What is wrong with this Outdoor Learning Environment?
- Lack of pathway
- Lack of shade
- Lack of settings and diversity
- Lack of plantings

Lack of Life

Design for Best Practice
Before

After

Before

After

OLE Best Practice Indicators

1. Diversity of trees and shrubs
2. Shade
3. Wide, curvy, looped pathway
4. Multipurpose lawn
5. Vegetables, fruit trees, shrubs and vines within OLE
6. Designated vegetable garden
7. Natural materials
8. Outdoor toys
9. Settings that support a variety of gross motor activities
10. Ten settings or more

Diversity of Trees and Shrubs
Diversity of Trees and Shrubs

Full body contact vegetation
Tastable, smellable fences!

“Camping” in the forest
Rain Garden/Vegetated Swales

Trees and Shrubs:
Design Considerations

- Plants provide the architecture that defines spaces
- Think about the scale of the child
- Create secret spaces where children can get away, but that adults can supervise
- Seasonal supply of natural loose parts
- Protect new plants as they become established

Settings created with plants

Grass Maze
Orchard
Blueberry House

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Shade: Design Considerations

Shade can be provided by:

- **Vegetation.** Use medium-size trees or large shrubs. 2 ½-inch caliper trees provide sufficient shade in a few years. Evergreens provide year-round shade, while deciduous plants provide shade spring to fall.
- **Structures.** Arbors, pergolas, tunnels, trellises.

Locate shade-providing vegetation and structures south or southwest of area that needs shade.

Pathways

Primary Pathways: Width

5 feet Minimum, 7 feet Maximum
Secondary Pathways

Primary Pathway Design Principles

- Connected to and centered on entrances & exits.
- Looped. No deadends.
- Curvy. Avoid sharp angles.
- Loop size. Leave space inside and outside loop for settings and buffers.
- Width.
  - Preschool: 5’ minimum
  - I/T: 4’ minimum
- Respond to the geometry of the site.
- Keep pathways away from sand, walls, ball courts, and fences.

What is right about this path?

- Connected to entrance & exits.
- Curvy.

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What is **wrong** with this path?

- Not centered on entrances & exits.
- Not looped. Deadends in the corner.
- Curvy, but has multiple sharp angles.
- Less than 5’ wide.
- Very close to the back fence.

What is **right** about this path?

- Connected to and centered on entrances & exits.
- Looped. No deadends.
- Loop size. Leave space inside and outside loop for settings and buffers.
- Width. Entire path 5’ wide.
What is **wrong** with this path?

- Not Curvy. Multiple sharp angles and long straight stretches.
- Very close to a tree.

What is **right** about this path?

- Connected to and centered on entrances & exits.
- Loop. No deadends.
- Curvy. Avoid sharp angles.
- Loop size. Leave space inside and outside loop for settings and buffers.
Multipurpose Lawn:
Design Considerations

- Multipurpose: Games, dramatic play, story time, relaxation.
- Large enough for group of 25 children
- Naturalistic form.
- Defined edges.
- Connect to adjacent settings.
- Install quality lawn turf, well-drained, irrigated.
Fruit Trees

Fruit Vines

Vegetable Garden

Vegetable Gardens: Design Considerations

• Location:
  – Sunny (veggies need 6 hrs. of sun per day)
  – Quiet and protected
  – Near water source
• Protect in raised beds or with fencing or shrubs
• Defined entrances and pathways throughout.
• Various styles:
  – Raised beds
  – In-ground
  – Containers (pots, tubs, window boxes, buckets)
Natural Materials: Design Considerations

• Provide diversity of materials:
  – bamboo poles
  – bark wedges
  – straw bales
  – small stones
  – log stumps
  – tree cookies
  – trimmed branches
  – pine cones
  – leaves
  – seeds
  – nuts
  – flowers
  – wood chips
  – and many more

• Include containment and accessible storage
• Encourage children to gather natural materials to add to the collection
Natural Materials: Sand or Earth Play

Sand Play: Design Considerations

• Depth of sand. Toddlers: 12-18 ″ Pre-K: 18-24 ″
• Location. Away from paths, against a fence or in a corner.
• Containment. Timber, logs, or smooth rocks with plant buffers.
• Entry. Single entry with wooden deck.
• Covering. Cover with a fine mesh tarp or net when not in use. Allows sun, rain and fresh air to get to the sand.

Outdoor Toys and Storage

Storage: Design Considerations

Provides storage for outdoor toys and garden tools.

• Location. Access from primary pathway, close to settings where play and educational programs are held.
• Access. If contents are accessible to children, they can learn to take initiative, carry out an activity, tidy up and return items when completed.
Settings that Support Gross Motor Activity

• Provide an array of gross motor options for children of all abilities and interests.
• Be creative. Think beyond traditional play structures:
  – Balance and climbing logs
  – Hill slides
  – Wheeled toy pathways
  – Multipurpose lawns
  – Other examples?

10 or more settings

• Indoor-outdoor transition
• Pathways
• Gathering space
• Arbors, pergolas, & trellises
• Multipurpose lawn
• Sand & Earth Play
• Water Play
• Decks and Stages
• Tunnel
• Playhouse
• Sensory garden
• Grass maze
• Rain garden

• Vegetable garden
• Garden shed
• Animal Habitat garden
• Play hills and topography
• Play structure
• Loose parts and play props
• Outdoor storage

Settings that support Gross Motor Activity: Design Considerations

10 or more settings

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10 or more settings

- Excel At, Morehead City, Carteret County
- The Little Cam, Wilmington, New Hanover County
- Spanish for Fun, Chapel Hill, Orange County

10 or more settings

- Small Beginnings, Iredell County
- Friendly Ave. Preschool, Guilford County
- Spanish for Fun, Chapel Hill, Orange County
- Friendly Ave. Preschool, Guilford County

10 or more settings: Gathering Places

10 or more settings: Gathering Places
Gathering Places: Design Considerations

- Accommodate different size groups of children.
- Provide space for group gathering and/or quiet retreat.
- Various types: Log benches, decks, vine teepees, sitting circles, low walls, smooth boulders, amphitheaters.
- Provide several sizes to accommodate different group sizes.

Multipurpose Decks and Stages

- Dry, warm, year-round surface above ground.
- **Size.** A minimum width of 4-5 ft. can provide a useful activity space—up to 15 ft. affords all kinds of activities.
- **Location.** Straight edge against fence. Avoid differences of more than 6 inches in level between deck and ground.
- **Shape.** Squares, rectangles, hexagons, octagons.
- **Enclosure.** Trellises on back and sides add a sense of enclosure.
- Avoid drop-offs, hidden back spaces.
Water Play: Design Considerations

- Use potable water that drains into the sewer system or rain garden.
- No standing water.
- Consult state and local sanitation regulations that may apply.
- Provide shade structures or shade trees.
- Various types of water play features:
  - Tables
  - Fountains
  - Play streams
  - Misters
  - Lawn sprinklers
  - Spray pads