

Outdoor Learning Environments for Preschool-aged Children

Marley Jarvis: Hi, everybody. Welcome to this next episode of Front Porch. My name is Marley Jarvis, and if you haven't been with us before at a Front Porch webinar, it's a series of webinars that focuses mainly on research behind a lot of what we're thinking about in terms of working with preschool-aged children. We provide evidence-based practices as well a little bit of an overview of some current research. We're focusing on preschool-aged children, 3 through 5, and across all Head Start programs.

Again, my name is Marley Jarvis and I am from The National Center on Early Childhood Development, Teaching, and Learning, and I'm based at The Institute for Learning and Brain Sciences, which is at the University of Washington. I've also invited another person from the University of Washington to join us today, DeEtta Simmons. She's going to be our guest expert, and I'm going to bring her on towards the end of the webinar. You'll hear from her in a bit. But she's great. You'll really enjoy our conversation today.

This webinar is the second in a three-part series, all of our Front Porches this year are focusing on the outdoors and playing outdoors and learning outdoors and different aspects of that. It's OK if you missed the previous one, but I wanted to tell you about it in case you're interested. The previous webinar focused on social-emotional development outdoors. You can rewatch that on the ECLKC or the Head Start Early Childhood Learning and Knowledge Center.

Today we're going to be talking about a lot of the benefits there are to time outdoors. There's a lot, both for children and adults alike. To just a little brief overview of what some of those benefits are.

Our first learning objective is around that and so that you should be able to describe some of the benefits of time spent outside and how outdoor learning environments support learning and development across the domains. We're also going to be spending some time thinking about some overall strategies for your program's outdoor spaces as well as some more specific tips.

That brings us to our second learning objective, is that you should be able to identify strategies for creating and using outdoor spaces to support learning and development. We're focusing on preschool-aged children, children ages 3 to 5 and all Head Start programs. I said across all learning domains, so this is what I'm talking about. These are the preschool domains of the ELOF, or the Head Start Early Learning Outcomes Framework. We're not really going to go into ELOF in depth today. But I just wanted to mention here are those various preschool domains and, really, across all of them we see great support for building skills through outdoor learning environments.

Since we're not diving into this a ton today, I did want to point out that a previous Front Porch webinar that was on nature-based learning, hosted by Dr. Beth Zack. She did a wonderful job really walking through how nature and outdoor environments really support all areas of the ELOF. If you wanted to learn more about the ELOF and outdoor environments, particularly nature, go check that out.

A reminder that all of our Front Porch webinars, you can go and watch them after the fact on ECLKC, and that the link to that is in your viewer's guide in that resource link widget. Again, go find that. There's a lot of good resources in it.

OK, what are some of the benefits to time outside? Let's do a brief overview here. A lot of the benefits revolve around physical skills and physical fitness. This comes back to play. Research shows that children play harder and longer outside as compared to how they might play in indoor environments. Playing harder and longer, this is beneficial when we're thinking about physical fitness because they're engaging in more vigorous play and this more vigorous play is what is strengthening their hearts and their lungs and their muscles. All of that is happening naturally outdoors. We're thinking about fine and gross motor skills, but also just this general overall fitness level. Research tells us that this is happening to a really great extent more outside than inside.

We also see a lot of benefits in children's immune systems from time outside, which interesting. A side note, this is true for adults as well, but one particular study here found that there were fewer illness-related absences. From preschool programs and other early childhood education-type program settings, there's fewer illness-related absences when children have daily opportunities to play outside. Which is very fascinating to me. I think that's really cool. It's something that we might intuit that being outside is good for our health but when we can actually link it in research and see that there are fewer absences due to illness when children have daily opportunities to play outside, that's really, really fascinating.

There's also many, many studies that show that time outside is beneficial to our mental health and our mood. Again, this is true for adults as well as for children. Then many children tend to be deficient in vitamin D in our country. Being outdoors, that provides access to vitamin D, so that's another important aspect of health that we see these benefits with, with being outside.

