

## **Outdoor Play: A Key Element for Holistic Child Development**

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### **Abstract**

*Early childhood educators consent to the fact that play is crucial to children's learning and development irrespective of their cultural variations. Many of the developmental tasks such as exploring, risk-taking, development of fine and gross motor skills as well as the acquisition of basic knowledge needed for later years are most effectively learned through outdoor play. In the past, children enjoyed playing outside their houses, in the neighbourhood, gardens, open fields even on waste grounds. They were intimately involved with nature through climbing of trees, hunting, fishing, playing under showers of rain among other thrilling outdoor experiences. The same cannot be said of children of this contemporary world. Many of them seem not to be engaging sufficiently in these pleasurable and memorable activities as children of old. This however can be associated with the misconception of what outdoor play is and modern parents' perception of what children need for healthy mental, physical, social, emotional growth and development. This article, therefore provided some empirical-supported values of outdoor play and its place in the holistic development of children. Also, some factors responsible for the decline of children's engagement in outdoor play our contemporary world was highlighted. Possible ways to maximize the free gifts of nature outside our houses were equally discussed.*

**Keywords:** Play, Outdoor play, Natural environment, Child development, Contemporary society

## **Introduction**

Children are naturally very active, restless and are always looking for opportunities to express the accumulated energy in them. They can be engaged in activities and be engrossed in it for as long as they desire because of the pleasure they derive from them. These pleasurable moments and satisfying activities children engage in can simply be referred to as play. During childhood, it is ideal that every child should enjoy play freely without being ordered around or restricted. Through this, the basic life skills needed for survival and function living are acquired.

Fromberg and Bergen (2006); Frost, Wortham and Reifel (2008) however defined play as any activity that is freely chosen, meaningful, active, enjoyable and open-ended. Also, Rivkin (2000) consider play as an active form of learning that unites the mind, body and spirit while Melone and Tranter (2003) viewed it as a means by which children learn without being taught. It involves doing, exploring, discovering, failing and succeeding. During play, children make sense of their world, become empowered to do things for themselves, master so many skills and also experience social competence. In addition, play situations contributes to children's learning across all the learning domains.

Early childhood educators have long valued play as the primary and most effectual way children learn. Copple and Bredekamp (2009) states in the National Association for Young Children Education (NAEYC) position statement on developmentally appropriate practice that, play is an important vehicle for developing self-regulation as well as for promoting language, cognition and social competence across all ages. The works of Vygotsky and Piaget in Bullard (2010) illustrates the role of play in children's learning and development. For Vygotsky, play leads to development and for Piaget, play fosters the social life and constructive activity of the child. Through play, children discover what they can do, test their physical and mental abilities and compare these with those of their peers. The environment however influences the type of play children engage in. Sometimes, their engagement could be within the confinement of a building (indoors) and some other times, they engage in activities outside the house (outdoors). The focus of this paper is on the later, that is, the outdoor engagements with emphasis on modern view of the concept, its role in the development of children, risks/

limitations as well as suggested ways to revive outdoor play for young children in our society.

### **The Role of Playing Outdoors in Child Development**

Children playing outdoors is as ancient lifestyle and has been passed on from one generation to another. Outdoors has been the playground as well as learning environments since the existence of man that is why it is difficult to separate children's play from the open-space environment. The outdoor is an invaluable place for learning which provide opportunities for children to explore, to discover and to develop an understanding of nature (Henley, 2010; McMillian, 2014). The pleasures of playing outdoors are among the deepest, most memorable fun during childhood. Oftentimes, adults recall and draw inspiration from the magical experiences of the natural outdoor settings.

Playing outdoors enormously benefits young children particularly in their learning and development. The experience of playing outside the confinement of a building enhances young children's physical development, they also learn how to get along with other children and manage their emotion. It has been scientifically proven that children develop a more positive attitude to learning when they engage in learning activities outdoors. During outdoor play, children are usually more active, engrossed and involved in the self-chosen tasks and they are able to make meaning in what they are doing.

The pleasures of playing outdoors are among the deepest and most passionate thrills of childhood. Oftentimes, adults tend to remember and draw inspiration from the magical experiences in natural outdoor settings as their strongest and most powerful memories (Willoughby, 2014). The outdoors environment is an invaluable place for learning. Tovey (2011) affirmed that it provides opportunities for children to explore, to discover and to develop an understanding of the nature around them.

Along with a natural drive to play, young children particularly have deep connections with nature and the outdoor environments. The outdoor environments stimulate children thinking skills and the ability to solve problems make decisions and try out new ideas (Jalongo &

Isenberg, 2012). It also gives children unique opportunities to experience with all their senses, engage in physical activities, observe, develop interest for art, science, mathematics, language and develop social skills through interaction with the peers and the physical environment.

