

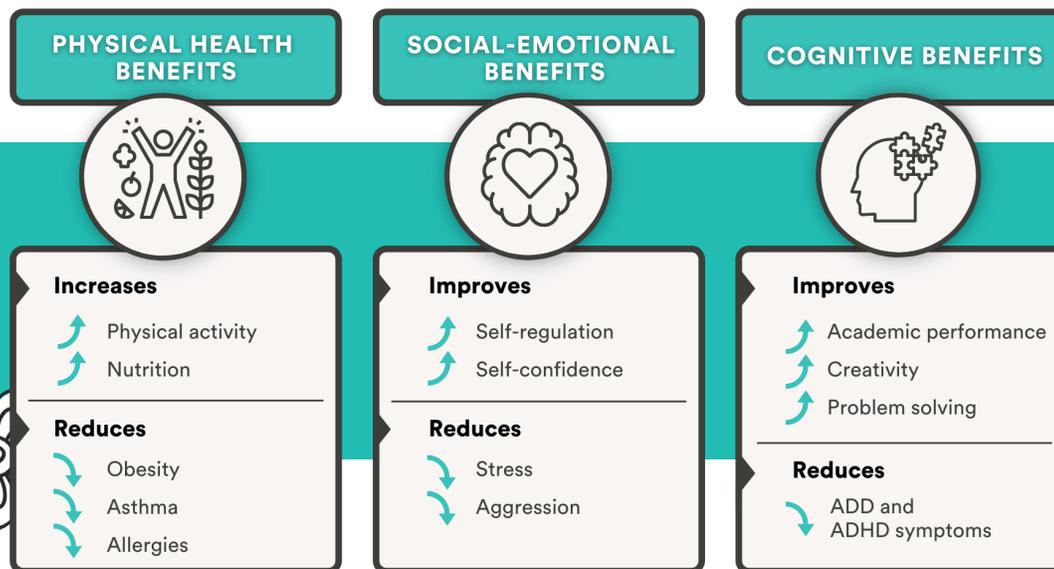
Improving Outdoor Learning in Child Care: A Health Equity Strategy

Affordable, high-quality child care is critical for a national recovery that gives every child and family a fair chance for a strong future. Nature-based outdoor learning environments are a low-cost and high-impact strategy for improving program quality, educator well-being, and children’s learning and health. Yet few child care programs receive the [funding, guidance, or support](#) to improve their outdoor settings beyond minimum health and safety requirements.

[People of color, families with children, and communities with low incomes](#) are most likely to be deprived of the benefits that nature provides. [Research shows](#) that young children today are spending less time outdoors engaging in active play and exploring the natural world. In addition, [reviews of the health status of early childhood educators](#) show that many struggle with chronic disease, healthy eating, sedentary time, stress, and depression. Federal partners can promote healthy child development, support the early childhood workforce, and enhance health equity by including outdoor learning environments in facility investments, strengthening program standards, and promoting professional development.



Health Benefits for Children



Source: [Natural Learning Initiative](#)

Recommendations

Despite the documented benefits, a [review of early childhood education policy frameworks](#) at federal and state levels shows a lack of attention on using the outdoor play and learning environment to advance children’s learning and health. The Child Care and Development Fund regulations and Head Start standards that address outdoor spaces are minimal. The following recommendations would make high-quality outdoor learning environments federal priorities for child care, Head Start, and Early Head Start policies:



Make Money Talk

Make outdoor learning environments a qualified use for facility funding and make outdoor learning training and technical assistance qualified uses of professional development and quality improvement funding.



Raise the Standard

Use the term “outdoor learning environment” instead of “playground” or “play structure” to stress its value in meeting child development objectives. Strengthen federal performance standards, guidelines, and licensure minimums to foster quality improvements in outdoor learning environments and increase the time children spend playing and learning outside. Examples include:

- Create specific standards for outdoor learning environments including the number of learning features, gross motor activity features, and natural features in the outdoor environment that enrich play and learning. Children benefit from having a variety of things to do and see outdoors, just like they do in the classroom. Giving them choices is empowering.
- Create a standard for minimum time outdoors, weather permitting, such as 30 minutes outdoors per three hours at the program.
- Incorporate measures of outdoor learning practices and environments in program evaluation or rankings.
- Incorporate strategies using outdoor learning into guidelines and standards about child health, physical development, motor development, and nutrition.



Share Best Practices

Compile [best practices](#) for improving outdoor learning spaces and engaging in enriching learning activities outdoors. Fund and share [research](#) about the importance of access to nature and outdoor play.



Commit to Equity and Accessibility

When funding providers to cover the cost of high-quality care, use a definition of quality that is equitable, inclusive, age appropriate, culturally affirming, and considers outdoor quality as a strategy to meet child and workforce objectives. Ensure all families can find and afford high-quality care at a setting of their choice, with quality definitions and standards that include both indoor and outdoor spaces.

ACT NOW!

We stand at a critical moment for prioritizing healthy children and healthy communities. New federal appropriations and COVID relief funds provide an unprecedented opportunity to re-imagine child care to more fully support young children. Investing in outdoor learning is an innovative strategy that improves child outcomes, supports educators, increases community access to nature, and mitigates disparities in health outcomes. Federal leaders have the power to support healthy child development by ensuring that all children have the daily opportunity to thrive outside.

