

# ECHO: Resources for Outdoor Learning Initiatives

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

These resources were researched and compiled by Community Connections for Children's Outdoor Learning and Play Consultants. To work with CCC's Outdoor Learning and Play Consultants on design support, professional development, or to receive ongoing resources including suggestions for equipment/materials, websites, books, and podcasts, please contact:

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

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## 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 well-being. Spending more time in nature with children is best achieved with a strategic plan that includes the guidance of landscape designers and professional development with nature-based ECE content experts. This ongoing support can help guide ECE leadership and staff to add outdoor features and practices that enable children to achieve the fullest health and developmental benefits that more time outdoors supports.

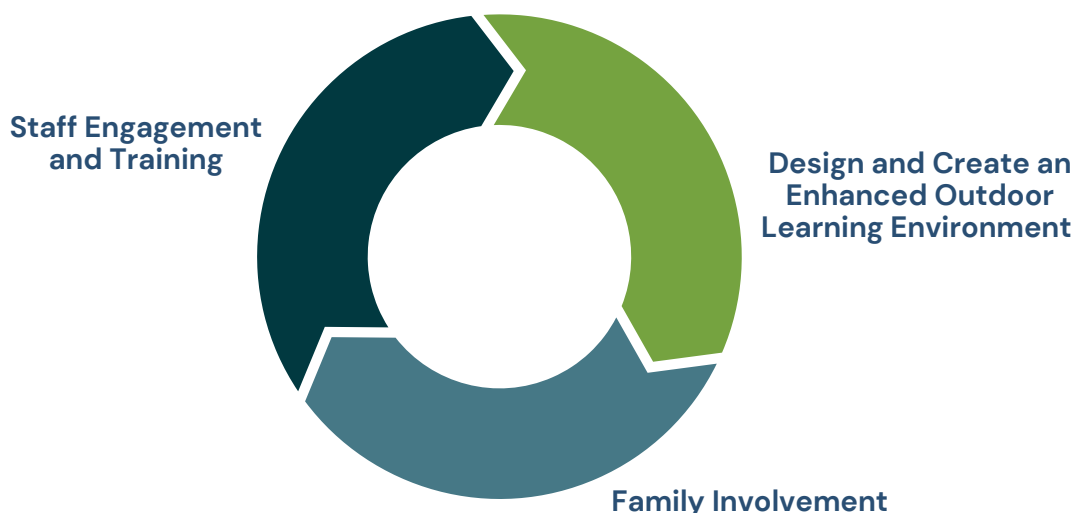
## Implementing a Nature-Based ECE approach with an Outdoor Learning Environment

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 manipulatives, or [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 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, child-led 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.

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



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### OLE Design Options (from least to most expensive):

- Find a volunteer or stakeholder willing to follow a DIY plan to create an OLE design. There are resources available to guide motivated individuals to create a design that features elements that align with best practice indicators. Resources include:
  - [ECHO DIY Guides](#)
  - The book (or free PDF): [Quality Outdoor Play Environments](#)
- Find a volunteer or stakeholder willing to take an online design course that culminates in a site-specific OLE design, such as:
  - Rusty Keeler’s [Nature Play Design Masterclass](#) – \$249 – self-paced online course
  - NLI’s [Early Childhood Outdoor Learning Environments Certificate](#)
- Hire a landscape designer that specializes in master designs of children’s outdoor learning environments (more resources available upon request):
  - [Rusty Keeler’s Design Consulting](#)
  - [Nature Explore’s Outdoor Classroom Design](#)

## Additional Resources

### Benefits of OLEs:

- [Research Brief: Impact of Naturalized Early Childhood Outdoor Learning Environments | NLI \(naturalearning.org\)](#)

### OLE Resources:

- [Natural Learning Initiative Best Practice NLI Outdoor Preschool Toolkit, 2021](#)
- [Preschool Outdoors: Best Practice Toolkit \(2nd Ed.\) | NLI \(naturalearning.org\)](#)
- [25 Easy Nature Play Ideas for Preschools \(hhs.gov\)](#)

### 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](#)

### Online Professional Development:

- [The Grove Membership — Samara Early Learning](#)
- [Rusty Keeler](#)
- [Natural Start Alliance](#)
- [Early Childhood Health Outdoors \(ECHO\) Professional Development](#)
- [Online Nature-Based Early Learning Conference | Natural Start Alliance \(NSA\) Conference, July 14-18, 2025 \(w/ access for 1 year\)](#)
- [Association for Nature-Based Education \(ANBE\) Online Nature-Based Teacher Certification](#)

### Equipment/Materials

- [Tried and True Outdoor Learning Supplies and Materials Guide](#)
- [Community Playthings Outlast Collection, Natural Playground Store, Nature Explore store, Nature's Instruments](#)
- [Outdoor School Shop Oaki Children's Outdoor Adventure Gear](#)

### Grant Writing Support

- [Nature Explore Sample Grant Proposal](#)
- [Nature Explore Fundraising Resources](#)

