

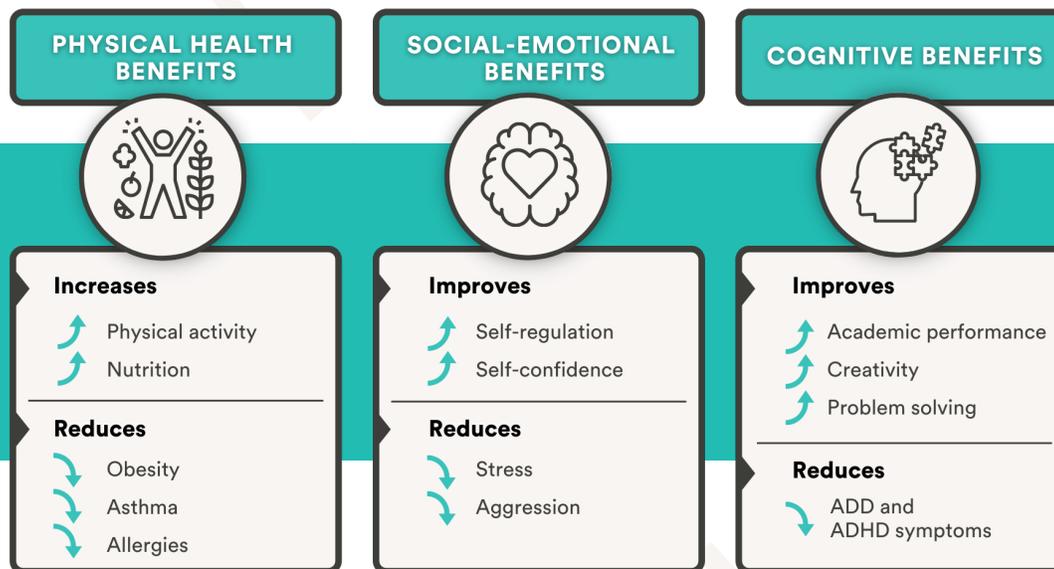


A New Day for Outdoor Play in Child Care: State Policy Recommendations

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. The following policy recommendations are a winning strategy for state leaders to promote healthy child development, support the early childhood workforce, and enhance health equity in communities.

Health Benefits for Children



Source: [Natural Learning Initiative](#)

Recommendations

State leaders hold significant power over the funding, administration, and regulation of child care. Licensing regulations, program standards, quality rating improvement systems, early learning guidelines, and funding decisions each present opportunities to prioritize and invest in outdoor learning environments. The following recommendations support quality improvements in child care with long-lasting benefits for children.





Maximize Federal Opportunities

Incorporate strategies for outdoor learning environment improvements and educator training and professional development in state plans for federal programs including for the Child Care Development Fund, Early Head Start-Child Care Partnerships, and Preschool Development Grant Birth through Five. Use the full range of [federal infrastructure, rehabilitation, and community investment programs](#) from the Department of Housing and Urban Development, Department of Agriculture, Small Business Administration, Environmental Protection Agency, and Department of Treasury.



Utilize COVID-Related Funding

States should take full advantage of limited-time [federal funding](#) to improve outdoor quality in child care, just as the Office of Head Start issued a [Program Instruction](#) to grantees to use American Rescue Plan funding for nature-based learning and outdoor classrooms.



Seed Improvements

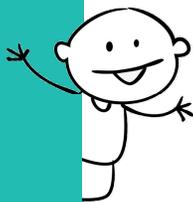
In state-sponsored grant competitions, include outdoor environments in facilities- or capital improvement-focused initiatives and include educator training and support in quality improvement initiatives.



Raise the Minimum Standard

Replace the term “playground” with “outdoor learning environment” in licensing regulations to reframe the importance of outdoor settings in meeting child development objectives. And strengthen licensing regulations to mandate, at minimum:

- Each center has outdoor space of at least 75 square feet for each child using the outdoor learning environment at any one time, with exemptions granted only if the center has no outdoor space and daily walking outings to nearby parks or public spaces are provided. A minimum area of outdoor space for each age group for which the center is licensed should be provided to ensure each age group has adequate space. Home-based child care providers should also provide access to enough outdoor learning space for children of all ages to move freely and participate in a variety of activities.
- At least 30 minutes of outdoor time is offered per three hours at the center, weather permitting.
- The outdoor play and learning environment has at least two gross motor features (e.g., looping pathways or climbing features).
- The outdoor play and learning environment has at least two outdoor learning settings (e.g., gardening area, loose parts setting, dramatic play setting).
- Consumption of site-grown fruits and vegetables is expressly allowed.



