

Growing Physical Skills Through Outdoor Learning and Play

Marley Jarvis: Hello, everybody. Welcome to this episode of Front Porch. In Front Porch webinars, we're talking about some of the latest research and some practical applications, particularly for topics that are relevant for preschool-age children. My name is Marley Jarvis, I'm your host today. I'm from the National Center on Early Childhood Development, Teaching, and Learning. And I'm based at the Institute for Learning and Brain Sciences which is at the University of Washington. I've also gathered together a couple of really special guest speakers that I'm so thrilled to have on today. They are also from the University of Washington, so I've Mike Browne and Jennifer Fung, and they are fabulous. You're going to hear more from them in a bit.

First, this webinar, it's the third and final in a mini-series that we've done this year focusing all about different aspects of outdoor learning and play, etc. But again, all for preschoolers. If you missed those and you'd love to get more about outdoor learning environments, don't worry, it's totally fine if you didn't see those other two webinars. But if you'd like to catch up on them, they're available for you, you can re-watch them on the ECLKC which is the Head Start Early Childhood Learning and Knowledge Center.

The objectives for today are, your first one is that to be able to explain how outdoor learning environments can help support skills within the preschooler perceptual, motor, and physical development domain of the ELOF. And also, to be able to plan for materials and interactions that support the development of preschoolers' physical skills, particularly outdoors.

Physical skills, that's a broad term so I wanted to quickly narrow in sort of what I'm talking about when I'm saying physical skills. To do that, we're going to look at the ELOF for a minute here. Here are the ELOF domains for preschoolers, and today we're narrowing in right here. That red box, our topic fits within the perceptual, motor, and physical development domain. We'll take a look at what is in there. There is these three sub-domains, we've got gross motor and fine motor, so a lot of motor stuff. And then that third one health, safety, and nutrition.

That first subdomain, gross motor, children are practicing balancing, building core muscles as they walk across a log, for example, or even walking on smooth or bumpy surfaces, those changes in surfaces. They are showing strength, coordination of muscles when they're running, and they're climbing trees, and they're carrying materials back and forth around outside. There's also perceptual information that they're using so they're maybe judging when they're leaping from a rock to another rock or, again, if maybe the grass in the pavement or two separate materials so they have to navigate that using perceptual information.

All of these are gross motor activities that support this ELOF goal that a child demonstrates control, strength, and coordination of large muscles. Now, of course, some preschoolers may have individualized education program so IEPs, and there might be specific goals in there for gross motor development. Working with specialists, you can design experiences such as an obstacle course and an after-play area, things like that that will promote strong child outcomes for all children.

OK. The second subdomain. Fine motor skills. We had gross motor skills, now fine motor skills so things like you see here in these pictures when you're using your small muscles. Fine motor skills like when they're using tools like rulers or tweezers maybe to pick up a little treasure that they find, or on the right, trying to water some plants or maybe vegetables in the garden that they might have at the program. And, of course, we want to adapt tools for children of different abilities, including those with disabilities or suspected delays. And anyone with any physical limitation, so you might change up those tools or adapt them. And using tools is important because it supports a goal in this subdomain, the fine motor subdomain of the ELOF and that's that a child demonstrates increasing control, strength, and coordination of small muscles.

Now, we're mostly talking about motor skills but I think the health, safety, and nutrition subdomain also comes in quite a bit. I want to make sure to round it out and tell you a little bit about what's in here as well.

Time outdoors tends to come with opportunities to take safe calculated risks. And taking these sorts of risks is really an important part of learning. We are foreshadowing here, we're going to talk a lot more about what this means and some things around risky play as some folks call it later on in the webinar. With adult support, of course, preschoolers are learning how to identify dangers and avoid them or manage danger, and things like that as well as learning to alert others to any dangers, maybe keeping a safe distance from swings out on the playground. That is all under this subdomain. And this all supports this ELOF goal that a child demonstrates the knowledge of personal safety practices and routines.

I'm not going to spend much more time talking about the ELOF but I did want to mention if you do want more information or a deeper dive on specifically how outdoor play and physical play in nature and outdoors can support learning across the ELOF. There are these two great previous Front Porch webinars that, again, are linked to in your Viewer's Guide and that resource list and you can re-watch them. Check those out for more on these topics.

OK. We're going to do a quick pulse check. I want to know what you think, do you think that most young children are getting enough physical activity throughout the day? We've got thumbs up for yes, thumbs down for no. What do you think are most young children getting enough physical activity?

The answer is pretty much nope. Generally, studies have shown that fairly large substantial percentages of children in this preschool age category so ages three to five are less physically active than public health authorities tend to recommend. One of these groups is the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services. And they suggest active play for at least three hours per day for this age group.

Keeping that in mind, OK, it seems like we need to perhaps increase some physical activity levels in young children. What are some ways to do that? If you have some ideas, feel free to share them with us in the Q&A widget and I will, of course, share some ideas as well. Going outside is a simple way to achieve this. Research shows that children play harder and longer when they're outside. Part of this is that it's play, there's fun, and there's a really great motivator there. Children are more likely to engage in really that vigorous play that strengthens

their hearts, their lungs, their muscles when they're outside. This is improving their motor skills but also their overall fitness level. Going outside more is a really great thing that you can do.

