



CREATING A QUALITY LEARNING ENVIRONMENT

A Safe Space for Gross Motor Play

Use this video supplement to learn more about the child care spaces used for gross motor play. This video provides ideas for programs using, designing, or maintaining environments for children's large muscle play. The video addresses common questions and scoring issues related to gross motor spaces and play that occur during the North Carolina Rated License Assessments.

This video supplement offers additional information for providers who have viewed the training video “A Safe Space for Gross Motor Play.” Safe spaces ensure that children can develop and practice gross motor skills while reducing the likelihood of injury. In addition to this supplement, providers should also make sure they have a current copy of “NCRLAP’s Requirements for Gross Motor Space and Equipment” (www.ncrlap.org) because this document outlines specific requirements for the considerations discussed in the video.

How to Use the Video and Video Supplement Guide

Child care centers, family child care providers, and agencies that offer assistance to these programs can use this information to supplement the content discussed in the video. Much of the content follows the outline of the video, but additional information and examples are provided in this format.

We encourage programs to consider their own gross motor spaces and the many unique factors in each setting. These factors include size and shape of the space, available equipment, the ages and abilities of the children using the space and equipment, and how teachers supervise and facilitate gross motor and other types of play.

Pausing the video after each chapter allows time for consideration of the review questions. Note that there are some responses in the guide, but these are intended to serve as suggestions; facilitators and participants can generate other ideas in considering their own gross motor spaces. We hope the information generates new ideas for your program.

Considerations While Viewing the Video

During the video, viewers may notice scenes that seem problematic for meeting various requirements across different agencies. Providers may note issues or concerns not addressed in the video, or disagree with how a situation is handled. It is important to acknowledge the belief that no child care program offers “perfect care” and that the goal of the video is to show quality programs in more typical child care settings, rather than depicting an ideal or unobtainable standard. Furthermore, this video focuses on safety and supervision requirements. While there are many examples of positive interactions, language, and socialization, these are not the focus of the video. As providers bring up questions or concerns, training facilitators may consider prompting participants to think about best practices for children, while also reminding them of the specific focus of the video.



Important factors to consider when planning gross motor spaces: size and shape of the space, available equipment, the ages and abilities of the children using the space and equipment, and how teachers supervise and facilitate gross motor and other types of play.

Outline of Video Supplement Content

- I. Supervision and Interaction
- II. Protective Surfacing, Fall Zones, and Equipment Spacing
- III. Age Appropriate Equipment
- IV. Fencing and Other Important Considerations
- V. Outdoor Learning Environments with Natural Features
- VI. Importance of Daily Outdoor Play for All Age Groups (Weather Permitting)
- VII. Resources

I. Supervision and Interaction

While children participate in free play outdoors, or in other gross motor spaces, the role of the teacher is to ensure that children are safe, and also to interact with children and engage them in quality learning and play experiences. Because outdoor spaces are typically larger than classrooms, and children tend to engage in activities that can lead to injury during active play, the supervision needs of children playing outside differ from those indoors. Maintaining visual supervision of children is critical. Teachers should consider the shape of their space and the placement of large elements, such as climbing equipment, when planning for supervision needs. The design of some gross motor spaces may create a need for additional staff while children are outdoors.

In addition to providing supervision, teachers should plan on facilitating meaningful experiences for the children. Providing supplementary materials in the space for gross motor play allows children to engage in a wider variety of play and exploration. Plans should be made to ensure that the space is set up for children to use all the materials and equipment in a safe and meaningful manner.

Chapter Review Discussion

- 1 *What are some examples of supplementary materials seen in the video? How does adding these materials to a gross motor space change the supervision and interaction needs of the children?*

The infants' space included fine motor and music toys, dramatic play, and books. The toddlers and preschoolers had sensory activities, dramatic play, and large blocks. Preschoolers and school age children had art materials, and the school age space included a variety of games. These materials provide a wider range of choices for children playing outdoors; they promote varied and complex



play, enhancing children's social and cognitive development. It is important to be aware of the range of supervision needs depending on the types of materials offered. The ages and abilities of children also influence the supervision and interaction needs in the outdoor space.

