

## **Planning and Developing Outdoor-Oriented Practices with Children**

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Promoting children's outdoor play depends much on adults' knowledge, beliefs, and attitudes regarding children's development and the outdoor. An inappropriate approach to outdoor practices can hold back parents and teachers from going outside, making children feel afraid of exploring and preventing them from taking the best from the outdoors. This chapter aims to support the planning and development of outdoor activities, highlight key aspects that should always be accounted.

### **Exploration precedes Play**

It is essential to differentiate play from exploration. Exploration is a precursor of play, an information-gathering venture that enables children to understand the characteristics of the environment. Before playing, children need time and space to explore the environment and the objects around them (Pellegrini, 2009). Such sense of freedom and independence will drive children to deeply experience their surroundings, finding answers to their questions: "What is it?", "What does it feel, look, smell, taste like?", "Where have I seen something like this before?", "What is it for?" (Ouvry, 2003). Only after the surroundings and the objects become familiar, children will play (Pellegrini, 2009). Therefore, every outdoor-oriented activity should be preceded by a moment of exploration of the space and the objects around. For example, if we plan to play "Grabbing the handkerchief"

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with our children, we should first let children freely run around the area, run in circles, run while holding a handkerchief in hands, throw the handkerchief to the air and let it fall, etc. The adult should always keep in mind that children need time to accommodate their surroundings and make their own sense of the world, before relishing adults' proposals.

### **The need of active play**

Moreover, we should also consider that nowadays' children spend much time indoors, therefore being prevented from releasing their energy and emotions through movement. Indeed, empirical studies (Pellegrini & Davis, 1993; Pellegrini, Huberty, & Jones, 1995; Smith & Hagan, 1980) have shown that after being impeded from engaging in physical activity, children need to compensate for such privation by engaging in longer and more intense physical play. It is important to allow such biological necessity and accept that when children have the chance to go outside, they will probably engage in active and rough play, which enables them rechanneling surplus energy and emotions, accumulated indoors (Veiga, et al., 2017). Hence, when planning outdoor activities, ones should account for a progressive decrease of physical activity levels, starting with active and boisterous activities (e.g., Around Tires), then evolve to more controlled activities that require inhibitory control (e.g., One, Two, Three, Little Monkey on the Tree) and finally propose calmer activities involving relaxation (e.g., Relaxing Body), body or artistic expressiveness (e.g., Express your Body; Journey Stick), attention (e.g., Leaf Detectives), or memory (e.g., Hidden Objects).

### **Preschoolers still struggle socially**

The early childhood period is a time of rapid increase of emotional abilities, which have a great impact on social success. Preschoolers become gradually better at inhibiting inappropriate actions, delaying gratification, and complying with instructions, which makes them increasingly skillful at initiating and maintaining social interactions (Rose-Krasnor & Denham, 2009). As a gradual process, some preschools still struggle with emotion regulation and social relationships (Denham, et al., 2003). Therefore, activities' planning should also account for the social-emotional skills required. That is, with younger children it is preferable to start with activities in which children do not depend on others (e.g., Snake) and progressively evolve to cooperation (e.g., Rescue Team) and later to competitive activities (e.g., Sack Race). One should note that only by 4- or 5- years old children become able to play cooperatively. Cooperation and competitive activities should be first carried out in pairs (e.g., The Mirror), and later with bigger groups (e.g., Dodge Ball).

### **Observation of children's spontaneous behavior**

Besides, if adults want to extend children’s learning through outdoor practices, they need to carefully observe children’s spontaneous behaviors and interactions to understand the learning goals children already accomplished and their developmental needs (Ouvry, 2003). Such observation and reflection should always precede the planning of outdoor activities.

### **Planning Outdoor Activities**

A well-planned activity covers different areas of development at once. For example, the traditional “Fish and fishing net” involves locomotor skills, attention, planning, information processing speed, and relationship skills, therefore extending children’s motor, cognitive, and social-emotional development. The activities proposed in this book may have a preparation or a follow-up, indoors or outdoors, when children have the opportunity to explore the objects or the concepts in a different way.

The next pages of the book will present 47 outdoor-oriented activities. Each activity will be characterized in terms of the developmental domains and the respective skills (see Table 3) involved, four types of questions that extend children’s learning, and adaptations for children with disabilities (e.g., children with hearing loss, children with movement difficulties).

