

Nature-Based Learning

Taking Infants and Toddlers Outside

Emily J. Adams

During planning time, infant and toddler teachers Lorena and Angela are thinking about their outside time. Lorena says, “We take lots of walks, but that isn’t very exciting.” Angela agrees: “I’m just not sure what else to do—we don’t want them to get hurt, and I’m not sure the parents would be happy if we sent home messy children.”

They approach their director, Madeleine, to ask for some support and ideas. Luckily, she knows of a conference coming up with a workshop titled “Nature-Based Learning and Development (NBLD) for Infants and Toddlers.”

Angela and Lorena attend the workshop on NBLD, and they learn so much! Both teachers are excited to find out about all the ways children’s learning can be extended through the outdoors and experiences with nature. There are so many things children can learn from touching, smelling, hearing, tasting, and seeing. For example, children can learn by experiencing wind, sunshine, birds singing, and the feel of grass. Although their stroller walks offered the children some of these experiences, Angela and Lorena are ready to try something different.

Take them outside!

Think back to your own childhood and your favorite places to play. Did you play outside? Did you get to dig in the dirt and make mud pies? Were you free to climb trees or collect leaves? Did you have a snail or bug collection? For a variety of reasons, children today are spending much less time outside than the previous generation did (Clements 2004). This means that children have fewer opportunities to enjoy the sensory and learning experiences of feeling a breeze or squishing mud through fingers and toes.

Early childhood settings are an ideal place to help bring infants and toddlers into contact with nature. Think about what is outside your door. Even if you live in an urban community, you probably have dirt, grass, trees, birds, or squirrels. The following ideas might help you think about how to take advantage of the nature you have.

- Encourage infants and toddlers to feel smooth twigs, bumpy bark, and rough rocks. Help them collect these items to display in the classroom or use in the water table (Williams 2008).

- Explore light and shadows while you are outside with young children. Help a child discover how to make his shadow move. Bring colored cellophane or window blocks outside to explore light and colors.
- Reconsider your idea of wildlife. Listen for the buzz of flies or tweets and caws from birds. Touch a worm, and discover the red-orange breast feathers of a robin (Honig, n.d.).
- Talk about the weather every day, and observe how it changes or stays the same. Toddlers will begin to understand concepts like “yesterday,” “today,” and “tomorrow” (Honig, n.d.).

Ways to make going outside easier

During the workshop, Angela and Lorena heard that taking infants and toddlers on stroller walks is a great way to get outside, but it is not the only option. They decided to try other ideas. First, they brought some of the children outside and put them on a blanket in the grass. Pretty soon the mobile babies were setting off to explore! A 5-month-old lying on her tummy was fascinated with brushing her fingers through the grass.

One of Angela and Lorena’s concerns was how much time it takes to get infants and toddlers ready to go outside, and then to settle down inside once they are done. As it turned out, that concern was shared by many of the participants of the nature-based learning workshop. They all realized that the time spent getting infants and toddlers ready, whether putting on mittens and coats or slathering on sunscreen, was time that could be used for conversations and building relationships with each child.

They also found that having a supportive supervisor really makes a difference. Madeleine helped the teachers get outside more often by

- Helping staff plan for outdoor experiences
- Finding coverage (or stepping in herself) so that a teacher could stay with babies who were sleeping
- Asking families to sign a sunscreen permission form and provide hats for children during the warmer months, bring extra clothes for rainy days, and make sure children have jackets and snow pants in winter
- Keeping extra clothing for different weather conditions for children and staff in the center to use when needed
- Reminding the teachers to update their outdoor first aid kits and do daily safety checks of the outdoor area

Bring nature inside

Another way to help young children get in touch with nature is to bring natural elements inside. Observe the children: What are they interested in? Is one child making a leaf pile or another creating a rock circle? Let toddlers collect the items they are interested in and bring them inside to the sensory table or science area. This helps them learn that they can contribute to, and enrich, their own learning environment!

Growing plants is another way to bring outdoor elements into your setting. (Always choose child-safe plants, such as spider plants or ornamental bamboo, in case children accidentally taste them.) Young children can get involved in the planting, watering, and care of plants with a little support from adults. You can buy seeds or use the ones from the snack time fruits and vegetables. Sure, you might not grow a productive lemon tree inside, but you can still watch it sprout! For ideas about what is safe and available locally, check with your state university's garden extension or master gardener program, a local nursery, or a gardening club.

Working with families

Although some of the families were excited that the children were spending more time outside digging in sand, climbing over logs, and playing with water, others shared concerns. Angela and Lorena made time to talk to all the families. They shared what they learned about how many opportunities exist outside for learning through different

sensory experiences. Families were especially interested in the many health benefits like increased physical activity. They learned that when children's developing eyes have opportunities to look at far distances, their ability to see far away is strengthened (French et al. 2013). Even more important—they heard what families were concerned about. One mother did not want her daughter getting dirty, so the teachers offered to put her in play clothes for the school day but change her back into her nicer clothes before her mother came to pick her up. Another parent was concerned about sand in her son's hair and how difficult it was to get out, but was happy to provide a hat if the teachers would try to keep it on his head. Because the teachers listened to families' concerns with compassion and open minds, they were able to find solutions that worked for everyone.

Think about it

- How do you feel about being outside? Do you have outdoor hobbies like gardening? Or are you more of an indoor person who doesn't particularly enjoy insects, birds, and worms?
- What do the families in your setting value about spending time outside? What outdoor activities do they enjoy?

Try it

- Get outside! Start small, maybe just a few minutes at a time. As you and the children get more comfortable being outdoors, you will all want to be outside more.

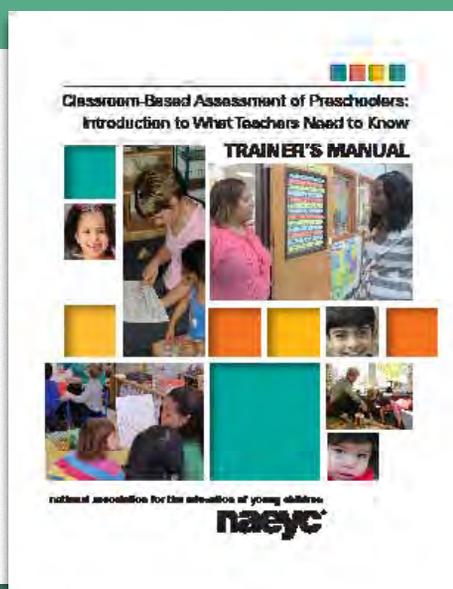
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- Observe infants and toddlers outside, documenting what you see with photos and notes. Share with families what children are exploring and learning.
- So much of what infants and toddlers learn comes from adults describing what children are doing, seeing, hearing, smelling, and touching. Try observing what young children are noticing, and wonder with them about their experiences. You might say, “Do you see that squirrel chattering at us from his tree? I wonder what he is saying.”

Conclusion

After a short time, going outside was the highlight of the day for both the teachers and the young children in their care. Lorena and Angela observed that a great deal of learning was happening as the young children watched and interacted with their environment. Now it's your turn—what are you waiting for? Go outside!

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Emily J. Adams, MA, is a senior writing and training specialist at ZERO TO THREE. She has spent her career in Early Head Start working with infants, toddlers, and their families and supporting teachers and home visitors. eadams@zerotothree.org

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