We've been talking about fitness levels, aerobic activity, and also things that are building muscle like climbing or lifting objects but I also wanted to point out that we need to think about bone strengthening activities too. That includes things like hopping, skipping, jumping, tumbling, dancing, walking, stuff like that. Adults may tend to limit these kinds of activities I think often that more vigorous type of activity tends to make us worried about children hurting themselves or even just sort of getting too out of hand.

I wanted to take a moment to remind us that there's a very real biological benefit to activities like this, so the American Academy of Pediatrics, they put it as a safe force on the bones. And that's typically the impact with the ground while jumping or tumbling. Now, this is important for children with disabilities as well so you need to work with family members and the IEP team to make sure that children with disabilities or suspected delays have these kinds of opportunities to be active as well. There might be adaptive equipment that they can recommend for specific activities.

What else boosts children's physical activity, specifically in childcare settings? Note there's not a ton of research about in the home so for home visitors and family childcare providers, I'm sure you can glean some from this but I just wanted to be transparent, there's not a ton of research-specific to those settings, so that's why I'm saying in childcare settings here.

As we've been mentioning, just increasing the time children spend outside is a big thing that you can do. At least daily whenever possible. And, of course, if you are in a home setting and you don't have a yard, consider visiting nearby parks, field even, or some other outdoor area.

OK. You can also think about providing more portable play equipment. Things like loose parts, wheel toys, things like that. Research tells us that these kinds of things increase children's physical activity levels. You don't have to have the funds for a big permanent play structure. I think this can be good news. In fact, research suggests that these sort of fixed equipment type play structures, they may be great for some things but when we're thinking about physical activity, research shows that they're actually correlated with less activity. Think loose parts on the playground, we can get creative with found objects or natural materials like sticks or stones or pine cones, things that are very cheap if not free, things you can find. Pretty easy additions. Also building materials like boards and boxes.

You can see these boys here in a family childcare home, they're having a great time with some pretty simple materials here. These can be often pretty affordable additions to a home environment if you're a home visitor or family childcare, or a childcare center. And again, a note, if you don't have access to your own yard or outdoor play space, you can think about making a go-kit of portable play equipment and that can be something that you can do with a family or with a program so they can take with them when they go visit some other outdoor play space.

Free play is enormously important. You certainly don't want to discredit free play. But also, what research tells us is that education staff should join children in play and lead some guided or structured activities, specifically when we're thinking about trying to boost physical activity.

These guided structured activities can boost physical activity throughout the day. And also, it's a really great way, not only to add physical activity into the day but it's a really useful strategy for making sure children with disabilities or suspected delays are also able to play along with their peers and take part.

Then lastly, train staff and also give families ideas for how to integrate physical activity into other activities throughout the day. For example, during book reading, how can you have children using their muscles and their bodies during book reading or imaginary play? If you want more ideas for how to do that, there's an initiative from Head Start called I Am Moving, I Am Learning so I added a link to that, again, in that resource list. One of the goals of that initiative really is this to increase the amount of time that preschoolers are physically active throughout the day by integrating a lot of these things within the activities that they're doing throughout their day. Check out that link in the resource list for some more great ideas there.

OK. We're going to watch a short video now and it's some preschool-age children, they're playing outside in the yard of a family childcare home. I did want to note back to your Viewer's Guide throughout the webinar, there is places for you to take notes if that's helpful for you. You can do that while you watch these videos. But what I want you to think about as you're watching is again, we're talking about physical skill development. What kinds of physical skill development, what do you see happening here? And then to be taking it step back, we've got the outdoor environment and the materials and adult interactions. What is supporting that? OK, we'll go ahead and watch that now.

[Video begins]

Teacher: His turn to throw it in. There we go. Do you think you can make it from there? Whoa! You hit the top. Whoa. That one's in. Oh, crash. Are you boys okay?

Boy: Yeah.

Teacher: Whoa, so close. Oops, you missed. That's a really hard shot. If you get a little closer, it gets easier. Yeah, you made it. Oh, and another ball's in. Woo-hoo! Are there any more balls?

[Video ends]

Marley: OK. There's a lot of physical skills going on in that video. You've probably caught quite a few. Of course, a lot of motor skills. There were a lot of gross motor, probably some fine motor, they're handling the ball, things like that. And again, when we're zooming out thinking about the outdoor environment that includes the materials, that includes the adult. What is supporting that?

I see lots of movable parts so that tube, it's more flexible than a basketball hoop. They're able to do different things with it. You can move it around, etc. There's also all of the balls and things like that that are movable loose parts. We've got a hill. It's pretty simple. But there's a grass-covered terrain that sort of enables their running up and down, they're getting a bit more physical activity that way. Also, grass in general it allows for softer landings. They're running around, rough and tumble play, things like that.

That moment that the boys collided. It would have been a little different if it was on concrete, right. The material itself can facilitate that more physical play. The adult, of course, she's giving

a lot of encouragement of their play, that's keeping them going. She's, of course, had a thoughtful selection of materials throughout. She also I thought did a nice job when the boys did collide. She checked in to make sure that they were fine, but she wasn't overreacting or swooping in. And then they were fine, so everybody got back up and was able to play. And she also is sort of keeping a mental note that everyone is getting a chance to play.

