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Author(s): Linda L. Flynn and Judith Kieff

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Let's go outside!

Including Everyone in Outdoor Play

Linda L. Flynn and Judith Kieff



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Outdoor play has benefits for all children. It offers young children many unique opportunities to develop physical, cognitive, communication, and social skills. When playing outdoors, children often experience a sense of freedom that encourages them to become involved in interactive games that foster language and create authentic opportunities for problem solving (Rivkin 1995). A child's motor development and manipulative skills are enhanced by the spaciousness of outdoor areas and the availability of large equipment for climbing and sliding (Pepler & Ross 1981; Myers 1985; Poest et al. 1990). Outdoor play tends to stimulate greater use of words and more complex language than that used indoors (Tizard, Philips, & Plewis 1976). The flexibility of outside play permits children greater freedom to interact with peers (Boulton & Smith 1993), which provides opportunities for the development of positive social skills and emotional fitness (Frost, Wortham, & Reifel 2001). In addition, children experience sensory stimulation through access to natural play materials such as sand, water, grass, dirt, living

Linda L. Flynn, Ph.D., is director of early intervention in the Department of Special Education and Habilitative Services at the University of New Orleans in Louisiana. Linda has directed federal and state projects to include children with disabilities in child care, Head Start, and other public and private community-based programs.

Judith Kieff, Ed.D., is an associate professor in early childhood education at the University of New Orleans. She has taught preschool and kindergarten and directed an early intervention program.

things, and, of course, fresh air (Olds 1987). Thus, outdoor play promotes children's development and interaction among peers.

Children with a wide range of abilities participate in outdoor play. With typically developing children, learning through outdoor play experiences comes easily and naturally. However, for children with special needs, learning through play may take on a different meaning (Merchant & Brown 1996). For example, some children with special needs may lack concentration skills and the initiative to begin and sustain an activity or play with peers (Hughes 1998; Buchanan & Cooney 2000). These difficulties are particularly significant during outside play, which inherently has multiple distractions. The outdoor environment is a wonderful place to engage in fantasy play; however, children with special needs may find it more difficult to sustain dramatic play than their peers. Children with special needs may process information more slowly than typically developing peers (Li 1985). Because of these characteristics, as well as an array of others, a child with special needs may tend to isolate himself from the other children during outside play. Teachers must provide supports to enhance the level of play with peers.

Teachers must actively support inclusion

Often special and regular education teachers are challenged to facilitate the inclusion of children with special needs in activities outside. Clearly, the role of the teacher and the addition of modifications to sup-

port positive inclusive experiences for children are critical (Jones & Rapport 1997). Children with special needs may have unique characteristics that require attention to individual needs and learning styles. They may need both environmental and social supports in the form of adaptations or modifications to take optimal advantage of outside learning activities.

Adaptations may range from extremely simple to complex. Adaptations may include not only physical modifications of the environment, but also techniques used by teachers to interact and communicate with children during outdoor activities. All children should be able to have fun outside, participate in activities with each other, and achieve learning goals through environmental modifications as needed.

The purpose of this article is threefold. First, we share information about specific guidelines to outdoor play that are important when children have special

needs. Second, we describe talking points or questions that guide the decisionmaking process about which types of adaptations might be most helpful for a particular child. Finally, we cover specific adaptations and interventions for teachers and other team members to enhance outdoor play for children with special needs. Our emphasis is on modifications that are easy and simple, yet make a considerable difference in a child's ability to participate in outdoor play with other children.

Modifications of activities and materials to ensure independence are imperative to the child's success in outdoor play.

Guidelines for inclusive outdoor play

Teachers who address children's needs through individual adaptations should follow a set of guidelines to ensure that the outside experience is positive and promotes learning. These guidelines are critical for *all* children but become especially important when children have special needs.

- **Reflect on the quality and quantity of multisensory activities available to children.** Multisensory experiences include those activities



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that address the senses of touching, smelling, seeing, tasting, hearing, and moving. A child who has compromised sensory input such as blindness, hearing loss, or physical limitations will not be able to use all of the senses available to typically developing children. This child will need to use the senses that are available to understand and explore the outside environment.

For example, teachers may think at first that a riding toy is not appropriate for a child who is blind or has low vision because of her inability to see where she is going. However, when a multisensory approach is applied, a beeper is placed on the back of the tricycle of another child and the child who is blind plays "follow the leader" with the child whose tricycle has been adapted. With a simple modification and the selection of an appropriate peer, the child who is blind can independently participate in this outside activity. Multisensory activities are good for all children to facilitate their learning but are mandatory for children with certain disabilities.

