

Front Porch: Building Social and Emotional Development Outdoors

Dawson Nichols: Hello. Welcome to this episode of Front Porch and thank you so much for joining us. Front Porch is a series of webinars that focus on research and evidence-based practices for teaching preschool children. We hope that these presentations are helpful for everybody who works with preschool children, but they are especially targeted for people who work with Head Start, Migrant and Seasonal Head Start, AIAN communities, and family child care programs. Teachers, family child care providers, home visitors, managers – this is for you.

We're going to cover some of the research behind the ELOF, the Early Learning Outcomes Framework, and talk about some ways that the ELOF can be used to improve our practices. My name is Dawson Nichols, I work for the National Center for Early Childhood Development Teaching and Learning, the NCECDTL. My colleague Marley Jarvis and I are from the University of Washington's I-LABS, the Institute for Learning and Brain Sciences, and we're going to be presenting this series. You'll be hearing from Marley in just a minute.

I want to tell you that this is the beginning of a three-part series on learning outdoors. The next two episodes are going to cover physical development outdoors and outdoor learning environments, but we are starting with social and emotional development outdoors. If these two things, social and emotional learning and the outdoors, seem disconnected to you, I hope that by the end of this I will have convinced you that they are intimately connected and work together quite well.

I think I am ready to begin. Social and emotional development in the outdoors. I've been thinking about this for a few weeks knowing that I was going to give this talk, and I've been thinking about it for all of us, not just children. My youngest daughter has just gone off to college – well, in the fall, so my spouse and I are in the empty nest stage of our lives, and we have found that going outside makes us feel better. In the fall, for instance, we live here in Washington state, so we have access to these beautiful mountains. We went and saw one of the first snows while the larches were still turning. We hiked up into the mountains and saw some blueberries. I like to look for mushrooms, so we saw some mushrooms. We brought our dog Tess with us, Tess found this beautiful little spring surrounded by ferns.

The point is, this is a place where we can go and feel better about things if we're having trouble, if we're feeling sad. It doesn't have to be an elaborate hike out into the hinterland, it can just be a walk through your neighborhood. We walk down our street sometimes. There is a little path a little further down that we like to go to so we can feel the trees around us. It makes us feel like we've recharged our batteries. It gives us energy, it makes us feel centered. And we are not the only ones who feel this way. There have been studies on this, in hospital patients, for instance. Those who have a window that can look out even just at a little bit of foliage, a little tree outside their window, they do better than other patients who are undergoing similar procedures who look out on just urban landscapes and urban settings. The ones who had a little greenery out their window, they required fewer painkillers, they experienced fewer complications, they had shorter hospital stays. The nurses reported that they had improved states of mind, too. People, I think, of all sorts, intuitively feel that being outdoors is healthy.

But there is an enormous body of research that it is especially beneficial for children, and it's one of the reasons that the Office of Head Start program standards include access to outdoor spaces. We want this because it is healthy.

Let us remember it also helps with every single developmental area that children are going through and working on. And one way to do this is we can just walk through the ELOF, the Early Learning Outcomes Framework, which covers all developmental areas, and see just how well the outdoors facilitates development in different areas. When children are outside, they naturally are working on experimentation and exploration. These are strategies for learning, the kind that we talk about in Approaches to Learning. The outdoors are particularly good, because they tend to adapt to a child at that child's level. Children with disabilities or suspected delays can usually find an environment in the outdoors that will accommodate them and meet them where they live and work with them at their level.

The outdoors gives us lots of opportunities to practice language and use it in different circumstances, opportunities especially for children who are learning more than one language to practice multiple languages. When children are outside, they're exploring with nature, and they are working on all sorts of cognitive things – math and scientific reasoning – and as they're doing that, they are exploring materials. They are using fine motor skills, gross motor skills. They're working on their physical development as well. They are oftentimes interacting with adults, with other children, so there is a lot of social and emotional development that happens in the outdoors. We're going to dig into that a little more.

I like to show it like this, because it's easy, sometimes, to separate these things for the purpose of talking about them. But we should remember that all of these kinds of development, they blend together, and this is especially true outside. I want to give a little taste of this to just show how complex it is and how much all of these things are working at the same time. As I do this, I want to mention again the Participant's Guide. It's got a space there for you to jot down some notes, which you might want to do, because the teacher in this video has some wonderful techniques as she talks the children through this activity. You will see her helping these children dig through some soil and prepare some places to plant some seeds. Another child comes in, and is there space for this child, or is there not? I'm not going to give it away, but I want you to watch how the teacher is so – handles this so well. Be ready for the surprise ending at the end of the video. It's short.

[Video begins]

Child: My hands are dirty.

Girl: I want to play it, too.

Teacher: I don't think we have space right now. Can you take turns later? Children: Yeah.

Teacher: Yeah. Is it OK?

Child: No.

Teacher: No? Can we make some space for her?

Girl: No.