Later on, in the video, you didn't see it, but she helps the younger one reach, she picks him up so that he can also participate. A lot going on in a pretty simple activity here. And we're going to revisit this video later on with this question on your screen in mind. I want us to be thinking about how we can support children with disabilities in outdoor play as well. Despite many of the benefits of going outside, we know that children with disabilities or suspected delays, they often have fewer opportunities for this kind of active or outdoor play.

With that, I'd like to bring on our first guest speaker, Jennifer Fung. She's going to chat with us a little bit about inclusion in outdoor play and outdoor learning environments. And we're going to revisit the video later on with this in mind again. I'd like to introduce Dr. Fung here. We have Dr. Jennifer Fung and she is an educator, trainer, consultant, researcher who has dedicated her career to addressing all young children, including those with disabilities have a strong start of their educational journeys. And Jennifer is a senior consult at Cultivate Learning at the University of Washington in the Center on Early Childhood Development, Teaching, and Learning. Jennifer's background includes a Master's and Doctorate degree from the University of Washington with specializations in early childhood special education, infant mental health, and adult learning.

Her professional experiences with young children with disabilities and families include working as a special educator, behavior consultant, parent educator, and family support coordinator. Dr. Fung has extensive experience in partnering with the school, early care, and education, and other community organizations to create, sustain successful inclusive programs. Thank you so much, Jen, for being here and welcome.

Jennifer Fung: Hi, Marley. Thank you much for having me. And hello, Head Start audience. Good to be here with you today.

Marley: We're so thrilled and lucky to have you here with us today. OK. Jen, so a big topic, of course. But what do we know about outdoor play and children with disabilities?

Jennifer: Yeah. We know what you said, Marley. We know that while access to play and access to the natural physical environment is so important and by many leading human rights organizations, international human rights organizations that access is viewed as a human right. But we also know that children with disabilities, people with disabilities have been identified as really underrepresented users of less access to public outdoor and public outdoor play spaces.

Marley: Yeah. That's so important. What exactly does that mean to be under-represented users? Tell us a little bit more.

Jennifer: Yeah. I mean, I think that we know that children and individuals with disabilities have less access but I think what's really important is what that lack of access – what limiting those opportunities for children with disabilities to be able to – certainly not only access but to

engage and participate and really be included. And we'll talk a bit more about this difference between accessing an inclusion but limiting those opportunities and really, denying children with disabilities to take risks and learn and develop and play with their friends, it really does limit the opportunity for learning and growth, and it also denies that human right and really doesn't treat individuals with disabilities like we know they should be treated with. Yeah, I think that at the core of it when we think about inclusion, it's a human rights issue and we want to promote that access to grant people that right.

Marley: Yeah. That's so important. Thank you, Jen. Also, just a note that public playgrounds built after 2012, they are required by the Americans with Disabilities Act to adhere to some pretty basic accessibility standards. Typically, we should be going farther than that. But it's a good place to start and certainly to be aware of. I've included a link to more information on this. Again, in your resource link, lots there. I told you. If you'd like to learn more. Jen, in general, what might impact a child's ability to really fully access and participate in outdoor play? What are the things that we should be thinking about, and any tips that you might have for education staff here today?

Jennifer: Yeah. Today I think we should talk about the environment; the physical environment and what barriers might exist there. And then also talk about some child characteristics, some individual learning and behavioral characteristics that will be helpful to be aware of as we plan and design and support children in those environments.

When we're thinking about the environment and really thinking about how do we be aware of and work to identify what those barriers might be so that we can eliminate them and design environments without those barriers in place? We think about both the physical environment but it's also really important to think that there's barriers in the social environment.

The physical environment, that's pretty self-explanatory. I think that makes sense to a lot of people. That's more thinking about barriers for a child's mobility, how they can move around in this space. But we also think about like you've been talking about the equipment and the materials that are in this space. That might be that the materials that are in the space, maybe some of those bigger fixed materials offer limited ways and fewer ways that the equipment or the materials could be used and really thinking about whether there's a barrier in terms of the number or the types of activities that really match a child's developmental abilities.

But then, like I mentioned, we also want to think about social barriers or potential social barriers. And we know that those social barriers often originate with the adults in the environment. Yeah. That's when we're thinking about those barriers, of course. It's important to look at the physical environment and then let's also think about our own behaviors and our own planning and our own support and what that looks like.

There's a few different ways that these social barriers can happen. Often times, I think it starts with expectations. When we talk about inclusion and we talk about all children, but especially children with disabilities or suspected delays, we always talk about making sure that our expectations for what children can do is high. Starting from that strengths-based perspective. But often, especially when we're talking about risky play, there might be lower expectations for what children can do or should have the opportunity to do. And that might have to do with

their safety, their physical safety, of course. But adults often act as gatekeepers and make decisions about a child's – what their perception of a child's ability or the child's interest in play is.

That's something that's really important to be aware of. Another thing, you just talked about that research tells us that adults providing structured lessons and group games or more structured opportunities for physical play but we also know that often times adults see outdoor play as free play and are less likely to intervene or provide direct support when we know that that can be beneficial for children. What it really comes down to, that need for support and whether or not we're identifying that. But I think a really big barrier can be when adults are making decisions for children about what they're interested in. Children with disabilities often have less autonomy when it comes to that outdoor play.

