DEVELOPING AN OUTDOOR CLASSROOM:
Blending classroom curriculum and outdoor play space

by Mary L. Studer

“What’s this?” asks 4-year-old Blake, pointing to the orange-and-black insect on the zinnia leaves in the play yard.

“A ladybug,” says his teacher.

“Will it bite?” he asks. Before his teacher can reply, he wants to know more: “Is it a baby? Where is it going? Can I play with it?”

Why should children have to wait until they go inside to find a book about the ladybug they have just discovered, or wait for crayons and paper to draw pictures of the bugs in the garden? Children are eager to examine this new discovery with all their senses. By setting up learning centers outdoors, teachers can provide information for children as they seek to understand the world they live in.

Why blend the classroom curriculum with the outdoor play space? Children learn best by doing. The outdoors, weather permitting, offers children as much opportunity for active learning as they have indoors. The outdoor environment can offer rich learning experiences not found indoors. The play yard is full of wonderful things for children to experiment, discover, and explore. In a well-planned outdoor environment, children do much more than run, climb, and ride bikes. They notice the weather, insects, plants, and everything going on around them. Their curiosity is stimulated as they seek answers to their questions about their new discoveries.

An outdoor classroom is ideal for an emergent curriculum, one in which units are planned in response to children’s interests and discoveries. An observant teacher can watch for teachable moments when children make a discovery, ask questions, and are eager to learn. Nature provides a convenient and readily available source of learning materials.

The outdoors is also the ideal place to provide experiences that are sometimes considered too messy to do indoors. Sensory experiences such as measuring flour or mixing sand and water can be more fully explored without the limits of the indoor classroom. For the preschool child, the freedom to use materials, without restriction, always leads to greater levels of creativity and understanding.

Outdoor learning centers offer learning opportunities just as they do in the indoor classroom. Centers focus on writing, art, reading, science, manipulatives, and blocks with the same high quality of content as indoors. They provide opportunities for quiet play as well as active play while children are outside.

Teachers can extend current themes and projects into the play yard by planning for outdoor activities in weekly lesson plans. The most successful programs with outdoor classrooms employ a trained play yard coordinator who works with classroom teachers to bring curriculum themes outdoors. When all staff brainstorm together, amazing things can happen in the play yard. Teachers support the yard program by consistently enforcing rules for use and storage of yard equipment and materials. Cooperation and communication among the staff are the key elements to make this program work. When it works, you will have a rich and exciting play yard.
What is an outdoor learning center?
A learning center is a place where children have access to the materials or equipment necessary to fully explore their current interest. Learning centers support and complement each other as well as current classroom topics. Outdoor learning centers, like those indoors, promote active learning through play and hands-on exploration. Using Spring as a classroom topic, for example, the children will find a variety of different insects while planting the spring flower garden in the play yard. A well-stocked cart or cabinet is essential because science is the core of the outdoor curriculum. Children need a variety of resources in their process of discovery, and materials ideally are readily available indoors and outdoors.

What is the teacher’s role?
The teacher can make all the difference in what a child does or does not learn. Ideally, the outdoor coordinator or teacher is a skilled listener, understands the outdoor environment and has a passion for it, and is able to ask open-ended questions to prompt, coach, and support a child’s exploration while outside. Because the outdoors offers ongoing learning experiences, the coordinator—with the classroom staff on the yard—is able to support and add excitement to these experiences. In addition to handling all the ordinary responsibilities of teaching, yard coordinators and teachers are comfortable holding a creepy-crawly insect, digging sand tunnels, helping weed the garden, and setting up an exciting yard even if it rains.

The teacher understands that children learn about the physical world through natural curiosity and an urge to touch, see, hear, smell, taste, and investigate. By using hands-on material amply provided by nature in a well-established play yard, a teacher can support and encourage children’s interests, and use their questions to guide them in understanding the world in which they live. Children are not passive observers but active investigators. They are perfect examples of the saying: “I hear and I forget, I see and I remember, I do and I understand.”

How to plan outdoor learning centers
To create learning centers outdoors, begin by drawing a diagram of your yard. Decide what type of learning centers you would like to have and which areas of the yard best suit the needs of each center. Consider soft and hard areas, wet and dry areas, and quiet and noisy areas. Spend time observing the play patterns of the children. How do they use the various areas, corners, and existing structures and tables? Where are the children’s natural pathways?