Researchers also find some specific benefits for children who are diagnosed with attention-deficit hyperactive disorder, or ADHD. Children with ADHD who are regularly playing in outdoor environments tend to have milder ADHD symptoms. This is comparing that with children with ADHD who are playing indoors or even if they're playing outside but in pre-fabricated environments, things like playgrounds with stationary equipment. That link that they found with milder ADHD symptoms was specifically with outdoor environments with green space.

What do I mean by green space? Think open, grassy fields, trees, different plants that have that color green. There's some link there and some really fascinating research around that. This is just a light overview of some of the research around some of these really truly amazing benefits for both children and adults in terms of spending time outside regularly.

OK, we're going to watch a very short video, and then we'll chat a bit about it.

[Video begins]

[Rain and inaudible children] [Video ends]

Marley: In addition to all those benefits that I've just been talking about, I wanted to make sure to recognize that the outdoors is also just a wonderful source of joy and fun. Note that it's raining in this video but does the child look any less joyful due to the rain? I mean, I don't think

so. She's looks pretty happy bopping around on that bike thing. It's really great, and it just sort of brings a smile to my face, so I wanted to show that here.

Of course, weather can be a barrier to getting outside but we have to remember that there's so many places around the world that have perhaps what we might think of as inclement or bad weather most of the time, if not all of the time, and yet that doesn't mean that they never go outside. We do need to address that. Of course have the right outerwear to stay warm and dry, but adult attitudes can be a little bit of a barrier to access to outdoors, especially in inclement weather.

We'll talk more about that in a bit later on. I wanted to take a moment before we talk about sort of the weather and getting outside and adult attitudes and stuff. I'm going to back up a little bit. In addition to things like adult attitudes and bad weather, what else might be a barrier to accessing outdoor environments for children?

We're going to take a moment to focus on equity in the outdoors here. We'll do a little reflection, and I want you to think about someone who comes to mind, either some you know or you might imagine, who is outdoorsy. Who do you know that is really outdoorsy or who might you imagine that's really outdoorsy?

You can share any thoughts with us in the Q&A. Are they dressed a certain way? What do they look like? What are they wearing? Maybe there's a gender or a race or something that pops up.

I'll share a story from my own life. I used to work at a marine lab. On the coast, a lot of really dirty, muddy physical work, often on boats. I remember hearing a comment from my boss at the time about a coworker who was female and she wore a lot of really nice clothes and earrings, which kind of made her stand out at a field station. She looked very put together. He made a comment about her appearance. He sort of implied that she must not be very experienced or very good at doing field work due to the way she was dressed.

Flash forward, it turned out she was one of the most hard-working field biologists that I think I've ever met. She now is studying big wildcats in the mountains of South America, which requires hiking for several days. Of course, it should be obvious that the way that the way that she was dressed was not really a very good indicator of her interest in the outdoors or how good at doing fieldwork she might've been, but rather that her boss had sort of fallen trap to a stereotype. This may be something that impacts all of us, whether or not we're aware of it. It's important for us to address here.

There's really many stereotypes around what kinds of people enjoy spending time outside and these can leak into our practice and our interactions with young children without us even knowing about it. For example, maybe things around gender, like girls don't like to get dirty. Or maybe adding a value on there, that girls shouldn't get dirty. Like boys maybe enjoy it – it's more natural for boys to get dirty, for example. Those are stereotypes.

There's also many around race, for example. That only white people like to hike. Of course these aren't true. You probably know lots of people that go against these stereotypes, but still these stereotypes can impact the way we're interacting with children outdoors, even if we're not meaning to.

Now, for home visitors in the home-based programs, you have to be aware of both possible biases in the education staff, so in the home visitors themselves, but then also as well as the parents. There's sort of a fine balance of very respectful tone you have to take between balancing the different values or expectations about the kinds of play that might be appropriate or desired for their children, along with supporting children's access to outdoor play. You can have these conversations in these joint planning sessions, and it's all really important. But there is that balance of being respectful there.

I think it's also important to acknowledge that there have been many historical barriers to outdoor access, specifically to outdoor recreation for people of color. Segregation and racist policies have made it very difficult historically, if not impossible, for people of color to live in well-resourced neighborhoods, and these are the ones that tend to have well-funded parks and nice green spaces like what we're seeing here in this photo. Prior to the Civil Rights Act, many people of color were actually legally barred from or segregated at – if they were allowed at National and State Parks.

