



# Quality ChildCare

For Registered Home-Based Providers

LEARNING TO GROW ★ WINDWARD COMMUNITY COLLEGE

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## 10 Hallmarks of Quality Child Care

- ★ Build trusting relationships
- ★ Provide consistent care
- ★ **Support children's health**
- ★ Provide a safe environment
- ★ Provide positive guidance
- ★ Provide a language-rich environment
- ★ Foster curiosity and development through play
- ★ Individualize care and learning activities
- ★ Partner with parents
- ★ Pursue personal and professional growth

## This Month's Hallmark of Quality Child Care Support Children's Health

### Designing an Outdoor Learning Space for Children

Where did you enjoy playing as a child? Recent research shows that an overwhelming majority of adults report their best childhood memories took place outdoors. The benefits of playing and being outdoors include:

- Supports gross motor skills and reduces childhood obesity
- Promotes cognitive development and academic performance
- Promotes self-confidence and reduces stress

North Carolina State University's *The Natural Learning Initiative (NLI)* provides resources for *designing outdoor learning environments in the daily lives of young children*. *NLI* highlights the importance of focusing on the *function of the space*, or what a child can do with it. These are called *affordances*, a concept created by psychologist James Gibson to describe the opportunities that a specific environmental feature offers. Affordances are the *do-ables* of an environmental feature. For example, a grassy lawn may be "runnable," "crawl-able," or "jumpable" for a young child. For an adult, it may be "sittable" and "de-stress-able." The same lawn has different affordances based on the individual. When we focus on affordances, it'll help us recognize the things that should be in our outdoor spaces for children, based on their specific ages and needs – thereby, helping us to provide outdoor experiences that are engaging and just what the children need to help them grow, learn, and develop.

In this newsletter, we will provide examples of the environmental features that you can include in your outdoor environment for – infants, toddlers and preschoolers, and discuss the affordances these features offer to young children.



## Infants

For young infants, design an outdoor space that affords sensory stimulation (looking, listening, touching, etc.) For mobile infants, in addition to sensory stimulation, design a space that affords for their physical development (learning to sit, crawl, stand, etc.)

Consider including the following in your outdoor space for infants:

- **Chimes:** Overhead objects like wind chimes are look-able, hearable, and observable. They are auditorily (sound) and visually (sight) pleasing to an infant. Chimes stimulate eye exercises (looking up). Point to the chime and talk about it. For example, “Look at the wind chime! There are so many colors. I see red, yellow, etc.” Other examples of outdoor elements that afford sensory stimulation for an infant include birds singing and leaves blowing in the wind.
- **Tree stumps:** Safe, solid stumps, a bench, rails, and other low-level structures are graspable and holdable for infants affording them a place to pull themselves up to stand, hold on, and cruise along when learning to walk.

## Toddlers

Besides running, climbing, sliding, and other movement activities, toddlers like to interact with “stuff” – by filling/ dumping, carrying/ transporting, putting in/taking out, and making discoveries.



Consider including the following in your outdoor space for toddlers:

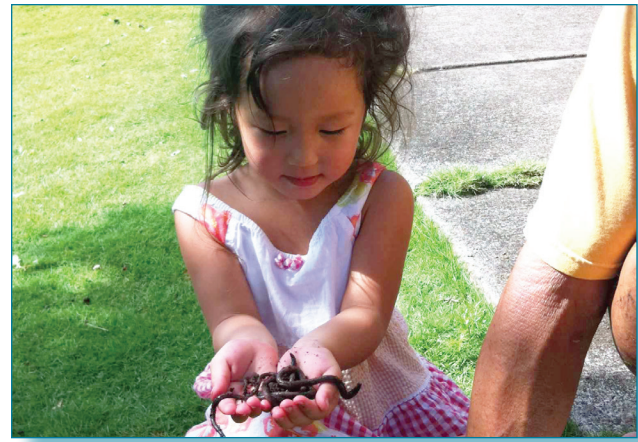
- **Sensory play station:** Open-ended sensory materials, such as sand -- which is diggable, fillable, dump-able, scoopable, and moldable (when wet), afford toddlers rich opportunities to develop muscles, coordination, cognitive skills, and their imagination. Include items such as buckets, containers of different sizes, scoopers, funnels, and play dishes, and allow the children to move their buckets of sand to another outdoor area (as toddlers enjoy moving objects from place to place). You can put the sand into a sandbox, a flat container or even a child-sized swimming pool. Remember to cover it when it's not in use.
- **Grassy hill:** A low grassy hill can be crawlable, climbable, runnable, slide-able, rollable and affords toddlers opportunities to expand their developing physical skills, improve balance and coordination, and strengthen their leg muscles. Bare feet on soft grass also provide a delightful, tactile experience.
- **Child-safe plants:** Adding shrubs, trees and other safe plants to your outdoor environment stimulate physical activity and are “explorable” for toddlers. They afford toddlers opportunities to learn spatial relations as they move “around,” “through,” “over,” “under,” and “between” the plants. Plants also encourage wonder, and are “discoverable.” Include plants in your garden that attract butterflies such as a hibiscus bush.

