



Cities Connecting Children to Nature

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EARLY CHILDHOOD NATURE CONNECTION STATE POLICY

As municipal leaders strategize about opportunities to embed stronger nature connections within their local early childhood system, it is critical to consider the unique state context that lies underneath. Local programs serving young children operate in a complex, interconnected framework of federal, state, and local policies that affect everything from how programs are funded, to their standards of operation and who is eligible to be served. The rules and regulations that govern most aspects of early childhood care stem from state-level policies. Two such policy levers of particular importance are state child care licensing regulations and state Quality Rating and Improvement Systems (QRIS).

CHILD CARE LICENSING REGULATIONS

Every state has adopted laws and regulations governing the basic requirements for child care centers and family child care homes to operate. While laws vary from state to state, they all outline the minimum health and safety standards and procedures for monitoring compliance. While there are a range of topics covered, generally state regulations dictate the number of children one adult can care for a time (child-staff ratio), the number of children allowed in a class (group size), supervision, building safety, reducing the spread of disease, nutrition, and basic training and education requirements for the adults in classroom. In addition, [Caring for Our Children](#) is a collection of national standards that represent best practices around health and safety practices in early childhood education settings. This framework serves as the foundational floor of many state's child care licensing laws and regulations. It is also important to note that not all child care programs are required to be licensed, many states exempt providers that serve only small numbers of children or operate only part of the day. Most states maintain responsibility for monitoring compliance, but there are some states that have delegated the authority to city or county governments.

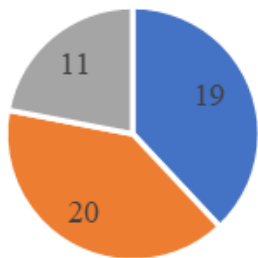
State level child care licensing can lay the groundwork by requiring outdoor time, permitting natural materials and nature-based learning for at least some period of each day, and providing for full-day nature-based early childhood programming.

OUTDOOR TIME IN CHILD CARE LICENSING LAWS

While licensing laws provide a floor for health and safety, there are states that have surpassed that baseline in recognition that early childhood programs have a responsibility to provide more than just safe care for children

but also support their development. As a basic step to enable early childhood nature connection, states can require that early childhood programs provide children with time outdoors. Indeed, 11 states specify a length of required outdoor time ranging from 60-90 minutes, and 20 more states require some outdoor time for full-day preschool aged children.

Length of Outdoor Time



- None Specified
- Time required, but no minimum length
- Specified length of time required

Time Required

Full-day preschool aged children

More Information:

[National Database on Child Care Licensing Regulations](#)

[National Resource Center for Health and Safety in Child Care and Early Education](#)

FEATURE: A State in Action- Washington

In 2021 Washington became the first state to allow early childhood providers to become licensed to provide full-day outdoor nature-based programming. Washington can serve as a model for other city leaders and states that are looking to create a path for licensure for early childhood centers offering nature-based programming. This decision came in response to the success of an earlier 2017 law creating a pilot program to test licensing changes that would support nature-based programming in early childhood settings. Previously, many nature-based preschools operated under a license-exempt status and thus were unable to provide full-day outdoor learning experiences and were ineligible to accept state child care subsidies for children or participate in the state’s Quality Rating and Improvement System. Going forward, more low-income families receiving child care subsidy will be able to gain access to outdoor early childhood programs, and programs will be able to offer more services and receive support to enhance quality.

Both the initial pilot legislation and the final legislation making the pilot permanent received broad bipartisan support among state legislators. The success of the effort relied on a broad set of engaged local stakeholders (including operators of nature-based programming), buy-in from key state agencies, and sufficient time and planning to ensure that changes were made with intentionality.

Some of Washington’s new licensing requirements to address the specific needs of early childhood providers operating nature-based programming include:

- Lower staff to child ratios and group sizes to ensure greater supervision in the outdoor environment.
- A benefit-risk assessment and management plan.
- Outdoor preschool staff to have experience or training in outdoor/environmental education.
- Utilization of developmentally appropriate techniques around boundaries and self-regulation for outdoor play.
- Children have proper gear and clothing to remain safe and healthy outdoors.

More Information:

[Outdoor Preschool Pilot Legislative Report](#)

Washington State Department of Children, Youth and Families

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WHAT CAN CITY LEADERS DO REGARDING CHILD CARE LICENSING?

