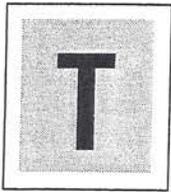


# Everything under the sun

## Outside learning center activities

by Elizabeth Vaughn



Too often teachers rely on a well-designed playground to adequately encourage children's activities. In planning the outdoor play environment, teachers should

consider both playground design and learning center activities. The playground design provides permanent structures and equipment with which to play. By using outside learning center activities, teachers can change materials and props for variety on the playground. These activities can also be used to extend learning that is occurring in the classroom.

Children may become bored with a playground that always remains the same. Frost & Klein (1983) suggest that one of the elements which should be included in a play area is continuous change. In order to maintain the children's interest and to challenge them, a variety of materials and ideas must be presented for play experiences (Hildebrand, 1985). Two playground design features which are associated with high levels of play are flexible materials and a wide variety of experiences. Flexible materials are those which children can manipulate, change, and combine. They are more dynamic and interesting than immovable, single-use pieces of equipment. A variety of activities and materials provided in the outdoor play environment also stimulates and challenges children of all levels and interests (Johnson, Christie, & Yawkey, 1987).

Outdoor play areas should promote four

varying types of play.

*Functional play*, or exercise, involves practice and repetition of gross motor activity such as climbing, swinging, and sliding. This type of play is supported by much of the traditional playground equipment.



Photo by Francis Wardle

*Constructive play* involves using materials in a purposeful way in order to create. This includes creating with sand, constructive art, and using boxes, crates, and other loose materials to build structures.

*Dramatic play*, or make-believe, is supported by provision of enclosed struc-

tures for buildings and varying dramatic play props.

*Group play* requires two or more children to work together. Sociodramatic play activities, equipment such as see-saws, and games with rules are examples (Johnson, Christie, & Yawkey, 1987, Frost & Klein, 1983).

The nine outside learning centers described by Howard (1975) provide a framework for planning for these types of play. Howard's centers allow for digging, water play, dramatic play, pushing, pulling and riding, construction, open running, climbing, gardening, and quiet time. Many learning centers integrate more than one type of play. The digging center may involve both constructive and dramatic play activities. The dramatic play center may involve both dramatic and group play activities. The type of play will depend on the props and materials available and the level at which the children "work". Description of appropriate activities for each center follow.

### Digging

The digging center may be a sandbox or sandy area where children may use a

variety of digging tools and props to stimulate play activity.

(1) Seashell Hunt: Bury seashells in the sandbox and provide shovels and pails for children to use.

(2) Baking: Provide measuring and cooking utensils and a cardboard box to represent a

stove.

(3) City: Provide small cars, trucks, and street signs for children to construct roads and tunnels.

(4) Animals: Provide farm or zoo animal figures and have child construct the setting.

### Water Play

Water play activities may be set up with buckets, dishpans, wading pools, or other containers. They are frequently set up on a hard surface area which is less messy; however, it is sometimes set up in conjunction with the digging area when mud play is planned.

(1) Washing Clothes: Put out tubs of soapy and water for children to wash doll clothes or dramatic play clothes. Children can hang them on the fence with clothespins to dry.

(2) Car Wash: Set up using buckets of water, rags, sponges, and wheel toys.

(3) Painting with Water: Provide pails of water, large paint-brushes, hats, and shirts. Let children paint playhouses and other outside structures.

(4) Blowing Bubbles: Provide soapy water, straws, and individual cups for children to blow bubbles.

### Dramatic Play

Many dramatic play activities are especially suited to the outdoors. More space, natural environments, and the availability of wheel toys for vehicles enhance outside dramatic play.

(1) Fishing/Camping: Set up a tent. Provide camping gear, cooking utensils, fishing poles, and tackle box.

(2) Picnic: Provide picnic basket, tablecloth, dishes, and play food. Let children pack basket and go on picnic.

(3) Circus: Set up ticket booth, chairs, costumes, and equipment for acrobats such as balance beam, stilt cans, and mini-tramp.

(4) Drive-Thru Restaurant: Using play house and wheel toys, set up drive-thru window. Use props from hamburger, taco, or other local fast food restaurants.

### Push/Pull/Ride

Push/pull/ride centers include wheel toys and other equipment such as swings and slides which children use.

(1) Gas Station: Set up gas pumps made out of cardboard boxes. Provide oil cans, rags, and other props for children to use to service their wheel toys.

(2) Wheel Toy Obstacle Course: Set out

large traffic signs, cone markers, and tires to form obstacle course in wheel toy area. Children ride wheel toys around obstacles.

(3) Fire Station: Set out wagon, tricycles, hoses, and fire station props. Children may use these in conjunction with playhouse.

(4) Cardboard Sleds: Cut flat pieces of cardboard from large boxes. Attach rope to corners of one end of cardboard to make sled. Let children pull each other in grassy, hilly area.

### Construction

The construction center provides a variety of materials with which children can construct their own creations. A table or workbench is needed for many activities.

(1) Nature/Junk Sculpture: Let children collect natural objects outside or provide items such as egg cartons, styrofoam, pipe cleaners, and buttons for children to use.

(2) Box Sculpture: Provide boxes and containers of various sizes and shapes for children to glue or tape together to create structures. Paint or other decorative materials may be added.

(3) Woodworking: Provide wood scraps, nails, hammers, and saws for children to use.

