



Australian Children's
Education & Care
Quality Authority

QUALITY AREA 3

BABIES AND OUTDOOR PLAY

Providing babies with quality care and education includes offering positive experiences in the natural outdoor environment.

No matter the season, outdoor environments afford unique and abundant opportunities for babies to engage in play-based learning and sensory activities, which is critical for their developing brains. Outdoor experiences can provide an opportunity to explore, discover and appreciate the natural world, as well as be active, strengthen fine and gross motor movement skills, test physical limits and get messy.

Time spent in the outdoors should be an important part of the daily program for all children, including babies. Educators can support babies to interact with the outdoor environment by planning quality experiences to promote engagement and maximise learning and development.



LINKS TO THE NATIONAL QUALITY STANDARD

Quality Area 3 Physical Environment

3.2.1 Outdoor and indoor spaces are organised and adapted to support every child's participation and to engage every child in quality experiences in both built and natural environments.

Providing quality experiences for babies is also integral to the outcomes of Quality Areas 1 and 5:

Quality Area 1 Educational Program and Practice

1.1.2 Each child's current knowledge, strengths, ideas, culture, abilities and interests are the foundation of the program.

1.1.3 All aspects of the program, including routines, are organised in ways that maximise opportunities for each child's learning.

1.2.1 Educators are deliberate, purposeful, and thoughtful in their decisions and actions.

1.2.2 Educators respond to children's ideas and play and extend children's learning through open-ended questions, interactions and feedback.

1.2.3 Each child's agency is promoted, enabling them to make choices and decisions that influence events and their world.

Quality Area 5 Educational Program and Practice

5.1.1 Responsive and meaningful interactions build trusting relationships which engage and support each child to feel secure, confident and included.

THE BENEFITS OF OUTDOOR PLAY FOR BABIES

Outdoor experiences are an important part of children's healthy growth, learning, wellbeing and development. The benefits of outdoor learning environments and engagement in nature play for young children are varied and many.

Encouraging babies to spend time in the outdoor environment (including touching sand, grass, dirt or leaves), has potential health benefits and can help stimulate their immune systems. Opportunities to move freely, grasp objects, kick legs, crawl and observe others running and playing supports physical development. Research indicates that spending time in fresh air also encourages better healthy sleep patterns for babies as they begin to understand the difference between night and day.

Providing babies with varied experiences and early opportunities to engage in natural outdoor play can additionally support their sense of belonging to the world. It also creates an important foundation that embeds a continued and lasting interest in exploring, questioning and appreciating nature and fostering curiosity. Making sense of new sights, smells, textures and sounds stimulates brain development and provides a foundation for learning by encouraging discovery and exploration.

When educators engage in outdoor learning experiences with and alongside children, there are further opportunities for social exchange, relationship building and language development.

PROMOTING LEARNING AND DEVELOPMENT

Belonging, Being, Becoming: The Early Years Learning Framework explains that educators can ‘recognise spontaneous teachable moments as they occur and use them to build on children’s learning’ (p.17).

Educators should be purposeful and intentional in planning quality experiences in the outdoor environment and maximise opportunities for learning and development:

- Plan the use of age and ability appropriate resources to strengthen each baby’s sense of agency and encourage engagement with the natural world, while extending their emerging abilities and interests.
- Provide opportunities and encouragement to promote sensory motor development as babies safely explore the environment with their hands, mouths and bodies.
- Promote positive interactions by listening to and responding when babies play with language. Repeat sounds and gestures, and describe objects, textures and sounds.
- Promote babies’ discovery of the natural environment and share their intrigue by describing what they are doing, feeling, seeing, smelling.
- Foster relationships and social interaction with other babies, children and educators.
- Reorganise spaces for ongoing engagement – babies who are not yet mobile will benefit from experiencing varying locations. Place babies on their back or tummy on a blanket or mat of various textures and patterns; if able to sit up, place them where they can look out and engage with their surroundings.
- Document experiences, interests and their responses in order to scaffold and extend future learning.
- Talk with families about the benefits and learning that is occurring throughout these playful experiences.