Marley: Thanks, Jen. Yeah, that's all super important stuff for us to be thinking about. I really appreciate it, especially honoring a child's autonomy and being able to choose what they're interested in doing. It's so important. And speaking of which, we're continuing with that, imagine that there is some characteristic – we've been talking about characteristics of the space and materials and the adults, but there's probably also some child characteristics that might impact how a child with a disability might participate in outdoor play so I'd like to ask you to chat a little bit about that too.

Jennifer: Yeah, absolutely. Again, when we're thinking about outdoor play and what's the nature of outdoor play, we're thinking again about the physical environment but also the social environment. I think that's important to keep in mind when we're talking about children's individual learning and behavioral characteristics and what we might see with children with disabilities or suspected delays.

We know that unstructured outdoor play is really fast-paced, it's a little less predictable than some of the routines and activities that children, other learning activities and routines that they may engage in. And that includes this type of social play between children that happens outside. Just that unpredictable nature can make it difficult for children with disabilities to participate for many reasons.

One, of course, is mobility. We mentioned mobility. For some children, it may be difficult for them to accurately or safely navigate the physical environment whether that might be due to a gross motor delay or some sort of, you mentioned adaptive equipment. And then you also mentioned safety. Some children with disabilities, again, because of a gross motor delay or a physical characteristic, or for some children who have sensory differences, the technical term is proprioception in their vestibular processing but that awareness of where their body is in space can definitely impact how a child judges whether or not a situation is safe and whether a particular risk is safe to take.

For some children, we see that some children with disabilities or suspected delays might have limited understanding or might need more support to actually manipulate and play with some of the materials or equipment that are in outdoor spaces.

When we think about motivation, you mentioned motivation earlier. We know that some children with disabilities, all children have different interests but when it comes to motivation

to engage and sustain in activities that might be more difficult, motivation is certainly a learning characteristic, an individual characteristic to be aware of.

Thinking about, again, that social interaction and that social nature of outdoor play and how important that is, some children with disabilities might have difficulty or need support initiating interactions with other children or sustaining and remaining with those. And especially again, thinking about that fast pace nature and things change and rules are assigned, that switching of attention and staying in that social interaction, again, we're thinking about that this might be a learning characteristic that can make it difficult, but what support can we as the adults in those environment provide to help children access and participate in those outdoor spaces.

Again, every child is individual but those are some common learning and behavioral characteristics that we might see that might make it a little more difficult to participate. Or create a different need for support than other children may have.

Marley: Yeah, those are some really great places that we can observe and think about where support might be helpful. It's not just the adaptive equipment.

Jennifer: Yeah.

Marley: We're shifting, those are all the things we can think about and where we can provide that support. We're going to shift to talk about a little bit about what that looks like for us as adults that are planning this play and supporting children here. What does inclusive play outdoors look like, and our role in it? We talked a little bit earlier about how one of the top suggestions, so again, we're talking about physical skills outdoors and increasing physical activity in children outdoors, one of the top suggestions is to create a play space with loose parts rather than fixed structures so logs, mud, ropes, even water to play with.

Jen, is this a good approach also for accessible outdoor learning environments for children with disabilities? And, of course, what would you add if I like invite you to add anything else we should be considering for how we can support that for all children?

Jennifer: Yeah, absolutely. Definitely, I want to talk about that but before we talk about those characteristics and the things we can do to set up those environments that are accessible and inclusive, I do want to talk a little bit about that difference and maybe conceptualize a little bit these ideas of accessibility and inclusivity.

When we think about accessibility, that's when we think about the removal of those environmental or those physical barriers, so that children can be in, can move around in, and can safely participate in and access those physical environments. But when we think about inclusion and what high-quality inclusion is, access is important but also participation and support.

If an environment is going to be truly inclusive, and a lot of times that's where that social piece comes in. It's not enough for us if we want an inclusive environment, it's not enough just to remove the physical barriers but also we want to remove those social barriers. Really thinking about creating an inclusive outdoor play space where children who are in the same age group don't need to be separated by ability, so that this play space works for everybody.

When we're thinking about an environment that's accessible and inclusive, a few characteristics that we're thinking about, underline all of this we're really thinking about that a child, regardless of their learning or behavioral characteristics can really play in this space and be in this space. That there are things that they enjoy, that there are things that they can do independently, that there's really things that they can deeply engage with. And then also like I just said, that children with and without disabilities can be in the space together but that they can also interact and play together.

When we think about those more physical characteristics of an inclusive space and accessible space. What you've mentioned that there are a variety of different play activities and materials. You've mentioned loose parts, you've mentioned the go kits, I think that that's great. But we also want to think about what the complexity of those play activities and those materials are, so that we're meeting children who might be at different developmental levels as well as children, thinking about their fine motor or their gross motor that they're able to actually manipulate and engage with those materials.

Thinking really about equipment and materials that offer an appropriate level of developmental challenge as well as an appropriate level of physical challenge. We also want to think about the layout of the physical environment. Thinking about mobility certainly, are there spaces, are there barriers, are there things in the way or are there pathways? Are there multiple pathways? And you've talked about, it's an important developmental task to be able to navigate different surfaces but some children might not be at that level yet so thinking about the surfaces, are there multiple pathways and are they accessible? I think that's really important too, thinking about how children are moving about in the space.

