



Cities Connecting Children to Nature

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Children
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Network

ADDING NATURE TO OUTDOOR SPACES IN EARLY CHILDHOOD PROGRAMS: A PATHWAY

THE OPPORTUNITY FOR CITIES

Many young children spend hours each day in early childhood programs—including licensed and unlicensed care settings such as centers, preschools, and family, friend, and neighbor care. These settings make critical contributions to early childhood development.

Adding natural and design elements to outdoor spaces of early childhood programs enables 0-5 year olds to be active, learn in nature, and develop motor skills. (*Adapted from: [NC State Natural Learning Initiative](#)*). Natural elements in outdoor spaces can include looping pathways, boulders, logs, edible gardens, and pollinator gardens. Adding nature to early childhood outdoor spaces supports local priorities including school readiness, obesity prevention, climate resilience and environmental stewardship.

CCCN's 2021 landscape scan identified several steps municipal leaders can take to increase young children's access to nature in early childhood programs in their city:

Promote adding nature into early childhood programs' outdoor spaces. City leaders have an unmatched bully pulpit to back high-quality early childhood settings that include access to natural features and nature-based learning. For example, San Francisco Mayor London Breed and other city officials [spoke](#) about the importance of investing in nature additions at early childhood programs for young children's mental and physical health.

Foster inclusive design processes with children, families, and caregivers. In order to obtain the best results, cities can take the lead to ensure co-design of outdoor spaces. Design processes should involve center staff, parents, and children themselves. Cities can also leverage the assistance and partnership of landscape design schools at universities, as well as landscape and design firms with expertise in outdoor learning environments.

Finance equitable addition of nature into outdoor spaces. Whereas cities can facilitate the transfer of some natural materials to early childhood program spaces at very low cost, adding designed natural elements can get expensive to design and construct, especially for a small business

operating on thin margins. The centers that reach children who have the least access to green space likely do not have the individual fundraising capacity for nature additions. Cities can support expansion of these spaces by establishing grant programs using public and private funding sources to pay for infrastructure improvements or other support, such as design assistance. Funding could possibly be leveraged through city initiatives related to early childcare quality improvement or public health, including obesity prevention and nutrition.

CITY EXAMPLES

Austin. Austin's CCCN Initiative includes a focus on adding natural elements to early childhood outdoor spaces as part of the multi-purpose, statewide Outdoor Learning Initiative! (OLE! Texas). The initiative also includes professional development opportunities for center staff in the [Growing Up Wild](#) curriculum, and training for landscape designers to receive the [Natural Learning Initiative's Outdoor Learning Environment Design - Online Certificate](#). Four Austin early childcare centers currently participate in OLE. To support the OLE! Texas initiative, Austin created an Outdoor Learning Environment guide to help childcare centers transform their campuses and [Nature Way Preschool](#), part of the City of [Austin's Nature and Science Center](#), developed and shared online videos to help educators support nature-based learning during the pandemic.

Los Angeles. The Los Angeles Unified School District (LAUSD) is utilizing bond funding to build [Nature Explore certified outdoor classrooms](#) in all 88 of its early childhood centers, reaching 25 centers to date. Measure RR, which Los Angeles voters approved in 2020, authorized LAUSD to issue \$7 billion in bonds to update classrooms and school buildings. As of [March 2022](#), LAUSD has allocated \$48.3 million for 17 Nature Explore classrooms throughout the district.

Madison. As a CCCN site, the City of Madison and partners have added natural elements to the outdoor spaces of seven early childhood programs. Partners included the City of Madison Parks Department, Public Health Madison & Dane County, elected officials, and community members. Equity was a strong focus of the initiative: partners selected early childhood programs with less green space and those that enrolled 50% or more of children with subsidized tuition. Children, educators, and directors at the centers helped co-design and co-build the newly added nature-based spaces. In addition to adding natural elements to their respective play spaces, each center received mini-grants to support nature connection such as rain boots or visits by animal specialists. Funding support came from a CCCN catalytic grant, a grant from the Madison Parks Foundation, and some city funds.

San Francisco. As part of the CCCN Initiative, [SF Children & Nature](#) (SFCN) and partners, including the Low-Income Investment Fund (LIIF), First 5 SF and the Office of Early Childhood Education, came together to provide funding, design coaching, and professional development for adding nature to outdoor spaces of early childhood centers and family child care homes. In 2021, SF Children & Nature [completed](#) nature additions at four early childhood centers and five family childcare homes serving priority populations. Centers and child care homes received a total of \$300,000 in funding. The team worked with Bienenstock Natural Playgrounds to provide design support, and Rebuilding Together San Francisco, a community development nonprofit, to provide project management and 350 skilled volunteers to complete the renovations. San Francisco Recreation and Parks and the Presidio Trust

repurposed stumps and natural materials from local parks to support nature play in the early learning sites.

