

Teachers Outdoors: Letting the Good Times Roll

by Margie Carter

During the problem-solving portion of our recent child care directors' meeting, an experienced director asked, "Give me your best ideas for getting teachers to focus on the kids and not on each other when they're out on the playground." There were sighs and nods of understanding around the room. Many offered suggestions that amounted to rules: assign each one to an outdoor station; rotate particular duties and roles for the playground; require the playground to be included in curriculum planning. I was most impressed by the suggestion to ensure that teachers get ample break time during their work day, with a pleasant, comfortably furnished staff room, arranged to provide for adult socializing, relaxing, and munching needs.

Rather than more regulations, teachers need help in identifying the barriers that prevent them from enjoying outdoor time with children. This, along with discovering something they really like to do outside, could become the cornerstone of an effective training plan for teacher outdoor behaviors.

Strategy — Examine our own experience

Ask teachers to recall one of the worst and one of the best outdoor experiences they had as a child. As they share their stories, jot down the essence of each on chart paper divided into two columns — best and worst. Repeat this exercise recalling worst and best outdoor experiences as adults. As a group look over the list to identify the common elements within each of the columns. Are there any insights that illuminate how we feel and what we do during outdoors time?

While some teachers are aware of their own discomfort during time outdoors, others have only a vague sense of not really liking it. Some may be unaware of their director's dissatisfaction with their behavior, where others get annoyed at directives to stop socializing and warming the bench outdoors. Knowing the source of our feelings and behaviors is the first step toward creating any changes we might want to make.

The presence or absence of avid horticulturalist, scientist, male, teenage, or athletically inclined colleagues can dramatically impact the adult dynamics outdoors. Most often our staff is predominantly female, women whose socialization has included a strong message of caution in using our minds for scientific inquiry or our bodies for much physical activity. That, in combination with an emphasis on our clothing and appearance, may leave us timid, physically unfit, or inappropriately dressed for enjoying the out of doors. The exuberant, messy, and oftentimes fearless behavior of children's outside play can be considerably different from the energy and dispositions adult females bring to this supervisory responsibility. Examining our thresholds for risk and safety, dirt and bugs, and the elements of weather, physical energy, speed, and super-hero behaviors may help us understand our own reluctance and the support needed to make this a positive adult experience.

Strategy — Scavenger hunt

It's very possible that teachers have never explored the program's outdoor play area from a child's point of view, or considered its potential for sharing their

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own interests with children. Develop a series of scavenger hunts to provoke ongoing discussions about outdoor possibilities. Devoting 20-30 minutes for this activity during each meeting over the course of several months will do wonders for sparking new insights and enthusiasm. With the assignment to bring back an example, representation, or story of each item, possible scavenger hunt lists could include the following:

Find contrasting elements . . .

- something heavy/light
- something smooth/rough
- something dark/bright
- something natural/man made
- something huge/tiny
- something scary/comforting

Find four kinds of . . .

- holes
- sounds
- things that move
- smells
- places that challenge your body
- symbols or writing
- dangers

Find places for pretending . . .

- you are powerful
- you are small as an insect
- you are at home
- you are on TV
- you are a detective
- you are an artist
- you are a scientist

Find the natural world . . .

- a new texture to explore
- an intriguing shadow
- something the wind does
- animal tracks
- something alive
- something dead

Strategy — Audition for new roles

The role of playground supervisor can make one weary, either from too much to keep track of or not enough of interest to keep one awake. Familiar roles that usually take up most of our time include: patrol cop, first aid dispenser, referee, or benchwarmer. Create a set of new roles for teachers such as body builder, detective, environmentalist, architect,

weather forecaster, visitor from another planet, landscaper, inventor, engineer, pilot. Ask them to develop possible behaviors or activities. In subsequent staff meetings, share scripts and stories of how the plot unfolded in trying out these new roles.

Strategy — Chart the discoveries

When outside time holds parallel discoveries for adults as well as children, new enthusiasm is generated. Teachers can brainstorm a series of charts, documenting over time their shared discoveries with children. Chart headings might look like the following:

- Where we found the most interesting shadows, sounds, smells
- Kinds of bugs, clouds, animal tracks we've found
- How long it took for the trees to become completely bare, the ice to melt, the puddle to disappear, the water to travel from one place to another
- Forms of graffiti, signage, symbols we've seen
- What we've seen machines do

Strategy — Health project

Some teachers will only come to enjoy the outdoors when they spend time there away from the children. Brainstorm the possible places, times, and things individual teachers might use to enhance their own health and stress reduction goals. Could an adult-only place be designated for exercise equipment such as a bike, rowing machine, roller-blades, or a chin-up bar? An outdoor walking or running path or obstacle course? A set of stretching or aerobic exercises posted in a space suitable for doing them? Consider providing this as a cost effective extra health benefit for those working in your program.

Drawing on our imaginations, we can surely enhance the possibilities for teachers to approach time outdoors with a new sense of adventure and reward.

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