(4) Moveable Parts: Provide crates, planks, ladders, and other moveable pieces of equipment for children to construct their own structures.

### Open Running

The open running center is a large, grassy area where children can participate in a variety of activities and games. While young children are not usually ready to participate in games with rules until five or six years of age, the open running center provides space for younger children to practice skills which may later be used in games. As children become ready, low-organized games may be introduced.

(1) Balls/Frisbees: Place several balls or frisbees in open area for children to use.

(2) Kite Flying: Let children run with paper plate kites which they can make in the construction center.

(3) Hula Hoops: Place hula hoops in open area for children to use.

(4) Hay Bale: Place bale of hay in open area. Children can jump into the hay or use it in other ways.

### Climbing

Most playgrounds have some commercial climbing equipment; however, addi-

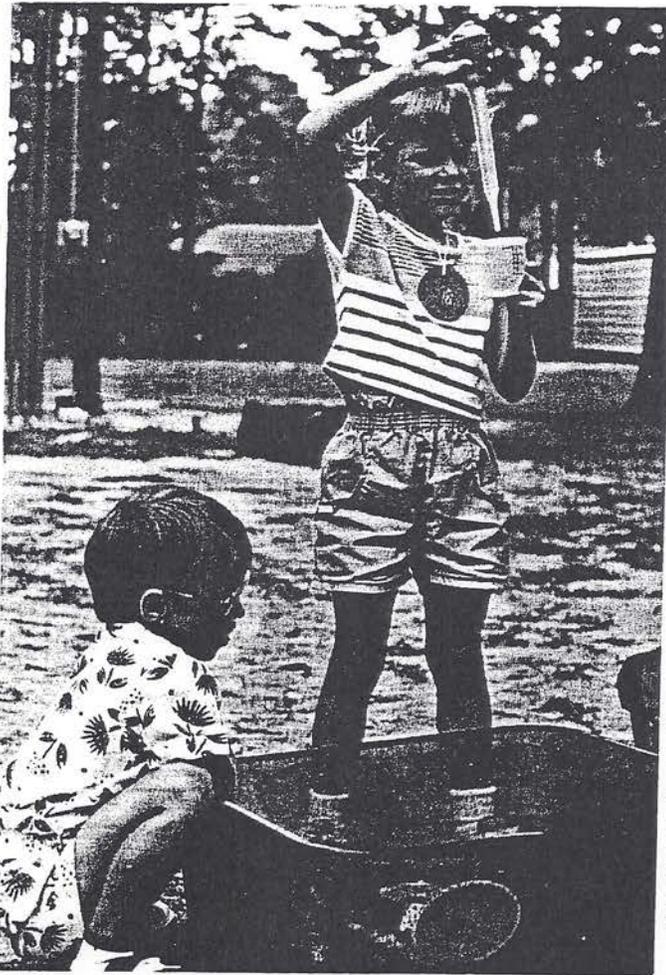
tional pieces may be added.

- (1) **Ladders:** Provide small ladders in safe, steady areas for children to climb.
- (2) **Cable Spools:** Arrange cable spools of varying heights for children to climb upon.
- (3) **Tree Stumps:** Arrange tree stumps of varying heights for children to use for climbing and balancing.

### Gardening

An area for the gardening center can be set aside on the playground or planters may be used. Children can assist in preparing, planting, and caring for the garden.

- (1) **Flower Beds:** Have children plant flower seeds or bulbs in a flower bed.
- (2) **Vegetable Garden:** Let children plant various types of vegetables in the garden.
- (3) **Grass:** Let children spread grass seed on the playground in areas where needed.
- (4) **Trees/Shrubs:** Have children assist in planting trees or shrubs on the playground or around the school.



Water play activities may be set up with bucket wading pools, or other containers.

Photo by Nancy P. Alexander

### Quiet

A quiet center should be set up outside to allow children a place to play less actively or to rest when tired. A porch area or a blanket spread on the ground make a good quiet area. A table and chairs may also be used.

- (1) **Books/Puppets:** Set out a variety of books and story activities such as puppets for children to use.
- (2) **Games/Puzzles:** Place a variety of table games and puzzles for children to use.
- (3) **Playdough:** Place playdough for children to use to create.
- (4) **Drawing Materials:** Place markers, crayons, paints, or other materials and various types of paper in quiet area.

These are just a few of the many activities which can be provided on the outside playground.

There are differences between the use of inside and outside learning centers. Outside learning centers are used in a less structured way than inside learning centers.

Divisions between centers are less clear. Many activities may involve more than one center. Having a car wash with wheel toys involves water play, dramatic play, and push/pull/ride centers. Centers are not located in fixed areas. Learning centers may move depending on the specific activity planned. Dramatic play camping may be set up on the ground under the trees and the drive-thru restaurant may be set up in a playhouse. Children have more freedom to move due to the greater space. Children may not be limited as to the number of persons allowed in a particular center. Every outside learning center may not be set up every week. Some centers are sea-

sonal, such as water play and gardening. Outside learning center activities should also

be changed frequently, usually every week or two.

If early childhood teachers and care givers make the time to plan and implement outdoor learning center activities and change them frequently, they will see their children become more constructively involved during outside play time. The children can assist in taking out and cleaning up materials to save the teacher time. The children will no longer be bored by a playground which remains the same day after day, month after month. Instead, the outdoor play area will become a challenging and stimulating environment for children.

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