

# OUTDOOR PLAY

CREATING AN  
OUTDOOR LEARNING  
ENVIRONMENT ON  
A “SHOESTRING”  
BUDGET



MISSISSIPPI STATE UNIVERSITY™  
EXTENSION



## BENEFITS OF OUTDOOR PLAY

Outdoor play is essential for children's development, providing many physical, cognitive, and social benefits. Engaging in outdoor activities allows children to develop gross and fine motor skills, enhance their coordination, and build a strong foundation for a healthy lifestyle. Exposure to nature fosters sensory exploration, stimulates creativity, and promotes cognitive growth. Additionally, outdoor play encourages social interaction, teamwork, and the development of important social skills.

Childcare providers can easily incorporate outdoor play into their daily routines using items readily available around the house. Simple activities, such as sensory paths, water play, and more, offer endless opportunities for exploration and fun. Allowing outdoor play offers children the freedom to explore, create, and learn in a natural environment.

# OUTDOOR PLAY ACTIVITIES

## SENSORY PATH

**Primary Learning Domain:** Science

**Age:** Toddler and Pre-K

**Materials:**

- ◇ Plastic containers and/or box
- ◇ Outdoor foliage (leaves, acorns, rocks, sticks, sand, pine cones, etc.)
- ◇ Materials for a path (bricks, blocks, logs)

**Description:**

This activity can be created in many ways. Sensory paths can be made with items found around the yard. Creating a more complex path may take more time and require additional foliage and materials. You can take the children in your care on a nature walk to collect most of these items. While on the walk, engage in back-and-forth conversations about the items.

## COAT HANGER SCALE

**Primary Learning Domain:** Math

**Age:** Pre-K

**Materials:**

- ◇ Hangers
- ◇ Twine
- ◇ Plastic bowls
- ◇ Hole puncher
- ◇ Items to measure

**Description:**

This fun activity helps children practice their math skills, particularly their measuring skills. Take two bowls and punch three holes in each one. Take the twine through each hole and connect them by tying a knot at the top. Place the items that you want to measure in the bowls. Engage in back-and-forth conversations with the children about the weight of what you are measuring.

## MUSIC CENTER

**Primary Learning Domain:** Music

**Age:** Infants, Toddlers, and Pre-K

**Materials:**

- ◇ PVC pipe
- ◇ Zip ties
- ◇ Baking pans
- ◇ Spatula for drum
- ◇ Water bottles (put in rocks, rice, corn, etc., for infants to shake)
- ◇ Bells
- ◇ Soup cans

**Description:**

This is a fun and simple activity to engage children in music. The PVC pipe is used to make the base of the music center. You can be as creative with the other items as you would like. For example, when we created a music center, we used soup cans and baking sheets for drum sets and a spatula for the drum. We found bells in the playroom and added them to the center as well. We used plastic water bottles with different items for the infants to shake. As you are engaging in this activity with young children, you will label the items and engage in back-and-forth conversations.

## WIND CHIMES

**Primary Learning Domain:** Music

**Age:** Infants, Toddlers, and Pre-K

**Materials:**

- ◇ Cleaned tin cans
- ◇ String
- ◇ Washers
- ◇ Metal washers
- ◇ Paint and glitter to decorate (optional)

**Description:**

This fun, hands-on activity is for all ages. You can collect jar tops and soup cans for a wind chime. Metal washers can be placed inside of the soup cans and jars to make the wind chime sound. You can be as creative as you want by painting the cans and tops. You can even add glitter to make it pop!

## MAKE-AND-TAKE BOOKS

**Primary Learning Domain:** Literacy

**Age:** Toddlers and Pre-K

**Materials:**

- ◇ Lunch bags
- ◇ Hole puncher
- ◇ Popsicle sticks
- ◇ Rubber bands
- ◇ Glue
- ◇ Markers, colors, stickers, pictures, etc., to decorate

**Description:**

Make-and-take books are perfect for a simple outdoor activity to promote literacy skills. You will need two to three lunch bags to make the pages in the book. The spine will be made with popsicle sticks and connected with a rubber band. You will use a hole puncher to loop and connect the rubber band to the popsicle stick. Allow children to be as creative as they want to be. Our two most popular books to make are *All About Me* and *Nature*. We went on a nature walk to collect the items for our books.