Try to match learning centers to the types of activities children like to do in certain areas. You would not put the quiet reading area in the middle of a natural pathway because it would disrupt the children seeking rest and quiet.

Consider the weather at different times of the year. Do you have a covered area to use when it rains? Do you have an area protected from the wind? Do you have a well-shaded area for hot, sunny days? How will the different seasons change the types of activities you can provide?

Consider who will use the yard and when. How many children will be on the play yard at the same time? Will more than one age group be using the yard at the same time, or at different times? The number of children in the yard will influence how many centers you decide to provide. The more children in the yard, the greater choice of activities you will provide.
Storage and organization are essential

A small storage shed on the play yard is probably the most efficient way to store equipment and materials. The shed should have plenty of shelf space so that you can find things easily. Label the shelves so staff will know what goes where during afternoon clean-up. We have a container for lost parts and pieces. The yard coordinator regularly returns these items to their proper places to ensure that games and equipment stay intact.

Plastic milk crates are excellent storage containers. Each crate will contain a different type of equipment. Larger items such as bikes and shopping carts can be stored on the floor under the shelves.

Reserve enough shelf space for art materials such as easel paper, paints, and brushes.

Milk crates are not for storage only. We use them in many ways: as chairs at the various tables, building blocks, and cars, for example.

You may reserve some materials for outside use only and borrow other materials like manipulatives, animals, blocks, and puzzles from the classroom. Store those things that are specifically for outside use in the shed. Be sure to return other materials to the classroom.

Care and cleaning of equipment is easier than you might think. Fill a water table, buckets, or dishpans with warm, soapy water, and set the toys that need cleaning next to it. The children will wash them again and again. Children also like to wash things with a cloth and scrub brushes, which are excellent for improving body coordination.

Learning center ideas

Writing center
This center often leads children into many imaginative games. It contains a variety of materials that encourage creativity. The center also promotes language in all its forms—writing and reading as well as talking and listening. A telephone is a wonderful tool because it encourages verbal communication. We often hear children having a conversation with Mommy or Daddy, especially when they are feeling lonely or sad. They usually feel better after this imaginary contact with a parent.

A small-wheeled cart with two or three shelves works well for storage and set-up of equipment. We restock the cart from the storage shed when we set up in the morning; and then we simply carry it out and place it next to the writing center table. On the top shelf are markers, crayons, colored pencils, scissors, insect stamps, two small stamp pads, and chalk—each in an appropriately sized open container. The second shelf holds paper, and the third shelf holds a telephone and small, message-size pieces of paper. For variety, we add a keyboard, different types of paper, or an adding machine.

The writing center area is in the same place every day. This helps the children learn to use it properly. A small trash can in the area helps children clean up after they finish projects. Once the children learn proper use and clean-up rules, they can incorporate them into almost any play activity. With proper supervision, children learn that writing tools, puzzles, and books are each kept in a special place. All day, they will go back and forth from writing to running to climbing. At the same time, they understand that they may write a note and carry it to the dramatic play or climbing area or make signs for the yard. We have rolls of tape readily available for their signs.

Dramatic play
We have a small, open-sided playhouse for this center. With different props, this structure serves as a grocery store, fire station, hospital, or flower shop. Place rugs on the ground to create a soft and quiet area. Provide dress-up clothes, or add blocks to encourage building activities.

Art and manipulatives
A large table works well for this center because you may need room for large groups of children. When you are not using this area for art projects, you can
use it for manipulatives, puzzles, and games or for parent lunches and dinners. For manipulative materials, consider Waffle blocks, wild animal figures, Legos, puzzles, games, wooden blocks, small cars and trucks, dinosaurs, and plastic plants and flowers. Ideally, all are durable, reasonably weatherproof, easy to sort, and fun.

For arts projects, consider sponge painting on individual sheets or on a large piece of paper taped to cover the table. You can also plan watercolor painting, finger painting, painting rocks, collages made from natural items such as shells and moss, and wood sculptures with glue.

Sensory table
This wonderfully versatile area is used for sensory experiences such as sand, water, mud, and goop (cornstarch and water). Add some play dishes, measuring cups and spoons, sieves, funnels, and similar items. Include brooms and dustpans for clean-up.

Children love to pretend they are baking and cooking. Move a table near the sand box and provide water. Children can mix sand and water in large bowls with spoons, place their creations in baking pans, and slide them into an oven made by stacking a couple of empty milk crates. When they are finished, hose down the area and fill the sensory table with warm, soapy water and provide a few wash cloths so they can wash the dishes. Set out dishwashing as a cool afternoon activity.