While of course every child is different, some are going to have likes and dislikes about being outside, or being more or less comfortable outside, I think it's really important that we recognize that some of these preferences may be shaped by prior experiences and access, frankly. Not all children have had regular access to safe and enjoyable outdoor spaces. I think it's important that we're not making character judgements of children who seem to not be comfortable outside but instead can support them in providing a relationship and access with the outdoors.

This is the good news here, of your superpower here as early childhood educators, is that we have this wonderful, amazing opportunity to provide early, positive access to the outdoors for all children in our care. Your program can play this really amazing important role in decreasing the childhood access-nature gap that I've been talking about. In addition to the joy and fun that can come from being outside, remember all of those benefits, those health and physical skills benefits from access to green space. That's all wonderful things that you and your program can provide.

I wanted to make space for you to share with us in the Q&A. If you have any ideas or things you wanted to share with us about how we can make outdoor spaces more welcoming to all, and I'll take a little bit of time while you're doing that to share some tips.

From research that we've been talking about, one thing that you can do for your outdoor learning spaces is to green up your outdoor spaces. Just providing as much access to nature, to greenery, and natural materials as possible while they are in your care in your program.

This is from a paper from 2020, so a study, and the photos are from that study and you're looking at some examples of the natural materials and the green spaces that they looked at. What they found was that access to nature, like this, in play spaces boosted children's self-regulation skills, which is a really wonderful and interesting thing to be able to support just with something as simple as adding in a little bit of green space.

I also wanted to mention that this can be a really cost-effective thing. Green space can be grassy hills or rolling green terrain. It can provide balancing and climbing opportunities, but can

be much cheaper to provide, to set up, and to maintain than something you'd have to purchase, like a plastic climbing structure.

If you don't have access to an outdoor play space or green space, then what you should be thinking about is how to add that connection to the outdoors. Maybe you can incorporate trips to a nearby park, or explore a forest, or maybe even find a farm nearby that you can visit.

In home-based programs, home visitors, what you can do is leave the house with the family. Go with families to their local outdoor spaces and help them find one, even if it's just an open field that they can run around in and help them get creative and visit it together to make sure that it's a safe place that they feel comfortable visiting with their children.

There's a great resource on this on the ECLKC, the title of it is, "When Availability of Outdoor Play Space is an Issue," and it is intended for infants and toddlers, but there's a lot there that's very valuable for preschoolers, I've added a link to that again. Go find that widget. Lots more in there. I'm going to keep referring to it.

We're continuing to think about strategies for making our outdoor learning environments welcoming and engaging to all children. One part of this is that you might want to think about highlighting the type of natural elements that children in your program may relate to. For example, children who live in a grassland or a prairie-type ecosystem, they may have experiences with plants that look very different than the pine tree forests of western Oregon, for example. Maybe there's significance, like a cultural significance, to plants that you have nearby. Your outdoor spaces can reflect that.

Yes, greenery is beneficial and yes, we should try to add in greenery in places where we can. I want to mention this, that we should try to encourage a sense of home in your outdoor spaces. We're not necessarily saying that you should be trying to overhaul your entire play space to perfectly mirror an environment that's not necessarily natural to your community. Nature, of course, looks different in different places and part of honoring culture and making children feel welcome there is honoring the different places that we're from.

Now, thinking about other ways to really have our outdoor spaces feel welcoming and inclusive of different cultures and different languages of the children in our programs, I think we do a great job of this often in indoor learning environments in terms of including pictures of families from home or materials from cultures to which the children belong, and have - those materials included in the indoor environment. It's a really reassuring and comforting and wonderful thing for children. But we tend to forget about this outdoors. I want to encourage you to get creative there and a bonus is that outdoor often can accommodate things that maybe wouldn't be workable indoors.

