

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

NC STATE



NCDHHS

Division of Child Development and Early Education

In 2011, the DCDEE conducted a collaborative project with Natural Learning Initiative (NLI) titled *Creating a Supportive Network*. Over a decade later we are excited to relaunch the project with the hopes of increasing the awareness of health and social-emotional benefits of nature-based learning.

The COVID-19 pandemic highlighted child care facilities

as a critical economic resource and a place where young children feel safe and secure while families work. The Centers for Disease Control (CDC) promoted the idea and early educators discovered that time outdoors reduced disease transmission and increased physical activity. Children were happier and freer to be themselves, which improved social-emotional learning. Time outdoors became more widely acknowledged as a critical support for mental and physical health.

In 2002, supported by the Z. Smith Reynolds Foundation,

NLI administered a statewide survey to establish a baseline of physical conditions of outdoor play and learning spaces in NC licensed childcare facilities. Results indicated lack of environmental choice, absence of shade, low biodiversity, and limited time outdoors (proxy for physical activity). Repeat surveys assessed impacts of subsequent POD (Preventing Obesity by Design) cohorts. Now expanded and re-administered, results will reset the baseline and include NC nature preschool environments and programs.

The partnership between DCDEE and NLI brings the many benefits of healthy outdoor environments to the whole child, increases the time outdoors for children playing and learning in NC child care facilities, and allows NC to explore nature-based child care. Time outdoors is a critical tool for supporting mental and physical health in young children. Adoption of best practices for outdoor play and learning spaces is a critical component of increasing daily time spent outside.

About NLI

The Natural Learning Initiative (NLI) was founded in 2000 with the mission: *Creating environments for healthy human development and a healthy biosphere for generations to come*. NLI programs are delivered via environmental design, research, professional development, and dissemination of information. NLI is a national leader supporting the creation of children's healthy outdoor play and learning environments.

The four components of this project include:

1. Relaunching a supportive network model of DCDEE consultants and NCRLAP assessors to increase their knowledge and confidence in supporting naturalized outdoor play and learning environments in child care facilities, achieved through regional in-person workshops, dissemination of evidence-based resources, quarterly webinars, and training modules.
2. Facilitating an engagement and visioning process with an invited group of stakeholders and expert representatives of the community of interest to assist DCDEE in considering a policy and regulatory framework to support nature-based child care in North Carolina. This will be achieved through researching, engaging stakeholders to consider needs, and potential child care requirements, to support the development of a plan to embed nature-based programs into licensed child care facilities in North Carolina.
3. Increasing time outdoors for children playing and learning in NC child care centers, achieved by launching a multi-pronged professional development strategy for early educators and technical assistant specialists that is focused on nature-based best practices delivered via combined distance education, hands on teacher training, and ongoing support and resources for early educators.
4. Increasing time outdoors for children playing and learning in NC family child care homes, achieved by delivering tailored professional development activities and resources for family child care home operators, disseminating consumer education materials, and providing technical assistant implementation support

About DCDEE

Since 1971 the mission of the Division of Child Development and Early Education (DCDEE) is to ensure the health and safety of children in child care programs, to promote quality child care by implementing evidence-based standards, and to increase access to quality child care to families and children across North Carolina.