



# TRANSFORMING

## Your Outdoor Early Learning Environment



**LISA DALY**

Photographs by **JENNA KNIGHT**



# Transforming Your Outdoor Early Learning Environment





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## Early Learning Theories Made Visible

## Loose Parts

## Loose Parts 2

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## Loose Parts 4



# **Transforming Your Outdoor Early Learning Environment**

**LISA DALY**

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For my parents, Don and Lois,  
who give me love, time, encouragement,  
validation, hope, guidance, and  
wisdom unconditionally.







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Living Willow  
Hut





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# Introduction to *Transforming Your Outdoor Early Learning Environment*

Visiting early childhood practicum students in a wide variety of environments has been one of my pleasures and passions. One program is quaint and welcoming, while another is filled with rich play opportunities for children. I never know until I arrive what the program's characteristics will be. I find that I am drawn to imperfect programs, but the feel and environment are important. A good program, I have determined over the years, must always be filled with joy, warmth, connections, a sense of belonging, flexible spaces, intriguing loose parts, engagement, risk, reflection, and intentional educators. That is quite a list of qualities, and they are not seen in every program.

Unfortunately, today is one of those days when I am observing a program that lacks many of these qualities. Upon my arrival, I am escorted to an outdoor play space that is hot and narrow with an asphalt surface. A few random plastic toys clutter the area. The air is filled with arguing as 12 children compete for limited plastic riding toys. Lucky children attempt to maneuver riding toys in the limited space. Some children run around aimlessly while two children stand and stare. There is no evidence of the natural world. The practicum student tries to remain positive, but she assumes an authoritarian role as she strives to maintain some sense of order. My heart aches for the children, families, and teachers of this program. It does not have to be this way. Simple ways exist to transform sterile outdoor areas into beautiful, captivating, and engaging spaces, even with limited resources.

Thoughtfully planned outdoor classrooms provide active play opportunities that are vital to young children's healthy development. Children thrive as they explore and engage in beautiful environments with natural elements. Inspiring outdoor learning spaces improve children's well-being, support learning and development, change behavior, and encourage



healthy risk-taking. An effective outdoor environment, however, depends greatly on design and materials. Outdoor play yards come in a wide variety of shapes and sizes, with diverse circumstances that may be considered a delight or a barrier: size, ground coverings, permanent features, natural elements, storage, and resources. When design obstacles are viewed as opportunity rather than a challenge, many creative and favorable possibilities emerge.

Outdoor play zones for all ages of children follow the same principles, but aspects of the environment require different considerations. We adjust ground surfaces, equipment heights, and the size of the space to meet developmental needs. A smaller protected sand area is appropriate for infants and toddlers, while an expansive sand area is needed for the active play of preschoolers and school-aged children. Children can use the same loose parts according to their interests and abilities. An infant crawls up a wood plank propped on a tire. A toddler walks up the inclined plank and jumps off the tire to the grass below. A preschooler jumps from tire to tire. A school-aged child designs an elaborate obstacle course using tires and planks.

Reflected in this book are outdoor design ideas geared for young children ages zero to five, although the design ideas are suitable for school-aged children as well. In fact, two of my recent memories involve school-aged children's active engagement with transformed environments. The first incident occurred at an open house for a renovated family child care outdoor environment. Older siblings of children attending the program were captivated all afternoon. Their sustained engagement and actions with sand and the mud kitchen were a delight to watch. The second incident happened as I finished transforming a toddler yard on a rural elementary school campus. The school is a one-room classroom consisting of kindergarten through third grade students. The older children kept peeking at our construction work throughout the installation day but were redirected by their teachers to other areas of the play yard. Upon completion of the yard, I invited the children to come check it out. They were immediately enthralled with the trajectory wall, where objects or water can slide down ramps and through tubing, and with the sand area. These students are lucky, as they will have access to the play zones during their outdoor time.

Design ideas appropriate for both center- and home-based environments are included in this book. Outdoor play zones are the same for each program type, but various aspects of the environment require different considerations. Creating outdoor spaces in family child care programs, for example, requires thought concerning home and child care usage needs. Space may be limited in home programs, or providers may want to maintain adult spaces when children are not present. Many of the book's images

are taken in family child care environments. Hopefully the photos will inspire you to create distinctive spaces, whether at a home- or center-based program.

This book invites you to reimagine and reconstruct your image of conventional play yards and create beautiful outdoor learning spaces on a limited budget, using natural elements and loose parts that offer children opportunities for irresistible engaging explorations. Join me on a journey to transform outdoor play environments as I share ideas, inspiration, and benefits for changing your own outdoor environment. Learn the basics for designing, transforming, and maintaining specific outdoor play zones.

First, I want to be transparent and disclose that I am not a landscape or playground architect. I am a retired early childhood college professor with many years of practical experience as a classroom educator and administrator in preschool, parent cooperative, and college lab settings. I know children, development, and learning well. I can spot what children find fascinating, and I know how to set up spaces to support and extend their interests. Recently I have been mentoring educators in transforming their thinking and environments. During mentoring sessions, I use an approach that results in amazing transformation of play yards, educator thinking, and children's behavior, learning, and play opportunities. Many educators have asked about this process. I am happy to share my joy and design plan for transforming outdoor environments with you here.

## Chapter Organization

Chapters are organized according to play zones, selected because of their potential to encourage schema learning (repeating patterns in children's play), play themes, and developmentally appropriate learning. Zones can be clustered into creative (art studios, clay studios, sound gardens), imaginative (mud kitchens and small worlds), active (construction, trajectory, and large motor), sensory (sand and water), and quiet (cozy areas):

**Art studio:** a space for children to do art outside, such as drawing or painting on surfaces with different media and designing, modeling, or transforming materials in new ways

**Clay studio:** a space for children to express their energy, creativity, emotions, and ideas as they manipulate natural clay

**Sound garden:** a space for sound exploration, using upcycled materials such as pots and pans for children to explore pitch, dynamics, tempo, and rhythm



**Mud kitchen:** sometimes referred to as an outdoor kitchen, a space designed for children to pretend to cook, mix concoctions, experiment, and transform

**Small world:** imaginative play experiences in miniature, similar to a fairy garden or dollhouse; playscapes that promote dramatic play and expand children's imaginations

**Construction zone:** a space for building real and imaginary structures on a larger scale than indoors

**Trajectory zone:** an area to explore moving objects, featured as a trajectory wall with inclines secured to a vertical surface or offered in other zones such as sand and water

**Large-motor zone:** a space with large loose parts, such as tires, crates, planks, and ladders, that provides an alternative to fixed play equipment

**Sand zone:** a spacious area of sand for children to dig, tunnel, trench, excavate, dump, and make sandcastles and mud pies

**Water zone:** a sensory play area for children to freely explore the physical properties of water with a wide variety of containers, tools, and loose parts

**Cozy spaces and hiding places:** protected, peaceful, and safe refuges for children to have solitude, relax, or self-regulate, alone or with a friend

### Value of the Zone

Each chapter begins with a vignette story followed by an introduction to the value of the zone for children's development.

### Schema Learning

In each chapter you will discover ways that common action schemas are spotted in the play zone. I encourage you to intentionally look for these behaviors and implement the ideas to enhance schema learning. It is important to look for patterns in behavior and not just isolated incidents. Be creative in discovering additional ways and opportunities for children to explore schemas.

### Fostering Learning in the Zone

Highlighting stories of children at play, this section covers how play in the area fosters children's competencies, development, and learning in social

and emotional, language and communication, cognitive, physical, and expressive arts domains.

### **Essential Components**

Practical guidance is provided on the important elements that the zone needs so it will be an engaging and effective play space. There are considerations for zone location, work space, furnishings and materials, loose parts, storage and organization, and cleaning and maintaining the area. Advice is given about ground surfaces, functionality, setup, and special touches to enhance and beautify the space.

