“Dirt on My Shirt”
by Jeff Foxworthy

There’s dirt on my shirt
And leaves in my hair
There’s mud in my boots
But I really don’t care

Playing outside is so much fun
To breathe the clean air
And feel the warm sun

To step in a puddle
Or climb a big tree
Makes me quite happy
Just look and you’ll see

O utdoor play has a long history in early care and education programs. Friedrich Froebel, a 19th century pioneer in the field, was one of the first to promote outdoor play for children (Tovey 2014). Then and now, experts in early care and education strongly support children spending big blocks of time outdoors (Park and Riley 2015).

More recently, the push for outdoor play has come from health care experts. Far too many children from birth to 12 years are overweight or obese, which puts them at risk for developing problems such as diabetes and heart disease. About 170 million children in the United States are overweight (Erwin, Ickes, Ahn, and Fedewa 2014), and a little more than 18 percent of American preschoolers are obese (Spencer and Wright 2014).

Ideally, outdoor play is active and physical. One type of active, physical outdoor play is exercise play, which includes digging, running, climbing, and hopping. A second type is rough-and-tumble play, which includes chasing, wrestling, and play fighting. Both types are energetic. But preschool children who do more rough-and-tumble play are less popular with their classmates (Veiga, de Leng, Cachucho, Ketelaar, Kok, Knobbe, Neto, and Reiffe 2016). Teachers may want to redirect it into exercise play.

For school-agers, on the other hand, rough-and-tumble play does not seem to affect their popularity with classmates. Even so,
teachers may still want to redirect that rough-and-tumble play into cooperative games. (See below for both exercise and cooperative play activities.)

Children who regularly play outdoors enjoy many benefits, both health and educational (Erwin, Ickes, Ahn, and Fedewa 2014; Park and Riley 2015; Spencer and Wright 2014; Veiga, de Leng, Cachucho, Ketelaar, Kok, Knobbe, Neto, and Reiffe 2016). These children:

- tend to be physically fit,
- are less likely to get sick,
- are less likely to have asthma,
- have healthy bones, muscles, and joints,
- have better eyesight,
- have strong hearts and healthy lungs,
- develop their motor skills,
- play more creatively,
- have more active imaginations,
- report less anxiety and less depression,
- show greater respect for themselves and others,
- are more socially competent,
- have higher self-esteem,
- have better classroom behavior,
- pay attention longer, and
- have better memories.

**Supervising children**

Many teachers recognize that outdoor play is an important part of “...the total care and education of young children” (Olson, Thompson, and Hudson 2014). They seek to encourage the development of the whole child, which means having different types of playground equipment, giving children choices in activities, and guiding children in the activities (Erwin, Ickes, Ahn, and Fedewa 2014).

Unfortunately, some teachers regard outdoor play as a time to visit with other staff or satisfy supervision requirements. “Supervision is far more than just assuring sufficient teacher-child ratios” (Olson, Thompson, and Hudson 2014). It includes preparing the outdoor space so learning can take place safely and guiding children to play safely.

Safe and interesting outdoor spaces are developmentally appropriate, offering activities that fit the children’s motor, cognitive, and social-emotional abilities. The outdoor setting safely challenges children to explore and be adventurous. In addition to being safe, it must provide enough freedom for children to stretch their abilities (Park and Riley 2015). (See Child Care Licensing: Rewarding, but risky, business for information on playground safety.)

In supervising children during outdoor play, teachers are watchful, alert, and ready to redirect children from unsafe play. Active supervision requires that teachers know each child’s developmental stage, be aware of potential injuries related to that developmental stage, and be ready to remove any possible hazards (Olson, Thompson, and Hudson 2014). For example, toddlers are unsteady on their feet and can trip on toys left on the ground. A teacher who is actively supervising toddlers would pick up toys left on pathways.

As a group, teachers work with each other to develop playground supervision policies. They can decide together how to divide the playground into supervision areas or zones. For each zone, they create laminated action cards that do the following:

- state the area to supervise (example: sandbox and playhouse),
- provide safety guidelines (example: The sand stays close to the ground),
- suggest activities (example: Encourage pretend play between the sandbox and playhouse), and
- set clean-up procedures for the zone (example: Brush sand off materials and place them in labeled crates) (Kern and Wakeford 2007).

