

# From Drab to Fab: Creating an Intentional Outdoor Classroom

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## About me



- Sarah is an Assistant Professor of Practice at the University of Texas at Austin. She teaches and mentors undergraduate students at the Priscilla Pond Flawn Child and Family Laboratory, where she also teaches a group of preschoolers and young toddlers. Sarah graduated from Oklahoma State University with a Master of Science in Human Development and Family Sciences with a concentration in Family and Community Services. She received a Bachelor of Science in Human Development and Family Science with a Concentration in Early Childhood from The University of Texas at Austin. Sarah has about seven years' experience teaching young children in the Austin area and has been at UT Austin for 4 years.

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## Agenda

- ▶ Define and identify elements of an outdoor learning space
- ▶ Examine research and proven benefits of outdoor learning
- ▶ Explore challenges in creating an outdoor classroom
- ▶ Review implementation ideas for each major developmental domain

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## What is an outdoor classroom?

- ▶ A learning environment where education and play occur outdoors in a naturalistic setting
- ▶ Play materials are natural, flexible, open-ended and renewable.
- ▶ Spaces are designed using evidence-based guiding principles to create optimal learning environments
- ▶ Spaces support full-bodied learning, child-led exploration, and direct interaction with nature

Dennis, S. F. Jr., Wells, A., Bishop, C. (2014). A post-occupancy study of nature-based outdoor classrooms in early childhood education. *Children, Youth, and Environments*, 24(2), 35-52

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# E X A M P L E S



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## Research tells us

- ▶ Outdoor learning and play with diverse natural elements enriches all developmental domains, health, and wellbeing of young children.
- ▶ The natural world helps children to build capacity for learning by providing stimulating and engaging opportunities to structure their knowledge.
- ▶ Interacting with nature even in passive way was found to reduce stress, increase relaxation, and improve cognitive functioning
- ▶ Finally, children's time spent in nature has been linked to long-term outcomes such as environmental stewardship as adults

Acar, I. H., (2013). Early childhood development and education through nature-child interactions: A conceptual paper. *The International Journal of Educational Researchers* 2013, 4 (2), 1-10

Cooper, A. (2015). Nature and the outdoor learning environment: The forgotten resource in early childhood education. *International Journal of Early Childhood Environmental Education*, 3(1), 85-97

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## Benefits of an outdoor learning environment

- Improves self-regulation
- Advances physical fitness and gross motor development
- Improves nutrition
- Promotes cognitive development
- Improves academic performance
- Lessens the symptoms of ADHD and improves concentration
- Promotes social/emotional competencies
- Builds understanding and appreciation of ecosystems, food systems, and environmental processes



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## Teachers role in outdoor learning

- Design purposeful intentional space to motivate learning through imagination and play
- Provide emotionally supportive, learning-friendly, and child-centered environment
- Provide instructional support (e.g., providing feedback and direction via questions or constructive responses)
- Facilitate peer interactions to encourage sharing, cooperation, and helping each other
- Build cognitive competence through Vygotsky's Zone of Proximal Development
  - scaffold children's capacity for learning in a diverse environment



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## Outdoor classrooms should:

- Inspire curiosity, creativity, natural exploration, self-confidence, and inclusivity
- Include many different areas (e.g., group/solitary play, structured/unstructured play, etc.) for increased learning opportunities (cooper)
- Include developmentally appropriate materials for all ages
- Include open-ended materials
- Include “loose parts” and sensory materials
- Include open space for physical activity and cozy spaces for alone time
- Provide safe risks (e.g., jumping, climbing, balancing)

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## E X A M P L E S



Safe risks



Open-ended materials



Opportunities for creative expression



Child-initiated curiosity



Natural areas to explore



Quiet cozy spaces

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## Examples by domain

If possible, include aspects of each major content area in the outdoor space.

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## Cognitive

- ▶ Includes: inquiry, questioning, reasoning skills, problem solving, creativity, imagination, temporal and spatial skills
- ▶ Science – form and test predictions, use tools to explore the environment (a magnifying glass, magnets, sifters, etc.), investigate properties of objects, begin to understand what life forms need to grow and live, environmental responsibility (recycling, composting, food sustainability)
- ▶ Math – measure materials, explore patterns, number concepts, categorize objects by color, shape, size
- ▶ Executive functioning – planning, focus, recall, cognitive flexibility, impulse control
- ▶ Promote various play types – constructive, symbolic, imaginative, and collaborative

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## Social/Emotional

- Includes: self-confidence, emotional regulation, empathy, impulse control, responsibility and ownership, resilience, respect for self, others, and nature
- Dramatic play – creating play scripts together, abstract thinking
- Social studies – understanding of humans and their roles and routines
- Sensory
- Music
- The outdoors provides children an outlet to have big movements and “outside voices.”
- More space, various areas of engagement, and numerous materials minimizes conflict and competition in natural environments
- Outdoor environments can help decrease separation difficulties during drop-off and support transitions at pick-up

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# S O C I A L E M O T I O N A L



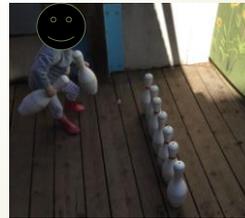
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## Motor movements/Health

