



# OUTDOOR PRESCHOOL PILOT FINAL LEGISLATIVE REPORT



Washington State Department of  
**CHILDREN, YOUTH & FAMILIES**

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## Executive Summary

Outdoor, nature-based education and child care is often described as “learning with, in and about nature.” Teachers use nature-based experiences to support children’s holistic learning and development, and support children’s connection to nature and sense of ecological identity. Outdoor, nature-based experiences also promote children’s healthy physical, cognitive and social development and learning in ways that are unique from a traditional indoor environment. All children can benefit from and deserve these opportunities, yet many children lack access to outdoor and nature-based experiences and these inequities often fall across socioeconomic and racial lines.

The Washington State Outdoor Preschool Pilot (2017-2021) is the first program in the nation to successfully develop state licensing requirements and processes for outdoor, nature-based early learning and child care programs, expanding access to safe and high-quality child care and education. In 2018, the Washington State Department of Children, Youth, and Families (DCYF) established the Outdoor Preschool Pilot Standards, which are the licensing standards for outdoor preschools. By September 2020, DCYF had provided pilot licenses to seven outdoor preschool programs, despite interruptions due to the COVID-19 pandemic. Licensure allows outdoor preschool programs to provide care for children beyond four hours per day, and two of the licensed outdoor preschools provided a full-day of care with a blended model, where children are enrolled in a center-based early learning program as well as the outdoor preschool program. Licensure also allows early learning programs to receive subsidy payment through Working Connections Child Care (WCCC) for income-eligible families, and/or to participate in the Early Childhood Education and Assistance Program (ECEAP). Both of these programs were successfully used by outdoor preschool programs, expanding access to the benefits of outdoor, nature-based education to children of qualifying families.

Through the licensing process, programs began implementing more consistent practices, particularly around benefit-risk assessment and supporting children’s safe and educational explorations of natural environments. Initial data indicates that these practices do ensure child safety, as well as kindergarten readiness among children enrolled in licensed outdoor preschool programs. Outdoor preschool programs were also well-prepared to operate during cold and rainy weather, however, poor air quality from wildfires was the primary cause of weather-related closures for outdoor preschools during the pilot.

The COVID-19 pandemic was also a cause of temporary closures for outdoor preschool programs, however, the majority have re-opened and are seeing increased demand, especially for school-age children. Although programs are expanding where possible to meet the demand, the need to keep groups of children consistent has also reduced the program’s flexibility in enrollment, and there has been a decrease in the overall number of children and families that are enrolled in the outdoor nature-based programs involved in the pilot. ‘Outside play’ is still recognized by the Washington State Department of Health (DOH) as an effective method to reduce transmission of COVID-19, and outdoor preschools are well-positioned to provide such opportunities, along with the many benefits such programs provide to children’s development and learning.

DCYF recommends that the Legislature authorize the department to have permanent authority to license outdoor, nature-based child care for preschool and school-age children, thereby continuing to expand access to such beneficial programs. DCYF will submit legislation for consideration in the 2021 Legislative Session to that effect. DCYF has successfully established plans to incorporate outdoor, nature-based settings into Early Achievers, the state’s quality rating and improvement system (QRIS), and is also prepared to support workforce development with a drafted *Nature-Based Competencies for Early Care and Education Professionals Supplement* and proposed curricula for required trainings.

## Introduction

Outdoor, nature-based experiences promote children’s health, development and learning. All children can benefit from and deserve these opportunities, yet many children lack access to outdoor and nature-based experiences and these inequities often fall across socioeconomic and racial lines. In 2017, a group of outdoor preschool providers (and the families enrolled in such programs) worked with DCYF (formerly the Department of Early Learning)<sup>1</sup> and the Washington State Legislature to establish a pilot project so that outdoor preschools could become licensed.

The Washington State Outdoor Preschool Pilot (2017-2021) was the first program in the nation to successfully develop state licensing requirements and processes for outdoor, nature-based early learning programs, expanding access to safe and high-quality child care and education. Through the pilot, DCYF, partners and participating providers:

- Learned what it takes to provide an outdoor preschool program or add an outdoor, nature-based classroom to an existing child care program.
- Established standards to ensure children’s health and safety in the outdoors.
- Began collecting and verifying lessons-learned about how outdoor preschool benefits children and families.

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*Outdoor preschool was never an option when we lived in Georgia. I’ve always liked the idea of children spending more time in nature following their curiosity, especially early in life. I always had positive childhood memories with my own family and I wanted to share that with my kids. When we moved to Washington and it was raining, I saw a typical Pacific Northwest day. In outdoor preschool, all of the children were wearing their rain suits and sitting around having a peaceful morning circle. The way that the teacher interacted with the kids, they really respected them as their own whole human beings. – Outdoor Preschool Parent*

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## What is Outdoor, Nature-Based Education and Child Care?

Outdoor, nature-based education and child care is often described as “learning with, in and about nature.” Teachers use nature-based experiences to support children’s holistic learning and development, and support children’s connection to nature and sense of ecological identity. The curriculum is primarily interest-based and incorporates seasonal and ecological phenomena. Outdoor, nature-based education, child care and expanded learning opportunities can be provided to children of all ages. However, as tasked by the Legislature, the DCYF pilot project specifically focused on outdoor, nature-based early learning and child care programs for preschool-aged children (see *Final Recommendations and Opportunities* in this report regarding outdoor, nature-based programs for school-age children).

Outdoor nature-based early learning and child care programs:

- Operate primarily outdoors in a nature-based setting on a daily basis.
- Provide a nature-based curriculum.
- May have a permanently located and maintained outdoor classroom.
- May be a roaming program, where resources are brought to the location each day.
- May have a child care center where children are also enrolled.

## Legislative Background and Requirements Overview

Substitute Senate Bill (SSB) 5357, laws of 2017, required DCYF to establish a four-year pilot project to license “outdoor, nature-based early learning and child care programs,” otherwise known as “outdoor preschools.”

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<sup>1</sup> Although the pilot was established under the former Department of Early Learning, for the purposes of simplicity, this report will henceforth refer to DCYF as the agency overseeing all aspects of the pilot.

When the bill passed, the Legislature found that more than 40 outdoor preschools were operating in Washington, but because these programs were unlicensed they could not provide full-day care. The Legislature also found that these part-day programs were in high demand and many had waitlists. Further, because these programs were unlicensed, they were unable to serve families who would otherwise be eligible for high-quality early learning opportunities through the state’s WCCC program and ECEAP.

The goal in creating this pilot project was to “expand access to affordable, high-quality early learning programs, and to further investigate the benefits of outdoor, nature-based classrooms for Washington’s children and families” (SSB 5357, Section 1).

To accomplish this, the Legislature required DCYF to establish a pilot project to license outdoor preschools, which began Aug. 31, 2017, and is scheduled to conclude June 30, 2021. DCYF must adopt rules to implement the pilot project and may waive or adapt licensing requirements as needed to allow for outdoor preschool classrooms. DCYF must also explore options for outdoor preschool participation in Early Achievers, and convene an advisory group of outdoor, nature-based early learning practitioners.

DCYF has provided annual status reports, which began on Jan. 15, 2018, that describe the implementation of the pilot project. This is the final report on findings from the pilot project.<sup>2</sup>

## Review of Past Progress (2017-2019)

### Establishing the Pilot Structure and Participation

When SSB 5357 was signed into law, DCYF began coordinating the pilot project both internally and with stakeholders in the outdoor preschool industry. DCYF hired a pilot program manager with a 14-year history in child care licensing and a program specialist with a background in early childhood policy development, program evaluation and nature-based early childhood education.

In 2017, the Outdoor Preschool Advisory Group (OPAG) established a pilot project structure to maximize the inclusion of stakeholder input and expertise, resulting in a two-tiered cohort participation structure. “Implementers” work with DCYF to apply the outdoor preschool pilot standards under a “pilot license” and receive the related opportunities, such as accepting child care subsidies and participating in Early Achievers. “Observers” provide comparison data until they apply for a pilot license. Directors of both the implementer and observer cohort programs participate in OPAG and provide program data to help establish appropriate licensing requirements and advise DCYF in meeting the goals of the pilot project.

Recruitment of existing programs in the outdoor preschool industry shows that outdoor preschool programs operate with a variety of organizational structures and program types. Participating programs include a mix of rural, urban and suburban locations to provide more family choice (see Appendices A and B). These programs also include a mix of nonprofit or for-profit organizations, programs located at the University of Washington (UW) campus, programs that work in conjunction with Seattle Parks and Recreation and programs that operate in public parks throughout the state. The pilot project also includes the participation of a federally recognized Indian tribe operating a licensed child care center.

Although the majority of outdoor preschool programs participating in the pilot have historically been exempt from licensing, licensed child care centers can also provide an outdoor preschool program. These classrooms are conducted in natural areas adjacent to or nearby the licensed child care centers.

Throughout the project, participation in the pilot has shifted to allow new members (see Appendix A).

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<sup>2</sup> Past reports can be found on [DCYF’s “Find a Report” webpage](#)

## Developing the Outdoor Preschool Pilot Standards

In 2018, DCYF established the Outdoor Preschool Pilot Standards, which are the licensing standards for outdoor preschools. Additional or alternative standards were designed to meet the same health and safety expectations as center-based early learning programs. Pilot participants began implementing these standards, which has led to more consistent practices among outdoor preschool programs, particularly around practices of benefit-risk assessment and supporting children's safe and educational explorations of natural environments.

In the second half of 2018, many of the implementing programs preparing for licensure began making necessary improvements to their program policies, handbooks and safety practices. Outdoor preschool programs often operate in public parks, and although these spaces are managed for public safety, it is the responsibility of the outdoor preschool provider to ensure child safety and education.

The key differences between center-based early learning program rules and the outdoor preschool pilot standards are in the following areas:

- **Ratio and Group Size** – The outdoor preschool pilot standards require a 1:6 staff to child ratio with a maximum group size of 16. During the pilot, two programs applied for variances to provide a 1:7 ratio, for a group size of 18. These were granted based on reduced risk of the settings and positive track records of compliance to licensing standards. For comparison, center-based early learning programs have a ratio of 1:10 with a maximum group size of 20. This difference ensures appropriate active supervision of children in the outdoor preschool environment.
- **Benefit-Risk Assessments** – Outdoor preschool providers must complete a benefit-risk assessment and create a risk management plan for all regularly used locations and nature-based activities (e.g., climbing natural features, foraging and encountering wildlife). Activities or locations with increased risk must have policies and procedures to mitigate that risk and these must be approved by DCYF.
- **Teacher Qualification in Environmental or Outdoor Education** – Outdoor preschool program directors or supervising staff must have experience or training in environmental or outdoor education in addition to the same early childhood certificate requirements as center-based early learning programs. This qualification supports child safety in the natural environment, as well as optimized learning with a nature-based curriculum.
- **Curriculum Requirements** – Outdoor preschools must utilize developmentally appropriate techniques to teach children about boundaries and self-regulation for outdoor play. Instead of having fences, teachers use visual cues, such as cones, and review the boundaries with children. Outdoor preschools must also provide a nature-based curriculum, using natural materials and processes to enhance learning. The outdoor preschool pilot also requires programs to incorporate a tribally-approved curriculum, such as the Since Time Immemorial early learning curriculum,<sup>3</sup> in the spirit of 2015's **Senate Bill 5433**.
- **Weather-Related Policies and Emergency Procedures** – Outdoor preschools operate outside every day and must ensure that children have the proper clothing and gear to remain healthy and safe. They must also have a safe building available for emergencies. Programs must partner with parents to understand the importance of providing proper clothing and must support children who do not have such clothing. Programs must also have policies and procedures for closures due to weather (e.g., poor air quality or dangerous storms) and staff must be trained in emergency procedures for sudden weather changes.
- **Hygiene** – Outdoor preschool providers must follow alternative procedures to ensure the same level of hygiene as required in other licensed early learning programs. For example, outdoor preschools may use sanitizing wipes to clean public toilets before children's use and they may provide hand wipes with alcohol to sufficiently wash children's hands before eating. Each of these alternative procedures is aligned with guidance from a DCYF health specialist.
- **Outdoor, Nature-Based Specific Standards** – Standards are also developed for the following:

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<sup>3</sup> Since Time Immemorial

- Waterless toileting standards, such as port-a-loos or composting toilets, which are based on guidance from DOH.
- Egg collection activities, storage and serving standards, which are based on guidance from the Washington State Department of Agriculture.
- Campfire areas and activities, including supervision and safety procedures, which are based on guidance from the U.S. Forest Service and aligned with practices used by other outdoor education organizations or nature-based early learning programs in other countries.

DCYF continues to support outdoor preschool programs to meet these standards. The outdoor preschool pilot licensing standards address concerns about health and safety. They also support and promote children's healthy development and encourage interaction with nature. The outdoor preschool pilot will evaluate these practices once they are implemented by the participating programs. The regulatory standards developed by the end of this pilot project could lay the foundation for quality, outdoor early childhood environmental education for Washington State and programs around the nation.

### Outdoor Preschool Licensing Success

Providing a pilot license to outdoor preschool programs that have historically operated in license-exempt status required addressing several regulatory challenges. In 2018, DCYF resolved these challenges by developing a contractual relationship with each outdoor preschool applying for an outdoor preschool pilot license, requiring these participants to adhere to general health and safety rules for child care (e.g., background checks and federal monitoring requirements) and to adhere to the Outdoor Preschool Pilot Standards.

In 2019, Washington became the first state in the country to successfully develop state licensing requirements and processes for outdoor, nature-based early learning and child care programs, ensuring quality care and education without the need for a child care center facility or family home. Licensure allows outdoor preschool programs to provide care for children beyond four hours per day and allows subsidy payment for income-eligible families (WCCC).

In 2019, DCYF provided an outdoor preschool pilot license to five outdoor preschool programs:

- Squaxin Island Child Development Center's Sapling & Cedars program in Shelton.
- Kaleidoscope Forest School on Orcas Island.
- Three Tiny Trees programs: Carkeek Park, Camp Long and Jefferson Park in Seattle.

Two of the licensed outdoor preschool programs (Squaxin and Kaleidoscope) provide a full-day program with a blended model of care, where children are enrolled in outdoor preschools programs as well as a center-based early learning program. So far, these two programs serve 42 children who are enrolled through ECEAP and two children whose families receive WCCC subsidy. Across four locations, of which three were licensed, Tiny Trees also has 40 students enrolled in the Seattle Preschool Program.

As DCYF began issuing outdoor preschool pilot licenses, various media outlets reported on Washington State's leadership and progress, along with educating the wider public on nature-based early childhood education. A Seattle Times article on Oct. 2, 2019, was the first to highlight the pilot's progress, and there was a nationally televised segment on NBC's Today Show.<sup>4</sup> DCYF staff have also presented nationally and internationally on the outdoor preschool pilot, such as at the National Association of Regulatory Administrators (NARA) conference in September 2019 and a special webinar for the Natural Start Alliance in December 2019, which had international interest and attendance.<sup>5</sup> These opportunities, as well as other partnerships at the state, national and international level, have expanded public awareness of Washington's outdoor preschool pilot project, its progress and its success.

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<sup>4</sup> See Appendix B for a full list and links to media, publications and presentations regarding the WA Outdoor Preschool Pilot.

<sup>5</sup> See Exhibit A for the NARA presentation. Appendix B has a link to the recorded Natural Start Alliance webinar.

## Benefits of Nature-Based Preschool and Initial Child Outcomes

Reports from researchers and feedback from partnering agencies and offices indicate that outdoor preschools are beneficial to children’s education and health and that programs can meet high-quality standards. Outdoor, nature-based play is shown to provide physical, cognitive, social and emotional benefits for children:<sup>6</sup>

- **Physical Benefits** – Outdoor play provides more vigorous, varied and sustained play; improves gross and fine motor development, including bone health, balance, coordination, endurance, spatial awareness, core strength and posture; strengthens immune systems; and promotes lifelong engagement in physical activity.
- **Cognitive Benefits** – Outdoor, nature-based play supports improved executive functioning and self-regulation abilities; increases observation and problem-solving skills; increases attention and focus; and challenging play supports children’s resilience, independence and self-confidence.
- **Social and Emotional Benefits** – Nature-based play supports the development of empathy for the natural world and an emotional connection to special places, laying the foundation for environmentally-responsible attitudes and behaviors and reduced stress, anxiety and depression.

Initial data collected by the Squaxin Island program regarding children’s pro-social behavior in the outdoors are aligned with research on how nature improves children’s executive functioning. Squaxin Island Child Development Center teachers tracked incidents of challenging behavior between children,<sup>7</sup> and in two months found that while there were 29 incidents of challenging behaviors between children when they were in the center, there were zero incidents for the same group of children when they were in the outdoor preschool program.

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*He’s just so peaceful in the forest. From everything I saw and heard, he was so happy and peaceful and relaxed. Especially when he was going more days per week, it would permeate out into the rest of his life. –*  
Outdoor Preschool Parent

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In 2018, Dr. Fyfe-Johnson completed a pilot study<sup>8</sup> examining the impact of outdoor, nature-based early childhood programs in Washington on children’s obesity, compared to children enrolled in more traditional indoor preschool models. This pilot study looked at 50 children over nine months and found that for children enrolled at Tiny Trees there was a 14% reduction in the prevalence of children’s obesity within six months, compared to no change in obesity in the control group of children enrolled in more traditional indoor preschools. Dr. Fyfe-Johnson received a five-year National Institutes of Health (NIH)-funded grant to conduct a more comprehensive study with similar objectives, but with more participants, longer follow-up time and more health outcomes. For more information concerning the impact of nature contact on children’s health outcomes, please see Exhibit B for a recent literature review conducted by the UW School of Medicine and Seattle Children’s Hospital.

Tiny Trees and the Squaxin Island Child Development Center have also been assessing children’s learning and development as part of their requirements from the Pathway to Seattle Preschool Program (SPP) and ECEAP, respectively. All ECEAP and SPP children (including Pathway to SPP and Step Ahead, which is a similar Seattle program,

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<sup>6</sup> *Nurturing Early Learning: Research to Support Young Children’s Learning in the Outdoors.* UW Cultivate Learning is responsible for assessing program quality in the Early Achievers program, as well as providing Early Achievers Institutes for professional development. In July 2018, Cultivate Learning and doctoral students at UW developed a series of research briefs that highlight the benefits of outdoor, nature-based learning opportunities to support educators in making improvements to their practice.

<sup>7</sup> Incidents were defined by the Squaxin Island teachers as “fighting, hitting, biting, pushing, etc. and requiring teacher intervention.”

<sup>8</sup> This study is ongoing and data was submitted by Dr. Fyfe-Johnson to the outdoor preschool pilot for the purposes of this report. For more information, please see: **WSU study to examine health benefits of outdoor preschools.**



but is now finished) are assessed with the Teaching Strategies GOLD® Birth to Third Grade (TS Gold)<sup>9</sup>, to track their early literacy and math skills, and their cognitive, language, physical and social-emotional development. While there are some limitations to the comparison,<sup>10</sup> initial analysis of TS Gold measures indicates that child development outcomes for ECEAP and Pathway to SPP-qualifying children enrolled in outdoor preschool programs are the same or better than the average outcomes for children enrolled in ECEAP, statewide and mostly the same or better than the total Pathway to SPP and Step Ahead populations. Unfortunately, due to COVID-19 impacts, TS Gold data from the 2019-2020 school year is unavailable (see the *2020 Progress and Findings* and *Outdoor Preschool Programs and DCYF Response to COVID-19* sections of this report).

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*If it wasn't for this program, I probably would not have enrolled my kid in any other preschool program in the area. I love the idea of them being outside and I love the way they teach child-led learning. They cover all the academic foundations before they go into kindergarten, but they do it through different means. Plus, they're also learning about nature!* – Outdoor Preschool Parent

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These results have potentially huge implications for the use of nature-based programs for at-risk children and families, ultimately supporting the DCYF goals of eliminating race and income as predictors in children's outcomes.

## 2020 Progress and Findings

On Feb. 29, 2020, Washington State went into a State of Emergency due to COVID-19, and on March 13, the Governor issued a mandatory closure of K-12 schools in all counties,<sup>11</sup> causing severe disruptions to the day-to-day lives of many Washingtonians. On March 23, the Governor issued a "Stay Home, Stay Healthy" order, which banned Washingtonians from leaving their homes for any non-essential gatherings and ordered non-essential business closures.<sup>12</sup> Child care services were deemed essential, however, and DCYF and DOH began releasing guidance to programs that remained open or re-opened with modified services to serve the children of essential workers. The outdoor preschool pilot's progress was impacted along with child care services throughout the state. This section reports on pilot progress made up to March 2020, DCYF and the outdoor preschool pilot programs' responses to the COVID-19 pandemic, as well as additional findings.

### January-March 2020

By January 2020, DCYF had licensed five outdoor preschool programs,<sup>13</sup> and by March 2020 was processing the applications of eight additional programs:

- Sequoia's Farm and Forest School in Olympia.
- Washington Outdoor School (two locations) in Roslyn and Ellensburg.
- Little Woodland Adventures in Veradale.
- Fiddleheads Forest School in Seattle (licensed August 2020).
- Bell Creek Nature School in Deming (licensed March 2020).

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<sup>9</sup> **The 2018-19 ECEAP Outcomes Report** says TS Gold "is a valid, reliable seamless assessment system which meets the assessment standards of the National Association for the Education of Young Children and the National Association of State Early Childhood Specialists in State Departments of Education. Teachers observe children in the context of everyday activities and natural settings over time, record their observations, and use them to rate 36 objectives, plus two more for children learning the English language."

<sup>10</sup> Limitations include the small sample size of children (Tiny Trees n=40 and Squaxin Island n=5), which limits the power of statistical analysis, and the potential impact of different teachers' use of the TS Gold assessment tool.

<sup>11</sup> **Proclamation 20-05** and **Proclamation 20-09**

<sup>12</sup> **Proclamation 20-25**

<sup>13</sup> Squaxin Island's *Saplings and Cedars*; Kaleidoscope Forest School; Tiny Trees at Camp Long, Jefferson Park and Carkeek Park East.

- Montessori Forest School in Snoqualmie.
- Tiny Trees at 5 Mile Lake Park in Auburn.

Many of these applicant programs were operating under four hours per day, exempt from licensing under RCW 43.216, or were not yet operational and awaiting licensing to open. In March 2020, any operational outdoor preschool programs participating in the pilot closed in-person services to due concerns about spreading COVID-19, closures of the public parks being utilized by some programs and because many families were staying home to care for their other children due to school closures and the “Stay Home, Stay Healthy” order. DCYF also temporarily suspended initial licensing inspection visits due to COVID-19 and the outdoor preschool pilot program awaited further DCYF guidance on carrying out initial visits for providing a license. See the *Outdoor Preschool Programs and DCYF Response to COVID-19* section of this report for further details.

### **Child Safety and Minimal Impacts of Adverse Weather Conditions**

DCYF is responsible for reporting and retaining records of serious injuries and incidents<sup>14</sup> that occur in child care settings in Washington State, and licensed programs are required to report such injuries or incidents to DCYF (see Exhibit C). Although license-exempt programs are not required to report injuries to DCYF, the programs participating in the outdoor preschool pilot voluntarily submit information regarding minor and serious injuries or incidents that may take place.

In the 2018-2019 school year, with 551 children attending participating programs (all license-exempt), DCYF received only one serious injury report: a broken finger as a result of something being dropped into the child’s hand. In the 2019-2020 school year, with 646 children attending pilot programs (licensed or license-exempt), there were no serious injuries or incidents reported in licensed outdoor preschool programs. Outdoor preschools in Washington’s pilot project have also not reported any serious injuries from climbing trees, logs or other natural features. It is also worth noting that no serious injuries or incidents were a result of extreme weather, adverse outdoor conditions or interactions with strangers or wildlife.

However, injuries continue to occur in more traditional child care settings, with 109 serious injuries reported to DCYF in the same time frame (from September 2018 to September 2020) for children enrolled in a licensed center or family home program. Of these, incidents of broken bones are by far the most common (see Appendix C). Although a direct comparison of the rates of injury between licensed outdoor preschools and other licensed child care programs is not possible, the single occurrence of serious injury in two years during this pilot project is an indicator of child safety in outdoor, nature-based settings.

To further demonstrate the safety of children in outdoor preschool settings, an international research review into child injury during risky outdoor play indicated that although there is a risk of injury in outdoor play, their findings support the promotion of risky outdoor play for healthy child development, and recognize supervision as one of the primary factors to increased child safety.<sup>15</sup> This research, along with the overwhelming research into the benefits of outdoor, nature-based experiences on child development (see the *Benefits of Nature-Based Preschool and Initial Child Outcomes* section of this report) demonstrate the safety and benefit of outdoor preschools for Washington’s children.

Of the outdoor preschool pilot programs licensed in 2019, none reported closures due to inclement or extreme weather during the 2019-2020 school year, indicating that programs and families were well-prepared to support children’s safe and educational experiences outdoors in all kinds of weather. However, in the summer of 2019 and in September of 2020, smoke from wildfires in the U.S. and Canada created dangerous air quality conditions throughout the state. Like

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<sup>14</sup> Serious and Critical Injuries include: Injury resulting in overnight hospital stay; severe neck or head injury (such as a confirmed concussion); choking or serious unexpected breathing problems; severe bleeding; shock or acute confused state; sudden unconsciousness; chemicals in eyes, on skin or ingested; near-drowning; one or more broken bones; severe burn requiring professional medical care; fatality/near-fatality; poisoning; overdose of a chemical substance.

<sup>15</sup> Brussoni, M. et. Al. (2015) *What is the Relationship between Risky Outdoor Play and Health in Children? A Systematic Review*. International Journal of Environmental Research and Public Health: 12; doi:10.3390/ijerph120x0000x

any child care program, outdoor preschools had to suspend outdoor services for children and families, and programs without an associated indoor facility had to temporarily close in response to these natural disasters.

