

Nature Play Supports Children's Creativity

Early Childhood
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Brief

UNIVERSITY OF NEBRASKA-LINCOLN

Creative Expression in Nature

When children play with natural materials they generate their own ideas, which seems to fuel their innate creativity. Extended unstructured time outdoors is not only really inspiring, it seems to also afford the practice of high-level thinking and problem-solving.¹The process of experiencing and expressing or creating art provides children opportunities to synthesize all that they are learning about the world around them, especially the natural world.

Children's creative nature play supports the whole child. Outdoor play in natural settings often includes movement, poetic language, invention of play props and structures, and collaboration with peers. Let's take a look at children's creative expression, across the realms of dramatic play, music, purposeful movement and visual art.

Dramatic Play

When children engage in elaborate, imaginative play (referred to as dramatic play) they are showing us what they are thinking about and how they are making sense of what is happening around them. Many adults today are concerned that children's play is becoming dominated by commercial media, wherein they primarily act out stories they have seen on television or in movies. However, when children are using natural 'loose parts' such as stumps, sticks and pinecones, their play often takes on new richness and challenges requiring resourcefulness as they think of their own ideas and create their own props. Pretend play outdoors can range from cooking up mud cakes or digging the Grand Canyon in the sand box, to assigning jobs to each friend helping to build the fort and inventing rules for catching "bad guys."



Music and Movement

Music and movement pair well outdoors because of the freedom to be active and loud. We know that everyone, but especially young children, need to move to learn. Helping children learn about what their bodies are capable of and how to regulate them is powerful. A natural outdoor classroom provides the space for children to engage in a wide variety of movement like running, dancing, rolling, and chasing. It can also include real work such as digging holes, raking leaves, carrying buckets of water, and rolling stumps.

When real music instruments are available every day, children often tie their movements to music. They might hop as a friend pounds on a drum or float around with dancing scarves in hand like a butterfly while listening to friends play a melodic metallophone.

¹Kiewra, C. & Veselack, E. (2016). *Playing with nature: Supporting preschoolers' creativity in natural outdoor classrooms*. *The International Journal of Early Childhood Environmental Education*, 4(1), 70-95.



Another unique opportunity the outdoors affords is practice in close listening. Children develop valuable musical understanding when matching notes played with their voices or experiment with pitch and volume. An interesting example of a child intently listening comes from a program who shared the story of a child who regularly listened for birds and then played music for them. She hoped the birds enjoyed her songs as much as she enjoyed theirs.

Visual Arts

The beauty of nature inspires so much of the art we see in museums and galleries. It shouldn't surprise us that children respond to natural wonders much the same way. Early educators recognize that developmentally appropriate practice calls us to focus on the process of creation rather than the product. Outdoor nooks for children to use as art areas can be filled with small loose parts can inspire children's processes. I have seen stone mosaics, mud paintings on easels and sidewalks, and snow sculptures awaiting the warmth of sunshine to melt them into new shapes. The messy artistic work that can happen outdoors with materials such as these virtually ensures that art creation is a pleasing sensory experience.

² "Meet Your Next Favorite Book," Good Reads. Accessed 10 October 2019, <https://www.goodreads.com/>

Nature provides opportunities for children to express their emotions and unique experiences. Opportunities for children to interpret the world around them in their own imaginative ways fuels their inquisitiveness. As Mary Lou Cook says, "Creativity is inventing, experimenting, growing, taking risks, breaking rules, making mistakes, and having fun."² When children act out stories, make music, paint or draw; they make visible what they know, what they feel, and who they are.



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