This is a great opportunity to chat with families. What are outdoor activities that they enjoy? Also trying to get to know what their children might associate with time outdoors. Is it work, like farming or construction, or maybe leisure like camping trips, hiking, fishing, cookouts, picnics? Maybe there's cultural traditions like gathering food or various celebrations. All of this is very helpful for you to know and you can weave it into your ideas for what to include in your outdoor play spaces and outdoor learning environments.

We want to make sure that we're showcasing diversity in the outdoors, both historical and current examples, whether through stories, books, imagery, but essentially, we want to showcase a variety of different types of people engaging with nature and the outdoors in a variety of different ways. There's not just one way to have fun or be outside, and that's really important for all children to see.

Lastly, we really can just let children show us how they engage with outdoors and what they want to do out there and follow their lead. There might be different ways that children like to interact with the outdoor learning environments that perhaps is a little different than you might, or that you might expect.

We want to follow their lead and let children show us how they want to play outside and then we can adapt our spaces as such. OK, we've been talking a lot about the many reasons why outdoor spaces are an important part of any program for all preschool-aged children, and about equity in the outdoors and creating a welcoming and inclusive space outdoors. We're going to move towards thinking of some sort of over-arching theme that we can use to guide us when we're creating our outdoor learning environments.

To start, we want to think about providing opportunities for young children outdoors that allow for choice, play, exploration, and experimentation. This means we want to think about providing lots of opportunities for a child to choose what they want to play with or where they want to go, what materials they want to use. Lots of opportunities for choice as well as exploration of not just the materials themselves but exploration of different spaces and of different ideas outdoors. A lot of this comes down to opportunities to play, so both unstructured and structured. Of course lots of time for free play.

We also want to make sure that our outdoor spaces are allowing for a lot of variety of motor experiences, both fine and gross motor, big body play, materials to explore, and so on. A related point – part of this that I wanted to call out in particular is our sensory experiences. Outdoor environments are a fantastic place to explore with our senses, and the preschool age is a really wonderful, rich time for that. Touch, sight, hearing, smell. You can think about how you can support sensory exploration in your outdoor learning environment and that can be a great guide. OK, we're going to watch another video and again, if you want, you can jot down any thoughts in that viewer's guide. Then after we watch it, we'll chat about it briefly.

[Video begins]

Child 2: Uh-oh! Oh no! Someone! Kiera!

Ms. Marley: I hear that you and your grandma go hunting for bugs at home? Do you guys go hunting for bugs?

Child 2: Ms. Marley!

Child 3: At Grandma's house?

Ms. Marley: Oh, there's one right there.

Child 4: Ms. Marley?

Ms. Marley: Yes.

Child 4: Kaitlyn got her stick caught on the ground right there.

Child 2: Whoa, Raider caught a beetle! Whoa...

Ms Marley: OK, hold on just a second. Did you find that?

Child 4: How did you get that, Raider? Look what I found.

Ms Marley: Oh, here's a baby slug right here. See it?

Child 5: I caught a beetle! Look I caught a beetle.

Ms Marley: You've got to open up the tweezers. There you go. Now pinch it gently.

Child 5: Ms. Marley?

Ms. Marley: Yes?

Child 5: I caught a beetle.

Ms. Marley: You caught a black beetle, look at that! How many did you get it? How many things do you have in yours now?

Child 5: One.

Ms. Marley: Only one? You're a good bug hunter. Are you sharing with your friends? Are you sharing?

[Video ends]

Marley: It was a pretty charming video while they're all hunting bugs, but it's also a really nice example of some of the things that we've been talking about in the section. I think it's a nice example of sensory exploration outside and use of wonderful rich materials and natural materials. Of course there's a lot of opportunity there for exploring motor skills and choice of what they're doing and materials as well as exploration.

Moving on to some additional over-arching themes that we want to think about. We want to design outdoor learning environments that are allowing for both child-directed and adult-directed activities. When thinking about adult-directed activities, parents in a home-based program as well as education staff can support children's thinking in a really wonderful way. They can have those conversations with children. They can help keep kids engaged and involved, as well as of course helping keep children safe as they play. Adult-directed is also a really wonderful part of any program. But it's also important to let children lead interactions with adults. Allow them to lead us sometimes. That's what's shown here in this picture. As well as for children to have their own childhood free play.