- Gross Motor: arm/leg strength, core strength, balance, coordination, agility, proprioception
- Fine Motor: finger grip, grip strength, dexterity, hand-eye coordination
- Nutrition (gardens): understanding of where food comes from, nutrients, healthy food choices, cooking, environmental stewardship
- Advances physical fitness
- Promotes overall well-being (mood, stress)

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MOTOR MOVEMENTS



Language/Communication

- Includes: emergent literacy, emergent writing, connecting spoken words to written print, communication with adults and peers



## Gardening

- ▶ Inground or raised beds, planters, or pots
- ▶ Native plants (hardy, less watering)
- ▶ Herbs/veggies/fruit trees
- ▶ Garden to table process – cooking activities
- ▶ Consider:
  - ▶ Placement – hours in sun
  - ▶ Accessibility to children
  - ▶ Insects and critters
  - ▶ Maintenance



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## Bring nature indoors

- ▶ Can be done even in urban areas
- ▶ Provides continuity between indoor and outdoor space
- ▶ Planting/seed germination
- ▶ Examine insects, leaves, feathers, etc.
- ▶ Sand, wood shavings, plastic insects in sensory
- ▶ Camping or gardening dramatic play
- ▶ Add tree blocks or pieces of bark to blocks
- ▶ Paint with pinecones or feathers on rocks or leaves
- ▶ Nature provocations



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## Implementation plan

- ▶ Start small, consider easy realistic starter steps (short and long-term plan)
- ▶ Consult with proper channels for your program
- ▶ Gather materials and people power
- ▶ Designate areas of space and boundaries (think similarly to your classroom)
- ▶ Develop outdoor curriculum and maintenance plan
- ▶ Put ideas into practice and adjust as needed
- ▶ Keep things simple – only rotate materials every few weeks
- ▶ Keep some things as outdoor staples
- ▶ Think about next step ideas to gradually continue to transform your outdoor space!

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Start your own implementation plan!

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## Take a few minutes to consider

- ▶ Visualize your program's outdoor space
  - ▶ Are there natural elements?
  - ▶ Are there elements to promote development across major domains?
  - ▶ Are there opportunities for children to explore nature that feed their natural curiosity?
  - ▶ Can children freely engage with nature on a daily basis?
  - ▶ Are there areas that promote various learning styles and personalities?
  - ▶ Are the materials safe for all ages in the space?
  - ▶ How do you as a teacher promote deeper learning and curiosity outdoors?

**If you answered no to any of these, what are some easy initial changes you could make and what are your long term goals for the space?**

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## Additional resources

- ▶ Local programs and resources
- ▶ Outdoor Learning Environments (OLE! Texas)
- ▶ The Outdoor Classroom Project
- ▶ Sustainable Food Center
- ▶ Partner in Education, Agriculture, and Sustainability (P.E.A.S.)
- ▶ EcoRise
- ▶ 4-H CAPITAL/Travis County AgriLife Extension
- ▶ Keep Austin Beautiful
- ▶ Outreach
- ▶ Texas Parks and Wildlife
- ▶ Lady Bird Johnson Wildflower Center
- ▶ Growing Up Wild

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Thank you!

Questions?

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## Resources

- ▶ Acar, I. H., (2013). Early childhood development and education through nature-child interactions: A conceptual paper. *The International Journal of Educational Researchers* 2013, 4 (2), 1-10
- ▶ Cooper, A. (2015). Nature and the outdoor learning environment: The forgotten resource in early childhood education. *International Journal of Early Childhood Environmental Education*, 3(1), 85-97
- ▶ Dennis, S. F. Jr., Wells, A., Bishop, C. (2014). A post-occupancy study of nature-based outdoor classrooms in early childhood education. *Children, Youth, and Environments*, 24(2), 35-52

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## Photos (in order of appearance)

- ▶ Oregon Parks and Recreation. <https://www.nwf.org/Home/Kids-and-Family/Connecting-Kids-and-Nature/Nature-Play-Spaces>
- ▶ <https://www.pinterest.com.au/pin/213850682279008657/>
- ▶ <https://www.pinterest.cl/pin/448319337892879896/>
- ▶ <https://theimaginationtree.com/inspiring-outdoor-play-spaces-kids/>
- ▶ UT PPFCL
- ▶ <https://www.pbs.org/parents/thrive/gardening-with-kids-how-it-affects-your-childs-brain-body-and-soul>
- ▶ <https://www.countryliving.com/uk/homes-interiors/gardens/a21997987/how-encourage-children-garden/>

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## Outdoor Classroom Summary Sheet

### Implementation plan

- ▶ Start small (short and long-term plan)
- ▶ Consult with proper channels for your program
- ▶ Gather materials and people power
- ▶ Designate areas of space and boundaries (think similarly to your indoor classroom)
- ▶ Develop outdoor curriculum and maintenance plan
- ▶ Put ideas into practice and adjust as needed
- ▶ Keep things simple – rotate materials every few weeks and keep outdoor staples
- ▶ Gradually build to continue to transform your outdoor space!

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## Outdoor Classroom Summary Sheet

▶ Ask yourself:

- ▶ What natural elements can be easily added?
- ▶ Does the space promote development across all major domains?
- ▶ Can children freely explore and engage with nature on a daily basis?
- ▶ Are there areas that promote various learning styles and personalities?
- ▶ Are the materials safe for all ages in the space?
- ▶ How do you as a teacher promote deeper learning and curiosity outdoors?
- ▶ How can you bridge your indoor and outdoor spaces?