OUTDOOR EXPERIENCES

Outcome four of the Early Years Learning Framework reminds educators to ‘provide babies and toddlers with resources that offer challenge, intrigue and surprise, to support their investigations and share their enjoyment’ (p.38).

Babies need interesting things to look at, touch, listen to, and smell. They also need engaged educators to describe these things and scaffold their learning.

Practical ideas for outdoor experiences for babies include:

- a variety of objects that are soft and hard, heavy and light, rough and smooth, wet and dry, cool and warm, things that make sounds or blow in the breeze or when shaken or kicked
- natural objects, such as leaves, feathers, flowers, herbs, grass, smooth river stones (must be larger than a D-size battery)
- objects for muscle development, such as things to push and pull, balls, large hollow blocks, and hanging things to reach, grasp or kick
- open-ended materials that babies can explore in their own way – objects to grasp, poke, bang, squeeze and shake
- containers, boxes and baskets to take things out of and put them back in
- different surfaces to crawl on, such as grass, wood, pavers, rubber, straw matting
- places to crawl over, under and through, such as a low wide bridge, a short tunnel, a plank close to the ground, a small ramp, and places to play ‘peek a boo’
- sturdy items to pull up on (logs, ledges) with soft ground to fall back onto
- sand play for experiencing wet and dry sand on their hands and feet
- wind chimes and mirrors
- sturdy picture books and other indoor resources, preferably made from natural materials or safe repurposed items
- water play in a shallow basin or trough, with two or three small containers that are easy to hold, a spoon or small ladle, a few smooth large flat stones, and objects that float, sink, and have holes in them. (Supervise closely and empty water immediately after use.)

SAFETY CONSIDERATIONS

1. Maintain a safe environment

Carefully check the outdoor area, ensuring the removal of sharp, small or dangerous objects. Anything smaller than a D-size battery is a choking risk. Babies mouth everything they touch, so be observant and ready to remove unwanted objects.

Undertaking regular risk assessments and risk-benefit-analyses will help in maintaining a safe, age appropriate, engaging, learning environment and support the process of reflecting on and communicating the thinking and planning that educators are engaging in.

Supervision is essential. Educators need to be actively supervising and engaging with babies when outdoors, being mindful of ratios and maintaining adequate supervision during routine times, such as nappy changes.

2. Follow sun safe practices

The Cancer Council Australia recommends that children under the age of 12 months are not exposed to direct sunlight when UV levels are 3 and above, which is most days in most parts of Australia. Therefore it is recommended to:

- keep babies inside during the middle of the day when the sun is at its hottest
- ensure babies are always completely in the shade
- dress them in protective clothing, such as loose-fitting, lightweight long sleeves and long pants and hats (broad brim or legionnaire style).

As a baby's skin is sensitive and highly absorbent, the Australasian College of Dermatologists recommends minimising the use of sunscreen on babies aged six months or younger.

It is important to keep abreast of research and current recommendations. For further information on sun safety for babies visit the website of the [Australian Cancer Council](https://www.cancer.org.au)

3. Ensure appropriate clothing

Being mindful about the clothing babies are wearing will ensure their comfort, safety and protection from the elements such as sun, wind, cold and rain.

While babies do not become ill by being outside on a cold day, for their comfort and wellbeing their heads, hands and feet should be covered.

Regularly check the skin on the baby's head, neck, hands and feet to ensure they have not overheated or are not cold. If so, remove or add a layer of clothing.

Ask families to provide suitable clothing for all kinds of weather and a change of clothes in case the baby gets wet or dirty.

REFERENCES AND RESOURCES

Gilbert, J. & Knight, R. (2017) *Dirt is good: The Advantage of Germs for your Child's Developing Immune System*. St. Martin's Press, New York.

[Sun protection and infants - factsheet](#)

[The importance of taking infants and toddlers outdoors](#)

[The importance of outdoor play and its impact on brain development in children](#)

[Things to do – infants and toddlers](#)

[Even babies need the outdoors](#)

Stonehouse, A. (2011) *The more you know, the more you see: babies' and toddlers' learning and the EYLF*. Deakin West, ACT. Early Childhood Australia

More information is available on the ACECQA website [acecqa.gov.au](https://www.acecqa.gov.au)