Teachers carefully watch their assigned area or zone. Ideally, they will:

- scan the assigned area often, looking for actual or potential safety problems (Olson, Thompson, and Hudson 2014),
- interact with and support the play of all children in their assigned area (Kern and Wakeford 2007),
- keep an eye on children moving through their area,
- help children transition from one activity to another as needed, and
- stay in their zone until relieved by an aide or floater. If a floater is not available, they call other teachers on the playground for help via a walkie-talkie or cell phone (Kern and Wakeford 2007).

In sum, outdoor play encourages children to communicate, express their feelings, discover, and investigate the world around them (Olson, Thompson, and Hudson 2014). Children of all ages benefit physically and mentally from outdoor play. It’s a vital part of early care and education.
as well as after-school programs. Moreover, active supervision by teachers keeps outdoor activities safer and more fun.

**Activities for infants and toddlers**

Infants and toddlers need outside time as much as preschoolers and school-agers do. Health habits that start young are more likely to continue into adulthood (Erwin, Ickes, Ahn, and Fedewa 2014). Unless weather makes it impossible, bring toddlers outside every day. Here are some activities that you can do with little preparation or equipment.

- **Blanket time.** Bring a soft, washable blanket outside. Place it on the ground in a shady part of the playground. You can talk about the outdoor sights and sounds, read storybooks, and provide outdoor snacks while on the blanket.

- **Sunshine walks.** Take infants on sunshine walks on the playground for brief periods. Be sure every child wears a sun hat and sunscreen. Talk about sights and sounds. Offer the infants safe objects like a leaf or flower to touch. Talk about how it feels.

- **Tree trunk tag.** Play tag with toddlers around a big tree with a fat trunk. They will enjoy running around trying to catch you and each other. Let them catch you more often than you catch them (Honig 2011).

- **Look and see.** Say, “I see…” with excitement and look around the playground, behind a tree, or in the sky. Finish the statement with an object that can easily be seen by the infants or toddlers. Repeat with other objects until children want a turn (Mississippi State University 2010).

- **Ball toss.** Provide a large basket or box containing enough balls so that every child has at least one. Encourage children to toss the balls into the basket or box. For variety, encourage them to toss or roll the balls to each other. Showing excitement and applauding their tossing and rolling will encourage them to continue playing with the balls (Mississippi State University 2010).

- **Bug bottle.** Choose a clear plastic container with a lid. Poke air holes in the lid before starting the activity with the children. Gather the children, and put pieces of moist bread in the container. Add a little honey or sugar. Turn the open container on its side and place it on the ground. The next morning, take the children outside to see if any insects are eating the sweetened bread. If there are, tightly screw on the lid. Bring the container indoors, and place it where the toddlers can see inside. Ask what they see. Expand on what they say. For example: “Yes, that’s a red bug. It has black spots on it. It’s a ladybug.” At the end of the day, release the insects outside (Mississippi State University 2010).


**Activities for preschoolers**

Many activities that children enjoy indoors can also be done outdoors. For example, teachers can offer a quiet place to rest with...
books or puzzles on a blanket. All kinds of art materials, such as watercolors, sidewalk chalk, and finger paints work outdoors too. Table toys, including small wooden blocks, Legos®, and snap blocks, have a place outdoors. These quiet activities offer children a rest from active play. Taking activities outdoors is more than a repeat of what children can do indoors, however. Some activities work best outdoors.

Preschool children naturally play actively. Teachers can encourage this play by providing equipment or materials that interest children. Here are some activities to do outside with preschoolers.

**Treasure sacks.** Attach a 3-foot length of clear contact paper to a fence or a table. The sticky side should face you. Give each child a small paper lunch sack, clearly labeled with the child’s name. Invite children to gather outdoor nature treasures such as twigs, leaves, and pebbles and put them in their sacks. Walk, hop, and skip with the children all over the playground as they gather their treasures. When their sacks are full, invite them to attach their nature treasures to the clear contact paper. Talk with them about the colors, shapes, and sizes of the treasures. Leave the contact paper outdoors overnight. The next day, talk with the children about what the wind has blown onto the contact paper. Then, talk with the children about what the wind has blown onto the contact paper. Pretend play. Invite the children to pretend play with you. "Pretend you are leaves, like the ones you picked up," you might say. Talk about the color, shape, and size of leaves they are pretending to be. Ask them how leaves move around the playground. For example, they float to the ground, they are blown by the wind, and they tumble along the ground. Invite the children to move like leaves: "Let’s float like leaves to the ground." "The wind is blowing hard. Let’s move like the wind is blowing us." Some children will start to pretend, while others will need you to model how to move. Older preschoolers can take turns suggesting how to move. Continue the activity until the children lose interest.

