

Outdoor Learning

Supervision Is More Than Watching Children Play

Why is outdoor play so important for young children's learning? What are teachers' supervisory responsibilities when children play and learn outdoors?

**Heather Olsen,
Donna Thompson,
and Susan Hudson**

What a perfect day to be outside! It is warm, the sun is shining, and there is a light breeze. A few children are climbing on playground equipment. Some are digging in sand. A few laugh as they chase each other. Four children are standing together, looking around.

The two supervisors are sitting on a bench, drinking their morning coffee and planning their next science project. Inga, a 4-year-old, comes running and in a frightened voice says, "Pedro is hurt!"

Similar scenarios take place every day in early childhood programs around the world, and demonstrate why careful supervision is so important for early childhood professionals.

Early childhood programs strive to provide good-quality care and education as young children develop their physical, emotional, social, and intellectual skills. In order to provide children with positive, developmentally appropriate learning opportunities, educators ensure the safety and security of children, indoors and outdoors.

The outdoor learning environment is an important element of the total care and education of young children. Outdoor spaces can enhance curriculum, especially when teachers responsibly supervise children who are engaged in unstructured play. Supervision is far more than just assuring sufficient teacher/child ratios. The supervision practices explored in this article deal with two primary issues:

- preparation of the outdoor learning environment, and
- watchful guidance of young children by educators

Why Outdoor Play Is Important

Insights about children's play from Montessori (1966), Piaget (1962), Vygotsky (1978), and the Gesell Institute of Human Development (2010) have contributed to the early childhood literature that clearly indicates that children learn and develop through play.

Play typically happens inside and outside the classroom. The term *recess* has often been thought of as time spent without any real purpose (Clements, 2000). The values of outdoor play are far more than giving children a break, or allowing them to run off steam or get fresh air. Research has shown that

- outdoor play encourages children to communicate, to express their feelings, to discover and investigate the world around them (Guddemi, Jambor, & Moore, 1999), and that
- play is an important vehicle for developing self-regulation, language, cognition, and social competence (NAEYC, 2008).

The Alliance for Childhood (2010) is focusing its advocacy efforts on creative play, which is disappearing from childhood in the United States. Every child deserves a chance to grow and learn in play-based early childhood programs. Educators are pressured by factors such as preparing children for academic tests and the stress of meeting time limits due to the increase of shared space and structured programming.

Teachers play a central role in children's play (Wardle, 2008). Teachers spark children's curiosity and support healthy development so they can become lifelong

learners (Miller & Almon, 2009). The interactions between teachers and children are especially important in “today’s media-saturated world, where many children have not learned how to engage in rich play of their own making and need a teacher’s help creating it” (p. 53).

Children need to be involved with various kinds of play (motor/physical play, social play, constructive play, fantasy play, and games with rules) because play is “the most efficient, powerful, and productive way to learn the information [and skills] young children need” (Wardle, 2008).

Because play is so important to children’s development, teachers are responsible for facilitating safe, appropriate learning experiences.

as adults who are alert, are aware, know the play rules, and intervene when inappropriate behaviors occur (Thompson, Hudson, & Olsen, 2007). Among the many factors that constitute adequate supervision are awareness of the children’s developmental stages, identifying any hazards present in the environment, and recognition of the types of injury to which children may be susceptible (Saluja, et al., 2004).

Children grow and learn in a safe, engaging play environment.

Children require the opportunity to grow, learn, and have enjoyable experiences in a safe play environment. Professionals who supervise children’s outdoor play have three primary responsibilities, to

- *create an environment* that empowers children to independently pursue creative play,
- *enhance the quality* of the play experience by interacting with children, and
- *carefully observe* to assure that children play in appropriate and safe ways.

Early childhood educators have a legal and moral responsibility to keep children safe and provide them with a good-quality learning environment (National Association for the Education of Young Children [NAEYC], 2005a).

Three responsibilities of early childhood educators who supervise children’s outdoor play

1. create an environment that empowers children to independently pursue creative play
2. enhance the quality of the play experience by interacting with children
3. carefully observe to assure that children play in appropriate and safe ways

The American Academy of Pediatrics (AAP), the American Public Health Association (APHA), and the National Resource Center for Health and Safety in Child Care (NRCHSCC) also recognize the importance of supervision. In their comprehensive health and safety standards they note

Children like to test their skills and abilities. This is particularly noticeable around playground equipment. Even if the highest safety standards for playground layout, design, and surfacing are met, serious injuries can happen if children are left unsupervised. (AAP, APHA, & NRCHSCC, 2002, p. 59)

Supervision is more than having an adult present and making sure the children are playing safely. Supervisors in good-quality programs are expected to enhance children’s development by offering developmentally appropriate materials and activities that engage children. Educators provide a space that empowers children to take ownership in their discoveries. These three factors are necessary to implement high-quality supervision practices:

1. Plan interesting, safe learning environments.

Questions to consider about outdoor play

- Why does supervision of young children matter?
- How can adults create dynamic outdoor learning environments to assure meaningful play experiences?
- What level of supervision is needed to ensure children’s safety?
- What adult behaviors are expected during supervision? What adult activities are not appropriate?
- How can adults interact with a child or small group and also supervise other children?

