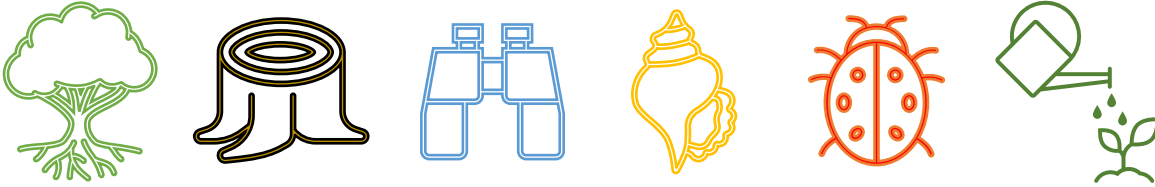




Resources that enhance and support Nature Play in early learning



National Association for the Education of Young Children

[Tuning Out to Tune In: How Time Outside Can Improve Readiness to Learn Inside](#)

The Power of Outside

Nature has beautiful and unexpected ways of capturing our attention--the wind suddenly blowing across our face, our feet slowly sinking into the sand at the beach or seeing an animal run in full stride in its natural habitat.

Researchers call this type of attention "involuntary attention" and believe that time spent in involuntary attention may be giving our voluntary attention an important time of rest (Kaplan, 1995, and Taylor, Kuo, & Sullivan, 2001). Voluntary attention includes such activities as focusing on a math problem or writing letters- basically tasks that make a person focus on what he is doing. Involuntary attention is when we don't mean to pay attention to something, but our brain shifts our focus anyway (an animal making noise, the sound of thunder, the smell of lilacs, etc.) This research isn't new, but as academic expectations are pushed down into earlier grades, sometimes what is considered the "non-essential" and non-academic parts of a child's day, including recess, are tragically cut or eliminated. The reality is, outside matters, and children need time outside to be ready to learn inside.

[Explore the Great Outdoors with Your Child](#)

Children are natural explorers. Set some basic boundaries, and let the child discover. The learning will come. Children use all their senses to explore. They look and listen to observe what is happening around them, touch what they can reach, smell the fresh scents of nature, and occasionally taste when given permission. They run, jump, dig, and climb as they discover new places.



Resources for Families and Providers



BENEFITS OF NATURE FOR KIDS

WHAT ARE THE BENEFITS OF PLAYING IN A NATURAL ENVIRONMENT?

Outdoor play fosters children's intellectual, emotional, social and physical development. And by being outside and surrounded by nature, children experience an ever-changing and free-flowing environment that stimulates all the senses.





Nature Play Spaces

What is a Nature Play Space?





The idea behind a nature play space is that, instead of the standard, cookie-cutter metal and plastic structures that make up the bulk of today's playgrounds, people can incorporate the surrounding landscape and vegetation to bring nature to children's daily outdoor play and learning environments.

Nature Play at Home

Children have a natural affinity toward nature. The National Wildlife Federation and the Natural Learning Initiative at North Carolina State University have created a guide for creating enticing outdoor play spaces as close as your backyard, patio, or balcony.

[*Nature Play at Home: A Guide for Boosting Children's Healthy Development and Creativity*](#) shows parents and caregivers how they can turn an uninspired outdoor environment into an entertaining and exciting play area that will have kids racing to, "Go outside and play!"

Play in nature has different impacts at each stage of development. As children grow and develop, they need to confront new challenges at the edge of their known world that will constantly exercise newfound skills. This means a truly "developmentally appropriate" environment must be designed to offer a diversity of settings and uses to engage the developing child daily, constantly supporting the growth of new skills and knowledge at each developmental level.

-  **For Infants** – A comfortable place for parents and young children is to be out in nature together. Gardens with colors, textures, sounds, and smells stimulate the senses.
-  **For Toddlers** – A space for beginning steps of independent exploration. Encouraging walking and exploring nature using balance logs, sensory gardens, edible and wildlife gardens, and lawns for active play. Developing creativity and imagination, stimulating free play. Observing, naming, and discovering. Moving objects from place to place.
-  **For Preschoolers** – Places to support cognitive development, gross and fine motor development, and science learning. Social skills and dramatic play. Construction play, building, sifting, sorting, measuring, digging. Running, jumping, climbing, hopping, skipping, dancing. Weather, habitat and wildlife exploration and observation. Experimenting.
-  **For School-Age Kids** – Spaces to deepen understanding of plants, animals, and human interactions. Observing changes and effects of weather and seasons and how they relate to changes in the environment and other living forms. Gross motor exploration – climbing, running, balancing. Games with rules in open areas. Designing and building forts and animal habitats. Places to get away.



Resources for Families and Providers

How Playing in Nature Helps Your Child's Development

Playing in nature can help children of all ages with their motor skills, communication, social-emotional skills, sensory integration, and so much more! Here are some of the benefits of playing in nature.



The Benefits of Playing Outside

Playing outside promotes...



Exploration & Creativity



Executive Function Skills



New Sensory Experiences



Motor Skills



Relaxation & Emotional Regulation

Best toys for outdoor play



Some of the best toys for playing outside are...



