



NATURE-BASED OUTDOOR EDUCATION IN EARLY CHILDHOOD EDUCATION

**A PRACTICAL TOOLKIT FOR EARLY
CHILDHOOD EDUCATORS**

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WHAT IS NATURE-BASED OUTDOOR EDUCATION?

Nature-based outdoor education is a child-centred, play-based approach to learning that takes place in outdoor environments and emphasizes exploration, curiosity, movement, and direct engagement with the natural world. It supports meaningful learning experiences by allowing children to investigate, discover, and interact with nature in hands-on ways.

Child-led learning

Holistic development

Nature-based exploration



KEY RESEARCH FINDINGS



01

NATURE-BASED OUTDOOR EDUCATION SUPPORTS HOLISTIC DEVELOPMENT

Outdoor experiences support children's physical, cognitive, social, and emotional development through active, hands-on, and play-based learning.

02

OUTDOOR EXPERIENCES BUILD CONFIDENCE AND INDEPENDENCE

Children develop resilience, problem-solving skills, decision-making abilities, and self-confidence when they are given opportunities to explore and take appropriate risks.

03

NATURE-BASED LEARNING STRENGTHENS CHILDREN'S CONNECTION TO THE ENVIRONMENT

Regular engagement with nature helps children build appreciation, respect, and care for the natural world while developing early foundations for environmental awareness.

04

BARRIERS CAN AFFECT IMPLEMENTATION

Challenges such as weather, safety concerns, limited resources, and lack of educator confidence or training can make nature-based outdoor education more difficult to implement consistently.

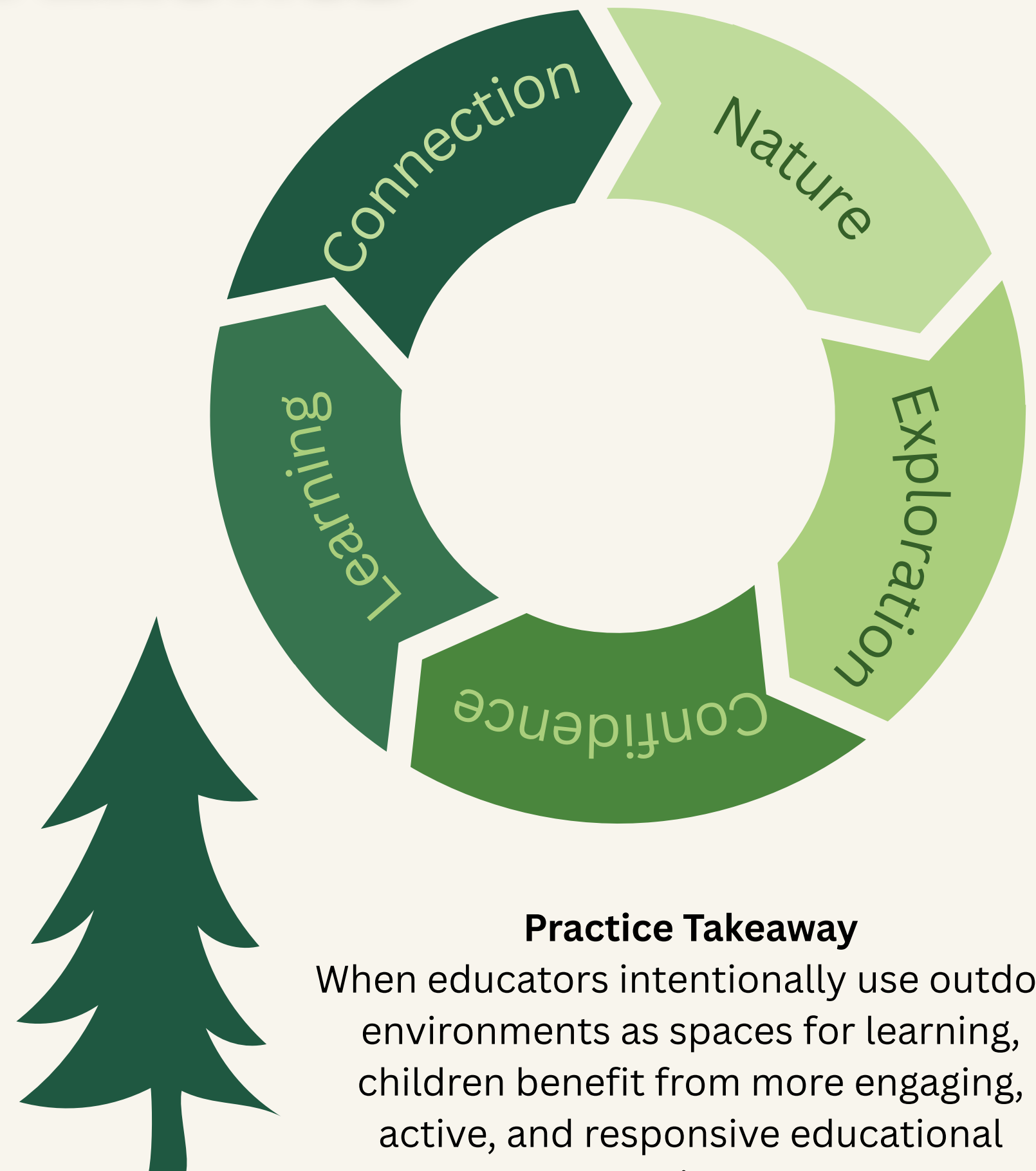
WHY IT MATTERS FOR PRACTICE

Nature-based outdoor education is more than simply taking children outside. It is a meaningful and research-informed approach that supports whole-child development and creates rich opportunities for learning through exploration, play, and interaction with the environment.