Sometimes I think when we're thinking about preschoolers and going outside, we're just thinking of preschoolers playing outside as this big, loud, free-for-all, which is definitely the case a lot of the time, but we also want to provide a variety of spaces that allow for many different uses. Both calm, cozy-type spaces, so maybe a reading nook or a small space that allows for quiet reflection in nature. I think we think about this indoors, but it's important outdoors as well.

If you are a family childcare person or perhaps you're a home visitor, so any house that happens to have a small outdoor space or patio, you can add in this thing without taking up a ton of space for pretty cheaply. It could be as simple as making sort of a fort with a sheet or piece of fabric draped over a patio table, for example. Or even just a big cardboard box. I'll show you a video in a second with this. We want to think about these calm, cozy spaces. Then active spaces as well.

Do you have big, open spaces for them to run around in or can you go visit open field or someplace where preschoolers who are these very busy, active, a lot of energy, where they can safely run around and get some of that full, big body play. We also want to think about three-dimensional surfaces, sort of just what's shown here or it can be more simple with log rounds or stones. Just something that has different heights that can encourage climbing or jumping.

Again, this full body play is really important for all children, including those with disabilities and suspected delays. We need to make sure we're providing many opportunities for all children for this. A related point is that we want to think about creating outdoor learning environments that are facilitating opportunities really for these different group sizes. For individuals, for small groups as well as large groups. Let's watch a video now. It's a really nice example of creating opportunities for small groups as well as quiet play in a cozy space using a cardboard box outdoors. We'll go ahead and watch that now.

[Video begins]

Adult 1: Oh, Logan and Robby are coming in for some lunch. Kaley, what did you make them?

Child 6: It's crowded.

Adult 1: Yeah, it's a little bit crowded with your backpack.

Child 7: The backpack.

Adult 1: Great, where do those go, helper? Good remembering. Oh, do they go here? Or do they go over the easel? Or did you and Teacher Carmen have a plan I don't know about?

Child 8: Paint!

Adult 1: You're going to paint your house?

Child 8: He has food!

Adult 1: Look, Robby brought food for lunch. He came prepared, didn't he. Go ahead and have a seat, Robby. You and Logan can have a little picnic while Sara paints the house.

Child 8: I will ask people to help. Here's your spatula.

Adult 1: Thanks, Robby. That's a nice house you guys are sitting in. And Sara's going to paint it. Oh, she's going to paint it brown.

Child 8: A lot of colors.

Adult 1: Did you bring a lot of colors?

Child 8: Yeah.

[Video ends]

Cardboard boxes can go a long ways. In general, just think of things that help define a small area where a child can sit and play by themselves or maybe encourage a small group interaction, like what we just saw there. I also wanted to point out that this is a nice example of why when we're talking about learning environments, we're not just thinking about the "stuff" – we also need to think about the adults.

They're an essential part of the learning environment and there that educator was supporting their play, she was letting the children lead the activity, but she was also anticipating their behaviors, keeping everyone safe and engaged. Adults are always the most important part of any learning environment. It's a nice reminder there.

Moving on to some additional considerations for outdoor learning environments. Do you have a wide variety of open-ended accessible materials? Accessible is the key here. Is your space accessible to children with disabilities? What accommodations can you make? Outdoor learning environments, just like inside, need to be accessible and engaging for all children.

Change can be a really powerful motivator for children. Novelty, where the things are typically indoors, like some of the kitchen supplies here, or just rotating materials based on their interests, in can really boost children's activity and creativity when you're doing this in an intentional way. We often think about fixed structures outdoors. Playgrounds, the slides, the climbing structures. These are great. They add a lot. But they can be pretty expensive and also research tells us that children tend to have more narrow kinds of play with these sorts of fixed structures.

Research tells us that movable or loose parts tend to provide children with sort of a more varied type of play. Don't forget about loose parts outdoors as well. You can think natural materials like leaves and twigs and stones and so on. But also think of things that maybe you wouldn't normally think about as play materials. Boards, boxes, pipes, ropes, maybe a stack of blankets. You can get pretty creative with pretty cheap materials and things can make great loose parts.