How Is Outdoor Play Best Supervised?

The term *supervision* can be found in any dictionary (e.g., to oversee, direct) (Morehead, Morehead, & Morehead, 1995). Supervision in the field of education has been defined

2. Actively supervise the children.
3. Develop and follow supervision policies.

Plan Interesting, Safe Learning Environments

With planning and thoughtful creativity, educators can design good-quality learning environments that are filled with learning opportunities. The best unstructured outdoor play environments are designed to allow children to explore, follow their curiosity, and express their physical being and body movements. Children choose to play in challenging, inspiring, and inviting spaces that appeal to them. Unique play spaces for children's informal learning often include

- natural areas
- objects to manipulate
- swings
- climbing units
- open grass
- pretend play settings
- water/sand spaces
- digging sites

All staff members, especially those who supervise children outdoors, should be part of the planning process to create the unstructured outdoor play environment. Observant supervisors have insights into how children move and behave when they explore. They understand how mixing active and passive areas can create conflict and unsafe behavior. Teachers' understandings about how children play on different pieces of equipment or use various manipulative objects can be very beneficial in setting up an effective outdoor environment.



Subjects & Predicates

Outdoor play encourages children to communicate, to express their feelings, and to investigate the world around them. It is an important vehicle for developing self-regulation, language, cognition, and social competence.

For instance, sand and water play are very common features in many programs. If sandboxes have less than an inch of sand and a limited number of tools (shovels, buckets, truck), children may have to wait a long time for a turn and their explorations with the sand will be limited. Spaces such as sandboxes should have plenty of materials and equipment. Sand and water are meant for groups of children to explore, manipulate, and create.

Supervisors can easily point out concerns in playground design as well, such as blind spots. For

instance, a large storybook cottage may appear cute on the blueprint, but may in fact be a hazardous situation in the making for children who can either hide in or behind the structure. Thus, experienced supervisors can bring a practical perspective that focuses on safety to any proposal.

Actively Supervise Children

Unstructured outdoor play areas make it impossible to predict every move children will make. In this article's opening scenario, two supervisors were present, but they were

not actively taking responsibility. Lack of supervision may well have resulted in a serious injury. Three practical components can result in appropriate supervision in an early childhood setting:

1. Identify each supervisors' responsibility
2. Be an active supervisor
3. Be prepared to respond to emergencies

Identify precise responsibilities of all supervisors.

Identify responsibilities

The first component of appropriate supervision is each supervisor's awareness of his or her responsibilities. Program expectations are to keep children safe and provide enriching environments for learning, but just exactly how is that done? The American Academy of Pediatrics standards for health and safety refer to supervision more than 20 times (AAP, APHA, & NTCHSCC, 2002). These guidelines include:

- "Children shall not be permitted to play without constant supervision in areas where there is any body of water, including swimming pools, built-in wading pools, tubs, pails, sinks or toilets, ponds, and irrigation ditches" (p. 112).
- "Children shall always be supervised when playing on playground equipment" (p. 222).
- "Parents expect that their child will be adequately

supervised and will not be exposed to hazardous play environments, yet will have the opportunity for free, creative play" (p. 351).

More detailed written supervision guidelines are still needed to clarify the specific responsibilities of educators who supervise young children.

Most injuries to young children are preventable (Rimsza, Schackner, Bowen, & Marshall, 2002) and happen when an adult is supposedly supervising them. A number of lawsuits against early childhood programs have raised questions about their supervision practices. This case was settled out of court.

Four supervisors were assigned to the play area with 18 children (age range from 15 months to 3 years). One supervisor went inside. A second adult was sitting on a picnic table. The third and fourth supervisors were standing together in a corner opposite from a playhouse. Five children were inside the playhouse, all of them out of direct sight. A child ran to the two supervisors to report that there was something wrong with another child. An adult found him underneath a plastic-ring-filled pool in the playhouse, not breathing.

Had the adults been interacting with the children and present in the playhouse, this incident would likely have never happened. To decrease the potential for accidents and inappropriate children's behaviors, early childhood programs need to identify precise responsibilities of staff who supervise children during unstructured play. The condition of the environment and the activities that are offered help determine these responsibilities.