**Table 3. Specification of Developmental Domains and Respective Skills**

Domain	Skills
Cognitive	attention, memory, inhibitory control, information processing speed, planning, creativity
Motor	locomotor skills, postural control skills, manipulative skills, body schema
Socio-emotional	self-awareness, self-management, social awareness, relationship skills, responsible decision-making
Expression and Communication	musical expression and communication, dramatic expression and communication, plastic expression and communication, oral expression and communication

Majorie Ouvry (2003, p. 54-55) proposes 8 questions that should underly the planning of each activity:

- “1. What are the children’s current interest?

2. What do I want the children to learn from this activity in terms of knowledge, skills, and attitudes? (specify learning goals)

3. Using play, first-hand experience, exploration and/or discussion what experiences am I going to plan? What words will I use? What questions will I ask?

4. What resources will support this learning, both inside and out? (materials, songs, poems, etc.)

5. Which children will be involved in this activity? Which children will I focus on, and why? Will the group be self- or adult-chosen? How and where will they be grouped, inside or out?

6. Which adult will plan/lead the activity?

7. How will I know if the activity has been successful? By asking? Observing? Listening to hear if the children are using the new words introduced? Seeing if the children are repeating the activity at their own pace?

8. How did it go, and what will I do next from what I observed and heard from the children's reaction?"

Additionally, the planning should also consider children with disabilities in the group and the required adaptations.

### **Planning for everyone**

Indeed, activities' planning should always respond to each child's specific needs in order to promote optimal development. While it is true that all children are different, it is also true that such differences are usually most noticeable in children with disabilities. Adults should find appropriate strategies to include children with disabilities in their educational activities, so that they can benefit from the same educational and developmental opportunities as their peers. Therefore, frequently, outdoor-oriented activities will have to be adapted and modified according to the skills and needs of children with disabilities. Hence, we describe possible adaptations for the 47 proposed outdoor-oriented activities, to promote the participation of children with disabilities. We hope that such examples stimulate readers to find adaptations for their own activities.

One should note that promoting inclusive contexts requires adaptations regarding the equipment, the space, the task, the instruction, and the people among others (Black & Williamson, 2011; Kiuppis, 2018). Bellow, we provide some general examples of adaptations:

#### **Equipment.**

- Large and light balls are easier to keep in the air (as well as balloons);

- Large balls are easier to be conducted and stroked by wheelchairs;
- Balls with bells (or wrapped in plastic bags) make noise and therefore can be easier to track;
- Grab balls can be easier to be cached;
- Colored equipment (e.g., brightly colored balls) is easier to track visually;
- Velcro gloves can make it easier to catch a ball;
- Ramps can be used, so children in wheelchairs throw balls to the field;
- Parachute games encourage social inclusion.

### **Space.**

- Hard surfaces are better for wheelchairs;
- The dimensions of the playfield can be changed, facilitating the participation of children with mobility limitations;
- Tactile lines (or different types of surfaces) facilitate the orientation of children with visual impairments;
- Different skills can be performed in specific zones of the field, allowing, for instance, that a ball can be played in various ways according to the zone;
- Distanced to be covered can be reduced or increased according to the children's skills

### **Play Activity.**

- Rules can be changed (e.g., winning can require that all players participate/interact; balls can be thrown or received in easier ways);
- Noise should be avoided (or reduced) when playing with children with sensory integration difficulties and with children with hearing loss;
- The velocity of the players can be constrained (e.g., walking, hopping, sliding) so they move at the same pace of children with movement difficulties;
- A sound (hands clapping, a radio) near the target can be added for children with visual impairments.

### **Instruction.**

- Instruction should be simple and clear;
- Instructions can be repeated anytime needed;
- Part-to-whole and simple-to-complex educational strategies can be used when describing the activity;
- The abilities involved in the activities can be demonstrated in vivo or using videos as an alternative;

- Physical guidance can be used with children with visual impairments;
- Sign language or visual supports can be used with children with hearing loss;

### **People.**

- Children with and without disabilities should be paired (supporting possibilities include guidance, pushing the wheelchair, receiving a ball and delivering it in hands, etc.);
- Teams may have unequal numbers to balance their strengths and limitations;
- The number of players can be decreased by forming two groups that perform the same activity simultaneously;
- Groups of children can be assembled according to their ability level;
- People with specific knowledge in special education can help and give additional information and support.