**Lively tricycle path.** Make the tricycle path more challenging for older preschoolers. Place plastic orange cones at different places along the path, and draw arrows on either side of the cones. Instruct the children to follow the arrows and ride around the cones. Change the number and location of the cones daily to keep the children interested.

**Obstacle course.** Make an obstacle course of loose parts, such as sawhorses, planks, self-supporting climbers, a balance beam, and wooden climbing boxes. Emphasize moving safely along the course. Hold hands with children who are hesitant to join in as the move through the course. Alter the course every one or two weeks to keep it interesting and challenging.

**Hide-and-seek.** With younger preschoolers, announce that you are It, and let children hide while you turn and close your eyes. After counting to 10, open your eyes and narrate where you are looking. “Is Francesca behind this tree? No, she’s not behind the tree.” Look in places where it would be possible or impossible...
for the children to hide. Children enjoy the humor of hearing, “Is Jerome under this leaf? No, he’s not under this leaf! Where could he be?” Continue looking for several minutes or stop when the children announce where they are hiding. Make the game more challenging by varying the instructions, “This time hide some place high,” or “This time find a place to hide under.” These instructions will encourage children to move their bodies in different ways. Anticipate that children will want to play this game many times.

**Sandbox dig.** Place big pans or buckets and plastic scoops and shovels in the sandbox or digging area. Encourage the children to fill the buckets. Admire their efforts: “Wow! That’s a deep hole.” “It takes lots of strength to fill such big buckets.” When the bucket is full, encourage the children to refill the hole. Younger children may need your assistance.

**Bowling.** Use empty plastic milk containers—the half-gallon size works best—as the pins. Provide balls of varying sizes. Give each child three chances to roll the ball and knock over the pins. After each child’s turn, have the child replace the pins with you. To keep the game challenging, increase the distance between the bowler and the pins. For older preschoolers, add a little sand to the milk containers to make the game more challenging. (Adding the sand makes it harder to knock over the pins.)

More activities for preschoolers (and school-agers) can be found at [www.childcarequarterly.com/summer04_story3a.html](http://www.childcarequarterly.com/summer04_story3a.html).

### Games for school-agers

School-agers arrive at your program after a long day of sitting at their desks. They need not only active outlets for their physical energy but also time to relax after the stress of school. Cooperative outdoor games allow them to do both.

**Snake in the gutter.** Assign at least three children the role of snake. Instruct the snakes to stand in a line with wide spaces, the gutter, between them. They stand facing the rest of the children, who are 10-15 feet away. When you yell, “Snake in the gutter!” the children attempt to run through the gutter without being tagged by a snake. Children who get tagged become snakes and stay in the gutter. Children who were not tagged run through the gutter again. Continue the game until everyone has been a snake (KidsHealth n.d.).

**Blob tag.** Assign the role of tagger to one or more children. When the tagger tags another child, they join hands to form a tagging pair. The tagging pair is now a blob. When the two-person blob tags another child, the third child holds hands with one of the pair, making a three-person blob. The members of the blob work together to tag the next child. The game continues until all the children are part of the blob (KidsHealth n.d.).

**Scavenger hunt.** This game requires some advance preparation. Gather some easily recognizable objects, such as a red ball, a yellow plastic sand pail, a cardboard box, and a pink hula hoop, and hide them around the playground. Assign children to pairs...
or teams of three or four. Give each pair or team a list of five items to look for and clues to help them find the objects. The game continues until all the objects are found (KidsHealth n.d.).

**Parachute games.** These two games are played with a parachute (KidsHealth n.d.) or a big sheet (The players roll the edges of the sheet until it is roughly circular).

**Sharks.** Choose one child to be the shark. Instruct the other children to sit and hold the parachute (or sheet) to their shoulders with their legs underneath. The shark goes under the parachute and crawls around, pulling children under the parachute. The children pulled under become sharks too. They pull other children under. The game continues until all the children are sharks.

**Around the world.** Instruct the children to stand and hold the parachute to their waists. Toss a beach ball, the world, into the center of the parachute. Instruct the children to work together to move the ball around the edge of the parachute. The goal is to keep the ball on the parachute. Continue playing until the ball falls off. Vary the game by using different sizes and weights of balls.

More games for school-agers can be found at http://kidshealth.org/en/parents/school-age-games.html#.

**References**


Tovey, Helen. 2014. Outdoor play and the early years tradition. In Jane Waters and Trisha Maynard (Eds.), *Exploring Outdoor Play in the Early Years*. Maidenhead, Berkshire: McGraw-Hill.