

Praise from leaders in early childhood education

“Through this reflective work and its myriad examples including illustrative photographs, resources, and planning tools, Eric Nelson unveils the essential elements for establishing and supporting highly engaging quality outdoor environments for young children. This book provides a developmental framework that early childhood practitioners, administrators, and trainers need to effectively address this extremely important aspect of children’s play and learning.”

—Ed Greene, PhD, Senior Advisor of Piramide Approach to Early Learning, Cito USA/
Netherlands and Facilitator at JCCEO Head Start Center of Excellence in Birmingham

“The outdoor classroom is a healthy, engaging, and creative response to today’s educational challenges. *Cultivating Outdoor Classrooms* provides the why and how in an accessible format that any educational leader can use to transform the learning environment at their school site. Photographs, design plans, a defined process of staff engagement, as well as curricular ideas and the information you need to begin this transformation, are all here. Educators would do well to embrace these concepts.”

—Renatta M. Cooper, Coauthor of *Playing to Get Smart* and President of the Pasadena Unified School District Board of Education

“With *Cultivating Outdoor Classrooms*, there are no more excuses for the same-old, same-old behaviors and routines in early childhood programs. Now, everyone can learn how to build a practical, useful, and exciting outdoor classroom at any site. Preschool children today do not spend nearly enough quality time playing outdoors—not at home, and not in school. Denying children ample outdoor playtime has developmental and academic consequences. *Cultivating Outdoor Classrooms* highlights these risks, and gives solid evidence for the value of time spent outside playing. Eric’s enthusiasm for the outdoors and for giving children the opportunity to learn in nature is translated into a text that is meaningful for everyone who works with young children. Pages of wonderful photographs help to inspire ideas and give concrete examples for easy steps teachers can take *today* toward changing spaces and making outdoor learning accessible for children in school programs. *Cultivating Outdoor Classrooms* is both a foundational how-to book for educators taking their first steps toward the joy of working with children outdoors, and, for more experienced educators, a confirmation of their best practices. This book inspires me to continue working with teachers, parents, and other school directors as they explore the possibilities of creating outdoor classrooms at their school sites!”

—Sheryl E. Cohen, PhD, Director of Stephen S. Wise Temple Early Childhood Center,
President of BJE-Early Childhood Director’s Network, and Vice President Programming
of the National Jewish Early Childhood Network

“Eric Nelson understands the profound benefits children gain from daily access to natural outdoor classrooms. His comprehensive and thoughtful book outlines practical strategies for making this wonder-filled learning a way of life in early childhood programs. *Cultivating Outdoor Classrooms* will support and inspire teachers and administrators as they begin an exciting journey toward a fulfilling new way of working with children. Research continues to show the adverse effects of children’s disconnection from nature and the positive gains possible when daily nature connections are supported by caring, engaged adults. The ideas in this book are needed today more than ever.”

—Nancy Rosenow, Coauthor of *Learning with Nature Idea Book* and Executive Director of Dimensions Educational Research Foundation/Nature Explore

“Eric Nelson has created the definitive textbook for training new early childhood educators about the importance of bringing nature into the lives of children and helping them to become independent learners. He provides practical steps teachers can take to become agents of change in their schools. From beginning discussions, to planning, to implementation, *Cultivating Outdoor Classrooms* gives wonderful examples of what teachers can do in their current environments to engage children in the wonder of learning.”

—Shelley Gonzales, MA, Adjunct Faculty and Child Development Center Laboratory School Director at West Valley College in Saratoga, CA

Cultivating Outdoor Classrooms



Cultivating Outdoor Classrooms

Designing and Implementing Child-Centered
Learning Environments

ERIC NELSON

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To my granddaughter, Haley Ella Hom, and all those of
her generation, that their world be a better place.

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Foreword

How did you play as a child? Where did you play? What did you learn by playing?

Probably (depending on how old you are) you got to play outdoors, investigating a complex and often unpredictable world of nature and negotiating relationships with friends. As many adults will remember, but many children today have never discovered, the richest learning environments are outdoors. In contrast, many children today spend all their time indoors, in activities programmed by adults to teach right answers to children.

