

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



In 2007, the [Natural Learning Initiative](#) (NLI) launched the POD (Preventing Obesity by Design) strategy. In 2015, POD was piloted in South Carolina by the Departments of Social Services (DSS) and Health and Environmental Control (DHEC), beginning with a design workshop in Florence.

[The POD strategy](#) is a built environment, nature-based intervention in the outdoor spaces of licensed childcare facilities. The aim is to enrich outdoor play and learning environments to foster life-long healthy habits by increasing physical activity, healthy eating, outdoor learning, and social-emotional development of young children during their formative years. Key components include landscape design, rigorous evaluation, cross-sector professional development, and website-based information dissemination. POD implementation employs collaborative participatory processes to engage stakeholders, including designers, technical assistants (TAs), owners, center directors, teachers, parents, children, community supporters, and state regulatory staff.

[Grow Outdoors South Carolina \(SC\)](#) was launched in 2020 to extend the reach of prior POD initiatives and celebrate POD achievements already on the ground. The new Grow Outdoors SC Expansion Project will implement POD statewide in continuing partnership with NLI, plus the implementation expertise of the National Wildlife Federation (NWF) [Early Childhood Health Outdoors \(ECHO\) program](#).

The aim of Grow Outdoors SC Expansion is to greatly increase the rate of implementation by creating a suite of new resources, delivering a diverse professional development program, engaging families in the process, providing financial installation support to individual sites, and instituting a rigorous evaluation process to support continuous improvement of implementation processes and results on the ground. The goal of this joint initiative of DSS and DHEC is to transform early childhood outdoor spaces into diverse, naturalized environments that spark play and learning.

About NLI, NC State University (NC SU)

[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.

NLI Grow Outdoors SC Expansion implementation tasks include:

- 1. Branding**
- 2. Grow Outdoors SC Website Design and Development**
 - A. Build Grow Outdoors SC Website.
 - B. Select content collaboratively with Grow Outdoors SC Leadership Council.
 - C. Upload content.
 - D. Test website for functionality and useability (including ADA compliance).
- 3. Grow Outdoors SC Professional Development Program**
 - A. TA Training
 - B. Clinic Sessions
 - C. Tutorials
 - D. Webinars
 - E. Short Courses
 - F. Audience: childhood educators, designers, installers, extension agents, and community college instructors
 - G. TTT (selected participants)
- 4. Grow Outdoors SC TechSheet series / Green Industry Advisory (GIA)**
 - A. Form the Green Industry Advisory (GIA).
 - B. Conduct a user survey and identify the most relevant topics based on the needs identified by the GIA.
 - C. Create TechSheets based on user survey feedback
- 5. Grow Outdoors SC Community Engagement Publication**

Audience: families, community members
- 6. Grow Outdoors SC Evaluation Program**
 - A. Subawards (UNC-G, TTU)
 - i. Provide training for staff in SC on the Preschool Outdoor Environment Measurement Scale (POEMS)
 - ii. Design a system for data entry, processing, and reporting
 - iii. Develop and complete the Institutional Research Board (IRB) process in conjunction with NC State and Texas Tech University
 - iv. Analyze and report on data collected in Year 1
 - B. Online baseline Statewide Knowledge and Attitudes Survey.
 - C. Online baseline Statewide Existing Conditions Survey (Child care centers)
 - D. Identify tools to assess SROI
 - E. Report findings

About ECHO, National Wildlife Federation (NWF)

[Early Childhood Health Outdoors](#) (ECHO) is a National Wildlife Federation (NWF) nature-based initiative that collaborates with local communities to transform spaces used by young children, their caregivers and families. ECHO works with low-income, marginalized communities to reduce barriers to healthy environments and increase equity for those otherwise lacking access to high-quality outdoor settings.