- 2** *Are there any challenges to maintaining visual supervision on your playgrounds? How can you address these challenges?*

One of the playgrounds shown in the video was L-shaped. Consider the shape and size of your playgrounds. Are the teachers who use them able to easily supervise all the areas at once? Are additional adults needed, or can you create a plan for teachers' positions and ongoing communication to ensure that the playground is well supervised? Is there equipment that poses a barrier to supervision? Would rearranging equipment help?

II. Protective Surfacing, Fall Zones, and Equipment Spacing

These requirements pertain to safe spaces for anchored and unanchored gross motor equipment, such as climbers, slides, and swings. This applies to both natural and manufactured equipment. In all cases, the height and type of equipment determine whether these requirements are applied. Assessors consider these factors and also observe how equipment is used

when assessing the safety of gross motor spaces. For example, a tunnel that is flush with the ground and only used for crawling would not need cushioning, a fall zone, and spacing; but if children are permitted to climb on top of the tunnel, as occurs on the preschool playground in the video, then the assessor measures the height of the top of the tunnel to determine the safety requirements.

Protective surfacing is the material placed under and around equipment to ensure that if children fall, their impact is cushioned. Common surfacing types include mulch, pea gravel, sand, and manufactured cushioning. Surfacing must be maintained at the required depth in all areas of the fall zone to ensure that children are safe.

The fall, or use, zone refers to the area under and around gross motor equipment where surfacing is required. The height of the equipment and age of children using it determine the size of the fall zone.

The height and type of equipment are also used to determine the rules for equipment spacing. Proper placement ensures that children and adults have enough space to move around without being in danger of striking the equipment or other children in the space.



- 1 *How do assessors determine if fall zones, cushioning, and spacing requirements apply? How are these requirements applied to more natural settings?*

Height and type of equipment as well as the age of children using the equipment determine these requirements. For example, the size of the fall zone required around swings is different from the size of the fall zone around climbing equipment. Use “NCRLAP’s Requirements for Gross Motor Space and Equipment” to define these requirements. When outdoor spaces include natural elements, their intended use and their height determine what requirements apply. For example, if a large rock is used for climbing and is over the height stated in the NCRLAP document, then fall zones, cushioning, and spacing requirements would apply. These requirements would not be applied to a trellis for plants that is not used for climbing or logs or stones for children to sit on.

- 2 *What are some ways programs can ensure that their gross motor space meets these requirements at all times?*

The video discusses regular playground maintenance, including pushing displaced mulch back daily. Teachers can visually check spaces to ensure that children do not have access to exposed bolts or nails, sharp areas of fencing, and broken equipment. Awareness of the requirements described above are important, so that teachers can make sure children do not place portable materials in a fall zone.

III. Age Appropriate Equipment

To provide children with equipment that stimulates the development of gross motor skills, equipment should be age appropriate. This means considering the individual needs and developmental characteristics of the children enrolled. For example, young infants’ needs are very different from older, mobile infants. As young infants work on reaching, kicking, rolling over, and sitting up, they need a safe surface, such as a blanket, mat, or grass, along with materials such as balls and grasping toys to promote the practice of these skills. Mobile infants need time on the ground and equipment that support the practice of scooting, crawling, pulling up, and early walking. Toddlers have a larger range of skills; space and equipment should promote larger and faster movement, as well as more precision. Gross motor space for preschoolers must be flexible to accommodate the widening range of skills. The addition of portable equipment



allows many options for challenging games. Finally, there are school age children, ranging in age from 5 through 12 years, whose physical abilities are quite varied. Providing stimulating activities for this group can be a challenge, but adding games and more complex portable equipment helps children to practice new skills.

