



The toy area should include puzzles, toys, and natural objects, such as a collection of large shells.

lids and easy-to-work latches or locks; things toddlers can fill and empty; sets of large cubes, beads, and pegs; and figures and vehicles for pretending. Keep in mind that while it is very easy to stock this area with things made from plastic, this is also the place to include collections of a wide variety of household and natural objects of different textures, aromas, and weights.

Storage

To help toddlers find and choose what they need, these toys and other playthings should be stored on low shelves in open, easy-to-access baskets and containers.

Labeling these baskets and containers with a sample object, picture, or photo may help older toddlers put toys away on days when they have emptied all the containers. (See p. 276 for a summary checklist of equipment and materials for the toy area.)

Outdoor play yards for infants and toddlers

The outdoor play area is an important extension of the indoor exploration and play environment. Outside, infants can hear, smell, feel, or see trees, clouds, wind, warm and cool temperatures, and changes in light. Toddlers can run, throw,

kick, climb, swing, or dig; they find plants, animals, and insects to examine. (See “Learning About Nature” on pp. 251–253.) Rich in sights, textures, sounds, smells, and opportunities for movement, an outdoor play yard greatly expands children’s store of sensory-motor experiences.

Generally, 75 square feet of outdoor space per child is considered appropriate in early childhood licensing standards and accreditation criteria. “The outdoor space should be designed for play value and safety,” says pediatric health and safety expert Dr. Susan Aronson (2002, p. 120). Since many technical issues feature in the design of a safe playground, Aronson recommends that a certified playground safety inspector review existing facilities and plans to modify or build new outdoor spaces.

A significant concern in outdoor play areas is the safety of the surfaces and equipment. Since the majority of playground injuries are due to falls, the most important safety feature is an impact-absorbent surface that meets the standards of the ASTM International (www.astm.org). The US Consumer Product Safety Commission (www.cpsc.gov) conducts tests on the shock-absorbing properties of common loose-fill surfacing material, including wood chips, shredded bark mulch, sand, pea gravel, and shredded rubber tires. Each has advantages and drawbacks, including the cost of periodic replacement due to weather-related deterioration. While commercially manufactured surface materials (also called unitary materials) may be

more expensive initially to purchase and install, they require less maintenance and may save money in the long run.

In addition to protecting children from falls, outdoor play areas should guard against entrapment, tripping, and choking and avoid exposure to excessive wind and direct sunlight. They should be separated from streets, traffic, and access by unauthorized persons and be inspected daily to guarantee they are free of glass, litter, and other hazards. This is true especially for local public playgrounds used by the child care setting. For more information on the safety of outdoor areas, see Aronson (2002), accreditation criteria (NAEYC, 2007, criterion 9.B.06), and the websites of the organizations cited in the previous paragraph.

Location

To make movement from indoor to outdoor play easy and hassle-free, the play yard should be located as close to the indoor play space as possible. In stand-alone or school-based facilities, a play yard often adjoins the indoor care space. Child care centers located in apartment buildings or office complexes may have to be more creative to find a suitable outdoor play area. For example, urban centers are creating rooftop play areas with natural features (sod, raised beds) that let young children escape intrusive stimuli from the city down below. (For examples of rooftop play areas for child care centers, visit the website of the Association of Play Industries [www.api-play.org].)



A stroller ride in the neighborhood can be a supplement to regular experiences in an outdoor play yard.

Infants and toddlers generally spend more time outdoors when the indoor play space opens directly onto the play yard. If the yard is not directly accessible, caregivers will need to think about how children can safely move (or be moved) there from indoors. Infants can be transported in strollers or wagons, and toddlers will be able to walk to the yard with caregivers if it is only a short distance away. If the distance is really too far for toddlers to walk, caregivers can transport small groups of them in wagons or strollers. If one outdoor play yard serves both infants and toddlers, child care centers can separate the infants' space from that of the older children by a low barrier of canvas- or vinyl-covered cushions, a low wall or fence, or low shrubs.

In settings that share an outdoor space with preschool programs, the infant and toddler play area should be separated from that of older children. Even if use of the shared space by each group can be scheduled for different times of day, mobile infants and toddlers need play equipment geared to their specific needs, located in its own designated area. Mobile infants and young toddlers need stable, sturdy wheeled toys and vehicles to push, pull, and ride. Older toddlers need small-scale climbing equipment. Older toddlers should be able to use this equipment (e.g., swings and low slides) by themselves; that is, with adult supervision but without needing assistance to get on or off the equipment (Copple & Bredekamp, 2009).



