



No Playground? Find Other Outdoor Learning Environments Around Your Program!

It can be challenging for a program without playground equipment or its own adjacent outdoor learning environment to meet NAEYC Accreditation criteria related to outdoor experiences. Learn more about opportunities for alternative outdoor learning environments!

Does a program need to have its own outdoor environment on-site?

No! NAEYC is able to assess outdoor learning environments that are not part of, or adjacent to, the program facility. These outdoor play areas, however, must be used **at least once a week** by the children. Outdoor areas that are located off-site or in adjacent outdoor spaces, but considered nontypical for play, can function as outdoor learning environments. Public playgrounds, public green spaces, parking lots, open fields, gardens, or woods can all function as outdoor learning environments.

Because walking is another way for children to take in fresh air and observe the natural environment, public sidewalks, footpaths, or trails used for taking walks can also be assessed. Note, however, that walks can meet some—but not all—of the outdoor-related NAEYC Accreditation criteria.

When should children utilize outdoor learning environments?

Children need fresh air and room for gross motor play **daily**. Each group's posted daily schedule can serve as evidence toward meeting this criterion! Choose outdoor learning environments with natural barriers or protective fences to prevent access to streets and to avoid other dangers. This is especially applicable when using parking lots for outdoor play. Off-site outdoor play areas with play equipment and other manufactured features should be used only if teaching staff have thoroughly assessed the equipment for fall areas, catch points, sharp hazards, protruding hardware, and entrapment. Because public playgrounds often serve children of all ages, know the recommended climber heights for the age of the children you serve, and use only

developmentally-appropriate equipment. Also watch for any outdoor features that prevent teaching staff from supervising children by sight and sound. Is the outdoor play space Americans with Disabilities (ADA) compliant? Ensure that play areas can accommodate your children with special needs. Remember to access an outdoor play space at least **once a week** that provides enough space to accommodate the group of children. NAEYC recommends at least 75 square feet of outside space for each child.

If an outdoor area lacks installed play equipment, how can teaching staff set up play activities or learning centers?

Staff can bring along materials and equipment that can be set up to support gross motor movement, dramatic play, art activities, manipulative play, and sensory activities. Include materials that support curriculum content areas while children are outdoors. Don't forget to include materials for very young children! Teaching staff can carry baby dolls, toy animals, sorting/stacking toys, and other infant- and toddler-specific toys to the outdoor play areas.

Always remember to carry first aid equipment and emergency contact information with you when you venture off-site.

How are outdoor learning environments assessed?

During a visit, the assessor observes a sample of your groups including at least one group from each age category (infant, toddler/two, preschool, kindergarten) you serve. If the children go outside during their one-hour observation, the assessor follows them out, and takes that time to rate the outdoor environment and equipment while also continuing to observe what your teachers and children are doing. If a group does not go

outside during the one-hour observation, the assessor will take about 10 minutes of additional time to visit the outside environments and rate the space, equipment, and materials.

Keep in mind that evidence of your outside practices can also be rated from documented evidence inside the classroom! Posted daily schedules, photo documentation of outdoor projects, collections of natural objects, and other materials provide evidence of daily outdoor curriculum and experiences. Comprehensive documentation from multiple sources of evidence can help demonstrate meeting NAEYC Early Childhood Program Standard 9 and related criteria in the other standards. Additionally, many programs store their outdoor equipment and materials in sheds, closets, or other places that are typically locked or out of sight. On the day of your accreditation visit, do point out to the assessor where your outdoor equipment is kept, and offer to unlock the storage areas if necessary so the assessor can view this evidence of your outdoor curriculum practices.

NAEYC has resources for programs seeking to enhance and increase outdoor play experiences for their young children. Find more articles and books about outdoor play and nature by searching [NAEYC.org](https://www.naeyc.org).

References

- Spencer, K.H., & P.M. Wright. 2014. "Quality Outdoor Play Spaces for Young Children." *Young Children* 69 (5): 28–34.
- Carlson, F.M. *Big Body Play: Why Boisterous, Vigorous, and Very Physical Play Is Essential to Children's Development and Learning*, 2011, NAEYC.
- Rivkin, M.S. *The Great Outdoors: Restoring Children's Right to Play Outside* (rev. ed.), 2014. NAEYC.
- Shillady, A., ed., *Spotlight on Young Children and Nature*, 2011, NAEYC.
- Find more books about outdoor play and nature by browsing in the NAEYC Online Store.