

Parent Aware Tip Sheets

Outdoor Play

Why is outdoor play important?

Outdoor play is an important part of every child care/early education program. Children of all ages need time outdoors to exercise their muscles, practice important physical skills, get aerobic exercise, use their creativity and interact with nature and one another. Typically children enjoy time outdoors and many look forward to outdoor play as a favorite time of the day.

How should you plan outdoor play?

- Choose at least two significant blocks of time each day for outdoor play. Young children need 60 minutes of **active** play each day for healthy development. Most caregivers plan some time each morning and each afternoon for outdoor play.
- Determine the number of children who can safely use the outdoor play area at one time. An overcrowded play space is likely to result in injuries and challenging behavior. If necessary, plan for children to use the play space in small groups to prevent overcrowding.
- Plan activities for outdoor play. While children often naturally enjoy outdoor play, caregivers should still plan activities such as games, races, riding vehicles, digging in sand, props for dramatic play, science experiences, gardening, etc.
- Develop a policy addressing outdoor play in inclement weather or when air quality is poor. Outdoor play is typically safe when temperatures are between 15° F and 90° F (including wind chill) and children are dressed appropriately.
- Create and enforce rules for outdoor play that allow children to actively explore in a safe and healthy way. Rules might limit the number of children using equipment at one time, taking turns for certain pieces of equipment, or other things as required to prevent injuries or accidents.

How can you be sure your outdoor play space is safe?

Outdoor play can be a fun-filled adventure for young children. But it must be safe for children to gain developmental benefits. To avoid potential hazards in the outdoor play area, check the following regularly:

- The fence (or other barrier) is secure and in good repair to prevent children from leaving the area.
- The area is free of pests such as beehives, wasp nests or large anthills.
- There are no poisonous plants accessible to the children.
- Outdoor maintenance equipment, tools, weed killers, or other hazards are stored in locked areas away from the children.
- Climbing structures have deep and cushioning fall zones.
- Equipment has no sharp edges, cracks, rotting wood, rust, loose parts, protruding pieces (screws or bolts), exposed concrete footings or broken sections.

- The outdoor equipment matches the abilities of the children. The height of climbing structures is typically 1 foot per year of a child's age. For example, a 3 foot high climber is well matched to a three-year-old.
- Equipment, especially climbing equipment, is safely anchored and stable so it is unlikely to tip.
- Climbing structures and other equipment have no risk of head entrapment or entanglement – there are no openings between 3 ½ inches and 9 inches.
- Slides and other flat metal surfaces are not in the direct sunlight; they do not become hot to the touch.
- Sandboxes are covered when not in use, raked daily and checked for animal droppings.
- Standing water that accumulates in the play area is emptied each day to prevent water accidents and the hatch of insects.
- Water features such as pools and hot tubs are fenced. Pools are only used with direct adult supervision. Use of pools requires special attention to additional licensing rules.
- A well-stocked first aid kit (including latex gloves) is available in the outdoor area.

What should you be paying attention to while child are playing outdoors?

During outdoor play children enjoy freely exploring the physical challenges of climbing, running, hopping, digging and more. It is not unusual for children to become deeply absorbed in play and to require little interaction with adults. However, outdoor play is not a time for caregivers to lose focus or to decrease their supervision. Children's safety during outdoor play requires vigilant supervision. To maintain a high level of supervision during outdoor play:

- Maintain adult-to-child ratios. Plan ahead for children who may need to use the bathroom or return to the indoor space for some reason.
- Be aware of the number of children in care at all times. Count the children as they transition from indoors to outdoors and when they return indoors.
- Scan the outdoor play area frequently. Pay particular attention to areas that have challenges such as swings and hiding places.
- Stay close to the areas where children are playing and be ready to step in when needed to solve conflicts or redirect behaviors that could result in accidents or injuries.
- Enforce rules for safe play.
- Monitor children for overexposure to the sun, cold or heat. Encourage children to play in the shade, to wear sunscreen and to take frequent drinks of water during warm weather play.
- Inspect the play area daily for potential hazards – trash, pests, broken equipment, etc.
- Model safe play. Children will imitate what they see as well as what they are told to do.
- Get involved with the children by actively engaging them in games and inventing new ideas to keep them interested in physical activity.
- Check children's clothing to be sure they are not wearing any dangling strings, necklaces or other items that could become entangled in play equipment causing strangulation.
- Sweep or shovel sidewalks regularly to prevent slips due to sand or ice.
- Return indoors when the sun goes down even if the outdoor play area has some lighting.

- Ensure that the outdoor play area is well maintained – grass is clipped; roots or other tripping hazards are covered; air conditioning units are clean and inaccessible to the children; measures are taken to eliminate pests, animal droppings, thorny shrubs, etc.