## Outdoor Preschool Programs and DCYF Response to COVID-19

### Program impacts and changes in enrollment and pilot participation

When the COVID-19 pandemic began, all but one program participating in the pilot as either an implementer (licensed or applying to be licensed) or observer (observation group only) closed. Most programs remained closed through the spring, although as programs began to re-open, services were offered to children of essential workers. Two programs<sup>16</sup> not yet licensed remained open and even took on additional children, while another continued providing remote services,<sup>17</sup> such as online classes and at-home activities (see Appendix D). Of the 15 outdoor preschool pilot participating agencies (with 24 separate locations), six opened summer-time programs,<sup>18</sup> either as continuations of their licensed outdoor preschool program or as a license-exempt summer camp operation. In total, 67 preschool-age (and 80 school-age) children were reported as enrolled in outdoor programming during the summer of 2020 (see Appendix D). Between March and September 2020, two more programs were successfully licensed: Bell Creek Nature School (in Deming) was licensed in March 2020, and Fiddleheads Forest School (in Seattle) was licensed in August 2020.

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*Our summer program pretty much ran as smoothly as anything we have ever done. I think having the small classes, just eight kids with two teachers, was a dream. Everyone was so happy to be out doing things together. We had no problems with kids wearing masks. Sometimes they needed a gentle reminder to pull it over their nose or to put it back on, but that was it. No one was scared and no one cried or got upset about wearing a mask. The best quote of the summer came from a 4-year-old in our morning program who mused one day that COVID-19 would be with us for a while and “we just wear masks to take care of each other.” We hadn’t even been talking about COVID-19 or masks, it just seemed to be on her mind as we walked up to meet her family at the end of the morning. I felt like she was sharing a universal truth that everyone needed to hear.*

– Outdoor Preschool Program Director

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As of September 2020, all but four programs resumed services or planned to re-open<sup>19</sup> (see Appendix D). Prolonged closures impacted the financial status of many of the pilot participants, as programs closed, lost tuition and laid off staff (permanently or temporarily). Many programs reported staff turnover, and although two programs reported raising tuition rates, five programs were able to provide raises for staff or signing bonuses (see Appendix E). Many programs also changed their program offerings, reducing class sizes and limiting enrollment to ensure consistency of cohorts. This means that when programs used to offer two or three days per week enrollment, they now only offer full enrollment of four or five days per week. Unfortunately, this means the pilot programs are serving fewer families and are less able to offer flexibility to meet families’ needs. Two of the licensed programs, Kaleidoscope Forest School and Bell Creek Nature School, applied for variances to increase their capacity and group size to be able to serve additional children and families in need. Overall, the changes to enrollment practices have resulted in only 246 preschool-aged children being enrolled in outdoor preschools in the pilot as of September 2020. After years of expansion and the onset of successful licensing, these changes are an unfortunate hurdle to expanding access to the benefits of outdoor, nature-based programs to Washington’s children and families.

<sup>16</sup> Montessori Forest School, Little Woodland Adventures

<sup>17</sup> Tiny Trees

<sup>18</sup> Bell Creek Nature School, Fiddleheads Forest School, Kaleidoscope Forest School, Montessori Forest School, Nurture in Nature, Washington Outdoor School

<sup>19</sup> ACORNS NW, Polliwog Preschool, and two licensed Tiny Trees location (Jefferson Park and Camp Long)

Interest in outdoor preschool programs, however, continues. In September 2020, outdoor preschool programs participating in the pilot (implementer and observer cohorts) reported a staggering 1,232 children on waiting lists or with expressions of interest, with increases particularly noted in the Seattle area. At Fiddleheads Forest School, located in the UW arboretum, more than 65 waiting list applications were received between April and September 2020. Other programs noticed a shift in families' interest, with some families withdrawing enrollment due to their concerns about children under 5 wearing masks (see Appendix E).

Since March 2020, two additional providers<sup>20</sup> have expressed interest in participating in the pilot project and have begun working with the outdoor preschool pilot specialist to prepare an outdoor preschool license application. Additional programs have reached out for support and resources (see the *Supporting Outdoor, Nature-Based Education* section of this report).

Another interesting development in outdoor preschool enrollment trends is the increased interest from kindergarten and school-age families. Likely due to the closures of schools, this was reported by a majority of outdoor preschool programs in the pilot. As the impacts of COVID-19 on K-12 school closures continue to be unknown, DCYF acknowledges that families are recognizing the outdoors as safe and desirable options for child care for school-age children (see *Final Recommendations and Opportunities*).

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*There was a big increase in interest in enrollment for the fall. A lot of families feel safer having their children in an outdoor setting during COVID-19. – Director of an Outdoor Preschool Program*

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### Complying with Phases and DOH Guidelines

As guidance from DOH became available, DCYF ensured that outdoor preschool programs participating in the pilot, as well as those operating as license-exempt care, were aware of DOH guidelines. Programs began re-opening with limited group sizes, and with the resources needed to adhere to sanitization and screening requirements. In the April and May 2020 OPAG meetings, programs were supported to share information about teaching strategies to support children's physical distancing or in providing effective remote learning services.

Outside play has been one of DOH's guidelines for Child Care, Youth Development, and Day Camps During the COVID-19 Outbreak since they began being released,<sup>21</sup> as an effective method to reduce transmission of the virus. Outdoor preschools are well-positioned to provide such opportunities, however, some outdoor preschool programs faced challenges in re-opening due to the limits on the use of public park spaces.

Since the COVID-19 pandemic began, DOH has been tracking outbreaks (of all kinds) in non-healthcare settings. At the time of the writing of this report, there have been 51 outbreaks of disease in child care settings and 10 outbreaks at K-12 schools. However, there were no recorded outbreaks of disease at any outdoor preschool program or summer camps provided by agencies involved in the pilot project.

### Supporting Outdoor, Nature-Based Education: Presentations and Publications

In the early stages of the COVID-19 pandemic, many experts in the field of outdoor education quickly rallied to support child care programs and schools to consider outdoor educational opportunities for serving children and families. State and national non-profits and associations for nature-based early childhood education, such as the Washington Nature Preschool Association and the Natural Start Alliance, began providing resources and support and the DCYF outdoor preschool pilot also provided support within Washington and nationally.

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<sup>20</sup> Fidalgo Nature School, Little Explorers Outdoor Preschool

<sup>21</sup> **Child Care, Youth Development, and Day Camps During the COVID-19 Outbreak**

Within Washington, and as part of the DCYF strategy to respond to the pandemic state of emergency, the outdoor preschool pilot team created the *Outdoor, Nature-Based Considerations for Emergency Waivers and Emergency Childcare Licensing* (Exhibit D), for providers seeking to modify their program due to the pandemic or apply for an emergency waiver or license to provide outdoor, nature-based care. This resource is recognized as one of the U.S.’s most “complete” resources to “help child care providers feel confident in moving activities substantially outdoors during the pandemic” by the Natural Learning Initiative, National Wildlife Federation and the Early Childhood Health Outdoors Initiative (Exhibit E).

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*Many teachers and schools have reached out since April asking for our curriculum, ideas for moving their class outside, designing outdoor spaces, creating new outdoor schools, etc. These are both local and from around the country. It is so incredibly exciting to see so much focus on learning outdoors!*

– Outdoor Preschool Director

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In the summer of 2020, the DCYF outdoor preschool pilot specialist also presented multiple times to ECEAP and Head Start directors and staff on the benefits of nature-based play, strategies for bringing children outside and facilitated a panel discussion with outdoor preschool directors for the Head Start and ECEAP Director’s Retreat. In July 2020, the DCYF outdoor preschool pilot specialist also facilitated a national conversation on P-3 strategies to support outdoor learning during COVID-19 at the University of California at Berkeley’s BEETLES and Bay-Sci Virtual Open Space Conference.<sup>22</sup> This outreach and support continue as the pandemic continues to impact child care and schools around the country.

In August 2020, the DCYF outdoor preschool pilot specialist presented as part of the closing plenary session for the Natural Start Alliance conference on “Outdoor Preschool for All,” a panel examining three states’ efforts to expand outdoor preschool access.<sup>23</sup> In October 2020, the program specialist also spoke at the *Advancing Early Childhood Education Outdoors* series to support leaders and stakeholders in British Columbia, Canada, and will also be guest-lecturing at New York University’s Environmental Conservation Program. These events indicate that Washington State is an acknowledged leader in outdoor early education policy and programming, and our successes are being closely watched across the country and the world.

Washington State’s outdoor preschool pilot licensing approach to risky play was also featured in “Adventure’s in Risky Play” (2020) by Rusty Keeler,<sup>24</sup> a book exploring the benefits of developmentally appropriate risk-taking and how teachers and parents can support children in their play.

Please see Appendix B for a complete list of media, publications and presentations from the pilot project.

### Finalizing the Nature-Based Competencies Supplement

In 2009, DCYF established the Washington State Core Competencies for Early Care and Education Professionals, which defines what professionals need to know and be able to do to provide quality care for young children (0-8 years of age).

The core competencies are important because they:

- Define what early care and education professionals need to know and be able to do to provide quality care and education for children.
- Serve as the foundation for decisions and practices carried out by professionals in all early care and education settings.

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<sup>22</sup> **Virtual Open Space Conference**

<sup>23</sup> Washington, Oregon and Colorado

<sup>24</sup> Keeler, Rusty (2020) *Adventures in Risky Play: What is Your Yes?* Lincoln, NE: Exchange Press.

- Establish a set of standards for early care and education settings that support the professionalism of the field.
- Are an integral part of a comprehensive professional development system.

The core competencies are a framework of the knowledge and skills for the five levels of professional preparation. The levels of competency start with the basic skills necessary to enter the field (Level 1) and go to an advanced level of academic preparation and varied experience (Level 5).

DCYF recognizes that staff from outdoor preschools need specialized competencies – a particular set of knowledge, skills and attitudes –to be successful in caring for children in the outdoors and providing a nature-based education. Outdoor preschool staff must consider and plan for utilizing the natural environment in the curriculum, limit the impact of the program on the natural environment and manage any risks associated with outdoor activities (including being prepared for the weather and the presence of various plants and animals).

DCYF also recognizes that regardless of the program type or setting, all children can benefit from nature-centered and nature-based learning experiences. By interacting with nature, children can develop a sense of belonging and connection to the natural world, children can explore and understand the relationships within their ecological community and children’s learning and development in all curriculum areas can be improved with experiences with nature.

In 2019, a workgroup of stakeholders, tribes and experts in nature-based and nature-centered early childhood education was established to develop this document, as part of the outdoor preschool pilot’s requirement by the State Legislature to “further investigate the benefits of outdoor, nature-based classrooms for Washington’s children and families.”

Workgroup members for this project included:

- Faculty from universities and colleges in Washington State
- Members of the Washington Early Childhood Teacher Preparation Council
- Leaders and staff of independent environmental education teacher-training institutions
- Directors and staff of outdoor preschools
- Experts in child development
- Outdoor and environmental education experts from K-12
- Various DCYF staff, including Professional Development and Early Achievers representatives
- Tribal representatives with expertise in early learning

In 2020, this workgroup further developed the *Nature-Based Competencies for Early Care and Education Professionals: A Supplement* (see Exhibit F), which is intended to support early care and education professionals to incorporate nature and natural elements into their practice in both indoor and outdoor early learning environments, as well as in outdoor preschools. It is intended to supplement the Washington State Core Competencies for Early Care and Education Professionals and will be used to:

- Establish professional competencies for professionals in outdoor, nature-based and nature-centered early childhood education.
- Build Washington’s capacity to provide teacher training opportunities for nature-centered and nature-based early childhood education.
- Determine training and education requirements for nature-based early learning professionals.

Within the *Nature-Based Competencies for Early Care and Education Professionals*, there are competencies to support racial equity and social justice that are specific to nature-centered or nature-based programming. The *Nature-Based Competencies for Early Care and Education Professionals* also includes competencies to honor indigenous sovereignty and supports professionals throughout Washington.

The *Nature-Based Competencies for Early Care and Education Professionals* also includes competencies to ensure children’s safety and well-being in the outdoors, and includes nature-based and nature-centered competencies for

professionals in the standard curricular areas in early care and education, and also describes a new content area sub-category for Content Area II, Curriculum and Learning Environment, as follows:

- a. Creating the Learning Environment and General Curriculum
- b. Promoting Physical Development
- c. Promoting Cognitive Development
- d. Promoting Language and Communication Development
- e. Promoting Social/Emotional Development
- f. Promoting Creative Expression
- g. *Promoting Ecological Identity and Nature Connectedness*

Promoting ecological identity and nature-connectedness in children is considered a distinct goal for children’s learning and development for nature-based and nature-centered education, and as beneficial to all young children. By interacting with nature, children can develop a sense of belonging and connection to the natural world as they explore and understand the relationships within their ecological community.

### Program Models, Revenue and Impacts on Child Care Availability

Nature-based programming does not require capital investment in a facility, however, staffing ratios are smaller (one teacher for approximately every six students) and class sizes are generally smaller (12-18 students) which is an additional cost than is experienced by a regular licensed child care center class of children. However, as discussed in previous years’ reports, outdoor programs may be connected to child care centers in a blended model, which gives the center the ability to expand their capacity with fewer start-up costs than needed if adding an indoor classroom-based program. These models can more easily be provided by any facility-based anchor program, such as a child care center, family home, parks or community center or even a school.

- Half-Day
  - Most programs participating in the pilot began with half-day (four-hour programs), and these remain a viable program model for children and families. These programs often include a snack and a meal, and staff take breaks in between four-hour sessions if they are offering morning and afternoon half-day sessions. This model is least likely to use a facility-based anchor program.
- Morning and Afternoon Swap
  - Children are in care from 8 a.m. to 4 p.m., with a morning and afternoon session in the outdoor classroom, effectively swapping one group of 12 children for another between the nature-based and center-based environments. Through this full school-day swapping model, one classroom is used to provide 24 children with four hours of high-quality outdoor, nature-based education each day, as well as four hours of high-quality center-based learning experiences. Each groups’ daily schedules allow for children to nap or rest indoors, and the morning group eats lunch outside at 11:30 a.m. before coming indoors. Food, including a warm lunch, is prepared at the center and the staff person relieving teachers for their lunch-break delivers this food and remains outdoors during the other teachers’ breaks.
- A School Day (with extended working day option)
  - A center or family home is open from 7 a.m. until 6 p.m. to accommodate various working family schedules, and children can also be enrolled in the outdoor, nature-based program from 8:30 a.m. to 3:30 p.m. Children may be enrolled in the outdoor program only, effectively attending for a school day (seven hours), or the family may also enroll children in before-school or after-school slots. Like with other programs using a facility for an anchor program, food is prepared at the center and delivered by the staff person covering the other teachers’ breaks.

While nature-based programs can be operated without the additional cost of facilities, some additional and unique program supplies are needed for nature-based programs,<sup>25</sup> such as:

<sup>25</sup> See Appendix F: Outdoor Preschool Supply Costs for more details

## OUTDOOR PRESCHOOL PILOT

- **Rainy Day Gear** – waterproof boots, pants and jacket for children, waterproof backpacks for staff, bins for supplies and canopies.
- **Staff Training** – nature-based education and wilderness first aid, if needed.
- **Hygiene Supplies** – handwashing stations, garbage bins/bags, portable or composting toilets or backcountry toileting supplies, if needed.
- **Outdoor Adventure Supplies** – travel cart, walky-talkies, emergency whistle, plant ID books, magnifying glasses, laminated story-books, etc.
- **Comfort** – insulated pads and sleeping bags or blankets, if napping outdoors.

While the costs of establishing a new outdoor preschool program include additional fees, such as the licensing, business and insurance costs, these do not apply to outdoor programs provided by an already established facility-based program.

Table 1.1 compares the additional cost and potential revenue of adding an indoor or outdoor class to increase capacity, using a sample budget for a child care center preschool age classroom based in King County.<sup>26</sup> The potential revenue from adding an outdoor, nature-based class of children is much higher than when adding an indoor classroom, whose rent and utilities may be significant. This has potentially large impacts on the expansion of child care availability, as provided by anchor programs that are already established. These spaces can provide a consistent outdoor classroom for one class of children, or the licensed outdoor space can be used rotationally so that more children enrolled at the program can enjoy and benefit from time spent in the outdoor, nature-based location.

Table 1.1 Additional Outdoor vs. Additional Indoor Class		
	+ Indoor	+ Outdoor
<b># Classrooms</b>	1	1
<b># Children</b>	17	12
<b>Child/ Teaching Staff</b>		
<b>Lead Teacher, \$20/hr. (5.5)</b>	41,600	41,600
<b>Assistant Teacher, \$18/hr. (7)</b>	37,440	37,440
<b>Benefits</b>	26,313	26,313
<b>Program Expenses</b>	18,000	5,000
<b>Occupancy</b>		
<b>Rent/Mortgage</b>	52,000	2,000
<b>Utilities, Custodial</b>	24,000	1,800
<b>Admin</b>	23,363	23,363
<b>Total Additional Operating Expenses</b>	<b>222,716</b>	<b>100,353</b>
<b>Estimated Revenue per year (50% subsidy + 50% market rate)</b>		
<b>Profit/Loss</b>	<b>1,786</b>	<b>58,119</b>

<sup>26</sup> Sample budget based on the Exhibit G: *Impact of Public Investment in Early Learning Facilities on the Child Care Business Model in King County* by Child Care Resources.



## Final Recommendations and Opportunities

### Authorize DCYF to License Outdoor, Nature-Based Child Care

Based on the successful implementation of the outdoor preschool pilot, demonstrated benefits to Washington’s children and families and the ability to incorporate outdoor programs into the state’s licensing and quality improvement initiatives, DCYF recommends the Legislature to authorize the department to license outdoor, nature-based child care for preschool and school-age children.

DCYF is submitting agency request legislation in the 2021 Legislative Session to accomplish this authorization. Generally, this bill adds “outdoor, nature-based child care” throughout the child care licensing laws (chapter 43.216 RCW). Specifically, this bill will add a new section to chapter 43.216 RCW that establishes nature-based child care, and adds “outdoor, nature-based early learning and child care” to the definition of “agency” in 43.216.010 as follows:

43.216.010 (1) (e) "Outdoor, nature-based child care" means an agency or an agency-offered program that:

- (i) Enrolls preschool-age and school-age children on a regular basis for four or more hours per day; and
- (ii) Operates in an outdoor, nature-based setting (that is not a licensed center or family home child care outdoor play space) for fifty percent of daily program hours or at least four hours of the daily program, whichever is lower.

This bill draws from the Outdoor Preschool Pilot Standards, which defines “nature-based” to mean that a child care or early learning program must offer a philosophy, curriculum and organizational practices that provide developmentally appropriate early childhood education and environmental education in a natural space. A “natural space” means land that is natural, semi-natural or planted and includes plants, animals and other features and products of the earth.

### Adopting the Majority of Pilot Standards as WAC

DCYF is prepared to adopt the majority of the Outdoor Preschool Pilot Standards as a WAC chapter for outdoor, nature-based child care programs if the Legislature confers the appropriate authority on the agency necessary to do so. Programs participating in the pilot have been able to comply with each of the Outdoor Preschool Pilot Standards, even when technical assistance was required.<sup>27</sup> DCYF would adjust the standards to allow for mixed-age groups, school-age children and align with requirements for school-age programs (WAC 110-305).

This license would be available to any child care agency looking to establish or expand their capacity by licensing an outdoor, nature-based space for child care. For example, the outdoor, nature-based license would be available to family homes and centers. By allowing for child care availability to increase in this way, without the need for capital investments, child care programs may financially benefit while also providing a highly beneficial experience to the children in their care (see the *Potential Revenue and Impacts on Child Care Availability* section of this report).

DCYF would also revise the outdoor preschool pilot standards to incorporate lessons-learned about licensing needs for outdoor, nature-based settings. This includes standards alignment with the local zoning and fire safety requirements for outbuildings used to meet children’s biological needs. The requirements of these buildings are often limited to meeting children’s biological needs, such as toileting or shelter while eating or resting, as children are spending the educational parts of the program outside. However, there are a variety of structures that can meet children’s biological needs, and these structures are not commonly evaluated for such use. This would need to be resolved with local governments and fire authorities. Additionally, relationships between programs, DCYF licensing and public parks directors would continue to be maintained and created to support the development of appropriate land use agreements for outdoor child care programs operating on public lands.

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<sup>27</sup> Technical assistance was most often required for developing program policies.

## Incorporating Outdoor, Nature-Based Settings into Early Achievers

Early Achievers is committed to supporting licensed child care providers who embrace nature-based education and child care in outdoor settings. During the outdoor preschool pilot, the QRIS team organized focus groups to hear about concerns and expectations and, along with partners at UW Cultivate Learning, engaged in field research with programs in the Outdoor Preschool Pilot to better understand the challenges of collecting data in outdoor environments. Early Achievers is satisfied that outdoor, nature-based programs can meet quality standards and is optimistic about the future of outdoor nature-based early childhood education in Washington State.

Additionally, with the engagement of committed community stakeholders, the state QRIS team and partners are working to develop systemic supports that recognize and encourage continued quality improvement in particular designations, including outdoor, nature-based education and child care. This designation could include more traditional programs that have indoor classrooms but would like to increase, or be recognized for, their focus on nature-based education, allowing families to choose care based on the provider’s dedication to nature-based education.

## Adopting the Nature-Based Competencies Supplement

The *Nature-Based Competencies for Early Care and Education Professionals Supplement* was successfully developed during the outdoor preschool pilot and is ready to be adopted for use by DCYF. OPAG and workgroup members used the draft supplement to discuss professional workforce development opportunities and potential requirements for staff of outdoor, nature-based child care programs, recommended below. This work was also supported by UW faculty and partners at Cultivate Learning, who have drafted a professional development course curriculum to meet the following goals for pre-service requirements for lead teachers. It is recommended, that in addition to the current requirements for early learning staff in centers and family homes:<sup>28</sup>

- All outdoor preschool staff responsible for supervising children should have pre-service training in outdoor, nature-based health and safety considerations (level 1 competencies), possibly in the form of an outdoor, nature-based Child Care Basics (CCB) component.
- Outdoor preschool lead teachers should also have at least 10 hours of DCYF-approved training that covers the competencies in levels 1-3 in the supplement, and which may be inclusive of the CCB training.
- Outdoor preschool directors or a delegated supervisory staff member (i.e., assistant director or program supervisor) should also have completed at least three college credits on nature-based education or other DCYF-approved alternatives, such as 30 hours of DCYF-approved professional development training, with Level 4 competencies included.

Position	Qualification Requirements for Early Learning Program Staff (WAC 110-300)	Recommended Additional Training Requirements for Outdoor Child Care
<b>Assistant Teacher</b>	CCB; ECE Initial Certificate by Aug. 1, 2026	Three hours (level 1 competencies)
<b>Lead Teacher</b>	CCB; ECE Initial Certificate and ECE Short Certificate by Aug. 1, 2026	10 hours (level 1-3 competencies); and two years of experience if no supervisor on-site
<b>Director, Assistant Director, Program Supervisor</b>	CCB; two years of experience; ECE State Certificate by Aug. 1, 2026	Three credits or 30 hours (level 1-4 competencies)

There are a few professional development courses that meet these requirements already available in Washington, online and through in-service trainings. The formal adoption of the *Nature-Based Competencies for Early Care and*

<sup>28</sup> WAC 110-300-0100, 0105, 0106

*Education Professionals* by DCYF would allow for more college or DCYF-approved professional development courses to be offered and also recognized for outdoor preschools to meet the training and qualification requirements for staff.

### Additional Opportunities for Children’s Health and Educational Outcomes

As demonstrated by the outdoor preschool pilot, expansion of child care availability is possible through the licensure of outdoor, nature-based settings and programs. This presents many opportunities for the success of additional programs and efforts underway in Washington and the U.S.

Outdoor preschool programs have already begun expanding the availability of ECEAP programs and services, and this could easily continue with increased interest from current ECEAP directors and staff already expressed, once outdoor, nature-based settings are fully licensed. Similarly, outdoor early learning programs also provide opportunities for Head Start to expand, potentially through locally-designed variation options as described in the **Head Start Program Performance Standards 1302.24**.

Licensing outdoor, nature-based programs also offers increased research opportunities to explore the detailed impacts of such programs on children’s health and development. In 2019, Dr. Amber Fyfe-Johnson began a multi-year study funded by the National Institute of Health, which continues without pause due to COVID-19. Research into outdoor preschool programs’ impacts on children’s health outcomes can have significant impacts on policy and program decisions across the U.S. Dr. Pooja Tandon from Seattle Children’s Hospital, member of the UW Nature and Health research group, agrees that research can also support Washington’s efforts in maximizing our resources to create beneficial impacts on at-risk communities.

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*The COVID-19 pandemic has magnified the need for and inequities in access to safe, natural outdoor spaces that can play a role in supporting the health and well-being of children and families. As early childhood educators navigate these unprecedented times as essential workers, it is critical to support the role they can play in safely supporting outdoor, nature-filled experiences for young children. – Dr. Pooja Tandon*

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Indeed, licensing outdoor preschools and school-age enrichment programs align with many other state and national efforts focused on improving children’s well-being, as well as the well-being of families, communities and whole ecosystems.<sup>29</sup> Within Washington State, outdoor, nature-based child care also aligns with the goals and opportunities provided by the **No Child Left Inside grant program**, which is specifically geared to fund programs and activities that provide positive outdoor experiences for under-represented or at-risk youth. Licensing outdoor, nature-based programs for preschool and school-age children furthers these opportunities.

Outdoor, nature-based programs are also supportive of children’s educational outcomes in school-age years, and the opportunities provided by state licensure of these programs may provide opportunities for partnerships with schools in achieving goals for children’s learning. “Forest Fridays” or other regular trips to nature-based locations can continue to occur for all children in elementary years, in partnership with licensed nature-based programs, and culminating with a capstone experience of immersive outdoor education. By providing outdoor, nature-based experiences consistently for all children throughout their development, all of Washington will experience the benefits these programs can provide.

