



SUPPORTING NATURALIZED OUTDOOR PLAY AND LEARNING ENVIRONMENTS IN SOUTH CAROLINA CHILD CARE FACILITIES

Grow Outdoors SC is a joint initiative of the [South Carolina Department of Social Services - Division of Early Care and Education](#) and the [South Carolina Department of Public Health - Nutrition, Physical Activity, and Obesity Prevention Section](#).

VISION

All children in South Carolina spend time outdoors for health, happiness, and a greater appreciation of nature.

MISSION

Transform early childhood outdoor spaces into stimulating, naturalized environments that spark play and learning.

Rebranded in 2020, Grow Outdoors SC builds upon the successes of previous initiatives, particularly the POD (Preventing Obesity by Design) strategy, now extending its impact across the state.

Through strategic partnerships with universities and a non-profit organization, Grow Outdoors SC aims to transfer knowledge and support the early childhood community to create vibrant outdoor spaces that inspire curiosity, creativity, and physical activity among children.

The Grow Outdoors SC collaborative implementation team comprises the Natural Learning Initiative, College of Design, North Carolina State University, and the National Wildlife Federation's Early Childhood Health Outdoors (ECHO).

FOCUS AREAS

Information & Resources

We are dedicated to promoting outdoor environments that contain a variety of opportunities for play and learning in a natural setting. We provide resources and information related to the benefits of children spending time outdoors and promote the use of creative and affordable ways to improve outdoor environments for early childhood teachers and community leaders. Through Grow Outdoors SC, we seek to create outdoor environments that support hands-on learning and provide education so that child care providers have a desire to learn more and make outdoor improvements in their sites.

Professional Development

We believe teachers and child care providers are looking to improve their skills, tools, and resources to become champions for outdoor play and learning. Grow Outdoors SC provide educational opportunities that help providers understand how high-quality outdoor spaces support movement, promote mental health and wellbeing, encourage healthy eating, and motivate learning in, about, and through nature. Via technical assistance and coaching, we aim to improve and naturalize outdoor spaces while aligning with child care licensing regulations and ABC Quality indicators, incorporate nature-based learning into programs, and ensure outdoor play and learning experiences are safe and age-appropriate.

Design Assistance

ABC Quality participating child care centers can apply to receive assistance to plan, design, and incrementally develop a naturalized outdoor play and learning environment at their facilities.



WHY CHILDREN NEED TO BE OUTDOORS

Outdoor play promotes physical activity, strengthening muscles, coordination, and overall health while also boosting the immune system and reducing the risk of allergies and asthma. Time in nature has been shown to alleviate stress, enhance attention function, and support cognitive development, making it a vital component of early learning.

- Increased outdoor time is a significant predictor of children's physical activity, associated with enhanced motor development and lower obesity rates.
- Nature provides a rich, interconnected environment that nurtures their physical, emotional, and cognitive well-being.
- Research shows that children from birth to age 8 spend about 2.5 hours per day in front of a screen and less time outdoors than previous generations.

WHY ARE OUTDOOR PLAY AND LEARNING ENVIRONMENTS IMPORTANT?

A naturalized outdoor play and learning environment is intentionally designed to allow children to freely explore and play in a natural setting. This space encourages physical activity, healthy eating, social interactions, and outdoor learning. It promotes problem-solving, creativity, risk-taking, and collaboration, providing a stimulating and safe space for daily experiences. By integrating natural elements into play areas, we not only support children's development but also promote stewardship of the outdoors, creating spaces that attract families seeking comprehensive, nature-based learning experiences.

- Rich outdoor play and learning environments offer stimulation counteracting engagement with screens.
- Child care programs offer a crucial opportunity to positively impact young children's overall health, as they can spend up to 10 hours a day in these programs and consume two meals and a snack during that time.
- Child care is highly regulated. Quality improvement systems including standards about high quality outdoor environments may have a high impact on healthy child development.

CONTACT INFORMATION

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LEARN MORE ABOUT THE IMPLEMENTATION TEAM

NLI, NC State University (NCSU)

The [Natural Learning Initiative \(NLI\)](#) was founded in 2000 with the mission of "Creating environments for healthy human development and a healthy biosphere for generations to come." NLI programs are delivered via landscape design, research, professional development, and dissemination of information. NLI is an international leader supporting the creation of healthy, "biophilic" play and learning environments so children grow up caring for the planet and each other.

ECHO, National Wildlife Federation (NWF)

The [Early Childhood Health Outdoors](#) mission is to ensure that every young child has healthy outdoor experiences every day for the benefit of our families, communities, and planet. ECHO has a team of educators, landscape designers, and policy advocates who work with partners to facilitate the creation of high-quality outdoor play and learning settings for young children. ECHO works to reduce obstacles to healthy environments and increase availability for young children lacking opportunities to play and learn in healthy outdoor settings.



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