# Maximising outdoor learning in early childhood settings during COVID-19

In line with current Victorian Chief Health Officer’s advice, early childhood education and care (ECEC) services are encouraged to consider how programming for children can be offered outdoors. This factsheet provides service leaders and educators with information and ideas for planning increased outdoor learning in Term 4, 2021 and beyond.

## Key messages

* Early childhood services are encouraged to operate their educational programs outdoors where possible to ensure optimum ventilation and reduced risk of coronavirus (COVID-19) transmission.
* Increasing time spent outdoors means that children and families may notice differences in how your educational program is presented. Educators are encouraged to communicate with families about these changes and the many advantages and rich learning opportunities of outdoor play.
* Increased outdoor learning should be considered as a continuation of your current program in line with your existing educational program goals.
* Critical reflection on outdoor programming with your team will ensure you are supporting positive learning and development outcomes for children at your service.

## Re-imagining outdoor learning environments

Many services already operate indoor/outdoor programs and/or nature-based programs. Services are not being asked to redesign programs or philosophies to be nature-focused, but rather to increase the amount of time children spend outdoors and provide a stimulating program that can support long periods of time outside.

Think about how you can use your existing outdoor resources in new and flexible ways to make your space work most effectively. Natural loose materials such as mud, dirt, clay, stones, sand, branches, bark, seed pods and leaves can be used as part of your existing learning program. Loose parts are full of open-ended play opportunities and can be transferred across different outdoor play spaces to suit varying learning experiences.

Critical reflection as a team can support educators to consider new ways in working towards the goal of spending as much time outside as possible. As a first step, you may like to consider implementing an indoor/outdoor program if this is not already in place at your service.

Following time together as a team, involve children in the planning of the outdoor learning space. Ask them for their ideas on what experiences and activities could be done outside. The outdoors often provides more opportunities than indoor areas for children to change and adapt spaces.

**Consider and reflect on the following questions:**

* *How could you adapt your current indoor activities to the outdoor environment and work together to plan, coordinate and share outdoor spaces?*
* *Are there any areas in the outdoor environment that are not currently well utilised? How could you change these to maximise their potential or encourage children to explore them more?*
* *Can routines and resources become more open ended and flexible to adjust to children’s learning needs or changes within the environment? How will the team communicate these changes across the day with each other?*
* *With current health advice, is there an opportunity to visit playgrounds or small areas of nature or community gardens in your local area that align with your educational program goals?*

## Engaging with families

Educators should support families to understand the rich play-based learning that occurs in the outdoor environment. Families will benefit from regular updates about children’s learning, as well as reminders to bring spare clothes, given that children may find themselves engaged in more messy play in a range of weather conditions.

To support your conversations, a [letter to families](https://www.education.vic.gov.au/Documents/childhood/professionals/Outdoor-Learning-Family-Letter.docx) has been created that can be adapted by your service.

Educators can also share with families the well-researched benefits of outdoor play including:

### Inclusive learning environments

* Outdoor open-ended play experiences enable all children to build social skills and connect through common interests, increasing the time to compromise and negotiate, problem-solve and take risks more readily.

### Literacy and Numeracy development

* An engaging outdoor environment can support children to develop oral language and vocabulary and explore mathematical concepts, patterns, measurement, spatial awareness, reasoning and counting.

### Physical development

* Fine and gross motor skills, core strength, co-ordination, balance, and physical endurance are enhanced when children encounter the diversity of experiences in an outdoor learning environment – climbing trees, balancing on logs, walking on uneven surfaces, swinging from ropes, running, pushing heavy materials, engaging in rough and tumble play.

### Wellbeing

* Playing in the outdoors has health benefits such as increased Vitamin D from the sun, as well as positive effects on children’s mental health, emotional regulation and social skills.

### Risk taking and self-assessment

* The uncertainty and unpredictability of the outdoors offers challenges for children of all ages and abilities. It requires children to make decisions and judgements constantly, and allows children to experience graduated risk, at levels they are comfortable with.

## Outdoor learning experiences

Take time to reflect and identify if current programming and planning practices are indoor-focused, or if limited outdoor space is available, how it could be used differently. You may need to identify new ways in which the outdoor environment can be organised to enable children to follow interests through play and feel empowered and independent to participate in the space.

**Consider and reflect on the following questions:**

* *Are parts of your planning cycle (observations and assessments) filled with a balance of learning observations from both indoor and outdoor spaces?*
* *How does your team observe outside play? Is it a time for children to be supervised whilst taking physical risks? And/ or is it a time to observe free play?*
* *Does your team document children’s learning more from a structured approach indoors, such as ‘table top’ activities and group time? How do you document unstructured play?*

The Victorian Early Years Learning Development Framework (VEYLDF) promotes learning across indoor and outdoor spaces. Take some time to critically reflect with your team and revisit the five Learning and Development Outcomes.

### Outcome 1: Children have a strong sense of identity

***Example Learning Objective – Children develop their emerging autonomy, inter-dependence, resilience and sense of agency***

An outdoor program can help children to take considered risks in their decision making and develop resilience.

***Potential Learning Provocations***

* Promote building strength, balance and body awareness by encouraging spinning, dancing, jumping, climbing, crawling, etc. Celebrate the achievements as children increase risk taking and build confidence.
* Involve children in risk assessments to help identify clear boundaries, unsafe spaces or potential risks and collaborate with each other to manage risks.