### **Before and After Photos**

In each chapter, a before photo of how a zone looked is highlighted alongside a photo taken after a transformation. The before photos demonstrate how a space can be changed for function, organization, and aesthetic appeal with minimal resources. The after photos illustrate creative ideas for designing stunning and captivating play spaces.

### **Top Tips for Designing the Zone**

There is nothing more satisfying than creating a play zone that is beautiful, engaging, organized, and functional, but doing so takes time, hard work, and thoughtfulness. Detailed suggestions for designing each zone are found within the chapter text; however, for those of you who are impatient and like a quick, concise how-to guide, check out the top tips list offered with the “after” photos.

### **Tools and Materials**

This section includes a list of tools and loose parts that are particularly good for the zone, but please feel free to add your own loose parts ideas. Storage ideas for accessibility, simplicity, and organization are included. Maintenance suggestions highlight ways to ensure safety, cleanliness, and usage.

### **Images**

Rich, vivid photographs illustrate how chapter concepts look in real programs. There are design variations from center-based and home-based



early care and education programs, as well as images of how concepts are applied in large and small spaces. Also included are photos of materials, accessories, storage options, organization systems, and children engaged in each zone. I am a visual learner and find that images trigger my creativity and make it easier for me to understand concepts. My hope is that the photographs provide you with inspiration and ideas for creating play spaces with upcycled materials that are captivating, aesthetically beautiful, and engaging.

### **The Extra Dimension**

In this section, a unique idea for adding to the play zone is offered. This is a little something extra that will enrich the play space for children. It may be a creative idea, an unusual furnishing, or a way to make the space more visually appealing.

### **Supporting Equitable Learning**

Adaptations and supports are included to ensure that all children are included as successful, engaged learners in the space. To design a play zone that works for every child, consideration must be given for children with a variety of abilities, languages, cultures, and experiences, as well as ages and sizes.

### **Adaptations for Infants and Toddlers**

Mobile infants and toddlers can engage in all play zones if materials are suitable, safe, and accessible. Tips are provided for adapting play zones so infants and toddlers can freely explore developmentally appropriate materials safely and securely.

### **Appendices**

Appendix A gives an example of the Be, Do, Become process discussed in chapter 1. Appendix B provides a rubric for assessing your current outdoor environment and planning your future transformation. Appendix C is a complete list of the materials, nature materials, and loose parts suggested in the book, organized by chapter. Appendices are available starting on page 239 or by scanning the QR codes on pages 21, 22, and 26.

## Beginning the Transformation Journey

Outdoor learning environments should be designed with the same intentionality as indoor learning environments. With creativity and determination, all indoor play zones can be set up outdoors. Furthermore, bringing inside play experiences outdoors can generate new interest and play prospects. Imagine the joy that a child experiences when allowed to freely explore and transform an outdoor environment into whatever they desire, individually or with friends. I recommend that you begin by reading the first chapter, which unpacks the what, why, and how of transforming outdoor learning environments. Then dive into play zone chapters for ideas, inspiration, and benefits, and to learn designing, transforming, and maintenance strategies. May you be encouraged and inspired on your journey to transform captivating outdoor learning environments for young children.





# Chapter 1

## The What, Why, and How of Transforming Outdoor Learning Environments

Early Head Start funding afforded Maggie the opportunity to receive mentoring while transforming her family child care program into a loose parts play environment. Initially, Maggie and her husband, Randy, wanted to preserve a large portion of their backyard as an adult space without evidence of child care. Throughout the weeks of mentoring and participating in the outdoor transformation process, including a field trip to see the expansive, natural, and captivating environment of another home-based program, Maggie and Randy realized that child care, beauty, and personal space can coexist. With their growing knowledge of the loose parts philosophy and the importance of natural environments, they were willing to commit their entire outdoor area to children's play. The result was a visually appealing, engaging, natural environment. Today the two enjoy morning coffee and evening dinners in their beautiful yard while children delight in the inspiring environment during the day.

### ***What Is Transforming Your Outdoor Early Learning Environment?***

Dreaming about captivating learning spaces in your outdoor environment is exciting, but knowing where to begin or what to do to enhance your space can be challenging and confusing. Following a comprehensive, practical, and effective process will clarify your vision, affirm your values, and direct you in planning an environment with elements that positively affect the children who use them. The what, why, and how components provided here reveal the essential beliefs that serve as the foundation for transforming outdoor play spaces and are intended to guide you from project inception to installation.



The *Transforming Your Outdoor Early Learning Environment* approach is one that does the following:

**Requires minimal resources:** Many early childhood programs survive on limited operating funding. Often most startup funds are delegated to materials and equipment for the interior environment, leaving little or no resources for outdoor play spaces. The good news is that money is not necessarily a barrier. Engaging outdoor play zones may be created with imagination, effort, knowledge of community resources, volunteer help, and minimal cash.

**Features loose parts:** Loose parts are fundamental materials for every outdoor play zone. Their availability, versatility, economic feasibility, sustainability, and attractiveness make them the perfect open-ended items for children's play. The undefined nature of loose parts allows for maximum creative use in children's play.

**Uses upcycled materials:** Sustainability is one of the biggest challenges that currently faces our planet. Educating the next generation to be good stewards and being one yourself are top priorities. One way to help children learn about their impact on the environment is through the reuse of materials. Finding discarded items and repurposing them to create new play possibilities is a central component of the framework.

**Integrates nature:** Many children today live in neighborhoods surrounded by asphalt and concrete and have little connection with nature. Contact with nature contributes to the health and well-being of children (Chawla 2015). Adding natural materials such as plants, rocks, and tree trunks gives texture to play surfaces, enhances outdoor play spaces, and connects children and nature. Tree trunks are cut sections of the large central part





of a tree. At 12 to 24 inches in width, they sit on end and can range up to 18 inches in height. They are wide enough for children to walk, climb, balance, and sit on.

**Emphasizes aesthetics and authenticity:** Beauty is a fundamental component of outdoor play spaces. Environments affect how we feel, think, and behave. Surrounding children and educators with art, natural materials, and interesting textures, colors, and sounds enhances the beauty of play spaces. Authentic materials offer an aesthetic attractiveness while providing meaning and relevance to children's play. Children often prefer to engage with real cooking, art, or gardening tools used by adults rather than play imitations. Generally, real materials are appealing, of greater quality, and more durable. They often work better and are more effective and reliable.

For children, *Transforming Your Outdoor Early Learning Environment* is an approach that does the following:

**Recognizes outdoor play as central to whole-child learning and development:** Thoughtfully designed outdoor learning environments support children's growth and development across the emotional, social, physical, cognitive, and creative domains. Children are capable and competent learners and are the most important individuals in their own learning and

development. Giving children many varied outdoor experiences and opportunities supports and challenges their whole learning and development.

**Incorporates opportunities for open-ended exploration and active learning:** Children learn best through experiential, active learning opportunities. Child-initiated outdoor explorations including loose parts foster creativity, self-discovery, self-direction, self-evaluation, expression of feelings, and freedom of choice. Active learning means the following:

- Children control materials rather than the materials controlling the child.
- Children decide what they are going to do with the materials and how they are going to use them.
- Children can use materials in multiple ways.

**Offers intriguing and captivating play spaces:** Rich, intriguing environments offer children opportunities for risk-taking, inquiry, wonder, innovation, and imagination. The complexity of the landscape affords a variety of play activities.

**Supports equitable learning:** Children of all ages, stages, temperaments, learning modalities, and abilities can successfully engage in rich, in-depth outdoor experiences. The open-ended nature of loose parts and flexible spaces accommodates all children.

**Offers opportunities for meaningful connections:** Intentional outdoor spaces and experiences are designed for collaboration. The availability, type, and location of loose parts along with space layout offer possibilities for children to connect with others and build strong relationships.