It's February in Los Angeles, where I live. The sun is shining, the grass is green, and there's snow on the mountains. The birds are busy and noisy, but where are the four-year-olds? They're sitting at the tables indoors, getting wigglier every minute. Real learning happens outdoors too. It's time to go out—and *move*.

I learned to teach young children at the University of Wisconsin–Madison, where February is quite a different experience. But we took our little badgers outdoors every day, where they used all their large muscles and explored snow and ice and frosty breath, and we either stood and shivered or sensibly joined them and ran around too. Children, as I learned then and have been confirming ever since, are active learners—acquiring physical knowledge and social-emotional knowledge and co-constructing cognitive knowledge not only by sitting and listening, but especially by doing. And there's more to do outdoors—more space, more sensory materials, more unpredictability, more open-ended tasks in which the outcomes haven't been predetermined by adult planners. “If I

do this, what will happen?” the three-year-old thinks, and then she does it, and finds out.

Prehistorically, much of human intelligence was developed in response to the challenges posed by the natural world: what can we do when we find ourselves cold, wet, sunburned, thirsty, hungry, or being snarled at? Children deprived of all such challenges simply won’t be as smart as those with opportunities to confront nature for themselves, temporarily separated from heating, air-conditioning, and nonstop video.

“The teacher’s contribution to play always begins with the physical environment, with stage setting. Developmentally, physical knowledge comes first. . . . It’s up to adults to provide enough space, enough materials, and enough time, by arranging the environment so the play can happen” (Jones and Reynolds 2011, 21).

And almost anything that can be done indoors can also be done outdoors. What activities can we take outside? What will the children learn from them?

I’ve known Eric Nelson for many years through our shared experience at Pacific Oaks College and Children’s School, and in 2003 when his Child Educational Center received funding from Los Angeles County for a five-year project “to increase the quantity, quality, and benefit of outdoor experiences for children ages 0 to 5 in Los Angeles County child care centers,” I jumped at the chance to join its educational team. We offered teachers weekend opportunities to play in an Outdoor Classroom themselves, share their experience, and reflect on what they could do in their own settings. We learned too. What’s an Outdoor Classroom? How can you create one? How can you convince others that it’s where young children learn best?

In this outstanding guide for teachers, decision makers, and parents, Eric Nelson offers solidly documented background on why and how to overcome nature deprivation in children’s daily experience in preschool.

Elizabeth Jones, PhD
Faculty Emerita, Pacific Oaks College

Jones, Elizabeth, and Gretchen Reynolds. 2011. *The Play’s the Thing: Teachers’ Roles in Children’s Play*. 2nd ed. New York: Teachers College Press.

Acknowledgments

THIS BOOK evolved from thirty-five years of experience with ECE environments, programs, professionals, and others associated with early care and education. None of that would have mattered had David Heath of Redleaf Press not approached me after a presentation with the invitation to write it. I am most indebted and grateful to the contribution the entire Redleaf team has made in bringing the work to publication.

My professional path, not to mention the subject matter of the book, was the combined result of the contributions of many individuals and organizations. My parents, Stanley and Dorothy Nelson, provided me with a childhood that allowed me to experience the outdoors on my own, starting as a very young child, establishing a personal reference point for all that I do. Sally Smith Graney initially opened the door to the world of working with young children, and Betsy Hiteshew started me on my professional path and mentored me along the way. My educational experience as a graduate student at Pacific Oaks College under the tutelage of Molly Scudder and the PO faculty during the 1970s provided me the theoretical and practical foundation for my Outdoor Classroom work.

More recently Betty Jones, Sharon Stine, and Renatta Cooper all contributed to my first efforts at articulation and sharing of Outdoor Classroom philosophy and practices. Important psychological and philosophical concepts are drawn from my graduate study at the University of Santa Monica under the leadership of Drs. Ron and Mary Hulnick. A special thanks is owed to Richard Louv, whose *Last Child in the Woods* has ignited a renewal of the return-to-nature movement for children

and families and helped me cultivate important elements of my thinking about the need for the Outdoor Classroom.

Experience from activities in the field has been fundamental to articulating the Outdoor Classroom concept and practice. For over thirty years the development of the model Outdoor Classroom has flourished at my place of work, the Child Educational Center, Caltech/JPL Community (CEC), through the participation and support of children, parents, staff, and boards of trustees, as well as the California Institute of Technology and the Jet Propulsion Laboratory. CEC program director Lisa Cain-Chang and a host of CEC long-tenured teachers have nurtured that model, establishing a guiding set of practices and substantial body of fieldwork.