- **Convene** local early childhood providers to elevate the importance of children spending time outdoors and identify potential regulatory barriers to programs offering more nature-based programming.
- **Commission** research on how spending time outdoors benefits programs and children and best practices for how it can be done safely.
- **Collaborate** with state agency partners responsible for child care monitoring to disseminate guidance to early childhood programs on how they can spend time outdoors while adhering to existing state licensing laws.
- **Engage** with state level policymakers and early childhood advocates to ensure that child care licensing laws articulate a minimum length of outdoor time for children and programs are afforded the maximum level of flexibility to offer nature-based programming.

QUALITY RATING AND IMPROVEMENT SYSTEMS (QRIS)

If state child care licensing laws establish the floor for the minimum level of standards early childhood programs must meet, then state and local Quality Rating and Improvement Systems (QRIS) attempt to build out the rest of the structure for what it means for a program to be of high-quality. Only 40 states have a statewide QRIS and each state defines quality using different standards.

The Role of the Federal Child Care and Development Block Grant (CCDBG)

Quality rating and improvement systems were originally an outgrowth of requirements under the federal Child Care and Development Block Grant (CCDBG) program that mandated that states create a way to increase the quality of early childhood programs. Many states began their initial QRIS as a tiered reimbursement system wherein programs that met higher-quality standards (such as NAEYC accreditation) would receive a higher rate of child care subsidy reimbursement. This continues to be a prevalent aspect of many systems, but over the years states have built out more robust versions that not only reward existing programs of quality but include mechanisms like coaching, mentoring and grants to assist programs to meet higher standards. These financial incentives and support are often funded through CCDBG quality improvement funds, dollars separate from the CCDBG funds that support child care subsidies. As federal investment in early childhood continues to grow through this block grant, it is likely that states will be interested in finding new ways to support quality improvement efforts in early childhood programs, including outdoor environments.

OUTDOOR ENVIRONMENTS IN STATE QRIS

[Texas Rising Star](#) is the only QRIS that incorporates a standalone indicator regarding outdoor learning environments, where programs can receive up to three points on their overall quality designation score. The Texas standalone indicator represents one option for promoting early childhood nature connection.

Another option involves focusing on the Environmental Rating Scale which can include attention to outdoor play and learning facilities. Twenty-Nine states incorporate an indicator around the use of an Environmental Rating Scale (ERS) and 28 require the use of a curriculum that is aligned to the state's early learning standards. Most states provide flexibility with the curriculum providers can use. There is an opportunity to provide guidance to early childhood providers and their technical assistance specialists on how outdoor learning can help them meet their state's early learning standards and achieve a higher quality designation on their ERS score. One example resource is Georgia's Department of Early Care and Learning and Georgia Organic's Guide: [Getting Started: Georgia Farm to Early Care and Education Guide](#) which details how Farm to Early Childhood Education aligns with state QRIS, state early learning standards, and the state environmental rating scale.

More Information:

[The Quality Compendium: Profiles on State Quality Rating and Improvement Systems](#)

[BUILD Initiative](#) and [Child Trends](#)

[Environmental Rating Scales Institute](#)

[State Early Learning Standards](#)

FEATURE: State in Action - Texas

[Outdoor Learning Environment \(OLE! Texas\)](#), a multi-site initiative profiled in the Naturalized Outdoor Spaces Pathway of this Toolkit, pioneered the practice of cross-walking the ways that outdoor learning environments fit within state child care licensing regulations, as well as how such practices can contribute to meeting state QRIS

standards. The crosswalk appears in [The Regulatory Framework for Outdoor Learning Environments in Texas Childcare Facilities: A Practitioner’s Guide to State Laws, Regulations, and Policies Associated with 18 Early Childhood Play and Learning Settings at Childcare Centers and Childcare Homes.](#)

WHAT CAN CITY LEADERS DO TO RAISE QRIS SCORES VIA EARLY CHILDHOOD NATURE CONNECTION?

- **Convene** local early childhood providers to crosswalk of the ways that nature-based programming can support quality within their state QRIS.
- **Commission** policy research on how nature-based programming enhances early childhood program quality within the context of a state QRIS.
- **Collaborate** with state agency and non-profit partners responsible for the state QRIS to disseminate guidance to early childhood programs on how nature-based programming and outdoor learning environments can enhance quality.
- **Engage** with state level policymakers and early childhood advocates to identify ways to make outdoor learning environments explicit in state QRIS standards, and on opportunities to use quality improvement funding to enrich outdoor learning environments.

More Resources

[New America and National Wildlife Federation Early Childhood Health Outdoors: Federal and State Policy Recommendations to Improve Outdoor Learning in Child Care](#)