# Preschoolers

For this age group, think about designing an outdoor space that affords diverse play experiences to support their growing cognitive development, physical development, and science learning.

Consider including the following in your outdoor space for preschoolers:

- **Looped, curvy pathway.** This is a path that starts and ends at the same location, forming a complete circle or closed circuit. You can start with a simple circle then add loops and curves to make it more challenging. The pathway is runnable, chaseable, rideable, hop-able, skippable, jumpable, push-able, and pull-able (e.g., a wagon). Its circular design boosts physical activity because of its continuous, uninterrupted form, which encourages preschoolers to perform physical activities for an extended amount of time. In addition, walking along curved paths helps children develop balance, coordination, and spatial awareness.
- **Performance Stage.** An above-ground surface, such as a deck, affords imaginative play for preschoolers and becomes pretend-able, danceable, singable, and a place that develops children’s creativity – where they can freely express themselves. You can make a simple stage using safe shipping pallets, or by simply marking off an area using natural materials like long tree branches or rocks, rope placed on the ground, or non-toxic and washable chalk-based spray.



- **Nature Zones.** Areas with leaves, rocks, and twigs can prompt preschoolers to explore and build. For example, rocks are turn-over-able, and afford preschoolers opportunities to discover life underneath (e.g., bugs); twigs are write-able and buildable, and prompt preschoolers to create nests for insects. This provides opportunities to observe, collect, sort, experiment with and question – which all supports early science learning.

## Citations

North Carolina State University Natural Learning Initiative Resources. (2026). <https://naturalearning.org/resources/>

Moore, R. C. (2014). Nature play, learning and education: Linking child development to design. In *Nature Play & Learning Places: Creating and managing places where children engage with nature* (pp. 18–31). National Wildlife Federation.



## Training Opportunity

### *Creating Outdoor Learning Environments*

This course introduces best practices in outdoor learning environments that enhance the quality of outdoor spaces. View this free *Texas A&M Agrilife* webinar and earn a 2-hour certificate of completion.

<https://agrilifelearn.tamu.edu/s/product/creating-outdoor-learning-environments/01t4x000008Xg8jAAC>

## Featured Activity

### Create a Looped Pathway with Chalk



#### What you need:

- White or bright sidewalk chalk
- Outdoor concrete surface, fenced-in garage, driveway, or other flat, hard surface

#### What to Do:

1. Make a plan with the children for what the path will look like. Keep in mind that you want to create a large, continuous, winding circular path.
2. When you are ready, use the chalk to draw the outer border of the path on your concrete space.
3. Next, draw the inner border – a few feet away from the outer shape (wide enough to accommodate children and their wheeled toys), and parallel to the outer border.
4. You now have a looped pathway – ready for children to run, ride, jump, balance, etc. on!

*Variation:* Place rocks, stones or cones on a grassy lawn to form a loop that children can run, skip, and jump around.

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## Suggested Books

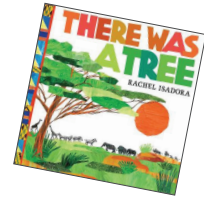
Discover these books and more at the Hawai'i State Public Library [www.librarieshawaii.org](http://www.librarieshawaii.org)

### Infants and Toddlers

#### *There Was a Tree*

by Rachel Isadora

This story, also known as *The Green Grass Grew All Around*, is a cumulative folk song with repetitive lyrics about nature—starting with a hole in the middle of the ground. The repetitive lyrics and colorful illustrations are sure to capture the attention of your little one.



#### *The Best Mud Pie*

by Lin Quinn

How do you make a mud pie? Read the story and learn how from Roberto. Your child will soon be making his own mud pies!

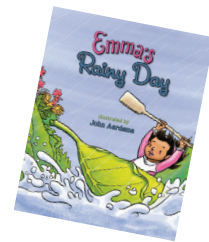


### Preschoolers

#### *Emma's Rainy Day*

by Jane Gillespie

Join Emma on her adventure as she goes outside to play on a rainy day. A banana leaf becomes her boat and a stick becomes her paddle as she paddles down the 'auwai (irrigation ditch) full of imaginary creatures. It is a story about the power of imagination and having fun, even when it rains.



#### *A Bug Hunt in Hawaii Nei*

by Joy Au

Bring along a bucket, scoop net, and a jar, to discover bugs in Hawai'i! This delightful, engaging lift-the-flap book will help your child learn the names of bugs in Hawai'i and their habitat: some live in plants, some in the dirt, some under rocks. A glossary at the end gives more information about each of the bugs featured in the story.



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