Teacher: You want to do it now? No, so what we can do?

Girl: You need to wait.

Teacher: Can you wait?

Boy: Wait one minute.

Teacher: No? If you don't want to wait, what can you say to them? How are you going to ask?

Boy: Nothing.

Teacher: Let her try. Let her try. Let her try. How are you going to ask? [Speaking native language]

Girl: [Speaking native language]

Teacher: Let her have a chance. Give her some time.

Girl #3: I want to play with them, too.

Teacher: [Speaking native language]

Girl #2: No.

Girl #3: I want to play, please.

Teacher: Please! She used the magic word. She said please. Can we share this pot? Maybe we can have three people do this one and two people do that? She's being so nice.

Boy: No.

Teacher: OK, Alex, do you want to do – You're very nice. You're very nice. Erica is very nice. Alex is moving over for her. Let's put this one here.

[Video ends]

Dawson: I love how the teacher takes her time helping the children understand the situation and the different kinds of behaviors that are appropriate in that situation. She switches through different languages to help the children understand in different ways. They're learning so much, and I love how that child comes in at the end and comes up with a solution and gets it done and brings in that extra bucket to help the other little girl. It speaks to some real good groundwork that has been done here, I think, because she is able to understand the situation, the other girl's perspective, she's sensitive to the other girl's feelings, she really thinks through it. I think there's been a lot of good groundwork that has been laid there. They're learning a lot of different things, but they are certainly engaged in social and emotional learning. The outdoors – it helps children develop every single part of themselves, and it mixes it up in a natural way.

Before I go into social and emotional more specifically, I do want to mention these three things that you see here, because research is strong in showing that being outside helps children develop healthy habits – exercise, for example – and these habits can stick with children for the rest of their lives and give them benefits for a long, long time. They can learn to value nature in the outdoors and value our planet, and our planet needs a lot of that these days. They learn to play, and let's remember that play is learning. This is something I like to talk about all the time.

Play is not time away from learning, play is a kind of learning. The ECLKC has wonderful materials on this, and some of them are in the materials that we've provided for you, so please take advantage of those if you want to learn more about any of those topics.

Today, though, we're going to talk about social and emotional development. We're going to describe how – and probably a little bit of the why – the outdoors provides this rich environment for social and emotional development. Then, we're going to explain some strategies for using outdoor spaces to support the social and emotional development that these preschool children are going through. I've given an overview of this already, but you may be asking, why social and emotional learning outdoors? Why pair these things? First, we do have some evidence that early child educators don't always recognize the wealth of learning opportunities that there are in the outdoors. Several studies have been done showing that early childhood educators tend, when they go outdoors, to think of it as a break from learning. They concentrate on things like behavior management and safety, which are, of course, important, but they neglect to see the learning opportunities. Typically, there's less money devoted to outdoor spaces, too, and less thought is put into how those spaces can be used to enhance learning. There was a study that summarized this by saying teachers place greater value on indoor relative to outdoor environments, which is a real shame. But studies also show that when teachers are made aware of the learning potential of the outdoors, they tend to change their practices. That's what we're doing here. We are trying to make everyone aware – outdoor environments are absolutely wonderful learning environments.

But why social and emotional learning? That's the second thing. It's best explained by looking at our history a little bit. Don't worry, I know this is not a history class, I promise to go through this very quickly. I think it's worth remembering that modern humans arose about 300,000 years ago, a long time ago. For the vast majority of the time that human beings have been on this planet, we have been outdoors. If all of human history was compressed into a single 365-day year, civilization was only there in the last few days. This idea that we're going to spend our time indoors is a relatively new idea. For hundreds of thousands of years, people spent the majority of their time in natural environments, in the outdoors. A study in 1981 found that people in industrialized nations like ours tend to spend about 90% of their time indoors, 90%. And that was 40 years ago, before the Internet came along. I think it's safe to say that now, we probably spend more than 90% of our time indoors. But our bodies, our senses, evolved so that we could be successful here in these environments, outdoors. It may be why we have a sense of wellbeing when we go outdoors. Indigenous cultures have been saying for quite a long time and trying to get all of us to recognize that going outdoors is, in a very deep sense, going home. It is going into this place where we developed. And we developed out there, of course, together, in social situations. We are a social species. Other people are the most important part of any child's environment. This is one of the most robust findings in child development. Children learn best in social situations, and for the majority of our history, we've been social outdoors. I can hear somebody saying now, "OK, so what?" We developed indoors for a reason. We like being indoors. I do, too, and I'm not saying there's anything wrong with being indoors. My point is that the outdoors are also a wonderful place where children can learn, and it has a long, proven history of being good at helping us develop and learn. It is, after all, where we learned to be social, and it is where we learned how to learn.

All of this is suggestive that children will learn well outdoors, and especially in social situations outdoors. But it can sound a little theoretical. What does the research say? Is there research? Is there evidence that being outside is good for children, and especially for their social and emotional development? I asked my colleague, Marley Jarvis, to do a deep dive into this research. I'm going to ask her to join me now. Hi, Marley.