Also, loose parts and open-ended materials are a wonderful, wonderful way to allow flexible use of materials in play, which is a great way to support all children in play outdoors and allow for that adaptive child-led experience.

Another resource I wanted to point you to in your viewer's guide is the Head Start Body Start Play Space Assessment. It's specifically for preschool-aged children and it's a tool and some guidance to help you look at your program's play space or your outdoor learning environments. It's got some great tips in there, so I wanted to make sure to direct you to that. It's particularly helpful if you're thinking about trying to make some changes or some improvements to your outdoor space.

I'm really thrilled to have a guest expert with us today. We've been talking about some over-arching guiding themes and we're going to chat a little bit more here about some tips for your specific program's outdoor learning and spaces and how to make them more engaging. I have DeEtta Simmons. Hi, DeEtta. She is the Senior Director at Cultivate Learning at the University of

Washington, and she does many other web series. She's the cohost of a really great one called Meaningful Makeover. You'll want to check that out if you haven't already.

DeEtta leads the quality recognition work for Washington State's Quality Rating and Improvement System, Early Achievers where she works on weaving equity into systems by strategically engaging with stakeholders to improve processes. Before she was at Cultivate full-time in 2012, DeEtta served children and families in private and non-profit early learning programs all the way up in Alaska and Hawaii and in Washington State, so she's been in some really beautiful places. DeEtta has relied on the Environment Rating Scales and Class Assessments and is passionate about play and outdoor nature-based early learning environments. Thanks for being with us here today, DeEtta. I appreciate it.

DeEtta Simmons: I'm so happy to be here.

Marley: I'm happy to have you here. We're going to kick us off here. I would love to hear some of your tips for cost-effective additions or modifications to outdoor play areas.

DeEtta: Thanks, Marley. That's a really great question. A good first step is to assess your environment and determine if you already have natural items there. Things like pine cones, leaves, sticks and rocks are great. A garden can also be a great cost-effective addition and it doesn't have to take up a lot of space. You can even experiment with container gardening and you can even take your garden vertical, with hanging baskets or a sturdy shelf. Gardening is great for multiple age groups, which is great for those of you who are or who support family childcare providers.

Marley: Yes, I really appreciate that. That might be true also if you're a home visitor and you're working with a family and we're focused on preschool-aged children, but of course families have more than just one child sometimes. That's a really wonderful suggestion. Thanks, DeEtta.

DeEtta: Yeah, that's right. I mean, infants can look at the plants, smell them. Toddlers can start to touch them and touch the dirt. Preschoolers can actually help take care of the garden and even record their progress, which can be a lot of fun. A garden is a really great way to teach about the life cycle.

Another small change that can have a big impact is including spray bottles with water for children to use. Spray bottles can enhance concentration, they're really engaging and can be challenging while supporting the development of fine motor skills. They're especially fun outside and a great way for children to help water plants indoors and out, and I would add that there are different types of spray bottles, to customize or individualize for the kids in your group.

Another idea if you have the space, is to create trails or pathways. Even a small or simple marked pathway can be really engaging for kids and they can also help with the flow of traffic outdoors. Another one that I was thinking of that can be low or even no-cost depending on where you are is to include natural wood rounds that children can build with. You can even add letters or numbers or children's names to support a variety of engaging activities.

Marley: That's really fun. I love that. I think that can be, free even, if you happen to get lucky. One tip if you're trying to get those wood rounds is to maybe look up if you've got any tree

maintenance – look in your yellow pages, see if there's a local company that does tree work, whether it's cutting down limbs that are hanging over power lines, things like that, they will often have tree rounds. Especially if you mention that you are an educational program, sometimes they can even cut them to size for you. That's worth taking a look around. That can be a really great, cheap addition.

DeEtta: Absolutely. I've even seen them on my local neighborhood group app where people were giving them away.

Marley: Oh, yeah.

DeEtta: Another thing that's great to do is to set up the space by defining the areas so that children know what is going to be available in each area. Think about how that set-up can help you. For example, is the water table near the water spigot? Do you have place where ...