And then, coming back to this idea of props and loose parts, and the different materials and equipment, not just at different developmental levels but props and materials that can support and offer variety in the type of play that we're doing. Props to support imaginative play. Children do engage in a lot of imaginative play outdoors but when we're thinking about that, again, thinking about the different learning characteristics, are there props to support cooperative play?

And also, for children who might need a break and children who are working up to and need some support with more cooperative play, are there props that can offer opportunities for solitary play that meet children's interests? I mentioned sensory, for some children who have sensory differences or sensory needs, offering materials for sensory play opportunities is really important.

Thinking about spinning toys or materials that might spin or even an open space where a child can spin. My daughter spins a lot. She loves it. And I'm just like, OK, I can't stop this but does she have a place where she's not going to run into anything and she's not going to hurt herself if she falls down, right. But spinning, swinging, slides, thinking about that, the different sensory needs that children have. But also, thinking that there are many different types of senses. For those large physical body movements but also, toys that have different textures or toys that have different shapes, or toys with different colors, maybe even musical toys where you're thinking about all the different sensory modalities and for children who are seeking that type of input do our materials offer those different types?

then also thinking about the environment, are there environment materials that offer that input like bumpy slides, floor surfaces that have ridges or bumps? This picture that you see here on this screen, I think this is a great example of – to the left there, it's that little sensory board mounted on a chalkboard where this playground, this school didn't have a big budget to modify or adapt their playground but this was a simple adaptation that the teachers made where they've got a keyboard, they've got a little chain, they've got some ribbons, they've got some keys, and they mounted this onto a piece of plastic and put that up at a level where all children could access. It doesn't have to be big or complicated but just thinking about not only what are the barriers but what are the interest, the abilities of the children in our program and how can we make sure that we are providing that opportunity to engage in many different ways.

Marley: So many good ideas here, Jen. I'm going to have us watch a video now. And we're going to invite you to tell us what you see that's working well and also what barriers that might exist. We'll watch this video and then come back.

Jennifer: Perfect.

[Video begins]

Teacher: Come on down.

Michael: Luke didn't push her.

Teacher: What? Did you push Lola?

Luke: Yes.

Teacher: OK. Make sure that ... It's important to be safe at recess.

Teacher #2: I got it, Michael. Thank you.

Teacher: If you want to talk to your friends, you can tap them on the shoulder, you can ask them high five, you can say, "Let's play chase." You can ask Michael if he'll play chase with you. Say "Let's play chase, Michael."

Luke: Chase, Michael.

Teacher: Run! Oh! Watch out, they're running! Are you playing chase too, Lola? Lola's playing chase too, Michael and Luke. Hey, cutie. You're such a great friend, always helping Luke find a nice place to rest. That's being such a great friend. Yeah. Luke, great job being safe while you're playing with Michael. Nice work. No pushing. No pushing. It's a part of the game. You can say, "Luke, you can push me."

Michael: Push me! Push!

Teacher: OK. Michael said push. That's when you're pushing somebody down the slide. That's a good job. Woo!

Michael: Ready!

Teacher: There you go. Woo! Very good. Woo!

[Video ends]

Marley: I love "Whee!" Okay, Jen, so what's going well, what might be improved from this accessibility standpoint?

Jennifer: Yes, absolutely. And definitely, I encourage folks too, I see lots of comments coming through the Q&A and our Q&A supporters will push those out but share your thoughts with us as well in the Q&A. But when I think about what's going, well, this physical environment generally does seem to be accessible. The little guy that we were watching can run, he can get on and off the slide, he can get to the play structure, so there aren't barriers for his mobility. And we also saw some support for the social environment. We saw some really specific adult support for him to interact with his friends in his environment.

Marley: Yeah, she did good with that.

Jennifer: Yeah, so when we think about what might make this a more inclusive space, I definitely think what we were just talking about, the variability of the materials and thinking about his needs, of course, as well as the other children. But looking specifically at him, he was doing some pushing. And the teacher is doing a great job of reshaping that, and getting him to use his hands in a safe way.

But for some children, he might be seeking some sort of sensory input. Is there a way that there's a swing or a wagon where you put a couple of like big cans in there, we call it heavy work. But thinking about things that might be added to that environment that will help meet that need. But again, coming back to what he can play with, are there a variety of materials, are there loose parts he can manipulate? I might also think about the social game. Again, the teacher was providing some really specific support around using his hands safely, she was providing some support for a friend to help him, some of that peer pairing.

But thinking about just what you had mentioned earlier about the research around some of those more structured games, I think having him – because he was doing a lot of that free play fast-paced but maybe some specific recess type of social games as well could help him. But also, thinking about for a little guy who might get overwhelmed – anybody who might get overwhelmed with that fast-paced nature. Thinking about is there a space outside where he can play alone if he needs a space to regulate his body or if he's just wanting to play along. I think that overall they were doing a great job but there are some things that we might think about that might make it, not only more accessible but more inclusive for him.

Marley: Yeah, great. That's all really helpful, Jen. Thank you. We're going to as promised re-visit that first video and do the same thing. I'm going to play that again for us now.