My early consulting with Dennis Hudson helped me to articulate design concepts, as have design partnerships with Ronnie Sigel. ALA funding from First 5 LA enabled me to first articulate the Outdoor Classroom idea. Continuing funding from the Orfalea Foundations, with the guidance and support of Adrianna Foss and Lois Mitchell, has enabled me to further develop Outdoor Classroom concepts while working in depth with most of the child care centers in Santa Barbara County. Teachers, directors, and parents from hundreds of centers have been both generous and gracious in sharing their experience of implementing their Outdoor Classrooms.

As that implementation has spread, the members of the Outdoor Classroom Demonstration Site executive committee have been constant contributors of ideas and a source of support along with my Los Angeles administrator and friend of over twenty-five years, Lynn Farwell. Ellen Veselack, CEC preschool director and my frequent co-presenter, and Theresa Embry, my Santa Barbara work partner, have been instrumental in cultivating hundreds of Outdoor Classrooms while providing me with a steady source of stories and learning from the field.

Last, but foremost, I would not have been able to write the book without the steadfast love, infinite patience, encouragement, and contributions of my wife and work partner of over thirty years, Elyssa Nelson, CEC executive director. Our lifetime collaboration has made it all possible.

Cultivating Outdoor Classrooms



INTRODUCTION

The Role of the Outdoor Classroom

THE OUTDOOR CLASSROOM is a philosophy and a practice that benefits all children, particularly those enrolled in early childhood education (ECE) programs. In this book, you will learn how to create the Outdoor Classroom, guided by these premises:

1. Education is not an end in itself. Early childhood education is much more than preparing children for K–12 programs; its first and foremost responsibility is to honor the process of childhood and the uniqueness of each individual child as it supports every child in realizing his or her full potential.
2. Effective programs for children reflect a vision and a set of values. The Outdoor Classroom is built on the premise that society seeks to serve the highest good.
3. Process is as important as content in the Outdoor Classroom: children learn as much from their teachers, the environment, and the program's vision as from the content of a curriculum.

Note on Implementing the Outdoor Classroom in Challenging Climates

The Outdoor Classroom Project, from which the content of this book evolved, began in Southern California. Many of the examples in this book are taken from that location. The philosophy, principles, and practices are, however, applicable in all climates. This is discussed in more detail in chapter 2.

Looking Back at the 1950s



There is something to be said for the view that the quality of childhood peaked in the United States in the 1950s. Two world wars and the Great Depression were over. The economy was strong. One of the great scourges of twentieth-century childhood, polio, was on its way to defeat. Many families could afford for the mother to stay at home. Pressures on most children were low: school demands were mild, summer was still downtime, and children probably had more time on their own than at any other point in American history.

Clearly, not all children had golden childhoods in the 1950s. But some elements of that era provide useful reference points when we look at what is happening to childhood today:

- Children spent much of their time outside, often in natural settings.
- Children enjoyed a lot of unstructured free time.
- Children spent much of their time with little or no adult supervision.

Compare these conditions to those of most children today, and you can see what a difference fifty years has made. Today far fewer children enjoy unstructured outdoor play. Instead, the majority of American children have become preoccupied with electronic devices. Physical inactivity, along with changes in diet, have produced an epidemic of obesity among children. Diagnoses of attention deficit disorder steadily increase. More and more children lack any meaningful contact with nature.



How the Outdoor Classroom Can Address These Problems

The Outdoor Classroom addresses the problems facing children today with certain principles, elements, characteristics, and tenets:

Principles

- Time—Children benefit from spending substantial time outdoors.
- Activities—Even with a minimally developed yard, there are very few children’s activities that cannot be done outside.
- Initiation—Children’s development is optimized when they spend a significant amount of time participating in child-initiated activities that are teacher supported.
- Nature—Children need a connection to nature in order to be whole.

