

ECHO: Resources for Outdoor Learning Initiatives

For early childhood education programs pursuing an ECHO Innovation Grant Program or BLOOM ECHO Start Up Grant Program project, please read and consider the following resources/best practices.

These resources were researched and compiled by Community Connections for Children's Outdoor Play and Learning Consultants. For a full list of resources, including design support, professional development, equipment/materials, websites, books, and podcasts, contact Elizabeth Marcello at emarcello@cccforpa.org.

If you're looking for a contractor or specialty business, check out [York Builders Association](#) and [York County Economic Alliance](#) for business and member listings.

Networking and Learning Opportunities

If you are interested in pursuing technical support for your outdoor learning environment, join CCC for an upcoming webinar on **October 7, 2024, from 7–8 PM**. It is free to attend, however registration is required. It will be recorded. [Register here.](#)

We offer regularly scheduled office hours for outdoor learning the third Tuesday and third Wednesday of each month (registration not required):

- [Link to join: Tuesday, October 15, 7–8 PM](#)
- [Link to join: Wednesday, October 16, 1–2 PM](#)

Introduction

We know that despite the documented [benefits of naturalized early childhood outdoor learning environments](#), childcare providers may lack the resources to redesign and enhance their playgrounds to include the [field-tested OLE features](#) that best support children's overall health, development, learning, and wellbeing. It is important to consider that spending more time in nature with children requires not only funding but a strategic plan and the guidance of landscape designers and nature-based ECE content experts. This ongoing support can help guide ECE leadership, staff and volunteers to successful implementation so that children achieve the fullest health and developmental benefits of a Nature-based ECE approach (NbECE). Implementation is driven by a collaborative design process with all stakeholders, including the children who will use the space.

Implementing a Nature-Based ECE approach with an Outdoor Learning Environment

If an existing playground contains primarily gross motor and climbing structures and is used for "recess," the first step is to start considering the outdoors as an extension of the play and learning that happens indoors. The addition of simple, inexpensive (or even free) features to an existing early childhood playground can begin to transform it into an Outdoor Learning Environment (OLE) quite literally within a week. This process typically begins with the addition of loose parts, which have been shown to engage children readily, keep their attention, and foster creativity and imagination as they use random, open-ended items to manipulate and bring their play ideas to life. This can be blocks, chunks of wood, wood "cookie" slices, pinecones and other natural materials, and even pots and pans that children will use to play outdoor kitchen, very much like they may do inside. Other additions to an OLE may include painting and play dough offered daily, an outdoor cozy/reading area, pre-literacy and math "invitations" (aligning with the Reggio Emilia philosophy), fine motor activities, vegetable and/or sensory gardens, places to have snack or lunch outside, a water feature (ideally near the Outdoor Play Kitchen), and many options to retreat to a variety of shady areas to keep children and adults comfortable.

Beyond these simple, DIY features, childcare programs may wish to consider the addition of outdoor features identified as “[Best Practice Indicators](#)” in OLEs.

3 Elements to Develop a Nature-based ECE Approach with an Enhanced OLE



Design and Create an Enhanced Outdoor Learning Environment

- Through a collaborative process with all stakeholders, design and create an engaging, biodiverse Outdoor Learning Environment using the field-tested features and principles from experts like the [Natural Learning Initiative](#).
- Utilize the expertise of landscape designers trained in OLEs is recommended, but programs may choose to utilize [expert resources](#) and create their own designs.



Staff Engagement and Training

- Offer whole-staff professional development to encourage buy-in and to help staff recognize that outdoor time is more than gross motor play/recess and is an invaluable part of children's learning and development.
- Coaching in best practices and curriculum support to link outdoor play to development and learning standards will give staff the confidence to spend more of the day outdoors, so that children experience the essential benefits of outdoor play and exploration.



Family Involvement

- Understanding the benefits their children get from connecting to nature helps families understand that outdoor play is an invaluable part of children's learning and development and may inspire families to spend more time outdoors together.
- These shared experiences help children build strong emotional bonds to nature, and to the adults with whom they share their explorations.

Additional Resources

Design Support

- [Nature Explore Outdoor Classroom Design Services](#)
- [Rusty Keeler; Rusty Keeler: 20 Ways to Create Play Environments for the Soul](#)
- [Bienenstock Natural Playgrounds Design Services](#)
- [ECHO DIY Guides](#)

Professional Development

- [Rachel Larimore/Samara Early Learning](#)
- [Rusty Keeler](#)
- [Early Childhood Health Outdoors \(ECHO\) Professional Development](#)

Equipment/Materials

- [Community Playthings Outlast Collection](#) , [Natural Playground Store](#), [Nature Explore store](#), [Nature's Instruments Outdoor Playground Equipment Shop](#)
- [Outdoor School Shop](#) [Oaki Children's Outdoor Adventure Gear](#)