The sensory table is also used for manipulatives with small or round parts. Lincoln Logs with people or farm animal figures are a favorite. Use Legos, miniature wild animals, miniature dinosaurs, small wooden blocks, Bristle Blocks, or any combination of materials you have on hand.

Science center
Science is not limited to planned activities but rather allows children to further explore their discoveries and interests. Here children can take the time they need to fully explore a new concept. Science and discovery activities offer children many benefits: pre-reading skills, the ability to distinguish different sounds and visual patterns, hand-eye coordination, motor skills, understanding of cause-and-effect, and positive self-concept. Children develop these skills as they work directly with materials. They fit parts together, compare objects, and observe changes.

They develop concepts and learn words they can use as they begin to read.

Standard items for the science area include handheld magnifying glasses, prisms, bug jars, plastic insects, binoculars, kaleidoscopes, telescope, scales, rulers, magnets, flashlight, and bubble solution and wands. From time to time, add natural materials such as rocks, plants, dried flowers, birds’ nests, feathers, gourds, seashells, fossils, pine cones, nuts, and seeds. Set up an ant farm, a root-view farm, and similar farms.

Designate a table for the science center and stock it with materials and activities each day. Or create a portable center by using a low cart (no more than 24 inches high) that has an ample work surface as well as storage shelves with doors. The cart provides easy access to equipment and allows you to set up materials on a moment’s notice as the children make discoveries.

Reading area
Provide a soft, quiet area for reading. Choose books that support current themes, children’s interests, and topics about nature (weather, insects, animals, and plants). On our play yard, the book children read most is the photo album. We frequently take pictures of interesting projects, popular activities, and special events to keep the album current. When

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<tr>
<th>Play yard field trips</th>
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<tr>
<td>These are short excursions on or near the school grounds. Some ideas:</td>
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<tr>
<td>- Hunt insects.</td>
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<td>- Collect leaves.</td>
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<td>- Explore a tree.</td>
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<td>- Look for birds’ nests.</td>
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<td>- Observe an ant hill.</td>
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<td>- Dig for worms.</td>
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<td>- Look for animal tracks.</td>
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<td>- Collect and study rocks.</td>
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<td>- Look for the effects of erosion.</td>
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<td>- Look for colors.</td>
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<td>- Look for shapes.</td>
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<td>- Go on a listening walk.</td>
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<td>- Visit a nearby construction site.</td>
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<tr>
<td>- Look for worms and snails.</td>
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having film developed, we order double prints so we will have a copy for the activity file. The children never seem to tire of looking at pictures of the fun they had on the play yard. They also enjoy using story tapes with the books to follow along.

Sand box
Add plastic flowers, and watch the children create a garden. Add dinosaurs, and watch them create a prehistoric landscape. Be prepared to help them make a volcano for the dinosaurs! Add old boards to use as a ramp for rolling wheels (spools) and cars. Dig a 1-foot-deep trench in the sand and lay the board across it as a bridge. Add a few plastic alligators to make an alligator pit that is sure to create lots of excitement.

Keep an activity file
To make an activity file, you will need a file box and index cards. The 5-inch by 8-inch size works well. Photograph each activity as children are engaged in it. Write a description of each activity on the front of the card, and tape pictures on the back.

An activity file provides a record of the many exciting activities you have created for the play yard. The record is not only satisfying but also serves as a resource file of ideas. A file is especially helpful if you must be absent for a day, or if you take another job. Your substitute will have some ideas of the children’s favorite activities.

Gardening
A garden is an ideal way to create ongoing science projects in the outdoor classroom. Nothing is so fascinating as planting a seed and watching it grow into a flower or edible vegetable. A garden allows children to use all of their senses.

Grow some fruits and vegetables. Choose a fruit tree well-suited to your region and plant it. Children will enjoy smelling the blooms and watching the flowers turn into plums or peaches. For vegetables, consider fast-growing plants such as onions and radishes. Later, children can compare the tastes and smells of their home-grown vegetables.

Flowers are a wonderful experience for children. They run up to us in the play yard and say, “Close your eyes, I have a surprise for you!” They take our hands and lead us around making sure we don’t bump into anything. When we reach the destination, they say, “Open your eyes now. Surprise!” The excitement and delight shines in them. It is a rewarding moment and fills us with joy.