Moreover, playing outdoors is a crucial part of children's life which significantly influenced their development and learning process. The outdoors is the very best place for children to practice and master emerging physical skills. It is in the outdoors that children can play vigorously, use loud voice, release excess energy and engage in large messy projects and interact with different landscapes such as hills, holes, streams and mud pond (Bullard, 2010). Based on the important role of outdoor environment, Frost, Wortham and Reifel (2008); Cople and Bredekamp (2009) proposed that all children should engage in outdoor play or activities every day if the weather permits.

In addition, playing outdoors greatly enhances children's health. According to National Health and Nutrition Examination Survey in 2003 and 2004, the percentage of children who are overweight is increasing by the day particularly in the developed countries. For instance, in the United States, 14% of children ages 2 - 5 are overweight and 19% of children ages 6 - 11 are overweight. Also, Lynn-Garbe and Hoot (2004) stated categorically that children who are overweight face both immediate and lifelong health problems including Type II diabetes, high blood pressure, high cholesterol, orthopedic problems, gallbladder diseases, sleep disorder, stroke and premature death.

Apart from hereditary factors, the strongest predictor of being overweight is lack of exercise (Nelson, Carpenter & Chiasson 2006). Children engaged in higher activity levels and burn more calories when they play outdoors (Sutterby & Frost, 2002). Children who spent more time outdoors are more physically fit than their peers (Baranowski, Mendlein, Resnicow, Frank, Cullen & Baranowski, 2000). This is because the outdoor play offers the only opportunity to engage in aerobic activities that enhance fitness, strength, flexibility and endurance and helps compensate for faulty diets.

It is important to note that, children in early childhood years are typically in the fundamental movement phase (Frost, Brown, Sutterby &

Thornton, 2004). Mastery of the fundamental movement such as running, walking, hopping, kicking, catching and so on is critical to participate successfully in many activities like games and sports. Although, maturation plays a role in the development of movements and it is not enough to assure competence. Children need opportunities to practice skills as well as encouragement to do so (Gallahue, 1993). The free play that includes the range of physically challenging activities and equipment is the best way to provide movement activities (Frost et al, 2004). Teachers who interact with children during outdoor free play can provide encouragement and individualized instruction, as a result, enhancing skill development.

Furthermore, children develop social skills as they interact freely with peers, organize games, develop rules for playing and resolve conflicts (Jarrett, 2002). The playground provides one of the limited opportunities for children to play freely with peers. In school, it usually creates opportunity children from different classrooms to interact with an expanded peer group (Bullard, 2010). In addition, during outdoor play the language skills of which are a fundamental intellectual achievement is developed (Elkind, 2006). Opportunities to participate in science, music art and problem-solving are equally created.

Another major benefit of playing outdoor is that the love for nature and the desire to preserve it is developed in children as they constantly interact and play outside with the natural world (Schultz, Shriver, Tabanico & Khazian, 2004; Sobel, 2004). If children do not have ample opportunities to play outdoors during their childhood years, they may never develop the attitude of loving nature (Sobel, 2004). Rather, their interaction with plants, animals, insects and other living creatures from which they can learn will be very poor, hence their thinking, observation and imaginative skills and other scientific skills may be under developed.

### **Challenges of Playing Outdoor in Today's World**

Children's play has long been understood to have a lasting impact on their wellbeing, satisfaction as children, and in the development of their future life skills (Voce, 2008). However, the freedom to playing outdoor is rapidly declining for many children irrespective of their family status and location (Tovey, 2011; Hanscom, 2015). As a result, many children

are missing out on the memorable experiences that can only be gotten from the opportunities to play in the open space. The reason for this decline according to Tovey (2011), can be associated with the culture of fear, over-organised lives, growing intolerance for children's play, lack of time and safe spaces for play, virtual spaces through technological advancement, health issues, ignorance as well as negative disposition to children playing outdoors. In addition to these, there are some other limitations to children's freedom to enjoy outdoor play. These includes;

**Parents' Restriction:** Parents' control over their children's freedom to play outdoors has drastically increased both in the developing and developed countries (Amemiya, Hata & Kikuchi, 2013). It is therefore imperative to look into some factors that influence parents' restriction. The first factor is the children's demographic characteristics. According to O'Brien, Jones, Sloan, and Rustin (2000); Amemiya, et al (2013), parental restriction tends to be most strict when children are female, young or members of an ethnic minority.