Marley Jarvis: Hey, Dawson. How's it going?

Dawson: I think it's going OK. What did you find?

Marley: Well, a lot, I'll say. There's thousands of studies. I won't go through every one, don't worry. But really, there's many studies that deal with children and the outdoors, it's a big topic. Overall, there's pretty overwhelming evidence that being outside is a good thing. It's beneficial for children in every learning domain you want to think about. I'm going to talk about a review paper here. This review, Gill, is a pretty good example. Remember, reviews are looking at a summary of a lot of papers, so it's a great place to go. This one covers dozens of studies, and I like this one because it concentrates on – well, I'll quote – “Everyday experiences with natural environments.” What does that mean? Things like playgrounds, preschool gardens, parks out in the community, so we're thinking about the kinds of outdoor experiences that the kids and families that we support are going to interact with on a daily basis.

Dawson: Yeah.

Marley: In this review, they use a term I like. They talk about these spaces as “nearby nature” spaces, which I love. Probably going to start using that a little bit more, it's a great term. We're thinking about nearby nature, these spaces that are accessible. They give us an opportunity to go outside, like what you were saying, not on this massive special hike up to the hinterlands but going outside on a regular basis as part of our daily activities, and children benefit from that. Remember, this is a review of dozens and dozens of studies that looked into this. Their conclusion, of all of those studies, is that throughout all these different findings and all these different studies, they view that spending time in nature is part of what they call a balanced diet of childhood experiences. And that this balanced diet, including nature, this promotes children's healthy development.

Dawson: I love that idea of a balanced diet of experiences. It gives the idea that we want a lot, we want a lot of experiences. It's just part of a balanced diet. That seems like a good way of thinking about this.

Marley: Yeah, absolutely.

Dawson: Yeah.

Marley: We're going to chat about another review. This one looked at about 43 different studies, so still quite a bit. In this case, I wanted to point out that they're from different places all over the world – Australia, Spain, and so on. Which is useful, because nature is thought of differently in different cultures and different countries. Then looking at that same idea that we just talked about, the nearby nature spaces but in different countries. They also focused on social emotional development specifically, so obviously key for what we're talking about today. They found what they call consistent evidence, so across all of these different studies, all of

these different countries, that outdoor experiences were associated with – again, I'm going to quote from them – “children's intra- and interpersonal socioemotional function and development.” That's just what we've been saying this whole time, that outdoor experiences promote social and emotional development, especially in young children.

Dawson: Yeah, and it's –

Marley: And I also wanted to note – oh, yeah, go ahead.

Dawson: No, go ahead.

Marley: I wanted to note that both of these reviews include studies that looked at children with disabilities with respect to delays. Both of these reviews found that these children also benefit from outdoor experiences, so it's good for everybody, adults and children alike.

Dawson: Yeah. The amount of evidence is amazing. This is over 100 studies, and they all agree that social and emotional development happens in outdoor environments really well.

Marley: Yeah, it's a lot of work summarized in those couple of reviews. It was great.

Dawson: Yeah. I think it's important, because recognizing more and more that these social and emotional skills that are necessary for success in other educational environments, too, and for building toward other kinds of development.

Marley: Do you remember, we were talking about that study focused on Head Start in particular?

Dawson: I do remember that. It was more than 350 children, right? It was another pretty large study.

Marley: Yes, we could learn a lot from it. In this study, the children who received extra social and emotional instruction, they did better in that transition to kindergarten. That's great to hear.

Dawson: Yeah.

Marley: This makes sense, because social and emotional skills are foundational. They're not just this light and fluffy nice-to-have thing. As you said earlier, we're a social species. This is foundational. In fact, you know how some people talk about STEM – or even STEAM learning, the new terms – science, technology, engineering, art and math. Some researchers also talk about SEAL learning – another acronym for you, I apologize – SEAL stands for social, emotional, and academic learning. SEAL, it highlights this idea that you can't successfully learn all these other academic subjects until you've learned the social and the self-regulatory skills that allow you to engage in social learning, because that's how we learn.

Dawson: Yes. SEAL, I love that. I'm going to start using that.

Marley: Yeah, it's good. I like that it conveys this idea that social-emotional skills come first. It's how our brain works, it's how we've evolved as a people. It's truly foundational skills.

Dawson: Yeah.

Marley: I've been talking about these big review papers, which are great, we can learn a lot from that. But I also wanted to give people a flavor of some of the individual studies as well. Let's look at outdoor play. We're looking at an observational study. They wanted to compare preschooler play but in different kinds of locations. They worked with several child care centers and they were looking at how the play differed, how it changed between indoors and outdoors. What they found was that, in general, when kids are outside as opposed to inside, children were more likely to engage in what they call more complex forms of peer play. In other words, these kids, when they were outside, they were having more complex social interactions. Their play tended to happen outside in these more peer-to-peer, complex types of interactions, which is interesting.