### Outdoor Preschool Pilot Budget Assessment

DCYF has received general fund state proviso funding in the 17-19 and 19-21 biennial budgets to support its licensing operations. DCYF has safeguarded the state funding and underspend the budget each fiscal year throughout both biennial budgets. Refer to Appendix G for the Outdoor Preschool Budget Assessment, showing fiscal outcomes for each closed fiscal year.

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<sup>29</sup> Natural Learning Initiative; Early Childhood Health Outdoors; Preventing Obesity by Design; Natural Start Alliance  
November 2020

## Appendix A: Participant Testimonials for Outdoor Preschool Pilot Final Report

**ACORNS NW (various locations in Olympia, WA area).** A Cooperative Outdoor Revolutionary Nature School Northwest (ACORNS NW) is hosting programs 100% outside year-round in ALL types of weather. ACORNS NW is also a non-profit program currently in the process of becoming a 501(c)(3). We are a nature- and earth-based experiential learning program. We seek to help nurture and restore connection to the natural world through exploration, play, observation, and community. It is our hope that prioritizing a connection to nature and building a relationship in the ways we learn, grow, teach, share, and live, that we will create more inclusive and sustainable futures for all beings. ACORNS NW Forest School was co-founded in November 2015 as a homeschool enrichment program by two queer women, Heather McKenna and Kendra Obom. Our hope and vision is to create accessible nature connection programming for the Olympia and Thurston County community. For the past five years, Ms. McKenna and Obom have acted as the directors on a mostly volunteer basis with the hope of providing affordable programming and meaningful employment within their community. In 2016, we added the outdoor preschool program, which has grown into ACORNS NW most active program. The ACORNS NW community seeks cooperative and justice-based approaches to both social and environmental issues, and continues to grow its capacity to deliver alternative education and nature-based community for all ages.

**Bell Creek Nature School (Deming, WA).** Bell Creek Nature School is a 100% outdoor program regardless of weather. The 5-acre forested campus has a small greenhouse and an open-air lean-to which provide us with dry storage space as well as shelter from the rain if needed. Our program is a child-led program meaning that the activities are determined by the interests of the group each day. We describe the day as following an unstructured flow-learning style. We do start the day off with a 10-minute morning meeting where we welcome everyone to school through song and discuss the importance of safety and respect in the forest. Throughout the day, teachers are trained on how to recognize teaching opportunities and on how to integrate lessons into the play-based environment through inquiry-based teaching. This integrated approach to curriculum brings meaning to each academic subject by incorporating and combining academic lessons with nature immersion, play, exploration, social interaction, and daily life. We strive to promote and support creativity, confidence, problem-solving skills, curiosity, and an excitement for learning new things. We focus on the learning process rather than the content allowing the children to build upon topics that they are currently interested in. We foster compassion, respect, and mindfulness towards each other and towards the natural world which creates a nurturing class dynamic. Bell Creek Nature School LLC would love our program to be accessible to everyone regardless of their financial status. We offer discounts wherever we can, but we are unable to accommodate all of the requests that we receive. With licensing, we could serve those who need financial assistance.

**Fidalgo Nature School (Island and Skagit Counties).** Fidalgo Nature School is a non-profit serving Island and Skagit counties out of Deception Pass State Park. We are outdoors in all weather for our 4-hour school day, exploring beaches, forests, and open meadows. The school strives to foster a lifelong, significant connection to the natural world while supporting the developmental needs of young children. Our belief is that children are intrinsically motivated to learn and that the natural classroom is the ideal environment to cultivate a strong mind, body and emotional being. Building on what children already know, teachers provide opportunities to discover more and dig deeper. The curriculum is lively and always developing rather than pre-planned. We use stories, dramatic play, songs, and inquiry-based exploration to co-learn with children. Our programs currently serve part-time students. We also offer nature play classes for babies and toddlers. Affordable, accessible care for all community members is important to our mission. Licensing through DCYF would help us to offer: full day care for working families, reduced tuition through subsidies and grants, healthy meals, and living wages for staff.

**Fiddleheads Forest School (University of Washington, Seattle, WA).** Fiddleheads Forest School was established at the Washington Park Arboretum, a public park in the city of Seattle, in 2013. Fiddleheads was the first entirely outdoor preschool in Seattle and one of the first urban outdoor preschools in the country. Flexibility is a cornerstone of the Fiddleheads philosophy. Our program is as responsive as the environment in which we operate. Teachers take into account a variety of factors including the weather, the wildlife, and the children themselves when determining the

direction of the day. On any given day at Fiddleheads, students spend the morning exploring and engaging with their environment in a multitude of ways that is unique to our specific space. At Fiddleheads we believe strongly in empowering students to guide their own learning process, and work to help each of them develop the tools to do just that through use of a curriculum that expressly teaches self-regulation. We have found that the forest grove classroom is uniquely suited to helping children develop these skills through exposure to gradual, contextual change. Fiddleheads pioneered the outdoor preschool approach in Seattle and continues to lead the field both regionally and nationally. Our seasonal approach arises out of the unique relationship between, children, families, and the environment, and emphasizes the development of self-regulation and natural science skills. Becoming licensed would help set a standard of practice in the field and allow us to reach a greater diversity of families in and around the Seattle area.

**Kaleidoscope Forest School (Orcas Island, WA).** Kaleidoscope Forest School operates within Kaleidoscope Preschool and Child Care Center, a non-profit center on Orcas Island, WA. Kaleidoscope has partnered with YMCA Camp Orkila and Moran State Park to create ecologically dynamic forest classrooms in which children can explore the natural landscapes of Orcas Island. Each Forest School day takes place entirely outdoors. The group meets at the school building and then buses over to that day's forest site with all their supplies, gear, backpacks, meals, and more! Kaleidoscope Forest School uses an emergent curriculum teaching philosophy, in which children's interests are supported through observation, documentation, and response. Each week, teachers create a flexible curriculum based on the emergent interests documented and predictable seasonal trends, in order to offer optional learning activities such as nature-based crafts, exploratory walks, wood working projects, and open-ended materials play. Enrollment options include part-time (two days/week), full-time (four days/week), and one day/week as a component to regularly enrolled preschool at Kaleidoscope Preschool and Child Care Center.

**Little Explorers Outdoor Preschool at Camp Kinderland (Des Moines, WA).** Formerly known as Forest Kinderland, Little Explorers Outdoor Preschool is a non-profit 501(c)(3). We serve children ages 2 1/2 to 6 years old. Our Program Supervisor, Kylee Nelson shares her love for teaching children, community, nature and exploration in a meaningful way. Our curriculum is inspired by Waldorf education and reflects the sense of wonder and reverence that children experience in the natural world. We celebrate the simple things and find magic in the mundane Our program emphasizes acknowledgment and gratitude of land, and environmental awareness. The children observe and exercise their own imaginations and creativity through art, music, dramatic play, and hands on exploration. Our goal of becoming a Licensed program is essential to our values, as it would allow us to offer a diverse, equitably accessible program.

**Little Woodland Adventures: Into the Forest Preschool (Spokane, WA).** Into the Forest is a licensed childcare facility that offers outdoor learning through our Little Woodland Adventures program. We opened our facility in hopes to create a program that blends the Reggio Approach and Waldorf Theory; focusing on a nature-infused learning environment with real life experiences. We also bring nature inside for learning. We believe children learn best through experiences of touching, moving, listening, and observing—when they have control over the direction of their learning. A child's self-confidence and self-esteem are built when they can explore and make their own decisions while being supported by peers and teachers. Our classrooms resemble homelike environments and use simple and natural materials, which allow children to immerse themselves in imaginative and creative play and learning. We also offer a safe place for children to explore and problem-solve in outdoor adventures. This strengthens the connection between children and the natural world. Everyday this outdoor program offers many opportunities for unplanned learning, such as watching birds build a nest or a hummingbird drink nectar from a flower. We want to build a solid foundation of healthy living habits that children can take with them as they grow and learn. Right now, we are unable to have or do a lot of the things we want to do, things that we know benefit a child's learning tremendously. We are participating in the pilot project to see if we can help change the standards in this area to allow such natural learning. Little Woodland Adventures is a fully emerged outdoor learning program, located at the Dishman Hills Conservation Area. Our philosophy focuses on real life experiences that children will be able to take with them throughout their life. We teach children at their own pace and on their own terms about academic, social, emotional, environmental and survival skills. Self-confidence and self-esteem are built when they can explore and make their own decisions while being supported by peers and teachers. We also offer a safe place for children to explore and problem-solve in outdoor adventures. This

strengthens the connection between children and the natural world. We are in the processes of getting licensed to run a full day program for an enhanced learning experience for the children in our community!

**Montessori Forest School (Snoqualmie, WA).** Montessori Forest School uses the Montessori Method and 3-year curriculum, which combines S.T.E.A.M. (Science, Technology, Engineering, Art, Math) lessons with the natural world, so children can make the connection between modern day concepts and the reality of nature. We show them how to make or use today's things and understandings, and then we show them natural alternatives so they get to appreciate our planet, nature and the natural world. Things they can make themselves stimulates their imaginations and stokes the flame of ingenuity and self-esteem, while keeping a firm root on the practicalities of ecology, protecting the earth and respecting green spaces & all our environments. To provide the highest quality learning environment for our children, our lead teachers are MACTE AMS Montessori Certified. We provide choice time to the children, presenting the Montessori materials in accordance with teacher-observed emerging teachable moments precious to each individual child. Group lessons are provided daily and include movement-encouraging songs, dance, games, Forest crafts, lunch & story-time in the Forest, tree climbing, health & safety. We have no-walls classroom spaces for plenty of bone-strengthening movement, set in fresh air & real sunlight so the children's teeth & bones have the chance to harness vitamins & minerals necessary to develop strength. Our outdoor mountain, river and tree views stimulate peace and calm inside the hearts of the children, help develop their eye sight and allow a sense of freedom within which to process all the information they are receiving during the lessons. We hire passionate, health-conscious, nurturing & fun teachers who represent our nature-conscious policies. We love jumping in mud puddles, seeing real Elk in our parks, and climbing real trees towards independence, awareness and self-esteem.

**Nurture in Nature Preschool (Tacoma, WA).** Nurture in Nature Preschool is based at the Tacoma Nature Center, which is a facility of Metro Parks Tacoma. Our mission is to provide a high-quality early childhood environment that meets preschoolers' needs, while inspiring them to love nature. With over 70 acres of natural area, several dedicated indoor and outdoor school spaces, and outstanding teachers and staff, this hands-on learning program allows children to learn and grow at their own pace. We encourage their endless curiosity and plant the seeds to help them become lifelong learners. Our emergent child-inspired curriculum often follows the changing seasons. Although traditional academic skills and opportunities are part of our school, they are definitely not the focus. Our philosophy is that preschoolers grow and learn how to be part of a community through play, discovery, and learning. When their brain is ready, they will naturally gravitate towards more academic pursuits.

**Olympic Nature Experience (Sequim, WA).** Olympic Nature Experience is a non-profit located in Sequim, Washington surrounded by the beautiful Olympic Peninsula. Our preschool programs run five days a week and serve 42 children, ages 3-6 years old, from 41 families. Several children have special needs such as speech impairment, giftedness or possible spectrum disorders. Our organization also runs programs for children ages 18 months to 12 years including a family play group, summer camps, after school programs, and homeschool enrichment classes. The backbone of our school's philosophy has developed from Wilderness Awareness School's nature connection model, which uses children's passions, emergent curriculum, and flexible activities to educate, inspire, and empower children. To ensure our children are meeting Early Learning standards and are Kindergarten Ready, we have created an in house Waldorf-inspired curriculum and an educational framework that incorporates the five standard Head Start domains. We added our own sixth domain, called Earth Wisdom which incorporates ideas of connection to place, critical thinking, community building and personal empowerment. By connecting children with their local environment, they are learning the age appropriate math, literacy, and cognition skills but with an everyday context that gives the world around them greater relevance.

**Polliwog Preschool: Mercer Slough Environmental Education Center (Bellevue, WA).** Polliwog Preschool is a play- and nature-based preschool at the Mercer Slough Environmental Education Center in Bellevue. The program is a collaboration between the Pacific Science Center in Seattle and the City of Bellevue. At Polliwog, we believe that the natural world is an ideal catalyst for discovery and an amazing medium to lay a foundation for the love of learning. While we have indoor classroom space, we spend 50-90% of our day exploring the outdoors in the 320-acre wetland park. Polliwog Preschool has three part-time classes, with 12 children age 3-5 years old in each class. We currently serve 36

total families. Last year, we were only able to offer enrollment space to about 50% of families who applied. Polliwog Preschool uses the natural world as the guiding theme to frame our core curriculum areas of science, art, music, math, language and literacy. The program is play-based and student-driven with a combination of activity choices, discovery explorations, and specific activities that relate to each week's theme. With a 320 acre wetland as our classroom, "Polliwogs" have the opportunity to hike through the forest, dip for creatures in a pond, investigate the flow of a stream, wander through meadows, and bounce on a bog. While we're not sure whether licensure is right for our program, we've enjoyed the advisory group discussions about best practices, and look forward to another year of participation in the pilot program.

**Saplings & Cedars: Squaxin Island Child Development Center (Shelton, WA).** Squaxin Island Child Development Center is a for-profit entity owned by the non-profit Squaxin Island Tribe. The center expanded their license capacity to begin offering Saplings & Cedars. Saplings & Cedars is unique to the pilot project as it is part of an already licensed child care center through DCYF. The updated license capacity to accommodate the outdoor class is 130. The center is located on property owned by the Squaxin Island Tribe. It is located near a natural forested area with two fresh water streams with a "culturally modified tree" as the focal point of the building. The site is surrounded by tall maple, fir and cedar trees and offers ground cover similar to a rain forest. Salmon return to the two streams each year as a part of their natural life cycle. Our program celebrates and honors what "Mother-Earth" gives us. We have our own garden beds where the children actively engage in the planting and harvesting of crops that are used in our food service program. We partner closely with the Squaxin Island Community Garden staff and Community Development staff to participate in recycling and composting. Fruit trees were donated to establish our own orchard. The pumpkins we grow are used each October for National Pumpkin Day and apples are harvested to make cider. One of the highlights of our program is the annual Salmon Ceremony. The children are actively engaged in drumming, dancing and singing about the arrival of the first salmon. Tribal elders and leaders come and share stories about the life of the salmon and the children honor the salmon by respectfully returning part of the salmon back to the water to let other salmon know they are welcome here. Although we use Creative Curriculum to guide our curriculum, we still practice emergent studies/curriculum to support the needs and interests of the children. There is a blend of group and individual exploration and play. Each day opens with a group safety meeting and concludes with a group hike into the forested area, before debriefing and returning to the classrooms for the afternoon, as most children are here for the entire day. It is the intent of this program to inspire exploration and making connections to the natural world.

**Sequoia's Farm and Forest School (Olympia, WA).** Sequoia's Farm and Forest School was established in September 2019 on a small 4.11 acre farm with 5 children attending half-day. These children are private pay and associated with Sequoia's Treehouse Children's Center. The emphasis at Sequoia's Farm and Forest School is on the physical, cognitive and social/emotional growth of children ages 4-7. Children are presented with experiences allowing them to discover and explore their world through art, science, music, dramatic play and the natural environment. Our focus is allowing children the opportunity to explore and spend time in the outdoors as much as possible through free play and structured learning activities such as gardening, cooking, canning, woodworking, raising and caring for animals, and building outdoor skills. Our goal is to promote every child's individual development using an appropriate mix of academic and recreational activities. Not only are there over 4 acres of land in which to roam, grow food, and raise animals (there are currently 9 chickens that have been raised from chicks), there are also many different fruit trees and plenty of berries. In addition, there is a stand of trees in which to explore and build a future tree house (and to plant more trees to create a mini-forest). Sequoia's Treehouse Children's Center is a nature- and Reggio Emilia-inspired early learning center located in Olympia, WA and is approximately 4 minutes driving time to Sequoia's Farm and Forest School. A mini-bus was purchased for additional field trips off the farm and for transportation to and from Sequoia's Treehouse Children's Center. Sequoia's Treehouse Children's Center was established in 2015 and currently has approximately 115 children attending ages 6 weeks to 6 years. The ultimate goal at both programs is to hopefully instill a connection to the planet in children at an early age, teach the old ways and the skills that are becoming lost including where food comes from, build an understanding of our connection to every creature and the earth, and teach children about choices and the endless opportunities for growth. Our program is full of choices, open-ended materials, risk-

taking, Teacher guided assistance with building empathy, mutual respect, and boundaries, all while helping children believe and trust in their own capabilities.

**Tiny Trees Preschool (several locations throughout King County, WA).** Tiny Trees is a 501(c)(3) non-profit based in Seattle with classroom sites throughout King County. Tiny Trees uses the High Scope curriculum, which incorporates evidence-based practices to provide the highest quality learning environment for our children. High Scope is a preferred curriculum of Head Start and Seattle Preschool Program facilities. Tiny Trees also makes preschool affordable by eliminating the cost of building, renovating, and maintaining a child care facility. We break down the schoolhouse walls and take the classroom outdoors. This means that instead of spending a huge amount on bricks and mortar, we spend money on what matters: hiring and supporting great teachers. Tiny Trees is a scale up of an innovative, proven concept. Started in Europe, outdoor preschools have shown to be healthier, more affordable and able to reach great academic outcomes. Tiny Trees is modeled after outdoor preschools in Norway, Germany and Denmark, three countries where the weather can get really cold. Tiny Trees also helps kids enter kindergarten ready to thrive. We help children learn to read, succeed at math and explore the wild where they receive both a world class science education and a gleefully muddy childhood: one full of play, exploration, and wonder in the great outdoors. Full day classes are a must for working families. Becoming a licensed child care provider would allow Tiny Trees the ability to offer students and families a higher quality environment, improved health and safety, and greater ability for low income families to work.

**Washington Outdoor School (Roslyn and Ellensburg, WA).** The Washington Outdoor School is a 501(c)(3) non-profit, based in Roslyn, Washington, that serves children from 2.5 to 6 years old in morning programs and children in grades K-5 in after school programs. Our all-outdoor settings include forested trails—some more maintained than others (we come across fallen trees at times)—sandstone outcroppings, and seasonal creeks and streams in Roslyn. In Ellensburg, Helen McCabe State Park has a large pond and is skirted by a rushing creek, which makes its way to the Yakima River through a canyon. The landscape changes quite dramatically through the seasons. Access is easy along parts of the pond trail in late fall through winter, but the difficulty increases in the spring when grasses grow taller than the children. Two Crack Oak trees in the park are favorite places for the children to climb, and we spend a lot of time in and around them throughout the year. It is not unusual for us to walk more than a mile a day in both locations and sometimes much more than that in Roslyn. Drop off and pick up occur in local parks, Helen McCabe State Park (Ellensburg) and Centennial Park (Roslyn). Our mission is to cultivate a child’s sense of wonder and foster a sense of stewardship through immersion in the natural world. We believe that interacting with nature encourages a sense and knowledge of place, awakens curiosity and creates healthy minds and bodies. Our work is based on the core values of strong communities, equal access to outdoor adventures, and stewardship of our natural world. Our approach to education is child-interest led with an emphasis on experiencing each day in the moment—noticing changes and building on previous experiences. The natural world provides our curriculum for the day. We are about exploration, play, building positive relationships with each other and the world around us, and experiencing what the natural world has to offer, which cultivates an attitude of joy and wonder within each child. We infuse experiences with relevant books, stories, songs, and activities. These experiences can include journal writing, crafts, and, in Roslyn, planting and tending to garden spaces. Being licensed by the Department of Children, Youth, and Families would validate our type of program and communicate to families that programs like the Washington Outdoor School provide viable preschool options for kindergarten readiness. We seek to provide equal access to outdoor adventures, but many families in Kittitas County struggle to afford early learning programs for their children. As a DCYF- licensed program, families could use state subsidies toward tuition, which would allow our program to better serve our economically diverse community.



## Appendix B: Outdoor Preschool Pilot Media, Publications and Presentations

### Presentations

Yair, A., Groff, D., Farmer, T. (Sept. 2019) *Adventures in Licensing: Benefit-Risk Assessment in Washington State's Outdoor Preschool Pilot*. Presented at National Association of Regulatory Administrators (NARA) Annual Conference, New Orleans, LA.

Yair A. (Dec. 2019) *Washington Outdoor Preschool Pilot*. Presented to the Natural Start Alliance, North American Association of Environmental Education, online webinar. <https://naturalstart.org/bright-ideas/webinar-recap-washington-outdoor-preschool-pilot>

Yair, A. (May 6, 2020) *Nature-centered Experiences in ECE*. Presented at DCYF Support Webinar for ECEAP and Head Start directors and staff for COVID-19, online webinars.

Yair, A., Green, S., Paulsen, A., Morrill, K., Cardinaux, M. (August 8, 2020) *Outdoor Preschool: Going Beyond Playgrounds*. Presented at the Head Start and ECEAP Director's Retreat, online webinar.

Yair A. (July 27, 2020) *Lessons from Outdoor Preschools and Supporting P-3 Outdoor Education*. Presented at the University of California at Berkeley's BEETLES and Bay-Sci Virtual Open Space Conference, online forum <https://sites.google.com/berkeley.edu/openspace/home>.

Yair, A. (July 31, 2020) *Outdoor Preschool for All*. Panelist at The Nature-Based Early Learning Virtual Conference, Natural Start Alliance, online.

Yair A. (Oct. 1, 2020) *Advancing Early Childhood Education Outdoors*. Panelist for Advancing Early Childhood Education Outdoors Working Group, University of British Columbia, Canada. <https://eceonow.pwias.ubc.ca/>

Yair, A. (Oct. 9, 2020) *Nature-Based Early Childhood Education and Opportunities for Impact*. Presented at New York University's Environmental Conservation Program, online webinar.

### Publication Features

Keeler, Rusty (2020) *Adventures in Risky Play: What is Your Yes?* Lincoln, NE: Exchange Press.

### Media Publicity

Dwyer, O (Sept. 12, 2020) *School's Out*. REI Co-Op Journal <https://www.rei.com/blog/news/outdoor-preschool-trends>

Takahama, E. (Oct. 2, 2019) *Learning in Nature: Washington becomes first in the country to license outdoor preschools*. The Seattle Times <https://www.seattletimes.com/education-lab/learning-in-nature-washington-becomes-first-in-the-country-to-license-outdoor-preschools/>

Rowe, M. (Oct. 11, 2019) *Veradale preschool among small group participating in state pilot program for outdoor learning*. The Spokesman <https://www.spokesman.com/stories/2019/oct/11/veradale-preschool-among-small-group-participating/>

Leins, C. (Oct. 11, 2019) *Best States: Washington licenses outdoor preschools*. U.S. News & World Report. <https://www.usnews.com/news/best-states/articles/2019-10-11/washington-is-the-first-state-to-license-outdoor-preschools>

Kussman, L. (Nov. 14, 2019) *Kaleidoscope becomes first in the country to license outdoor preschool*. The Island Sounder <https://www.islandssounder.com/life/kaleidoscope-becomes-first-in-the-country-to-license-outdoor-preschool/>

E.W. Scripps Media TV segment, <https://www.wptv.com/news/national/outdoor-preschools-a-new-education-trend-is-trading-walls-and-desks-for-trees-and-creeks>.