For educators, *Transforming Your Outdoor Early Learning Environment* is an approach that:

**Incorporates a design process based on inquiry:** An open-ended method to design is guided by reflection, assessment, and analysis. Involvement in the process creates more innovative, collaborative, and thoughtful designs that reflect the ideas and vision of all who participate. Time spent planning up front will eliminate potential challenges in the future.

**Provides an action plan:** An overall master plan offers a big-picture look at the outdoor play zones. A plan keeps the transformation on track and provides a guide for implementing the process in the most effective way. Whether the design is carried out all at once or broken down into phases



and installed over an extended time as finances, time, and energy allow, a master plan ensures continuity.

**Involves imagination, creativity, and satisfaction:** Finding sources of inspiration, upcycling items in innovative ways, discovering solutions to problems, collaborating with others, and engaging in hard work all bring immense joy and satisfaction. Transforming unattractive and underused parts of the play yard into beautiful and captivating play spaces is exciting, particularly when you see children's delight and engagement.

**Focuses on connections and community:** Participating in a reflective and collaborative process builds connections. It is very satisfying to actively participate in the design and construction phases and know that your ideas and help are valued. Relationships are strengthened as teachers, family members, and friends work alongside each other. Community partnerships develop as materials are purchased and donated from local sources. Environments are designed to reflect the natural features in the community, such as rock and wood native to the area, bringing a sense of community and familiarity to children and families.

### ***The Why of Transforming Your Outdoor Early Learning Environment***

After a scenic drive through magnificent coastal redwoods and spectacular segments of the California coast, my friend Cheri and I met Nina, a family child care provider in Humboldt County. Nina had previously attended one of our presentations on transforming outdoor environments with loose parts, and she was excited to tell us her story. After learning about loose parts, Nina removed the gray plastic climbing castle from the large-motor area in her yard and replaced it with large, open-ended loose parts—tires, planks, and tree trunks. At one point, she even added a mini trampoline. Nina told us how transformation in the children's skill and ability levels was immediate. Previously, children simply ran around in the area, ignoring the climbing castle. After adding the large materials, play in the space dramatically changed. She witnessed increased muscle strength, balance, communication, risk-taking, problem solving, creativity, and collaboration when the children were in control of designing and changing the loose parts. Nina observed more growth in a few short hours than she had seen over a year. Creating new learning spaces from unused, uninteresting, and unattractive areas in a play yard supports loose parts play, schema learning, and common outdoor play themes in addition to fostering children's learning and development.

## Supporting Loose Parts Play Yards

Nina instinctively recognized the value of loose parts over fixed play equipment in a play yard. Outdoor play environments composed of loose parts afford children opportunity to imagine, discover, and create in ways that do not happen with fixed play yard equipment. Regular play yards start to feel rather sterile, while play yards filled with loose parts change as children's interests and competencies evolve. While there are advantages to fixed play equipment, play with loose parts offers a richer learning environment.

### Play Yard Comparison

#### Fixed Equipment

#### Loose Parts

Expensive to purchase and can be expensive to install.	Inexpensive or free; sustainable.
Needs weekly inspections to look for use, weathering, and vandalism on the structure and protective ground surfacing; needs quarterly inspections of equipment and surfaces for wear and tear. May need to replace hardware.	Require some maintenance. Some resources need to be washed and cleaned. For example, mud kitchen utensils need to be hosed off periodically.
	Need to be assessed for appropriateness prior to placing in the environment.
	Need to be checked before and during play sessions to remove any hazards. For example, splintered wooden planks need sanding.
Requires no additional labor other than replacing broken, cracked, loose, missing, rusted pieces if needed.	Must be initially gathered and collected by educators or donated by parents and the community.
	Must be replenished as they wear out.
Requires close supervision, particularly near swings, slides, and climbers, where most playground injuries result (Sawyers 1994).	Invite educators to stand back, observe, and allow children to lead their play.
Requires no storage.	Require storage such as containers, shelving units, or sheds that children may independently access.
	Invite children to participate in cleanup routine.
Is static and intended to be used in specific ways.	Create richer play environments for children.
	Allow children to redesign the environment as frequently as desired.
Benefits gross-motor play (climbing, jumping, spinning, sliding).	Accommodate all play types equally (creative, imaginative, social, physical, and cognitive).
May not be inclusive or accessible for all children.	Are inclusive of all children.
Is less flexible to children's ideas.	Allow all children to create, imagine, explore, transform, and more to make their ideas real in the world.
Becomes boring over time.	Become more engaging over time as children's skills increase.
Provides opportunity for social interaction.	Foster high levels of peer play and social unity.

Suzanna Law and Morgan Leichter-Saxby offer a comparison that illustrates benefits of loose parts play yards over yards composed of traditional, fixed equipment (2015). I encourage you to compare features of both play yard options to determine for yourself which approach offers deeper learning opportunities for children.

### **Supporting Schema Learning: It's Not about Purple**

A key reason for creating well-designed outdoor spaces is to respond to and support children's intent. Observing for children's fascinations, focus, persistence, and resolve will guide you in creating intriguing spaces and provisioning them with loose parts that support and extend children's interests. Careful observation of children at play will reveal specific recurring interests or behaviors called *schemas*. Schema learning is a theory about how children learn and think: "A schema is a thread of thought which is demonstrated by repeated actions and patterns in children's play or art" (Wijk 2008, 1). Young children learn and form cognitive structures in their minds through schema learning. Action schemas are one type of schema; they focus on ideas about movement in the physical world. Action schemas are typically easy to identify, so they are a good way to begin schema recognition in the outdoors. Characteristics of children engaged in schema play include intense concentration, persistence, complete absorption, a sense of wonder, and deep enjoyment and satisfaction. Once adults notice schemas in young children's play, they can respond in ways that extend and support children's learning.

One of the most helpful ways I have found to discover children's interests is to pursue the action, rather than the object with which the child is playing. Follow the verb rather than the noun. While visiting a practicum student, I observed the student attentively watching a four-year-old girl make circles with a purple crayon on round paper attached to a lazy Susan. The child was skilled at placing the crayon tip securely on the paper and spinning the base while holding the crayon on the paper. She swiftly spun the lazy Susan round and round and round. For several minutes, the girl remained focused and persevered with the spinning action. When the child finished, I asked the student what she noticed about that moment. Totally missing the point, she replied, "She likes the color purple." It was not about purple or the crayon (nouns) but the rotating action (verb). The girl had a fascination with rotating schema. When you practice following children's actions, you will get really good at identifying their intent. Once you have observed multiple occurrences of the same action, you can determine ways to support and extend children's interests. Here are some examples of focusing on the action.



## Things or Actions

### Noun = Thing

### Verb = Action

Ball	rolling, accelerating, racing, cascading, falling, speeding, throwing, bouncing, tossing, tumbling, dropping, propelling, flinging
Scarf	spinning, twirling, rotating, revolving, whirling, spiraling, turning, twisting, wrapping, covering
Rope	connecting, joining, tying, attaching, hooking, securing, fastening, fixing, binding
Clay	pounding, pinching, squishing, squeezing, rolling, digging, shredding, crushing, hitting, tearing, flattening, stretching, poking, pulling, pushing

Here is a list of what to look for in action schemas that are commonly seen in children's play. Know that spotting a behavior pattern and supporting a child's interest is more important than discerning which schema is happening.

**Transporting:** Children with an interest in transporting like to move objects from one place to another. They may transport containers of water to the sand area or push a dump truck loaded with dirt or collect a bucket of natural materials. Transporters may also be interested in putting things in their pockets or being transported themselves, such as riding in a wagon. Loose parts particularly good for transporters include all kinds of containers and materials to move from one place to another.

**Transforming:** Children with a fascination for transforming like to change things to see what happens. They may add water to dirt, mix paint colors, or reshape clay. Dressing up and changing appearance, combining vinegar and baking soda, and rearranging materials to create new spaces are exciting experiences for transformers. Malleable loose parts that are especially good for transformers include paint, sand, water, and clay. Design materials, textiles, and blocks are also good options.