Dawson: Yeah. Did they say why this was happening outdoors as opposed to in?

Marley: Yeah. Good question. The researchers, they noted in their write-up that outdoor materials and the equipment and stuff, so all the stuff of the environment outdoors, tended to be more open-ended, which is kind of interesting.

Dawson: Yeah.

Marley: So, when you have that open ended-ness, what they were seeing was that the children were able to follow their curiosity, and their own initiative was what was steering that activity, steering what the play was. As opposed to when they were doing these observations at the indoor environments, they noticed that children – the material seemed to have more specific activities associated with, “We do this with this.” That is what they noticed about the materials inside.

Dawson: Can you give an example of what these open-ended activities might be like?

Marley: Yeah, sure. Let's watch a video. I put that short “Friends” video in the queue, would you mind playing that?

Dawson: Yes, I will. Do you want to give it a – tee it up, or just have it run?

Marley: Yeah, I'll just say a little bit. It's a relatively short video, it's just some children playing outside together. It's both nothing special but also something wonderful and special. What I want you to notice is that really, they're improvising. They're not following set rules, they're just kind of outside. Let's watch that.

[Video begins]

Boy: That's mine.

Boy #2: I can do this.

Boy: Yeah. Now we can do it.

Boy: [Screams]

Boy #2: Daniel's hurt.

Daniel: You hurt my hand.

Girl: Now we try to pick it up.

Boy: Grab it! Hey, hey, hey. [Children shouting]

Boy: It's too heavy.

Girl: What you going to do?

Boy #2: [Whines]

Girl: Anthony, help me. Help me.

[Video ends]

Marley: So much happens in such a short little clip. We were talking about how the social dynamics are more complex outside, I think this was a great example of that.

Dawson: Oh, yeah.

Marley: It's this sweet, fun video to watch. But this kind of play, it's all about social-emotional learning. There's so much going on in there, of their back-and-forth and they're navigating what's going on. They're not following some specific rule about how to play with this tire. They're just enjoying being together, and that is a skill. Especially when there aren't rules, you're not playing a set game.

Dawson: It is definitely a skill. Playing with someone is a lot harder than just playing. Or in an unstructured environment, it's much harder than playing in a structured environment. It's so good, yeah.

Marley: And it takes a lot of practice. Thinking of which, a lot of cities in the reviews that I was talking about earlier, they all point out that children outdoors, they tend to play for longer. The bouts of play, if you will, are longer, which is cool. Also, they tended to engage in more complex kinds of play. Imagine the play, for example, is more complex. Not just longer periods of time that they're playing, but in a more complex way.

Dawson: I'm noticing that independence is a theme here. There were no educationalists in the video. Is that typical? Are adults more typically in an observational role outdoors?

Marley: Yeah, it's a good question. It's important to emphasize that adults are present, of course. They're ready to step in, whether it's for safety or to help. Those kids were navigating some things, and they were doing that pretty well on their own, but sometimes things escalate and we have to step in, of course. We want active supervision, but it's helpful to let children work things out on their own when they can. The open-ended nature of things, those materials outside we're talking about, that gives these opportunities, these additional opportunities to develop those social skills. Everything from when and how you might initiate play with other kids, or how to compromise and negotiate, we have a ton of that going on in that video. How to deal with those big feelings when they arise, like her hand was getting hurt and how she navigated that in the video. Children, preschool age, they're really working on these things. They need help from adults in learning these things, but they also benefit from us giving them space and time to work it out on their own, too.

Dawson: Yes, oh, gosh. Thank you so much for going through those with us, Marley. I appreciate it.

Marley: Yeah, of course. My pleasure.

Dawson: Excellent. This, I think, is a good time to stop for a second and spend a moment thinking about the differences between indoor and outdoor spaces. We make indoor spaces to be attractive for ourselves and comfortable for ourselves. We can control them. We make floors flat, so we don't trip. We have nice chairs and things that we can sit on and be comfortable. We have constant lighting. We adjust the air temperature so that it's always comfortable for us. These are wonderful inventions, of course, and they do make us more comfortable. But they narrow our range of experience, too, especially our sensory experiences. Children benefit from a great diversity of sensory experiences, experiences of all kinds. Many of these are not available to them indoors, though. Running and jumping, sitting on the ground or on a stump. Climbing something. Looking off to the horizon. Looking up and seeing a string of migrating birds going by and just wondering about them. "What are they? Where are they going? What would it be like to fly?" Imagining themselves into that experience. These are the kinds of things that can happen outdoors that may not be able to be happening indoors. Often a full body experience, too. It's full of sensory input and lots of motion. It's a wonderful environment for all these kinds of exploration, exploring your limits. Being inside is often, as Marley was saying, more controls with tasks that are set, and you know what you're supposed to do. This has a lot of big implications for social and emotional learning. One way that I like to think about this is, I frame it this way – about 50 years ago, there was a researcher named Roger Barker who gave us this framing. He observed that children learned behaviors partly through us instructing them and learning directly that way, but also through cues in the environment. He formed this idea of behavior settings. The idea is fairly simple – places, just by how they are set up, encourage different kinds of activities. You probably already knew this. When you make a little reading area, for example, like this one. It has cues in it that show a child what kind of activity is expected here. There's books, there's a place to sit, probably a good place for reading. If we put different things into the environment, easels and bibs, then a child would know painting is a good activity in this area. This idea of behavior settings is very simple, but it also gives us a tool to look at outdoor and indoor environments and make some observations about them.

