

A photograph of three children running happily in a park. On the left, a young boy in a white shirt and blue jeans. In the middle, a boy in a plaid shirt and blue jeans. On the right, a girl in a light blue shirt and dark pants with her arms outstretched. The background is a blurred green park setting.

Cities Connecting Children to Nature

NATURE CONNECTION IN EARLY CHILDHOOD EDUCATION

Strategy:

Add natural elements into outdoor environments where young children spend time as a way to promote everyday connections to nature

Who is Engaged: Children ages 0-5

Key Benefits:

Promote lifelong patterns of physical activity and healthy eating; improve executive functioning; enhance early childhood cognitive development; increase family and caregiver involvement in early education

Related City Priorities:

Obesity prevention; early childhood center quality improvements; urban agriculture; family and community engagement; park activation

Improving children's access to nature in early childhood can lead to multiple benefits including promoting lifelong patterns of [physical activity and healthy eating](#), [improving executive functioning](#), and [increasing family and caregiver bonding](#). City government plays an important role in activating several mechanisms that promote young children's connections to nature in places where they already spend time. These techniques include adding outdoor learning facilities to public spaces and early child care sites, as well as delivering nature preschool programs in existing city parks.

OUTDOOR LEARNING & PLAY ENVIRONMENTS

Cities and their partners have taken the lead on adding outdoor learning and play environments to public spaces and child care centers. Outdoor learning and play environments include elements such as vegetable gardens and looping pathways that help 0-5 year olds to learn in nature, develop motor skills, and get more active. Here, cities define “learning” broadly as contributions to child development overall, not solely academics. As one example, [Outdoor Learning Environments](#) (OLE! Texas) works statewide to add outdoor learning environments at childcare centers. The initiative receives support from Texas Department of State Health Services (DSHS) and guidance from [The Natural Learning Initiative](#) (NLI) of the College of Design at NC State University. The development of outdoor learning environments accompanied changes to the Texas Quality Rating Improvement Systems (QRIS) to provide [financial incentives](#) for child care settings with natural outdoor play and learning settings. OLE! Texas demonstration sites operate in [Austin](#), [San Antonio](#), [Harris County](#), and [Lubbock](#). In another example operating at scale, the [Colorado Early Childhood Health Outdoors \(ECHO\)](#) initiative of the National Wildlife Federation has begun to create outdoor learning environment demonstration sites in community centers, nature centers, public parks, and community playgrounds across the state. In [Maryland](#), outdoor learning and play environments can be found in nature centers, private child care centers, and State Parks.

Several cities have specifically focused on implementing nature play spaces within early child care sites. One example comes from the CCCN site in Madison, Wisconsin, which implemented [seven nature play spaces](#) in child care centers with the potential to get 200 children into nature daily. Madison’s city priority to address childhood obesity led Public Health Madison and Dane County to focus attention on early learning and play environments. Over time, Madison plans to add nature play as a standard within the city’s [voluntary accreditation process](#). The seven sites cut across the wide variety of early care and education providers present in most cities: family, friend and neighbor care, as well as public, private, licensed, and unlicensed sites.

Nature connection in small children *can improve executive function, an interrelated set of mental processes that allow people to retain and work with information, focus attention, filter out distractions, problem solve, and shift mental gears. Three primary dimensions of executive function are widely understood to be working memory, self-control, and mental flexibility.*



NATURE PRESCHOOLS

In a promising development, cities including Austin, Baltimore, and Seattle now offer nature preschools where children spend most of each day outside, either directly thanks to a city department or in partnership with a non-profit educational entity. For instance, the Austin Nature and Science Center, an outpost of the Austin Parks and Recreation Department, features the [Nature's Way Preschool](#) enrichment program. In this immersive effort, children learn and connect to nature through experiences such as nature walks, mud and water play, and creek exploration. The Baltimore City Recreation and Park Departments runs the [Wild Haven Forest Immersion Program](#) at the Carrie Murray Nature Center. Lastly, through a partnership with [Seattle Parks and Recreation](#), Tiny Trees, a local outdoor preschool program, operates 11 affordable nature preschool classes. The Austin and Seattle programs offer financial aid or scholarships. For additional resources or examples of this growing trend of Nature Preschools, see the [Natural Start Alliance](#).



	Learning & Play Environments	Nature Preschools
Who	<p>Target Audience: Children 0-5, their families and child care providers</p> <p>Implementers: City leaders, parks or public health agencies, local or regional child care accreditation agencies, zoning authorities community organizations</p>	<p>Target Audience: Children 0-5</p> <p>Implementers: City leaders, park agencies, child care providers, local or regional child care accreditation agencies and zoning authorities</p>
What	The addition of natural elements such as boulders, logs, vegetable gardens, and looping pathways into public spaces, like parks, and child care centers	Outdoor nature preschools operated directly by or in partnership with city parks and recreation department
Why	Adding nature play elements to areas where children already spend time can help children connect, play, and learn in nature without major changes in routines.	Nature preschools serve multiple purposes including serving as a park activation strategy and a form of high-quality early learning programs
How	Survey stakeholders to learn about greening opportunities and to consider current use of nearby nature sites; engage with regulatory authorities.	Survey parks, nature centers, families, and child care centers on interest and need in developing nature preschool programs;; engage with regulatory authorities