[Video begins]

Teacher: His turn to throw it in. There we go. Do you think you can make it from there? Whoa. You hit the top. Whoa. That one's in. Oh, crash. Are you boys OK?

Boy: Yeah.

Teacher: Whoa, so close. Oops, you missed. That's a really hard shot. If you get a little closer, it gets easier. Yeah, you made it! Oh, and another ball's in. Woo-hoo! Are there any more balls?

[Video ends]

Marley: OK. Again, a lot of great stuff going on here but if this family childcare provider perhaps they had someone join their program that had a disability or a delay or something, what might be your suggestions for how she might make this a bit more inclusive?

Jennifer: Yeah, absolutely. Thinking about access and inclusion, some of those surfaces might be a barrier – again, thinking especially about accessibility, so that grass, depending on children's mobility, their ability to navigate different surfaces if they have adaptive equipment, that might be difficult.

I don't know folks noticed but there was a woodchip area with the swings, but there was a wooden divider, that could definitely be a barrier, as might the woodchips themselves, it takes a different type of strength and balance to be able to navigate and move through woodchips. Also, thinking about some of the materials and the equipment. That tube, which is wonderful, as you mentioned, provides some flexibility, it's really tall. For a child who might be in a wheelchair or a walker, or a child who crawls, that might be a little too tall for them. Is there a modification or a smaller, something different where they could play in the same way. But that might be a little too tall.

We saw a sandbox on the ground, again, thinking about where children are and what their motor skills are like. For a child who's in the stander, right, or in a wheelchair, that might be too low for them. Could you have an additional opportunity to play with sand and water or other sensory materials but that's at a different height.

And sort of in general while there were some great stuff going on there, a lot of it really did rely on what we saw those guys were doing some good, adventurous, risky, large motor play. But I didn't see, at least in that short clip when we think about the different varieties and options of materials for different types of play. I didn't see much of that. Thinking about some of that could be helpful. Yeah. Yeah.

Marley: Awesome. That's all really helpful, Jen. Thank you so much for joining us today and doing this walk-through of how we can make this outdoor play more inclusive. I am going to transition now to our last little segment here before we leave you today is on the risky play. And we've talked about this a little bit with Jen in terms of supporting children with disabilities in risky play but we're going to talk a bit more around this.

Obviously, we hear a concern about safety, especially when children are in our care for outdoor and physical play. And, of course, that's completely understandable. We want to keep children safe. But we do know from research that children's physical activity actually can be unnecessarily limited due to the adults' lack of knowledge or our comfort with certain kinds of play. We might refer to this as rough and tumble play, risky play, big body play. There might be some chance of injury, it's physically active play. But there's a difference between putting children in danger and allowing them really to test and stretch the boundaries of what they can do physically.

An important thing here is that if we're not providing safe challenges, children are going to find their own. And they tend to be more dangerous than if we were planning for these kinds of risky play. I wanted to note that this sort of risk-taking is fundamental to children's exploration and understanding of the world. There are some key aspects that it's voluntary, everyone's

having fun, everyone's choosing to participate. And you can really help model taking risks and exploration here while maintaining safety, things like is anyone at the top of the slide, I'd like to climb up rather than limiting climbing up the slide.

We really need this balance between safety procedures and making sure that there are soft surfaces under climbing structures, things like that. But not imposing so many restrictions or too many restrictions on children's outdoor risky play because that's really hindering their development.

A quick bit of research here is around this idea of risk reduction. We know that this is actually changing our outdoor play spaces, we're getting a lot more pre-fabricated equipment, limited natural materials, and other limits on risky play.

Here's one study from a risky play researcher Mariana Brussoni. And she and her researchers, they came into a couple of childcare centers in Vancouver, Canada, and they were looking at how making some changes impacted children's play. You're looking at the before and after. And not all the changes that they made are visible in these photos but they added an accessible pass, they added in some bamboo forest that they could hide in. They added in boulders and rocks and things that were different heights that you could jump off of and different surfaces and textures to explore.

And some of the things that they noticed was that children had less anti-social behavior, they had increased physical activity, they played more with natural materials, they had more independent play as well as pro-social behaviors like sharing. And then when they were talking with the educators and the staff, they reported improved socialization, problem-solving, focus, self-regulation, creativity, reduced stress, and a whole other list of really incredible stuff.

But the one I really wanted to highlight is that they also reported reduced injuries. By increasing risky play, they're actually seeing fewer injuries. And this comes up in research a lot, it's something that children need to practice. I think that that actually makes a lot of sense. And, of course, just a reminder that children with disabilities deserve access to risky play as well. I just wanted to make sure that we continue to highlight.

And for our last little bit, I wanted to invite another very special guest here, so we've got with us Mike Browne. And Mike Browne has lived a multitude of lives. He has danced ballet and tapped for seven years, he's played Division I football, he lived in London and Spain for four years, and he hosts a podcast called Napcast. I invite you all to go and find that. All before returning home. Not to Seattle, he's an East Coaster but back home to early childhood education. Mike currently serves as the senior director of Community Engagement, Cultivate Learning at the University of Washington using his experience as a toddler and preschool teacher to dismantle systems of oppression in our learning environment. Welcome and thank you so much for being here, Mike.