NBC Today Show. <https://www.today.com/video/year-round-outdoor-preschools-launch-in-washington-73587269564>

**Appendix C: Serious Injury and Incidents in Washington State, Sept. 2018 – Sept. 2019**

Facility Type and Injury Type	Count of Injuries
<b>Child Care Center</b>	<b>95</b>
Broken bone	65
Choking/unexpected breathing problems	2
Injury resulting in overnight hospital stay	1
Injury resulting in overnight hospital stay; Broken bone	1
Severe bleeding	2
Severe burn requiring professional medical care	2
Severe neck or head injury	15
Severe neck or head injury; Broken bone	2
Shock or acute confused state; Unconsciousness	1
Unconsciousness	4
<b>Family Child Care Home</b>	<b>14</b>
Broken bone	12
Severe neck or head injury	2
<b>Grand Total</b>	<b>109</b>

**Appendix D: Outdoor Preschool Pilot Participants COVID-19 Impacts, Sept. 2020**

Program Name and Location	Pilot Cohort and Licensing Status in September 2020	Describe program offerings and daily schedule (days/hours) for the summer and for the upcoming school year. Include how has the program changed to adjust to COVID-19.	What were the impacts of COVID-19 closures on spring enrollment/finances, and did that impacted your summer or September 2020 re-opening plans?
<p><b>ACORNS NW</b> <b>Olympia, WA</b></p>	<p>Observer</p>	<p>ACORNS NW has been closed since March 16, 2020. The stay at home order came into place and we held our last program on March 13, 2020. For a period of time the public park we use was closed. Then it reopened with limited access to group sizes. I had to put my staff on standby while waiting for the park the open. All of them have found other work since.</p>	<p>We lost our entire business while being closed due to covid. No funds come into our program unless we are running program. Our spring and summer break camps for the school aged kids is a program that financially helps keep our preschool running. Refunds for all cancelled programs were given. Using a public park and interfacing with the public with a group of kids in masks, didn't feel like a doable task. Especially in the heat of the summer, wearing masks, keeping kids physically distant, sharing restroom space with the public, and changing many of our ACORNS traditional activities.</p>
<p><b>Bell Creek Nature School</b> <b>Deming, WA</b></p>	<p>Implementer - licensed</p>	<p>We offered 3 weeks of summer camps this summer. They ran from 9:00-2:00 Mon-Thurs. We decreased our class size from 12 to 8 to reduce group size. Our Pre-K camp was scheduled to run from 9:00-3:30 but we did reduce the hours of this camp to avoid having rest time at camp during COVID. We are offering an outdoor Preschool Program this fall. It is for ages 3-6 and runs from 9:00-1:00. Our major changes include increasing space for snack times to allow for social distancing with eating. We have also increased handwashing breaks, and we are sanitizing all tools daily. We have a temperature screening protocol in place at the beginning of every day. We have created a COVID-19 Policies Document to share with families. We are offering a school- aged program (ages 6-11) from 1:30-5:00 Monday and Wednesdays. This is a new program this year as we saw the demand for school-aged children due to COVID school closures.</p>	<p>We were able to get a PPP loan for the two spring months that we missed. Our business was impacted during the summer because we did have to cancel more than half of our summer programs during Phase 1 of reopening. Summer Programs fund our scholarship fund as well as start-up costs for the school year.</p>

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<p><b>Fidalgo Nature School</b>  <b>Anacortes, WA</b></p>	<p>Implementer - not yet licensed</p>	<p>MTWThF 9 am - 1 pm, Sept - June</p>	<p>We applied and received a PPP loan from BECU so was able to pay for teachers through the year. We gave tuition refund for April to families which made starting this fall a bit paltry with funds and with being able to offer better pay to new teachers.</p>
<p><b>Fiddleheads Forest School</b>  <b>Seattle, WA</b></p>	<p>Implementer - licensed</p>	<p>Summer: 9am-1pm, M-F, 5-day kids only. Due to COVID we eliminated our 2 &amp; 3-day class option and kept only the 5-day option. We also reduced our class sizes from 14 down to 8. School year: 9am-1pm, M-F, 5-day kids only. We also eliminated the 2 &amp; 3-day class option and made all spots 5-day only. We shrunk our class sizes from 14 to 12. We also cut our afternoon program. We made these changes primarily to minimize the number of children the teachers are exposed to. Our experience this summer has shown us how large the impact of the smallest cold can be on families and teachers – long absences, waiting for test results and symptoms to clear. We decided to keep our class sizes small and that each teacher will only be exposed to a singular group of children to minimize ANY illness transfer. We also don't anticipate having class volunteers this school year and so reducing down to 12 feels more manageable without that extra assistance.</p>	<p>COVID has had a significant financial impact on Fiddleheads. The 4 teachers and myself have all been given FTE reductions as of July 2020 (they were intended to begin in May, but UW has been slow and difficult to work with). This delay in FTE reductions was painful on the budget as we were paid in full without the revenue from tuition (due to UW delaying the FTE reductions). We are on FTE reductions (20%) until the end of Sept. and then it is expected that we will be reduced another 20% beginning in October due to cutting the afternoon class and lost revenue. That reduction in October will be semi-permanent and last until we can increase our program numbers.</p>
<p><b>Kaleidoscope Forest School Orcas Island, WA</b></p>	<p>Implementer - licensed</p>	<p>Monday - Thursday 8:00-4:30 both for summer and fall. We only offer a full-time option since Corvid. For fall the only change we are making is adding 6 spots and adding another teacher. We have had more interest in outdoor options and still have a waiting list after adding more spots.</p>	<p>No impact. No income but also no expenses. We have increased our possible enrollment and hired another teacher</p>
<p><b>Little Woodland Adventures: Into the Forest</b> <b>Spokane, WA</b></p>	<p>Implementer – not yet licensed</p>	<p>We off a full outdoor program held at Dishman Hills conservancy. We are open Monday-Friday 8-4, starting mid September when fully licensed. We stopped class for the summer because the area became over crowded due to Covid-19.</p>	<p>Not really any impacts.</p>

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<p><b>Montessori Forest School Snoqualmie, WA</b></p>	<p>Implementer – not yet licensed</p>	<p>Summer Camps: M-F 9:30am - 3:30pm (full day) - 1:30pm (half day). Upcoming school year: Continues until Oct 9th with Summer Camps hours &amp; days. COVID - more enrollments.</p>	<p>Impact: We worked harder than ever with no breaks for no extra charge and were very busy serving front line worker children and our regular enrolled children. Went from 2 to suddenly 7 signups (not daily but in total). Some have stayed on for this new year. Some have graduated to Kindergarten but said they may be back out of not wanting 6 hr screen time for their child.</p>
<p><b>Owl's Hollow: Olympic Nature Experience Sequim, WA</b></p>	<p>Observer</p>	<p>Three enrollment options: Monday/Wednesday, Tuesday/Thursday, or Friday from 9:30 – 1:30 Students must choose one enrollment option and cannot dual enroll in multiple classes to encourage cohorting and prevent the spread of Covid-19. In the past families have been able to sign up a la carte for any day combination that suited them.</p>	<p>We let go all of our teaching staff in the Spring and only kept on our Executive Director and Administrative Director. We were unable to run any summer programs and at this time do not anticipate being able to run any of our homeschool, after school or camp programs. We were able to get a EIDL and PPP loan this year.</p>
<p><b>Roots &amp; Sky Nature-Based Learning (formerly Roots &amp; Sky Nature School) Seattle, WA</b></p>	<p>Observer</p>	<p>Normally, I would offer families the opportunity to schedule anywhere from 2 – 6 hours a day Tu – Fri; however, I stopped offering Nanny in Nature on March 13th, and I did not have any summer offerings this year. I am only working with pods (maybe 1 or 2 families) for the upcoming school year. I will offer up to 4 hours in nature near the family's home. There will need to be an adult available to assist with toileting, which will take place in the family's home. I am not going to have kids at large in parks until such a time as I feel I can safely mitigate toileting in public facilities with up to 3 children.</p>	<p>Per the Nanny in Nature childcare agreement details, the payments for March were not refunded, but I received no income whatsoever from Nanny in Nature from April through the present. As a result, I applied for unemployment benefits during that time. This has not impacted my reopening plans.</p>

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<p><b>Sequoia’s Farm and Forest School Olympia, WA</b></p>	<p>Observer</p>	<p>Farm and Forest School - outdoors on 4.11 acres. Interacting with animals and fully immersed outdoors. Children enrolled at Sequoia’s Treehouse and attend the Farm on a daily trip 8.30 a.m. to 3:00 p.m. with before and after school options up to 7 a.m. to 6 p.m. All our children are 4-5 years old except for two children who are 6 and one is 7. We have 4 groups of about a 1-10 ratio (we wouldn't go over 10). And we put in a business waiver making it clear to parents that if a child couldn't handle themselves on the Farm, they might not be ready yet and would have to go to the Center. So far, we have a great group of children, many who have been at the Center but many are also new. Changes made me taking temps, wearing masks if ever indoors, in the mini-bus. Parents and staff wear masks at pick-up and drop-off.</p>	<p>Wasn't good, but I was able to secure PPP and a disaster loan from the SBA. That and some local grants helped a lot.</p>
<p><b>Sapling &amp; Cedars: Squaxin Island CDC Shelton, WA</b></p>	<p>Implementer – licensed</p>	<p>With COVID-19 we have been closed since March 19<sup>th</sup>. Once we re-open we will be changing the way our classrooms are. We are reducing our ratio from a maximum of 16 children to 12 children. We will be changing from two 4 hour sessions (Am class/ Pm class) to eventually two simultaneous 8 hours classes. We made this change to limit the exposure between multiple children.</p>	<p>Our families have been very flexible and understanding during this time. We have only had families leave us because of moving onto kindergarten.</p>

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<p><b>Nurture in Nature Preschool Tacoma, WA</b></p>	<p>Observer</p>	<p>Summer 2020 offering: All outdoor class for 10 4/5 yr olds in 1 section T/W/Th – 9:30-1:15</p> <p>Current offerings for Fall 2020: All-outdoor classes for 36 4/5 yr olds in 3 sections: M/W/F 1-4; T/Th 1-4; T/W/Th 9:30-12:30 Virtual-only classes for 24 3/4 yr olds in 2 sections: Live M/W 10; T/Th 10; + Pre-recorded content 60 total participants</p> <p>Without COVID issues we would have had 4 indoor/outdoor hybrid classes with 12 kids each and an all-outdoor section with 16 kids. 64 total. Same schedule as above but the morning classes would have been M/W 9-12 and T/Th 9-12 instead of just at 10.</p> <p>The main reasoning behind going virtual-only with the younger kids is that we did not think we could keep staff or program participants safe due to the inability to keep children that age from touching everything and each other constantly and the fact that mask-wearing would likely be too difficult to manage for that age group.</p>	<p>We had to refund upwards of \$48,000 due to the early closure in March. Many parents kept the credit on their accounts for this fall. If we had not run the preschool, we would have had to refund the credits to the tune of about \$14,000. I frankly am not sure if the MPT leadership team would have let us re-open this fall if that money had not been there as a liability.</p> <p>As a side note – we are no longer letting parents pay tuition in full for the entire school year. We cannot open ourselves up to that kind of financial liability should future closures happen.</p>
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OUTDOOR PRESCHOOL PILOT

<p><b>Tiny Trees Various Locations in King County, WA</b></p>	<p>Implementer - licensed (3) - not yet licensed (1) - observer (5)</p>	<p>We closed in April and offered remote learning: family directed, nature based activities like scavenger hunts and plant ID, with a daily zoom meeting with stories, dance parties, etc. We ended our school year June 23. We will open fewer classrooms (7) Sept. 17. We adjusted our class offering to have closed cohorts, so we are ONLY having one M-F class per teaching team. We have 12 kids enrolled per classroom, with three adults. We also shifted the job description to make Lead Teachers the on-site supervisor, and setup professional development plans to get everyone up to the licensings standard. We've had to close two of our licensed classrooms temporarily this year (Jefferson and Camp Long) We hope to open Jefferson this Spring, and Camp Long next fall. These closures were due to a staffing shortage in response to COVID, and lack of emergency shelter and park access due to challenges in Seattle Parks, and a community center renovation. Morning programs run 9-1, and one site has a PM classroom running 1-4:30. Finally, we're following CDC and King County Health Dept. guidelines, offering masks, health screening and social distancing.</p>	<p>We lost over a million dollars in tuition, and had to furlough our staff from May to August. The impact has been a smaller program overall. We cancelled summer programs, and we are serving just 84 kids this fall instead of the 365 we anticipated, and we can't open full day programming this year. We are small but mighty, and trying to stabilize as an organization. Having just one AM class (instead of AM and PM, as well as partial week openings) has limited access for families. We still plan to license Five Mile, and hope to open Jefferson (another licensed site) this Spring. Still hoping for full day in White Center and Five Mile next year too.</p>
<p><b>Washington Outdoor School, Roslyn and Ellensburg, WA</b></p>	<p>Implementer – not yet licensed (2)</p>	<p>From July 6th through Aug. 6th we offered a morning preschool class and an afternoon school age class Mon-Thurs, 8 kids and 2 teachers per class. We had to incorporate several COVID related protocols and serve fewer children. We met families at their vehicles and kids wore masks when we couldn't physically distance. This Fall we are trying to keep groups together with the same teachers and that is limiting what we can offer. Families only have a 2 day per week option, no one day per week which is hard for some families who really like that option or maybe paying for two days a week is not in their budget.</p>	<p>Fortunately, only a small fraction (maybe 20% of families) requested a refund, most chose to apply what they had paid to a future session. We did receive PPP funds that helped pay staff in May and June. We lost staff during that time, though, and now we need to hire but because our class sizes are small and we can only have two teachers, training a Lead Teacher is pretty much impossible.</p>



## Appendix E: Outdoor Preschool and Child Care Enrollment – Impacts of COVID-19 and Program Recovery

Program Name and Location	Pilot Cohort and Licensing Status in Sept 2020	Children served 2019 - March 2020	Period of closure due to COVID-19	Preschool children served Summer 2020	School-age children served Summer 2020	Preschool children enrolled 2020 - 2021	School-age children enrolled 2020 - 2021	Children on waitlist 2020 - 2021	Other Enrollment Impacts
<b>ACORNS NW</b> Olympia, WA	Observer	25	March 16 - current	0	0	0	0	25+	Stopped taking emails for inquires. Need to hire and train new staff before re-opening. "Using a public park and interfacing with the public with a group of kids in masks, didn't feel like a doable task."
<b>Bell Creek Nature School</b> Deming, WA	Implementer - licensed	(not submitted)	March 16 – July 13	8	0	12	12	8	Reduced group size and hours for summer program to limit potential spread of the virus. Reduced Fall hours for preschool program to accommodate school-age program, where demand increased due to school closures.
<b>Fidalgo Nature School</b> Anacortes, WA	Implementer – not yet licensed	(not submitted)	April – September	0	0	24	0	5	We have heard several families wanting to enroll but we only offer part time preschool. The families need full time preschool that we cannot yet provide.
<b>Fiddleheads Forest School</b> Seattle, WA	Implementer - licensed	65	March 15 – June 29	16	0	24	0	182	We eliminated our 2 & 3-day class option and kept only the 5-day option. We reduced our class size from 14 to 8 in the summer and 12 in the Fall. Increase in school-aged inquiries, despite not having a school-age program. We had around 8 families withdraw from summer programming due to COVID concerns. We had approximately 4 families withdraw to COVID concerns for fall.
<b>Kaleidoscope Forest School</b> Orcas Island, WA	Implementer - licensed	27	March 15 – June 1	10	0	15	3	2	Group size increase from 16 to 18 due to increased interest in outdoor program. We only offer 5-day enrollment since COVID. Many school age children's parents have reached out to us about

## OUTDOOR PRESCHOOL PILOT

									older students, but we currently do not have the staff to be able to accommodate.
<b>Little Woodland Adventures: Into the Forest</b> Spokane, WA	Implementer – not yet licensed	7	March 15 – September 15	0	0	(not submitted)	(not submitted)	5	
<b>Montessori Forest School</b> Snoqualmie, WA	Implementer – not yet licensed	2	Did not close. Opened for extra days.	7	0	7	0	0	“Huge interest (in school-age enrollment) due to COVID closures.”
<b>Nurture in Nature Preschool</b> Tacoma, WA	Observer	64	March 15 - May	10	0	36 in-person, all outdoors; 24 virtual-only	0	0	Reduced class sizes and program offerings in summer due to COVID. Limited enrollment to children 4+ years old for in-person classes. Many parents desired programs for school-aged children. 5 families withdrew due to mask requirement.
<b>Owl’s Hollow: Olympic Nature Experience</b> Sequim, WA	Observer	42	March 15 – Sept 1	0	0	36	0	5	We have had to cancel our other homeschool enrichment programs. We have definitely seen an increase in interest from homeschool students in the 5-6-year-old range. We are cohorting our teachers by class in addition to our students.
<b>Polliwog Preschool: Mercer Slough EEC</b> Bellevue, WA	Observer	36	(not submitted) preschool program closed indefinitely	0	(not submitted)	0	(not submitted)	N/A	
<b>Roots &amp; Sky Nature School</b> Seattle, WA	Observer	8	March 16 – Sept 15	0	0	4	0	0	I am only working with pods (maybe 1 or 2 families) for the upcoming school year. I will offer up to 4 hours in nature near the family’s home. I do know that families with school-aged children are looking for more outdoor learning alternatives.

## OUTDOOR PRESCHOOL PILOT

<b>Sapling &amp; Cedars: Squaxin Island CDC</b> Shelton, WA	Implementer – licensed	24	March 19 – current; modified to online services	0	0	24	0	(not submitted)	More families have shown interest due to COVID-19 studies showing that being outside is better than being in a room together.
<b>Sequoia’s Farm and Forest School</b> Olympia, WA	Observer	5	March 22 – May 4	25	0	35	2	0	We are losing more kids due to COVID-19 procedures and the smoke. We were already an outdoor program for the most part, so we filled back up but I've lost a lot lately because of COVID-19 fears and new families.
<b>Tiny Trees</b> Various Locations in King County, WA	Implementer - licensed (3) - not yet licensed (1) - observer (5)	281	April – Sept 17; offered modified remote services	0	0	84	0	1000 (includes children aged into Kindergarten)	We cancelled summer programs. We only offer 5-day enrollment in cohorts. Only serving 84, instead of the 365 anticipated. We've had to close two of our licensed classrooms temporarily this year due to a staffing shortage in response to COVID, and lack of emergency shelter and park access due to challenges in Seattle Parks, and a community center renovation.
<b>Washington Outdoor School,</b> Roslyn and Ellensburg, WA	Implementer – not yet licensed (2)	60	March 15 – July 6	16	80	16	(not submitted)	0	We have definitely seen an increase in interest for the K-5 families! We are struggling to meet the need and, most likely, will not be able to do so this Fall. Our preschool classes aren't full, yet, and I am suspicious that it has to do with our requirement that kids wear masks when they can't physically distance.
<b>Total</b>	15 agencies, 24 sites	646		67	80	246	15	1232	

## Appendix F: Outdoor Preschool Supply Costs

	Description	Cost	How Many	Notes on Frequency or Amount	Annual Cost, first year
<b>Total</b>					
<b>Staff Training</b>	Subtotal				<b>\$1870</b>
	Wilderness First Aid	\$235	2	For sites located 30 min. distanced	\$470
	Nature-Based ECE Course	\$1400	1	For lead teacher	\$1400
<b>Outdoor Space</b>	Subtotal				<b>\$77.60</b>
	Cones	\$15.99	1	Set of 10	\$15.99
	Portable gazebo	\$49.99	0		\$-
	Tarp	\$12.99	2		\$25.98
	Toilet	\$150.00	0	per month	\$ -
	Handwashing water jug	\$11.64	1		\$11.64
	Bin for dirty towels	\$17.99	1		\$17.99
	Webbing	\$6.00	1		\$6.00
<b>Equipment</b>	Subtotal				<b>\$2,770.48</b>
	Flashlight	\$7.68	1		\$7.68
	First aid kit	\$8.99	2		\$17.98
	Eating equipment (plates, bowls, silverware, etc.)	\$150.00			\$150.00
	Bucket	\$5.38	1		\$5.38
	Thermometer	\$9.29	1		\$9.29
	Food thermometer	\$9.39	1		\$9.39
	Lock box	\$18.54	1		\$18.54
	Medication boxes	\$14.57	2		\$29.14
	Spray bottles	\$12.99	1		\$12.99
	Water pitcher	\$8.23	4		\$32.92
	Touchless trash can	\$61.98	1		\$61.98
	Zip lock bags for bedding	\$6.49	0		\$-
	Insulated thermos	\$23.99	2		\$47.98
	Waterproof bins	\$24.99	3		\$74.97
	Walkie talkies	\$34.99	1		\$34.99
	10-person tent	\$199.99	0		\$-
	Plant identification book	\$4.25	1		\$4.25
	Insulated pad	\$49.95	0		\$-
	Snow pants-teacher	\$41.76	2		\$83.52
	Insulated rain coat	\$59.99	2		\$119.98
	Gloves	\$14.99	2		\$29.98
	Dry bag	\$10.99	2		\$21.98
	Insulated gumboots	\$79.85	2		\$159.70
	Oakiwear Boots	\$39.99	12	Extra for children	\$479.88
	Snow suit	\$43.43	12	Extra for children	\$521.16
	Jacket	\$22.49	12	Extra for children	\$269.88

OUTDOOR PRESCHOOL PILOT

	Rain pants	\$21.95	12	Extra for children	\$263.40
	Gloves	\$16.99	12	Extra for children	\$203.88
	Fleece	\$7.47	12	Extra for children	\$89.64
	"No smoking" sign	\$10.00	1		\$10.00
<b>Supplies</b>	Subtotal				<b>\$1,276.01</b>
	Extra clothing	\$100.00			\$100.00
	Extra batteries	\$6.98	4		\$27.92
	Hand sanitizer	\$9.96	2	Set of 4	\$139.92
	Reusable towels	\$179.99	3	Assuming each child uses 4 in a day (2 meals, 2 bathroom trips) and towels get washed weekly = \$20/child	\$539.97
	Toilet paper	\$18.99	1	Every 2 months	\$113.94
	Bleach	\$19.34	1	Annually	\$19.34
	Tissues	\$26.99	1		\$26.99
	Gloves	\$7.99	4		\$31.96
	Waterproof paper	\$26.03	1	200 sheets	\$26.03
	Waterproof pen/pencil	\$10.00	10		\$100.00
	Large trash can liners	\$16.99	2	Annually	\$33.98
	Laundry soap	\$28.99	1	Quarterly	\$115.96

OUTDOOR PRESCHOOL PILOT

Appendix G: Outdoor Preschool Pilot SFY18-SFY21 Actual Results

FY18	Fiscal Month	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10	11	12	99 (Adj Month)	FY 18 Total		
	Budget	\$26,417	\$26,417	\$26,417	\$26,417	\$26,417	\$26,417	\$26,417	\$26,417	\$26,417	\$26,417	\$26,417	\$26,413	\$	\$317,000		
	Spend	\$	\$		\$5	\$50	\$28,271	\$36,956	\$17,453	\$37,417	\$26,139	\$27,838	\$24,219	\$2,639	\$200,987		
	Balance	\$26,417	\$26,417	\$26,417	\$26,412	\$26,367	\$(1,854)	\$(10,539)	\$8,964	\$(11,000)	\$278	\$(1,421)	\$2,194	\$(2,639)	\$116,013	FTEs Charged	2.3
FY19	Fiscal Month	13	14	15	16	17	18	19	20	21	22	23	24	25 (Adj Month)	FY19 Total		
	Budget	\$26,417	\$26,417	\$26,417	\$93,098	\$18,004	\$18,032	\$18,004	\$18,032	\$18,004	\$18,032	\$18,004	\$18,539	\$	\$317,000		
	Spend	\$15,393	\$16,592	\$23,110	\$19,841	\$18,326	\$19,473	\$18,963	\$18,966	\$19,486	\$21,603	\$35,491	\$1,907	\$2,368	\$231,522		
	Balance	\$11,024	\$9,825	\$3,307	\$73,257	\$(322)	\$(1,441)	\$(959)	\$(934)	\$(1,482)	\$(3,571)	\$(17,487)	\$16,632	\$(2,368)	\$85,478	FTEs Charged	2.2
FY20	Fiscal Month	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10	11	12	99 (Adj Month)	FY20 Total		
	Budget	\$26,402	\$26,418	\$26,418	\$12,083	\$22,834	\$22,834	\$22,834	\$22,834	\$22,834	\$22,834	\$22,834	\$65,841	\$	\$317,000		
	Spend	\$2,168	\$49,189	\$23,214	\$12,306	\$17,489	\$23,051	\$23,692	\$24,759	\$17,681	\$23,585	\$21,997	\$39,387	\$118	\$278,637		
	Balance	\$24,234	\$(22,771)	\$3,204	\$(223)	\$5,345	\$(217)	\$(858)	\$(1,925)	\$5,153	\$(751)	\$837	\$26,454	\$(118)	\$38,363	FTEs Charged	2.5
FY21	Fiscal Month	13	14	15	16	17	18	19	20	21	22	23	24	25 (Adj Month)	FY21 Total		
	Budget	\$19,265	\$21,920	\$21,920	\$21,920	\$21,920	\$22,804	\$22,804	\$22,804	\$22,804	\$22,804	\$22,804	\$65,808	\$	\$309,577		
	Spend	\$18,589	\$21,697												\$40,286	FTEs	2.2
	Balance	\$676	\$223	\$21,920	\$21,920	\$21,920	\$22,804	\$22,804	\$22,804	\$22,804	\$22,804	\$22,804	\$65,808	\$	\$269,291	through Aug2	

# Adventures in Licensing

## *Benefit-Risk Assessment in Washington State's Outdoor Preschool Licensing Pilot*

NARA | September 25, 2019

Aliza Yair  
Debbie Groff  
Tyler Farmer

[www.dcyf.wa.gov](http://www.dcyf.wa.gov)



# Who's in the Audience?

Licensors, Administrators, Lawyers, Others?





# What's Cooking in the Mud-Kitchen?



- Introducing “outdoor preschool”
- The benefits of nature-based programs for children
- The Outdoor Preschool Pilot in Washington State
- Outdoor preschool licensing standards
  - *Benefit-risk assessment*
- Monitoring outdoor preschools
- Implications of nature-based programs in your state/region



# Introducing Outdoor Preschool to the Public

Video: Cedarsong on Nightline [https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=nqFwgHLK\\_0c](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=nqFwgHLK_0c)





# Myth-Busting

Don't go outside in the cold, you'll get sick.

Better instruction happens indoors.

Children have more injuries outside.



# Benefits of Outdoor, Nature-Based Early Childhood Education



## Better physical development

- Strength, eyesight, hearing, bone structure, immune system and lifelong interest in physical activities.

## Better cognitive development

- Executive functioning, self-regulation, self-esteem, observation and problem-solving, abstract reasoning and focus.

## Better social-emotional development

- Independence, collaboration, reduced anxiety/depression, empathy and care for nature.

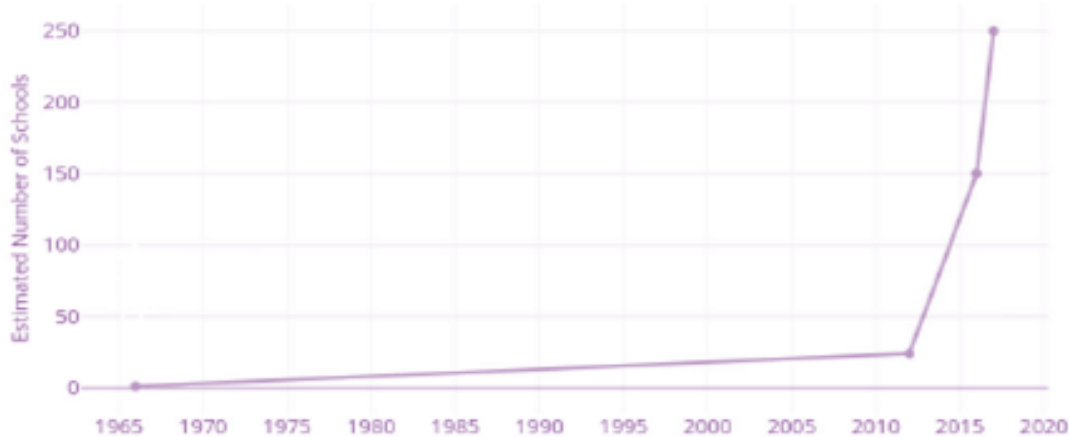
## STEM learning

## Educator/adult well-being



# Nature-Based ECE National Context (Natural Start Alliance Survey)

**Estimated number of nature-based preschools and forest kindergartens in the U.S. by year**



As of 2017, at least 250 nature preschools and forest kindergartens operate in 43 states. Many are concentrated in the Pacific Northwest, California, the Upper Midwest, the Mid-Atlantic and New England. Although previous national surveys employed different methodologies, the data suggests that the number and rate of growth of nature preschools and forest kindergartens in the U.S. have greatly increased in the last five years.

