

MDE Benefits of Outdoor Play

Overview: Article should focus on the benefits of outdoor play and how it supports learning and development. Many families don't realize that children 0-3 learn best through play. And when playing, they are learning some really important things.

Creative Considerations: Focus on infant and toddler information

Creative Objective: Get families to prioritize 0-3 learning

Play Your Way to Learning in the Great Outdoors

There's a great big, wonderful world out there, and it's just waiting for your child to explore it. Babies and toddlers learn by touching, tasting, seeing, hearing and smelling. The outdoors gives them experiences they can't get indoors. That all adds up to building stronger brain connections. This is very important from ages 0-3, when your child's brain is geared for growth.

Another great thing about outdoor play is that it's free. A small yard or park offers plenty of play and learning. Even ten minutes outside is helpful for learning. Add to that, outdoor play is just plain fun and a great way to spend time with your little one. Here are some benefits of outdoor play.

Playing Outside for babies

A baby's brain is busy making connections. Many connections are best made when she's between four and eight months old. Seeing and hearing new things during the first eight months helps your baby make these brain connections and helps her develop vision, hearing, thinking skills and language. Your baby needs many chances to grow her brain, so she should have lots of play time outside.

Outside smells, sights, sounds, and textures are different from indoor ones. The outdoors gives babies new experiences they can't get indoors. From the tickly, uneven grass to the bright blue of the sky, everything around your baby is new. Make the most of their time outside by spreading a blanket on the grass and helping them spot new things. Ask questions like, "Do you see the man walking his dog?" so they can identify sounds and things and learn the words that go with them. Learning new words and seeing and hearing new things helps strengthen brain connections. And learning by touching, moving, and hearing creates better, stronger connections.

Exploring outside with 10-15 months

As your infant grows into a young toddler, there are even more fun things to discover outside. Let their natural curiosity take the lead and explore things nearby, like reaching to touch grass or sand, sticks and leaves. Talk about the textures and help your child name them. Ask questions like, is it smooth? Rough? Bumpy? Your young toddler will learn about how things can be different from each other, and how they can be the same. Name the items and colors you see: blue truck, red bird, green grass so they learn about colors and build connections in the brain that help them remember. Another fun game is to play I Spy, asking your child to find things that you can see, for instance, a red bench, or the yellow swing. Ask them to find the white car. Helping them connect the word and color to the object they see will grow stronger brain connections that will help them as they go to school and beyond.

At around 12 months, they will love watching other children play, and want to touch and hug them. You can help your child learn to be gentle, and take turns, the first steps toward good social relationships. Free play time helps young toddlers build motor skills, gives them the opportunity to decide what they want to play with, and helps them feel more comfortable with nature.

Becoming more active 15-24 months

Around the ages of 15 to 24 months, your toddler starts becoming more active, using his hands and feet with more skill. When you are playing outside, bring a ball for him to chase and kick, and practice rolling it or throwing it back and forth with you. His eyes will learn to how to follow moving objects and he'll discover that a ball can move quickly or slowly, roll on the ground or fly through the air. A shovel and pail for digging and dumping at playtime will help him make the physical connect to concepts of in and out, full and empty. Let him climb on playground equipment and learn about over, under, through and around. He will love the physical play, and learning by doing things creates better and stronger connections in the brain.

Playing outdoors for 24 to 36 months

Bring a few toys and let your toddler decide what she wants to do. This will help develop her imagination and self-direction. The outside play world allows her to see science and nature in action. She'll see her hair move when the wind blows, how the sun feels warm on the sidewalk, and the rain makes the grass damp. Noticing differences between sounds of birds, the loud honk of a truck versus the beep-beep of car will help her tell different word and letter sounds apart as she learns to read. Many words have similar sounds, like car and cat, and learning to pick out the small differences between sounds helps her develop language skills. Movements like climbing up the playscape, peddling a tricycle, or walking on tiptoes helps her understand time and space and speed, foundations for math and science.

Preparing for weather

It's easy to get your child outside when the weather is nice. It is important to be safe when playing outdoors. Use sunblock, no matter what the temperature or cloud cover is like. Even cloudy days can yield sun damage, especially on delicate baby skin. Don't let snow, or even rain

stop you. With the right outerwear, snowy and rainy days can be some of the best days to be outside, especially for toddlers and preschoolers. On rainy or snowy days, your child can have fun splashing in puddles, floating leaf boats, or listening to the crunch of fresh snow while walking in it. All of these different sights, sounds, textures and smells are valuable learning inputs for young ones because new experiences help grow brain connections. The more new things they do, the stronger the connections grow. This creates a strong learning foundation that they can build on to gain even more new skills.

Getting messy and risky play

While you may want to keep your child clean and calm, getting messy and taking some risks helps your child get more out of outdoor play and develop other important qualities, like self-confidence and problem solving skills. The great outdoors provides space for them to run, climb, jump and gain confidence with their growing physical abilities. Research shows that children who engage in this kind of 'risky play' learn how to manage fear and control their emotions. They develop confidence and learn to think for themselves.

Playing safe

Just as you want to keep an eye your child when they play inside, you'll want to watch them closely outside. Infants and toddlers use all their senses to learn, so make sure to keep small stones and harmful objects out of their reach. Look out for plants that could be poisonous, and for other things, like metal or glass that could cause injuries.

The outdoors is a constantly changing and challenging classroom for young ones with new things to see, smell, touch and hear every day. Make regular outdoor play part of your routine with your little one and she will develop physically, emotionally and cognitively, setting a strong foundation for future learning.

For more information and ideas about how you can help your child learn and thrive, visit michigan.gov/mikidsmatter.