

# A Letter to Families about Outdoor Play

Dear Families,

Physical exercise and fresh air are important for your child's health and well-being. We take children outdoors everyday so they can run, jump, swing, climb, and use all of their large muscles. They move around, breath fresh air, and catch balls and bugs. They lie on the ground to watch clouds and birds, and they climb high to look down. We talk about the things children see, hear, touch, smell, and feel so they become aware of changes in the weather, the seasons, plants, and animals.

Playing outdoors helps your child learn to

- notice and appreciate the natural world
- discover how water puddles during a rain and disappears when the sun comes out
- follow shadows
- use his or her body in increasingly skillful ways

We encourage children to wonder about what they see by asking questions like these:

“What do you notice?”

“Where do you think the birds are going?”

“How are the flowers different? How are they the same?”

What You Can Do at Home

Fresh air and exercise are very important to your child's health and to yours. Try to spend time with your child outdoors every day except when the weather is dangerous. Take walks in your neighborhood, go to parks together, and explore the natural world with your child. Watch what your child notices and show that you are interested.

Children love to collect things and then play with them. They sort them, make patterns with them, and pretend with them. Bring along a container or plastic bag when you go outdoors so your child can collect treasures (seeds, leaves, and rocks) along the way and bring them home to examine. You also can plan special activities outdoors. Here are some ideas:

- Bring drawing paper and crayons outside so your child can draw what he or she sees.

- Take a pail of water and large brushes so your child can paint the sidewalk or fence.
- Bring colored chalk, which is perfect sidewalk art.
- Play catch with balls of all sizes.
- Bring bubble-blowing solution and wands of various shapes.

Make time each day to be outdoors with your child, exploring, making discoveries, and enjoying nature.

# What Children Learn Outdoors

## Literacy

Expand your child's vocabulary and language by asking questions and encouraging them to describe what they see. Use a variety of adjectives when you observe with them: slimy, bright, bold, glowing, rough, furry, prickly, and so on.

Teach your child jump rope rhymes and clapping games to promote phonological awareness. Have them attend to the sounds and sights around them: how various horns sound and how different animals sound.

Teach your child about print and letters and words by providing traffic signs for wheeled toys. Give your child a clipboard to record observations or make signs to identify plants.

## Mathematics

Promote problem solving by guiding your child to find solutions to problems they encounter (e.g., What can we do to keep the balls from going over the fence?).

Teach number concepts by talking with your child about how many seeds to plant and helping them mark off the days until the seeds sprout.

Encourage your child to explore patterns and relationships by noting the patterns in caterpillars, flowers, and leaves. Suggest making a design with the leaves or shells they collected.

Nurture your child's interest in measurement and graphing by including string and yardsticks so they can measure the plants in their garden or the distance between things outdoors.

## Science

Introduce your child to physical science by offering them balls, ramps, tubes, water wheels, funnels, and sifters, and by taking an interest in how they use these materials.

Guide your child's development of process skills by posing questions such as "What would happen if...?" \; "How can you find out?"; and "What did you learn?" Encourage your child to be a good observer by showing them that you, too, are interested in finding out what is waiting for you each day outdoors.

Encourage your child to explore life science by putting up a bird feeder and keeping it stocked all winter. Collect caterpillars and study their eating habits and their life cycle.

#### Social Studies

Explore concepts related to people and how they live when you take walks. Identify stores in your neighborhood and different kinds of houses, or visit construction sites.

Make your child aware of people and the environment by taking a trip to a nearby river or lake to see how people use water and to find out about pollution. Plan a project to clean up litter around your neighborhood.

#### The Arts

Promote dance and music by encouraging your child to use their body freely outdoors. Bring music outside so they can dance and move to different beats. Encourage them to move like different animals.

#### Technology

Provide tools for your child to use outdoors, such as binoculars, pulleys, microscopes, thermometers, magnifying glasses, and cameras.

# How Outdoor Play Promotes Development and Learning

## Social-emotional

Children experience a sense of accomplishment and growing competence when they engage in purposeful activities outdoors every day. You can see the pride a child feels when she can keep a swing going on her own, climb to new heights, throw and catch a ball, and complete an obstacle course. Social skills grow as children share equipment such as tricycles and shovels, work together to build a tunnel in the sandbox, and follow safety rules.

## Physical

The number of overweight children is increasing steadily. One factor contributing to the problem is that children do not get the large-muscle activity essential for their healthy development; it is not always safe for children to play outdoors and children spend too much time watching TV. Thus, it's even more important to make the most of outdoor time while children jump, swing, slide, and climb. These activities allow children to take risks and try new skills. Children also use their fine-motor skills outdoors to weed a garden, collect bugs, and pour sand through a funnel.

## Language and Literacy

Children expand their vocabularies when they learn the names of insects and plants, and use words to describe the characteristics of each. They learn to read traffic signs and use field guides to identify the leaves, birds, and spiders they find.

## Cognitive

The outdoors is a laboratory for scientific explorations as children observe and explore nature firsthand. They find and study bugs and butterflies, plant seeds and watch vegetables grow, observe leaves change color, taste snow, touch the bark of a tree, hear crickets, and smell the air after a rain shower. They count the seeds they plant and the number of petals on a flower, measure how tall a sunflower grows and calculate how long it takes for a flower to appear, note patterns on the bodies of caterpillars and butterflies, and solve problems like how to make water or sand run through a plastic rain gutter.