Provisions for gross motor play indoors allow programs to supplement children's outdoor time and gives children opportunities for gross motor play when the weather does not permit outdoor play. Programs can provide indoor gross motor experiences in a variety of ways: by setting up a designated space or by offering activities in the classroom.

Chapter Review Discussion

- 1 *How can programs use portable equipment to increase the level of challenge in their gross motor spaces?*

Portable materials offer flexibility and a wider range of potential games for children. When stationary equipment no longer provides adequate challenge for the children using the space, or when the children seem less interested in the stationary options, teachers can use portable materials to introduce new skills, activities, and games.

- 2 *Discuss options for providing indoor spaces for gross motor play in your program. What types of equipment do you have that are safe for use indoors?*

Answers will vary, depending on available space. Some programs have unused classrooms, or a family child care provider may have a large living space outside the caregiving area that can be used for large movement and safe portable materials. Other programs may opt to use a wide hallway or to move furnishings in their classroom or caregiving area. There are many types of portable materials intended for indoor use including soft balls, indoor bowling sets, bean bag toss games, low balance beams, and tumbling mats. Materials could also be homemade; consider making a bowling set out of water bottles, a balance beam with painter's tape, and a parachute from a bed sheet.

IV. Fencing and Other Important Considerations

This chapter considers other hazards common in gross motor spaces. All outdoor spaces typically used should be enclosed by a fence, and the fence should consistently meet the height requirement. Factors including placement of landscaping or containment borders and the buildup of a cushioning surface due to erosion against the fence may alter the fence height over time. Routine



maintenance also helps programs avoid problems such as protruding bolts or nails on the fence or equipment, tripping hazards, open S-hooks on swing chains, and children's access to sharp objects, including broken toys.

Chapter Review Discussion

1 *What are some ways to eliminate these hazards in play areas?*

Simple maintenance can address many of these concerns: bending back sharp areas of fencing, hammering exposed nails back into place, removing/repairing broken toys. Open S-hooks can be closed, covered, or replaced with fasteners that screw closed.

2 *What about a problem that is not easy to solve?*

More challenging problems include those that cost a lot of money to fix. In the video, one playground had a containment border placed against the fence that shortened the fence height. Moving the containment border away from the fence is an option if it does not impact the required fall zone. A less costly solution may be to raise the fence height, just in that area. Incurring one-time costs to save money over time should be considered; for example, it is costly to install containment borders, but if they prevent cushioning from eroding and, thus, having to be replaced more frequently, they may save the program money over time.

V. Outdoor Learning Environments with Natural Features

In an attempt to offer more meaningful experiences with nature, many programs are adding natural elements to their outdoor spaces. Natural outdoor learning environments may include a variety of plants and natural features such as hills, gardens, and water features. Other programs may opt to provide a mixture of both natural and traditional elements on their playgrounds. Natural features are not a requirement for North Carolina child care licensure, but they do enhance children's experiences with the natural world and are considered a desired component of a well-designed outdoor space.



- 1 *Discuss simple and more complex natural features. How do the presence of these features change the way children play in these spaces? How can teachers use these features to promote learning?*

The toddler space included a tree in one corner and a mud hole in another. Both areas are very interesting to the children, especially as they change over time. The toddlers pretend to hide under the tree in the spring and summer because its leaves create a sheltered area. When there are fewer or no leaves, they are more likely to run or dance around the tree or study the trunk and branches. Similarly, the mud hole varies with the weather and season. On or after a rainy day, the toddlers like to stomp in the shallow puddle created there. Then, as the puddle dries up, they can bring shovels and buckets into the area for digging. Both areas provide opportunities to learn about nature and to practice gross motor skills. Of course, it is important to maintain these features. For example, as the tree grows, the program will likely need to prune the branches for safety.

While traditional climbing equipment is usually unchanging over time, the outdoor learning environments with many natural features change constantly based on weather and seasons. Children's interactions with the natural features are stimulated by these changes. On the preschool playground with mounds of earth, children can roll down a hill covered with soft green grass in the summer or climb up a hill of stiff winter grass. Children's work in a garden changes with the seasons as well, and there are many skills to be learned in tending the plants.