Key Elements

- Teachers and program directors must *be interested* in the Outdoor Classroom and *committed* to making it happen.
- Teachers and program administrators must have the *skills and knowledge* to make it happen.
- *Physical resources* are needed to support the Outdoor Classroom (toys, equipment, etc.).
- Parents, executive management, and owners or governing boards of centers must *allow*, and hopefully *support*, the Outdoor Classroom.

Characteristics

- Children spend substantial *periods of time* outside, and it is easy and safe for them to get there; they are free to move easily between the indoors and outdoors.
- *Space* is available for all activities, including running.
- A full range of activities are available for children to participate in, including many activities that are traditionally thought of as “indoor activities,” even when there isn’t a fully developed yard.

- While outside, children frequently initiate their own activities.
- Children are engaged with their activities, and the teachers are actively engaged with them.
- The outdoor program supports continuous learning and the fact that children are learning all the time.
- The outdoor curriculum is a distinct and robust part of the overall program and changes with children's changing needs and interests.

Tenets

- Learning occurs everywhere and all the time.
- Outdoors, the process of mastering the fundamentals of literacy, math, and science is greatly enhanced in a curriculum that is holistic and complete.
- The foundation of cognitive development and success in later life begins with, and relies on, physical activity during the critical first five years of brain development.

To implement the Outdoor Classroom successfully, you'll need the following:

- a vision of what you want to achieve
- an awareness of the challenges facing today's children
- a grasp of developmental theory
- an understanding of the Outdoor Classroom's principles and practices
- the ability to assess children's progress in the Outdoor Classroom

Preschool Politics and Play

For decades, the role of play in children's development has been a contentious issue. Advocates for adult-driven academic programs have quarreled with advocates for children's right to unstructured, self-initiated play. Recent funding emphasis on kindergarten readiness as well as the standards movement have intensified the stakes in this battle. Advocates for the importance of play have responded by forming

groups like the International Play Association, the American Association for the Child's Right to Play, and the National Institute for Play. Recent books pleading the case of play include Elizabeth Jones and Renatta M. Cooper's *Playing to Get Smart* and David Elkind's *The Power of Play*.

The efforts of advocates for play are grounded in the belief that children learn best through play—that like other mammals, children develop physically, cognitively, psychologically, emotionally, socially, and linguistically through play. Children are hardwired for play; it's how they learn about themselves, other people, and the world around them.



If learning through play is completely natural to children, where does adult-designed learning fit in? The Outdoor Classroom's answer is it must fit in *very carefully*, particularly for very young children. Adult-designed programs are commonly accompanied by adult expectations and standards (and these, in turn, characterize some efforts by children as “mistakes”). Everyone learns best when relaxed. Play, almost by definition, is relaxing and open ended.

During unstructured play, children only need to satisfy themselves. They can try something over and over until it satisfies them and their companions. They are not forced to compete with each other or be evaluated by adult standards. They participate when and how they feel comfortable. Their play is usually seamless, moving from one plot or interest to another. Play reflects the natural rhythms of children's concentration and curiosity. When opportunities for play occur in enriched environments, children develop the skills that formal education strives for: literacy, math, and science.

Unstructured play is imperiled today. What passes for play in many ECE programs is more a product of adult and commercial influences than it was fifty years ago. Nonetheless, adults who are devoted to child-centered play can protect and nurture play that is structured naturally by children's initiative rather than by adults.

Between the social factors that discourage children's play and the emphasis on adult-defined outcomes in ECE programs, it is amazing that play can hold its own anymore as a valued linchpin in children's lives. The Outdoor Classroom turns play into an adult-supported child-led learning strategy in ECE programs.



A New Guiding Vision for Early Childhood Education

Childhood is a critical stage of human growth. While I watched my daughter nursing and caring for her new child recently, I marveled at how a nine-month gestation had produced a healthy baby. I realized how much more work and focus would be needed to guide that child forward into a mature and healthy adulthood. As difficult as pregnancy was for my daughter, she now faces a much longer and more complex task, as do her husband and all of the people who will be part of her daughter's young life.

Children need a nurturing childhood to emerge as healthy, whole adults, just as fetuses need those nine months inside nurturing wombs. As a society, we've learned a lot about the importance of prenatal care—but how much do most of us know about *postnatal* care? We need a social vision for nurturing childhood as much as we do for nurturing gestation. How different would well-nurtured children look as adults? How would our society look if it were populated by such people?