## WORKIN' AT THE CAR WASH

**Primary Learning Domain:** Pretend Play

**Age:** Pre-K

**Materials:**

- ◇ Milk or water jug
- ◇ Solo cups
- ◇ Water
- ◇ Matchbox cars/trucks

**Description:**

In this activity, you will use minimal items you can find around the house. Place the solo cups down with the milk jug on top. You can cut little holes in the bottom of the milk jug. When you place the water hose inside the top of the milk jug, watch the water sprinkle down to mimic a car wash. You can use toy trucks and matchbox cars for the car wash center.

## HOPSCOTCH

**Primary Learning Domain:** Gross-Motor

**Age:** Preschool

**Materials:**

- ◇ Cardboard box
- ◇ Scissors
- ◇ Hand and footprints (lamination is optional)
- ◇ Zip ties
- ◇ Hole puncher

**Description:**

This fun and simple activity provides children with the opportunity to practice their gross-motor skills. The easiest way to make this activity is to cut the flaps off boxes. You will use the hole punch to make two holes on each piece of cardboard and connect the pieces with zip ties. You can trace children's hand/footprints. You can also cut them out with a die-cutting machine, laminate them, and place them on cardboard.

## SHEEP SHEARING

**Primary Learning Domain:** Fine-Motor

**Age:** Toddlers and Pre-K

**Materials:**

- ◇ Stepping stool or basket with holes
- ◇ Cotton balls
- ◇ Construction paper and googly eyes to make the sheep's face
- ◇ Child-friendly scissors or tweezers

**Description:**

This fun and engaging activity can be implemented indoors or outdoors to help children practice their fine motor skills. You can use a stepping stool or laundry basket for the sheep's body. Place the cotton balls in the holes and ask the children to give their sheep a shearing. Children can use child-friendly scissors or tweezers.

## SHOWER CURTAIN PAINTING

**Primary Learning Domain:** Art

**Age:** Pre-K

**Materials:**

- ◇ Shower curtain
- ◇ Paint
- ◇ Paint brushes
- ◇ Heavy-duty cord or twine

**Description:**

Who doesn't love painting outdoors? All you need is a clear shower curtain, paint, cord/twine, and imagination. Let your children lead this activity and create their artwork. You will loop the twine in the holes of the shower curtain and connect it to tree limbs or a fence. Engage in back-and-forth conversations about the child's creativity as they are painting.

## WATER WALL

**Primary Learning Domain:** Science

**Age:** Pre-K

**Materials:**

- ◇ PVC pipe
- ◇ Zip ties
- ◇ Hole puncher
- ◇ Piece of lattice, wooden fence, or bench for the "wall" (make sure it is in a safe condition)
- ◇ Pool noodles, funnels, etc.
- ◇ Recycled water bottles, baskets, shampoo bottles of different sizes, etc.
- ◇ Scoops for pouring water

**Description:**

The perfect outdoor activity for a hot summer day. This easy water wall can be made with recycled items found around the home. You can make this so many different and fun ways. This activity helps with social, math, motor, and science skills. You can find a piece of lattice, wooden fence, or bench to make the "wall." Make sure it is safe for the children. You will connect the items using zip ties and a hole puncher. You can use funnels, pool noodles, bottles, and other items found in your backyard for children to explore with water.

# HULA HOOP RING

**Primary Learning Domain:** Infant Development/Fine-Motor

**Age:** Infants

**Materials:**

- ◇ Hula hoop
- ◇ Twine to connect objects.
- ◇ Ribbon, bandanas, socks, etc.
- ◇ Rattles and shakers
- ◇ Soft toys, mirrors, and other objects of their interest

**Description:**

Looking for a fun outdoor activity to do with your infants? Grab a hula hoop and items of interest found in your home. You can connect items to the hula hoop with extra ribbon or twine. This activity can also be used to encourage tummy time.

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