Marley: Right.

DeEtta: ... you're dusting off boots where they come after playing in the sand kind of a thing?

Marley: Right. Right. It's some of those logistics that can be so important for the adults who are helping support this and make it a little easier on us, especially for cleanup. I know sometimes that can be a barrier. I appreciate that. I wanted to point out – cleanup can always be a little challenging. I wanted to point out we're on sort of the topic of things that are relatively cheap to do. There's another great resource with more tips, again, in that viewer's guide in your resource widget. The title of this one is called Affordable Settings and Elements: Ideas for Cost-Effective Solutions, go find that if you want even more great suggestions there.

Back to you, DeEtta. I'm wondering, what if you are at a program and you have some outdoor space but it's really not very exciting. Maybe it's just a slab of concrete. What then?

DeEtta: Well, I think that that's actually fairly common, and there are a lot of ways to bring in nature, even if the area is concrete. If you have good drainage, my first go-to is water. Water is a great element to add because from a nature-based perspective, it's incredibly important because it's part of our everyday lives. Children learn so much from water. They develop gross motor skills, fine motor skills such as lifting, pouring, carrying, may different things.

Marley: That's true. There's a lot that we can do with water and that's hopefully relatively readily accessible and cost-effective there.

DeEtta: Right. It's also very soothing and relaxing and can encourage play in some children that might not like to be outside as much can be engaged in doing water play. Another really engaging material outside is sand. It has a lot of open-ended possibilities as well as the opportunity to incorporate math and science concepts. You can add things like measuring cups and spoons and balance scales to help increase some of those math activities in your outdoor environment.

Marley: That's great. What you hinted at, you can get creative about what types of toys or materials are with the sand and water. It doesn't have to be just buckets and shovels in the sandbox. You can bring in things from the kitchen or you can certainly get a little creative there with loose parts.

These are all really great activities for home-based programs and childcare settings as well. Even if you just have a tiny little patio, you can probably make space for some water play or some sand play. I think these are some really flexible, great, simple additions so thank you, DeEtta.

We've been talking about a lot of really great ideas that are cost effective for your outdoor space and earlier, the many benefits of time outdoors. I want to offer up, you can find that Q&A and share with us about what are some barriers that come to mind in getting preschoolers outside. I wanted to invite DeEtta to comment on this. What are your thoughts about some of these common barriers for getting preschoolers outside?

DeEtta: I think one of the barriers is often the adult comfort level with being outdoors. This can include the teacher, the family childcare provider, home visitor, and the parents.

Marley: Absolutely. Maybe weather or I mentioned cleanup, sometimes just things getting really messy outside, being prepared for that. I think that's a really great point.

DeEtta: We talked about many reasons why people have had different experiences outdoors and one thing you can do is to think about how to make that environment more inviting for the children and for the adults. Some things you can do is provide a covered area, a convenient space where the adults can access things they need such as boots, gloves, hats, drinking water, that emergency backpack. It's also helpful to think about what activities the children or adults like to do outside so that you're not – think about it ahead of time so you're not having to think something up on the spot.

Marley: Yeah, that's a great point. I mean, some adults are fantastic at coming up with activities to do with children at a very last minute, but that's part of what may or may not be comfortable for you as an adult, so being prepared in advance can make that run a little bit more smoothly. Any other barriers that you're thinking about, DeEtta?

DeEtta: I think having appropriate clothing can be a challenge. The weather. Your location or even being in a location where you just have limited access to the outdoors.

Marley: Absolutely. We've been talking about adult attitudes as a barrier and of course, as you mentioned, for education staff as well as parents. That's a really good place for home visitors to try and find some ways they can support parents. Planning together what they enjoy about being outside and sort of how to do that in a way that's safe and that they're comfortable with. If it's maybe rainy or snow or sun – in some places it's the sun is more hard to work around in really hot desert climates, or intense wind. You can help emphasize to parents that really all children need access to outdoor play and sort of help support that.