The first thing that I'd like to observe is that indoor spaces, they tend to be smaller. There are chairs and tables, encouraging less motion. The activities, as we've been saying, are more structured and contained. Even things like sleeping and eating and dressing – necessary activities, of course – are structured activities. Many outdoor activities are not structured like this. Simple field of grass, like we're looking at here. Where you go, what you do, it is all open and up to you. You can skip, you can run, you can jump, you can gallop. And you get to decide in an environment like this. There's a lot more choice. I'm not saying that this is better, but it is different. And we want children to experience different kinds of environments. There are outdoor environments that are not entirely open-ended, you can think of this baseball field. We know the kinds of things that happen here. Running and swinging a bat, those are the sorts of things. Could you read a book in this environment? Yeah, it would be a little strange. That behavior belongs in a different environment, one more like this, an indoor environment.

Behavior settings encourage specific activities. But – and here's why this is so important for social and emotional learning – the behavior setting only encourages that behavior, because we have a social agreement that that's what it's going to do. A child could kick a ball inside, it's not impossible. But a child learns that that's not appropriate, because we have this social agreement. These behavior settings are social settings.

I think it becomes particularly important when we think about how flexible the outdoor environment is in this regard. Again, reading is not something you generally do on a baseball diamond, but if the community has gotten together for a book sale, and we set up tables out there, people are invited to browse and read. And now reading is fine, it's a fine activity here. It's the same place, but we've changed the behavior setting, and that is just a social agreement that we have. Learning to navigate that is really important, an important part of social and emotional development.

By the time children are three or four, most of them understand these behavioral cues, these behavioral settings. Running is OK on the playground, probably not indoors, in classrooms, certainly not. Not in your family's child care provider's living room, please. Not in the kitchen. The behaviors in those areas are different, and they are much more contained. Usually, they're much more stable through time. They don't change from one day to the next. What we do in a reading area doesn't change much. But what about outdoor environments? Well, they're more fluid. One day we play a game with rules, the next day we don't have rules. We just let other children join in. Or one day we play by ourselves. Outdoor behavior settings are just inherently flexible that way. They depend on these other social situations and these cues that we have. Outdoors, it is complicated. Every social situation is different, and children need to learn to navigate these things. And they're subtle. For example, if you're a child, like this one on the playground, and yesterday you saw your friend go up the slide, and oh, that looks like it might be kind of fun. You're going to try it today. But when is it your turn? Hmm, this is not the normal way to go use the slide. It's a thing you've got to kind of negotiate. You've got to wait a little bit. Not now. Wait until this person is down. Then you can start up. But then, oh no, not now. I'm having to negotiate all of these other people, I have to say I'm sorry, again, using some social and emotional skills. I have to use some patience. I have to learn some persistence. And then I have to wait and wait, and gosh, even the teacher wants to come down this slide. It seems like everyone wants to come down this slide today. I have to tamp down these emotions and control myself until my friend comes and tells me that yes, yes, the slide is finally free and you can try going up there. This is a common thing. Negotiations like this happen all the time, and children need to have lots and lots of experiences so that they can come to understand how flexible these social environments are. It can be very difficult. When you're outside navigating these difficulties, yes, you will want a teacher there sometimes, an adult there to help you through these things. Because asking to join an activity is different than from just joining in. Both are acceptable sometimes, but it depends on what the activity is, who's playing, who's taking part, what materials are available – it gets complicated quickly. There are a thousand different variations, and each one calls for slightly different behaviors. I think we can all give a little empathy to children trying to learn these things. It's so complicated.

I'm going to look at another example this is a very short video in a family child care setting. I think it illustrates this point. Two boys are playing in the sand, and then another boy comes

over and takes a shovel that is not being used. This happens quickly, so don't look away, but watch what happens.

[Video begins]

Boy: Give me!