Mike Browne: Absolutely. It's a pleasure. I lived all over and now I'm broadcasting from the traditional land of Nacotchtank which is the traditional lands of the first people what is now known as Washington, DC. I'm all over the place but I'm glad to be here in the community.

Marley: We're so happy to have you here. We've been talking about big body, risky, loud play, there's a lot of different ways you can refer to it. And a key point here is it can make adults uncomfortable. And we know from lived experience but, of course, from the research also that even unintentionally some staff view children, Black boys, in particular as more risky than others in this sort of loud, boisterous type of play. And the result, of course, is that Black boys are therefore disciplined more, they're limited further in their play. Let's dig into this for our last little bit here, Mike.

Mike: Yeah, just thinking about that reminds me of a story. I'm an Afro-Caribbean so we tell stories. And the story I'm going to tell is just thinking back to one day a child in my class like told me that, "Oh, I don't want to grow up because I don't want to go to work." And I was like, that's interesting like why not, tell me more about that. And they were like because work is so boring. And I was like, that's not good. All right. But then I was like, you know what, let me reframe this. I was like, "Did you know that you're at work right now?" And their eyes lit up. And I was like, yeah, and your work right now is to play. And that all of our jobs as we grow older should be rooted in like in this play and happiness and joy.

Marley: I love that.

Mike: Now, that was a Black boy in my class. And as a male educator of color, I feel like it's really my duty to preserve that, that play, that happiness, that joy for the children of color in my community because society doesn't allow Black children to play. To be playful.

Between gendered racism and really the scripts that we have about Black male bodies, it really doesn't allow Black boys – and I'm going to quote Article 31 of the United Nation's Convention on the Rights of the Children -- of the Child, excuse me. We don't allow Black boys to participate freely in cultural life and beyond. And I think we have, we can go on and on just on that. But I think we don't view and we certainly don't treat play the same.

When Black boys are engaging in rough and tumble play, we stop them because we have really equated blackness and the sort of expressive play as violent, as gang-like. And when on the opposite side, when Black boys are engaging in play that involves dresses and dancing, and I'm speaking from my own experiences, doing ballet growing up and they're engaging in playful expression, we also see that as risky. And we stop them because that view, that's harmful to our ideas of what males should be.

Black boys and Black children's play are restricted. If it's threatened, then how can we expect them to be curious in life, to self-regulate, to reason, to problem solve, to have relationships with themselves and with adults, to have that sense of identity? And this all should sound familiar because it's part of the ELOF.

Marley: Totally. It's all in there.

Mike: I think we really need to pause and ask ourselves when we think about risky play, are we considering it risky for us or are we considering it like risky play for them?

Marley: Yeah. I think that sense of perspective is so important.

Mike: Just thinking about that, I recall one time in my environment where the children were working with hammers and they were constructing a stage for dramatic play in the morning,

because I allow that in my environment with supervision. And then hours later, I saw one of them hurt themselves while coloring at the table. And I didn't run over to them and take away their crayons and say this is too risky for you, I've got to take that away from you. And I understand that we need to be accountable to the licensing, and keep children safe but if a child is ready to fly, they're ready to blossom, to soar, wouldn't it be a disservice if we clip their wings? And I think this is that gray area. We need to live more in as educators.

Marley: Yeah. That risky play educator that I just mentioned, she, Mariana Brussoni, she's got a quote, I guess, you can say – I think it's some useful guidance. She says, "Think about things, making things as safe as necessary rather than as safe as possible." And I like that a lot.

Mike: I think that gets us to an overarching idea of risky play needs to be centered on the child and not our level of comfort as adults. We really need to decenter ourselves as educators from the curriculum. Because when we start to demonize certain type of play for Black boys, for Black males, because it makes us uncomfortable as opposed to like coaching them around boundaries, around consent, around times and places where this play might be acceptable, then what we are doing is essentially crushing them into submission.

Marley: Yeah. And, what you just said is so important, rather than disciplining and restricting children when they make us uncomfortable, we need to be talking about boundaries and coaching them and being a model for them, not just shutting them down.

Mike: When we place Black boys like playful expression into boxes and say you must act according to like societal construction of your gender assigned to you at birth, we're not really nurturing their cognitive functioning skills. We certainly aren't supporting their joy which I'm all here for. I want Black boys to be joyful. We're doing really the exact opposite than we sign up to do as early childhood educators.

Marley: Yeah, exactly.

Mike: I like to tell this outright. I like for us to think about how schools are actually our microcosm of like the larger society. And I say that because children are consciously and unconsciously internalizing our beliefs of what we think they are capable and competent enough of doing.

It's hard for me to worry about my colleagues in the K-12 system even though I think about early learning as pre-natal to nine, but it's hard for me to like focus on the K-12 system, what they're doing to our Black bodies or our Black souls, our Black spirits, when I see that happening in the early learning systems and how that's systemically destroying them ourselves. And the scariest thing about it is that anti-blackness that we're exhibiting in our early learning systems, it is the blueprint we are using and applying to children with disabilities.

Marley: Thank you so much, Mike. Yeah. I mean, the core of all of this is that all children deserve access to outdoor risky play, including children with disabilities and Black boys. And I just want to say a big thank you to both you and Jen for helping highlight that today.