Young children should have plenty of opportunities to explore the outdoors. This young toddler is fascinated with blades of grass she is collecting in a small bowl.

The immediate neighborhood can also be a part of the children's outdoor experience. Pushing infants in a stroller, pulling infants and toddlers in a wagon, or walking with toddlers gives them the opportunity to go places they cannot yet go on their own and to see, hear, or smell a variety of sights, sounds, and aromas. Because of the children's need to move

and act on and touch things, however, it is important that stroller and wagon rides supplement rather than take the place of children's on-the-ground exploration and play in a safe outdoor play yard. During this on-the-ground exploration, it is important to ensure that any sticks, leaves, and stones that children pick up to mouth are nontoxic and too large to swallow.

Equipment and materials for infants

The playthings that support infants' indoor activity will also work outdoors. They will play outdoors with balls, rattles, and containers, for example, as long as someone brings a basket or tub of these materials outside for them to play with. There are some other things, however, that work particularly well in holding infants' interest outdoors, and they include:

- *Movement opportunities.* Something as simple as a change in terrain, such as a gentle grassy hill built into the play area, will provide mobile infants with a good deal of crawling pleasure. For other up-and-down crawling opportunities, caregivers can consider adding low, flat tree-stump rounds; a smooth log or landscape timber children can straddle; low, flat rocks; a few wooden steps; an inflated inner tube; a low wooden platform; and a canvas- or vinyl-covered mattress. A large carton, a tunnel, or a tent can provide a cozy crawl-through space. Mobile infants who are pulling themselves up to stand can do so beside a sturdy bench or wagon, the seat or bed of

which also makes a good place for banging and pushing small wheeled toys while standing and balancing. Infants *who sit well by themselves* may enjoy being pushed gently back and forth in a sturdy, safely suspended outdoor infant swing-seat. (If the caregiver pushes from the front of the swing, the caregiver and child can see and converse with each other.) Infants also enjoy the swings that are designed to accommodate two infants face to face.

- *Things that move in the wind.* Young infants lying and sitting on blankets or mats enjoy watching and listening to the fluttering and flapping of banners, streamers, hanging foil pie tins, or wind chimes. These can be tied to branches, poles, or fences.
- *Crawling surfaces.* The outdoor play area can afford a variety of crawling surfaces, such as grass, aromatic-herb ground covers (such as mint), sand, leaves, wooden decking, and pathways made of smooth flagstone, packed clay, concrete, or wood. Direct contact with each of these surfaces will tell babies that each surface has a distinct look, smell, and feel (some will feel more comfortable than others).
- *Water-play materials.* Supplying a sitting infant with a small container of water and some objects that float provides opportunities for splashing and dabbling where nobody minds if the "floor" gets wet.

- *Garden plants.* Gardens of any type provide infants with a wealth of sights, textures, and smells. Raised garden beds provide young infants with colors and textures to view, and they give older infants who want to reach the flowers an added incentive for pulling themselves up to stand. Plantings can include flowers (nontoxic), vegetables, herbs, grains, and grasses.

Equipment and materials for toddlers

As walkers and climbers, toddlers are eager to explore a wide range of outdoor equipment and materials, including natural features and things to climb, balance on, swing on, throw and kick, dig, push and pull, or ride.