The second factor is the physical and social environment of neighbourhoods. Parents living in urbanized areas, high-rated crime areas as well as economically disadvantaged areas tend to limit their children from playing outdoors (O'Brien et al., 2000; Prezza, Alparone, Cristallo & Luigi, 2005). The third is relationships between parents and neighbourhoods. Oftentimes, when parents do not have good relationship with the neighbours they tend to restrict their children from playing in the neighbourhood suspecting the neighbours to be harmful, hence, prevent the children from having anything to do with them. In addition, parents tend to restrict their children's outdoor activities due to their vulnerability, perceived danger in the neighbourhood, a high risk of their children becoming victims of crimes and traffic accidents and the lack of help from neighbourhood residents when dangerous incidents occur.

**Security Issue:** The issue of security in many nations of the world today has become a major challenge for all. People (children inclusive) no longer enjoy quiet, safe and peaceful environments as it used to be in the past. As a result, children's freedom to play outdoors has drastically

been limited by their parents due to fear of the unknown. Reports of kidnapping, ritual killings, stray bullets and rape cases are on the increase in our society. The environment therefore has become a threat for the children rather than being a source of inspiration for them.

**Academic Workload:** Another major challenge of children's outdoor play is the volume of academic workload. Parents' most of the time engages their children with academic activities which is reflected in their quest for extra lessons for their children after school hours, private home lessons as well as holiday lessons (Afsharlahoori, 2007). Private school owners and teachers too do not portray the understanding of the significance of play in children's learning and development. The approaches to teaching in many classrooms often times are not activity-based. The same conventional methods of teaching which deprives children of pleasurable learning experiences are still being repeated. All these obviously deprive the child the opportunity to engage in meaningful activities in his/her physical and natural environments.

**Playground and Equipment:** The physical outdoor environment provides a spacious arena for children's play and can stimulate their learning as well as all round development. Unfortunately, many parents of nowadays do not consider it necessary to consciously set up the outdoor environments to enhance children's play (Afsharlahoori, 2007). Rather, they encourage the children to remain indoors and play if they have to. In addition, the costs of structuring the outdoor environments which includes procurement of outdoor play equipment such as swings, slides, playhouse among others is relatively high. Hence, children are deprived of the pleasure of enjoying their play outdoors except on very few occasions when some parents take their children out to amusement parks and some other places structured for children's play.

**Technological Advancement:** One of the major factors affecting children's engagement in playing outdoors is screen time. Kaiser Family Foundation (2011); Akinbote and Agarry (2012) asserted that an average child in this contemporary world if given the opportunity prefer to spend more time in front of a TV, computer screen and other devices playing

games. This has greatly reduced the quality of time children spend playing outdoors learning and forming relationships. Although, Toys and Hobby Association (2013) reported that 63% of parents believe that there are greater dangers for children playing outside now than when they were children, Parsons (2011) however debunk the notion by encouraging parents to consciously create opportunities for children to play outdoors.

### **Conclusion**

The importance of play in the development of children cannot be overstressed. Play time remains the most pleasurable moments in the life of children. It is an experience that will remain memorable and relevant to the existence of children all over the world. However, the trend of children's play is drastically declining by the day both at home and the school areas. Many parents and schools now focus more on indoor activities and giving very little consideration for outdoor activities and playing outdoors. It is therefore important that outdoor play experience should be encouraged among children to enhance their optimal development.

Hence, parents and teachers should consciously allow children to spend more time playing outdoors instead of caging them within the four walls of a building. This is important because studies have shown that children who spend less time playing outside do not perform optimally like their counterparts who enjoy free outdoor play. Also, tight security measures by the government, the community as well as individual adults especially parents should be put in place in order to make the environment safe for the children to enjoy their childhood experience through outdoor play (Bullard, 2010).

In addition, outdoor physical environments must be designed in a way that allows children to take safe risks while testing their emerging abilities. A safe, well-planned environment provides opportunities for children to seek new challenges as they master old ones. Natural play spaces can stimulate children's imaginations and engage their sense of curiosity as they explore their physical surroundings and learn in ways beyond what they can experience indoors. In terms of the outdoor play



equipment, adults can be improvised these equipment from natural resources found in the surroundings.

### **Recommendations**

- Academic activities should be fun to children rather than being a workload that children will have to battle with at home or school.
- Teachers therefore should maximize the natural outdoor environments through a thorough review of the instructional approaches. This will go a long way to make children's learning more interesting and meaningful. It will also make the teachers' work less stressful and more effective.
- Public awareness on the need to allow free outdoor play for children's holistic development should be considered by early childhood educators. The media, social networks, seminars/workshops for parents as well as Parents' Teachers' Association (PTA) meetings could be forum through which a large number of parents and custodians of children can be reached.

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