VI. Importance of Daily Outdoor Play for All Age Groups (Weather Permitting)

Though not specifically discussed in the video, it is important for programs to provide outdoor play to children every day when weather permits, so children have the opportunity to exercise, breathe fresh air, and practice gross motor skills. Some reasons to choose to keep children indoors include active precipitation such as rain, snow, or sleet, and weather advisories or public announcements related to unsafe weather conditions. It is important to note that even though children do not have to go outside if it is raining or snowing, teachers can choose to take children outside in these conditions if children are properly dressed and well supervised. There are several important factors to consider in creating your program's policies for children's outdoor play.

There are some conditions that pose barriers to playing outside, even when the weather technically permits outdoor play. Programs may have to deal with parents who do not want young children outside when it is very cold, or drainage issues on the playground that create wet and muddy areas, or frozen ground. In this section, we will address some of these



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barriers and provide ideas to help programs take children outside almost every day.

Some parents may not be aware of the many benefits of outdoor play, even for very young children. Parents of non-mobile children may be concerned about provisions for their children's outdoor experiences when the ground is wet or in cold weather. Other parents may not have the resources to provide all the necessary clothing to allow outdoor play in various types of weather. Programs can overcome these challenges by being upfront with parents about policies for playing outdoors. If parents receive information regarding the importance of daily time outdoors in reducing the spread of germs and encouraging active play as part of program policy, they may be more accepting of the policy. Programs can help parents be prepared by asking for specific items, such as hats, gloves, or mittens; a warm coat in the winter; and a raincoat and boots when it is wet. Programs can opt to have extra items on hand by purchasing these items new, buying them second-hand, or asking parents to donate extras.

When heavy rain leaves puddles and makes equipment wet, programs need provisions to allow children to play outside; this includes having cones to block off large puddles or areas where the cushioning surface has been washed away, drying off equipment with towels, and having parents bring in raincoats and boots. Other programs have the option of using another space that is not muddy such as a large concrete or asphalt area for activities such as riding trikes and playing ball. Frozen ground may also pose some challenges. Remember that if the resilient surfacing around climbing equipment is frozen solid, it cannot cushion falls properly. Children should not use equipment over frozen ground until it thaws. Standing water that freezes into an ice sheet can be dangerous because children may slip while walking or running on it. These areas need to be blocked off, or older children need to be instructed as to what areas they can use.

Whether it is the hottest month of summer or the coldest day in winter, altering your schedule seasonally or daily can increase the amount of time children can spend outdoors. Programs can create warm and cold weather schedules that take weather conditions into account. Scheduling more time outside in the early morning during warmer months, scheduling afternoon time outside in the winter, or breaking outside play periods into several shorter intervals in extreme temperatures all help to keep children comfortable while playing outside. Other warm weather provisions include providing shade, sunscreen, hats, and drinking water. Programs should be aware of ozone alerts and plan outdoor times accordingly.

When good provisions, like the ones described above, for more extreme weather conditions exist, it is more likely that children will get to play outdoors daily, or almost every day. This practice promotes healthy minds and healthy bodies, which in turn benefits children's overall development.



VII. Resources

Helpful documents and related resources are found at:

Web Resources

- Arbor Day Foundation: www.arborday.org/explore
- Natural Learning Initiative, NCSU: www.naturalearning.org
- North Carolina Child Care Health and Safety Resource Center: www.healthychildcarenc.org
- North Carolina Division of Child Development and Early Education: <http://ncchildcare.dhhs.state.nc.us/general/home.asp>
- North Carolina Cooperative Extension: Making the Most of Outdoor Time with Preschool Children: <http://ces.ncsu.edu/depts/fcs/human/pubs/FCS507.pdf>
- North Carolina Outdoor Learning Environments Alliance: www.osr.nc.gov/OLE/OLEhome.asp
- North Carolina Rated License Assessment Project: www.ncrlap.org

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