**Children enrolled in nature preschools or kindergarten programs by race, ethnicity or origin (some children belong to more than one category)**

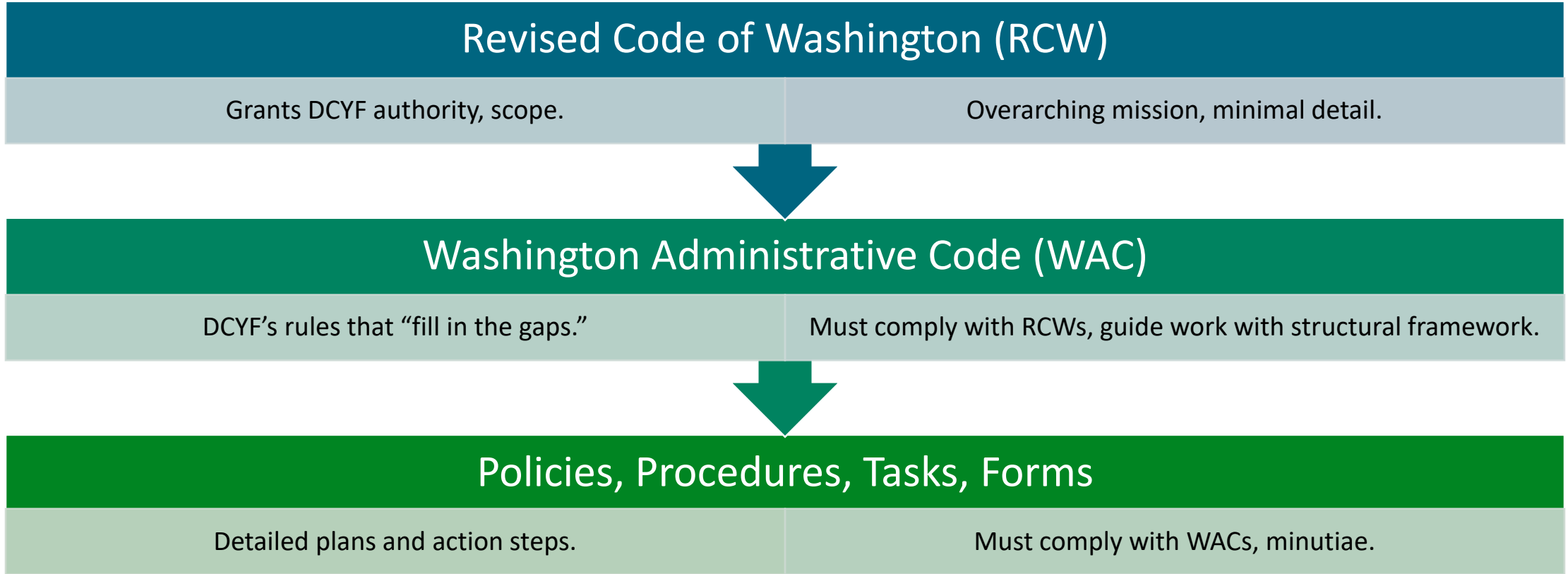
Race, Ethnicity or Origin	Average (Mean) Reported Percentage
White	83%
Hispanic, Latino or Spanish Origin	7%
Asian	6%
Black or African American	3%
Middle Eastern or North African	1%
American Indian or Alaska Native	1%
Native Hawaiian or Other Pacific Islander	<1%
Other Race, Ethnicity or Origin	1%

<http://naturalstart.org/bright-ideas/nature-preschools-and-kindergartens-record-numbers-us>

# Child Care and Early Learning Laws and Rules



# Licensing Authority





# Washington State Licensing Context

- The Washington State Department of Children, Youth, and Families (DCYF) currently regulates:
  - Center-based child care
  - Family home-based child care
  - School-aged child care (before and after school)
  - License-exempt providers
  
- WAC Chapter 110-300 – aligned center and family home standards

# Duties

RCW 43.216.020

(1) The department shall implement state early learning policy [...] The department's duties include, but are not limited to, the following:

(e) To safeguard and promote the health, safety, and well-being of children receiving child care and early learning assistance, which is paramount over the right of any person to provide such care;

(h) To standardize [...] licensing criteria, so that programs can function in an integrated fashion;



## Duties, *Continued*

RCW 43.216.250

It shall be the secretary's duty with regard to licensing under this chapter:

(6) To issue, revoke, or deny licenses to agencies pursuant to this chapter.

### Unlawful Care

RCW 43.216.365

Any agency operating without a license shall be guilty of a misdemeanor.



# What is an Agency?

RCW 43.216.010

(1) "Agency" means any person, firm, partnership, association, corporation, or facility that provides child care and early learning services outside a child's own home and includes the following irrespective of whether there is compensation to the agency:

(a) "Child day care center" means an agency that regularly provides early childhood education and early learning services for a group of children for periods of less than twenty-four hours;

(c) "Family day care provider" means a child care provider who regularly provides early childhood education and early learning services for not more than twelve children in the provider's home in the family living quarters;



# What is NOT an Agency?

RCW 43.216.010

(2) An "Agency" does not include the following:

- (a) Relatives
- (b) Legal guardians
- (c) Friends and neighbors (FFN)
- (d) Parents on cooperative basis (date night trade)
- (e) Programs under four hours ("nursery schools")
- (f) Schools
- (g) Seasonal camps
- (h) Drop-in child care when parent remains on-site
- (i) Boys and Girls clubs
- (j) Government operated (local, state, federal care)
- (k) Tribal care on tribal lands
- (l) Military care on military base
- (m) Early learning and support services programs



# Child Care and Early Learning Laws and Rules *Outdoor Preschool Edition*



# Washington Outdoor Preschool Pilot Bill

2017: Public advocacy for a four-year pilot to “waive or adapt” licensing requirements and explore quality improvement for outdoor, nature-based preschools (aka “outdoor preschools”).

- At the time, more than 40 outdoor preschools operating as license-exempt “nursery schools” (under four hours).
- License-exempt also means no DCYF support: not eligible to receive subsidies for low-income families; participate in the state’s QRIS; or public pre-k programs.



# Duties

RCW 43.216.740

## Outdoor preschool

(1) The department shall establish a pilot project to license outdoor, nature-based early learning and child care programs. The pilot project shall commence beginning August 31, 2017, and conclude June 30, 2021.

(2) The department shall adopt rules to implement the pilot project and may waive or adapt licensing requirements when necessary to allow for the operation of outdoor classrooms.



## Duties, *Continued*

RCW 43.216.740

### Outdoor preschool

(3) [...] the department shall explore options for developing a quality rating and improvement system for outdoor preschools.

(4) The department shall select up to ten pilot locations during the first year of the pilot project. Beginning August 31, 2018, additional outdoor, nature-based early learning and child care programs may apply to participate in the pilot project.

## Who is Covered?



RCW 43.216.740

(7) For purposes of this section, "*outdoor, nature-based early learning and child care program*" means an agency-offered program operated primarily outdoors in which children are enrolled on a regular basis for three or more hours per day.

# Outdoor Preschools: Who is Covered?

RCW 43.216.740

- Nature-based
- Agency-offered program
- Operated primarily outdoors
- Children enrolled on regular basis
- 3+ hours per day
- Preschool-aged children



# Further Defining Outdoor Preschool in Washington

0005 (95) “Outdoor preschool”, or “outdoor, nature-based early learning and child care program” means an entity-offered program operated primarily outdoors in which children are enrolled on a regular basis for three or more hours per day. For purposes of this section, “primarily” means a participant must operate an outdoor classroom for more than fifty percent of the program hours per day. Such programs may be offered as:

- An outdoor component of a licensed early learning program; or
- A program operating entirely outdoors on private or public park land, with or without a permanently located outdoor classroom.”

0010 (1) (a) “The child care or early learning program must be provided with a philosophy, curriculum, and organizational practices that provide developmentally appropriate early childhood education and environmental education;”



# Legal Structure of Pilot Program

## Revised Code of Washington (RCW)

RCW 43.216.740 authorizes and funds the pilot project, requires DCYF to promulgate rules.



## Washington Administrative Code (WAC)

Chapter 110-300D WAC is a set of rules used to administer the pilot project. Require each pilot participant to sign contract.



## Outdoor Classroom Agreement

Contract between the program and DCYF. Requires each pilot participant to follow draft rules, our outdoor preschool pilot standards.



## Outdoor Preschool Pilot Standards

“Touchstone Standards.” Draft licensing rules that allow DCYF to test rules during pilot but allows change-on-the-fly flexibility.



# Social Responsibility

By licensing outdoor preschools, we can:

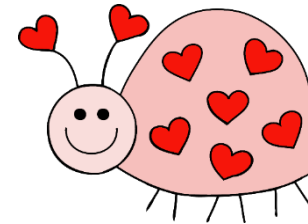
1. Increase options for all families.
2. Increase access for families that need subsidies, regulated or full-day care.
3. Promote connections to nature for more children.



# Questions?



# What Do We Have in Common?





# Pilot Project Overview



# Reporting to Legislature

## Pilot Project Research Questions

Can the outdoor preschool model help expand access to early learning programs?

- Enrollment and waitlists
- Family surveys
- Cost analysis

Can the outdoor preschool model help expand access to quality early learning programs?

- Injury/illness reports
- Attendance
- Quality measures: ECERS-3, CLASS, ERS-3i

How can the outdoor preschool model participate in a state QRIS?

- Potential alternative quality measures and coaching needs



# Participant Overview

- **Advisory Group**
  - Directors of current programs
  - Includes up to 10 pilot sites (implementing group) and others (observation group)
- **Program Types**
  - Nature preschools (with indoor facility)
    - May be already licensed
  - Nature center-based programs
  - All-outdoor programs
    - With or without a permanently located outdoor classroom
  - Gardens/farming included



Permanently-located outdoor classroom of an all-outdoor program at the Tacoma Nature Center.



# Timeline: August 2017 – August 2021



# Outdoor Preschool Licensing Standards



# Outdoor Preschool Pilot Standards Development



# Best Practices and Research



- Natural Start Alliance Best Practice Standards
- National Outdoor Leadership School
- Outward Bound
- USFS
- Leave-No-Trace
- Washington State Department of Health
- Washington State Department of Agriculture
- Research into “risky” play, benefits and potential injury, nature education
  - Mariana Brussoni (British Columbia)
  - Ellen Sandseter (Norway)
  - David Sobel (Antioch, NH)



# Outdoor Preschool – Specialized Standards

- Professional requirements for environmental education **and** early childhood education
- Smaller group size and ratios (maximum 16, 1:6)
- Teaching focus on boundaries and self-regulation
- Benefit-risk assessment for new or changing environment/activity
- Policies and Procedures
  - Activities: tree-climbing, tool use and campfires.
  - Hygiene: toileting, hand-washing and eating.
  - Family Engagement: proper clothing, commitment to outdoors and environmental education.





# Questions?



# Approach to Risk, Risky Play and Protecting Children

- **Hazard** = a source of harm that is not obvious to the child, such that the potential for injury is hidden; or a source of harm that is greater than a child can manage to avoid.
- **Risk** = a situation in which a child can recognize and evaluate a challenge and decide on a course of action, although there is the potential for injury. In this context, risk can be necessary to support healthy child development.
- **Risky Play** = play that is thrilling, exciting and where there is a risk of physical injury. This includes play involving heights, speed, dangerous tools or near dangerous elements (e.g., fall into something).
- **Benefit-Risk Assessment** = a process of identifying hazards and risky play elements in early childhood outdoor play and making plans to mitigate children's risk of injury while maintaining the developmental benefits for children.



# 0471 Outdoor Preschool Benefit-Risk Assessments, Risk Management Policies and Waivers (1)

(1) Outdoor preschool providers must have and implement benefit-risk assessments and risk management plans, reviewed by the department, and under the following circumstances:

- (a) Selection of a site
- (b) For different seasons as conditions change
- (c) For risky play activities
- (d) To provide guidance for staffing and staff policies.



# 0471 Outdoor Preschool Benefit-Risk Assessments, Risk Management Policies and Waivers (2)

(2) Outdoor preschools must have risk management policies and procedures to address potential hazards and risks of their nature-based program, including:

- (a) Encountering pets and wildlife
- (b) Interacting with strangers
- (c) Campfire activities
- (d) Water activities or supervision near bodies of water
- (e) Using an emergency shelter
- (f) Required clothing
- (g) Using any public facilities or buildings
- (h) Climbing natural features
- (i) Foraging or Egg Collection and Consumption
- (j) Encountering poisonous species
- (k) Use of sharp tools
- (l) Missing child protocols
- (m) Toileting
- (n) Hand-washing



# 0471 Outdoor Preschool Benefit-Risk Assessments, Risk Management Policies and Waivers (3-6)

- (3) Parents or guardians must sign an outdoor preschool risk waiver that acknowledges and accepts the potential hazards and risks associated with the outdoor preschool program.
- (4) A copy of the signed waiver is kept with the child's records.
- (5) Staff must be trained on the applicable outdoor preschool benefit-risk assessments, and risk management policies and procedures.
- (6) Staff must consider the daily health and safety needs of children and staff.



# Tree Climbing in the Squaxin Forest

## Risk

## Benefit



Up high, could fall

Smooth roots, could be slippery

Only room for one, could be conflict

One teacher stands nearby to assist

Discuss risk of slipping and need for turn-taking with children

Surrounded by cultural practice of cedar bark harvesting

Confidence and competence from "risky" activity of tree climbing

Familiarity with root systems and bark texture



# Questions?



# Risky Play – Research and Reflection



Reflect: What are the hazards and risks of your environment? (i.e. weather, wild animals)

How would you manage those challenges? (i.e. shelter, clothing, supervision)





# Addressing DCYF Liability

## Programmatically

- Teacher qualifications, training and experience (e.g., two years in nature-based education)
- Site-specific policies based on benefit-risk assessment
- Extreme weather emergency plans
- Requirements for campfires, water supervision, missing children protocols, etc.

## Legally

- Pilot is voluntary
- Licensing mechanism: program must follow rules, contract and standards
- Risk waiver for parents to sign is required
- Land use agreement required
- Program insurance required (\$100,000 per occurrence)



# Licensing and Monitoring in Practice

- Mirror child care licensing – just tweak to fit outside
  - Specialized standards (e.g. extreme weather plans, increased supervision)
  - Applications (e.g. maps and back-up staff)
  - Data collection systems (e.g. paper, Excel, attendance, filing benefit-risk assessments and policies)
  - Licensing and monitoring cycles (e.g., initial, initial to full, annual unannounced monitoring)



# Licensing and Monitoring in Practice – Staffing

- Need specialized licensing staff
  - Value outdoor, nature-based play
  - Familiarity and comfort in the outdoors
  - Gives staff the ability to check that risk management plans are reasonable for the area
  - Specific gear – rain gear, boots, snow shoes, waterproof data gathering systems
  - Specific trainings – value of field time – our special “boot camp”



# Pilot Licensing Process



Two licensed outdoor preschool programs

- Met all initial licensing requirements
- Licensed in early September 2019

Three applications in process

- For programs with no facility
- Initial licensing inspection in October 2019

Three programs receiving support for the application



# How Would This Work for You?

## Weather and environmental considerations

- Clothing, shelter, emergency preparedness?

## Legal context

- Government-run program, public-private partnership?

## Urban and rural area options

- Priority areas, ideal opportunities, community input?

## Build off existing standards

- Camp guidelines, school-age standards, using the Washington standards?

## Partners in your area

- Park directors, child care providers?



# Questions | Feedback



## Recommended Resources

- Last Child in the Woods - Richard Louv
- Nature Preschools and Forest Kindergartens: The Handbook for Outdoor Learning - David Sobel (Editor)
- Children and Nature Network
- Natural Start Alliance



# Thank you!

## Contact:

Aliza Yair [aliza.yair@dcyf.wa.gov](mailto:aliza.yair@dcyf.wa.gov)

Debbie Groff [debbie.groff@dcyf.wa.gov](mailto:debbie.groff@dcyf.wa.gov)

Tyler Farmer [tyler.farmer@dcyf.wa.gov](mailto:tyler.farmer@dcyf.wa.gov)

## Visit:

<https://www.dcyf.wa.gov/about/government-community/advisory/opp>







# Nature contact and children's health: a systematic review

Amber L. Fyfe-Johnson, ND, PhD; Marnie F. Hazlehurst, MS; Greg N. Bratman, PhD; Rick Thomas, MESM, MS; Sara Park Perrins, EdM; Kimberly Garrett, MPH, Edgar Marcuse, MD, MPH, FAAP; Pooja S. Tandon, MD, MPH, FAAP



## Background:

- Daily outdoor play is encouraged by the AAP; exposure to nature may offer independent benefits for children's health.
- COVID-19 related school closures and activity restrictions have highlighted inequities in opportunities for children to play outdoors.
- The lack of accessible, systematically reviewed evidence on the effects of nature contact has been a barrier to advocacy by pediatricians and the health care community.

## Objective:

- To conduct a systematic review to evaluate and aggregate the evidence regarding the impacts of nature contact on children's health and well-being.

**Financial disclosures:** None.

**Funding source:** BestStart Washington

**Contact information:** afj@wsu.edu



## Methods:

- We followed Preferred Reporting Items for Systematic Reviews and Meta-Analyses (PRISMA) guidelines for systematic reviews.
- Database search used PubMed, CINAHL, PsycInfo, ERIC, Scopus, and Web of Science through June 2018.
- Two reviewers reached consensus for review inclusion, nature exposure category, and quality assessment using the Mixed Methods Appraisal Tool (MMAT), a reliable and valid metric.
- Strength of evidence was determined by consensus using the MMAT, number of studies, N within each study, strength of association, consistency in results, and variability in outcomes.

## Results:

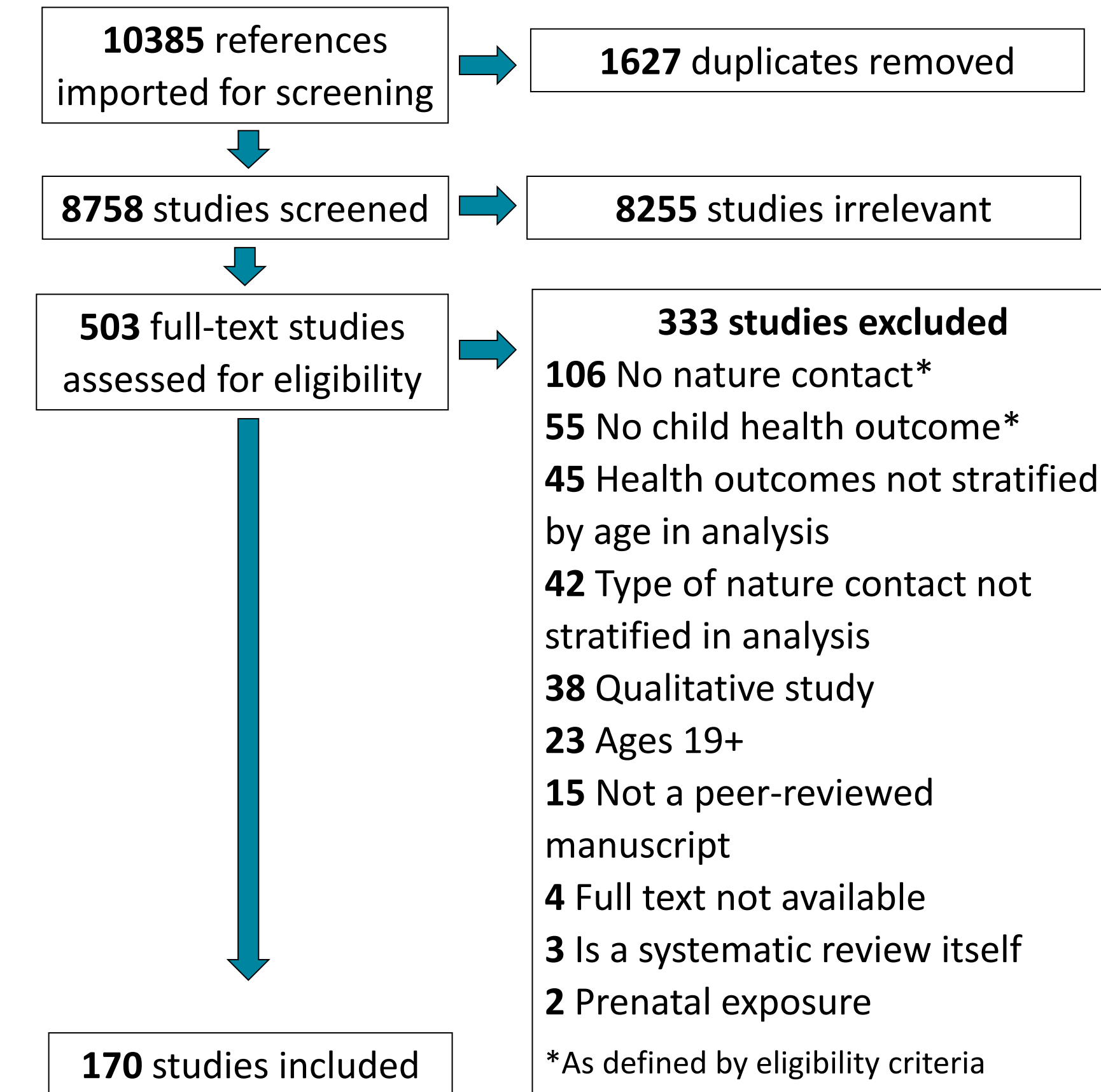
- Of the 8758 studies initially identified, 170 were included in the review.
- Most studies included were observational (n=133, 78%) and examined the presence of natural environments around residential or school locations (n=92, 54%).
- The strongest strength of evidence (moderate+) was found for physical activity and behavioral/ mental health outcomes.
- For nature exposure, the strongest strength of evidence (moderate +) was found for green space/park proximity to home and activity in greenspace.

**Table. Summary of strength of evidence, stratified by health outcome.**

Health outcomes	Study designs (n)				Findings	Strength of evidence <sup>1</sup>
	RCTs	Exp	XS	Long		
<b>Physical activity (n=75)</b>	1	10	58	6	All studies included physical activity or related activities (sedentary time). Objective child measures of physical activity were used in most (n=43) studies. Most studies reported positive associations (n=51), n=22 reported mixed/null associations, and n=2 reported negative associations. Studies with positive associations spanned all ages.	<b>Moderate+</b>
<b>Behavioral/mental health (n=40)</b>	2	13	15	10	Most studies (n=35) found positive associations for a range of outcomes, including attention (n=11) and depression- (n=6) related outcomes; n=5 found null or mixed results. No studies reported negative results.	<b>Moderate+</b>
<b>BMI (n=27)</b>	1	1	22	3	All studies included BMI or BMI-defined categories for adiposity status (overweight/obesity). Collectively, studies reported both positive associations (n=14) and mixed or null associations (n=11); a small number reported negative associations (n=2).	<b>Moderate-</b>
<b>Cardiovascular/metabolic (n=8)</b>	1	4	2	1	Outcomes included heart rate or heart rate variability (3), vagal tone (n=1), blood pressure (n=2), blood lipids (n=1) and HOMA-IR (n=1). Natural environments were positively associated with all outcomes, except blood lipid levels (null results).	<b>Low+</b>
<b>Academic &amp; learning (n=14)</b>	1	6	6	1	Outcomes included tests of working memory, cognitive performance, or attention (n=6), academic performance (grades, test scores, n=4), language development (n=1), chronic absenteeism (n=1), and science knowledge (n=1). Studies found positive (n=8), mixed or nonsignificant (n=5), and negative associations (n=1).	<b>Low+</b>
<b>Asthma &amp; allergy (n=10)</b>	0	0	9	1	Outcomes included parent-reported and physician diagnosed asthma, allergy, and related symptoms. Studies found positive (n=5), negative (n=1) and nonsignificant or mixed associations (n=4).	<b>Low</b>
<b>Other health outcomes (n=19)</b>	2	5	10	2	Outcomes were variable, with the most common being general well-being (n=5), quality of life (n=4), and diet related factors. Most studies (n=14) found beneficial associations for at least one of the outcomes examined; 5 reported null associations.	<b>N/A</b>

<sup>1</sup> Strength of evidence rated on a 7-point scale: low, low+, moderate-, moderate, moderate+, high-, high. Study design abbreviations: randomized controlled trials (RCTs); experimental study (exp); cross-sectional (XS); longitudinal (long). Note that the N's add up to more than 170 because studies were included more than once if they included health outcomes in more than one category.

## Figure. PRISMA diagram



## Conclusions:

- Current evidence is strongest for the associations between nature exposure and physical activity and behavioral/mental health outcomes in childhood.
- Clinicians should recommend outdoor time and nature exposure for children, especially for physical activity and behavioral/mental health.



