

Outdoor Learning Environment

Planning the outside learning environment is just as important as planning the indoor learning environment. Outdoor play allows children to explore their world, increase their knowledge of living things, and enjoy physical activities. Outdoor play also helps children develop cognitive and social-emotional skills. This is the space where children can be loud, messy, and silly while expending lots of energy.

Bringing Indoor Learning Outside

Taking the time to plan spaces for children to naturally group together can create impactful learning and discovery. Within these small group areas, learning activities should be provided to support engaging children in their growth and development. Just as materials and equipment are rotated inside the classroom, activities and the materials and equipment provided should change outside as well.

Small group areas may be created by or include the following:

- Blankets
- Sandboxes or sensory tables
- Benches or picnic tables (child-sized)

Learning activities focused on a theme (such as insects or weather) may include the following:

Indoor Learning Concept	Outdoor Activity Example
Reading/Literacy	Reading books on a blanket or conducting circle time outside
Science	Using a magnifying glass to search for objects or going on a nature walk to identify plants and animals
Math	Counting during exercises, such as jumping jacks
Language	Having children act out an animal motion during a race
Dramatic Play	Dress up clothes and hats that match the weekly theme
Manipulatives	Block play with toy vehicles and toy people
Art	Drawing with sidewalk chalk, crayons, or markers; painting on easels

When planning activities for a learning theme, many themes can be extended to the outside environment. However, outdoor activities do not have to be theme-related, they can also be skill-related.

Children should know which activities are being provided and have the appropriate materials readily available and organized, much like the indoor environment. Pulling out the materials from a storage shed or bin or physically bringing them from the indoor classroom outside and placing them in the desired small group areas supports children in accessing the materials with minimal support from the teacher.

Natural Environment

Outdoor environments provide children with opportunities to use all their senses to learn about the world. Outdoor environments that include things such as nontoxic trees, flowers, or plants, natural landscaping, or opportunities to care for animals help children understand and appreciate living things. Allowing children the opportunity to care for living items, such as watering plants or weeding a garden, helps them to appreciate the natural world around them.

Texas Rising Star acknowledges the variety of types of natural environment elements provided within the defined space of an outdoor play area. These types of natural environment elements may include the following:

- Trees, whether it is one tree or a variety of trees
- Plants, such as shrubs, vines, potted plants, and flowers
- Variety of ground surfaces (having more than one), such as wood mulch, pebbles, grass, and/or sand
- Topographic variations, such as mounds, slopes, and terraces
- Landscaping items that children can climb on, such as rocks, logs, and wooden stumps
- Vegetable or flower gardens located within the play area or, if elsewhere, must be regularly visited by the children to be considered
- At least one weather item within a child's eye level or line of sight, such as rain gauges, windsocks, and wind chimes
- Animal observation items, such as bird or squirrel feeders and bird houses
- Natural items in a sensory table or bin, such as sand, leaves, pebbles, or mulch

Some child care programs may not be able to physically change their outdoor environment, whether it is due to being located in a strip center, an elementary school, a church, or other unowned space. These programs should consider temporary solutions that will support children's outdoor learning experiences. Temporary solutions may include having portable sensory bins, which can provide natural elements to explore when children would otherwise be unable to access elements like sand, dirt, pebbles, leaves, wood pieces, or water. Another option is setting out items from a storage shed or bin that can easily be placed in the outdoor environment and just as easily picked up, such as potted plants, pinwheels, moveable wood logs (for sitting, stepping, or climbing on), and thermometers.

Outdoor Equipment and Materials

Children are naturally more active outside than indoors, so having equipment and materials that allow running, jumping, climbing, crawling, and other large motor activities help support growing bodies. Outdoor spaces should be inviting and encouraging for children to be active if they choose. It is also important that child care programs provide enough age-appropriate equipment and materials for all children in order to minimize challenging behaviors and altercations.

Equipment and materials that encourage physical activity include the following:

- Balls, jump ropes, and hula hoops
- Balance beams, logs, and stepping stones
- Swings, playscapes, and climbing structures



- Riding toys, tricycles, push toys, and wagons
- Space for skipping, hopping, running, rolling, and other outdoor games
- Outdoor game items, such as cones and bases

Varying materials and equipment and rotating nonpermanent materials regularly help maintain children's interest and increase their choices of activities. A lack of variation can result in bored children who may act out or long wait times resulting in competition for the limited materials available.

Materials can be stored in an outdoor shed (which should be accessible and/or open to teachers daily), storage bins, or a rolling cart.

Outdoor Spaces for Infants

Providing exploration opportunities outside for infants will allow them to understand nature, such as the sun, wind, and plants, as well as fresh air and open spaces. The outdoor environment for infants should include areas to climb, crawl, sit, and lay to observe natural elements as well as age-appropriate materials. Just as there are many activities for older children, similar ones can be provided for infants.

Equipment and materials that encourage infants to experience the outdoor environment include the following:

- Blankets or vinyl mats for sitting, crawling, or laying on
- Active play items, such as foam blocks, balls, or tunnels
- Small climbing structures or soft climbing blocks
- Toys one can push, pull, or ride on
- Low swings or a singular slide

Many child care programs may not have the physical space for a dedicated infant playground and may elect to only provide stroller or buggy rides for this age group, especially the youngest infants. These buggy and stroller rides are counted (as a score of one); however, the program can increase their score by placing temporary fencing around a select area of the playground specifically for infant play. Child care programs can bring items into the fenced area to support the youngest infants in having a more meaningful experience with the outdoors.

For more information about outdoor interest areas or items to include, visit the [Texas Rising Star Digital Resource Collection](#).