And we're just going to take these last few minutes to sort of wrap up and I'm going to round our discussion today thinking about what we should strive for, what's working, and what an inclusive, accessible, and welcoming outdoor play environment looks like. And I'm using the

word inclusion now a little more broadly. Beyond children with disabilities to a more broad sense of that word.

In our recap here, I'm going to remind us of some of those points that we've made throughout the webinar, including from Jen. And I'm going to ask you, Mike, to chime in with any additional thoughts you'd like to add in our conclusion here. We've talked about conceptualizing the outdoor environment as accessible and inclusive. That includes removal of environmental and physical barriers and also those social barriers as well, and that we're thinking about spaces where children who are in various different age groups or abilities they can play together, that are not separated. And spaces that are welcoming and identity-affirming really for all children. And, Mike, did you want to add anything to that?

Mike: Yeah, real quick. I always say real quick, but I'm from New York, so we talk a lot. I think about how Jen is so versed in inclusive practices for children with disabilities than I am. I think I'll take like my final thoughts just slightly differently because when I think about inclusive outdoor environments for Black, for indigenous, for people of color, my mind really goes directly to our cultural connections and narratives that are often overlooked by mainstream environmental movements of our educational system.

Like absolutely, there is intergenerational trauma flowing through our veins because of enslavement, colonization, and gendered and cultural racism. My mind and my provocation for us all is to think about where we're being intentional in our practice in centering intergenerational healing. And one way that I do this is by really acknowledging and honoring the flipside of the atrocities of being enslaved. And that's not me eradicating it or watering it down, I'm also just saying like make sure we acknowledge that the outdoors was essential to our survival. My ancestors navigated the stars to their freedom. My mom used to tell me growing up how back in the Caribbean because she was born in Antigua, how she used to harvest crops and sow seeds based off of stars constellations and she passed that down to me. And that's how she helped feed her and her family.

By deepening my understanding of that and our collective understanding of that, of not just my culture but of how my indigenous brothers, sisters in two-spirits, how they love, how they nurture, how they respect the biodiversity of the world, our plant relatives, the non-human world. Getting to know those narratives, those histories, those heritage, and leadership and the outdoors of my other melanated folks really helps me to deepen my understanding, it gives me the framework to think about how I can use my urban environment and geography to support children in developing a deep psychological attachment to people and spaces and to let my Black boys in my environment, the Black children in my environment know that we are connected to nature in ways very few people will ever understand. And we don't need a billboard or a marketing scheme that says, "Hey, come join us." Because deep down inside, we already belong.

Marley: I love that. It's a really powerful thing that you're showing children there and helping them know inside as well. And it's a nice counter to that stereotype out there that like hiking is for white people or that only certain kinds of people like to be outdoors. This brings us to this other culminating point is that nature and outdoor play belong to all children so that includes risky play, of course. And we also talked about a variety and complexity of materials supports

lots of different ways to play, loose parts, sensory play. We're thinking about that in terms of supporting inclusive play. I don't know, Mike, if you wanted to add to that.

Mike: Yeah, just to piggyback off of sensory play opportunities for children, I want us as educational staff like in our learning environments to really pause and consider and maybe re-consider the use of food as part of our sensory play activities. I grew up in a household that was experiencing food insecurity and then I'd go to school and I saw food being used for art projects and or sensory play, and I was like, wait, but that's food that I am eating.

What are we communicating around that when we're using food as part of sensory play. That's our gray area, I want us just to consider it, it's not bad or wrong, or good, but just consider how if we're playing with food is that communicating a sense of respect to our life source. Are we being conscious of our food environments?

Marley: Totally. It's such an important part of supporting inclusive play for all children.

Mike: Exactly. Because at the end of the day, our work for justice and equity is all interconnected.

Marley: Yeah. We're at the very end of our time. But just expand on that briefly.

Mike: Yeah, real quick. I think by modeling inclusion to children and centering disability justice in our play spaces communicates to them that disability justice is actually also environmental justice, and environmental justice is decolonization, and decolonization is reproductive justice, including Black maternal health and postpartum depression, and reproductive justice as immigration justice, including understanding the cultural considerations needed to support children who are migrants, who are immigrants, who are refugees, children who have endured trauma and that's a whole another webinar so we're going to leave that for that. But the list can go on and on and on.

Marley: Yeah, and it's really all connected because if we're not building this inclusive place of belonging that actually allows children to be their full selves, they can't run and jump and be playfully active, using all of your muscles, all those things that we've been talking about if you feel like you're going to get in trouble or if you're seen as a threat for doing that.

Mike: Right. Anti-blackness, disability justice, indigenization, language justice is the foundation of our work and not an add-on.

Marley: Absolutely. Absolutely. I'm going to move us to our final last thing here is that we've talked about the appropriate level of physical challenges. And that really, you know, I know, Mike, you've said this that this applies to indoors as well. And I think we're going to move to our final slide because I think we are out of time and a little bit over.

Thank you, everybody, for hanging there with us. But just that final reminder that we want physical challenges throughout the day and not just at these set recess times. Think about indoors and outside as well.

And I really, really wanted to thank these wonderful two presenters who have been here with us today. I know they've been checking out your questions in the Q&A. But just a huge shout-out for them for being here with us today.

Just a huge thank you for all of you and everything that you do to support children and families everywhere. I hope you join us next year for more Front Porch.