**Trajectory:** Children who are captivated with trajectory like things that move through space. They may throw or kick objects, roll balls down inclines, or pour water into funnels or rain gutters. Their own bodies may be the trajectory object as they jump off high places, swing, or roll down hills. Loose parts that support an interest in trajectory include inclines and a variety of objects that roll.

**Rotation:** Children who gravitate toward objects that spin or roll have an interest in rotating schema. They may love to spin on a tire swing,

participate in salad spinner art, or spin tops. You may observe children drawing circles, rolling hoops and balls, or watching wheels go round and round. Loose parts that foster children's interest in rotation include materials that are round or that spin.

**Enclosing and enveloping:** Children who are attracted to making boundaries around things find enclosing appealing. They may use blocks to enclose space that may be referred to as a house, garage, or zoo. Children may also show an interest in enclosing if they paint a large shape and then fill in the shape's interior. Children who like covering and wrapping things may be attracted to enveloping. They may get inside hiding places, such as a cardboard box, industrial pipe, or blanket fort. Wrapping up a baby doll or covering up oneself with a blanket are favorite activities of envelopers. Loose parts for supporting an interest in enclosing and enveloping include textiles and construction materials.

**Connecting and disconnecting:** A fascination with connecting involves joining things together, while being drawn to taking things apart focuses on disconnecting. Children who like to connect may use rope or string to attach items and tie things up. They may also connect pipes or hoses. Children who are disconnectors like to take apart and scatter materials, knocking down block structures, breaking sticks into pieces, or smashing sandcastles. Loose parts that foster children's interest in connecting and disconnecting include rope, string, clay, sand, and pipes that connect.

### Supporting Play Themes

Children engage in a variety of common outdoor play themes, and once you know these themes you can create interesting spaces and provision the environment with loose parts to strengthen, support, and extend children's interests and learning. Jan White proposed the following framework of children's play themes based on her research and work with children (Casey and Robertson 2019).

**Adventure:** Pursuing adventure, stretching boundaries, discovering, risking, taking chances, anticipating, venturing, and innovating. Loose parts afford children unlimited possibilities to undertake adventure, whether it be building tall or creating climbing structures.

**Enclosure, dens, and special places:** Making private, hiding, quiet, and secret places. This play theme relates to enclosing schema. Loose parts of planks, crates, and textiles present children with opportunities to design hiding spaces.



**Prospect (height):** Surveying pursuits, seeking high places, views, and lookouts, assessing the landscape, and making maps. Elements in the environment such as boulders or trees to climb, planks to balance on, or a dirt hill to scale all further children's quest for high places.

**Paths and journeys:** Exploring ways to travel across areas, investigating tunnels, discovering shortcuts and secret passages. Meandering pathways created from pavers, stones, and wood planks with bridges, vine-covered archways, and tunnels welcome children to travel to unknown places.

**Hunter-gatherer activities:** Searching, collecting, tracking, discovering, pursuing, gathering, hiding, stashing, storing, saving, and hoarding. This play theme is associated with transporting schema. A wide variety of containers and natural loose parts offer children opportunity to satisfy their desire to find and collect.

**Animal allies:** Caring for plants and animals, connecting to nature and wildlife. Gardening spaces allow children to grow and harvest food. Composting spaces let children experience the responsibility of caring for our environment. Animal spaces such as chickens in a chicken coop, bird-feeding stations, or insects in a bug hotel offer children opportunity to watch, care for, connect, and protect living things.





**Imaginative narratives (stories, imagination, and fantasy):** Making sense of the world through fantasy narratives, small-world play, and experiences that deepen friendships and relationships. Loose parts for storytelling and fantasy play along with small-world options support children's imaginative endeavors.

## **How to Transform Outdoor Learning Environments: A Framework**

Transforming your outdoor environment may seem intimidating and challenging. You may feel overwhelmed and not know where to begin. You may lack vision or inspiration. Know that it is possible to transform any outdoor space into a beautiful and captivating learning environment, no matter the shape or size, with a thoughtful planning process. Following a framework can help you generate ideas, consider alternatives, identify considerations and resources, and ensure the overall success of your transformation. Framework phases include reflection, information collection, brainstorming and analysis, design development, action, and project construction.

### **Reflection Phase**

One time as I was visiting Roseville Community Preschool, Bev Bos told me a story of a family who was visiting their program to decide whether to enroll their son. As the mother and father struggled to get their child

to leave the play yard, the boy resisted and replied, “Leave me here!” His words reflected his innate awareness of the environment and the strong sense of safety, security, and adventure he felt there. When we enter a space, we are influenced by what we see and hear, and we receive implicit messages about what to expect and how to behave. An outdoor environment can encourage children to explore, take risks, connect, create, and be independent. The physical arrangement of materials, equipment, and space suggests what happens in the area. For example, a wide-open space says, “Run and shout.” Materials on low, accessible shelves promote independence. A cozy, private space invites children to relax and get away from the busy outdoor environment. Loose parts encourage children to use materials as they desire rather than in a designed way.

Transforming your space begins by participating in a “be, do, and become” reflective process. Reflect on who children are in outdoor spaces, how they currently use the spaces, and what they become or gain through play in these spaces. Use your understanding of children’s development, learning, and developmentally appropriate practices to guide your reflections. I was introduced to this process by early childhood educators from the Children’s Center at the University of California, Santa Barbara, who used the format when designing their outdoor play environment. The three-step progression of thought is revealing and helpful for designing outdoor or indoor play zones. Brainstorm (as a teaching staff if you work with others) a list of characteristics and actions you have observed in children as they engage in the outdoor environment. Start with the word *be*, followed by *do*, and then *become*. Record the identified words on chart paper. After completing this exercise, it is helpful to keep the words posted in an accessible space for an extended time so that words may be added.

**Be:** Who are children in the outdoors? For example, a child may be curious, creative, energetic, or messy. If you are stuck with this step, try working backward from actions you observe. For example, if I jump, I may be fearful or courageous. If I see something new, I may be excited or uncertain.

**Do:** What do children do in the space? These are the actions that children engage in, such as dumping, filling, spinning, climbing, and designing.

**Become:** What do children become as they play outdoors? For example, children may become confident, capable, strong, and compassionate through their actions.



Appendix A documents the Be, Do, Become process of an outdoor planning session with educators at Creative Spirit Learning Center in Fair Oaks, California.

For educators, the reflective phase is a time to consider what is working for you and what is not. The idea is to design spaces that promote independence, competency, discovery, risk, collaboration, and engagement for children. A thoughtfully designed space will allow more time for you to engage in meaningful observations, interactions, and conversations with children. Specific considerations for each play zone are provided in respective chapters, but here are a few questions to reflect on to enhance your current outdoor space:

- What loose parts and real tools can be added to each play zone?
- What materials and resources can be available for children to move around, modify their environment, and decide their use?
- How can adequate storage space be created in each zone so that materials may stay outdoors and not have to be hauled in and out each day?



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- How can materials be organized in a visible way so that children can independently access them and take them back without adult assistance?
- Where are the spaces for sensory exploration, constructing, creating, transforming, surveying, traversing, transporting, nurturing, and imagining?
- How can natural elements for exploring be incorporated in the environment?
- How can spaces be designed for convenience and easy cleanup?
- How can the play environment provide opportunities for children to gain competence and experience appropriate challenges?
- How are areas designed for ease of supervision?
- How can spaces for your comfort be created by including a bench, log, chair, or similar item to sit on?
- How can the space welcome families and provide a sense of belonging?
- How can spaces be created for families to connect and share?
- How can spaces be created for families to sit, hang out, and watch their child play?
- How can spaces be designed that reflect the lives, cultures, and interests of families in your program?

