

Outdoor, Nature-Based Considerations for Emergency Waivers and Emergency Child Care Licensing

In response to the COVID-19 pandemic, the Washington State Department of Children, Youth, and Families (DCYF) is supporting early learning and child care programs in meeting the recommendations of the Washington State Department of Health (DOH) and continuing to provide high-quality programs for children and families in need. The [DOH COVID-19 Guidance for Child Care](#) and the [DCYF COVID-19 FAQ](#) have the most updated information on how child care programs can create healthy and safe environments for children and communities during the COVID-19 pandemic.

Taking children outside more often and creating additional space between groups of children are some of the [recommendations](#) made by DOH. Bringing children outdoors into authentic natural settings provides many other benefits essential to children's learning and healthy development, and this can be achieved by creating more [naturalized learning environments](#) or by bringing children into an outdoor, natural environment.

This resource is intended to support early learning and child care programs to bring children to an outdoor, nature-based environment, and guide their additional considerations when applying for an [emergency waiver](#), or an emergency child care license, to provide outdoor, nature-based emergency programming.

Please visit [this page](#) for more information about COVID-19 related waivers and guidance and email emergencychildcare@dcyf.wa.gov for more information or to apply for an emergency child care license.

These considerations follow the organization of WAC 110-300 and are based on the [Outdoor Preschool Pilot Standards](#). However, the waiver process is not a replacement for the outdoor preschool pilot licensing process.

Considerations for Outdoor, Nature-Based Child Care Programs

Child Outcomes

- Benefits of outdoor and nature-based play include:
 - Improved executive functioning
 - Reduced ADHD symptoms and improved focus
 - Supported risk assessment, creativity and problem solving
 - Increased physical activity and reduced obesity
 - Improved proprioception and balance
 - Improved eyesight and hearing development
 - More space for children to spread out and greater circulation of the air
- Nature has positive impacts on adults' stress levels and well-being
- For more information, please refer to:
 - [Benefits of Connecting Children with Nature](#) from the [Natural Learning Initiative](#)
 - [Tools and Resources](#) from the [Children & Nature Network](#)



- [The International Journal of Early Childhood Environmental Education](#) from the [Natural Start Alliance](#)

The Environment

- Ensure Access
 - If using a public park, check with the park manager to ensure the intended use is permitted.
 - Create a land-use agreement with the landowner, park director or manager.
 - Consider the barriers for families, such as transportation or access to the drop off area.
- Ensure Affordance and Benefits
 - Outdoor program locations should be intentionally selected based on their affordances.
 - These may include:
 - Shade and areas for comfort or quiet, such as shielded areas
 - Opportunities to explore novel areas, native plants and wildlife, and/or to deepen their connection with a consistent location
 - Sufficient space for rigorous physical activities, such as open fields or trails for hiking
 - Loose, open-ended objects, such as rocks, sticks, sand and logs
 - Water features, such as a stream or pond
 - Access to toileting facilities
- Hazards and Risks
 - You should not select a site with major hazards. A hazard in outdoor programming is a source of harm that is not obvious to the child, such that the potential for injury is hidden; or there is a source of harm that is greater than a child can manage to avoid, and that staff cannot control.
 - Common hazards in outdoor programming include:
 - Heavily traffic roads
 - Extreme weather conditions
 - Deep and/or swift-moving water
 - Toxic environmental pollutants
 - Dangerous or toxic plants and animals
 - Risky play (aka adventure play) may be appropriate and beneficial to children's development.
 - Beneficial risks can be identified and managed by the child or a group of children, while supportive adults can ensure children are safe, learning and enjoying themselves.
 - Common risky, adventure play elements in outdoor programming include:
 - Balancing or climbing on logs or other natural features
 - Sliding or running down hills
 - Lifting or carrying large branches
 - Playing or running on uneven terrain
- Prepare for the Shared Use of Public Areas and Facilities
 - Have a nearby back-up location.
 - Use cones or string to mark the boundaries of your program and/or separate groups.
 - Bring supplies to sanitize public restrooms before children's use.
- Minimize Your Environmental Impact
 - Aim for minimal impact on the environment, do not litter or allow children to damage delicate ecosystems.
 - Ask the park's director or a naturalist for advice about your particular area, if needed.

