

## Nature-based Learning and Development for Administrators

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Narrator: Almost every day, the choices you make about your early childhood center affect children's educational outcomes. This video offers you one of those choices. It shows you how to use the natural world as a learning tool to improve outcomes for the young ones at your center. You will see how to create enriching spaces and opportunities for children to interact with nature. When you design these spaces and opportunities, they can make a profound difference for children.

Research suggests that time outside and interactions with outdoor elements can enhance a young child's health and readiness for school. The concrete benefits that teachers often see are increased abilities to attend to tasks, development of motor skills, and more varied social interactions. Let's look at a few programs to see how it's done.

Here, you see some raised garden beds. These are used to teach about plants, insects, farming, and more. Providing a garden center with seeds, soil, tools, books, and charts can open up a child's curiosity about how plants grow. Some programs build these gardens with grant funds or partner with local garden stores. You'd be surprised by how many families volunteer to help build the garden.

Girl: See? The ant's on there. Woo!

Narrator: This center provides resources for children to interact with nature: Bug catchers with magnifying lenses and plastic tweezers to catch bugs. You can invite more wildlife by planting a butterfly garden, adding bird feeders, or creating small water collection areas. Here's a large appliance box for children to use in imaginary play outdoors. This cost the center nothing in terms of dollars. A volunteer brought it to the play area. Some children enjoy reading books outside on a blanket and pillows. Others like a sensory table to explore different materials outside. Also, when you add items from your region, like local plants, canoes, or shells, the outdoor space can create connections to the community and the broader environment.

Teacher: When we go outside, we're going to look for ovals and stars...

Narrator: As children transition in and out from one environment to another, look for opportunities to incorporate and use nature.

Girl: Look it, they're moving!

Narrator: Bring outdoor elements inside, like these caterpillars and this planter box. Indoor plants give children a chance to nurture a living creature and learn what it needs to thrive. Have a garden center indoors and out. Interactive stations like these are always full of children exploring, counting, predicting, formulating hypotheses, and more.

Teacher: Put your branches up!

Narrator: Also think about some easy ways to embed more nature-based learning into the daily schedule of the classrooms at your center.

Boy: I heard it! I heard it!

Teacher: What did you hear?

Boy: I heard -- I heard it go inside.

Narrator: Go beyond charting the weather. Encourage children to listen for the sounds of nature or talk about how many bugs they saw over the weekend or identify colors in nature while lining up outside. Use natural elements to illustrate number concepts: pine cones as manipulatives, sticks to form shapes or letters.

Teacher: You did the M! You went up and down and up and down, just like your M.

Girl: Yeah!

Teacher: What's next?

Narrator: Think about the classrooms and outdoor play areas in your center. How do they invite children to interact with nature? What about trees where children can play hide-and-seek? Any areas for digging and hunting for insects? Places for routines like hand washing or diaper changing? Are these areas designed so that teachers are comfortable and encouraged to bring children outside? What are the ways that the natural world gets brought indoors? Planters, caterpillars, and other bugs; leaves, pine cones, and seeds: There are so many different natural elements to use as learning tools inside the classroom.

There are resources available to support you in designing and managing nature-based learning. Checklists can help you be more deliberate in your planning. Some centers start with simple items, like appliance boxes, then move towards more involved projects, like raised garden beds in collaboration with families and the community. You may be able to get supplies from local gardening groups. Contact university and college programs to see how they may contribute to your efforts. Sporting good stores may donate rain or snow clothes for children and adults.

Begin by looking first at how your center is already incorporating nature-based learning components. Then identify the resources in your community that are available to expand on what you already have. Start small and work with your teachers and children's families. They will have ideas and know of many resources. The educators at your center may already be doing a number of things to bring the natural world alive for children. Your efforts can support their work.

Let's take a moment to review the key messages about nature-based learning. The research provides a strong case for creating play spaces with natural elements and for incorporating nature into learning activities. Giving children ways to experience, move, and interact with the outdoors not only improves health and well-being, it can also lead to better academic outcomes.

Program managers and center directors can do their part by finding ways to support the design and management of nature-based learning. Look hard at how well your center is doing to incorporate the natural world. Identify areas for professional development for staff or physical changes in the center's environment. Start simply. Start small. Look at the daily schedule and how your staff members already bring nature to the children. Don't forget to engage your families and the greater community. For resources and more information, visit the nature-based learning and development web page on your screen.

Children and Teacher (singing): We're going to have a great day. We're going to have a great big smile.

Narrator: Get started. The children are waiting to play outside.

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