

UCLA Early Care and Education  
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## **Back to Nature; the Importance of the Outdoor Environment**

“You dream of providing your children with the opportunities to play and discover the world of nature. But you just don’t have the space. You don’t have the right conditions. You don’t have the sunlight or you don’t get enough rain. Don’t let that stop you! Centers all over the world are looking at their outdoor spaces-big and small-and deciding to take the plunge and begin to add natural elements to their yards. It doesn’t take the perfect piece of land or picture-perfect conditions to be able to make beautiful changes to your outdoor space. All it takes is some creativity and helping hands. You can do it. It doesn’t take a magical landscape to create a beautiful playscape. It just takes a magical imagination and a team of enthusiastic people to make playscape dreams come true.”



By Rusty Keller  
Exchange, November/December 2009, Outdoor Environments

### **How to Get Started:**

#### **1. Assessment**

- ✧ challenging areas
- ✧ unused play spaces
- ✧ observe children’s needs and interests

#### **Listen & Observe**



### **Just Start:**

#### **2. Gather Materials**

- ✧ Request parent support and participation  
(e.g., create a letter with background information and suggested materials needed)
- ✧ Look around your neighborhoods  
(e.g., yard sales, fallen trees, parks, city-yard, Christmas tree lots)
- ✧ Seek low cost stores and magazines that have nature related materials
- ✧ Examples of materials:  
pumpkins, stumps, seeds/seed pods, logs, pinecones  
leaves, feathers, corn husks, sand/dirt, shells, cocoa  
shells, twigs, pine needles, bark, rocks/stones, hay

#### **Look up, look down, and all around**



## Designate areas

### 3. Suggested areas

- ✂ Sand and water
- ✂ Building area
- ✂ Nature art area
- ✂ Dramatic play
- ✂ Messy area
- ✂ Garden
- ✂ Gathering area
- ✂ Music and movement area



**Choose one or two areas at a time**

## Working & Doing

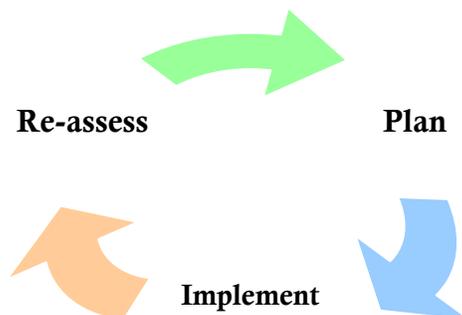
### 4. Planning & Implementation

- ✂ Designate a teacher or team of teachers to take on the project
- ✂ Set an ongoing planning schedule to meet and assess progress
- ✂ Develop a curriculum for the outdoors
- ✂ Implement plans
- ✂ Document and observe child's interactions, play, and engagement with new materials and altered play space
- ✂ Evaluate progress and make changes as needed

## Keep Going

## Continuous Cycle

### 5. Re-assess, plan and implement



## Concluding Thoughts

### 6. We encourage you to:

- ✂ Be creative and open-minded
- ✂ Seek inexpensive resources
- ✂ Learn from bumps in the road
- ✂ Enjoy the process
- ✂ Involve the children
- ✂ Have fun making new discoveries

**Continue your journey, the trip is worth it**

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Nature provides us all with so many wonderful and useful things. From beautiful sights, to food & shelter, to maintaining the delicate balance necessary to sustain life on this planet. First and foremost, a clean environment is vital to not only to our own healthy living, but survival of all living things. The air we breathe is the most essential resource that the environment provides us with, and our efforts to reduce air pollution are currently not even pacing the pollution being pumped into the air daily (especially in major cities). The importance of caring for the environment is absolutely paramount for many reasons. Perhaps most importantly, we need to make sure that we leave this place better than when we came for the next generations whose job(s) it will be to also look after the planet.