

## Supporting Outdoor Play and Exploration for Infants and Toddlers ≡

### A Closer Look at Safety Considerations

Safety is perhaps the most common concern and one that often interferes with active participation in outdoor play. Infants and toddlers are budding scientists. They actively investigate the world using all their senses and seem to have no fear when it comes to exploring with their hands, mouths, or entire bodies. Infants and toddlers are just beginning to understand what is and is not safe and how to protect themselves. They need responsible adults to minimize outdoor health and safety risks and eliminate the most dangerous hazards so they can explore and play safely.

At the same time, it is important to realize that no one can eliminate every possible risk. Minor bumps, cuts, scrapes, and bruises are normal. Some risk-taking is important and necessary for young children's growth and development.<sup>1</sup> Risk-taking teaches young children about what is and is not possible. It also sets the stage for managing challenging situations later in life. What is considered safe or unsafe depends, in part, on children's ages and developmental levels (e.g., sand is considered safe for toddlers but not for young infants, even with close supervision).

Reducing risk does not mean limiting play equipment or enforcing rules that restrict young children's movement or exploration of the environment. An ideal outdoor play space is one that encourages children to challenge themselves while also presenting little risk for injury; in other words, a space that has high challenge but low risk. In fact, studies show playgrounds that are high challenge but low risk are the best at promoting the goals of outdoor learning. Children get more physical activity; develop better physical, cognitive, and social skills, including respect for others; and are happier and more resilient.<sup>2</sup>

There are three important steps EHS (Early Head Start) and MSHS (Migrant and Seasonal Head Start) program leaders, staff, and families may take to balance outdoor play and exploration with safety.

1. Reach a common understanding of what it means to keep infants and toddlers healthy and safe while providing appropriate challenges. This includes identifying the benefits of risk-taking and defining reasonable risks.



2. Work with the Health Services Advisory Committee (HSAC) to develop, revise, and implement safe practices and procedures that support children's development, respect staff and families' beliefs about safe outdoor play and exploration, and follow the HSPPS (Head Start Program Performance Standards), state, local, and Tribal licensing standards, and other protective regulations.
3. Implement active supervision.

Here are examples of what to include in outdoor policies:

- Requirements related to Active Supervision<sup>3</sup> are essential in keeping children safe outdoors. For example, staff are expected to:
  - Maintain a 1:4 staff-child ratio at all times
  - Use mobile phones or walkie-talkies to quickly and easily communicate between adults outdoors and indoors and, if necessary, emergency services
  - Position themselves so they can see and hear children and use the time to observe children and engage with them rather than visiting with each other. During socializations, parents should interact one on one with their child
  - Continually scan the outdoor play space to know where everyone is and what they are doing, and count children frequently, especially during transitions to and from the outdoor space
  - Use what they know about each child's interests and skills to predict what he or she will do
  - Create challenges children are ready for and support them in succeeding
  - Offer different levels of assistance or redirection depending on each child's needs
- Weather-related policies defining when it is and is not acceptable to take children outside. Outdoor experiences can take place in all kinds of weather conditions, including rain, snow, heat, cold, and wind, if common-sense precautions and safety procedures are taken. For example:
  - Monitor air quality. Some air quality levels pose significant health and safety risks for young children and adults
  - Do not take children outside when there are blizzards, lightning and thunderstorms, or extreme hot or cold temperatures
  - Know the types of child and adult clothes that are appropriate for different weather conditions. Whenever possible, provide extra outdoor clothing for children and adults. Often, the lack of appropriate clothing reduces time spent outside rather than the weather condition itself.<sup>4</sup> See Summer Safety Tips for Early Care and Education Programs </publication/summer-safety-tips-early-care-education-programs> and Cold Weather Safety </publication/cold-weather-safety> for ideas about what to include in a weather policy
- Use of shade <http://nrckids.org/cfoc/database/6.1.0.7>, sunscreen and protective clothing for infants younger than 6 months, bug repellent <http://nrckids.org/cfoc/database/3.4.5.1>, and other protective substances
- Safe, sanitary water play <http://nrckids.org/cfoc/database/6.2.4.2> and sandboxes <https://nrckids.org/cfoc/database/6.2.4.1>
  - See CFOC (Caring for Our Children) standards for sensory table materials <https://nrckids.org/cfoc/database/6.2.4.3>
- Appropriate storage of medications that must be available when children are outdoors (e.g., EpiPens<sup>®</sup> and inhalers for children with allergies and asthma). Medications should be readily accessible at all times.
- Handling insect bites and stings
- What to include in outdoor first aid kits <https://nrckids.org/cfoc/database/5.6.0.1>

In addition to outdoor policies, there are other important safety practices and procedures to consider. The following selected practices and procedures, based on the HSPPS and CFOC (Caring for Our Children) Chapter 6: Play Areas/Playgrounds and Transportation <<http://nrckids.org/cfoc/database/6>>, are relevant for center-based and family child care programs with dedicated outdoor play spaces. However, program leaders, staff, and families can also consider how they might be applied to backyards, public playgrounds, and other spaces that infants, toddlers, and their families use for outdoor play and exploration.

