

OUTDOOR PLAY AREAS

Outdoor play is as important as indoor play. A good outdoor play area will stimulate activity, promote good physical development, and allow for further social growth. When the weather is good, any of the activities that are done indoors may be done outdoors. It is a good idea to have at least a little time outdoors every day, even when the weather is not ideal. It is important that children dress appropriately, however, to protect them from the elements.

Whenever possible, choose multi-purpose equipment (equipment which can be used a variety of ways). This will stimulate creativity in the children and utilize space more efficiently. Moveable equipment provides for versatility. Wheel toys, sand digging toys, climbing structures, and a playhouse, are basic pieces of equipment.

The location and shape of the outdoor play area is essential to proper supervision. Whenever possible, the play area should be located directly outside of the classroom. This allows the caregivers to move back and forth without losing sight of the children. A caregiver who is standing at one end of the play area should be able to easily see all children in the area, even at the opposite end of the area. For this reason, U or L shaped play areas are not good choices. A rectangular shape is preferred.

The play area should be planned according to use and divided into areas. An empty space for organized activity and a broad path will aid movement within the area. A path should divide activity areas. Without a path, children may be bumping into each other as they move from activity to activity.

While planning the space in the outdoor play area, keep a few simple rules in mind:

1. Children should not have to walk through one area to get to another. For example, the children should be able to get to the swings without walking through the sandbox.
2. Equipment should be spaced far enough apart so that a child using one piece of equipment cannot touch a child using another piece of equipment.
3. All equipment and play areas are visible from any spot in the play area.
4. Not more than one-half of the area is used for play equipment, leaving plenty of space for moving about.

For the safety of the children, play areas should be fenced. This prevents children from wandering off and makes outdoor supervision easier for the caregivers. The most common types of fencing used are chain link and wood. Whichever type is chosen, it is important that fencing be properly maintained to prevent injuries.

A well-landscaped area will provide beauty and interest to the play area. Caution should be used in selecting and placing plants. Some types of plants can be poisonous if ingested by children. These plants should obviously be avoided. The view of the play area by the caregiver should not be restricted by large trees or bushes. Choosing plants with different growing cycles will ensure that there will always be a plant to study and view.

The surfaces used in the play area are also important. Flexible material, such as sand, cushioned mats, and wood chips or shredded bark should be used under all climbing equipment. When children fall onto these types of resilient materials, they receive fewer and less severe injuries than when they fall onto hard surfaces. Four to six inches of resilient material is suggested.

Grass is a good choice for many areas of the play area. It provides a good surface for running and playing games. It is ideal to have pathways for wheeled toys constructed from asphalt or cement. Planning the area for wheeled toys provides safety for other children. One-way traffic prevents children from running into each other, or over each other. A path also prevents children from riding on the grass areas.

According to Utah "Center Child Day Care Standards", the outdoor play area must have 40 square feet per child or an acceptable alternative. It must be fenced with a five foot fence or barrier. A shaded area must be provided.

There are several safety points to keep in mind in an outdoor play area.

1. Equipment must be clean and maintained. Equipment should be inspected daily and repairs must be done immediately. Areas should be checked for dangerous objects such as nails, glass, and rocks. Rough wood, sharp edges and exposed nuts and bolts should also be checked for.
2. Equipment should be age appropriate and an appropriate height for the children.
3. Non-movable equipment should be fastened permanently to the ground.
4. The sandbox should be in the shade. It should also have a cover that is used when the children are not present to prevent cats from using it as a litter box.
5. Shade should be available for the children.
6. There should be a variety of equipment that provides for different types of play and muscle development.
7. Traffic patterns should be well-planned to avoid collisions.
8. There should not be standing water anywhere on the play yard.
9. Children must have enough space to run around without bumping into each other or equipment.
10. Resilient materials should be used under climbing equipment.
11. Children with disabilities should be able to use most areas of the play area.
12. The play yard should be fenced with at least a five foot fence.
13. An adult must be present whenever children are in the outdoor play area.
14. Safety rules should be established and followed by staff and children.
15. Sanitary drinking water must be available for the children.

Rules for the outdoor play area are important. However, try to establish as few rules as is necessary. Keep the rules positive. State what you want the children to do, not what you want them to avoid. Identify five safety rules you think would be appropriate for the outdoor play area. Remember to state them in positive terms such as, "Keep the sand in the sandbox," rather than, "Don't throw sand."