Dawson: Oh, no. The videographer stopped taking video at that point because there was confrontation, but I wish that they'd kept going, because that happens all the time. It is so common, and it is the kind of thing that children need practice with. Again, these situations are really complicated. From the perspective of the child coming in and taking the shovel, well, nobody was using it. Why shouldn't he get to use it? Why is this other kid going from zero to 90 in no time? But hang on, from the other child's perspective, "Well wait, my friend and I are here playing. This is our area. I wasn't using that shovel now, but it's one of the tools for this area. No one asked to come in. Why are you barging in like this? That's like trying to go up the slide." There are different perspectives. Think how difficult it is to understand another person's perspective. It's difficult for adults. Children will need help, and they'll need a lot of practice learning these things. There's so much to consider. I'd like to take a moment and have a little empathy for children learning these things. But again, the outdoors is a perfect environment for learning this kind of thing, because it is so open-ended and so flexible. The activities are dependent on the social situation, and that is how children can learn those social and emotional skills.

We have talked now about how and why the outdoors provides an ideal environment for social and emotional learning. I hope the idea of behavior-setting is helpful for thinking about how we set up situations and the kind of learning that we are encouraging with children. Now, I want to talk about some practical strategies that we can use to support this kind of development in outdoor spaces. The Early Learning Outcomes Framework goes through everything very rigorously. This is the social and emotional development. These are the subdomains for preschoolers, and there are four different things that we've identified that preschoolers are working on in this domain at this time. What I'd like to do is talk about a strategy for each one of these subdomains. I don't mean to suggest that the strategies are limited to these subdomains. We use strategies in a lot of different areas, and if you learn one for one of these, it's likely that it'll be helpful in other situations as well. If you have a child that goes from zero to 90, for instance, and you know that redirecting that child is a helpful strategy, that's probably going to work indoors and outdoors in different situations, so these strategies should be flexible like that as well. But I do want to direct them toward these specific things.

The first subdomain is Relationships with Adults. Children in their preschool years are getting so much better at their relationships with adults. They're getting more confident, they're communicating more, they're learning to engage in cooperative kinds of behavior. They're starting to ask questions and share ideas and get that sense of independence for themselves. It's a wonderful time, and it's exciting for them. But of course, to develop these skills, they need access to adults. The first strategy is simply make yourself available. It's a strategy because, when taking children outside, sometimes adults can default to letting children free reign, especially if the outside area is contained. If the children are active and involved, why intervene? Well, you don't always have to, of course. Children benefit, as we said earlier, from

independent time, from developing confidence and things like that, and interacting with children, of course. But it is also important for them to learn to build relationships with adults. And simply allowing yourself to be available for them and interacting with them can be important for their development. Let's look at an example of this, too. Again, please, mark down some notes, because this teacher is so wonderful. I'm going to ask Marley to come up and comment on this with me again. Marley, can you join me?

Marley: Hi.

Dawson: Hi.

Marley: I'm back.

Dawson: Yes, thank you. You see this family child care provider interacting with three different children, all different ages, because this is a family child care environment. Three different ages, that's juggling. Anyway, notice the little boy in green in the front, in the foreground. He wants to take part, but he's just, he's real young, and he's not sure how, so he waits. And in the end, well –

Marley: Well, let's let them watch it.

Dawson: OK.

Marley: We'll come back to that.

Dawson: Yes, we will come back to that. Here we go.

[Video begins]

Teacher: Oh, sand ice cream. You're making food or what?

Girl: Food.

Teacher: Food.

Girl: This is an ice cream from me.

Teacher: Ice cream for me? Thank you. You're so nice. Mmm. How should I eat it?

Girl #2: I made ice cream. Yummy ice cream.

Teacher: Yeah, yummy. Just pretend. That's so yummy. So yummy. How about you? You want to put over there? Yeah. One scoop. Second, two scoops.

[Video ends]

Dawson: I just love that. Simple, gentle interactions like that, they are so important for helping children learn how to relate to adults. There's some direct instruction there. But there's also the example. This is how we pretend together, this is how we are polite and patient with one another. I think it's wonderful.

Marley: Yeah, it's a terrific interaction. There's a lot in there.

Dawson: Yeah.

Marley: One thing I wanted to point out is the language that she uses. She's using a rich language with each of them. It's not just the words she's saying but how she's saying them. She's calm, that tone, I feel like I could listen to her forever. She's very welcoming, she's smiling. She's right down there at their level playing along with them. It's a way that, with both her tone and her body language, she's showing a lot of respect for them. This is all possible because she's making herself available.

Dawson: Yeah. And the behavior-setting is letting the children know and helping her convey to the children that this is about pretend ice cream. That's our activity today.

Marley: Right.

Dawson: When an adult is there taking part, it just becomes such a richer experience. This is a great example, again, of how simply making yourself available, being present, enriches that experience so much.

Marley: Yeah, absolutely. Not forgetting our home visitors, but this is a great thing that you can help families in thinking about as well.

Dawson: Yeah.

Marley: Being available in these small interactions that enriches the child's experience. Whether it's inside or outside, this is a great place to help support families with.

Dawson: Yes. The second subdomain is Relationships with Other Children. The preschool years are important in so many ways, but the skills that they are developing here with their peers to maintain relationships and build these relationships is so essential. These are their first real friendships. That parallel play of toddlerhood is becoming the more complex interaction. They're learning to cooperate and share and resolve conflicts. The question arises, why is the outdoors an ideal place to work on this?