There's one thing I wanted to mention, is that research tells us that children with disabilities often have fewer opportunities for play, largely due to adults' fears of them getting hurt. Yes, home visitors, this is a great place for you to work with parents on their comfort level here, but it's also a really great place for additional professional development, staff trainings, things like that, to really make sure all education staff are confident in keeping children safe and allowing them access to play.

One thing you can think about at sort of a program level is creating a philosophy statement describing your program's beliefs around outdoor play. You can build this with input from staff as well as from families and use that as a guide to have these conversations around what it might take or what it might look like to have daily contact nature and outdoor play and exploration, and what that might look like in your program.

Then if you have the sort of defined philosophy statement, it can be included in family welcoming materials and it can be something that helps guide those conversations so that everybody's sort of on that same page.

DeEtta: I totally agree, Marley. It's so important for all children to have access to the outdoors. In the case that you do have limited access to the outdoors for whatever reason, you can take steps to increased access to nature indoors as well. For example, you can grow safe plants indoors or bring other natural materials to increase that access for the times when you're not able to be outdoors. Even small increases in access to nature can have a positive impact for both the children and for the adults.

Marley: I love that. I think that it's fun to have a little weather station or something. You can think of things like that that are sort of drawing attention to what is going on outdoors, even without actually going outside. If you have access to a window, and then you can pay attention to what is happening out there. Sometimes those little points of connection to the outdoors can happen even without having to go outside, which is a really great point.

Go ahead and find that Q&A if you haven't already, and I would love for you to share something you've learned or a tip that you use for supporting access to outdoor play for all children in your program. You can share a reflection, maybe something you've been thinking about or practices that work well for you in your program, as well as maybe anything that works well in your outdoor space specifically. Or something that you'd like to try. We always love hearing from you, so feel free to share any of your thoughts in that Q&A.

We have been talking a lot about our outdoor environments and what it means to have engaging outdoor environments, while providing access to outdoor environments for all children as well as trying to make them welcoming to all. Sort of our summary slide here, covering a lot of what we've been talking about.

We want to make sure that our outdoor learning environments are welcoming and engaging for all children, but also identity-affirming. We talked about how we think about that in terms of indoor environment a lot, of bringing in culture and language to our indoor spaces. But we should be thinking about that outdoors as well and getting creative with how to do that. We want to allow for choice and play and exploration in a variety of materials and spaces. We're allowing children to have access to and choice between a bunch of different kinds of activities and spaces and letting them choose.

We also want to think about not just motor skills but also engagement of the senses. Where can we highlight that naturally in our outdoor spaces and also where can we encourage the sensory exploration in our outdoor spaces for children in our programs. We talked about active and quiet or calm activities. Yes, we want to make sure that there are these wide, big, open spaces for children to run around in and get off that preschooler energy, which is all really

wonderful for their fitness and their muscles and some of those benefits that we talked about with the vigorous play. But also can we have cozy spaces outdoors that allow for maybe individual or small group or these sort of calm or quiet activities?

Then in addition to our large-group activities, is there space for that? And then change. Change things up regularly, and that doesn't have to be super expensive. DeEtta gave us a lot of really wonderful ideas for affordable, sometimes even free, but cost-effective things that we can do to intentionally change up things that are going on in our outdoor learning spaces. Because when there is change of materials, children notice that and that can be very invigorating and exciting, and they might explore more. DeEtta, is there anything you'd like to add?

DeEtta: Those are just all such great tips. There's so many ways to increase preschoolers' access to nature. I hope you are inspired to try something new. Start small, follow the children's lead, and most importantly, have fun outdoors with the children.

Marley: Fun is a really great place to end on for that. I wanted to thank you all very much for joining us today and I wanted to extend a very special thank you to our guest expert, DeEtta Simmons, for joining us. If you want to hear more about outdoor learning, I want to invite you to join us for the next and final Front Porch for this year. It'll be myself and some additional guest speakers. Thursday, September 15th, is our third and final Front Porch webinar in our three-part series on Preschoolers Outside. In September, we're going to be taking quite a bit of time to chat with some guest experts around supporting physical skills outdoors in particular. Honing in on supporting physical skills outdoors, talking about both risky play and supporting children with disabilities in outdoor play. That is all for today. Thank you all very much for joining us.