

Nature-Based Learning Ideas Guide: Birth to Pre-K



What can I do outside today?



Photo credit: Sarah J. Benciscutto Amado | Minneapolis Nature Preschool



Photo credit: Willow and Sprout

What Can I Do Outside Today?

Introduction

This companion document to the [Outdoor Learning Booklet](#) has been developed to help educators see the possibilities for nature-based learning in common outdoor spaces for young children. Each “common space” is defined and specific activity examples are listed under the different learning areas which correspond to the learning domains from the [Minnesota Early Childhood Indicators of Progress \(ECIP\)](#). Listed after each activity is the code of a subcomponent from the appropriate learning domain. Although many of the activities can and do contribute to development of more than one subcomponent, for this purpose we are offering example codes to help illustrate how the activity can support the identified subcomponent.

For example

Under the common space **Concrete**, the activity listed under the topic: Approaches to Learning is: “Set up challenges for children: skip to the sign, hop to the tree, or jump to the cone” and the subcomponent identified is AL3. AL3 refers to the subcomponent “Focused Attention” under the component “Attentiveness” of the Approaches to Learning domain. The subcomponent and corresponding indicators address the standard: “Child focuses visual and auditory attention on relevant aspects of the environment.” This activity, when brought outside on the concrete, provides children the opportunity to focus their attention, engage for a period, and participate with others, while they listen to directions and visualize where and how they are moving their bodies. When children exhibit these “indicators” they are making progress in the standard identified in the subcomponent. This example illustrates how the outdoor activity is connected to the Early Childhood Indicators of Progress and how different domains can be supported using the common spaces available in many early childhood programs.

Example excerpt from the document: “What Can I Do Outside Today?”

Approaches to Learning

- Set up challenges for children: skip to the sign, hop to the tree, or jump to the cone **AL3**

Example of corresponding domain, component, and subcomponent from the Minnesota Early Childhood Indicators of Progress.

Domain: Approaches to Learning			
Components AL3-4: Attentiveness			
Subcomponent	0-1 year	1-2 years	2-3 years
AL3. Focused Attention: Child focuses visual and auditory attention on aspects of the environment when presented with	AL3.1. Reaches, gestures, or moves toward an object or person that interests them or of their choice. AL3.2. Repeats	AL3.3. Stays focused on sights, sounds, and actions for approximately one or two minutes. AL3.4. Repeats actions to	AL3.5. Maintains focused attention on sights, sounds, and actions for three to five minutes. AL3.6. Repeats

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Concrete

A concrete area is a hard surface outdoors. This includes patios, sidewalks, decks, plazas, or courtyards. This is a space free from vehicles. Cones can be used to define the space if it is utilized for other purposes beyond the program's use.



Approaches to Learning

- Set up challenges for children: skip to the sign, hop to the tree, or jump to the cone **AL3**

Language, Literacy and Communications

- Bring a basket of books and read **L4, L7**
- Write names in chalk **L6, L7, L9**
- Act a story out as a class **L8**
- Journal with paper and pencils **L4, L8**
- Place plastic or wooden animals or figures on a blanket for pretend play **L1, L2, L3**

Large Motor Skill Development Activities P4-5

- Hopscotch
- Animal movements
- Scooters
- Red Light, Green Light
- Obstacle course
- Yoga poses
- Parachute

Math

- Bring out scales and weigh nature items **M8**
- Make patterns with natural items **M9**
- Have materials out on a blanket or table to sort create patterns **M9, M13**
- Match and count leaves on a blanket **M2, M3, M4, M5, M6, M8**
- Draw shapes with chalk and use items like rocks or shells to fill the shape **M8, M11**

Music

Consider getting a portable speaker for music and movement activities on the go. Many of these activities can be done anywhere.

- Parachute with songs **A2**
- Make homemade instruments out of toilet tubes or tissue boxes **A3**
- Bring class instruments outside on a blanket **A3**

Art A1-4

- Make maps of the playspace or other class spaces
- Bring an easel for painting with sticks
- Draw with pencils or chalk
- Place natural items on a tray and have children make self-portraits
- Glue leaves and other nature material on paper
- Cover a table or the fence with paper for group painting or drawing (good for a windy day)
- Paint on egg cartons or rocks

Science

- Use magnifying glasses to look at nature items **ST2**
- Bring measuring cups and sensory items in individual bins **ST1**
- Create a weather station to observe each day at school **ST3**
- Listen and watch for birds **ST1**

Note: The ideas in this guide are meant to help you get started. Be creative!

Blacktop



A blacktop area is a hard surface such as a driveway or parking lot. For safety, it is important to use cones to mark off the areas that are dedicated to the classes. Try using a tables if there is debris on the ground making it uncomfortable to sit on directly.