Create a Pathway to Quality

Update child care program standards and voluntary quality rating improvement system guidelines to incorporate robust, research-based outdoor learning environment standards. (See box about Texas below for examples of research-based standards).



Lead and Coordinate

Convene a statewide child care outdoor learning environment work group including the child care agency administrator, licensing specialists, quality raters, professional development providers, child health and nutrition agency representatives, advocates, providers, families, and others to inform state-level needs for both policy and practice.



Support Educators

Ensure that providers have the tools and confidence to engage young children in outdoor settings through training, resources, coaching, technical assistance, and opportunities for shared learning. Incorporate training about outdoor learning into pre-service options and continuing education unit course offerings.



Equip Evaluators with Knowledge

Develop a professional learning community for child care technical assistance providers, licensing consultants, and quality assessors to be able to evaluate and provide guidance on the benefits of outdoor learning environments within existing health, safety, and quality improvement policies.



Share Best Practices

Foster the development of multiple demonstration sites that show the value, accessibility, and affordability of well-designed and implemented nature-based outdoor learning environments.



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 reimagine 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. State leaders have the power to support healthy child development by ensuring that all children have the daily opportunity to thrive outside.



States Leading the Way



TEXAS

The Texas Department of State Health Services brought together state and regional partners to create a statewide initiative to promote outdoor learning called [OLE! Texas](#). OLE! Texas uses the following strategies to increase the number of early childhood education programs (ECE) with quality outdoor spaces:

- Develop a network of trained landscape and design professionals to design, with ECE staff, outdoor spaces featuring best practices.
- Convene coalitions to identify local resources to assist ECE staff to develop and construct high-quality outdoor learning environments.
- Create resources for professionals from key disciplines—including landscape architects, ECE staff, horticulturalists, licensing professionals, and nature play specialists—to increase technical expertise in designing and implementing outdoor learning environments.
- Identify funding resources for ECE and designers to receive training, develop schematics, and complete construction.

OLE! Texas also revised the state’s voluntary quality rating and improvement system (QRIS) guidelines to add an emphasis on outdoor learning environments that are linked to and reinforce classroom learning. The [Texas Rising Star guidelines](#) include the following measures:

- “Outdoor environment allows children to engage in natural small groupings with activities that are linked to and reinforce indoor learning.” The highest score is awarded when there is evidence of numerous areas for small groupings and two or more activities that link to indoor learning.
- “Outdoor environment provides children with the opportunity to care for living things and appreciate nature.” The highest score is awarded when five or more living, natural elements are present in the outdoor environment.
- “Outdoor environment, equipment, and materials...motivate children to be physically active and engage in active play.” The highest score is awarded when much of the outdoor equipment and many materials are readily accessible for all children to use without undue competition or long delays; there is sufficient variety of materials and interest areas to allow children to make choices; and equipment and materials are rotated to maintain children’s interest.



NORTH CAROLINA

The North Carolina Outdoor Learning Environments Alliance was formed to pursue policy changes with the dual goals of improving the quality of outdoor learning environments and increasing children’s daily experience of nature. They achieved the following milestones:

- The Division of Child Development and Early Education (DCDEE) raised the minimum [licensing regulations](#) and [child care rules](#) and included enhanced outdoor learning standards in the voluntary quality rating system. It replaced the term “playground” with “outdoor learning environment” throughout.
- DCDEE partnered with the Natural Learning Initiative (NLI) to conduct a statewide baseline survey of outdoor conditions at child care facilities.
- NLI developed best practice guidelines for design and management of early childhood outdoor learning spaces.
- NLI and 75 local partnerships created a multi-year design and installation program of demonstration projects at child care facilities statewide.
- NLI and colleagues at state universities developed the [Preschool Outdoor Learning Environments Measurement Scale](#) to provide a valid and reliable assessment tool to guide child care providers as they improve outdoor learning environments.
- NLI launched a professional learning community of licensing consultants and environmental assessors and gave regional and statewide facilitated workshops on the importance of outdoor play and learning. The effort culminated in a report sponsored by the DCDEE with recommendations for achieving best practice standards in outdoor spaces.
- DCDEE provided intensive training of technical assistance providers on programming, design, and management of outdoor learning environments; ongoing creation of demonstration sites; and increased research on the impact of the outdoors on healthy eating, physical activity, outdoor learning, and social-emotional development.