- **Promote independence for all children.** Children with special needs may have conditions that interfere with their ability to participate independently during outside play. They may be accustomed to adults making

decisions for them and to receiving help from adults even though they are capable of completing a task independently through the use of adaptations.

For example, a child who has weak muscle tone and wants to work at the outside wood-working center might ask an adult to hold the nail or help grasp the hammer. If the teacher adds golf tees and Styrofoam to the center, the child will then be able to hammer independently.



Modifications of activities and materials to ensure independence are imperative to the child's success in outdoor play.

• **Use cooperative learning groups.** When children are clustered together into small groups and work collaboratively, the teacher can promote interaction among them. Children with special needs often require teachers to initiate and facilitate social interactions and development of meaningful relationships with nondisabled peers. For cooperative learning groups to be successful, the teacher must ensure that the child with special needs has a specific role in the activity and that the child understands the procedures to conduct the activity. Then, the teacher can facilitate interaction and communication among all of the children.

For example, consider the sandbox area on the playground. The theme in the sandbox is an archeological dig and a group of children are engaged in discovering

Multisensory experiences, independence, and cooperative learning groups are important considerations in the decisionmaking process when planning, implementing, and evaluating the outside environment and interaction with peers.

fossils and other relics. Two children are digging, one child has the job of recording, and another child categorizes the findings. To participate, a child who has low muscle tone and difficulty with grasping objects can wear an adapted glove with Velcro on the palm so that he can successfully hold a digging trowel with Velcro attached to the handle. By including a simple adaptation, the child with a physical challenge can independently, actively participate in the group project.

The outdoor environment is a prime location to organize cooperative learning groups as the noise level often increases when children are working together rather than completing activities individually. Children can use their "outside" voices and have fun learning together.

Considering a Child's Abilities and Needs

- What are the child's current abilities related to movement, cognition, communication, and social interaction?
- What components of the outdoor environment are particularly pleasing or interesting to the child?
- What motivates the child to explore his environment and interact with others?
- Which children in the class have similar interests to the child and could play in cooperative learning groups?
- What tends to overstimulate or even frighten the child?
- What barriers currently exist that impede the child's access to materials, equipment, and/or peers?
- What are the current goals for the child regarding cognitive, physical, social-emotional, and communication development?
- What opportunities does the existing playground—and routines related to playground use—offer for the development of these current goals?
- What easy or inexpensive changes should be made to equipment or playground routines to enhance the opportunities for the child to fulfill identified goals, interact with peers, and have fun?
- What extensive or complex changes should be made to equipment or routines to enhance opportunities for the child to fulfill identified goals, interact with peers, and have fun?

These guidelines can be helpful for both outside and inside environments. However, teachers and other staff often do not extend the inside curriculum into the outside playground. While the concept of play is highly regarded by early childhood regular and special educators, play outside is frequently neglected as a means to achieving functional and academic goals for children (Fewell & Kiminski 1988). These three guidelines should be at the forefront in the decisionmaking processes of planning, organizing, and adapting the outdoor environment. The guidelines are critical to the successful inclusion of children with special needs.

Talking points to guide decisionmaking on appropriate adaptations

The next step in developing appropriate adaptations for children with special needs is to gather specific information about each child. An inventory of the child's likes, dislikes, skills, and challenges is necessary to ensure that interventions match the child's learning needs and abilities. This information should come from a broad range of perspectives. A team of individuals who are familiar with the

child should be brought together. This team could include some, but not necessarily all, of the following individuals: family members, child care provider, speech and language therapist, physical and occupational therapist, teacher, classroom aide, nurse, and program administrator. Whether the team consists of two members or five members, it is imperative that the strengths and needs of the child be carefully considered when designing adaptations that will foster the child's participation in outdoor play activities. *Note that not all modifications are appropriate for all children with special needs.*

Talking points or questions to consider about individual children are listed on page 22. Again, as was stated in the discussion about guidelines, many of these questions can be used to facilitate learning and interaction with peers during inside activities but were designed specifically for extending the inside curriculum to the outside environment.

Parents, teachers, and other team members should all respond to these questions about the child with special needs. The information gathered can then be used to foster a greater understanding of how to best use outdoor space, equipment, and materials to benefit the child's overall physical, cognitive, communication, and emotional development. The three guidelines previously described—multisensory experiences, independence, and cooperative learning groups—are important elements to consider in the decisionmaking process when planning, implementing, and evaluating the outside environment and interaction with peers.