### Information Collection Phase

Assess the environment by exploring and investigating the current yard. It can be helpful to use a chart of outdoor play zones and record what is already present to support children's interests and ideas in the zone and what you would like to see. Appendix B: Assessing Your Current Outdoor Environment can be used as a guide. Often this step involves program educators, but it can include perspectives from children and families who use the play space. Selim Iltus and Roger Hart address the importance of transparency, feedback, and negotiation when children participate in the design process (1995). This recommendation also applies to families and educators. If you decide to involve children and families, asking specific questions to solicit perspectives is not enough. Token involvement does not help individuals develop competence in planning, designing, negotiating, and problem solving. Authentic participation, problem identification, shared decision-making, and discourse need to be transparent throughout the whole process for all involved participants.



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Observing other programs is an excellent way to generate design ideas. It has been my experience that early childhood educators are very receptive to giving program tours, sharing ideas, and offering valuable insight. You may discover solutions to design challenges, organizational strategies, new-found materials, or an intriguing way to set up a space. You may discover things that would *not* work for you, which is also helpful in identifying your vision. I prefer observing while children are present to see how they engage in the environment. Sometimes a space may seem too risky, noisy, or messy for your comfort, but your mind may be put at ease once you see how children use the materials. You will come away from program visitations feeling motivated, inspired, and encouraged.

Starting a gallery of inspirational photos can be another invaluable tool. As you discover photos of intriguing spaces and materials on image sharing and social media venues, save a copy and begin an inspiration board. Photos from program visitations and other places of inspiration can also be added. I frequently take photos of store displays, natural elements, and architectural elements that I find interesting when I am out and about. The intent is not to replicate exactly what you saw but rather to spark creativity, help you identify and refine important elements, and provide clear direction.

### **Brainstorming and Analysis Phase**

Now it is time to share and discuss the reflections and information that you have gathered. Refer to your discoveries about commonly seen characteristics, actions, and interests you observed in children as they used spaces. Consider the responses to guiding questions and other information you collected. What constraints need to be considered? What possibilities are there? Identify goals, priorities, uses for space, wishes, limitations, and resources. Formulate ideas about how best to design the outdoors. For example, if information gathering reveals children are intrigued with trajectory, design spaces to support their interest. If keeping areas flexible is a goal, create spaces with movable furnishings and loose parts. If a sand area is a priority, determine where it will go first. Concrete ground surfaces work well for multiple play zones, so thought is needed to determine which zone provides the best use of space. Will an art studio or construction area be the best choice? You may desire a hand water pump for the sand area, but lack of resources requires that it remain on the wish list. Limited space requires creative ways to ensure large-motor experiences. A sound garden may need to be located away from a neighbor's home.

## Design Development Phase

Beginning your transformation with a clearly defined plan and scope of design is critical to the success of the project. Time spent designing and planning will uncover potential problems and result in fewer costly mistakes. During the design development phase, you will gain a clear perspective of the overall environment layout by creating a sketch, a scaled drawing, and finally a schematic of the design to help you visualize the plan and see the big picture.

**Photograph the space:** Take “before” photos to document what the yard looks like before the transformation. The photos will be a helpful reference throughout the drawing and design phases. Sometimes sketches are confusing and a photo can provide clarity. It is also immensely powerful to look back at the existing space at the end of a project and see the incredible transformation.

**Sketch the space:** Draw a rough sketch of the play yard on paper. Start with a basic outline of the overall shape of the space, followed by large permanent features, and then move to specific elements. Include existing fixed and natural features, including permanent structures, sandboxes, pathways, trees, boulders, garden areas, and fences. Also identify ground surfaces and note the location of water sources, gates, stairs, and building doors and windows that may affect the design.

**Record measurements:** After your sketch is complete, it is time to record measurements. It is helpful to have two people assist with measuring. A contractor’s measuring wheel is a handy tool to quickly maneuver and measure long distances. One person can measure and call out the numbers while the second person helps and records the measurements on the sketch. Begin by recording the length and width of play space. Record the overall dimensions of each space. To get exact placement of fixed features, measure distances from at least two different points of reference. For example, measure the location of a tree from a fence line and a pathway. Be certain to clearly record beginning and ending points of each dimension on your sketch. Use a line with small perpendicular marks on its ends to show what the measurement represents. Take time to double-check measurements and make certain that all details are included on the sketch.

**Convert the sketch to a scaled drawing:** Once you have added all the measurements to your rough sketch, it is time to draw your sketch to scale. I find it helpful to transfer the sketch onto graph paper so the squares serve as the measuring unit. Use “1 square equals 1 foot” scale on graph paper for simplicity, or 1 square for 2 feet for large play yards. Make the plan as



big as possible, being certain that the space fits on the paper with space to spare along the edges. Then, beginning with the outdoor perimeter, start drawing elements in proportion with pencil. Add in doors, gates, windows, and other built-in features.

**Create a design schematic:** Now that you have a sketch to scale, it is time to create a preliminary design by organizing and defining locations of play zones. I typically make a few copies of the sketch so I can play with different zone locations and see which option works best. Each play zone chapter in this book contains information about location considerations, including sun, shade, ground cover, and amount of space, and whether the zone is quiet, noisy, active, or messy. A general rule is to begin with fixed features that cannot be changed. I often determine where water sources are first and locate water and sand areas near them if possible. Now is the time to be creative and develop a plan with colleagues. Use reflections, brainstorming sessions, and inspiration photos to decide the best usage of space. Refine the preliminary design into a final schematic. Consider making a colorful computer rendering of the schematic, or find a family member, colleague, or friend who is willing to help if you don't have the software or technical skills yourself.

**Develop a budget:** An important part of the design phase is developing a budget. Now that your design is complete, play zone locations, size, and ground coverings have been finalized. You are ready to calculate material quantities and receive pricing. Employees at landscape companies are extremely helpful in determining cubic yards of material needed based on the length, width, and depth of the space. Remember to factor in delivery fees.

**A friendly warning:** While it is important to have an overall design plan, I want to emphasize that the plan will change during installation. Most often these changes end up being better than the original plan. Borders or boundaries may change because of the shape and size of found tree trunks. As an area is created, more or less space may be necessary. A material or piece of furniture may not be available. Someone may find a unique element while collecting materials or come up with an irresistible new idea. I encourage you to be flexible and embrace these changes. The result will be magnificent.

## Action Phase

The action phase includes developing a plan to begin the play yard transformation. An established action plan will make for a successful project. Work to be done is identified and a timeline drawn up. It may be that you



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decide to complete the entire outdoor transformation at once or divide the project into manageable stages as time and resources allow.

Make a list of ground covers, furniture, fixtures, accessories, and materials for each play zone. You will find suggestions for these items specific to each play zone in each chapter. Appendix C: Outdoor Zone Materials and Accessories includes loose parts suggestions for various play zones. Once materials and donations are identified, they may be collected or purchased and scheduled for delivery.

Finding and collecting loose parts for play zones is exciting and immense fun, and I and many others find it addictive. Loose parts are everywhere, so always be on the lookout. Natural loose parts such as seedpods, leaves, and rocks may be found in your home yard, neighborhood, and community, and in nature at a beach, desert, mountain, or lake. Gathering a few natural objects found on the ground, such as pine cones and dead wood, for personal use may be permitted at some state parks, but you should check local regulations. Get children involved—remember that gathering and transporting are favorite activities. Garage sales and thrift stores are economical places to find pots, pans, and kitchen utensils. Home improvement stores and donation centers selling new and gently used furniture, home goods, building materials, and surplus items are perfect places to secure items that can be repurposed for play. Free loose parts can be found from cabinet makers (wood scraps), tree trimmers (tree trunks), and appliance stores (cardboard cove molding). Research the free or inexpensive resources in your local community, or ask other local educators for advice. Describe what loose parts are to neighbors, family members, and friends, and solicit their ideas and help collecting. You may be amazed by their contributions.