Approaches to Learning

- Yoga poses **AL3, AL9**
- Set up challenges for children: skip to the sign, hop to the tree, or jump to the cone **AL3**

Music

- Parachute with songs **A2**
- Make homemade instruments out of toilet tubes or tissue boxes **A3**

Language, Literacy and Communications

- Write names in chalk **L6, L7, L9**
- Journal with paper and pencils **L4, L8**
- Place sand in individual trays for finger or stick tracing and have name cards or letter cards out to copy **L9**
- Bring manipulative toys and other typically- indoors games outside and play on a blanket or table **L1, L2, L3**
- Bring pretend play props outside (e.g., play kitchen items) **L1, L2, L3**
- Place plastic or wooden animals or figures on a blanket for pretend play **L1, L2, L3**

Art A1-4

- Make maps of the playspace or other class spaces
- Bring an easel for painting outside
- Draw with pencils or chalk
- Do art activities on a table outside
- Glue leaves and other nature material on paper
- Cover a table or the fence with paper for group painting or drawing (good for a windy day)
- Paint on egg cartons or rocks **A1**

Large Motor Skill Development Activities P4-5

- Bikes or other wheeled toys with areas marked off with cones
- Hopscotch
- Yoga poses
- Scooters
- Parachute
- Red Light, Green light
- Ball play

Science

These activities could capture all the science subcomponents

- Use magnifying glasses to look at nature items **ST1, ST2, ST5**
- Bring measuring cups and sensory items in individual bins **ST1, ST2, ST3, ST6**

Math

- Have materials out on a blanket or table to sort create patterns **M9, M13**
- Match and count leaves on a table **M2, M3, M4, M5, M6, M8**



Grass



A grass area is a space that is covered in grass or other natural materials like leaves, sand, wood chips or dirt. This space is usually within your own school's play space or close to it.

Approaches to Learning

- Red light - Green Light traditional or switch colors **AL3, AL9, AL12**
- Tell a story together; teacher prompts with the beginning, students then add details **AL3, AL5, AL7, AL8, AL9, AL10**

Language, Literacy and Communications

- Bring a basket of books outside on a blanket **L4, L7**
- Create a story walk **L4, L7, L8**
- Write white boards on a blanket **L6, L7, L9**
- Bring out handwriting practice supplies: writing board, wooden pieces, and chalkboards
- Act a story out as a class **L1, L2, L3, L4, L8**
- Journal with paper and pencils **L4, L7**
- Place plastic or wooden animals or figures on a blanket for pretend play **L2, L3**

Music

- Parachute with songs **A2**
- Make homemade instruments out of toilet tubes or tissue boxes **A3**
- Bring class instruments outside on a blanket **A3**

Large Motor Skill Development Activities P4-5

- Animal movements
- Parachute
- Duck Duck Gray Duck
- Yoga poses
- Tunnels
- Ring-Around-the-Rosie

Art A1-4

- Lie in the grass and ask children how they think the clouds are made and then have the kids draw the clouds **A1**
- Bring an easel outside for painting **A3**
- Glue leaves and other nature material on paper **A1**
- Cover a table or the fence with paper for group painting or drawing (good for a windy day) **A3**
- Make leaf mobiles with a plastic sewing needle with yarn

Science

- Measure the diameter of a tree using yarn, compare with other trees in the area **ST1, ST4**
- Bring magnifying glasses or other science tools outside **ST1, ST2**
- Measure the length of different sticks and put them in order from biggest to smallest
- Plant bulbs that will grow in spring **ST3**
- Create a weather station to observe each day at school **ST3, ST5**
- Lie on a blanket to listen to the sounds of nature **ST1, ST5**

Math

- Bring out scales and weigh natural items **M7**
- Make patterns with natural items **M8**
- Look for patterns in nature **M8**
- Match leaves on a blanket **M2, M3, M4, M6, M9**
- Count how many clouds or birds are in the sky, ants on the ground, etc. **M2, M3, M4, M6, M9**



Playground



A playground area is a space that has a typical play structure. These areas can be utilized for play and exploration beyond just the play structure.