MINOR	SERIOUS	CRITICAL
Does not require DCYF Retention	Requires an Incident/Injury Form and Appropriate Reporting Per WAC	Requires Incident/Injury Form, Critical Incident Report via WA Compass, and Appropriate Reporting Per WAC

<b>Injury/Incident</b>
------------------------

<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>○ Abrasion</li> <li>○ Bruising</li> <li>○ Open wound/cut</li> <li>○ Sprain/strain/twist</li> <li>○ Pain/inflammation/bump</li> <li>○ Dental concern</li> <li>○ Nursemaid’s elbow/wrist</li> <li>○ Seizures <i>(unless resulting in serious injury)</i></li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>○ Injury resulting in overnight hospital stay</li> <li>○ Severe neck or head injury <i>(such as a confirmed concussion)</i></li> <li>○ Choking or serious unexpected breathing problems</li> <li>○ Severe bleeding</li> <li>○ Shock or acute confused state</li> <li>○ Sudden unconsciousness</li> <li>○ Chemicals in eyes, on skin, or ingested</li> <li>○ Near-drowning</li> <li>○ One or more broken bones</li> <li>○ Severe burn requiring professional medical care</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>○ Fatality/near-fatality</li> <li>○ Poisoning</li> <li>○ Overdose of a chemical substance</li> <li>○ Known media attention</li> <li>○ Area Administrator’s (or their designee’s) discretion</li> </ul>
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<b>Steps to Take</b>
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<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>○ Review I/I received from early learning program</li> <li>○ Consult with supervisor if there are concerns</li> <li>○ Call Intake if any child abuse/neglect allegations</li> <li>○ Fill out and retain I/I if rises to Serious</li> <li>○ Return I/I to early learning program if Minor only</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>○ Notified by Intake and/or early learning program or credible media source (all serious injuries must be called into Intake)</li> <li>○ Consult with supervisor</li> <li>○ Receive I/I form</li> <li>○ Ensure form completed in full and accurately</li> <li>○ Put I/I form licensing file</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>○ Notified by Intake and/or early learning provider or credible media source (medication/chemical overdose, poisoning, or fatality/near fatality must be called into Intake)</li> <li>○ Consult with supervisor immediately</li> <li>○ Supervisor complete CIR in WA Compass</li> <li>○ Area Administrator - review and forward to appropriate personnel</li> <li>○ Senior Child Care Administrator - review and forward</li> </ul>
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In response to the COVID-19 pandemic, Washington State's Department of Children, Youth, and Families (DCYF) is supporting early learning and child care programs in meeting the recommendations of the Department of Health (DOH), and continuing to provide high quality programs for children and families in need. The **DOH COVID-19 Guidance for Child Care** and the **DCYF COVID-19 FAQ** have the most updated information on how child care programs can create healthy and safe environments for children and communities during the COVID-19 pandemic.

Taking children outside more often and creating additional space between groups of children are some of the **recommendations** made by DOH. Bringing children outdoors into authentic natural settings provides many other benefits essential to children's learning and healthy development, and this can be achieved by creating more **naturalized learning environments** or by bringing children into an outdoor, natural environment.

This resource is intended to support early learning and child care programs to bring children to an outdoor, nature-based environment, and guide their *additional* considerations when applying for an **emergency waiver**, or an emergency child care license, to provide an outdoor, nature-based emergency programming.

Please visit **this page** for more information about COVID-19 related waivers and guidance, and you may email **emergencychildcare@dcyf.wa.gov** for more information or to apply for an emergency child care license.

These considerations follow the organization of WAC 110-300, and are based on the **Outdoor Preschool Pilot Standards**. However, the waiver process is not a replacement for the outdoor preschool pilot licensing process.

## Considerations for Outdoor, Nature-Based Childcare Programs

### Child Outcomes

- Benefits of outdoor and nature-based play include:
  - Improved executive functioning
  - Reduced ADHD symptoms and improved focus
  - Supported risk assessment, creativity and problem solving
  - Increased physical activity and reduced obesity
  - Improved proprioception and balance
  - Improved eyesight and hearing development
  - More space for children to spread out and greater circulation of the air
- Nature has positive impacts on adults' stress levels and well-being
- For more information, please refer to:
  - **Benefits of Connecting Children with Nature** from the **Natural Learning Initiative**.
  - **Tools and Resources** from the **Children & Nature Network** and,
  - **The International Journal of Early Childhood Environmental Education** from the **Natural Start Alliance**.

### The Environment

- Ensure Access
  - If using a public park, check with the park manager to ensure the intended use is permitted.
  - Create a land use agreement with the land owner, park director or manager.
  - Consider the barriers for families, such as transportation or access to the drop off area.
- Ensure Affordance and Benefits
  - Outdoor program locations should be intentionally selected based on their affordances.
  - These may include:
    - Shade and areas for comfort or quiet, such as shielded areas
    - Opportunities to explore novel areas, native plants and wildlife, and/or to deepen their connection with a consistent location
    - Sufficient space for rigorous physical activities, such as open fields or trails for hiking
    - Loose, open-ended objects, such as rocks, sticks, sand, and logs
    - Water features, such as a stream or pond
    - Access to toileting facilities
- Hazards and Risks
  - You should not select a site with major hazards. A hazard in outdoor programming is a source of harm that is not obvious to the child, such that the potential for injury is hidden; or there is a source of harm that is greater than a child can manage to avoid, and that staff cannot control.
  - Common hazards in outdoor programming include:
    - heavily traffic roads

- extreme weather conditions
  - deep and/or swift moving water
  - toxic environmental pollutants
  - dangerous or toxic plants and animals
- Risky play (aka adventure play) may be appropriate and beneficial to children's development.
- Beneficial risks can be identified and managed by the child or a group of children, while supportive adults can ensure children are safe, learning, and enjoying themselves.
- Common risky, adventure play elements in outdoor programming include
  - Balancing or climbing on logs or other natural features
  - Sliding or running down hills
  - Lifting or carrying large branches
  - Playing or running on uneven terrain
- Prepare for the shared use of public areas and facilities.
  - Have a nearby back-up location.
  - Use cones or string to mark the boundaries of your program and/or separate groups.
  - Bring supplies to sanitize public restrooms before children's use.
- Minimize your environmental impact
  - Aim for minimal impact on the environment, do not litter or allow children to damage delicate ecosystems.
  - Ask the park's director or a naturalist for advice about your particular area, if needed.
  - Habitat restoration projects do have impact, but a positive one. See if tree-planting or weeding is a possible activity.
  - For more information, please refer to: Leave No Trace <https://lnt.org/why/7-principles/>
- Weather
  - In addition to extreme temperatures, weather considerations include high winds (above 30 mph are generally considered unsafe for pre-school aged children), poor air quality, lightning storms, and hurricanes.
  - Check the weather every morning, and inform families early if there is a need to cancel the program.
- Eating and water access
  - Consider providing children with a labeled water bottle, for their use only. This aids in reducing cross-contamination, reduces the amount of dishes, and helps staff monitor children's water intake.
  - Ensure the water source being used meeting water safety requirements.
  - Consider serving food that does not need to be refrigerated, or check that your cooler and ice packs will be able to keep food sufficiently cool, according to food safety requirements.
  - Rather than serving family-style meals, consider pre-packing lunch boxes for children and using a tarp or table cloth that is easily sanitized to provide a clean surface for eating.
- Handwashing

- All programs, including outdoor programs, should be in areas that have adequate handwashing facilities on site. If a program must operate where there are not sufficient facilities, temporary handwashing stations with running water must be set up. If you need to set up a handwashing station, ensure you are bringing a water dispenser that allows for running water, liquid soap, a bucket for the waste water, individual-use towels, and a bag for used towels.
- If soap and water are not readily available, use an alcohol-based hand gel with at least 60% alcohol and preferably fragrance-free.
- Toileting
  - Public restrooms may be used, however, programs should bring supplies to sanitize surfaces before children's use.
  - Outdoor programs, in partnership with the public park or landowner, may rent and provide a portable chemical toilet, which can be locked and designated for the program's use, only.
  - Any backcountry toileting must be done according to Leave-No-Trace guidelines, principles, and/or by the permission of a park's land manager.
  - Composting toilets are also acceptable, and should meet the DOH guidelines (<https://www.doh.wa.gov/Portals/1/Documents/Pubs/337-016.pdf>)
- Sleep and Rest
  - Finding quiet and restful spaces for children is an important consideration for child development and basic needs.
  - Programs may bring sleeping pads and sleeping bags for children and may use large tents or picnic shelters, as appropriate for their location, and increasing the space between children to 6 feet when possible.
- First aid supplies
  - First-aid kits should be on-site and immediately accessible to program staff. They are often carried in the staff's backpacks. Additional supplies may include hand-warmers (not to directly touch skin) and fire-suppression blankets.
  - Locations requiring staff trained in Wilderness First Aid may pack additional items in their first aid kits.
- Storage and carrying supplies
  - Land use agreements may include storage on-site, however programs should be careful about the security of those locations.
  - Often programs will bring all of their supplies with them, and use a cart to bring all of the necessary supplies with them. When transporting supplies, one staff person should have both hands free.
  - For adults, backpacks with hip-bands are the most supportive when carrying heavy loads
  - Children should only wear child-sized bags, preferably with a buckle across the chest, if they will be going on long walks with their own bags.

## Program Administration and Oversight

- Insurance
  - Programs should ensure that their use of an outdoor, nature-based location is covered by their insurance policy.
- Parent Handbooks
  - Parents should be notified of policies and procedures that will be used in an outdoor, nature-based environment.
- Child Records
  - Programs should bring essential child information, such as emergency contact and medication authorizations on any outdoor, nature-based location.
- Emergency Preparedness
  - Provide staff and families a means to contact the facility for updates and concerns. Assure that families have provided current emergency contact information.
  - Programs should identify an emergency shelter location close to the outdoor program location to respond to a variety of emergency situations (lockdown, extreme weather, dangerous wildlife siting, etc.)
  - Programs must ensure they have access to the emergency shelter during program hours.
  - Programs must ensure a supply of extra food and clothing is kept or available at this location.

## Interactions and Curriculum

- Teaching children about the pandemic
  - It is important to teach children about following health and hygiene guidelines in the nature-based setting.
  - Natural resources used by children may be collected new each day, and children should be encouraged to use and keep resources separated (e.g. making your own nest or habitat).
- Setting boundaries
  - It is important to teach children about the boundaries for play in an outdoor area “beyond the fence”. Programs may use ribbons or cones to support children in remembering the boundary.
- Freeze and return
  - Staff may establish a call, like a bird noise, that signals to children the need to freeze or return in response to a perceived danger or when going too far away from the group.
- Outdoor, Nature-based Education
  - There are many benefits and opportunities to outdoor, nature-based education. The Natural Start Alliance states “In a nature-based early education program, nature is a setting for the program and an object of study. In addition, the care and protection of nature and the environment are regarded as a key outcome of the program, along with healthy child development. Some describe these nature-based early education programs as learning in nature, about nature, and for nature.”

- Since outdoor, nature-based programs provide less man-made materials (like puzzles, books, toys, etc.) it is important that staff understand how to support children's learning with the opportunities and affordances provided by nature.
  - For more information, please refer to:
  - **The Nature-Based Professional Practice Guidebook**
  - Head Start Nature-Based Learning and Development  
<https://eclkc.ohs.acf.hhs.gov/learning-environments/article/nature-based-learning-development>
- Supervision Outdoors and During Risky Play
  - Staff must actively supervise children at all times, and should visually account for all children regularly.
  - Supervising children while climbing a natural feature (like a log, tree or boulder) may require a teacher to be in arm's reach of the child's midriff as they start to climb a few feet off the ground, effectively acting as a barrier and being able to provide support as needed.
    - Children should not be allowed to climb a feature that has an obvious hazard in the fall zone, such as sharp tree stumps or rocks, until those objects have been removed.
    - Children should not be picked up and placed into trees or on top of boulders. Instead, staff should encourage children to accept their current levels of ability as they work towards goals.
  - Campfire activities, if allowed on the property, must follow all US Forest Service guidelines for fire safety (<https://smokeybear.com/en/prevention-how-tos/campfire-safety>), and should remain small and manageable. Children should remain at least three feet away from the fire and if a child is supporting a staff member to build or tend the fire, there should be 1:1 support and supervision.
    - **Outdoor Preschool Pilot Standard 0351** is a good resource for campfire safety considerations.
- Walkie-Talkies and Phones
  - Program staff should have a way to communicate with one another, as well as with program leadership, at any time.
  - Program staff must have a way to call emergency services (like poison control or 911) if needed.

## Professional Development, Training, and Requirements of Staff

- Prepare staff for outdoor safety.
  - Be aware of the hazards and risks of an outdoor location prior to bringing children there.
  - Visit the location and create safety plans to manage any hazards (see Hazards and Risks below for more information).
  - If the program is operating more than thirty minutes from emergency medical care, consider requiring a current Wilderness First Aid and CPR certificate for at least one staff member.



- Clearly establish who is responsible for bringing sufficient water, food, clothing, hygiene and sanitary supplies.
- Develop plans to have coverage for additional staff to work in the event of increased staff absences. If you need a substitute, The Imagine Institute oversees the **Early Care and Education Substitute Pool**.
- Prepare staff for outdoor, nature-based education.
  - Outdoor and environmental education training or experience for lead teachers is preferred.
  - Information about parks or natural areas can often be found on the State's Parks website <https://parks.state.wa.us/281/Find-a-Park> or if visiting a city or county park, please visit the relevant website to find out more.
  - Create shared expectations about routines, policies and procedures.
    - **Outdoor Preschool Pilot Standard** 0471 has a list of outdoor, nature-based activities that may require a policy or procedure, which should be based on the benefit-risk assessment of the activity and the location.
  - Staff should have or be supplied with the clothing and gear appropriate for the weather.
- Staffing, ratios and supervision
  - The staff-to-child ratios for outdoor, nature-based programming should depend on children's age and developmental levels, as well as the hazards and risks in the location.
  - A 2:12, or 3:18 ratio of staff to children is generally considered best practice for preschool age children (2.5 – 6 years old).
  - Programs operating within ¼ mile of a body of water and/or with water play in shallow water should have staff who can swim and life-saving equipment appropriate to the body of water.
  - If activities will occur in a body of water that is more than 24 inches deep at the lowest point, a lifeguard (or staff with a lifeguard certificate) must be present, along with appropriate life-saving equipment.

## Family Engagement

- Communicate with families about health and safety in the outdoors
  - Communicate in advance with families about the positive impacts of nature, the health and safety precautions being taken in the outdoor program.
  - Use these conversations to learn about families' experiences and concerns about being outdoors, and create culturally responsive practices.
- Ensure children are dressed for the weather
  - Children must be dressed appropriately for the weather and activities.
  - Have extra clothing available in case families forget or can't afford the appropriate clothing.
  - REI has a great resource **here** for understanding the safest way to dress.
- Communicate with families about your location
  - Families may need to arrange alternative drop-off or pick-up times, and should know where you plan to be in advance.



Reduce risk  
of disease  
and improve  
health during  
COVID-19—  
and beyond

Considerations for Child Care Guidance<sup>1</sup>

# GET OUTSIDE!

**This document** offers considerations to agencies, including state, county, and municipal regulators, and quality improvement assessors, offering guidance for the operation of child care centers during COVID-19, with a focus on keeping children healthy by encouraging and supporting increased time outside.

**Risk of spreading COVID-19 may be reduced if children and adults spend more time outside.** The American Academy of Pediatrics (AAP) has issued guidance encouraging time outdoors to mitigate transmission of the virus in child care settings. Studies suggest that exposure to sunlight rapidly deactivates the virus in the air and on surfaces. Open-air spaces are less likely to concentrate the virus than confined indoor spaces and outdoor moving air disperses the virus, lowering the risk of transmission.

Decades of research also show that spending time outside in nature supports healthy child development by increasing physical activity, supporting healthy eating through hands-on gardening, reducing stress, and enhancing social-emotional development. For evidence supporting enhanced outdoor spaces at child care centers, see [Benefits of Engaging Children with Nature](#) and this [Research Brief](#).

The COVID-19 pandemic has highlighted the potential health benefits of regular time outside, particularly as child care centers seek to reduce disease transmission and keep businesses viable. Considerations are based on a review of COVID-related guidance for child care from the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC), AAP guidance for child care and preschools, a review of state COVID-19 guidance from 18 states, and interviews with selected child care regulators, advocates, and public health experts. These suggestions may support the development of more explicit guidance for using outdoor spaces at child care centers as an immediate means of mitigating COVID-19 transmission and in recognition of the long-term benefits of spending time outdoors.

## Encourage Child Care Providers to Spend Time Outdoors

To date, state child care guidance related to COVID-19 has mainly focused on health and safety issues related to indoor spaces of child care facilities. While this is critical, current evidence suggests that increasing child care time outside is a viable strategy to reduce the risk of virus transmission. AAP's COVID-19-related guidance notes "indoor spaces are more risky than outdoor spaces," and outdoors "can and should be used to increase the space ... for each child." AAP's advice for preschools goes even farther, describing outdoors as a high priority strategy because it is hard to perfectly execute mask wearing and social distancing with younger age groups. Further, CDC's COVID-19 guidance for children states that "indoor spaces are more risky than outdoor spaces, where it might be harder to keep children apart and there is less ventilation."

Based on prevailing public health guidance, some states are currently encouraging more time outdoors during COVID-19, including [Oregon](#), [Washington](#), [New Mexico](#), [Kansas](#), [California](#), and [Colorado](#). Supportive guidance from state regulatory agencies is a crucial tool to help child care providers feel confident in moving activities substantially outdoors during the pandemic. Therefore, regulators may consider incorporating language in official guidance documents to codify the importance of the outdoors as a COVID-19 mitigation strategy. Guidance may be as direct as "Increase time spent outdoors," as in Colorado, or include stronger encouragement such as that provided by Kansas to "consider moving the majority of indoor learning activities outdoors." Creating

<sup>1</sup> This document is produced by the National Wildlife Federation's Early Childhood Health Outdoors (ECHO) program and North Carolina State University's Natural Learning Initiative (NLI). It is one of two, targeting child care providers and regulators respectively, addressing COVID-19 transmission reduction in child care facilities by increasing time outside. A third document presents the case for outside time as a broad strategy for reducing risk of COVID-19 spread for children and accompanying adults.

online, state-sanctioned resources specifically focused on outdoor use can further justify children being outside for a substantial portion of the day. This may be as simple as a declaration of the positive health impacts of increasing time outside or as complete as Washington's [6-page guidance document](#) for temporary outside programs authorized during the pandemic.

As regulators develop guidance to support time outdoors as a transmission reduction strategy in child care, the CDC, AAP, state health agencies, and other prominent public health institutions can play a pivotal role in explicitly supporting more time outdoors as a COVID-19 transmission reduction strategy.

## Facilitate the Healthy Use of Child Care Outdoor Settings

The following suggestions may aid child care regulatory agencies in providing guidance that supports outdoor play and learning while reducing health risks. By considering the suggestions below, regulators may facilitate more practical, frequent, and comfortable outdoor activities at child care centers, while continuing to follow prevailing COVID-19 public health recommendations.

**Mask use.** The use of masks/face coverings should follow local and state guidance and regulations. For child care providers, there is general consensus about the importance of using masks, which may be reflected in [state policy guidance](#). Currently, there is no consensus from public health officials on guidance for mask use in young children (birth to 8), with the exception of clear consensus to *NOT use face coverings on babies and children under age two*

*because of the danger of suffocation.* While the CDC encourages the use of masks on younger children "[when feasible](#)," they also [recognize](#) that "younger children (e.g., preschool or early elementary aged) may be unable to wear a mask properly, particularly for an extended period." State child care regulators and providers would benefit from more clarity from public health experts on mask-wearing for children age two and up, in this case in relation to the use of outdoor settings where open air and UV rays from [sunlight](#) may reduce risk of COVID-19 transmission. In the meantime, regulators may refer to the best state and national public health guidance on mask use, while encouraging compatible strategies to reduce COVID-19 transmission described in this resource.

**Create groupings or "cohorts."** Both AAP and CDC suggest establishing stable groups of children and adult(s), called cohorts, as a strategy to reduce the risk of community spread originating from child care facilities. As AAP comments, "The best strategy is keeping smaller class ratios and cohort grouping throughout the day." The CDC recommends: "If possible, child care classes should include the same group each day, and the same child care providers should remain with the same group each day." While there is not consensus on the need for physical distancing of individual children within cohorts, child care regulators can at least encourage the use of a cohort approach to prevent mixing between established groups while adhering to local or state guidelines for physical distancing, masks, and sanitation.

Regulators may recommend a variety of strategies that encourage providers to utilize the outdoors and maintain



Linear pollinator garden of perennial flowering plants offers endless fascination and motivation to learn for young children.—NLI

separation *between cohorts*. One strategy is to encourage providers to maintain physical separation of 6 feet between cohorts when outside, as is recommended in [Washington State](#). If there is adequate space in outdoor settings, encourage providers to subdivide space to include several ‘learning settings’ where multiple cohorts may spend time outside simultaneously while maintaining physical distance. These learning settings, which could each serve a distinct cohort at a particular time, can include lawns, outdoor classrooms, sand play, water play, vegetable gardens, or many other [activity setting ideas](#). To facilitate cohort separation and create distinct settings, outdoor space may be subdivided through physical or visual partitions (e.g., transparent shower curtains, fabric, snow fencing). Colored T-shirts or existing classroom names could further help children distinguish groups and help providers prevent cohort mixing.

**Managing children’s movement outdoors.** To facilitate cohort separation, regulators can encourage providers to establish easy-to-follow routes using physical or visual partitions (e.g., cones, flagging) to define movement between learning settings along designated pathways that are wide enough for groups to move quickly, in one direction. Adjustments to physical outdoor space may be complemented by establishing processes and timing for entering and exiting buildings and traveling between settings, thereby allowing providers to spend more time outside safely while minimizing risk of cohort mixing. By further subdividing the outdoor space with staggered timing, the CDC recommendation for “[staggering playground times](#)” can be followed while still encouraging more frequent use of the outdoors.

**Handwashing stations.** The CDC stresses the importance of handwashing with soap and potable running water, and recommends soap and water over the use of hand sanitizer. Regulators can encourage providers to set up outdoor handwashing stations including a large water dispenser (5- or 10-gallon) with soap and paper towels located nearby, with regular handwashing routines (e.g., when moving between learning settings). Hand hygiene advice is available from the [CDC](#).

**Outdoor sanitation and disinfection.** The CDC’s child care guidance for materials that may be used in outdoor settings states: “Routinely clean, sanitize, and disinfect surfaces and objects that are frequently touched, especially toys and games” and “Toys that cannot be cleaned and sanitized should not be used.” However, there is still an open question about the use of natural materials such as logs, sticks, sand, and rocks that may be of lower risk. For example, to avoid confusion about sand play, the CDC accepts the presence of sand and requires washing hands after use but not disinfection of sand. Neither does the [CDC](#) recommend disinfection of wooden surfaces (play structures, benches, tables) or



Open area with mud kitchen, gathering place, and rain barrel/plant care center accommodates independent groups of active children.—NLI

groundcovers (mulch, sand). Natural materials may be of lesser concern for virus transmission overall, but additional guidance from public health experts regarding expectations on the cleaning of natural play materials is needed.

For outdoor play equipment, the CDC indicates that [outdoor play areas](#) generally require routine cleaning, but do *not* require disinfection. Cleaning efforts should be focused on plastic or metal high-touch surfaces where hands frequently make direct contact, like grab bars and railings. The CDC recognizes that it is not practical to encourage or require disinfection of entire playground structures or sidewalks.

## Encourage Outdoor Enhancements

If existing child care outdoor spaces are to be used for a longer portion of the day, they need to be healthy, comfortable, and engaging. To achieve this, regulatory agencies can encourage creative use of outdoor space that reduces health risks and encourages more time spent outside.

### Low-cost enhancements for healthy play and learning.

Outdoor spaces need to provide a variety of opportunities for play and learning to keep children (and providers) creatively engaged outside day after day. State child care agencies may collaborate to develop or share resources that encourage short-term, low-cost, seasonally-meaningful outdoor enhancements that increase the diversity of play and learning opportunities, while also clarifying risks that need to be managed. [ECHO](#) and [NLI](#) have a variety of resources available to stimulate creative use of outdoor spaces and foster spontaneous, imaginative play and learning activities, making time outside more rich and inviting.

When state child care agencies consider whether to deter or prohibit the use of certain types of outdoor settings in areas with high community COVID-19 transmission, they may first consider whether there are strategies to manage or repurpose these features and minimize risks

while still providing opportunities for play and learning. For example, if playground equipment use is prohibited, repurposing surrounding use zones for other purposes may be considered rather than entirely closing off areas. If prohibitions are made, they should be specific to avoid generalizations that may limit safe outdoor activity. For example, while additional research is needed regarding the transmission of the virus through water, the CDC has recommended that all activities involving standing water be eliminated at child care centers. Unfortunately, that has led some centers to eliminate all water play, including sprinklers and ‘mud kitchens.’ More specific guidance on water play would be beneficial, especially during hot summer months.

**Shade/rain cover.** Sunlight can play an important role in rapidly deactivating the virus that causes COVID-19—both in the air and on surfaces. Managing spaces to encourage sunlight and reduce disease viability, especially in high-touch surfaces, may be an effective strategy. However, regulators and providers are aware that over-exposure to UV light is a health risk, so shade is a critical consideration. State regulators not already requiring a percentage of outdoor areas to be covered by tree canopy or shade structures may consider these requirements to facilitate more time outdoors. Cost-effective, temporary shade structures may include tents, sails, umbrellas, and pergolas, with trees serving as a preferred long-term solution. The use of covered outdoor areas with open sides for ventilation might be specifically encouraged when existing child care facilities do not have the ability to open windows, providing an additional option for children to be brought outdoors in inclement weather.