### **Strategies to promote meaningful learning**

In order to expand children's meaningful learning, adults need to interact and collaborate with children, but also facilitate and interpret, when necessary (Bilton, 2010).

Adults can use different modes of interaction: modelling and demonstrating (i.e., the adult does), pretending (i.e., playing alongside the children), suggesting or showing another way of doing things, and telling and instructing how to do things (choosing simple words and short sentences) (Mosston & Ashworth, 2008).

To facilitate and help to interpret, adults can describe how children are doing the activities, document in pictures and/or video in order to show them later the progress achieved, encourage and give feedback, precisely telling back to the child how he/she is doing in a certain activity (Ouvry, 2003). In fact, feedback is fundamental to the learning process at two levels: First, it helps reinforce or change the child's matter, behavior, or logistics, and second, it helps to shape the child's self-concept (Mosston & Ashworth, 2008). Besides, questioning is also an important technique to improve the children's learning process, by helping children to reflect upon the outdoor play experiences and the interactions with others in that setting (Ouvry, 2003).

### **The importance of questioning**

Questions can help children to reflect on their behaviors and thoughts, challenging them to deepen their awareness about the activity, therefore promoting learning and development. Hence, we present four different types of questions (Descriptive, Cognitive, Emotional, and

Connective questions) for the 47 proposed outdoor activities. Before questioning, the adult should first help children recall what happened during the activity, catching their attention, and stimulating their memory.

Descriptive questions aim to describe the activity in terms of rules, goals, roles, instructions, or outcomes.

Examples: Can you describe the mounds you built? (Mud faces); What did you have to do to as a leaf detective? (Leaf detectives); What should you do when you hear the word turn? (Around Tires); What were the rules of this play? (Snake); What is the goal? (Sack race); What do you need to do when you are in the center of the square? (Cat in the corner).

Cognitive questions stimulate practical problems-solving, reasoning-process, and logical thinking through reasoning and reflection. Questions are related to the cognitive concepts and abilities involved in the activity.

Examples: What was your strategy for not being caught? (Skipper May I cross?); What is the difference between a giraffe and a bear? (Express your body); Can this play be played at night? (Catch your own shadow) Which rule of this play would you change? (Dodgeball); What geometric shapes are drawn on the floor? (Hopscotch); How high can you count on your fingers? (Playing with numbers).

Emotional questions focus on children's awareness of their own and others' emotions, emotional expression, emotion regulation strategies, and relationship skills. Considering children's young age, body awareness of emotions is repeatedly focused.

Examples: How did you feel when you were caught? Which other situations made you feel that way? (Skipper, May I Cross?) How do your face and body look like when you feel angry? (Express your Body) Did you hear your heart beating? How was your breathing? (Somebody on the ground); Could you feel your legs tense? In which situations do you also feel that way? (Moving a tire) How did you feel when someone hit you hard? Were you able to calm down? (Dodgeball) How did you feel after blowing the leaves? In which situations do you feel you need to take a deep breath? (Leaf Detectives) Did you always agree with your friend about the construction? How did you manage your disagreements? Did you negotiate? (What's that?).

Connective questions aim the transfer from the activity to children's daily-life situations and contexts.

Examples: Where can we find a doctor? (Express your Body); Which other daily life situations do you have to hold hands with someone else? (Nightingale in the Cage); Do you usually walk or play in places that have trees? (Leaf Detectives); Which pumpkin meals do you know? (Are your Pumpkins Cooked?); How could this play be used in daily life? (Photographic Memory)

Although the book provides multiple questions for each activity, such questions are only suggestions. Each adult (whether the father, the

mother, or the teacher) knows what is best for his/her child. It is important to note that while preschoolers are expected to have developed the necessary cognitive, receptive, and expressive language skills, some children may have difficulty maintaining a conversation and answering adults' questions. Therefore, when questioning, cognitive and language abilities should be considered beforehand. Especially with younger children, adults should adapt their language, using age-appropriate words, adding verbal cues, and reformulating their questions. It is essential to avoid complex syntactic construction and to prefer short questions, instead of linguistically complex unitedness. Besides, it is preferable to ask one question at a time and one child at a time, as well as to give children time to think and consider their responses.