Specific adaptations to meet individual needs

To benefit fully from outdoor play, children with special needs must overcome unique obstacles. Adaptations or interventions are sometimes necessary. Caregivers should determine these modifications according to each child's individual skills, challenges, and learning needs. Children with low-incidence disabilities such as blindness, hearing loss, and autism, as well as those with physical limitations and cognitive delays, often require modifications in materials and teacher interactions to ensure them the opportunity to

Planning Guide for Outdoor Play Adaptations* Examples from Two Children

Activities	Child who is blind	Child who has autism
Transition to playground	Upon entering playground, give child verbal directions about where friends and equipment are located; use sighted guide (peer or teacher) to help child move to area of choice.	Prior to entering playground, tell child he is going to the playground next; give him a ball to carry outside and repeat "We are going outside now."
Gardening	Orient child to garden area verbally and physically; describe other children's activities (watering, digging) and offer choices for participating.	Create a physical boundary around garden area (fence or other physical structure); establish for child a specific area in which to dig, plant, and water.
Water table	Tell child which materials are in water table, where materials are located, which friends are present, and what they are doing.	Model ways to use materials and describe what you are doing or what child is doing.
Balls	Use adapted ball with beeper noise inside; place ball under child's hands rather than pulling child's hands to ball.	Communicate rules and boundaries clearly when playing with balls and repeat in different ways, as needed.
Climbing equipment	Alert child to any potential safety concerns (bumping head) and describe the location of possible danger.	No modification necessary (but monitor activity for safety).
Sandbox	Tell child which materials are available and who is playing; be aware of potential need to facilitate child's entering and maintaining play with peers.	Limit number of toys/materials available to those specifically of interest to child.

* See list of adaptations on pages 24–25.

participate with their peers to the maximum extent possible.

A sample of possible adaptations is listed on pages 24–25. Adaptations are categorized according to specific disabilities. However, teachers may find that many of the modifications are valuable for facilitating the learning of children with a range of different needs. Some of the adaptations may be applicable to inside environments, but are *critical* for outside.

POSSIBLE ADAPTATIONS

... for the child who is blind or has low vision

- Orient the child to the major playground features (e.g., the walkway, climbing equipment, water table, sandbox, garden, and fence) that can be used as points of reference. Take a tour of the playground. With adult supervision, a sighted friend can assist the child by offering her arm/elbow to guide the child who is blind.
- Describe what is happening in different areas to help the child who is blind find her friends and join in their play. When the child enters the playground, tell her which children are playing on the climbing structure, which are in the sandbox, and which are gardening or playing on riding toys.
- Use the child's name when verbally directing activities, as he will not be able to see a physical gesture such as pointing.
- Make certain the walking space is free from toys left unattended or other potential falling hazards.
- Mark the location of different outdoor areas or structures with audible cues. Different types of wind chimes or bells can help a child locate a particular area. For example, hang a wind chime from a tree branch above the sandbox. At first, physically assist the child to move into a desired area. Gradually decrease physical assistance and use verbal prompts to direct the child.
- Place toys underneath the child's hands to encourage exploration rather than pulling the child's hands forward to touch or hold the toys.
- Provide outdoor toys that use the senses of hearing, touch, smell, and movement and encourage activities that other children enjoy. Toys that address the sense of hearing are balls that beep or have noisemakers inside. Toys and materials that promote exploration through touch are those with interesting textures such as Koosh balls and bumpy balls. Smell can be incorporated into many materials by adding extracts/flavorings to paints and water. Movement can be experienced through swinging. Additional support to ensure safety and comfort may include the use of an adaptive swing.

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... for the child who is deaf or has hearing loss

- Obtain a child's attention through touch or gestures before giving a direction.
- Make sure the child can see your face and your lips with no shadows obscuring them when giving directions. Be sure the child who is deaf and the other children are positioned so that their faces and gestures can be easily seen by one another.
- Use gestures, prompts, and visual cues to communicate information. Gestures may include pointing and sign language. Prompts may include physically assisting. Visual cues may include the use of concrete materials and modeling (e.g., demonstrating digging with a shovel in the garden).
- Learn basic signs and teach them to the other children if sign language is the child's mode of communication.
- Make sure that the child can see most areas of the playground from any given spot. Remove extraneous walls, fences, or hedges that might block her view of the other children's play and further isolate her.
- Provide outdoor toys and materials that use the other senses available to the child, including touch, smell, and movement, and encourage activities that other children enjoy.