**Programming for healthy play and learning.** Providers may need programming support as the amount of time spent outdoors with children increases and some may be unfamiliar with ways to manage outdoor spaces and program activities to encourage children’s play and learning. State child care agencies could work in collaboration with community colleges and nonprofit organizations to incentivize providers to take online training [courses](#) and [webinars](#) in early childhood outdoor play and learning. State regulators and early childhood organizations may support and advertise opportunities through existing channels.

## Explore Expansion Beyond Licensed Outdoor Areas

If child care facilities seek additional outdoor space to safely and comfortably accommodate multiple cohorts of children, regulators can work with providers and across sectors to enable child care activities outdoors beyond the traditional licensed space during the pandemic using the following strategies.

**Repurposed contiguous space.** If supported by state regulatory agencies, providers may think creatively about

areas adjacent to licensed outdoor spaces, which may be enclosed and repurposed temporarily. Examples include areas in front of centers, adjacent wooded spaces or fields, and, possibly as a last resort, a fenced-off section of the parking area. Any such plan, even just beyond the licensed boundary, may be considered a “field trip” requiring parental permission. State regulators may also encourage development of experimental, COVID-responsive play areas emphasizing nature play. For example, Washington State is issuing emergency waivers to child care licensing requirements for “[outdoor nature-based emergency programming](#)” created as a response to COVID-19.

**Innovative ideas for urban locations.** Where outdoor space is really tight, child care agencies and providers may consider working with municipal agencies to repurpose and manage street infrastructure adjacent to or in the vicinity of child care facilities as a strategy to create additional outdoor space. Solutions include play streets ([more than a 100-year history in U.S. cities](#)), [parklets](#), and many innovations described in [Designing Streets for Kids](#), 2020 ([free download](#)).

**Walking field trips.** Building on longstanding field trip traditions, regulators may work across sectors to further enable outdoor activities beyond the licensed space, as feasible and with child safety as the priority. While regulators may consider canceling or prohibiting field trips that mix cohorts or involve assisted transportation (e.g., vehicles or ‘buggies’), guidance may explicitly encourage pedestrian excursions in the vicinity of child care facilities limited to a single cohort. Trips may include regular visits to an open space near the child care facility, or visits to uncrowded parks, greenways, community gardens, or cemeteries. Children may be taken on exploratory neighborhood ‘safaris’ within residential and commercial areas with proper regulatory guidance.

## Promote Outdoor Strategies for Kids and Providers

Child care agencies that issue COVID-19 guidance for providers may play a critical role in promoting more time outside as a strategy to reduce the risk of COVID-19, while supporting healthy child development. Use this document to inform guidance for providers. We invite you to share your progress with us ([echo@nwf.org](mailto:echo@nwf.org) and on the [NLI Get Outside! Blog](#)).

*Disclaimer: The Natural Learning Initiative (NLI), NC State University, the National Wildlife Federation, their partners, and supporting entities assume no responsibility for consequences arising from physical interventions using information contained in this document. Under no circumstances will liability be assumed for any loss or damage, including without limitation, indirect or consequential, incurred during installation, management, and use of such interventions. Highly recommended is adherence to relevant local, state, and national regulatory requirements concerning but not limited to health and safety, accessibility, licensing, and program regulation.*



# Nature-Based Competencies for Early Care and Education Professionals

A Supplement to the Washington State Core Competencies for Early Care and Education Professionals



Washington State Department of  
**CHILDREN, YOUTH & FAMILIES**



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## Background

In 2009, the Washington State Department of Children, Youth, and Families (DCYF, formerly the Washington State Department of Early Learning), established the [Washington State Core Competencies for Early Care and Education Professionals](#), which defines what professionals need to know and be able to do to provide quality care for young children (0-8 years of age).

The core competencies are important because they:

- Define what early care and education professionals need to know and be able to do to provide quality care and education for children.
- Serve as the foundation for decisions and practices carried out by professionals in all early care and education settings.
- Establish a set of standards for early care and education settings that support the professionalism of the field.
- Are an integral part of a comprehensive professional development system.

In 2017, following the development of these sets of core competencies, the Washington State legislature required DCYF to establish a four-year pilot project to license “outdoor, nature-based early learning and child care programs,” otherwise known as “outdoor preschools.”

Outdoor preschools are defined in the pilot project as a program operated primarily outdoors in a natural area, in which children are enrolled on a regular basis for three or more hours per day. Such programs may be offered as an outdoor, nature-based classroom for an otherwise licensed early learning program; or as a program operating entirely outdoors on private or public park land.

Outdoor preschools must have an educational philosophy and organizational and teaching practices that support nature-based early learning, which is sometimes also called early childhood environmental education or outdoor education.

DCYF recognizes that staff from outdoor preschools need specialized competencies – a particular set of knowledge, skills and attitudes – in order to be successful in caring for children in the outdoors and providing a nature-based education. Outdoor preschool staff must consider and plan for utilizing the natural environment in the curriculum, limit the impact of the program on the natural environment, and manage any risks associated with outdoor activities (including being prepared for the weather and the presence of various plants and animals).

DCYF also recognizes that regardless of the program type or setting, all children can benefit from nature-centered and nature-based learning experiences. By interacting with nature, children can develop a sense of belonging and connection to the natural world; children can explore and understand the relationships within their ecological community; and children’s learning and development in all curriculum areas can be improved with experiences with nature.



## Introduction

*The Nature-Based Competencies for Early Care and Education Professionals: A Supplement* is intended to support early care and education professionals to incorporate nature and natural elements into their practice in both indoor and outdoor early learning environments, as well as in outdoor preschools.

In 2019, a working group of stakeholders, tribal partners, and experts in nature-based and nature-centered early childhood education was established to develop this document, as part of the outdoor preschool pilot's requirement by the state legislature to "further investigate the benefits of outdoor, nature-based classrooms for Washington's children and families."

Working group members for this project included:

- Faculty from universities and colleges in WA
- Members of the WA Early Childhood Teacher Preparation Council
- Leaders and staff of independent environmental education teacher-training institutions
- Directors and staff of outdoor preschools
- Experts in child development
- Outdoor and environmental education experts from K-12
- Various DCYF staff
- Tribal representatives with an expertise in early learning

This document is intended to supplement the [Washington State Core Competencies for Early Care and Education Professionals](#) and will be used to:

- Establish professional competencies for professionals in outdoor, nature-based and nature-centered early childhood education.
- Build Washington's capacity to provide teacher training opportunities for nature-centered and nature-based early childhood education.
- Determine training and education requirements for nature-based early learning professionals.

## Nature-Based and Nature-Centered Competencies

*The Nature-Based Competencies for Early Care and Education Professionals*, as a supplemental document, describes only additional competencies that are suitable for nature-based and nature-centered education and care. These competencies are organized in the same framework and categories as the [Washington State Core Competencies for Early Care and Education Professionals](#). Please consider both documents together to understand the full range of knowledge, skills, and attitudes that professionals need.

In each content area, you will see **nature-based competencies** in bold font, while general or nature-centered competencies will be in plain font.

**Nature-based competencies** are especially for professionals providing education and care in a **nature-based setting**, such as for outdoor preschool programs. However, any professional leading an experience in nature, such as on a field trip or in a naturalized playground, will benefit from training and professional development in these competencies.

Nature-centered competencies, on the other hand, are applicable to professionals providing early education and care in any setting, and which provide to children the benefits of integrating nature into the early learning and care program.

## Racial Equity

Overarching all of the goals for children, youth and families set by DCYF, is the goal to eliminate disparities so that race and family income are no longer predictors of child/youth well-being. Program leaders and professionals should seek to understand and address the root causes and underlying drivers of racial inequities, so that each and every child, young person, and family can thrive. The [DCYF Racial Equity Framework](#) provides the DCYF community and partners with guiding principles, shared language, and these four actions to take to eliminate racial disparities:

- Increase community voice and influence for those furthest from opportunity.
- Inform practice with diverse measures and diverse stories.
- Make decisions that genuinely meet the requirements of communities of color.
- Design and implement systems that respond to children's diverse situations.

These actions can be applied to many practices put in place by early learning and care programs, including those that operate with a nature-centered or nature-based approach. Professionals should apply the framework for racial equity and social justice throughout their practice.

Within the ***Nature-Based Competencies for Early Care and Education Professionals*** there are competencies to support racial equity and social justice that are specific to nature-centered or nature-based programming. These practices support professionals to learn about and understand children and families' perspectives and practices related to nature and being outdoors, as well as the environmental concerns of the community at large. Based on these practices, as well as through the broader social justice and anti-racist efforts of an early learning program, the practices included in this supplement *should* be adapted to provide culturally responsive and culturally affirming experiences that are relevant to the demographic(s) of the program.

## Honoring Indigenous Sovereignty

***The Nature-Based Competencies for Early Care and Education Professionals*** includes competencies to honor indigenous sovereignty, and supports professionals throughout Washington in fostering relationships with local tribes and to implement tribally approved curriculum.

The indigenous people of Washington have thrived as communities full of wealth, strength and healthy flourishing families, in unison with the surrounding land, since time immemorial. Today many indigenous communities struggle from the generational trauma they have endured as the assimilative tactics of the federal government; these include colonization, genocide, the removal from ancestral lands, boarding schools, and continued oppression of indigenous rights. It is important for non-Native citizens to understand and acknowledge this challenging history and its impact. This history provides nature-based professionals with an empathetic responsibility and opportunity to honor indigenous sovereignty and actively support Native peoples as part of their efforts for racial and social justice.

Each tribe in Washington is a sovereign nation, with a unique history, culture, and system of governance and all of the federally recognized tribes have a government-to-government relationship with the state<sup>1</sup>. Non-Native Washington professionals should research their local tribes and in making this effort can create better relationships with their neighbors. By creating and fostering relationships with tribal communities, non-Native professionals can also avoid participating in cultural appropriation or

<sup>1</sup> For more information on treaties with tribes in Washington State, please visit <http://www.washingtonhistory.org/education/curriculum/treatytrail/readings/> and <https://nwtreatytribes.org/treaties/>

stereotyping, and can tailor their practices and curriculum to honor the unique culture, heritage, language and tribal protocols in a respectful way.

The *Since Time Immemorial* Curriculum is a unique curriculum designed by Native educators for our early learners to experience concepts related to tribal sovereignty and local tribal history, and has been approved by the Tribal Congress on Education. The lessons and resources of the *Since Time Immemorial* curriculum are place-based and inclusive of nature-centered themes for children's learning, and therefore are particularly relevant to the nature-based program's curriculum. The curriculum is a framework, however, so whenever possible the curriculum should be implemented with tribal input. Tribes may even have their own specific curriculum for non-Native educators, such as the Spokane Tribal Lifeways Curriculum. This is why competencies included in this document rely on the acknowledgment of the tribe on whose ancestral lands the program is based and building relationships from that acknowledgement. By doing so, children can learn the unique history of the indigenous peoples from where they live, creating an even deeper sense of connection with the Nature around them.

## Goals for Children's Learning and Development

Nature-based and nature-centered education can have many benefits for young children's learning and development. A 2019 meta-analysis of hundreds of studies into the cause-and-effect relationship between experiences with nature and learning outcomes provides us with "converging evidence [that] strongly suggests that experiences of nature boost academic learning, personal development, and environmental stewardship."<sup>2</sup>

With regard to early learning specifically, outdoor, nature-based play has been shown to provide physical, cognitive, social and emotional benefits for children:<sup>3</sup>

- **Physical Benefits.** Outdoor play provides more vigorous, varied, and sustained play; improves gross and fine motor development, including bone health, balance, coordination, endurance, spatial awareness, core strength, and posture; strengthens immune systems; and promotes lifelong engagement in physical activity.
- **Cognitive Benefits.** Outdoor, nature-based play supports improved executive functioning and self-regulation abilities; increases observation and problem-solving skills; increases attention and focus; and challenging play supports children's resilience, independence, and self-confidence.
- **Social and Emotional Benefits.** Nature-based play provides a calm and sensory-rich environment that reduces stress, anxiety, and depression; and can support children's development of empathy for the natural world.

Additionally, nature-based and nature-centered education can promote children's ecological identity and nature-connectedness quite significantly. As the field of nature-based early learning grows, DCYF provides the following working definition and description for this distinct goal:

**Ecological identity and nature-connectedness** (working definition): Children develop a sense of belonging and connection to the natural world as they explore and understand the interdependent relationships within their ecological community. Consistent with Bronfenbrenner's ecological development theory, Nature is included in the systems of

<sup>2</sup> Kuo M, Barnes M and Jordan C (2019) Do Experiences With Nature Promote Learning? Converging Evidence of a Cause-and-Effect Relationship. *Frontiers in Psychology* 10:305. doi: 10.3389/fpsyg.2019.00305.  
<https://www.frontiersin.org/articles/10.3389/fpsyg.2019.00305/full>

<sup>3</sup> Cultivate Learning's *Nurturing Early Learning: Research to Support Young Children's Learning in the Outdoors*.

environmental interactions that shape and are shaped by human development. Through these interactions, a child can become connected to nature both physically and through the guided development of a positive emotional (and/or spiritual) relationship with nature. Nature-connectedness can be most generally described as a positive human-nature relationship, which can influence the attitudes and actions of a person towards nature.<sup>4</sup> In forming an ecological identity, there can grow a sense of kinship with nature, and children begin to see themselves as a part of nature<sup>5</sup>.

Closely related to ideas of nature-connectedness and ecological identity are the goals of early childhood environmental education and supporting children's environmental literacy. From the North American Association of Environmental Education, Early Childhood Environmental Education Guidelines for Excellence:

"Research has shown that most attitudes are formed very early in life, and this is why it is so important for environmental education to begin in early childhood... Personal perceptions, attitudes, and connections with nature are the key goals at this stage, and facilitating positive experiences varies from child to child... Children are developing a relationship with the natural world. They are learning how to gently hold a worm, examine it, and then return it to its habitat. They are learning to appreciate all kinds of weather. They are learning how to explore and use tools of exploration such as magnifying glasses and popsicle sticks. Children are watching plants and animals change through their life cycles, and learning respect for the natural world and living things.

Children who respect the environment feel an emotional attachment to the natural world, and deeply understand the link between themselves and nature, will become environmentally literate citizens. The task of environmental education for young children is to forge the bond between children and nature."

***The Nature-Based Competencies for Early Care and Education Professionals*** were developed to support professionals in providing these benefits to children through their practices.

## Benefits for Adults and Communities

It is worth noting that nature-based and nature-centered experiences also have an impact on the mental and physical wellbeing of adults, including professionals working with young children. Impacts of engaging in nature-based or nature-centered activities for adults include reduced stress, a positive mood, and even stronger feelings of unity with neighbors<sup>6</sup>. Nature is even being prescribed by doctors to help with hypertension, anxiety, and obesity<sup>7</sup>, and a 2019 study of 20,000 people found that "people who spent two hours a week in green spaces — local parks or other natural environments, either all at

<sup>4</sup> Barrable, A. (2019) The Case for Nature Connectedness as a Distinct Goal of Early Childhood Education. *The International Journal of Early Childhood Environmental Education*, 6(2), p. 59 ISSN: 2331-0464 (online)

<sup>5</sup> Wilson, R. (2019) What is Nature? *The International Journal of Early Childhood Environmental Education*, 7(1), p.26 ISSN: 2331-0464 (online)

<sup>6</sup> <https://www.takingcharge.csh.umn.edu/how-does-nature-impact-our-wellbeing#:~:text=Being%20in%20nature%2C%20or%20even,the%20production%20of%20stress%20hormones.>

<sup>7</sup> <https://parkrxamerica.org/resources.php>

once or spaced over several visits — were substantially more likely to report good health and psychological well-being than those who don't.”<sup>8</sup>

“Communities thrive when the people within them have opportunities for meaningful experiences outdoors, whether at a nearby park, a garden or on the shores of an ocean. Getting outside connects us to ourselves, to each other and to the world around us, reminding us that we are part of a much bigger story. Building these connections increases people’s quality of life, health and social wellbeing, which are benefits everyone deserves. We have a shared responsibility to open the doors to all people, regardless of where they live or their backgrounds, and ensuring their experiences outdoors are positive and rewarding. The more people who connect in this way with nature, the more our communities are strengthened and the more we all benefit” – rethinkoutside.org

## Core Competency Organization

The areas of competency correspond with standard curricular areas in early care and education, and address development and learning across multiple domains of professionals, mirroring the organization of the [Washington State Core Competencies for Early Care and Education Professionals](#).

Each content area describes the knowledge and skills professionals need to work with children birth through 8 and their families in nature-based and nature-centered early childhood education. Professionals increase their knowledge and skills in the content areas through ongoing training/education.

### Content Areas

- I. **Child Growth and Development:** understand how children acquire language and creative expression and develop physically, cognitively and socially.
- II. **Curriculum and Learning Environment:** establish an environment that provides learning experiences to meet children’s needs, abilities and interests.
- III. **Ongoing Measurement of Child Progress:** observe and assess what children know and can do in order to plan and provide curriculum that meets their developmental and learning needs.
- IV. **Families and Community Partnerships:** develop strong relationships with families and work collaboratively with agencies/ organizations to meet children’s needs and to encourage the community’s involvement with early care and education.
- V. **Health, Safety and Nutrition:** establish and maintain an environment that ensures children’s safety, health and nourishment.
- VI. **Interactions:** establish supportive relationships with children and guide them as individuals and as part of a group.
- VII. **Program Planning and Development:** establish, implement, evaluate and analyze an early care and education setting.
- VIII. **Professional Development and Leadership:** serve children and families in a professional manner and participate in the community as a representative of early care and education.

<sup>8</sup> <https://e360.yale.edu/features/ecopsychology-how-immersion-in-nature-benefits-your-health>

## A New Content Area Sub-Category

This document includes nature-based and nature-centered competencies for professionals in the standard curricular areas in early care and education, and also describes a *new* content area sub-category for Content Area II. Curriculum and Learning Environment, as follows:

- a. Creating the Learning Environment and General Curriculum
- b. Promoting Physical Development
- c. Promoting Cognitive Development
- d. Promoting Language and Communication Development
- e. Promoting Social/Emotional Development; and
- f. Promoting Creative Expression
- g. *Promoting Ecological Identity and Nature Connectedness\**

\*Promoting ecological identity and nature-connectedness in children is considered a distinct goal for children's learning and development for nature-based and nature-centered education, and as beneficial to all young children. By interacting with nature, children can develop a sense of belonging and connection to the natural world as they explore and understand the relationships within their ecological community. See the *Goals for Children's Learning and Development* section below for more information.

## Levels

The core competencies are a framework of the knowledge and skills for the five levels of professional preparation; however, they are not exhaustive. Some competencies reflected in the content areas require caregivers and teachers to perform specific actions, while others suggest areas for continued growth and knowledge. Caregivers and teachers may find that satisfying some competencies requires further training/education.

The levels of competency start with the basic skills necessary to enter the field and go to an advanced level of academic preparation and varied experience. Caregivers/teachers progress from one level to another through a combination of formal and/or informal study and reflection on practice. Caregivers and teachers may have skills at varying levels in different areas depending on role, setting and experience. The five levels are cumulative. For example, a caregiver/teacher working at Level 3 has knowledge and skills to meet the competencies at Level 1, 2, and 3. At all levels, caregivers/teachers who care for and educate young children continue their participation in professional development activities and increase their knowledge and skills within each of the content areas. Caregivers and teachers who reach Level 5 are encouraged to continue their professional development and growth.

- **Level 1** sets the foundation for early care and education and includes the basic knowledge and skills expected of a professional new to the early care and education field, or a professional who has been in the field but has had little opportunity for specialized mentoring, training or education.
- **Level 2** includes level 1 plus the knowledge and skills comparable to a Child Development Associate credential, a certificate in child development, or training/education.
- **Level 3** includes levels 1 and 2 plus knowledge and skills commensurate with an associate's degree in early childhood education or child development.
- **Level 4** includes levels 1, 2, and 3 plus knowledge and skills commensurate with a bachelor's degree in early childhood education or child development.
- **Level 5** includes levels 1, 2, 3, and 4 plus knowledge and skills commensurate with an advanced degree in early childhood education or child development.

## **Acknowledgements**

TBD

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## Content Area I: Child Growth and Development

### Level 1

- a. Recognizes that child/human development is interconnected with nature and other living beings.
- b. Recognizes that children learn and develop through active play, and the importance of outdoor activity.
- c. Recognizes that children are active learners and learn through all of their senses

### Level 2

- a. Articulates the health benefits of outdoor, nature-based learning.

### Level 3

- a. Explains the process of children's learning through zones of proximal development.



## **Content Area II: Curriculum and Learning Environment**

### **Creating the Learning Environment and General Curriculum**

#### **Level 1**

- a. Recognizes nature as a teacher.
- b. Incorporates loose parts, including natural materials, into indoor and outdoor play areas.
- c. **Provides all children with opportunities for play and exploration in nature-rich outdoor spaces every day.**

#### **Level 2**

- a. Identifies nature-centered or nature-based curricula and resources, as appropriate for their setting.

#### **Level 3**

- a. Partners with local tribe(s) where possible to support indigenous curriculum priorities, and/or implements the Since Time Immemorial curriculum appropriate for children's ages and developmental levels.
- b. Creates outdoor play and learning areas that are appropriate and inviting for local species and ecosystems.
- c. Understand different types of play and how each one fosters core skills for STEAM and environment and sustainability education, such as creativity, collaboration, communication, and critical thinking skills.
- d. **Uses knowledge of local natural environment throughout the seasons, and local flora and fauna, to support all children's engagement in daily activities and learning opportunities.**

#### **Level 4**

- a. Evaluates various nature-centered or nature-based curricula options for their suitability to the developmental stages and interests of children in their particular setting.
- b. Connects curriculum to the environmental and sustainability education standards, and the next generation science standards for WA, as developmentally appropriate.
- c. Incorporates design features that support children's outdoor play, including connectivity, change, chance, variation, and "outdoor rooms", to support a range of activities and noise levels.
- d. Designs nature-rich indoor and outdoor learning environments.

### **Promoting Physical Development**

#### **Level 1**

- a. Recognizes that children learn and make sense of their world through all of their senses.
- b. **Recognizes that children's engagement in risky and challenging play supports the development of physical abilities, when the risk is appropriate to children's developmental levels.**

#### **Level 2**

- a. Offers opportunities for children learn and make sense of their world through all of their senses.
- b. Recognizes that experiences (outdoors and) in the natural world are necessary for all children's healthy development.

- c. **Recognizes that being outside in natural surroundings improves children’s physical and cognitive development, such as sight, hearing, balance, and executive functioning.**
- d. **Allows children to engage in risky and challenging play, appropriate to children's developmental levels, and provides close supervision and support as needed.**

### Level 3

- a. Supports children to notice and seek out the natural phenomenon that improve child development, such as looking far away, listening to sounds from far away, walking on and touching various textures, and being near green plants and water features.
- b. **Provides opportunities for all children to engage in risky and challenging play, making adaptations for each child based on their individual abilities and needs.**

### Level 4

- a. Enhances understanding of the physical world through activities and tools to heighten observations through their senses (i.e.: cupping ears, binoculars, etc.)
- b. **Encourages and extends children’s risky and challenging play opportunities by evaluating children's developmental progress and making plans with children on how to advance.**

## Promoting Cognitive Development

### Level 1

- a. Encourages hands-on explorations of the natural world or natural materials, when it is safe to do so.
- b. Provides hands-on and multisensory learning opportunities with natural materials for children.
- c. Encourages children to use all their senses.
- d. **Utilizes print resources, such as field guides, to increase children's exposure to print and the use of print in nature-based settings.**

### Level 2

- a. Recognizes the benefits of risky play for children's cognitive development.
- b. Utilizes nature-rich indoor and outdoor learning materials.

### Level 3

- a. Provides (physical and conceptual) tools and materials for children to investigate the outdoor/natural environments, including gathering, recording, and communicating information.
- b. Guides children to assess risks before engaging in risky play activities.
- c. **Supports children in observing qualities (e.g. shape, color, texture), patterns, phenomena, life cycles, similarities and differences, cause and effect, and changes over time in natural environments.**
- d. **Provides opportunities for choice and child-led activities during outdoor, nature play and follows children’s lead and curiosity.**

### Level 4

- a. Supports children to understand the interconnected and interdependent relationships between living organisms and their interactions with the natural world.
- b. Identifies and describes scientific thinking and engineering processes in nature.
- c. Builds connections between nature and math, science, literacy, social studies, and arts learning activities.

## Level 5

- a. Guides discovery and uses phenomena in the natural world to support children's scientific thinking and engineering processes.

## Promoting Language and Communication Development

### Level 1

- a. Provides vocabulary to children when describing what they see, smell, hear, taste, touch, and feel.

### Level 3

- a. Supports children in recording and reflecting on their outdoor/nature play experiences using a variety of materials and formats.
- b. Utilizes stories rich with vocabulary and imagery relevant to the surrounding environment.**

## Promoting Social/Emotional Development

### Level 1

- a. Understands that nature and natural materials can have a calming effect on human physiology.
- b. Understands the role of empathy and compassion for nature in building young children's connection with nature.
- c. Models empathy and compassion for nature, including the local fauna, flora, and delicate ecosystems.
- d. Understands the importance of children developing a sense of place and belonging in their local communities and environment.

### Level 2

- a. Guides children in self-regulation techniques that are supported by nature, such as grounding and conscious breathing, focusing attention on the sights and sounds of nature and the outdoors, giving energy into a strong tree or boulder, and how to find space for comfort and privacy without separating from the group.
- b. Supports children to feel safe in nature by emphasizing and explaining the boundaries of play, and engaging children in assessing risky elements of the environment.**

### Level 3

- a. Articulates the role of empathy and compassion for nature, including the local fauna, flora, and ecosystems, in building young children's connection with nature.
- b. Supports children in developing a sense of place and belonging in their local communities and environment.
- c. Supports cooperation, collaboration, and shared decision-making with and among children

### Level 4

- a. Models and encourages respectful, reciprocal, and sustainable interactions with nature, including the local fauna, flora, and delicate ecosystems.

