Bringing the Benefits of Nature to All Children

BY KIRSTEN HAUGEN

Increasingly, we hear the call to "Get outside!" How do we ensure children with exceptional physical, cognitive, sensory, or social challenges can fully participate in the outdoor opportunities we provide?

As a special educator involved in nature-based learning opportunities, I view the licensing and legal requirements of the Americans with Disabilities Act (ADA) and playground safety standards as essential, but not sufficient for children with unique challenges. ***Accessibility***, or getting *to* things, is critical, but it's only a pathway to ***participation*** — being *a part of* things. Bringing together the Universal Design for Learning (UDL) framework with research-based principles for implementing nature-based outdoor classrooms helps us move much closer to supporting children of all abilities to be a part of things — and thrive — outdoors.

UDL is a framework guided by research and focused on the *what*, *how*, and *why* of learning to promote the development of flexible and responsive learning environments and activities.*

- **What?** Include and allow for *multiple means of representation.* To help all children take in information, instructions, and ideas, incorporate spoken and written words, illustrations, diagrams, charts, hands-on models or materials, and physical demonstrations.
- **How?** Invite *multiple means of action and expression.* To fully understand what children think and know, support them to explore and demonstrate their ideas and knowledge with a variety of forms and materials: words, movement, large- and small-scale structures and creations, experiments, performances, and more.
- **Why?** Provide *multiple means of engagement.* To increase children's motivation, sense of purpose, and belonging, ensure your environments, materials, and activities reflect and connect with the diverse range of children's backgrounds, interests, and experiences — or are open ended enough to reflect the child's imagination.

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Looking through this UDL lens, I understand why many children with additional, unique needs fail to fit in or engage appropriately in the limited play options available during conventional recess. Even if they meet ADA requirements, playgrounds dominated by asphalt, turf, and manufactured equipment have a built-in bias toward competitive gross-motor play and "burning off steam," which compounds sensory overload, social challenges, and physical differences. Such playgrounds limit engagement, action, and expression, and can provoke or shut down some children as much as having to sit and complete the same worksheet, at the

Intentional efforts to arrange and balance outdoor areas for a variety of activities allow supervising adults opportunity to observe and support children's plans. Photo courtesy of © Nature Explore.

same time, in the same way as their peers. Supervising adults in this environment typically find their time taken up with intervening and redirecting children rather than observing and supporting their ideas, plans, and imaginations.

Learning and playing in nature-filled outdoor (and indoor) spaces, on the other hand, offers rich benefits for children and the adults who work with them.** With a purposeful balance and arrangement of activity areas, the outdoor classroom engages more children. Visual, physical, and even sensory cues built into signage, pathways, plantings, surfaces, and storage provide multiple means of representation, allowing children to understand the space and opportunities available. Children experience physical movement, challenge, and exertion through climbing, running, and crawling; engage socially through dramatic play and music; explore STEM strategies with block building, water play, or loose parts investigations; and find quieter, contemplative moments for art, reading, or scientific observations.

In these diverse environments, children have the opportunity to thrive in different ways and to practice self-regulation by choosing the mix of physical, cognitive, and social activity their brains and bodies need. Time in nature with supportive, responsive adults promotes good health and fitness, enhances attention span and observation skills, promotes problem solving and resilience, and supports appropriate risk taking. Accessible spaces with a range of activity areas offer children more ways to exercise their motor planning and skills, their competence, and their confidence.

Look at the outdoor spaces available to children in your lives through this dual lens of UDL and research-based outdoor classroom design. How will you expand the activities available, include more open-ended materials, and increase opportunities for engagement, expression, and action?

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* Learn more at kirstenhaugen.org/inclusion-udl and udlguidelines.cast.org

** Learn more at natureexplore.org/research

Organizing Your Outdoor Space

Making sure that materials are accessible is the first step to promoting full participation by all children in the outdoors. Adapting the find-use-return cycle from the classroom to the outdoor learning environment means creating a similar system of storage and labeling for the outdoor play space.

A Universal Design for Learning (UDL) framework encourages engagement, action, and expression — and that means a lot of "loose parts" to accommodate children's open-ended imaginations. Luckily, though, most loose parts can be stored outdoors with a simple storage system that will benefit both the materials and the appearance of the playground. In most cases, you can apply the same logic that you would inside the classroom (e.g., store families of things together, like acorns and pine cones and other "seeds" — and label materials in a way that makes sense to children).

A plastic garbage can will provide neat, contained storage for long, lightweight materials like PVC pipe, sticks, bamboo canes, gutters, drain tile, and pool noodles. Drill several drainage holes in the bottom of the cans and find a way to fasten them to the ground, to the shed, or to a fence to ensure stability.

Shelves are invaluable for storing loose parts. Remember that these should be totally accessible to children. Smaller materials, such as pine cones, corks, shells, and twigs can be stored in plastic tubs, while pots, pans, plates, and tubs can go directly on the shelves. If you expect to have an outdoor kitchen, plan on putting some storage shelves nearby.

Of course, some materials are best stored in free-standing piles — for example, rocks just big enough for a preschooler to carry with both hands, or logs. If you begin the pile in the corner of the playground and make a sign, then you can let the other staff as well as neighbors and friends know that you are beginning a rock or log pile and that you welcome contributions (specify the size and other limits).

Organizing your outdoor space — and keeping it organized — requires forethought and habituation, just as organizing your classroom environment does. In no time, though, that forethought will pay off as children enjoy the outdoors, take initiative, and act with independence, confidence, and competence in carrying out their plans.

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