Determine the installation date(s) and prepare the site for transformation. Sometimes work needs to be completed prior to installation: moving a fence, removing a fixed climbing structure, or installing grass. It may be possible for some furniture, such as a mud kitchen or cozy area, to be constructed ahead of time. Organize materials and equipment according to play zones, and make certain that all crucial items are available. For example, you may need zip ties to secure a reed fence, paint supplies to stain a bridge, or screws to secure a trajectory track. Having materials at hand and accomplishing tasks early can save time later.

### **Project Construction Phase**

Post information about the installation in a prominent place, and spread the word about the date as well as needed donations, equipment, and support well in advance. Displaying the color rendering of the plan can create

anticipation. Solicit support from family members. Educators can talk about the project with family members during pickup and drop-off times and encourage them to sign up to help. Perhaps someone works as a tree trimmer and can begin to collect tree trunks. Perhaps somebody has rock, wood, or bricks on their property that they would like to donate. Often you will discover family members with expertise in specific areas such as carpentry or landscaping who are delighted to lend a hand. Most of the work requires no skill other than a willingness to show up and work hard. Work such as hauling sand and rock is labor intensive, so having people work in shifts is a good option. Some family members may not be able to commit to a full day but are more than willing to contribute a couple of hours of time. Provide a list of helpful items to bring, such as gloves, wheelbarrows, rakes, and shovels. For family members who cannot attend a work day, consider projects that can be done at home. Making pillows, repairing equipment, or cutting tree cookies (branch and log slices) are some options.

Welcome helpers by providing water, snacks, and lunch. Rich conversations and a sense of community occur while sharing food. Children show a sense of pride and ownership when they can share that their grandma painted the bridge or their dad made the sand area. Family members and staff connect with each other as they sand wood and put together furniture. Involving families and center staff in the installation is a way to build relationships, promote family engagement, and save costs and time. Participating in the installation is an in-kind activity for family members to record volunteer hours as part of any mandatory participation requirements. For families, volunteering with the play yard installation provides a sense of purpose, allows participants to learn new skills, and presents an opportunity to make friendships. Conversations about the shared experience will continue well after the installation. There is nothing more fulfilling for families than realizing how much of an impact volunteering can make on their child's education.

## **Outdoor Learning Environment Considerations**

Whether indoors or outdoors, the environment needs to reflect the children and families who attend the program as well as the surrounding community and landscape, featuring local natural resources. Additionally, both environments need to include a full range of permanent play zones designed for independent use. For outdoors specifically, other factors, such as selecting materials that stand up to changing seasons and weather conditions and handling vandalism, need to be considered as part of the design process. It is likewise important to consider aesthetics, functionality, and cost effectiveness.



## Feature Local Natural Resources

Having the play yard represent a community's landscape is an important aspect of its design. Natural elements from the area should dominate to provide a sense of belonging, familiarity, and community. The Early Years School in Santa Monica, California, is located three blocks from a sandy ocean beach. The play yard is filled with sand, driftwood, sea glass, and seashells from the local landscape. With rugged, rocky shores nearby, rocks and pebbles used as borders, landscaping, and loose parts bring these elements into the space.

Roong Aroon School in Bangkok, Thailand, is a community that values the natural environment. Its outdoor environments contain design elements that illustrate the essence of Bangkok culture, including water, earth, and wood, which represent calmness, tranquility, beauty, enrichment, and wonder. The preschool play yard is brilliantly landscaped with the natural beauty of a pond and creek, lush green trees and foliage, rocks, and art. Banyan trees for climbing are plentiful. Bamboo is found in brooms for sweeping and gutters for water play. Children can pump and spray water from the pond and rinse off feet at a water faucet. Meandering and challenging pathways are created with tree trunks, stones, and dark, rich wood. Sand is plentiful for digging and transforming. The entire school grounds are an excellent illustration of incorporating community.

## Create Permanent Spaces

Just as inside, outdoor play zones are set up with materials that are attractively displayed, well organized, accessible, and available to children. Spaces are designed with a clear identity so that children know what happens in the area. In each play zone, children find all the materials needed for a specific kind of play, along with appropriate space to use them. For example, the large-motor area has loose parts such as tires, crates, tree trunks, wood planks, and ladders for building big structures for climbing and balancing. Children are free to move materials and redesign spaces as they desire.

## Weather and Outdoor Materials

Some teachers report that being outside is not their favorite part of the day, as it takes a lot of time and energy to bring materials in and out from storage units or inside classrooms. One solution is to leave materials outside, planning ways to display them and protect them from excessive weathering. Rainy and snowy weather, hot and cold climates, and coastal air can all

damage outdoor materials and furniture. Whether items will survive and maintain their beauty comes down to the materials. When assessing furniture, look for many of the same qualities that you value in indoor furniture, such as durability, accessibility, function, and design. The main difference, however, is that outdoor furniture and materials must withstand exposure to the weather. It is important to note that nothing is 100 percent weatherproof, but there are helpful factors to consider before investing time and money in outdoor materials.

**Natural materials:** Natural materials come from nature and are found outside. This makes them the perfect loose part for outdoors. It is okay for rocks, seashells, pine cones, leaves, and driftwood to get wet. Natural items can be added to yard debris or compost piles and be replaced as needed.

**Outdoor patio furniture:** Wooden outdoor patio furniture, such as benches, tables, wall panels, shelves, stools, and coffee tables, are good choices for storage units. Furniture treated with a water-based wood stain is durable enough for outdoor use. The life expectancy of wooden furniture depends on the climate and the furniture's exposure to sun, rain, and snow. Outdoor wood furniture does gray over time, so restaining with a water-proof stain and sealer once a year, or more frequently if necessary, prevents surfaces from drying out and cracking and keeps moisture from penetrating into the wood. If furniture is left exposed to rain or snow, protect it with a waterproof cover, such as a barbecue cover or tarp, and if possible, tilt the furniture to help water drain away. Keeping outdoor furniture under a solid roof such as a patio cover will also prolong use.

**Stainless and galvanized steel:** Stainless steel can withstand water and is resistant to corrosion due to an added chromium layer. Galvanized steel is coated in zinc, which makes it corrosion resistant too. Regular steel is made of iron, which will rust when exposed to moisture from rain or humidity. Aluminum is not a good choice. Even though it does not rust, it does corrode. Use containers that enhance the visual impact of materials. Shallow containers work well. If a container is too deep, children cannot see the materials within. Metal containers with open basket frames are preferred so that sand, dirt, and water fall through and do not collect at the bottom.

**Textiles:** Textiles can soften spaces and make areas feel cozy and welcoming. Many of today's outdoor fabrics are designed to withstand inclement weather, though they are not totally carefree. Anything that stays outside will collect dust or dirt and be subject to fading from the sun. The easiest and simplest solution for keeping outdoor cushions looking good is to

cover them up or bring them inside when not in use. Consider covers that are removable and washable. Outdoor rugs can define and complement a desired space. Look for rugs that are made from materials such as bamboo or sisal, as they are typically low maintenance. However, even outdoor rugs need to be maintained and brought indoors during wet seasons.

**Eliminate plastic:** While items made from plastic may hold up well outdoors, most detract from rather than enhance the beauty of a natural environment (see the Aesthetics section on page 31). I encourage you to limit the inclusion of plastic materials.

### Outdoor Maintenance

Outdoor play yards require regular maintenance just like a home yard. No yard is maintenance free. Throughout the year, things need to be painted, refinished, cleaned, repaired, cleared, and replaced to avoid expensive problems. A regular schedule of preventive maintenance is extremely helpful to ensure that everything is safe and in good repair.

