivkin, 2000).

How to set up an Outdoor Play Environment

Infants and toddlers require constant supervision when they are outdoors. Because they are exploring their world, they often taste it first, which can result in more exposure to germs or to choking hazards. Therefore, it is necessary to make sure that all potential choking hazards are removed from the area and that caregivers are in close

Health Benefits of Outdoor Play

Physical Health:

- Active play
- Physical development
- Physical fitness
- Large muscle development
- Sunlight that provides a source of Vitamin D
- Fresh air exchange with less risk for germs which cause illness

Mental and Emotional Health

- Independence
- Stress reduction among children, teachers, parents, and teachers
- Higher parent satisfaction with the program
- Increased job satisfaction and retention of staff

Spiritual Health

- Aesthetic and spiritual meaning and satisfaction
- Tranquility
- Beauty and peace

Environmental Health

- Children learn about nature and caring for the environment from direct experiences
- Children become involved in the task of caring for the environment and keeping it healthy

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Marcus, C.C., & Barnes, M. (1999). *Healing gardens. Therapeutic benefits and design recommendations*. New York. John Wiley and Sons, Inc.

Rivkin, M.S. (1995). *The great outdoors. Restoring children's right to play outside*. Washington, D.C. National Association for the Education of Young Children.

proximity to children so that they can remove unwanted objects from mouths.

Infants and toddlers also need a surface that will allow them to move around easily. This surface should be accessible to all children. It should be made of materials that will not get too hot in the summer or too icy in the winter. It should provide comfort, tactile experiences, and protect children when they fall. Because children are still mastering balance, there must be enough room to move without hitting a hard surface or sharp edges. The surfacing material should be around all equipment over 18 in. tall so that when children fall, it won't cause any life-threatening head injuries or broken bones.

The outdoor equipment should challenge children, but should be based on realistic expectations about what children at this age can and cannot do. All anchored equipment should be designed for toddlers, based on the new ASTM F 2373-05 guidelines for children ages 6 months to 23 months. Many playground manufacturers are not aware of these new standards therefore, it is important to check with them before purchasing equipment. Also, keep in mind that young toddlers are just learning to walk. They do not need high equipment, ladders, or climbers because they haven't mastered taking large steps. Walking across a low, wide bridge or balance beam is

challenging to them. Playing with riding toys, trikes, wagons (where they can put other materials in it), and different sizes of balls are just as interesting as climbing onto a structure. For infants, providing grass, balls, push toys, tunnels, and a ramp for crawling is just as stimulating as having a baby swing.

“A playground should be like a small-scale replica of the world, with as many as possible of the sensory experiences to be found in the world included in it. Experiences for every sense are needed for instance: rough and smooth; objects to look at and feel; light and heavy things to pick up; water and wet materials as well as dry things; cool materials and materials warmed by the sun; soft and hard surfaces; things that make sounds or that can be struck, plucked, plinked, etc.; smells of all varieties; shiny, bright objects and dull, dark ones; things both huge and tiny; high and low places to look at and from; materials of every type-natural, synthetic, thin, thick, and so on. The list is inexhaustible, and the larger the number of items that are included, the richer and more varied the environment for the child (Greenman, 1988).”

So what do you do with infants and toddlers outdoors?

Beyond the activities already mentioned, there are many interesting and fun experiences that you can provide for both infants and toddlers outdoors.

For children 0-3 months:

Provide a blanket for the baby to lay on. Point out the leaves moving, let them feel the leaves or grass, and point out the nature sounds that they hear.

For children 3 months-6 months:

With the blanket, let the child explore on his/her stomach. Bring out objects to grasp, books, or activity gyms. Again, point out the things happening in nature and let them feel natural objects.

For children 6 months-9 months:

Create a texture path on the ground using assorted textures, such as carpet squares, rugs, grass, and resilient surfacing. The children can crawl along this path to explore large motor skills and sensory stimulation (Miller, 1989). Provide tunnels, balls, and safe sensory tubes.

For children 9 months-12 months:

Provide balls, bubbles, and toys that are sturdy enough for them to practice standing. For early walkers, provide simple push toys. Attach musical toys, activity centers, and mirrors to the fence at different levels for children who are still crawling and for children who are standing.

For toddlers: Continue to add more materials that reflect the variety of developmental skills. Bring out riding toys and trikes, wagons to pull, baby carriages with dolls, large trucks to push, etc. Bring some music outdoors so that children can practice dancing, jumping, and twirling outdoors. Set up simple games. The HAPPE (High Autonomy Physical Play Environment), provides a great list of games for toddlers that can be played outdoors. Set up obstacle courses where toddlers can climb over and under material and walk a curved path. And finally, provide a garden outdoors so that

children can learn about soil, plants, and insects.

So what about the weather and the parents?

The ITERS-R does require that infants and toddlers spend an hour a day outdoors, weather permitting. “Weather permitting” can be subject to interpretation of course.

Thelma Harms, who is one of the authors of the Environment Rating Scales, often speaks of an old Swedish saying that says “there is no bad weather, only bad clothes.” If you travel to different sites across Colorado you will see this reflected on the Western slope where infants and toddlers are dressed in snow suits, gloves, hats, and boots to go outside in the winter. If the mountain communities waited until the weather was “appropriate,” they would only get to be outside from June-October.

The children are warm, happy, and excited to be outdoors. The only complaints are from the teachers who are often not dressed appropriately. Work with your parents on providing appropriate clothing for all kinds of weather and a change of clothes for when children get dirty. Also set up a clothing donation box so that parents, teachers, or other adults in the program can drop off winter clothing that no longer fits their child. You can then use that clothing for children who do not have extra warm winter clothes. Even if infants and toddlers are only out for 5 or 10 minutes because the weather is bad, it

will help prevent illness and it will give them some of those sensory experiences that are so critical for their development.

Remember that the experiences that infants and toddlers have outdoors while they are in child care, may in fact, be the only opportunity they have to really explore the outdoors. By taking infants and toddlers outdoors, you are providing wonderful opportunity and you are setting up a good model for parents to follow. If children learn to love being outdoors when they are young, it will make them healthier. It will also help ensure that they will take better care of our world when they are adults.

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