Marley: Sure. Well, there's a decent amount of research there. It's all saying that a lot of these outdoor activities are more open-ended. I know I've said this again and again, but it's one of these key advantages that outside has over indoors typically.

Dawson: Yes.

Marley: Activities aren't as constrained, there might be more space, there's different open-ended materials again. One of the things that does is it allows for more opportunity for freedom of choice on behalf of the children. With that freedom of choice can come all of these different opportunities to interact, and these more complicated, more complex social interactions that we were talking about. They're transitioning, if you will, between different activities. They're sharing or not sharing. They're taking turns and negotiating and cooperating. There's a ton of complex peer stuff there in the great outdoors as well. In other words, when they're outdoors, in order to have these playful fun interactions, children need to build relationships.

Dawson: Yes, and that becomes a mechanism for the play to continue. Yeah. I don't mind repeating, you know, messages by the way. I think it's important. It's still important.

This is also a time when adults need to help children understand their own emotions when they arise. They're new to these emotions, and it can be unfamiliar and unsettling and overwhelming. The strategy that I want to focus on is helping children understand the emotions of other children. This is hugely important, because this part of social and emotional development, it's tricky. It's not always easy to know what other people, especially children, are experiencing. Children can use some help with this. Here's our strategy number two – help children empathize with and understand other children's perspectives. It means that when conflicts arise, we talk to children about what's going on. We also encourage them to see the conflict from the other child's perspective, as I was doing earlier.

Marley: That's challenging, that's complicated. That's a big part of these three to five years old, that range, there's a lot of learning there, and it can be difficult to do in an inside setting, in an indoor setting. There's a lot of distractions, maybe not quite as much space, and some other challenges. Often, if we are taking this outside, there's more space to separate children, if need be, to have these small conversations or take that space, take that time. If you're a home visitor, including time for outdoor play during any group socializations that you have, it can help parents to practice. It takes practice supporting these skills.

Dawson: Yeah.

Marley: It takes a lot of practice on behalf of the adults, too. right. It can be tough, yeah.

Dawson: Yeah.

Marley: I guess in these outdoor moments like this, it can be a wonderful time to let children know that understanding the feelings of others is an important part of building relationships. We have a video on this. Yes, great.

Dawson: Yes.

Marley: Let's watch that one.

Dawson: I don't know that this one needs any introduction. It's probably best to just let it play. She's so good at this.

[Video begins]

Teacher: How do you feel when Acari is trying to get you wet? [Speaking Spanish]

You're sad? You're sad when Acari tries to wet you? Acari, how do you feel when Verenissa tells you that you're [speaking Spanish]? How does it make you feel?

Acari: Sad.

Teacher: It makes you sad. You know what, Acari's sad when you call her [Speaking Spanish], and you're sad when she tries to wet you. What can we do? [Speaking Spanish] So we can both be happy? Ah. You gave each other a hug. Do you want to tell her? "Please call me Acari. That's my name." Tell her. Tell her, "Please call me Acari."

Acari: [Speaking Spanish]

Teacher: [Speaking Spanish] OK, and then you can tell her what? [Speaking Spanish]

Verenissa: [Speaking Spanish]

Teacher: Uh-huh. [Speaking Spanish] What can you tell her about her wetting you? You can tell her, "Stop. I don't like that." OK? Tell her. "Acari, please don't wet me. I don't like that."

Verenissa: I don't like it.

Teacher: Good for you. Alright. It looks like you guys gave each other a hug, so I think you took care of things.

[Video ends]

Dawson: Oh, my gosh, there is so much that's going right in that, using the children's own language. Helping them empathize with one another. Giving them actual some script to use. I think that could be a wonderful strategy.

Marley: Yeah, absolutely.

Dawson: When children are engaged in this kind of outdoor play, they want to work together and work through any difficulties that arise so they can get back to the play.

Marley: Totally, yeah.

Dawson: I think that using that as a motivator is wonderful, it's a great incentive. The play itself can bring out these emotions, but children want to play, so they work through those emotions. Their own, but those of other children, too.

Marley: Totally. It's a super great point.

Dawson: Yeah. Alright, third subdomain. Emotional Functioning. Preschoolers are learning to express a huge range of emotions and recognizing them in others, as we've been saying. Outdoor environments allow behaviors that draw out big emotions in children. This is true for a number of reasons. We've already discussed how our bodies and our senses are especially attuned to outdoor environments, and they are engaged in outdoor environments. This is where humans learned to work together and to be social. It happened outdoors. Emotions also developed in this environment, and they all go together, don't they? What brings out emotions? Well, your senses, your bodies, the other people that you're interacting with.