### Vandalism

Unfortunately, vandalism is a major concern for some early childhood programs. Willful destruction of property affects children, families, staff, and community, and it takes time and resources to replace materials and clean play yards. Similarly, some programs are located on school campuses that are frequented by older children who play with materials after school hours and may potentially damage them. These are legitimate concerns. Here are some suggestions for combating vandalism:

- Involve community members in designing and building the play yard. People are less likely to destroy property in which they have invested time, energy, and effort.
- Leave materials visible rather than locking them up. This may seem counterintuitive, but it has been my experience that closed and locked storage units invite unwelcome visitors to investigate. They are curious about what is inside the storage shed. Leaving materials out may take away the mystery. Old pieces of wood, gutters, and pots and pans are not that exciting.
- Lock entrances and exits.



- Keep areas well lit at night with security lights.
- Strategically plant shrubs and bushes around the yard's perimeter.
- Install video surveillance. The presence of cameras can be a deterrent. Some security systems allow you to get notifications when cameras detect motion and to watch live views from your cell phone.
- Involve young people in alternative school activities. Perhaps young people can paint a mural on the school building or work in a school garden.
- Secure costly items.

## Aesthetics

Something that has aesthetic appeal is beautiful and attractive. Objects of aesthetic appreciation in an environment affect how children and adults feel and act in their surroundings. One change that makes the biggest difference in transforming a play yard's appearance is replacing plastic elements with natural ones. Think about a time when you hiked outdoors on a trail or along the beach. You appreciate the natural materials you see along the way, whereas a piece of plastic feels out of place. The same is true for a play yard. As your eye scans a yard, natural materials blend in, while a blue plastic shovel sticks out. Even if tree cookies are out of place, they are not a distraction. Begin by replacing plastic containers with metal ones and trading plastic shovels for abalone, scallop, and coconut shells.

I do make an exception and include black plastic storage crates in a play yard. I find that black crates blend into outdoor surroundings and are not distracting. Overall, however, I encourage you to eliminate plastic materials and replace them with natural ones to enhance a yard's visual appeal.

**Natural elements:** Enhance a yard's look by adding tree trunks as borders to sand areas or installing river rock to look like a creek bed. The natural colors of wood and river rocks make yard designs look spectacular. A rock strip around the school building, pathways edged with landscaping rocks, and rocks forming dry riverbeds add visual interest, texture, and contrast. Natural ground covers such as sand, gravel, cocoa mulch, and play bark become fodder for play as children use the loose materials for imagining and constructing. Installing natural reed garden fencing is an easy and inexpensive way to create privacy and natural beauty. It comes in rolls and can be attached to an existing fence. Bamboo rolls, fence panels, and screens are pricier but come in several options. Consider repurposing downed tree branches and logs and rocks. Pine cones, acorns, seedpods, and leaves can



further enhance aesthetics and play opportunities. Heighten the sensory allure of play materials with seasonal loose parts that are native to your area, such as grapevines, gourds, dried flowers, chestnuts, jacaranda pods, and evergreen needles.

**Art elements:** Enhance the beauty of outdoor spaces by placing attractive furnishings throughout the play yard. Outdoor décor using plants, textiles, and upcycled pieces in addition to sculptures and works of art, can totally transform how spaces feel. Position wall décor on fences or buildings to make outdoor areas more inviting. Bare walls can be covered with a trellis, latticework, pallets, shutters, or vertical gardens. Many planters are made to hang flat against a wall. Succulent or herb gardens in hollowed-out logs bring rustic texture to spaces. Children can make functional art, such as decorative stepping-stones for pathways or mosaics on terra-cotta flower-pots. Consider adding a little whimsy by hiding metal statues in foliage. Suspend

wind chimes from tree branches or rafters. Children can help create colorful strands of glass beads to suspend from a piece of driftwood. Having art in the play yard not only adds visual appeal but helps children to see the world in new, exciting ways and gain an appreciation for art.



## Functionality

Just as when designing a room in your home, space planning, layout, use, and storage are critical. How do you envision children will use each space? Refer to the reflection phase and the commonly seen characteristics, actions, and interests of children that you identified. After the function of each space has been defined, you can identify details of the design and materials. There is a difference between simply furnishing a play zone with materials and creating a space that offers functionality and identity. Each space should clearly convey what materials are available, include appropriate work space and storage, and have ample room to play. For example, if children will be pretending to cook, they need a standing work surface as well as strategically placed pots, pans, utensils, and dirt. There needs to be sufficient space, water access, and a ground surface that can get wet and muddy.

**Storage:** Incorporating adequate and well-placed storage in each zone is key to an organized and functional play space. Storage generally consists of simple shelving and containers. Here are some helpful strategies for maintaining organization:

- Create permanent, purposeful storage in each play zone.
- Use different surface levels.
- Store materials close to their intended use.
- Arrange materials on low, open, uncrowded shelves.
- Design storage for independent use.
- Position loose parts for easy accessibility.
- Present materials attractively.
- Display like materials together.
- Use attractive storage containers.
- Maintain organization; avoid clutter.
- Declutter on a regular basis.
- Offer a variety of diverse materials.
- Avoid displaying too many or too few materials.

## Outdoor Storage Ideas

While nothing is 100 percent weatherproof, some materials hold up better than others. Here are some suggestions for storage-related items that endure exposure to weather outdoors:

### STORAGE UNITS

- bamboo shoe racks
- commercial furniture made with weatherproof wood
- metal shelves of stainless or galvanized steel
- outdoor furniture made from hard wood such as teak, eucalyptus, redwood, or cedar
- wood shelves painted with exterior paint
- wooden crates
- wrought iron furniture

### CONTAINERS

- metal baskets with open basket frames
- stainless or galvanized steel

**Accessibility:** When arranging loose parts, think about how children will access them. Set up loose parts so children can see and reach objects. To make loose parts more accessible, place items on low shelves or in shallow open baskets and containers within children's reach. Arrange smaller items in front of taller ones so children can see what is available. Allow ample time for children to explore materials, and offer them opportunities to move items around the work space.

**Simplicity:** Display only one or two categories of materials at a time, and limit the number of containers. Two to four containers on a shelf is ideal. It is hard to find the right number of loose parts to display at a time. Too many items can be overwhelming and overstimulating for children, resulting in misuse of materials. Too few materials can frustrate children and limit their opportunities for play. This may cause conflicts among children trying to work with limited resources. One or two items are not enough to allow for rich explorations. Offering more of the same material allows for more complex play. For example, a provocation with large quantities of driftwood is stronger than a provocation with a few pieces each of driftwood, seashells, and stones.



**Consistency and variety:** Children deepen learning and understanding by repeating experiences and explorations. Familiarity with materials leads to competency and mastery of skills, techniques, tools, and media while discovering new possibilities. When children use the same materials, they make connections cognitively, physically, socially, and emotionally and also apply and expand established abilities and knowledge in new ways. For these reasons, it is helpful to keep a consistent supply of materials available at all times. Children also delight in surprises, however. The addition of a new tool or material or a change in the way in which items are displayed can pique interest and expand possibilities. For example, adding large sundial seashells with their magnificent spirals to a natural collection of materials may stimulate the creation of spiral designs. Children need both consistency and variety.

### Cost Effectiveness

Budget, time, and space restraints are almost always an issue. There are, however, numerous economical ways to transform an outdoor play yard with limited resources. Upcycling materials, doing work yourself, buying in bulk, and using natural elements are all possible options.

**Repurpose unwanted items:** Expensive toys and playground equipment are not needed to construct interesting play spaces. Rain gutters or drain-pipes are great for flowing water or rolling balls, and they cost substantially less than productions from commercial play-based companies. A barrel may be upcycled into a cozy area or a sink into a small-world container. An entire sound garden may be created by suspending baking sheets and broiler pan racks in an open window frame. Take advantage of yard sales, online sites for reusing, reducing, and recycling, and thrift stores. Imagination and resourcefulness are all that is needed.

**Save on labor costs:** For the installation, do work yourself and solicit help from family volunteers. Providing meaningful opportunities for family involvement builds effective partnerships.

**Buy in bulk:** Purchase ground cover materials such as sand, gravel, stones, bark, and dirt in bulk from landscape suppliers. There will be a delivery fee, but it is still more economical than buying small prepackaged bags of items.