... for the child who has physical challenges

- Position a child with physical challenges so that he can achieve maximum range of motion, muscle control, and visual contact with materials and other children. A child may need to lie on his side or use a bolster to access materials and interact with other children during activities such as gardening and painting.
- Furnish specifically adapted play and recreation equipment when necessary. This may include modified swings, tricycles, and tables for independent participation in activities.
- Encourage the child to use her own means of getting around—whether a wheelchair, walker, or scooter—to participate in the activities and games of the other children.
- Provide activities for the lower body and feet, such as foot painting,



splashing in a wading pool, digging in the garden or sand, and kicking a ball, for a child with limited use of his hands and upper body.

- Provide activities including painting, water table, sandbox, and gardening that a child with limited use of her feet, legs, and lower body can do independently and successfully with her upper body. Always ensure correct positioning of the child's torso.
- Increase the width of balance beams and modify slippery surfaces to support better balance.
- Use softer balls (e.g., foam balls) or lightweight objects to facilitate throwing and catching when a child lacks strength and endurance.
- Use large balls (e.g., beach balls) and other large objects to make catching easier for a child who is unable to grasp smaller objects.

... for the child who has autism spectrum disorder

- Be aware of situations and events, such as inconsistent and unstructured environments, new situations, overstimulation, and internal changes including illness or extreme fatigue, that may trigger undesired behaviors.
- Make sure the child is aware of playground modifications prior to experiencing the change. For example, if a flat-bottomed swing is removed from the swinging tree and a tire is put in its place, tell the child ahead of time about the change. Show her a picture of the new swing and describe it before going out onto the playground. If the child is willing, accompany her to the new swing and allow her to touch it, push it, and perhaps take a turn at swinging on it.
- Limit the number of outside rules, communicate them clearly and in multiple ways, and enforce them firmly, kindly, and consistently.
- Provide extra support during new or difficult tasks and break playground activities into simple, sequential steps.
- Increase predictability and consistency in outside routines and prepare the child for what comes next through verbal and concrete prompts. For example, put a ball in a child's hand to indicate it is time to go outside while simultaneously using words to describe the next change. When it is time to transition inside, ring a bell on the playground, tell the child it is time to go inside, and put an inside toy in his hands to carry.
- Include repetition and modeling when giving directions to children who have difficulty with perception and sensory input.

- Provide structured activities that are relatively free from distractions for children who have difficulty paying attention or controlling bodily movements.
- Organize sections of the playground that provide physical boundaries for the child. These may include a tunnel, large barrel, tent, or huge cardboard box made into a playhouse.
- Include pets in the outside play area. Some children may interact with pets before they will interact with people. Including pets in the outside play area allows children to touch the animals, feed and water them, clean their cages, and be responsible for their welfare.



... for the child who has cognitive delays

- Keep vocabulary at the child's level and sentence structure simple.
- Remind the child of the various types of play activities available and offer choices rather than determining places for the child to play.
- Adapt materials or vary the difficulty of an activity so that the child can succeed. For example, modify or shorten an obstacle course to encourage independent, successful completion.
- Lead the children in noncompetitive games so that the child can feel successful and enjoy her individual achievements.
- Reduce the number of concepts presented at one time.
- Use repetition and examples to explain an idea.

Teachers, family members, and other team members should determine the most appropriate modifications for each child. The table on page 23 gives an example of the results of a planning process the team could use to determine which adaptations are most helpful during outside play. Not all activities require modifications. Adaptations are used only when necessary to support the child's optimal level of outside play.

Outside play can allow children a level of comfort and freedom not found in the classroom, which in turn builds confidence and a sense of well-being.

Conclusion

The outside environment provides a wonderful opportunity to create learning activities and support peer interactions for children with special needs. Many children with special needs tend to participate physically before participating verbally, so the outdoors is a particularly important component of the daily routine for them. Outside play can allow children a level of comfort and freedom not found in the classroom, which in turn builds confidence and a sense of well-being. For children with special needs to benefit fully from the outside environment, adaptations must be identified and created by teachers and other team members. Adaptations open the door to opportunities for learning, interaction with peers, increased independence, and more active participation in outside play experiences.

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Websites on Accessible Playgrounds

- www.access-board.gov/play/guide/intro.htm—A guide to the Americans with Disabilities Act Accessibility Guidelines for Play Areas
- www.indiana.edu/%7enca/playground/play.htm—National Center on Accessibility's *Access to Play Areas*, a guide to creating inclusive play environments for children with and without disabilities
- www.boundlessplaygrounds.org—Boundless Playgrounds, a nonprofit organization, assisting communities in creating universally accessible playgrounds
- www.pcentral.com—PE Central, for health and physical education teachers, includes sections on Adapted Physical Education, Preschool Physical Education, and Lesson Ideas.

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