Where plants grow, insects usually take up residence. We have a lot of garden snails that eat everything we plant. We couldn’t seem to get rid of them and became discouraged until we noticed how they fascinated the children. So we began to use them in various activities. Here are two:

Snail trails
Dip snails in food coloring and let them crawl on paper so they leave a colored trail behind.

Snail circus
Tie a piece of yarn between two blocks to form a tight rope. Wet the yarn with water, and let a snail walk the tight rope.

Making a snail habitat is also fun for the children, but be sure to release the snails at the end of the day or keep them in a cool place. Even garden pests can entertain children, teachers, and parents.
Safety in a busy play environment

Every play yard needs rules and limits that staff agree upon and enforce. Consistency in rules prevents confusion for both children and adults. Create clearly defined boundaries to help children remember to stay within specific areas for specific purposes. For example, we mark our bike area with cones to keep the children from riding their bikes into the basketball area. This has helped to eliminate many accidents. You will need to determine the safety rules that best fit the needs of your yard and children.

Regularly check materials and equipment for broken parts or pieces that may injure a child. Also remember to check large equipment—climbing structure, swings, tables, and benches. Promptly repair or remove broken toys and equipment.

Keep a first-aid kit on the play yard for easy access. Being able to treat minor scrapes and injuries on the play yard means optimum yard supervision at all times. Otherwise, a staff member must go indoors to treat a scraped knee. We keep a small box stocked with small bandages, small bottles of disinfectant soap and water, gauze pads, and rubber gloves. Place the first-aid kit in a teachers' station. This is a small cabinet or shelf where staff keep their water cups, sunglasses, accident/injury reports, materials and other odds-and-ends needed for the day's activities.

To prevent the spread of germs, disinfect equipment on a regular basis. Use a chlorine bleach solution on the water fountain, play telephone, and table surfaces. Keep pathways free of dropped toys and other obstructions that may cause a child to slip and fall. Sweep cement and pavement areas daily to prevent them from accumulating sand and becoming slippery.
Hints for learning center use
In the beginning, staff need to set guidelines and make decisions about the use of the learning center materials and consistently enforce them. The children may have a difficult time remembering some of the rules at first, but with gentle reminders and consistent use of the rules, the children will soon be responsible users and eager helpers during clean-up.

Rule 1
Materials stay in the center area they are put in by the adult. This sounds like a difficult rule to enforce but it is necessary if you want to keep materials from being scattered all over the play yard. It makes clean-up much easier and less time-consuming.

Rule 2
Children are responsible for their own creations. They are supported and helped if needed, but they stay with the task to completion. By expecting children to help clean up after themselves, you are teaching them cause and effect as well as how to value and care for the toys they enjoy. It will help them feel good about themselves and their capabilities.

Rule 3
Have lots of fun! (Need I say more about this rule?)

By using these rules, everyone, including the staff, will have a happy and busy day.

Guidance and discipline
On our play yard, we rarely need to discipline children. Conflict is low because they have so many choices to occupy their interests, and children have learned to work together to resolve disputes.

Children are more likely to have difficulties sharing and cooperating when they are tired. Having a quiet reading area gives them the opportunity to rest without feeling like they are missing out on the fun. When a teacher sits down in the reading area and begins to read a book, children instantly cluster around to listen to the story and then beg for more.

When necessary, we redirect a child to a new activity. We offer many play choices. We sometimes deny a child the privilege of playing in a certain area. We combine this lost privilege with an opportunity for the child to watch appropriate behavior in that area. Our goal is to teach proper use of materials and to discourage destructive or inappropriate behaviors.

Trial and error
Developing an effective yard program takes time. Learn from your mistakes. Don’t give up. Ask other teachers for ideas. If something doesn’t work, analyze the situation and find a solution. For example, if you set up an activity and the children seem to have little interest, try the same activity in a different location or on a different day or even in combination with a different set of activities. You might be surprised to discover that the children really do like playing with puzzles but only under the tree and not by the fence. Or they like dancing with scarves but they like it better in the afternoon than in the morning.

A valuable resource
The play yard is a valuable resource too often overlooked and underused. The most active time of day is when the children are outside playing. It is also the time they are most eager to learn about and explore the environment.

Setting up learning centers outdoors helps connect children to the influences of nature. Only by experiencing nature can they begin to truly understand the world in which they live.
References

About the author
Mary L. Studer received her California Early Childhood Teaching Certificate from Glendale Community College. In addition to classroom teaching, she has been yard coordinator at Glendale Adventist Medical Center Children's Center for three years.