Why Educators Should Care

- Supports physical activity, coordination, and healthy risk-taking
- Encourages communication, cooperation, and social problem-solving
- Promotes curiosity, creativity, and inquiry-based learning
- Supports emotional well-being and self-regulation
- Helps children build authentic relationships with the natural world

(Abbott & Flynn, 2024; Dankiw et al., 2023)



Practice Takeaway

When educators intentionally use outdoor environments as spaces for learning, children benefit from more engaging, active, and responsive educational experiences.

GETTING STARTED WITH NATURE-BASED OUTDOOR EDUCATION

You do not need a forest or a specialized outdoor program to begin. Nature-based outdoor education can start with small, intentional changes in everyday practice and can be adapted to many early childhood settings.

Simple ways to start...

	Begin with short, regular outdoor sessions and build consistency over time
	Use available outdoor spaces such as playgrounds, school yards, fields, or nearby parks
	Follow children’s interests, questions, and observations during outdoor experiences
	Create predictable routines so children know what to expect
	Encourage open-ended exploration, movement, and discovery
	Prepare for changing weather conditions with appropriate clothing and planning

(Yalçın & Tantekin Erden, 2021; Zhai et al., 2025)

NATURE-BASED OUTDOOR ACTIVITY IDEAS FOR EARLY CHILDHOOD SETTINGS



NATURE SCAVENGER HUNT

Invite children to search for leaves, sticks, rocks, flowers, textures, or different colours in the outdoor environment. Educators can encourage children to describe what they find, compare items, and sort objects by size, shape, or colour.

Supports: observation, language development, classification, and attention to detail

(Dankiw et al., 2023; Novikova et al., 2024)



LOOSE PARTS PLAY

Provide materials such as sticks, pinecones, logs, stones, and leaves for children to build, stack, sort, and create with. Open-ended loose parts play allows children to experiment, collaborate, and use their imagination in meaningful ways.

Supports: creativity, problem-solving, collaboration, and spatial thinking



NATURE-BASED OUTDOOR ACTIVITY IDEAS FOR EARLY CHILDHOOD SETTINGS



ANIMAL AND INSECT OBSERVATION

Encourage children to look for birds, insects, animal tracks, or signs of wildlife in outdoor spaces. Educators can ask open-ended questions, help children notice patterns, and document observations through conversation or drawing.

Supports: curiosity, inquiry, scientific thinking, and environmental awareness



WEATHER EXPLORATION

Invite children to observe rain, puddles, wind, clouds, sunlight, and seasonal changes in the natural environment. These experiences can help children notice change over time and make connections between weather and their surroundings.

Supports: sensory learning, inquiry skills, and early science understanding

(Dankiw et al., 2023; Novikova et al., 2024)



SUPPORTING INCLUSION AND SAFETY OUTDOORS

Nature-based outdoor education can be highly inclusive when educators create flexible, responsive, and accessible opportunities for participation. Outdoor spaces can support diverse learners by offering different ways to explore, move, communicate, and engage.

SUPPORTING INCLUSION

- Offer multiple ways for children to participate in outdoor experiences
- Use visual supports, routines, and clear expectations
- Provide quieter or sensory-friendly outdoor areas when needed
- Adapt activities and materials to meet different developmental needs
- Focus on children's strengths, interests, and preferred ways of engaging

(Smedsrud et al., 2024; Sturges et al., 2025)

SAFETY AND RISK MANAGEMENT

- Complete a quick safety scan of the environment before activities
- Establish clear and simple boundaries for outdoor play
- Supervise children while still allowing for independence and exploration
- Teach children how to assess and manage appropriate risk
- Prepare for weather conditions and keep basic first aid materials available



COMMON BARRIERS AND PRACTICAL SOLUTIONS

BARRIER

Weather concerns

Safety worries

Limited educator confidence or training

Limited access to natural spaces or materials

SOLUTION

Plan for all seasons, communicate clothing expectations, and adapt activities to different conditions.

Use clear routines, supervision, simple boundaries, and regular safety checks.

Start with manageable activities, learn alongside children, and build confidence gradually over time.

Use available outdoor areas creatively and incorporate natural materials whenever possible.

Nature-based outdoor education is a valuable and research-informed approach that supports children's development, engagement, well-being, and connection to the natural world. With thoughtful planning and responsive practice, early childhood educators can create meaningful outdoor experiences that are inclusive, accessible, and practical in everyday settings. (Abbott & Flynn, 2024; Yalçın & Tantekin Erden, 2021)

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