Program leaders may find it helpful to identify three types of supervision (van der Smissen, 1990).

- **General supervision**—overseeing a group of young children involved in play. For instance, there may be several children playing in one large space with a variety of activities. Supervisors are dispersed throughout the area and actively watch their assigned territory.
- **Transitional supervision**—observing and overseeing children as they move between activities (van der Smissen, 1990). The supervisors' level of involvement in transitional supervision will vary depending on the ages of the children and the activity. For example, after a period of unstructured play (using general supervision techniques), supervisors implement transitional supervision techniques when they guide children to put away materials and equipment and move to the next activity.
- **Specific supervision**—constant and continuous monitoring of children, either one-on-one or in a small group. This type of supervision is common when the supervisor is giving instructions to children, the activity performed offers a greater challenge, or there is a need to guide a specific learning concept. In early childhood, this type of supervision is often referred to as *play facilitation* (Kontos, 1999).

Play facilitation or supervision?

Research on best practices shows that adults who actively facilitate play can extend the learning potential of the experience (Berk & Winsler 1995; Trawick-Smith, 1994). This teaching strategy is often called *intentional teaching* (Epstein, 2007). At the same time, interfering with and disrupting children’s play is not recommended when children are positively engaged (Miller, Fernie, & Kantor, 1992; Pellegrini & Galda, 1993).

Supervision is more than having an adult present.

In terms of a supervisor’s responsibility, very few people can do two jobs at once. If a person is teaching swimming in a pool, the teacher is focused on the learners, not the environment. A lifeguard is present to ensure that no participant spends too much time underwater. The

same thing happens in an outdoor play environment.

If early childhood teachers are expected to take an active role in play facilitation, then those individuals need to be designated prior to going outside. Thus, if three people have supervision (lifeguard) responsibilities, one may act as the play facilitator.

Attentively monitor children’s play

Active monitoring can ensure safety and help prevent injuries. Supervisors are constantly aware of the environment and continually scanning the play area so they can see more actions and behaviors. Scanning also enables a supervisor to give children “the eye” to prevent or stop inappropriate behavior and conflict. By being attentive when children are engaged in play, supervisors are readily available to intervene nonverbally or verbally.

Unsafe situations tend to arise when supervisors are engaged in one-to-one adult conversations or otherwise distracted. Active supervisors position themselves so they can

see the children. Supervisors agree beforehand as to who is responsible for what area. Again, a supervisor’s position can be likened to that of a lifeguard. Lifeguards are spread around a swimming pool with each person responsible for a different area, such as the slide, deep end, and shallow end.

Unstructured outdoor play is not a time for supervisors to catch up on each other’s lives. Interactions with other adults and children should be brief and to the point. When supervisors talk with another person, they stop being an active supervisor.

In some situations, leaders must determine appropriate times for adults to facilitate play. Imagine that three classrooms with 15 children each are outdoors. All three classroom teachers are assigned to supervise the children. Then one teacher takes three children to work in the garden. The other 42 children are scattered throughout the large area with two teachers supervising, resulting in a non-compliant (and unsafe) teacher to child ratio (NAEYC, 2005b). Teachers and administrators who discuss expectations and needs for balancing unstructured and more intentional outdoor play would develop a better plan.

Prepare for emergencies

Unfortunately, even under the best circumstances, injuries do occur. Early childhood programs must be prepared to respond appropriately to emergency situations, including injuries, natural disasters, and the arrival of unknown or unauthorized adults. All staff must know the procedures to follow in case of an emergency. This emergency plan must be practiced frequently. Whether it is an injury, fire, tornado, earthquake, or hurricane drill, all supervisors, administrators, teachers, children,



Subjects & Predicates

Active supervisors are constantly aware of the environment and continually scanning the play area so they can see children’s actions and behaviors. By being attentive when children are engaged in play, supervisors can intervene at once, either nonverbally or verbally.

and families need to know what to do when an emergency occurs.

An effective emergency plan includes details on how supervisors alert administrators and emergency responders to an urgent situation. Adults must have access to a communication system, such as a walkie-talkie or a cell phone at all times, to be used for work-related situations only. The plan also includes procedures for notifying families.

All staff must have training in basic first aid procedures, which is typically a requirement for licensing. Administrators and specialists provide staff with frequent updates on the latest recommendations for handling emergencies, including tending to children who have specific medical needs such as asthma, diabetes, or allergies.

Proper documentation of emergency situations includes completing an injury report form accurately (see sidebar) and following the program's submission requirements. Documentation is vital for legal protection and can be helpful in spotting patterns of concern to be addressed.



Subjects & Predicates

Supervision policies must be specific to the program, play area, staff skills, and children's needs. Review them at least once a year.