Approaches to Learning

- Yoga poses **AL3, AL9**
- Set up challenges for children using playground equipment

Language, Literacy and Communications

- Bring a basket of books and read **L4, L7**
- Journal with paper and pencils **L4, L7**
- Place sand in individual trays for finger or stick tracing and have name cards or letter cards out to copy **L6, L7**
- Bring manipulative toys and other typically- indoors games outside and play on a blanket or table
- Bring pretend play props outside (e.g., play kitchen items) **L1, L2**
- Place plastic or wooden animals or figures on a blanket for pretend play **L2, L3**

Large Motor Skill Development Activities

P1-4

- Hide and Seek
- Scavenger hunt
- Parachute
- Obstacle course
- Yoga poses

Music

- Parachute with songs **A1**
- Make homemade instruments out of toilet tubes or tissue boxes **A5**
- Create a music wall with old pots and pans and wooden spoons **A3**

Art

- Make maps of the playspace or other class spaces **A1**
- Bring an easel for painting **A3**
- Draw with pencils **A5**
- Bring a table out for art activities to be done outside
- Place nature items on a tray and have children make self-portraits **A4**
- Glue leaves and other nature material on paper **A1**
- Cover a table or the fence with paper for group painting or drawing (good for a windy day) **A3**

Science

- Bring measuring cups and sensory items in individual bins **ST1, ST2, ST3, ST6**
- Plant bulbs that will grow in spring **ST3**
- Create a weather station to observe each day at school **ST1, ST2**

Math

- Bring out scales and weigh natural items **M8**
- Make patterns with nature items **M8**
- Look for patterns on play equipment **M8**
- Have materials out on a blanket or table to create or sort patterns **M8**
- Match leaves on a blanket **M2, M3, M4, M6, M9**
- Draw shapes with chalk and use items like rocks or shells to fill the shape **M7, M9**
- Count how many clouds or birds are in the sky, ants on the ground, etc. **M2, M3, M4, M6, M9**

Beyond



Beyond is any space that is outside of your immediate play area. This can include a school forest, going for walks in the neighborhood, visiting a local park, or visiting a nearby community garden. Wagons are useful to have for supplies for when you set up your classroom in a space that is beyond the playspace that is right at your school.

Approaches to Learning

- Yoga poses **AL3**
- Set up challenges for children: skip to the sign, hop to the tree, or jump to the cone **AL3**
- Waiting places as you move from space to space **AL10**
- Red Light, Green Light (traditional or switch colors) **AL3, AL12**

Language, Literacy and Communications

- Bring a basket of books and read **L4, L7**
- Journal with paper and pencils **L4, L7**
- Bring manipulative toys and other typically- indoors games outside and play on a blanket or table
- Bring pretend play props outside (e.g., play kitchen items) **L1, L2**
- Place plastic or wooden animals or figures on a blanket for pretend play **L2, L3**

Large Motor Skill Development Activities

P1-4

Go for a walk:

- Shape walk
- Scavenger hunt
- Bug walk
- Color walk

Music

- Parachute with songs **A1**
- Bring a portable speaker to sing and dance to songs you would typically listen to in the indoor classroom
- Use leaves and sticks as “bean bags” and “rhythm sticks” **A4**

Art

- Make maps of the outdoor space being explored **A1**
- Draw with pencils **A5**
- Place nature items on a tray and have children make self-portraits **A4**

Science

- Measure the diameter of a tree using yarn, compare with other trees in the area **ST1, ST4**
- Measure the length of different sticks and put them in order from biggest to smallest **M2, M3, M4, M6, M7**
- Go for a walk to listen and observe what is heard and seen **ST1, ST2**

Math

Go on a walk to:

- Look for patterns in nature **M8**
- Count how many windows, doors, trees, flowers or buildings you pass **M2, M3, M4, M6, M9**
- Look for shapes in nature **M9**

Material Ideas



Art

- Portable/outdoor easel
- Homemade all natural water color paints
- Yarn and plastic sewing needles
- Trays
- Clay
- Glue
- Bird feeder kits

Dramatic Play

- Kitchen item set (plates, silverware, cups, etc.)
- Cleaning toys (vacuums, brushes, spray bottles, etc.)
- Costumes
- Plastic or wooden animal figures
- Dolls and doll houses
- Blankets

Fine Motor Skills

- Manipulative toys
- Tweezers
- Individual sand trays
- Building blocks
- Scissors
- Easels Sticks
- Scissors
- Bubbles

Large Motor Skills

- Cones
- Scooters
- Mini trampolines
- Balls (beach balls, soccer balls, bouncy balls, etc.)
- Pop-up tunnels
- Play vehicles (wagons, tricycles, toy cars, etc.)
- Buckets

Language and Literacy

- Books
- Chalk
- Walkie Talkies

Math

- Scales
- Rulers
- Discovery tables
- Abacuses
- Thermometers

Music

- Drums
- Bean bags
- Pots & pans
- Rain sticks
- Boomwhackers
- Tambourines

Science

- Magnifying glasses
- Journals
- Tweezers
- Pipettes
- Water pumps
- Measuring cups
- Gardening tools (shovels, rakes, spades, etc.)
- Binoculars
- Watering cans
- Pond nets
- Microscopes
- Field guides (insects, trees, animals, etc.)

Visit the [Early Childhood Outdoor Learning webpage](#) for more resources!