### Outcome 2: Children are connected with and contribute to their world

***Example Learning Objective – Children become socially responsible and show respect for the environment***

An outdoor program provides the opportunity to slow learning down and for children to become deeply involved in activities, problem solve and return to spaces overtime. Through increased time outdoors children’s sense of connection to the world deepens.

***Potential Learning Provocations***

* Create a herb or vegetable garden with the children to observe the growth process from seed to plant and then share your produce with families or the community.
* Discuss the growth of flowers, highlighting the ecosystem a plant requires to produce just one flower and how children can protect plants and the conditions they need to thrive.

### Outcome 3: Children have a strong sense of wellbeing

***Example Learning Objective – Children take increasing responsibility for their own health and physical wellbeing***

Children can be supported to recognise and manage their own physical and emotional risk and cope with consequences. Children can be encouraged to communicate their needs in a flexible and changing environment (thirst, hunger, rest, comfort, physical activity).

***Potential Learning Provocations***

* Support independence by designing a map of the outdoors with children, identifying where is the shade, where is the water, where they access spare clothes, etc, to support them to develop spatial awareness and overcome challenges.
* Children participate in changing and modifying the outdoor environment throughout the day to meet their needs and resolve issues themselves.

### Outcome 4: Children are confident and involved learners

***Example Learning Objective – Children develop a range of skills and processes such as problem solving, inquiry, experimentation, hypothesising, researching and investigating***

Identifying changes in seasons connects children to the elements and the transformations that occur outside. The outdoors offers the unique advantage of providing open ended experiences (plants, shadows, clouds, water, bugs) that cannot be easily replicated indoors.

***Potential Learning Provocations***

* Identify changes in seasons (spring/summer) and how the environment transforms (trees and flowers, shadows, clouds, ants, slaters).
* Plan some habitat investigation and encourage the children to explore who lives where and why.

### Outcome 5: Children are effective communicators

**Example Learning Objective – Children interact verbally and non-verbally with others for a range of purposes**

Develop children’s creative communication and storytelling about the outdoors. Document, share, revisit and extend the learning together.

***Potential Learning Provocations***

* Provide children with multiple buckets of natural materials or large trays of clay or mud on the ground and support them to build and experiment with loose parts. Take a photo and reimagine this as a drawing and document the story telling children create individually or together.
* Set up tinker tables outside for children to create and design. Providing various materials including nails, hammers, wood, string to enable children to create and communicate learning.

## Health and Safety Considerations

When planning outdoor programs, it is essential to ensure the environment will be a safe space. Make sure checks of outdoor spaces are completed regularly.

* Consider your shaded and unshaded areas and whether equipment and experiences need to be moved throughout the day to ensure children have adequate access to shaded areas. Review your SunSmart policy and check the UV rating each day.
* Children need to have access to fresh water all day. Make sure drink bottles are stored in a shaded area that children can access readily. Remember to empty any containers or spaces containing water at the end of each day and review your water safety policy for more information.
* Consider OHS practices when educators are required to move equipment and furniture outside. Completing a comprehensive risk assessment will assist you and your team to consider all possible risks to the health and safety of children and educators.
* Practice your emergency evacuation procedures from the outdoor environment. Document any changes that need to be made to improve the process. You may need to consider where the sign in book is located and change the location so it is accessible in the event of an outdoor evacuation.
* Consider children’s fine and gross motor skills and abilities and ensure outdoor environments are set up to engage and challenge children safely. Make sure you have adequate soft fall mats and that sand pits are topped up and maintained regularly.
* Review your licensed space and consider how many children can be outside together at the same time and adapt your daily timetable accordingly.
* Changes to the way in which you work should be captured in your Quality Improvement Plan (QIP). Amend your QIP to include strategies you have put in place to shift your educational program outdoors or build a strong indoor/outdoor program.

## Available Professional Learning

The Department of Education and Training, in partnership with Early Childhood Australia (ECA), has developed an online [Outdoor Pedagogy Portal for Victorian Educators](https://www.earlychildhoodaustralia.org.au/bespoke/vicece/) that includes a professional learning module, online books and case studies on outdoor learning to support teachers and educators. This content is general in nature and is intended as a guide to support planning outdoor environments. Educators are encouraged to consider the unique context of their service when implementing outdoor programs.

## Guidance for Policy and Compliance

All activities must operate in accordance with current COVID-19 health advice, as outlined on the [COVIDSafe Settings in ECEC webpage](https://www.coronavirus.vic.gov.au/covidsafe-ecec).

Remember to also refer to your service policies regarding Active Play, Sun Protection, Water Safety, Supervision of Children, Clothing and Comfort, and Excursions to support your program implementation. Always monitor the UV ratings daily.

## Further information

[DET / ECA Outdoor Pedagogy Portal](https://www.earlychildhoodaustralia.org.au/bespoke/vicece/)

[Natural environments (education.vic.gov.au)](https://www.education.vic.gov.au/childhood/providers/regulation/Pages/naturalenvironments.aspx)

[Outdoor play for children | Raising Children Network](https://raisingchildren.net.au/toddlers/play-learning/outdoor-play/outdoor-play)

[ACECQA Newsletter Issue 4 2016 | ACECQA](https://www.acecqa.gov.au/newsletters/acecqa-newsletter-issue-4-2016)

[An environment for learning (acecqa.gov.au)](https://www.acecqa.gov.au/sites/default/files/2020-12/AnEnvironmentForLearning.PDF)

[The values we lay in indoor and outdoor play (earlychildhoodaustralia.org.au)](http://thespoke.earlychildhoodaustralia.org.au/the-values-we-lay-in-outdoor-play/)