

Outdoor Learning Environments and Physical Activity

A child's play space may impact how much physical activity they get.

Researchers at NC State studied outdoor learning environments at 30 childcare centers. Their findings showed that the types of play activities, the amount of open space, and the proximity of outdoor activities all influenced how active children were on the playground. (Smith, 2016)

TYPES OF ACTIVITIES

Perhaps not surprisingly, play areas that included opportunities for sitting--such as chairs, benches, or even tables--encouraged children to be less active. What encouraged kids to be most active? Balls and, for boys especially, wheeled toys. (Smith et al, 2016) In general, portable play equipment (think balls, jump ropes, bicycles), encourages more physical activity both on the playground and in the classroom. (McWilliams, 2009; Adamo, 2015; Adamo, 2016; Cheng, 2016)

From an early age, girls are less active on the playground than boys (Soini, 2014; Vanderloo 2013). Girls may need special activities or encouragement to be physically active, especially to vigorous levels, on the playground.

OPEN SPACE

There is a sweet spot when it comes to open space in outdoor learning environments. Too much open space actually discourages movement from one play activity to another. But not enough space also discourages movement. Play spaces that included room to run and play, but were small enough to allow a view of the other play activities, were ideal for encouraging kids to move. (Smith, 2016)

PROXIMITY

As noted above, kids were more compelled to move when they could see what their friends were doing or what was happening at a nearby station or activity. Researchers suggested that as

children tired of one activity, seeing an interesting object, game or interaction at a nearby play activity encourages them to move about the playground. (Smith, 2016)

Even more interesting, kids tended to play with stations and objects (and to move more) when stations or play areas were located in the center of the playground. Learning environments where stations were lined up along the perimeter of the playground actually caused kids to move and play less. Researchers think that centrally-located play areas may be more visible to kids and, thus, inspire them to move. (Smith, 2016)

Although these researchers looked specifically at outdoor learning environments, these lessons may apply to classrooms as well. Classrooms that lack open space actually discourage movement! (Adamo, 2015; Adamo 2016)

Resources

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