- Habitat restoration projects do have an impact, but a positive one. See if tree-planting or weeding is a possible activity.
- For more information, please refer to [Leave No Trace](#).
- Weather
 - In addition to extreme temperatures, weather considerations include high winds (above 30 mph are generally considered unsafe for pre-school aged children), poor air quality, lightning storms and hurricanes.
 - Check the weather every morning, and inform families early if there is a need to cancel the program.
- Eating and Water Access
 - Consider providing children with a labeled water bottle, for their use only. This aids in reducing cross-contamination, reducing the number of dishes and helps staff monitor children's water intake.
 - Ensure the water source being used meets water safety requirements.
 - Consider serving food that does not need to be refrigerated, or check that your cooler and ice packs will be able to keep food sufficiently cool, according to food safety requirements.
 - Rather than serving family-style meals, consider pre-packing lunch boxes for children and using a tarp or table cloth that is easily sanitized to provide a clean surface for eating.
- Handwashing
 - All programs, including outdoor programs, should be in areas that have adequate handwashing facilities on site. If a program must operate where there are not sufficient facilities, temporary handwashing stations with running water must be set up. If you need to set up a handwashing station, ensure you are bringing a water dispenser that allows for running water, liquid soap, a bucket for the wastewater, individual-use towels and a bag for used towels.
 - If soap and water are not readily available, use an alcohol-based hand gel with at least 60% alcohol and preferably fragrance-free.
- Toileting
 - Public restrooms may be used, however, programs should bring supplies to sanitize surfaces before children's use.
 - Outdoor programs, in partnership with the public park or landowner, may rent and provide a portable chemical toilet, which can be locked and designated for the program's use only.
 - Any backcountry toileting must be done according to Leave No Trace guidelines, principles and/or by the permission of a park's land manager.
 - Composting toilets are also acceptable, and should meet [DOH guidelines](#).
- Sleep and Rest
 - Finding quiet and restful spaces for children is an important consideration for child development and basic needs.
 - Programs may bring sleeping pads and sleeping bags for children and may use large tents or picnic shelters, as appropriate for their location, and increasing the space between children to 6 feet when possible.
- First-Aid Supplies
 - First-aid kits should be on-site and immediately accessible to program staff. They are often carried in the staff's backpacks. Additional supplies may include hand-warmers (not to directly touch skin) and fire-suppression blankets.
 - Locations requiring staff trained in Wilderness First Aid may pack additional items in their first aid kits.

- Storage and Carrying Supplies
 - Land use agreements may include storage on-site, however, programs should be careful about the security of those locations.
 - Often, programs will bring all of their supplies with them and use a cart to bring all of the necessary supplies with them. When transporting supplies, one staff person should have both hands free.
 - For adults, backpacks with hip-bands are the most supportive when carrying heavy loads.
 - Children should only wear child-sized bags, preferably with a buckle across the chest, if they will be going on long walks with their own bags.

Program Administration and Oversight

- Insurance
 - Programs should ensure that their use of an outdoor, nature-based location is covered by their insurance policy.
- Parent Handbooks
 - Parents should be notified of policies and procedures that will be used in an outdoor, nature-based environment.
- Child Records
 - Programs should bring essential child information, such as emergency contact and medication authorizations on any outdoor, nature-based location.
- Emergency Preparedness
 - Provide staff and families a means to contact the facility for updates and concerns. Assure that families have provided current emergency contact information.
 - Programs should identify an emergency shelter location close to the outdoor program location to respond to a variety of emergency situations (lockdown, extreme weather, dangerous wildlife siting, etc.)
 - Programs must ensure they have access to the emergency shelter during program hours.
 - Programs must ensure a supply of extra food and clothing is kept or available at this location.

Interactions and Curriculum

- Teaching Children About the Pandemic
 - It is important to teach children about following health and hygiene guidelines in the nature-based setting.
 - Natural resources used by children may be collected new each day, and children should be encouraged to use and keep resources separated (e.g., making your own nest or habitat).
- Setting Boundaries
 - It is important to teach children about the boundaries for play in an outdoor area “beyond the fence.” Programs may use ribbons or cones to support children in remembering the boundary.
- Freeze and Return
 - Staff may establish a call, like a bird noise, that signals to children the need to freeze or return in response to a perceived danger or when going too far away from the group.
- Outdoor, Nature-Based Education
 - There are many benefits and opportunities to outdoor, nature-based education. The Natural Start Alliance states “In a nature-based early education program, nature is a setting for the program and an object of study. In addition, the care and protection of nature and the

environment are regarded as a key outcome of the program, along with healthy child development. Some describe these nature-based early education programs as learning in nature, about nature, and for nature.”