### **The role of the adult**

The inherent characteristics of outdoor environments mentioned in previous chapters, encourage children to freely make their own decisions about the ways of exploring both the environment and the activities (Maynard & Waters, 2014). However, adults' attitudes and behaviors regarding outdoor play have a profound impact on how children interact with the setting, its elements, and how learning takes place. Children need to feel supported and secure in order to explore the environment without significant constraints. Adults have a crucial role in providing such safety and encouragement towards the outdoors. For example, adults should (a) create opportunities for children to freely and spontaneously initiate outdoor play; (b) provide regular opportunities for outdoor play in different physical environments, including natural spaces; (c) teach children about the natural world and caring for the environment; and (d) support appropriate challenging and risky games. Besides, it is crucial that, when developing outdoor-oriented activities, adults build their relationship with children, facilitate communication, and enter children's world, identifying and creating within the children's interests related to the outdoors, scaffolding play, and shared thinking (Waller, 2011).

### **Setting outdoors' rules as positive behaviors**

Providing an outdoor learning environment demands that we trust on children's self-preserving instinct and counteract the recent obsession with safety and the fear of getting hurt, which is depriving our children of being outside or, at least, restricting their behaviors. As outdoor play advocates, we should point out the nonsense of some outdoor places' regulations, such as: no running, no chasing, no bare feet, no football, and its consequences. If we observe parents in a playground, we continuously hear directives such as: do not climb up the slide, do not put hands on the ground, that toy isn't yours, leave it, etc. These rules are refraining children's motor competence, divergent

thinking, self-confidence, social skills, among others. Besides, when adults put a bunch of rules in place, they create an authoritarian atmosphere that leads to a constant need for correction and punishment, undermining their relationship. Such rules also hinder children's self-awareness, self-confidence, and social responsibility.

The outdoors is a highly stimulating setting where emotions can run high, and conflicts and risk-taking behaviors are expected. Therefore, the challenge is to help children find out the basic principles for a positive experience outside. The idea is to facilitate the emergence of the rules by children's interactions in the outdoors. When a conflict happens, the adult should face it as an opportunity of setting outdoors's rules as positive behaviors. Ouvry (2003, p.89) suggests a set of rules rephrased into positive behaviors:

- “We take care with sand – sand hurts if it gets in our eyes.
- We take care when we are on the climbing frame with others.
- We dry the climbing frame after rain, before climbing on it.
- We take turns on the bike.
- We climb up the steps before we go down the slide.
- We put things back in the trolley where we found them when it's time to tidy up.
- We hang up our dressing-up clothes before climbing or going on a wheeled toy.
- We are kind to our friends.”

### **The importance of adults' beliefs and enthusiasm about the outdoors**

Finally, it is noteworthy that our beliefs deeply affect our desires, choices, and behaviors, and children learn by modeling the significant others, observing them, hearing them, and interacting with them. The quality of outdoor-oriented practices will depend much on the adults' beliefs about the richness of the outdoors and the enthusiasm they feel and express when outside. If children see bored adults out, they will model their behavior and become bored themselves. Therefore, it is crucial that adults are enthusiastic about the outdoors and can have fun when outside. Moreover, the quality and the length of children's play and interactions will increase if adults are interested and involved, without directing children's play and discoveries outside (Ouvry, 2003).

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## MOM, MAY I?



### Traditional Portuguese

#### DESCRIPTION

Children are lined up at one end of the space, side by side.

- Choose someone to be the "mom". The "mom" stands in front of the others, at the other end of the space and faces away from children, at ten or more meters.
- One child at a time asks the "mom":
- "Mom, may I?"
- "Yes."
- "How many steps?"
- "Five baby steps."
- Then the child is allowed to make whatever movement he/she was requested (e.g., the child advances, taking five tiny steps). The responses (orders) of the "mom" can be varied: giant (large) steps, crab steps (backwards), a piggyback (jump), scissors (lateral opening of the lower extremities), etc.
- Children continue taking turns. The first child reaches the "mom" becomes the winner, taking her place and restarting the play.