

Spending Time Outdoors Matters for Infants and Toddlers

Hi, I'm Jan Greenberg from the Early Head Start National Resource Center. And I'm excited to share some great information about taking infants and toddlers outside. Why is this exciting? Because spending quality time outdoors matters for infants and toddlers, and it matters in some very important ways.

Being outside offers infants and toddlers unique sensory experiences that aren't available within the four walls of a classroom, home, or other indoor space. Think about it. Sounds, smells, sights, and light are all different outside. Laying on grass and watching a bird circle high overhead, feeling a breeze move your hair all around, and catching falling snowflakes on your tongue and feeling them melt on your face are just a few of the many experiences you just can't bring inside. Sensory experiences are important for infant and toddler development. But there are other potential benefits of outdoor time.

First, there is strong evidence that going outside improves children's health. Outside, young children are more likely to play actively, using their whole bodies, in ways that can strengthen their hearts, lungs, and muscles. Being outside gives infants and toddlers lots of time and opportunity to develop their large motor skills, to freely crawl, toddle, walk, climb, run, and move their bodies through space in new and different ways. This improves their overall fitness and is an important defense against childhood obesity. Also, spending time outdoors helps regulate and balance young children's sleeping patterns. And even just a few minutes of sun each day increases vitamin D production, which is important for strengthening teeth and bones.

Second, going outside supports children's overall development. Research shows that outdoor play and exploration increases children's creativity and imagination; enriches their opportunities to make decisions, solve problems, and cooperate with others; improves reasoning and observation skills; and has positive effects on their ability to focus and pay attention.

Third, going outside builds children's connection to nature and the outdoor world. With your support, young children can develop an appreciation for the natural world as they experience and learn about things like weather and seasons, and discover plants, animals, and insects that live and grow around them. They can learn about life cycles and how plants and animals depend on each other for survival. They learn that nature is everywhere and that everyone is a part of nature. These early outdoor experiences are important because attitudes about nature are formed early. Infants' and toddlers'

positive experiences with nature will likely play a part in how they come to value and care for the environment as they get older and throughout their lives.

Finally, spending time outside is a rich and important part of daily curriculum for infants and toddlers. No matter where young children live, the outdoor world offers them interesting things to see, discover, and learn. Everything that happens outside—crawling from grass to a hard surface and being surprised by the change in texture, waving to a mail carrier while out on a neighborhood walk, feeling excitement as a fire truck races by with the siren blaring, looking at the different shapes, sizes, and colors of buildings and street signs—helps children develop social/emotional, physical, cognitive, language, and literacy skills.

So how can you make sure that infants and toddlers are getting quality outdoor time? Here are just a few ideas. Make going outside part of the daily schedule. Stroller and wagon rides are fine, but also give infants and toddlers lots of opportunities to crawl, walk, and move themselves, unassisted, as much as possible. Observe children and use what you learn about them to plan and extend your curriculum outdoors. Remember, you can provide individualized learning experiences for young children and families outdoors just as you do indoors. Playing with toys, looking at books, making music, and creating art are all great outdoor experiences. And talk with coworkers, families, and others, such as health services advisory committee members, about the value of outdoor time for infants and toddlers. Everyone has a role in supporting safe, healthy, and developmentally appropriate and challenging outdoor experiences.

Want to learn more about outdoor time for infants and toddlers? You can find additional resources from the Early Head Start National Resource Center on Head Start's Early Childhood Learning and Knowledge Center website at www.eclkc.ohs.acf.hhs.gov. This is Jan Greenberg at the Early Head Start National Resource Center encouraging you, the children you care for, and their families to go outside and play!