

Adding Learning Centers to the Playground

by **Debb Homman, Child Care Aware® Region One**

Outside time with children does not have to be “just another regulation” that has to be followed. There is more to a playground than jungle gyms, balls, and bicycles. As we share with children every day, it just takes a little bit of imagination to dream up a whole new world of learning in an outdoor environment.

Teaching the children something new on a daily basis is a great goal, so why not set up your playground as your classroom? Learning centers on the playground are a great way to increase the knowledge of the children. This just might decrease any challenging behaviors you are dealing with. The outdoor learning environment is a great way to allow the children to experience block play, dramatic play, science and discovery, library, or art. By adding all of these new and exciting centers to your playground, you have opened up a whole new world of imagination for the children. This is also a simple and fairly inexpensive way to engage all of the different learning styles of children.

As a child care provider, you know that the toys on the playground usually end up covered in rain, snow, or mud, so understandably you don't want expensive toys that will be ruined quickly. However, toys that will hold up for the children to play with for an extended period of time are also important. Visit with other child care providers and research good options online, it may take a time or two to figure out which toys work for your environment.

The toys and materials you choose to use should be developmentally appropriate for the children and should be able to be cleaned easily. Here are some suggestions that you can add to your outdoor learning environment:

Block play: Legos, wooden blocks, plastic non-violent people, tools, cars, plastic hats, plastic animals, waffle blocks, dinosaurs, and plastic multicultural families.

Dramatic play: dishes, silverware, sunglasses, raincoats, rain boots, plastic food, pots and pans, child size picnic table and chairs, and a playhouse.

Science & Discovery: some type of outdoor sensory table (ex: dish pan, activity tub, or small plastic pool that you will be able to cover at night), bug catchers, child size magnifying glasses, measuring cups, and plastic bugs.

Library: This is a center that you will have to take in and out with you each time. In a small bag gather some books and designate a small area of your playground to allow the children to have quiet time when they are outside. Some children get hot or do not always feel like playing when they are outside so this area will give them the chance to sit and take a break. Make sure you have a couple chairs in this area and that the bag of books is in the shade.

Art: paint in spray bottles, sidewalk chalk, paint shirts, colored pencils, glue, pom poms, pipe cleaners, construction paper, child size scissors, and an easel. Art on the playground can be tricky, so get a tote to keep the supplies in and then you can open it when you feel comfortable and can appropriately monitor the children.

Even though it may not always be possible to have these learning centers outside on a daily basis; the consistency of the environment helps the children maintain a routine. When offering this consistency you will see an increase in the children's social skills, fine motor skills, and large motor skill. By taking that extra step and putting yourself in the children's shoes for awhile, you can see what the playground is missing. Every playground has something to climb on and a toy to ride. However, not every playground is an outdoor learning environment. Each day add something new to your playground, and before you know it, you'll have met your goals to expand the learning opportunities for the children in your care.

