

EARLY HEAD START TIP SHEET

No. 48

Outdoor Experiences for Very Young Children, 2012

Why Does Time Outside Matter for Very Young Children?

Response:

The outdoor environment offers necessary and unique experiences for infants and toddlers.¹ Most adults recognize that being outside supports even the youngest children's gross motor development. Being outside also offers unique sensory experiences for young children that can stimulate their development in all areas. Sounds, smells, sights, and light are all different outside. Observing a bird in flight, feeling the breeze and the sunlight, watching breath crystallize on a cold day, tasting raindrops and snowflakes, and hearing the full noise of the traffic in the street nearby are just a few examples of experiences unique to the outdoors. Expanding exploration and learning experiences to the outdoor environment provides valuable opportunities for young children that can stimulate thinking and problem solving in unique ways. Young children can also learn about their community environment (urban, suburban, and/or rural) by being outside. Finally, there are important health benefits for young children who spend time outdoors, including increases in Vitamin D² and improved sleep.³

Programs are encouraged to offer children daily time outdoors and to use planning and observation to extend the curriculum to outdoor environments. Staff can deliver individualized outdoor learning experiences for children and families just as they provide them indoors. Materials and equipment should be safe for very young children and developmentally appropriate for their skills and needs. Climate, outdoor safety, and family perspectives about spending time outside with very young children are important considerations, as are health concerns for individual children. When dressed appropriately, children can spend time outside in a wide variety of weather. Staff and families should talk about the value of outdoor time for the youngest children. Staff, policy councils, health services advisory committees, and individual families have a role in considering health and safety issues, planning outdoor spaces, and planning for rich developmental experiences outdoors.

Questions to Consider for Planning and Programming:

- What outdoor experiences currently exist for children?
- How is outdoor activity discussed during home visits and in ongoing interactions with families? How can the program support families and children in spending time outdoors?
- What factors in the program promote outdoor experiences (e.g., weather, family interest, staff enthusiasm, the program's outdoor space)? How does the program capitalize on those factors?
- What factors in the program seem to discourage outdoor experiences (e.g., weather, safety issues, staff feelings, outdoor space)? How can the program work with families and the community to overcome these barriers?

¹Thigpen, 2007.

²Madhusmita, Petryk, Collett-Solberg, & Kappy, 2008.

³Harrison, 2004.

- How does the program ensure a safe, healthy, accessible, and developmentally appropriate outdoor environment?
- What resources would help with outdoor design and curriculum?
- Which community partners might be interested in supporting outdoor experiences?
- How does the program support staff in spending time outside or working with families to spend time outdoors?
- Does the program have extra snowsuits, raincoats, and other clothes for children and adults that can increase the amount of time spent outside on days when extra clothes are needed?

Performance Standards, Title 45, Code of Federal Regulations:

- 1304.21(a)(5)(i) In center-based settings, grantee and delegate agencies must promote each child's physical development by providing sufficient time, indoor and outdoor space, equipment, materials, and adult guidance for active play and movement that support the development of gross motor skills.
- 1304.21(a)(6) In home-based settings, grantee and delegate agencies must encourage parents to appreciate the importance of physical development, provide opportunities for children's outdoor and indoor active play, and guide children in the safe use of equipment and materials.
- 1304.53(a)(4) The indoor and outdoor space in Early Head Start or Head Start centers in use by mobile infants and toddlers must be separated from general walkways and from areas in use by preschoolers.
- 1304.53(a)(5) Centers must have at least 35 square feet of usable indoor space per child available for the care and use of children and at least 75 square feet of usable outdoor play space per child.
- 1304.53(a)(8) Grantee and delegate agencies must provide a center-based environment free of toxins, such as cigarette smoke, lead, pesticides, herbicides, and other air pollutants as well as soil and water contaminants. Agencies must ensure that no child is present during the spraying of pesticides or herbicides. Children must not return to the affected area until it is safe to do so.
- 1304.53(a)(9) Outdoor play areas at center-based programs must be arranged to prevent any child from leaving the premises and getting into unsafe and unsupervised areas. En route to play areas, children must not have access to vehicular traffic without supervision.
- 1304.40(d)(1) In addition to involving parents in program policy making and operations (see 45 CFR 1304.50), grantee and delegate agencies must provide parent involvement and education activities that are responsive to the ongoing and expressed needs of the parents, both as individuals and as members of a group. Other community agencies should be encouraged to assist in the planning and implementation of such programs.
- 1304.40(e)(1) Grantee and delegate agencies must provide opportunities to include parents in the development of the program's curriculum and approach to child development and education; see 45 CFR 1304.3(a)(5) for a definition of curriculum.
- 1304.21 (a)(6) In home-based settings, grantee and delegate agencies must encourage parents to appreciate the importance of physical development, provide opportunities for children's outdoor and indoor active play, and guide children in the safe use of equipment and materials.

Resources:

- American Academy of Pediatrics. (2002). *Caring for our children: National health and safety performance standards: Guidelines for out-of-home care* (3rd ed.). Aurora, CO: National Resource Center for Health and Safety in Child Care and Early Education. Accessed at <http://nrckids.org/CFOC3/>
- Early Head Start National Resource Center. (2003). *How do programs plan and implement developmentally appropriate environments that meet the intent of the Head Start Program Performance Standards for infants and toddlers?* (Early Head Start Tip Sheet No. 9). Washington, DC: Department of Health and Human Services, Administration for Children and Families, Administration on Children, Youth and Families, Head Start Bureau.
- Early Head Start National Resource Center. (2010). *News You Can Use: Environment as curriculum for infants and toddlers*. Washington, DC: Department of Health and Human Services, Administration for Children and Families, Administration on Children, Youth and Families, Office of Head Start. Accessed at http://eclkc.ohs.acf.hhs.gov/hslc/tta-system/ehsnrc/Early%20Head%20Start/early-learning/curriculum/environment_nycu.htm
- Early Head Start National Resource Center. (2012). *News You Can Use: Take it outside*. Washington, DC: Department of Health and Human Services, Administration for Children and Families, Administration on Children, Youth and Families, Office of Head Start. Accessed at <http://eclkc.ohs.acf.hhs.gov/hslc/tta-system/ehsnrc/Early%20Head%20Start/early-learning/curriculum/TakeItOutside.htm>
- Harrison, Y. (2004). The relationship between daytime exposure to light and night-time sleep in 6-12-week-old infants. *Journal of Sleep Research*, 13, 345–352.
- Misra, M., Pacaud, D., Petryk, A., Collett-Solberg, P. F., & Kappy, M. (2008). Vitamin D deficiency in children and its management: Review of current knowledge and recommendations. *Pediatrics*, 122, 398–417.
- National Head Start Training and Technical Assistance Resource Center. (2005). *Head Start design guide* (2nd ed.). Washington, DC: Department of Health and Human Services, Administration for Children and Families, Administration on Children, Youth and Families, Office of Head Start.
- Thigpen, B. (2007). Outdoor play. *Zero to Three*, 1, 19–23.
- U.S. Consumer Product Safety Commission. (2010, November). *Public playground safety guide* (Publication #325). Bethesda, MD: Author. Available online at <http://www.cpsc.gov/CPSCPUB/PUBS/325.pdf>

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This Tip Sheet is not a regulatory document. Its intent is to provide a basis for dialogue, clarification, and problem solving among Office of Head Start, Regional Offices, TA consultants, and grantees. If you need further clarification on Head Start Policies and regulations, please contact your Regional Program Specialist.