Information to Report

Injury report forms should include

- facility information
- child information
- time and date of incident
- location of incident
- equipment/product involved
- cause of injury
- parts of body injured
- type of injury
- first aid given at the facility
- who was contacted and what time
- treatment provided by whom and how
- follow-up plan for care of child
- corrective action needed to prevent reoccurrence
- name of agency notified
- signatures of staff members and parents (U.S. Department of Health & Human Services, 2009)

Develop and Follow Supervision Policies

Each early childhood program has different supervision needs, depending on the design and access to the outdoor play environment. The goal of preparing and implementing comprehensive, effective supervision policies is to enable children to have an enriching and safe play environment.

Most programs design outdoor play spaces to provide children with the opportunity to develop physically, socially, emotionally, and intellectually through exploration, interaction with others, and discovery. The supervision philosophy of informal play in this environment

would be to maximize the space so children can create meaning from the world around them.

Consistent, clear staff responsibilities must be identified. Supervision policies must be specific to the program, play area, staff skills, and children's needs. Review them at least once a year.

Provide Continuing Education for Staff

Annual staff development about outdoor play is a key ingredient for successful outdoor supervision.

Topics to consider include:

- Updating the environment for educational value and safety

- Identifying and revising supervisors' responsibilities
- Reviewing the components of active supervision
- Practicing current emergency procedures

High-quality early childhood programs address supervision preparation in order to ensure consistency in staff interactions with children and their colleagues. Supervision skills should focus on accountability, alertness, flexibility, and attitude (Thompson, et al., 2007). For instance, sometimes a child does not want to participate in an activity and may prefer to just watch from the side. A well-prepared supervisor would suggest that the child become an assistant or a scorekeeper, or engage in a related project near where the other children are playing.

Annual staff development about outdoor play is essential.

During professional development sessions, staff can be encouraged to discuss outdoor activities and behaviors that are and are not appropriate for children. Review the most effective teaching strategies to assure children's safety and involvement. Supervisors act as a team to develop the basic rules for activities, games, and unstructured play. These rules will then be consistent among all staff members and should be clearly communicated to the children and any other caregivers (Hudson, Bruya, Olsen, Thompson, & Bruya, 2010).

Program records about supervision development include information such as the date and times, name and qualifications of the leader, content covered, and names of participants who attended (Gaskin & Batista, 2007). These sessions may qualify as continuing education hours for staff in some states and therefore should also be recorded in individual employee's files.

Supervision Matters

Early childhood professionals provide positive, enriching experiences for young children. To ensure high-quality supervision of children,

- *supervisors* plan developmentally appropriate spaces, give children ample time to explore with plenty of suitable materials and equipment, and facilitate engaging play
- *administrators* provide regular professional learning opportunities so staff are confident and competent supervisors
- *staff* work as a team to carry out their daily supervision responsibilities

An investment in staff supervision preparation, and developing and implementing a comprehensive supervision policy, is essential for all good early childhood programs.

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Outdoor Learning Supervision Is More Than Watching Children Play

Good early childhood programs provide high-quality care and education as young children develop their physical, emotional, social, and intellectual skills. In order to provide children with positive, developmentally appropriate learning opportunities, educators ensure the safety and security of children, indoors and outdoors.

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Include these components in outdoor play spaces

- natural areas
- objects to manipulate
- swings
- climbing units
- open grass
- pretend play settings
- water/sand spaces
- digging sites

- enhance the quality of the play experience by interacting with children
- carefully observe to assure that children play in appropriate and safe ways

Steps to ensure high-quality supervision...

- supervisors plan developmentally appropriate spaces, give children ample time to explore with plenty of suitable materials and equipment, and facilitate engaging play
- administrators provide ongoing professional learning opportunities so staff are confident and competent supervisors
- staff work as a team in their daily supervision responsibilities

Three types of supervision to implement

- General supervision—adults are dispersed throughout the area and actively watch their assigned territories
- Transitional supervision—oversee children as they move between activities
- Specific supervision—continuously monitor and facilitate children’s play

Administrators offer continuing education on topics such as these

- Update the environment for educational value and safety
- Identify and revise supervisors’ responsibilities
- Review the components of active supervision
- Practice current emergency procedures

What responsible outdoor play supervisors do

- create an environment that empowers children to independently pursue creative play

Resources for ideas to encourage outdoor play

- Alliance for Childhood
www.allianceforchildhood.org
- International Play Association
www.ipausa.org
- National Program for Playground Safety
www.playgroundsafety.org
- Nature Explore
www.arborday.org/explore

Note: *Dimensions of Early Childhood* readers are encouraged to copy this material for early childhood students as well as teachers of young children as a professional development tool.