Taking Movement Education Outdoors

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Children’s free-play time outdoors has traditionally been considered a break from the classroom—a chance for them to play without interference from adults and for teachers to relax a bit while also supervising. More and more early childhood professionals, however, recognize the potential of the outdoors as a classroom extension and time outdoors as an opportunity to promote children’s development. They maintain that outdoor space should be used not only for the enhancement of physical skills but also for the development of children’s social, emotional, creative, and cognitive abilities (Isenberg & Jalongo 2000; Essa 2010; Gordon & Browne 2010).

This is not to say that teachers must prepare structured lessons for every outdoor session. But teachers can continue and extend outdoors many activities begun indoors, especially movement activities. For example, battery-operated CD and MP3 players and handheld instruments like guitars, recorders, and autoharps allow music to be part of outdoor movement experiences. During outdoor time, adults can interact informally with children, offering guidance and suggestions that extend children’s play.

The teacher’s role in supporting outdoor play is play leader—someone who interacts with children by asking leading questions and providing guidance for certain skills, like hopping, cooperating, and taking turns. According to play expert Joe Frost, a play leader helps children plan where they will play, discusses their play with them, and assists with any problems with their play that may arise. A play leader does all of this without taking charge.

The play leader’s role is critical because static playgrounds, with traditional swings and slides and their typical uses do not always stimulate children’s physical, cognitive, or creative development. Because the equipment does not change, there are fewer challenges immediately obvious to children. For example, traditional swings and slides do not typically encourage the exploration of such movement concepts as time (moving slowly or quickly), force (moving lightly or strongly), or space (moving in different directions, at different levels, and along different pathways). Play equipment associated with activities performed in one prescribed way limits children’s natural, imaginative play. A child is unlikely to look at the jungle gym and decide to pretend to be clothes hanging on the line to dry; but a play leader can suggest such an activity.

Although some modern, multiple-function, playground structures (wooden or modular plastic), like platforms with swinging bridges, rope ladders, and sometimes a firehouse pole, lend themselves to divergent play experiences, not every playground has such equipment. And on playgrounds that do have it, children may view the equipment as having circumscribed uses, such as merely climbing to the tower or platform and then returning to the ground. Thus children benefit from adult assistance in discovering more creative possibilities. What locomotor or nonlocomotor skills might the children perform on the platform? If teachers bring a portable CD or MP3 player outdoors, the children can play Statues, moving on the equipment until the music is paused and then “freezing” until the music begins again.

To do more

The playground is the obvious venue for many facets of early childhood physical activity. Unless your classroom has the necessary equipment indoors, such as climbing apparatus and balance beams, children can best perform...
gymnastic skills like climbing, hanging, swinging, and balancing on outdoor equipment. The playground is the appropriate place for practicing manipulative skills like ball handling—throwing, catching, and kicking. On the playground, children can push a friend on a swing, pull a wagon, and lift and carry objects. Of course, children outdoors can fully and freely perform gross motor skills like running, leaping, and jumping (including jumping off things such as a low balance beam or the edge of the sandbox).

Look for atypical ways children can use the playground space and static playground equipment (some examples follow). Use the open areas of the playground for large group movement activities that are inconvenient or impossible to do indoors. Suggest games like Follow the Leader, which is more challenging and appealing when there is a lot of space to explore and obstacles like trees and jungle gyms that have an impact on the course taken. If the children decide to play Simon Says, suggest forming two lines or circles so that children who are eliminated can instead go to the other line or circle and continue playing. This is easily done in the large, open outdoor space.

Parachute, hoop, and ribbon activities are often more practical outdoors (ribbon activities are certainly safer in a large, open area, because there is often less risk that the children will accidentally hit one another with them). And the possibilities for obstacle courses using small and large obstacles and equipment are endless. Encourage the children to work with you to set up an inviting obstacle course. Start small and change the course often (even daily). Ask the children to design or improve the course themselves. Children will look forward to creating and tackling gradually increasing challenges. The course should give young children experience with concepts such as over, under, through, around, and between.

If tires are available, consider the many possibilities beyond their use as swings. Help children lay them out in creative and challenging ways. Placed upright in rows, they create tunnels. They can also be stacked, rolled, crawled through, or used as targets to throw balls and beanbags through. When laid flat, tires can be grouped in different patterns (in a single-file line or in a hopscotch pattern). Invite children to explore possible configurations and ways to move from one end of the tire route to the other—crawling, stepping inside the tires, or stepping on top of them.

Even static equipment has new uses when you look at it differently. If the playground has a low balance beam (four inches off the ground), suggest imaginative ways the children can travel on it—like tightrope walkers, gymnasts, butterflies, inchworms, cats stalking their prey, or elephants. Have the children think up their own ways. How would a circus clown move from one end to the other? A ballet dancer? A giant or an elf?

To make swings more interesting and challenging, encourage preschoolers to swing sitting with one leg bent and the other straight, with both legs straight, with both legs bent, as slowly (or quickly) as possible, gradually increasing speed and then gradually slowing down or stopping on cue and starting again.

Freishtat, Frost, and Holecko (n.d.) tell us that adults who maintain their distance from children’s play are missing chances to engage with and learn from the children. Adults who enrich children’s outdoor experiences offer new opportunities for children to express themselves creatively, stretch their imaginations, and be continually challenged. Teachers who interact with children on the playground can make the outdoors an extension of the indoors and encourage movement learning in both settings.

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**References**


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