Seattle. A city-wide early childhood initiative led by the Seattle Department of Education and Early Learning (DEEL) and supported by a voter-approved levy provides capital improvement funds for facilities, including [outdoor learning environments](#) for early childhood programs without access to parks. Funding in 2021 supports improvements in five early learning facilities participating in the Seattle Preschool Program (SPP); four of these are operated by women of color and serve linguistically and culturally diverse students in West Seattle, South Seattle, Central District and Downtown.

STEPS TO IMPLEMENTATION

Cities interested in supporting efforts to add nature into outdoor spaces at early childhood programs can take steps such as the following:

Conduct a needs assessment. Inventory current assets and gaps relative to outdoor and natural elements across early childhood programs. This can be used to determine which early childhood programs to support. Cities often prioritize programs that reach children who have less access to nature or are receiving subsidies.

Leverage funding. Explore ways to fund initiatives to add nature to outdoor spaces at early childhood programs. Funding can support capital improvements, loose parts, curricula, and sometimes equipment such as rain gear to ensure year-round access.

Provide nature elements and loose parts. City departments such as forestry, public works, and botanical gardens and nature centers are all sources for natural elements that can enhance early childhood outdoor spaces, including stumps, logs, plants, and rocks.

Support professional development. Directly offer or partner with organizations offering nature-based professional development training sessions to educators to increase comfort and skill with nature. For instance, [SF Children & Nature](#) focused on professional development for early childhood educators in several ways. Through its early childhood outdoor learning initiative, the city offers \$1,000 grants to administrators and educators to participate in a year-long professional development program to support improvements in outdoor spaces to support learning. This includes partnering with a landscape designer, learning about the benefits of early childhood nature connection, and planning the vision for the space. The CCCN team is also working with San Francisco State University to develop a nature-based early childhood certificate program for early childhood educators. Pending approval, this will begin Spring 2022.

Seek out policy opportunities. Because most child care programs are licensed and administered at the state level, cities may have limited policy options to advance adding nature. Nevertheless, cities can consider developing local standards for early care and education licensing and quality that reinforce the importance of nature exposure. For instance, in Madison, the Office of Community Services within the Department of Planning and Community and Economic Development administers a [voluntary early childhood accreditation system](#) that goes beyond state standards and includes early

childhood nature connection elements. Cities may also want to ensure that local building codes support the development/expansion of outdoor spaces for childcare centers.

Provide early childhood nature connection opportunities to families and caregivers. Cities can consider creating an online resource hub which includes information like on how connect young children with nature at home or other opportunities for families to engage with nature in their community. Early childhood programs can also give away seeds, recipes, or other nature-related resources to families. Ensure prospective families know about the early childhood programs with nature additions through marketing, direct outreach, and partnerships with local organizations.

PARTNERSHIPS TO CONSIDER

Many potential partners can support city efforts to enhance nature access in early childhood programs, including:

Local: Local partners include city departments such as parks and recreation, public works, and agencies responsible for capital and community development. Those involved in local initiatives such as gardening, park greening, and public health and community partners with nature expertise (i.e., zoos, museums, aquariums, gardens) are also resources. Potential funders of capital improvements include park foundations, family foundations, corporate foundations, businesses, and hospitals. Service day programs sponsored by civic organizations and corporations can provide pro bono labor support and supplies.

Regional/State: [Local affiliates of the North American Association for Environmental Education Association](#) (NAAEE) can serve as good resources for education, convening, and other support for cities.

National: Head Start constitutes a large source of federal support for Early Childhood care, the [American Rescue Plan](#) funding guidance for Head Start Grantees allows for the use of outdoor play and learning improvements and professional development. Read [more](#) about initial guidance on using American Rescue Plan Funding to Bring Nature’s Benefits to Children.

Other key national organizations supporting nature in early childhood outdoor spaces include:

- [Natural Learning Initiative \(NLI\) at NC State College of Design](#) NLI developed the [Preschool Outdoor Play and Learning Environment Best Practice Toolkit](#) and also offers [the Early Childhood Outdoor Learning Environments Certificate Program](#) to help early childhood educators to gain skills and knowledge required to plan, manage, promote, organize, and administer high quality outdoor play and learning environments.
- [Nature Explore](#)
- [National Wildlife Federation ECHO](#)
- [National Farm to School Movement: Farm to ECE](#)

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