- Since outdoor, nature-based programs provide less man-made materials (like puzzles, books, toys, etc.) staff must understand how to support children’s learning with the opportunities and affordances provided by nature.
 - For more information, please refer to:
 - [The Nature-Based Professional Practice Guidebook](#)
 - [Head Start Nature-Based Learning and Development](#)
- Supervision Outdoors and During Risky Play
 - Staff must actively supervise children at all times and should visually account for all children regularly.
 - Supervising children while climbing a natural feature (like a log, tree or boulder) may require a teacher to be in arm’s reach of the child’s midriff as they start to climb a few feet off the ground, effectively acting as a barrier and being able to provide support as needed.
 - Children should not be allowed to climb a feature that has an obvious hazard in the fall zone, such as sharp tree stumps or rocks, until those objects are removed.
 - Children should not be picked up and placed into trees or on top of boulders. Instead, staff should encourage children to accept their current levels of ability as they work toward goals.
 - Campfire activities, if allowed on the property, must follow all [U.S. Forest Service guidelines](#) for fire safety and should remain small and manageable. Children should remain at least three feet away from the fire and if a child is supporting a staff member to build or tend the fire, there should be one-on-one support and supervision.
 - [Outdoor Preschool Pilot Standard 0351](#) is a good resource for campfire safety considerations.
- Walkie-Talkies and Phones
 - Program staff should have a way to communicate with one another, as well as with program leadership, at any time.
 - Program staff must have a way to call emergency services (like poison control or 911) if needed.

Professional Development, Training and Requirements of Staff

- Prepare Staff for Outdoor Safety
 - Be aware of the hazards and risks of an outdoor location before bringing children there.
 - Visit the location and create safety plans to manage any hazards (see Hazards and Risks below for more information).
 - If the program is operating more than 30 minutes from emergency medical care, consider requiring a current Wilderness First Aid and CPR certificate for at least one staff member.
 - Establish who is responsible for bringing sufficient water, food, clothing, hygiene and sanitary supplies.
 - Develop plans to have coverage for additional staff to work in the event of increased staff absences. If you need a substitute, The Imagine Institute oversees the [Early Care and Education Substitute Pool](#).
- Prepare Staff for Outdoor, Nature-Based Education
 - Outdoor and environmental education training or experience for lead teachers is preferred.

- Information about parks or natural areas can often be found on the [State Parks website](#) or, if visiting a city or county park, please visit the relevant website to find out more.
- Create shared expectations about routines, policies and procedures.
 - **Outdoor Preschool Pilot Standard** 0471 has a list of outdoor, nature-based activities that may require a policy or procedure, which should be based on the benefit-risk assessment of the activity and the location.
- Staff should have or be supplied with the clothing and gear appropriate for the weather.
- Staffing, Ratios and Supervision
 - The staff-to-child ratios for outdoor, nature-based programming should depend on children's age and developmental levels, as well as the hazards and risks in the location.
 - A 2:12, or 3:18 ratio of staff to children is generally considered best practice for preschool-age children (2.5 - 6 years old).
 - Programs operating within ¼ mile of a body of water and/or with water play in shallow water should have staff who can swim and life-saving equipment appropriate to the body of water.
 - If activities will occur in a body of water that is more than 24 inches deep at the lowest point, a lifeguard (or staff with a lifeguard certificate) must be present, along with appropriate life-saving equipment.

Family Engagement

- Communicate with Families About Health and Safety in The Outdoors
 - Communicate in advance with families about the positive impacts of nature, the health and safety precautions being taken in the outdoor program.
 - Use these conversations to learn about families' experiences and concerns about being outdoors, and create culturally responsive practices.
- Ensure Children Are Dressed for The Weather
 - Children must be dressed appropriately for the weather and activities.
 - Have extra clothing available in case families forget or can't afford the appropriate clothing.
 - REI has a great resource [here](#) for understanding the safest way to dress.
- Communicate with Families About Your Location
 - Families may need to arrange alternative drop-off or pick-up times and should know where you plan to be in advance.