

# Nature-Based Education



**Nature-based education** involves engagement with the natural world through skill-based activities. Nature-based learning can be a great way to encourage critical thinking and social skills in children and it provides an alternative to “traditional instruction”. Children typically spend an average of seven hours per day in child care, making it a great place to encourage outdoor play and exploration. Outdoor play and learning programs help children improve their social skills, build emotional regulation and management skills, and increase their physical activity.

## Getting Started

- Set up a **scavenger hunt** to familiarize children with different animals, plants, and insects. These activities allow children to develop observation skills, while heightening their curiosity of the natural world.
- **Outdoor exploration** is a simple way for children to develop motor skills such as balance, coordination, and strength. Take a classroom nature walk or play in the park together.
- Activities including **obstacle courses**, **gardening**, and nature games also encourage physical activity.

## Obstacle Courses

Use hula hoops and sticks to set up a “Mud Run” obstacle course. Children will enjoy getting a bit messy while working on their jumping skills! Have the children jump over the mud puddles and race to see who can make it through the course the fastest.

## Physical Activity

Regular physical activity is necessary for building strong muscles and bones. Playing limbo, running down a hill, and a freeze dance are all fun ways to get kids moving. Outdoor time is important even when the weather gets cold! Take advantage of a snowy day by looking for animal tracks or participating in a snowball fight.

## Exploration

To help children interact with nature, encourage them to point out leaves, plants, and bugs. Children can also set up a garden, crunch in the leaves, or listen to the birds. These activities engage all senses and promote critical thinking and problem solving.

## Safety

Though some risky play can help children develop judgement and reasoning skills, adult supervision should be a top priority during outdoor play. To help children stay safe and comfortable, clothes should also be appropriate for the weather.

**Tip:** Check out the **Tips and Materials** library for more activity ideas, including:

*20 Fun Things You Can Do in the Mud, 40 Winter Activities to Warm up Our Bodies, and 25 Things to do with a Tree.*

# The Whole Child

How outdoor play affects all aspects of child development.

## Cognitive Development

**Infants:** Adapt to a new environment, especially during weather changes.

**Toddlers:** Point and identify birds in the sky or other outdoor animals.

**Preschoolers:** Notice environmental changes: weather, seasons, and relationships to plants and animals.

**School-Aged Children:** Scavenger hunts and team-building activities promote critical thinking and problem-solving skills.



## Language Development, Literacy, and Communication

**Infants:** Listen to nature sounds and hear others talk about the outdoors.

**Toddlers:** Develop skills such as counting and shape, size, and color recognition.

**Preschoolers:** Name various nature-based items such as animals, bugs, and trees, and identify nature sounds.

**School-Aged Children:** Continue to build vocabulary by reading nature-based books.



## Social-Emotional Development

**Infants and Toddlers:** Outside time can help calm and reduce restlessness.

**Preschoolers:** Working with others provides opportunities for social and emotional learning and building personal connections/relationships.

**School-Aged Children:** Taking risks builds confidence and positive self-esteem and helps develop problem-solving skills. Time in nature positively impacts children's mental health.



## Sensory Development

**Infants:** Feel different textures by grasping the grass, dirt, leaves, etc. Hear animals, such as birds chirping, and smell flowers.

**Toddlers:** Identify colors of changing leaves and the sky. Play with dirt.

**Preschoolers:** Create mud puddles to jump in. Dig through the dirt.

**School-Aged Children:** Gardening! Planting flowers and vegetables allows children to appreciate the smells and textures of different foods.



## Health and Physical Development

**Infants:** Crawling on the grass promotes stability and grip strength. Gripping grass, leaves, and dirt improves fine motor skills.

**Toddlers:** Walking through grass fields and rocky grounds promotes balance.

**Preschoolers:** Jumping into mud puddles promotes bone and muscle strength.

**School-Aged Children:** Running through obstacle courses increases lung and heart capacity.

