

Regular, Unstructured Time Outside

.....

Research shows that viewing trees, touching soil, and just being in green space, fresh air, and sunlight has positive effects on our mental and physical well-being. By allowing students to explore freely - to build, balance, figure out how to move heavy stones, etc. – we can help them to develop motor skills, as well as scientific reasoning and the building blocks of scientific principles (like the laws of motion). Regular, child-directed exploration of a place also leads to recognition of its inhabitants and features, and eventually to connection, ownership, and stewardship.

“Unstructured” or “self-directed” means no lesson plans necessary. Join their play if they invite you, but otherwise all you need to say is, “go play!” Students will naturally tend towards different uses of outdoor spaces at different ages. If they want to dig holes or just sit and talk with their friends, that’s okay - and may be appropriate developmentally.

AGES: All

INTENDED OUTCOMES: Feet, Heart, Head

SUGGESTED SUPPLIES:

- A blanket to sit on, buckets and baskets for collecting treasures and moving things, and magnifying glasses for investigations, clothing appropriate for the weather
- If your yard or outdoor space lacks shade, consider bringing umbrellas, tarps, or other shade devices

Suggested steps and/or focus for each grade level*:

ECE-4th GRADE

- Select a space - patches of grass are great for looking for critters, dirt is great for digging, an area with stones allows students to create piles and knock them down!
- Enjoy your outside time! Either put yourself in a central location where they can find you if they need you, or go along with them – it’s fun to see what they discover and to be part of their play if they invite you in.

5th GRADE – MIDDLE SCHOOL

- At students get older, they may have a harder time engaging in free play, especially if they are used to screens. It’s okay to make suggestions if they are looking for things to do, but let them find their own way through their “boredom” as much as you can.

HIGH SCHOOL

- For high school students, time outside can be an important part of their peer relationships and a tool they can use to help manage new stressors. By taking walks, allowing them to socialize outside, and

actively prioritizing spending time outside, you model this as a value and teach them to utilize this tool when they need or want to.



TIPS AND TRICKS

- Set boundaries as it increases your comfort but be sure to include “moveable parts” and interesting things to explore within your boundaries. Examples include sand, dirt, water, bushes, seeds, pebbles or stones, logs or sticks, trees.
- Don’t have lots of nature on site? Many can be brought in easily (and found via donation) e.g. sand from the hardware store or water in a kiddie pool, potted plants, logs from a local arborist.
- Sticks and rocks make you nervous? Learn to distinguish between a risk and a hazard. Hazards are dangers that students cannot see or foresee and should be avoided or removed, while many things that seem “risky” to us are actually very beneficial for their healthy development. (The International School Ground Alliance’s declaration on risk may be helpful - available in Spanish too! <http://www.internationalschoolgrounds.org/risk/>)
- Highlight the learning that happens through child-directed play by having a class discussion or share-out on what they saw and did during their outdoor time. Consider documenting the play and the learning happening on the schoolyard with annotated photos or video. (Look at Reggio Emilia for examples of how to document learning through play.)
- For wet, cold, or muddy times of year, consider asking students to bring a change of clothing to keep at school and/or towels to put on the floor to sop up the extra!



Relevant Standards

SC09-GR.P-S.3-GLE2, SC09-GR.K-S.3-GLE1, CH09-GR.HS-S.3-GLE2