Seeing childhood as a period of gestation in which children must be protected, nurtured, and supported before they are formally taught facts and cognitive skills is fundamental to the vision of the Outdoor Classroom.

That said, I see the Outdoor Classroom as only one among many elements that are important in serving and supporting children's development. (Others include good parenting, good schooling, and fruitful social activities.) Programs in which the Outdoor Classroom's vision can thrive include programs labeled ECE, child care, day care, preschool, and nursery school. The Outdoor Classroom can be implemented in family child care settings as well.



The Outdoor Classroom: Fulfilling a Vision for Childhood

The Outdoor Classroom's vision is simple: children benefit from spending more time outdoors, especially in natural places. Its goal is equally simple: to increase the quantity, quality, and benefit of outdoor experience for children.

Here is an overview of the key features of the Outdoor Classroom.

The Outdoors Is a Primary Environment for Children

The outdoors is an important learning environment. Learning takes place outdoors that doesn't occur indoors. It is important, then, that outdoor environments be as richly and thoughtfully equipped as indoor ones. Children should be able to move seamlessly between indoors and outdoors; their play and learning should be as easy in one place as the other. Adults should not treat one location as more educational than the other.

Freedom for Children to Play on Their Own

A fundamental principle of the Outdoor Classroom is children's right to initiate their own activities. Children need to explore, imagine, try new things, and learn alone or with friends. Ultimately, what any of us learns most deeply is what we have explored "by ourselves."





Learning Takes Time

Too many adults who work with children try to hurry them. Pressuring children to hurry up inhibits rather than accelerates learning. Like almost everyone else, children learn best when they are relaxed and have open-ended time in which to create their own activities. They need time to refine and anchor new skills. The Outdoor Classroom encourages children to spend as much time as they want outdoors. The *time* children have is often directly related to the *freedom* they have.

Children Need Physical Activity

Physical activity is necessary for children's development and health. Open space offers children opportunities for big movement, vigorous social play, and explorations big and small. Their activities help them refine motor skills and teach them how the world works.



A Full Range of Activities

The Outdoor Classroom believes, “Everything you can do indoors, you can do outdoors, and even more!” Part of the Outdoor Classroom’s vision is that indoor and outdoor spaces constitute a single learning environment.





Comprehensive, Holistic, Emergent Curriculum

Curriculum is one of the trickiest elements in ECE. How do we support children's development instead of imposing our own adult agendas on them? In the Outdoor Classroom, we view curriculum as more than an adult-designed course of study or activities. Instead, it is everything that happens during a child's day, everything that a child comes in contact with. Adults observe and respond to children's needs and interests, taking this expanded understanding of curriculum into account.



Engaged Children and Engaged Teachers

Engagement is key to learning. Real learning occurs only when children become engaged with the environment and the people in it, usually through activities that they themselves initiate. Paradoxically, in ECE settings, this means that truly engaged teachers are often in the background, observing and responding rather than leading. Engaged teachers support children who are initiating their own learning.

Developmentally Appropriate Activities



The term *developmentally appropriate* in the Outdoor Classroom means that activities always lie within children's capacity to handle them and are never forced on children. Developmentally appropriate practices are fundamental to effective learning and to the well-being of children.

Moving Beyond This Year's Hot Topic

To the uninformed eye, the Outdoor Classroom may look like nothing more than children playing outside, as children always have. But play in the Outdoor Classroom means something much deeper. And that something is not just the next hot topic, the next new thing. Rather, it is a return to a very old thing: child-centered learning.

The Outdoor Classroom shifts ECE from a primarily indoor, teacher-initiated model to one that embraces outdoor, child-initiated play as critical to children's well-being. By moving children and their activities outdoors, the character and type of what they do are transformed. Children regain control over their activities and become responsible for their own learning and growth, supported by attentive adults who ensure their safety and stimulation. Teachers relinquish control to become observers and supporters.

Reflection

Close your eyes, take a deep breath, and relax. Clear your mind of thoughts. Try to recall the earliest time you can remember being outdoors. Where were you? What were you doing? Who were you with? How did you feel? What did you hear? What did you smell? What did you see? What was the value of that experience? Do children today have similar experiences? Do you think they should?