### **Maintaining the Outdoor Space**

Inspect the outdoor space and equipment. Look for signs of wear (e.g., loose chains), exposed hazards (e.g., bolts and splinters), and hazardous materials (e.g., poisonous, sharp, or choking hazards; buried objects; animal feces; rodents). Consider having choke tubes on hand to test potential choking hazards. If sand areas or sandboxes are part of the program's dedicated outdoor space, cover them when not in use. Check for ice on equipment, paths, and riding surfaces in wintery conditions and excessively hot equipment and surfaces in sunny, hot conditions.

### **Layout of Outdoor Space**

Consider placing more active areas and equipment away from less active areas. For example, place swings and bike paths toward the edge of the outdoor space. Surround active, fixed play equipment with a use zone that is a minimum of six feet and clear of other equipment from every direction. For fixed play equipment used only by children ages 6 to 23 months, the minimum is three feet. See CFOC 6.2.2.1: Use Zone for Fixed Play Equipment <<http://nrckids.org/cfoc/database/6.2.2>> for more information. Make sure paths are clear and young infants are out of the activity flow. Best practice suggests outdoor space for infants be separate but near space for toddlers. However, separating infants from toddlers may not be possible in many programs. In those cases, make sure the infant and toddler play area is separate from the preschool area.

### **Surface Drainage**

Standing water that does not drain is a hazardous breeding ground for mosquitoes and can transmit germs. Regardless of the type of surface used in the outdoor space, make sure water can drain off or through it.

### **Protective Surfaces**

Equipment children climb on should have protective surfaces that absorb shock beneath them; these types of surfaces reduce the impact from falls. Examples of appropriate surfaces include unitary materials that fit together, such as tiles or mats, and loose fill such as shredded rubber or engineered wood fiber and mulch. Loose fill surfaces must be installed correctly and maintained at the proper depth to safely cushion a child's fall. Pea gravel and sand are not appropriate protective surfaces for infants and toddlers. See CFOC 6.2.3.1: Prohibited Surfaces for Placing Climbing Equipment <<https://nrckids.org/cfoc/database/6.2.3.1>> for more information.

### **Protection from Excessive Wind and Direct Sunlight**

Make sure there are areas where children play that are shielded from wind and sunlight. Shade may be provided in different ways, including porches, gazebos, exterior screened rooms, awnings,

umbrellas, and trees. See CFOC 6.1.0.7: Shading of Play Area <<http://nrckids.org/cfoc/database/6.1.0.7>> for more information.

### **Safe Age- and Developmentally Appropriate Equipment**

Equipment should be appropriate for the size and skills of infants and toddlers. It should meet all relevant safety regulations such as those provided by CPSC (Consumer Product Safety Commission) for exposed surfaces, spacing (i.e., not allowing head entrapment or strangulation), materials, design, and location. Equipment for toddlers should provide enough challenge to keep them interested and engaged. Some pieces of equipment do not work well for infants and toddlers.<sup>5</sup> These include:

- Trampolines
- Teeter-totters
- Belt swings
- Single-chain and rotating tire swings
- Rung ladders
- Merry-go-rounds
- Horizontal ladders
- Overhead rings

<sup>1</sup>Almeras, *Creating a Nature-Based Culture*, slides 34–36.

<sup>2</sup>Farmer, et. al., "Change of School Playground Environment on Bullying: A Randomized Controlled Trial."

<sup>3</sup>U.S Department of Health and Human Services, Administration for Children and Families, Office of Head Start, *Active Supervision*.

<sup>4</sup>Williams, "Exploring the Natural World," 21.

<sup>5</sup>Greenman et al., *Prime Times*, 297; Frank Porter Graham, "Playground Information to Use with the Environmental Rating Scales."

### **Read more:**

[Outdoor play](#) </browse/keyword/outdoor-play>, [Play space](#) </browse/keyword/play-space>, [Safe environments](#), [Learning Environments](#)

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