**Secure tree trunks:** Tree trunks and logs add natural beauty and make a big aesthetic impact in a play yard, but they can be hard to obtain. Make connections with a tree trimming service and also let family, neighbors,



and friends know that you need tree trunks. Watch for trees that have fallen in your neighborhood or community and ask permission from residents to keep the trunks for a children's play yard. I always store found trunks even if I do not have an immediate need. They need to be replaced periodically because of rot.

**Find free natural resources:** One of my favorite parts of teaching is finding free natural resources. In my own backyard I have what I refer to as future loose parts (that is, waiting to fall from the trees): liquid amber or sweetgum tree balls, pine needles, and large cones of Monterey pines. I always keep an extra bag or two in my car and pockets for collecting materials I discover while out and about. On walks around my neighborhood, I have found rose pine cones (deodar cedar tree), mini pine cones (shortleaf pine), and acorns. My walks to the lake yield fabulous pieces of driftwood. While driving, I have been known to stop and collect palm tree bark and eucalyptus bark and pods. At a family cabin, I have harvested large sugar pine cones (2 feet long!) and manzanita branches. Everywhere I travel, I make it my quest to discover a natural loose part native to the area.

Natural materials will vary according to your own geographic location. Always check regulations before collecting materials from local, state, and federal parks, as it may be forbidden or require a permit. For those of you who are not into collecting, natural loose parts are available for purchase on many internet sites and in craft stores.

**Caution:** Always make certain that any natural elements you find or purchase are not considered poisonous to humans or to pets, if they live in the environment.

### Risk, Hazard, and Play

“Everyday life always involves a degree of risk and children need to learn how to cope with this from an early age. They need to learn how to take calculated risks and, for this learning to happen, they need opportunities for challenging and adventurous play and to move and act freely.”

—Marie Willoughby (2011, 7)

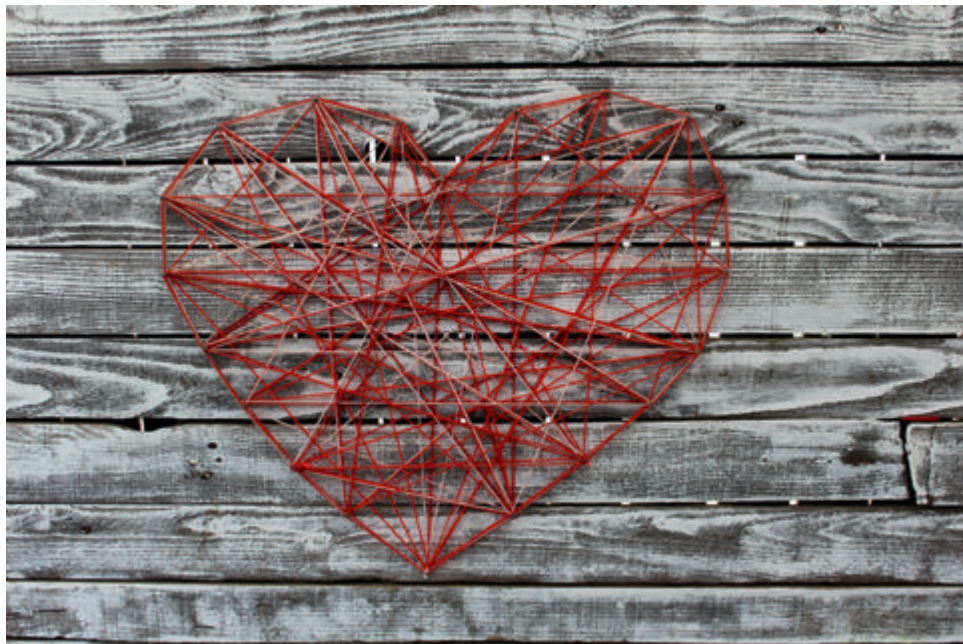
Keeping children safe is a top priority, but imposing too many limitations on children’s outdoor risky play can impede their development. Children need to see and experience the consequences of risk firsthand. Our role as early childhood educators is to understand the significance of risk in children’s play and ensure a balanced, thoughtful approach between safety and risk. When children take risks, meet challenges, and experience adventure, they discover what they can do as well as the limits of their physical capabilities. A study by Ellen Beate Hansen Sandseter, Rasmus Kleppe, and Ole Johan Sando found that risky types of play are attractive to children and that given the opportunity to choose freely, children engage in this kind of play at the same level as other typical play types, such as symbolic play (2021). Joan Almon discusses the various kinds of risks that children should be allowed to take, such as scaling high climbing equipment or gliding on a zip line designed for children. She states that children have a natural capacity for risk assessment that needs to be cultivated and encouraged rather than inhibited (2013). Play is critical for children to acquire resiliency and risk management skills that will help them in adulthood.

First, it is important to distinguish the difference between a risk and a hazard, so play yards permit risk but remain safe and do not contain potential hazards. According to Fran Wallach, “A hazardous situation on the playground is one in which the user cannot see or evaluate the



accident-causing problem. The potential for injury is thus hidden. Risk, on the other hand, allows the user to identify the challenge, evaluate the level of challenge and determine how to deal with it. Whether or not to cross a suspension bridge is a determination of risk, a bridge that falls because a rusted connector snapped when the child crossed the bridge is a hazard” (as cited in Jambor 1995, 7). Most playground injuries are caused by hazards rather than poor judgment in risk-taking (Jambor 1995).

Researchers are investigating the best strategies for providing children with outdoor risky play opportunities that minimize hazards, such as adventure playgrounds or the provision of unstructured play materials (loose parts) that can be freely manipulated in conventional playgrounds (Brussoni, Olsen, Pike, and Sleet 2012). Adventure playgrounds are filled with open-ended materials. They are based on the principle that children have control of their physical environment and can change it and add to it. Morgan Leichter-Saxby and Jill Wood compared injuries on a fixed-equipment playground with an adventure playground. Their research found that a statistically significant majority of play yard injuries occurred on the fixed-equipment playground. The adventure playground at the same school was found to be statistically safer. Their conclusion was that adventure playgrounds are safer because children can better control the risks. (2018). Eliminate real safety hazards and allow children to take risks.





## Moving Forward

Now that you know the what, how, and why of transforming outdoor environments, it is time to take an in-depth look at enhancing individual play zones. As you move forward with your environment transformation, I hope that you will be encouraged by the ideas, stories, and visual images revealed in the following pages to create meaningful spaces for children to flourish.



# Reimagine what is possible with your outdoor space

before

sand zone **after**

before

art studio **after**

*Transforming Your Outdoor Early Learning Environment* guides center and home-based educators in creating captivating learning spaces on limited budgets with natural elements and loose parts that offer children opportunity for irresistible engaging explorations.

Ideas, inspiration, and benefits for changing outdoor environments are provided along with the basics for designing, transforming, and maintaining 11 specific outdoor play zones.

*Transforming Your Outdoor Early Learning Environment* offers an approach that:

- **Requires minimal financial resources**
- **Features loose parts**
- **Uses upcycled materials and integrates nature**
- **Includes stunning photos of before and after transformations**
- **Offers specific design tips and material lists**
- **Incorporates a specific idea for infants and toddlers in each space**
- **Reveals action schema learning typically spotted in play zones**

Lisa Daly describes how play in each area fosters children's competencies, development, and learning in the areas of social and emotional, language and communication, cognitive, physical, and expressive arts and includes real stories of children at play with loose parts in every zone to illustrate children's learning and development.



**LISA DALY** is passionate about transforming early learning to deepen meaningful experiences and connections, innovation, creativity, and reflection. Her professional work is centered around collaborating with educators to shift teaching approaches and transform learning environments to support children's identities, inquiry, and engagement. She co-authored *Early Learning Theories Made Visible* and the award-winning *Loose Parts* series.