Marley: Yeah, you see this when you're working with children outdoors or you're on a home visit and you're spending time with families outdoors. You really see what you're talking about. You've got these activities that are, they're more physical by nature. That physical activity, your heart gets pounding, it's exciting. It can lead to lots of fun, big joy, but also frustration. And it can coincide with big emotional activity as well. All these big emotions that are happening, it's often happening outside. That means that that's a great place and time to talk about them. We work on identifying and talking about these emotions in the context where they come up.

Dawson: Yes, I think that's so important. There are a lot of opportunities outside for these big feelings, and that's precisely why it is the best place to deal with them. That is the strategy that I wanted to talk about for this third one. Big feelings, be ready for them. And how are you ready for them? As adults, first and foremost, I would say we want to be calm and steady. We want to be that person that is stable for the children in our care. Home visitors can model this for

parents and talk to them about how to keep your poise in the midst of children who are possibly having very big emotions, right.

Marley: Yeah, it takes practice for sure.

Dawson: It does. People tend to mirror the emotions of others. It's something that we do as adults, too. People are excited, we get excited. People are mad at us, we get mad right back at them. But as caregivers, we can't do that, of course.

Marley: No, we've got to be able to control ourselves, and it's challenging. It's tough work for sure.

Dawson: Yeah. I remember that kid who was in the earlier video, he said, "Give me." We certainly don't want to match an emotion like that. We want to help that child work through that emotion. We need to be ready to stay calm.

Marley: Like I said, it takes practice. That's something that we can be intentional about as education staff. We know that big feelings are probably going to come up, so we have to have a plan ready. What are the strategies that we're going to use to help children in managing those big feelings? Think about this especially, it can be important – well, for all children, but if we're thinking about children with any emotional, behavioral, cognitive disabilities, suspected delays, et cetera – it's important to note that sometimes, because of a specific disability, it might make it more difficult for them to regulate their emotions or big feelings.

Dawson: Yeah.

Marley: We might need to think in advance of some different strategies to support different children, and probably all preschool-age children. This is a big area that we can help them with. Have you thought about how you might help a child take some nice deep breaths? What's your strategy for some deep calming breaths with kids? Maybe you've looked around in the environment that you're going to be hanging out in outside and scoped out where is a good place that you can take a child to help them calm down, where they feel safe. You've maybe had the space that you've thought about before, or maybe you can help use their own words, talking them through that to talk about their feelings. Even just how to express them – giving them some modeling or examples and support for learning how to express your emotions and how to express your feelings. It's such a key thing that we can help support kids with.

Dawson: Yeah. I'd like to remind people that dealing with big emotions, helping families deal with these emotions, that's part of our job. When a child has a tantrum or cries, we can sometimes feel like we haven't done our job correctly. But I want to emphatically foot stomp, and emphatically say, that is wrong. It is. The job of early childhood education is not to keep children calm all day. It is to provide experiences that will help children grow and develop and learn and thrive. And some days, hopefully most of them, they'll be happy and joyful. But other days, there's going to be rocky parts, difficulties. I'd like to remind us that when that happens, a good attitude to have is, this is a learning opportunity, and it's necessary. Children need to learn these things.

Marley: It's normal.

Dawson: Yeah, it's crucial.

Marley: Yeah, absolutely. OK, can I do this last subdomain?

Dawson: Yes.

Marley: This one, I think, is really important. Well, they all are, but I'll say that about all of them. Sense of Identity and Belonging. This is so key. Preschoolers, this time period, they're starting to recognize themselves as unique individuals, and also that they have many different identities. Our last strategy is talk about cultures, communities, and groups.

Dawson: Yep.

Marley: Inside, outside. That's not just limited to outdoors.

Dawson: Indeed. Again, the adults can be there to help understand how and when these groups are changing, because they change, the roles change all the time in outdoor environments.

Marley: Yeah.

Dawson: I see we're getting to the end of our time, and I hate to rush through this. I'm so sorry. This is all such important stuff, but we do need to get to our end. I'm going to skip ahead here, Marley, to our next slide so we can get to our summary. Bear with us. Here we go. Being outdoors helps children to develop in absolutely every learning domain. Sorry for the rush here at the end. Outdoor environments give children opportunities to express and experience emotions of all kinds. They provide children with different ways to explore identity and develop a sense of belonging and work with different kinds of people and groups and communities. It is such a rich environment in which to learn all of these things. We can help them by making ourselves available, by helping them understand and empathizing with other people's perspectives, by being ready for big emotions and understanding that working through these emotions is a normal part of development. And finally, talking to them about identity and culture and community, especially as these things arise in these wonderful outdoor environments.

Do you have any last things you'd like to say, Marley?

Marley: I do want to point out, we've got two more episodes of Front Porch that are going to look, again, continuing this conversation about outdoors. You'll see me again the next two topics in this trio here on outdoors. It's going to be outdoor learning environments, and then the last one is physical development in the outdoors. A lot of great stuff coming up, continuing our conversation today about learning outside. I hope you join us for those as well.

Dawson: Yes, thank you. Thank you again for your attention and all the work that you do.