

“Why does your class spend so much time outdoors when they should be inside learning in the classroom?”

The Kindergarten program that myself and the Kindergarten team have created is based on many opportunities to allow the children to experience learning that peaks their interests and motivates them to expand their knowledge, vocabulary and development. It is a balance of adult- and student-guided, hands-on learning opportunities that take place all over the school, inside and out. Through the process of inquiry, the team and I are able to observe the children demonstrating different skills and using different resources than in the inside classroom.

To speak specifically to the question about outdoor time, it is important to expose children to different learning environments in order to allow growth in different areas of their development. Outdoor play provides children the opportunities to engage in a lot physical, hands-on interactions, allowing them to get appropriate amounts of physical activity, which helps to better their overall health. The children are able to move around in many different such as jumping, running, hopping, climbing and skipping, actions that are normally not safe or suitable for the indoor classroom environment.

During outdoor play, children are also able to engage in rich conversations with peers and their teachers about different topics and areas of learning than they do in the traditional classroom. The landscape of the outdoor classroom is also very different than that of the interior one. It allows larger open spaces for different types of active play that can be used to put on drama presentations, investigate objects or play interactive games, provides areas for gardening to learn about plant cycle and growth as well as where our food supplies come from, offers the choice to climb on various objects such as a large structure, logs, rocks, and even provides the opportunity to drive around on plasma cars and trikes to learn about negotiation and social norms.

Outdoor learning may look to parents as though the Kindergarten teachers have gone and lost their minds and are allowing the children to run around, meaninglessly playing and be silly. However it is so much more than that. It is a complete new and different lens that allows the children to dig deeper into learning the eyes of nature. I find as I observe the children engage in their outdoor play for more than 30 minutes, I am reminded of how such simple materials such as rocks and sticks add diversity to children's overall play, their language, thinking patterns and creativity. When children are given the freedom to explore open-ended natural materials of various shapes and sizes, they acquire knowledge about art, math, science, creativity, language, and building. They are learning from all 6 learning areas of the Full-Day Kindergarten program. In turn, I can support their curiosity within an inquiry-based learning experience.

Inquiry-based learning lends itself beautifully to outdoor learning. When I provide children with time, materials, and opportunities to exercise their sense of curiosity, students' questions, ideas, observations drive the learning. As part of this inquiry-based learning, through observation and open-ended questioning, I begin to understand when, why, and how to change the environment to trigger children's new options for creating questions, problem thinking and problem solving. Exploring the natural world seems to trigger questions and makes discoveries that contribute to a new level of understanding.