Sandboxes

Pick up, scoop and play to help senses and fine motor skills



Wheeled toys

Scooters, wagons, tricycles, bicycles, play cars



Sidewalk chalk

Write and draw to help fine motor, communication, and proprioception



Play tunnels

Strengthen gross motor skills and practice crawling



Water and sand tables

Walk and stand while playing with water and sand



Beach balls

Toss, hit, kick and catch to help body awareness and motor skills



Outdoor swings

Helps balance, body awareness, and even social-emotional skills



Bubbles

Good for gross and fine motor skills



Imitation toys

Play lawn mowers, gardening sets, playhouses, explorer kits



Sports equipment

Basketball, baseball, golf, lawn bowling, soccer

Copyright © 2022 Pathways Foundation



Turn Your Backyard into an Outdoor Play Area – Set up a mini-Frisbee or soccer game to get your kids moving.



Start a Garden – Help your kids plant and care for a garden. They will be able to take part in this activity all summer long. Family dinners will have a special touch with home grown fruits and veggies.



Set Up an Outdoor Craft – Outside craft projects are a great way for kids to create and play. Paint rocks with water colors or get out the sidewalk chalk.



Resources for Families and Providers

vroom

Use Vroom tips while enjoying time outside with your child(ren). Don't forget you can also download the free [Vroom app](#) to receive customized tips on your phone or computer.

Name That Sound

Ages 1-2

When you're in the park, pause and ask your child to "Name That Sound!" Take turns guessing. Are you hearing children playing or a dog barking? The squeak of a swing or the chirp of a bird? Point out some things like ants that don't make sounds.

Brainy Background

powered by Mind in the Making

You are inviting your child to focus on hearing the differences in sounds and figuring out what they are. This is an important skill for enjoying and learning language that will help your child communicate with others.



Learn more at usa.childcareaware.org/vroom



Did You Hear That?

Ages 0-1

When you're in the park, ask your child, "Did you hear that?" each time you hear a sound. Imitate the sound out loud and make gestures to go along with it. Invite them to make the sound too.

Brainy Background

powered by Mind in the Making

You're giving your child practice being able to hear differences in sounds. This is an important skill for enjoying and learning language so they can communicate well with others.



Learn more at usa.childcareaware.org/vroom



Up and Over

Ages 2-3

Ask your child to find an object like a stick or rock and place it on the ground near you. Encourage them to explore different ways of moving over it: Can you jump? Hop over on just one foot? Run and then jump? Take turns jumping with them and talk together about how far you both go.

Brainy Background

powered by Mind in the Making

It takes focus and self-control for your child to manage how their body moves, as well as flexible thinking to come up with different ideas. Fun experiences with math ideas like space and distance help them develop a foundation for learning now and in the future.



Learn more at usa.childcareaware.org/vroom



Check out these Vroom Tip YouTube Videos:

- [Animal Sounds](#)
- [At the Park](#)
- [Park Sensations](#)
- [Stop and Go Beats](#)



7 Ways to Connect Young Students to Nature

Fostering a sense of connection to nature has an impact on students' well-being and learning—and it can be as easy as bringing in a plant.

Young children benefit from frequent contact with nature in a variety of ways, including improved physical and psychological well-being. Children who spend more time in nature have lower rates of asthma, depression, and other illnesses. Studies have shown that green space around a school “significantly predicted schoolwide student performance,” including grades and graduation rates.

With these benefits in mind, educators have good reason to bring more nature into their classrooms. For many of us, it can feel like a challenge to add more time in nature into an already packed school day. But bringing nature to children doesn't have to be time-consuming or logistically challenging. Below are seven easy strategies for connecting your classroom to nature.

7 TIPS FOR BRINGING THE OUTDOORS INTO YOUR DAY

1. Incorporate nature into classroom routines - As you transition to other spaces, you can encourage students to notice sights and smells around them as they walk or even have them practice moving like different animals.

2. Take a snack or lunch break outside - As you prepare, you can teach necessary skills while indoors, such as sitting on a carpet square or mat and managing any wrappers or other trash that might blow away in a windy environment.



3. Naturalize your indoor space - Instead of bringing your students to nature, bring a little of it to them.

4. Use materials from nature - Incorporate twigs, wood slices, or small stones into the block area.

5. Consider a classroom animal - If a live animal isn't right for you, consider a virtual class pet.

6. Bring wildlife to you - A bird feeder outside of your window can entice visitors, and a few pairs of binoculars and a field guide can serve as a gentle invitation to birdwatching.

7. Grow something - Studies show that views of green spaces reduce stress, improve attention, and even improve student performance on standardized tests



4 things families can do with these resources:

1. Take your child outside and explore the great outdoors!
2. Use the *Nature Play at Home: A Guide for Boosting Children's Healthy Development and Creativity* to learn more about the impact of nature on your child's growth and development.
3. Start a family garden in your yard or in containers on your porch.
4. Enjoy time as a family at a local park and use the Vroom tips for extra family fun.

4 things providers can do with these resources:

1. Share the Nature Play resources with families.
2. Incorporate more opportunities for outside play – structured and unstructured.
3. Plant a school garden for all classes to take part in tending to, then use the produce grown for taste test or to send home with families.
4. Use the *7 Tips for Bringing the Outdoors into Your Day*, to incorporate more nature experiences in the classroom.

4 things early learning coalitions can do with these resources:

1. Share all of the Nature Play resources with providers through newsletters or at provider meetings.
2. Have a family workshop or training on the importance of Nature Play utilizing these resources.
3. Feature the Vroom tips and videos on social media throughout the year.
4. Feature an outdoor activity for a community event or family workshop. Plan activities for families or providers to demonstrate how learning occurs through Nature Play.