- *Natural features.* The toddler outdoor-play area is more than a fenced-off patch of grass, although this is what caregivers may start with. Shade trees, grasses, low shrubs, and plants (all nontoxic), vegetable gardens, a hill, a very shallow water course, stepping stones, and sand invite toddlers to spend time exploring nature, picking flowers, and enjoying the rigors of outdoor play. The more the area is like a backyard and the more varied its natural features, the more toddlers and caregivers will want to be outdoors.
- *Things to climb.* A climbing structure allows toddlers to safely climb sturdy steps, ladders, or ramps. This climber may include a low-sided, toddler-height slide; alternatively, the slide may be free-standing or set into a hillside. To cushion falls, caregivers can position the climber and slide on a surface such as sand or rubber matting.
- *Things to get inside of.* Toddlers enjoy playing in cozy places (corrugated packing boxes, tunnels, tents) and underneath the low-hanging branches of trees or shrubs. Some climbers also include little “rooms” to crawl into.
- *Things to balance on.* Along with liking the challenge of steps and ramps, toddlers like to try balancing on low tree-stump rounds, flat rocks or stepping stones, planks, flat boards, and low balance beams. They also like to straddle logs.
- *Swings.* Toddlers like to use low soft-seat swings for sitting or lying on their tummies. Underneath these should be a soft surface, such as sand or rubber matting. A very low, deep, cloth hammock provides children with a type of swing they can either sit or lie on — don’t forget the soft surface underneath, however, as hammocks may tip their users.
- *Sand and water.* The outside area should include a sandbox large enough for several children (and perhaps an adult) to sit in comfortably with a collection of sand toys. If possible, the sandbox should be located close to an outdoor water faucet so children can add water to their sand-box play. The sandbox should be constructed to allow drainage, covered



This play yard includes a variety of surfaces, levels, equipment, and materials for toddlers to explore.

- when not in use, and cleaned of foreign matter on a regular basis (NAEYC, 2007, criterion 9.B.05).
- **Balls.** Caregivers can provide toddlers with large beach balls, 10" and 12" playground balls, small rubber balls they can hold in one hand, and tennis balls for kicking, throwing, rolling, and carrying. Some toddlers will enjoy rolling balls down the hill, slide, or ramp and through tunnels, and dropping them off the climber.
- **Riding and rocking toys.** The play yard should include sturdy rocking toys and riding toys (without steering mechanisms for younger toddlers, with steering mechanisms for older toddlers). Some older toddlers may also enjoy small (10"-wheel) tricycles. Though toddlers will use riding toys on grass, they can generally ride better on decks, paths, walkways, or sidewalks. They also enjoy ringing and tooting vehicle bells and horns.



Equipment and materials for toddlers in the outdoor area can include tunnels, swings, large vehicles that they can push, and climbing structures.

- *Push and pull toys.* Toddlers take pleasure in pulling wagons; filling them with sticks, sand, or leaves; and even turning them over and spinning their wheels. They also enjoy maneuvering small, lightweight wheelbarrows, garden carts, shopping carts, or baby carriages. If it snows, the play yard should include small plastic sleds for pulling, pushing, and sliding.
- *Loose materials.* Some indoor materials are particularly fun and easy to use outdoors, for example, paints and paper, colored chalk, bubble-blowing materials, beanbags, and blankets for tents.

Storage

Whenever possible, caregivers should store all loose outdoor playthings at the play yard, in a shed or watertight storage box. Otherwise, these materials, along with riding toys, wagons, carts, strollers, and sleds can be stored as close to the yard as possible. The storage system should allow caregivers to save steps and time and to focus more on children than on moving materials. Any indoor materials that are usually used outdoors can be stored in baskets, bags, or buckets with handles; this makes it easy for caregivers to quickly sling them over their shoulder or arm, and toddlers are able to help in carrying them outdoors. Wheeled luggage is also a good option to avoid back strain and allow easy movement to and within the outdoor area. Toddlers will enjoy helping to pull a piece of luggage on wheels, and it may even become the toy or equipment of interest

itself. (See pp. 277–278 for a summary checklist of equipment and materials for the outdoor play yard).

Modifying the Learning Environment to Accommodate Children With Special Needs

Infants and toddlers with a wide range of special needs (e.g., speech and language delays, chronic illness, physical impairments, developmental disabilities) benefit from being in programs with typically developing children. Staff and children without special needs are also enriched by their daily contact with such children and their families. Infants and toddlers are particularly well suited to accepting children of different abilities and developmental levels as a matter of course. As far as they are concerned, everyone and everything is equal when it comes to learning about a world that presents new people, objects, and events on a daily — even an hourly — basis.

The primary goals of inclusion programs — those enrolling children both with and without special needs — are to allow all children to participate fully, operate as independently as possible, and reach their maximum developmental potential. The equipment and materials in the learning environment can contribute significantly toward the accomplishment of these individual and program goals. To support children as they navigate the space, caregivers need to avoid a tendency toward overprotection so infants and