

Children Thrive Outside

A New Day for Outdoor Play in Child Care

May 11, 2021 | 12:00 pm - 1:30 pm ET



Audience Q&A

We received so many questions during the event, that we didn't have time to answer them all. Below are audience questions and answers provided by event speakers, panelists, and the ECHO team.

Q: How do you get policy makers to feel comfortable to allow outdoor play during all weather?

A: In Colorado, Licensing tries to implement Caring for our Children Standards when creating rules. Caring for our Children requires programs to provide outdoor play year-round in all types of weather. Colorado child care rules require toddlers and preschool-age children to have one hour outdoors daily and infants should be taken outside at least three days a week. Licensing also has an [administrative guide](#) that provides additional clarification on rules and provides additional resources and rationale as to the "why" behind a rule. Colorado's administrative guide includes guidance on why outdoor play is so critical year-round.

Q: Is licensing working on standards for completely outdoor programs?

A: Colorado is currently working with a few programs through a waiver process to pilot an outdoor-based preschool program in hopes to create a new rule type. Washington state has an [Outdoor Preschool Pilot](#).

Q: Who did the training with licensing?

A: In Colorado, the ECHO team helped train the Licensing Specialist on the importance of nature-inspired environments and the design process. Initially, the Licensing Program Manager, who is a certified playground inspector, reviewed the design plans with the ECHO landscape architect or designer to ensure the plan met licensing requirements. The design plans were then shared with the Licensing Specialist to ensure any safety concerns were addressed.

Q: Is Head Start getting funds for outdoor classrooms?

A: The Administration for Children and Families Office of Head Start [recently issued a program instruction](#) regarding allowable use of funds made available by the American Rescue Plan. Use of funds may include, “Outdoor learning and play. Purchasing or enhancing outdoor learning spaces, including nature-based learning and outdoor classrooms. Creating play areas and landscape features that promote exploration and discovery in a natural environment, such as plantings, gardens, and “loose parts” (i.e., materials for construction and pretend play), rather than traditional play structures or playgrounds.”

Q: Do you have any design suggestions or ideas for small spaces? I am at a loss as to where to begin. What small features can I add to my space that can promote nature play?

A: For small spaces, ECHO encourages you to explore the [Resources page](#) on the ECHO website, including Nature Play at Home: [Considerations for Balconies, Patios, Porches & Other Small Spaces](#). Additional small features that can be added easily to promote nature play include [Loose Parts](#) and [Natural Construction](#), both are available in Spanish too. In addition, ECHO’s [How-to Guide on Natural Construction](#) is a great resource for easy, cost-effective ways to introduce materials that support natural play and learning.

Q: Is there research showing quality outdoor spaces help with job satisfaction and workforce retention?

A: ECHO believes this topic is an area of needed research. While there is anecdotal evidence that dynamic, healthy, and comfortable outdoor environments benefit early childhood educators, there have been few studies in this area. We do know that daily time in outdoor spaces with natural features benefits adults as well as children. Research in a growing scientific field called ecotherapy has shown a strong connection between time spent in greener or more natural outdoor settings and reduced stress, anxiety, and depression. In addition, adults in frequent contact with nature, even on a small scale in urban environments, had reduced diastolic blood pressure and heart rate, and researchers found that exposure to greenspace significantly reduces people's levels of salivary cortisol—a physiological marker of stress. We hope there is a movement across the research field to further explore how quality outdoor learning environments in child care settings help with job satisfaction and workforce retention – two critical needs in the child care field.

Q: Do you offer thoughts on "all season" and "all weather" outdoor spaces?

A: ECHO invites you to explore our [training offerings](#), which seasonally include *Brrr...It's Cold Outside. Let's Go Out and Play!* Training Description: So often cold temperatures and snow deter us from taking children outdoors in winter. This 1.5-hour training helps participants learn hands-on and fun ways to engage children outdoors in winter. We discuss barriers, guided activities, and ways your outdoor space can support play year-round. The ECHO team also considers requests for specific trainings any time of year, please email echo@nwf.org for more information. In addition, our Nature Play at Home guide features information on [Playing in All Weather](#), also available in Spanish. The Natural Learning Initiative's Green Desk also features [Spring Outdoor Play: Making the Most of the Season](#). You can also see our [Winter Play Tips and Tricks](#) guide on the resources page of our website.

Q: Can you share how demonstration sites can be a model for all public spaces and parks?

A: ECHO recommends consulting [Nature Play and Learning Spaces](#), which includes many design principals that can be adapted to the management and practice of quality features in public spaces specifically for young children. In addition, the Natural Learning Initiative promotes the importance of the natural environment in the daily experience of all children. Visit their [Green Desk](#) for activities, tips, and other information about creating high quality, healthy outdoor environments for young

children. Your local parks department may be another resource—many of which are helping early childhood nature play become more mainstream and often include examples of low-cost features and activity settings. We encourage you to visit [Bienenstock Natural Playgrounds](#) and the [San Francisco Children & Nature Guide](#) for more examples.

Q: What are the top three things all babies need?

A: ECHO would say first and foremost, a caregiver who takes them outside! In order to help make that happen more often, we highly recommend that early care and learning outdoor spaces include comfortable places for adults, especially seating for caregivers to sit with infants and toddlers. Babies also benefit from a variety of things to see and do outdoors, especially features that support sensory experiences, like wind chimes, music walls, and colorful items. Consider building raised garden beds with sensory plants appropriate for our youngest explorers. Last, an appropriate amount of shade is an absolute must in any infant/toddler outdoor setting.

Q: I would love to hear about any efforts in pioneering this idea of natural playgrounds in public elementary schools.

A: ECHO highly recommends researching [Green Schoolyards America](#), which is working to change the norm for school ground design, use, and management so that all children will have access to the natural world in the places they already visit on a daily basis. [The Big Sandbox](#) also has some great examples of comprehensive schoolyard planning that goes beyond an outdoor classroom.