## Promoting Creative Expression

### Level 1

- a. Provides reusable or compostable, non-toxic art materials.

- b. **Encourages children to be creative in natural environments and with found natural materials.**

## Level 2

- a. Supports children's imaginative responses to experiences in and about the natural world.

## Level 3

- a. Guides children to build connections between creative expression and other forms of nature-centered learning (e.g. explorations of nature, outdoor play, mathematic and scientific investigations).

## Promoting Ecological Identity/Nature-Connectedness

### Level 1

- a. Recognizes and understands environmental practices such as reducing waste, recycling, and composting.
- b. Understands how to identify flora and fauna.
- c. Demonstrates empathy and care of other living beings and ecosystems.
- d. Recognizes that we are on ancestral tribal land(s).
- e. Recognizes that children's emotional connections with the earth are supported by frequent positive experiences in their local natural environment, or with living organisms.
- f. Notices and points out to children living organisms in urban areas or indoors.
- g. **Provides ample time and space for child-guided play and exploration in natural environments.**

### Level 2

- a. Models, through self and parallel talk, curiosity and positive feelings about the natural world.
- b. Models environmental caretaking and sustainability practices, including being careful around fragile ecosystems and reducing waste, recycling, and composting.
- c. Identifies and names the local flora, fauna, and ecosystems with children, guiding children to identify the features of flora and fauna they encounter.
- d. Guides children in gardening activities.
- e. Understand the basic principles of botany, such as how plants grow and how they create and store energy.
- f. Understands basic principles of the water cycle.
- g. Recognizes whose ancestral tribal land(s) the program is located on.
- h. Acknowledges whose ancestral tribal land(s) the program is located on with children and families.
- i. Reinforce children's emotional connections to nature, through recollection and discussion of children's experiences with nature.
- j. Models appropriate handling of living things.
- k. Helps children build understandings of the needs of plants, animals, and other inhabitants of the natural world and make connections between these needs and children's own needs.
- l. Creates opportunities for children to care for living things, land, and ecosystems and build a sense of responsibility for their actions, for example gardening or habitat protection.
- m. **Engages children in varied natural environments.**
- n. **Provides frequent positive experiences for children in their local natural environment, including the green spaces of urban areas.**

### Level 3

- a. Explains the importance and impact of environmental caretaking and sustainability practices, including being careful around fragile ecosystems and reducing waste, recycling, and composting.
- b. Describes and demonstrates mindfulness practices, including stillness, active listening, and conscious breathing.
- c. Describes to children the traditional and current use of local flora and fauna by humans.
- d. Understand the basic principles of ecology, such as the role of various plants and animals in the food cycle, or symbiotic/predatory/parasitic relationships.
- e. Understands how human activities impact the local watershed.
- f. Identifies appropriate and authentic examples of other cultures' relationships to nature, and incorporates into the curriculum in a respectful and sensitive manner.
- g. Builds and models a relationship with nature, based on giving and receiving.
- h. Encourage children's sustained attention and observation of natural phenomenon.
- i. Facilitates conversations about the interdependence and connectedness of the natural world, including human beings.

### Level 4

- a. Recognizes the ecological, social, and economic systems that create human impact (i.e. resource use) on the natural environment, and our civic and sustainability responsibilities.
- b. Nurtures the spiritual dimensions of children's developing ecological identities.
- c. Sustains the ecological perspectives and practices that are valued by children and their families, communities, and cultures.
- d. **Guides children to practice appropriate foraging and gathering techniques, including when not to take.**

### Level 5

- a. Articulates practices that decolonize early education and land use.
- b. Engages with research and theory regarding children's development of ecological identities and ecological literacy.
- c. Communicates effectively with stakeholders about children's development of a positive ecological identity and nature-connectedness, drawing upon insights from research and practice.

## Content Area III: Ongoing Measurement of Child Progress

### Level 1

- a. Listens to children's verbal and non-verbal communication regarding their own goals for play and learning.

### Level 2

- a. Uses authentic observation to assess children's progress of understanding of natural phenomena.

### Level 3

- a. Engages children reflecting on their own learning, development, and progress towards their own goals.
- b. Checks for children's ability to identify local flora and fauna.

### Level 4

- a. Analyzes and applies children's verbal and non-verbal communication to create learning and exploration opportunities in the natural world.

## **Content Area IV: Family and Community Partnerships**

### **Relationships with Families**

#### **Level 1**

- a. Explains to families the importance of being prepared for outdoor play every day.
- b. Increases understanding of the history and cultural norms of the families and communities the program is trying to engage with.

#### **Level 2**

- a. Communicates effectively with families to arrive at shared expectations for children's daily outdoor activities.
- b. **Demonstrates willingness to understand the cultures and social considerations of families as it relates to being outdoors and relating to nature.**

#### **Level 3**

- a. Communicates with families to learn about their perspectives and practices related to nature and being outdoors.
- b. Communicates with families about opportunities to be involved in STEAM and environmental and sustainability projects in the community.
- c. **Understand the history, false narratives, and stereotypes that have all played a part in the exclusion of people of color from outdoor, wild spaces.**
- d. **Adopts an alternative way to name, recognize, comprehend and change the narratives that communities of color don't engage in the outdoors.**

#### **Level 4**

- a. Communicates effectively with families about the research into nature and children's development.
- b. **Engage in culturally sustaining practices with families, honoring elders and facilitate spaces to sustain others' cultures as it relates to nature and being outdoors.**
- e. Before engaging with communities of color either through community programming efforts or recruitment of families of color, create a long-term plan to build stronger connections with communities of color.
- f. Empowers children and families to see the modern world, engage in conversations about it, and utilize STEAM related skills and knowledge to improve it.

### **Use of Community Resources**

#### **Level 1**

- a. Identify the cultural history of the land you are on.

#### **Level 2**

- a. Identify and connect with your local Native American tribe(s) to create opportunities to incorporate awareness of the indigenous culture through stories, songs, or languages from the land you are on, if appropriate.
- b. Identify experts and resources for nature-centered education such as naturalists, gardeners, horticulturalists, environmental educators, wilderness skills or bush craft educators, park

- rangers, geologists, ethnobotanists, permaculturalists, and/or get in touch with your local zoo, museum, conservation district office, gardening center, community garden, or educational farm.
- c. Identify information to colleagues and families about the land and going into nature.

### Level 3

- a. Respectfully invites and supports community members to share their ecological perspectives and practices with the children.
- b. Actively searches for opportunities to be involved in STEAM and environmental and sustainability projects in the community.

### Level 4

- a. Identify and provide information to colleagues and families about service projects or direct actions that take care of the environment.
- b. Engages with the local Native American tribe(s) to establish a respectful relationship and support indigenous priorities, as appropriate to the goals of early childhood education.

### Level 5

- a. Builds long-term, equitable, collaborative partnerships with members of children's communities and invites them to share their ecological expertise by co-designing learning experiences.
- b. **Engage children and families in service projects or direct actions that take care of the environment, such as habitat restoration or clean-ups.**



## Content Area V: Health, Safety and Nutrition

### Knowledge of Regulations

#### Level 1

- a. Identifies environmental risks and follows risk management procedures that are based on a program's benefit-risk assessments.
- b. Demonstrates knowledge of Leave No Trace principles and any guidelines on land use from the land manager.
- c. Understands and implements all supervision regulations for nature-based activities with high risk of injury, such as campfires, water activities, and climbing natural features.

#### Level 2

- a. Understands a program's benefit-risk assessments and risk management plans.

#### Level 3

- a. Engages in benefit-risk assessment for locations and activities in outdoor, nature-based setting.
- b. Informs others of risk management procedures and can coordinate response to unexpected risk with others.
- c. Explains how humans do impact the environment and minimizes the impact of children's outdoor play on ecological systems.

#### Level 4

- a. Articulates benefit-risk assessment for locations and activities in outdoor, nature-based setting, and evaluates continuing needs for improvement.
- b. Works in partnership with the land manager to plan strategies to mitigate potential impact of the program on the land, including an assessment of the impact of practices on program quality.

#### Level 5

- a. Develops a plan for training and trains staff on the implementation of benefit-risk assessments and risk management procedures.
- b. Anticipates risk, develops risk management plans, and ensures others are able to implement risk management practices.
- c. Apply theory and ethics of being in right relationship with the land, minimizing impact on the land so as to not cause undue harm, such as avoiding an area where the grass is worn so that you allow it to grow back.

### Environmental Safety

#### Level 1

- a. Can identify locally harmful plants and animals.
- b. Understands the basic principles of outdoor safety, such as those described by the USFS <https://www.fs.usda.gov/main/r8/recreation/safety-ethics>.
- c. Identifies environmental hazards and keeps children separated from these dangers.
- d. Demonstrates awareness of the environment is prepared to be outside per program requirements.
- e. Places self in proximity to children in risky play situations.

## Level 2

- a. Can identify dangerous plants, animals, fungi, or toxic substances and teaches children to avoid them.
- b. Removes or otherwise mitigates hazardous elements in the outdoor classroom environment and risky play activity areas.
- c. Optimizes position of self and other staff to provide active supervision of all children, and ensure staff are able to support and respond appropriately during risky play activities.
- d. Limits the amount of risky play activities occurring at one time.

## Level 3

- a. Ability to adapt as needed based on daily weather and physical and emotional needs of staff and children.
- b. Knowledge of botany and plant identification is sufficient to support safe foraging.
- c. Engages in safe foraging practices with children.
- d. Identifies potential sources of injury during risky play activities, mitigates these risks through teaching practices, and helps others do so, too.
- e. Creates risk management plans and procedures to mitigate potential harm to children engaging in risky play activities.
- f. Reflects daily on the weather and physical and emotional needs of staff and children, to adapt the curriculum and risk management plans, as needed.

## Level 4

- a. Assists in self-assessment of program policies and procedures for risk management.
- b. Co-constructs boundaries (and guidelines) for nature-based play with children, supporting children to share responsibility for individual and group safety and well-being.
- c. Recognizes and makes decisions to manage the impact of children's outdoor play and exploration on ecological systems.

## Level 5

- a. Appreciates the importance of challenging play experiences for all children and the need to evaluate both benefits and risks when designing learning experiences for children.

## Responding to Health Needs of Children

### Level 1

- a. Guide children to check in with their bodily comfort and needs, just as feeling hot or cold, hunger, and bathroom needs.
- b. Demonstrates excitement about being outside in all types of (safe) weather conditions.
- c. Ensures children are dressed appropriately for the weather.
- d. Ensures there is communication access to emergency medical services when taking children into backcountry environments, and has Wilderness First Aid training if emergency medical services are more than 30 minutes away.

### Level 2

- a. Recognizes indicators of children's physical needs during outdoor play, including temperature regulation, hunger, and fatigue.

- b. Supports children in monitoring their own physical needs and enacting strategies to address these needs (e.g. staying active in colder temperatures).
- c. Demonstrates knowledge of serious health concerns that could arise during outdoor play (e.g. hypothermia, heatstroke), how to minimize the possibility of these conditions arising, and how to handle the conditions if they do arise.

## Nutrition

### Level 1

- a. Harvests food safely and appropriately, based on sufficient knowledge or under direct supervision of an expert.

### Level 2

- a. Engages children in caring for plants or animals at the early learning program or school so that children learn where food comes from.

### Level 3

- a. Plans activities about where food comes from, benefits of natural v. processed foods, and trying new foods.
- b. Plans for and grows food with children.

### Level 4

- a. Coordinates food activities with natural seasonal availability of plants.

## Content Area VI: Interactions

### Providing Individual Guidance

#### Level 1

- a. **Recognize when children should be given an opportunity to try challenging or new tasks, before providing assistance.**

#### Level 2

- a. Recognize when children need big activity to get their energy out as an emotional self-regulation technique.
- b. **Demonstrates awareness of the barriers to participation in nature-based, outdoor environments for children of different developmental stages and abilities.**
- c. **Uses strategies to assist children in learning how to assess risk, capabilities, and comfort level to plan for and try new activities in an outdoor setting.**

#### Level 3

- a. Engage in culturally sustaining pedagogy, supporting language use and cultural practices with regards to nature and the land.

#### Level 4

- a. **Identifies barriers to participation in nature-based, outdoor environments for children of different developmental stages and abilities.**

### Enhancing Group Experiences

#### Level 2

- a. **Uses visual aids and discussion to reinforce expectations for interactions with the environment, flora and fauna.**
- b. **Uses visual aids and discussion to reinforce expectations for travel from space to space.**

#### Level 3

- a. **Creates and maintains group expectations for interactions with the natural environment, flora, and fauna.**
- b. **Creates and maintains group expectations for travel from space to space.**
- c. **Creates and maintains boundaries for nature-based play using visual aids and discussion with children.**

#### Level 4

- a. **Demonstrates flexibility in adjusting rules and expectations depending on unforeseen changes in the environment.**

## **Content Area VII: Program Planning and Development**

### **Program Planning and Evaluation**

#### **Level 2**

- a. Uses the cycles of nature and what happens in the natural environment as the basis of planning curricular activities.

#### **Level 3**

- a. Facilitates emergent curriculum and child-led interests.
- b. Supports children to meet their own goals for play and learning by facilitating or providing activities and learning opportunities.
- c. **Have and maintain a positive working relationship with the land manager in an outdoor program.**
- d. **Understands how children’s experiences in and relationships with natural environments support a wide range of learning and developmental goals.**

#### **Level 5**

- a. Advances program practices and ensure processes are in place that engage in culturally responsive and sustaining practices with families, such as honoring elders, facilitating spaces and time within a program to sustain cultures, and ensuring program staff have resources and support.

## Content Area VIII: Professional Development and Leadership

### Displaying Professionalism in Practice

#### Level 2

- a. Articulates the 7 Leave No Trace principles for safe and prepared nature-based experience, and adheres to Leave No Trace ethics and codes of conduct while outdoors.
- b. Evaluates own mental, emotional, and physical wellbeing, and seeks self-care opportunities, or social or professional support.
- c. Guides others in adhering to leave no trace practices specific to the area where the program is located.

### Ongoing Professional Growth

#### Level 1

- a. Fosters own sense of wonder, awe, and enjoyment of the natural world.
- b. Reflects on own experiences and beliefs about nature.

#### Level 2

- a. Engages in learning about nature alongside children and families.

#### Level 3

- a. Continuously seeks knowledge and application of sustainability and stewardship practices.
- b. Continually deepens understanding of local places, including flora, fauna, geology, communities, histories, and environmental issues.

#### Level 4

- a. Engages in regular reflection and dialogue about environmental learning goals, formative assessment of children's progress, and ways to support these learning goals.
- b. Engages in reflective practice to intentionally and respectfully plan and deliver culturally sustaining interactions.

### Leadership and Advocacy

#### Level 1

- a. Recognizes that human life depends on a healthy environment.
- b. Recognizes potential program impacts on the environment.

#### Level 2

- a. Reduces carbon footprint of the program whenever possible, such as by reducing heat settings when children and staff are not present, using reduced energy light-bulbs, and turning off lights and computers when not in use.
- b. Provide information to colleagues and families about the land and going into nature.

#### Level 3

- a. Reduces waste, reuses materials, fixes broken items, and recycles whenever possible, engaging families and community partners in these efforts.

- b. **Manages the outdoor space to improve ecological sustainability, such as by using non-toxic pest management techniques, and cultivating native plants to support local insects and microbiome.**

#### **Level 4**

- a. **Monitors and evaluates the impact of the program on the land and environment.**

#### **Level 5**

- a. Advocates for children's equitable access to outdoor, natural environments.
- b. Engages colleagues and families in reflection and direct actions to address environmental impacts and injustices, including the intersections of the environment, racism and settler-colonialism.

DRAFT

## **Glossary**

(under development)

STEAM

Early childhood environmental education

Ecological identity

DRAFT



## References

TBD

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**Impact of Public Investment in Early Learning Facilities on the Child Care Business Model in King County**

The cost of operating a quality child care business in King County does not currently equal the amount families are able to pay (either personally or using subsidy), creating a child care crisis. Public funding for early learning facilities could reduce facilities costs for child care programs, relieving some of the following challenges:

- cost of care for families
- scarcity of child care slots for infants and toddlers
- scarcity of child care slots for children using Working Connections Child Care (WCCC) subsidy
- scarcity of child care slots in certain areas known as Child Care Deserts (See [Early Learning Facilities Development Proposal](#))
- low child care staff compensation
- other costs associated with quality child care, as required by Early Achievers

In order to serve children using WCCC subsidy, while maintaining quality, child care providers are forced to make tough decisions just to financially break even. They can either reduce costs or generate revenue.

<u>Cost reduction options</u>		Resulting impact on community
<b>Reduce Employee Wages/Benefits</b>	Early learning professionals tend to earn lower wages than kindergarten teachers, yet the positions require a similar level of education.	Lowering employee wages <b>decreases the quality</b> of a child care program and creates retention challenges.
<b>Reduce Infant and Toddler slots</b>	Licensing standards set specific limits on the ratio of staff to children based on age—the younger the children, the higher the required staff ratio, and the higher the cost.	Lowering staff ratios <b>limits the number of slots available for infants and toddlers</b> due to fiscal considerations (see budget below).
<b>Reduce Facilities Costs through PSTAA</b>	Public funding directed at facilities costs could save child care businesses up to 20% of their overall annual expenses.	Facilities cost alleviation could allow child care programs to <b>improve quality</b> by investing more in personnel, and/or to <b>improve access</b> by increasing slots for infants/toddlers and for children using subsidy.
<u>Revenue generating options</u>		Resulting impact on community
<b>Reduce the number of slots for children using WCCC Subsidy</b>	Child care providers lose income when they accept children using WCCC subsidies to pay for care, as they are reimbursed between 50-75% of their tuition rate.	Fewer child care slots for children using subsidy <b>decreases access to care for low-income families</b> , keeping most in the cycle of poverty.
<b>Raise tuition rates</b>	The market rate for an infant slot in Seattle is currently between \$1800 - \$3,000/month. Especially for	Raising child care rates sends our community further down a critical spiral, leading to <b>job loss and career/economic regression for parents, settling for low-quality care, or potentially even</b>

	families with more than one child, the cost* of child care far outweighs the burden of rent.	<b>homelessness</b> in the worst cases. Raising rates also <b>exacerbates the inequity of our current crisis</b> , widening income-based opportunity and learning gaps.
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*\*Many low-income families in King County are ineligible for financial support but are unable to pay market rate tuition. Only families under 200% of the Federal Poverty Level qualify for WCCC. A family of four must earn less than \$49,200 to qualify for WCCC, but a family of four making \$72,000 in King County is considered low-income by the federal housing administration. A family of four would need to make significantly more than \$72,000 annually to shoulder the financial burden of \$4,000/month to send two young children to child care.*

**BUILDING A SUSTAINABLE BUDGET**

Starting and maintaining a child care business requires three different stages of budgeting. Public funding toward early learning facilities, particularly in the form of grants or in case of county direct ownership, favorable lease terms, would be a significant support for providers during the pre-opening stage and first year of their business, removing significant barriers to offering more early learning services.

Expense Areas	Functions	% Total Expenses
Child care and teaching	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Staff compensation &amp; benefits</li> <li>• Equipment/food</li> <li>• Taxes</li> </ul>	50-60%
Occupancy	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Rent/mortgage</li> <li>• Custodial services</li> <li>• Building maintenance</li> <li>• Capital investments</li> </ul>	15-20%
Administrative Infrastructure	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Billing/Accounting</li> <li>• Office supplies</li> <li>• Phone</li> </ul>	12-20%
Other	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Health</li> <li>• Transportation</li> <li>• Social Services</li> </ul>	5-20%

Budget Considerations		
<b>Pre-Opening Budget</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Capital costs of acquiring and preparing the facility</li> <li>• Permanent equipment and initial supplies for classrooms</li> <li>• Kitchen and office supplies</li> <li>• Salary costs for staff needed prior to opening</li> </ul>	
<b>First-Year Budget</b>	Similar to the ongoing operating budget below, with adjustments because the center is likely to operate at 50% to 60% capacity for the first six months while enrollment fills up.	
<b>Ongoing Operating Budget</b>	Income	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• <b>Child Care Subsidies</b></li> <li>• <b>Family fees</b>, determined by considering:                             <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>○ Cost per child to provide high-quality care</li> <li>○ Affordability threshold in the community</li> <li>○ Competitors’ rates in at nearby programs</li> <li>○ Other revenue streams: USDA, grants, etc.</li> </ul> </li> <li>• <b>Fundraising</b>: Only possible for programs with not-for-profit status.</li> </ul>
	Expenses:	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>▪ Child care and teaching</li> <li>▪ Occupancy- PSTAA funds could be leveraged and targeted to allow for a less-than-market-rate occupancy costs</li> <li>▪ Administrative infrastructure</li> <li>▪ Other</li> </ul>

## SCENARIOS FOR KING COUNTY

Based on an actual cost scenario for a child care center in its second year of operation in Seattle, Table 1.1 shows a child care program expenses based on a 5-classroom site. Table 1.2 below compares revenue when the program offers 50% of its slots to children using subsidy versus accepting only families who pay full market tuition rate. With no other outside factors, the business accepting half low-income families will operate in the red.

The last table (Table 1.3) offers an example based in a direct ownership model, where King County would own a space and offer below-market occupancy costs (one of three recommended models for financing early learning facilities). In this example, the program accepts 50% children using WCCC subsidy **and** has below market rate rent/mortgage costs via a PSTAA facility.



**Table 1.1**

Child care program expenses				
	Preschool	Toddler	Infant	Total
# Classrooms	3	1	1	5
# Children	57	13	8	78
<b>Child Care and Teaching</b>				
Lead Teacher, \$20/hr (4.5)	124,800	62,400	62,400	249,600
Assistant Teacher, \$18/hr (6)	224,400	74,800	74,800	374,000
Director, \$27/hr (1)	28,000	14,000	14,000	56,000
<b>Total Staff Compensation</b>	<b>377,500</b>	<b>151,300</b>	<b>151,300</b>	<b>680,160</b>
Benefits	75,440	30,260	34,260	135,960
Program Expenses	54,000	18,000	18,000	90,000
<b>Occupancy</b>				
Rent/Mortgage	156,000	52,000	52,000	260,000
Utilities, Custodial	24,000	8,000	8,000	40,000
<b>Admin</b>	<b>61,832</b>	<b>23,363</b>	<b>23,363</b>	<b>108,557</b>
<b>Total Operating Expenses</b>	<b>748,856</b>	<b>282,947</b>	<b>383,947</b>	<b>1,314,769</b>

**Table 1.2**

Revenue	50% Private Pay / 50% Subsidy				All Private Pay			
	Preschool	Toddler	Infant	Total	Preschool	Toddler	Infant	Total
<b>Estimated Revenue</b> (50% subsidy + 50% market rate)	<b>742,824</b>	<b>238,290</b>	<b>169,728</b>	<b>1,150,842</b>	868,680	308,880	224,640	1,402,200
<b>Monthly Full Fee Tuition</b>					\$1,270	\$1,980	\$2,340	
<b>Monthly State Subsidy Tuition</b>	\$931	\$1,364	\$1,260					
<b>Net Income</b>	<b>-6,032</b>	<b>-44,657</b>	<b>-113,219</b>	<b>-163,907</b>	119,824	25,933	-58,307	87,451**

\*\*These funds could be used to pay employees an additional \$2-\$3/hour to result in a balanced budget.

Table 1.3

With PSTAA facility offering below-market occupancy	50% Private Pay / 50% Subsidy			
	Preschool	Toddler	Infant	Total
# Classrooms	3	1	1	5
# Children	57	13	8	78
<b>Child Care and Teaching</b>				
Lead Teacher, \$20/hr. (4.5)	124,800	62,400	83,200	270,400
Assistant Teacher, \$18/hr. (6)	224,400	74,800	74,800	374,000
Director, \$27/hr. (1)	28,000	14,000	14,000	56,000
<b>Total Staff Compensation</b>	<b>377,200</b>	<b>151,200</b>	<b>172,000</b>	<b>700,400</b>
Benefits	75,440	30,240	34,400	140,080
Program Expenses	72,000	24,000	24,000	120,000
<b>Occupancy</b>				
Rent/Mortgage	80,000	25,000	25,000	130,000
*Utilities	24,000	8,000	8,000	40,000
<b>Admin</b>	54,812	21,023	21,023	96,857
<b>Total Operating Expenses</b>	<b>663,836</b>	<b>254,607</b>	<b>254,607</b>	<b>1,173,049</b>
<b>Estimated Revenue (50% subsidy + 50% market rate)</b>	<b>742,824</b>	<b>238,290</b>	<b>169,728</b>	<b>1,150,842</b>
<b>Net Income</b>	<b>78,988</b>	<b>-16,317</b>	<b>-84,879</b>	<b>-22,207</b>

As is evident in the first scenario, there are strong financial disincentives to serving infants in the child care market, which contributes to a lack of available, affordable, high-quality infant care in King County.

Also evident is the impossibility for a program to serve a majority of children using Working Connections Child Care Subsidy, without supporting factors such as grants or PSTAA funds, while maintaining quality staff and care. In order to serve low-income children, almost all child care providers also need to serve private-pay children to balance out their income. Even in the scenario above where a site has below-market occupancy costs are covered through PSTAA funds, it is still not possible for this program to break even while serving 50% of children using WCCC subsidies.



Given the high cost of living in King County compared to the rest of the state, there are many low-income children who are ineligible for the state subsidy who would benefit from child care programs with subsidized costs and a lower regional cost of care.

Addressing these challenges is complex and necessary if we want to have a King County where all children have the opportunity to access high-quality early learning.

**A stakeholder group should be convened to inform the implementation criteria for a PSTAA Early Learning Facilities Fund to ensure King County is removing barriers and maximizing the number of low-income children who will benefit from this investment.**